

The City: An Inverse Outlook

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Cultural change involves the retaining of some cultural practices along with the modification, revision, and re-invention of events in the co-present. Just as the present is embedded in the past, the future is embedded in the present. (Robert N. St. Clair)

Abstract: In the dictionary, inverse can mean a form of inference in which a new proposition is formed whose subject is the opposite of the original proposition. This is the sense in which I refer to the inverse outlook, that which manifests opposition while the habitual and hegemonic outlook loses its naming force. Analyzing the inverse outlook from photos taken by a group of young Huicholes¹ during their first trip to a city allows us to observe visual choices portraying the city from an reverse angle; where we ourselves are the others and the photographers are indigenous people. The work I show here is from a trip made by 31 youths between the ages of 13 and 15, who left their village of San Miguel Huaixtita headed for the city of Guadalajara (Corona, 2012) with the object of “researching” the city and its urban Mexican residents.

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1. The City, Order and Disorder, the Journey

In referring to the city from the colonial era to the 20th century, Ángel Rama (2009) analyzes its creation along with the place that writing, and scribes, occupy in the established order of cities. The study of the city and the power imposed by writing also becomes, then, a study of the city’s symbolic creation. He notes that from the time the Spanish Crown “retro-fitted” the ancient city of Tenochtitlan, all efforts were focused upon building a city whose cultural center did the work of keeping order and managing ideology, in order to legitimize the power of the group that was guarding the monarch’s interests. Following the Conquest, insistence upon shaping an ordered city was clearly in the interests of the conquerors. To achieve their purpose, they felt the need to form a specialized social group that could order the universe of signs having to do with the city, and in the service of the Spanish monarch. To that group belonged all who were literate, as only through words could power be exerted.

Rama (2009) lets us see that school, reading and the very organization of the *literate city* eclipse knowledge of the others, those belonging to cultures of orality and image. For these communicative forms to acquire an equitable status does not involve making written culture

¹ The Huicholes are one of the 64 indigenous peoples in Mexico, speaking their own language and thus preserving their culture. They are known for defending their lands in the western Sierra Madre mountains, where more than 30,000 inhabitants (over the age of five) live.

disappear—a battle that would be lost from the start—but committing to development and construction of spaces for other communicative practices. In the field of research, I refer to this as getting to know inverse outlooks.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (2008), today's way of being in the world is liquid, which is to say uncertain, insecure, vulnerable. The city, home to half the planet's inhabitants, is a place where the processes of globalization coexist, but chaotically. The author mentions three results of this: 1. Cities are the dumping ground for problems produced on a global level, impacting cities but having no local solutions. 2. The city becomes the main battlefield in the fight over maintaining security without sacrificing freedom. 3. As places where strangers live together, cities become laboratories for human coexistence and understanding between different cultures.

These facts provoke contradictory feelings: on the one hand, the city is fascinating because it offers adventure and freedom, and yet living in the midst of constant change promotes a sense of threat and danger. Also, says Bauman, mixophilia and mixophobia arise in cities since “mixing with strangers has its pleasures — it may be exciting and hugely enjoyable [...] but on the other hand, being surrounded by strangers may be an off-putting and even frightening experience.” (Bauman, 2008, p. 32). These photographs by Huichol photographers are an opportunity to see the city, for a change, through the eyes of those to whom it is strange.

In his work entitled *Flesh and Stone* (1994), Richard Sennett analyzes bodies in the city, referring to their sensations of the urban spaces where they reside. His wide-ranging work takes on everything from the meaning of nudity in configuring urban spaces, to the practice of Athenian democracy, to the contradictory experiences of power and resistance to domination in the great 19th- and 20th-century cities. Today's city, the author notes, is one of troubled, restless, agitated bodies that become passive. The great cities, New York for example, have no spaces where bodies may be recognized as such. Roland Barthes (1991) adds to our understanding of the city with the concept of an “image-repertoire”, to define how we communicate with strangers. Stereotypes define how the other is understood, and situated according to images and categories based upon socially-recognized labels. With labels, or images imposed by public policies, the Other is feared, excluded, made invisible to his or her own outlook. This fact also reduces the excluded subject, disorienting because the image reflected back is blind to his or her own needs. I only exist if there is a you; I am that which you send back to me. Sennett (1994, p. 399) asks himself, what can impel us to “turn toward each other, to experience the Other?”

Nevertheless, Maffesoli (2003) believes that it is today's Western traveler who mounts a kind of protest against production goals as they are life's rhythms. But again, this is a concept of travel according to the urban dweller, referring to nostalgia for adventure, and searching within. For the West, the “getaway” is always present in society, synonymous with vacation, with adventurous voyagers and discoverers as referents, traveling in the opposite direction from daily life. But the traveler, the one who takes the actual journey, the nomad and the vagabond, evokes fear; he or she carries the risk of introducing novelty, having witnessed another world that might place ours under scrutiny. In the case of the young Huicholes' journey to the city, we propose rescuing that vision of the stranger facing the safety of our stable, fixed world.

