

Visual Reinterpretation of National Identity in the Public Space of Mexico

Visual communication in public spaces of Mexico has been significantly shaping collective identity, from pre-Columbian times to nowadays. This PhD thesis analyzes the visual aspect of cultural and religious identity in pre-Columbian and colonial eras, later, the discussion is led through the development of the modern day national identity that followed while concurrently explaining how former structural characteristics were partially maintained. Those phenomena are explored from two vantage points: that of the cultural and political elites and that of the general population. However, these perspectives aren't presented in a sharp opposition, rather, as two conjugating cultural streams that have been continuously negotiating and shaping cultural and national identity in correlation with historical and cultural events, including influence from significant others. Accordingly, the thesis explores the official version of national identity, that is promoted by state power, but also how official identity is received into intimate spaces, the everydayness of the bearers of such identity, its reinterpretation and alternatively, the rejections.

Since public art (mural art, popular graphics, graffiti, stencil art and other diverse means of visual communication in public space) has been one of the most used mediums to interpret and reinterpret identity in Mexico, visual articulations in public spaces are the main references of this research. The thesis is focused on how visual language, when articulated in public space, influences the process of shaping national identity and is employed to build the notion of a homogenous Mexican nation. While the first part of the thesis presents visual language as a generally cohesive stream of identity that was joined by other identity versions that weren't conflicting with the official narratives, the second part discusses various distinct versions of culture identity that problematizes the homogenous status of official narratives and exposes diversity of cultural identities in contemporary Mexico.

In terms of ethnography, the thesis is based on two long-term and two short-term field research carried out in Mexico between 2006–2013. In terms of theory, it draws on inspirations from symbolic and visual anthropology (Geertz 2000; Banks, Morphy 1999; Grimshaw 2001; Pink 2001), theories of national identity and nationalism (mainly Lomnitz 2001; Anderson 2008; Hobsbawm 1983; Gellner 1993; Brubaker 2006; Eriksen 2007) and postcolonial studies (Mbembe 2006; Said 2006). Based on this research, the author comes up with four main findings. Firstly, visual communication in public space is an important weapon of the weak (Scott 1987) in the case of Mexico. Citizens use visual communication as a vehicle to intervene with official culture and to subvert firm and impenetrable systems of power, such as the colonial governance in New Spain, dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz or present authoritative governance of PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) and the mafia structure that is connected to it. Secondly, art in public space plays a significant part in the process of negotiation and subversion across the Mexican territory and history and therefore is important to add its research into the main studies of culture and political phenomena, both – past and present. Thirdly, Mexicans only partially

identify with the official version of national identity, mostly because it's stale and doesn't address their needs. Fourthly, the thesis examines prominent streams of unofficial national (and cultural) identity and explains their cultural basis, how they are related to everyday life and why they appear throughout present day Mexico.