2. The Inverse Outlook as It Confronts the Hegemonic Outlook

From the stance of “arrogant reason” — Carlos Pereda’s (2006, p. 193) term for Western reason, it is common to view a stereotyped image of indigenous people, constructed according to photographs by 20th-century anthropologists and artists. Those images took shape in dialogue with that era’s educational, political and scientific discourse, and remain current to the present day. But such images are not constructed with participation from the indigenous outlook. The photographs that visually identify indigenous people, while belonging to different genres, are all similar to one another: underprivileged country dwellers, bowed down with heavy loads on their shoulders, dressed in embroidered clothing and hats, never looking at the camera. These images are consistent with descriptions by travel writers, anthropologists, tourists and scientists, and have been keystones for labeling the indigenous as vulnerable; eternal inhabitants of another time and place.

On the other hand, the visual construction of the modern city, and of the urban Mexican, is also a hegemonic Western construct portraying modernity and its contrasts. Tourism highlights the icons of each city that are “worth seeing”, the press denounces urban poverty and violence, art takes nourishment from the streetscape, tourism from its “peculiar charms”. It comes naturally for us to live in line with all the stories we’ve come to know.

But what are our “invisible cities” like? As in the metaphor suggested by Italo Calvino (2002) to name the city we cannot see despite its being our own? How is it seen by those who’ve never visited a city before? What will their photos teach us about our cities and about ourselves?

Here I’m exhibiting the inverse outlook, or indigenous visual “reason”, as a way of understanding what our cities hide — and that which only the vision of the other may reveal to us. From the inverse outlook, we the urbanites are the other. We thus also perceive the indigenous observers’ own visual sense; that built of their own discourse, and of others they happen upon in the city.

This photographic work lets us reflect on communication between all the others who inhabit our public places. In contrast to visual anthropology where the photo is used to corroborate the presence of distinct types, and differing also from indigenous art photographers who expose a face all their own, is the individual author here, who via the photo aims to express the indigenous outlook toward others, we the Western urbanites.

For its breadth of meaning photography may be interpreted from very different angles. In this place we want the photographers themselves to fasten the meaning of their creations and so to generate dialogue in both voices; the photo “irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, . . . at the level of generalisation, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph” (Berger & Mohr, 1995, p. 92). And so these young people’s photos, added to their words, become a powerful tool for naming themselves. And I myself, as another “reader” of the photos and texts, make my own interpretation.

3. The Journey and the Sojourners

The trip was made from San Miguel Huaixtita in the state of Jalisco to Guadalajara, the state’s capital city. The trip took 20 hours: the roads crossing the mountains are in bad condition. The

group was a full class of thirty-one (31) ninth graders from the Taatutsi Maxakwaxi Huichol school, 13 girls and 18 boys, chaperoned by two sets of parents and two teachers; all spending four days in the city. The group took photographs with disposable cameras, wrote personal journal entries, and taped group conversations. Photos, texts, field notes and conversations allowed compilation of a text where many voices are heard.

It is interesting to note that a questionnaire given the students before the journey, when they had still never seen a city, showed they already had an imaginary “portrait” of the place they would visit. Their responses include: a city is “a very large community, full of many things, houses, high-rises, very large homes, streets, cars, no earth beneath your feet. There are houses for rent, electric lights, a lot of people, cars and trucks.” The young photographers had certain “visual words” for naming the city which allowed them to close in on these images from the start. The experience offered them new names for creating other images to show us our own “invisible cities”.

4. Snapshots and Subjects

When describing the subjects of the photographs, just the referents they denote are considered. While I recognize that denotation is still a sign and thus at the first level of connotation, I base classification on the objects that appear to be central to each photograph. The body of photographic works consists of 695 photos, of which 5% were too dark or unfocussed to be visible and 9% were of such diverse subjects, that they were not taken into account for this analysis.

Table 1. Subjects of Photographs, by Photographer Gender.

	Zoo 24.28%	Buildings 23.70%	People 22.27%	Fountains 10.20%	Autos 3.44%	Stairs 1.46%
Male	52%	48%	76%	65%	87.5%	60%
Female	48%	52%	24%	35%	12.5%	40%

Photographs of zoo animals were the most-often repeated subject. A possible explanation for this is that cameras were delivered on the morning of the visit to the zoo, which was also for most of the students their first experience with a camera. Sheer pleasure in taking pictures could have determined the quantity of photos taken at this site. Still, within the zoo they took photos of animals; animals and hardly any of people or the place itself. They demonstrated a preference for what they mentioned as being those animals “we don’t know”.

Photographed subjects coincide with the imagined visions preceding their visit: cars, big houses, buildings (which they called *torres* or “high-rises”). These subjects were immediately recognized by the young Huicholes. Photos of buildings stand out, in both boys’ and girls’ photos: the impact of tall edifices justifies the quantity of those photos, though the photos couldn’t always be considered good quality because they were expressing the sensation of looking up at them from below. Here prior expectations were observed; the “names” they had

for identifying a city, and the bodily experience with buildings, determined their photographic description of the city. Both boys and girls made it their principal subject. In their community, structures are just one storey, so that lifting one's head back in order to see the top of a building was new to them, and amused them. And yet, on various occasions they described the resulting images as disappointing, because the buildings couldn't be seen in their entirety as they'd experienced them before taking the photograph.

Photographs of people were the third most frequent, despite the fact that photos taken by amateur photographers generally abound with "people" shots, over and above any other subject. (Bourdieu [1979] reports that 70% of the photographs by French amateur photographers are of people.) Photos of people may be grouped as: those encountered on the street and those from among their own group of travelers. Of the first, what most draws our attention is their scarcity. When explicitly questioned about this, students answered, "because we don't know them, so they don't interest us." The only photographs of city people are those who catch the eye for their uniqueness: the clown, the woman in high heels, the man in a wheelchair, the "crazy guy", the doctor in his white coat and the couple "who were just kissing."

Photographs of people, then, are mainly those taken of each other. Of the 155 photos in this area only six are "city people", and those six photos don't always correspond to an interest in capturing "the other" but of themselves: with the doctor (back to the camera), the lady's high heels (from the back) and the "obligatory" photo by the blonde photographer. Photos of the young people are posed in places they liked for showing their "having been there" (fountains, the house where they stayed, standing outside shops, beside cars, in the doctor's office, inside the buildings they visited), though these don't correspond to the city's traditional icons.

Also frequently shot were fountains, cars and stairs. They'd never seen a fountain, nor did they have the word for naming one. Along with being attracted by the spectacle of the water, they also wondered about the mechanism. Stairs were also unknown to them and they enjoyed climbing and photographing them for the first time.

As for the shots chosen, the camera and the photographer's eye together define what is possible to capture photographically. I focus on the openness or closed nature of the shot and the axis of the shot as it defines the outlook's perspective. Given the technical simplicity of disposable cameras, it wasn't possible to zoom in via the photographic mechanism, so the photographer him- or herself resolved framing of the image by moving in or drawing back. In the overall array of photos, though, real close-ups were non-existent. On the other hand, it was noteworthy that all photos taken outdoors preserve traditional relationships of horizontality and verticality. Photos made indoors, for example of their rooms, show a difficulty in maintaining the shot along the standard optical axis. It would seem that horizontal framing of the image relates to open spaces, which they know better, and less to city spaces whose views are blocked by walls, buildings and doors.

5. The City of Guadalajara, the Unknown City

Four groups of photographs are presented next, to describe four of the city's urban features, hidden from our view. From the *inverse outlook* of the young Huichol photographers, this is the City without stories, the City of desires, the City of the others and the City of unknown languages.

5.1. The City without Stories



Figure 1. The City without Stories

Inverse outlook: Guadalajara is made up of tall buildings, streets and sidewalks, wires hung willy-nilly. The city is seen as solid, imposing, of cement and glass, stairs going up and others going down. There are parking meters and electrical plants; while their names are unknown, they're part of the city. Cars don't stop, day and night they flow on and on, without end. Hundreds of the young Huicholes' photos prove it; Guadalajara is made up of these excesses. It is clear that our city, without our stories, is no more than what the photos show.

5.2. The City of Desires



Figure 2. The City of Desires

Inverse outlook: Guadalajara shows itself as rich, happy, powerful; promising adventures and boundless fun. The young people discover pleasures they never knew existed: bathing in warm water, getting the temperature they want with just a turn of the faucet handle. Beds with soft mattresses, private rooms, places that are spacious and clean. Leaving their rooms, the spectacle of never-before seen animals, gardens made for playing, everywhere merchandise for sale. In the city everything is offered for your enjoyment. But the city also cheats; inhabitants seem to be here to have fun but they live precariously, fearfully, with no time to spare. The students' indigenous professors thus asked before their school trip to the city that it include a tour of the zone where people live "without money", that students see the city's poverty because "here we are not poor, we have a house, water, land to cultivate." (Interview with the Director of the Taatutsi Maxakwaxi Educational Center, Professor Carlos Salvador).

5.3. The City of Hidden Languages



Figure 3. The City of Hidden Languages

Inverse outlook: To arrive in Guadalajara is to immerse oneself in a labyrinth of streets without knowing where to turn. Instructions for getting to a given address make no sense, names of streets and emblematic venues are unrecognizable. Signs appear everywhere, but they're contradictory. Arrows point upward and downward, images of strangers are stuck to the wall, advertisements with confusing metaphors. Things have names that one could say, but who knows what they are: parking meter, stoplight, fountain, electric generator, Palace of Justice. In the city the potatoes called *Sabritas* (chips) are not potatoes, the market is called St. John of God, the fabric store is named something like the *Parisiense*. Names themselves are saying something else: the perfume shop calls itself "the best price", t-shirts are "Elegance", the tortilla package announces they're "the only blue tortillas".

5.4. The City of the Others



Figure 4. The City of the Others

Inverse outlook: They knew they were in the urban world, the young people said, the moment their bus left the dirt roads of their land and hit pavement. At home “urban” means any place the pavement passes. On the bus, once they left the slow rocky dirt road and began picking up speed on the asphalt, the young people knew they’d left their community and entered that of others. On their trip they often recalled that in the city they are the others. Not just when photos were taken of them or they were regarded with interest, but also when they were looked after, in the way you do with someone who’s vulnerable. Their embroidered clothing makes them different from the norm, the things they know are strange to city people, and don’t help them to move freely along the streets of Guadalajara. Photos also serve for looking at themselves in the city; they pose with the clothes they bought there and practice the moves of urban folk.

6. Conclusion: The Inverse Outlook and the Author as Producer

Influencing my work, I realize, are the two conditions that Walter Benjamin (2004) discovers in technology, that lead to thinking of reworking the photographic camera: “to suppress the opposition between gazing subject and gazed-upon, and to suppress the opposition between technique and content” (Benjamin, 2004, p.44) .

Taking the first idea, suppression between the camera operator and that which is photographed, I propose to articulate as the photographed and the one taking the photo. Benjamin celebrates how the press “gave the reader access to authorship” by opening up letters-to-the-editor pages: before, they were relegated to reading only “real” writers. In this case, cameras placed in the hands of young Huicholes allow them to take their own photographs, of themselves and others. This new visual authorship makes the young indigenous person a “producer” who acquires competence through action; before only receptors, now producers of images. The indigenous person has no reason to remain the one “imagined” by photographers legitimized by art, tourism, advertising and science. With the camera, the new photographer, the indigenous author, says who he or she is – and who we are – from the vantage of his or her own outlook.

We recognize that the camera also imposes a quality upon the outlook. Because its vocation is one of “objectivity”, by selectively framing just part of the world and applying certain aesthetic rules, the camera returns an improved view of reality. When Benjamin (2004) observes this double-edged technology he warns, “What we should demand from photography is the capacity of giving a print a caption which would tear it away from fashionable clichés and give it a revolutionary use value.” (Benjamin, 2004, p.42) In our case, that of the students’ production, they added words to the photos that would affix their own meaning. “Here too technical progress is the basis of political progress for the author as producer.” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 42)

The second condition of the camera in the hands of the other helps as well when we reflect upon the vision-technique relationship, and demythologize the union of technique and content. In the photos the young Huicholes took of themselves, of their surroundings and of us, we may observe that the photograph constitutes another way of viewing the world. Understanding a creative work as the result of the era’s production relationships, of the dialectic between its technical forms, contents and outlooks, may overcome the power of the camera. The new

photographs, made by young indigenous students, express other forms of seeing: camera and visual conditions are revealed to create a different photo. The content may be the same when dealing with our city, the same streets and the same city-dwellers. But the new photos show us some different indigenous people and some different cities. The difference is in the way of looking – and looking at ourselves – through the viewfinder of another’s eye.

Nevertheless, turning producer also implies that the discourse of others runs through the new product. The photographs done by the indigenous students are not autonomous when it comes to the social dialogue. The *inverse outlook* communicates, that is to say “speaks”, because it resorts to the discourse of its surroundings, and the discourse that has been made of it. Before arriving there the city was already a complex of streets, cars and buildings. The photographs attest to that. Barthes (1991) calls them “off-stage voices” (Barthes, 1991, p.16) because they murmur cultural clues as a new enunciation – or a new photo – is being constructed; making it understandable to itself and the other who receives it.

The youths portrayed a modern city, which is to say an anonymous one, where skyscrapers and highways, objects and people, criss-cross a non-identifiable culture. This city has no center of gravity: where the others that all of us are come together, show themselves as they are and negotiate the faces by which they wish to be known. The inverse outlook leaves it patently clear that the city doesn’t reach out to those who are different, but instead excludes and makes them invisible.

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