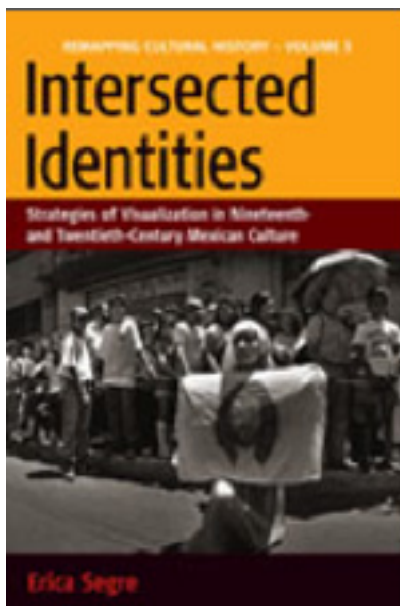


## **Erica Segre's *Intersected Identities: Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture***

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Segre, Erica. *Intersected Identities: Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007. 316 pages; 119 black and white illustrations. \$85.00 cloth.



*Intersected Identities: Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture* is an insightful contribution to the study of Mexican culture and a welcome addition to the field of visual studies. It joins a wealth of scholarship that looks beyond the Mexican mural movement and its major exponents (José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros) to interrogate the intricate role of the visual in the formation of Mexican national identity. The wide scope of the book, which covers two centuries, allows Erica Segre to explore change and continuity of visual discourses across time and interconnections between artists and a wide array of media. To do so, she draws from a variety of sources that include 19th century illustrated periodicals and writers, as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century photography, film, architecture, and digital art.

*Intersected Identities* is composed of eight chapters organized chronologically and thematically that can be read as discrete essays. If read sequentially, Segre argues that they are designed to “resonate with cumulative interconnections and contrasts, and to reflect the conceptual richness of visual practices in Mexico” (2). Each chapter includes a generous number of black and white illustrations. Segre’s goals are to place photography and reproductive media as central players in the construction and interrogation of visual identities and to suggest revisions to “the monolithic nature and persistence of a fundamentalist ‘mexicanicity’ in the visual arts”

(2). The introduction establishes a thematic unity between otherwise disconnected chapters in which Segre presents the style and organization of the book as “heteroclite” and the product of “intellectual serendipity” and archival research (2). At times, Segre’s heteroclite style delivers a creative and insightful interconnection between themes across time, only noticeable when the book is read as a whole. Worth commenting on are the interconnections between Mexican and European intellectual trends and artistic movements that Segre discusses throughout the book.

The first two chapters look at how advances within regimes of vision influenced literary genres of the 19th century and how these preoccupations bled into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Segre locates in *costumbrismo* iconography and in the work of Ignacio Manuel Altamirano two currents that underpinned Mexican visual culture for the next century: the tradition of the figurative and the picturesque and an awareness of the problematic uses of visual technologies, both as anthropological tools and as instruments of popular empowerment.

The last six chapters discuss 20<sup>th</sup> century film, architecture, and graphic arts, focusing on photography. Segre argues that photography is a medium in which the invisible—either as what is left out from the frame or the eye that looks through the viewfinder—is precisely what calls into question the stability of identities and the power relations that constitute them. The interaction between medium and content as well as the cross-fertilization between media becomes prominent in these chapters. For instance, in chapter three Segre compares the monumentality of a sequence of graphics by Leopoldo Méndez as they are being projected on the cinema screen to 1920s murals.

Chapter four looks at the urbanization of Mexico City beginning in the 1940s, as photographed by Nacho López and showcased in films by Luis Buñuel and Ismael Rodríguez. For Segre, these works seek to configure a legible identity, often ironically, of the transformations of the urban environment and a “dislocated modernity” (132). The question of Indian ethnicity, discussed in the first two chapters, is revisited in chapter five through the photographs of Mariana Yampolsky, Graciela Iturbide, and Flor Garduño. In this chapter, Segre defines photography as “an instrument of surface definition and critical unmasking” (158). The formal and conceptual underpinnings of photography as surface are taken up in chapter six through the metaphor of skin, along with a discussion of photographers working in the 1990s. In chapter seven, the veil becomes an allegory to explore the portrayal of different types of cloths, *huipiles*, *rebozos*, *sábanas* and *lienzos*, which constitute one of the most recurrent motifs of black and white photography throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Particularly interesting are the connections that Segre draws between the medium of photography itself and the aforementioned cloths. In chapter eight, Segre discusses the use of archaeological fragments in the work of national and post-nationalist artists including Manuel and Lola Álvarez Bravo, Silvia Gruner, and Gerardo Suter. For Segre, the archaeological fragment and photography share a natural affinity as both make virtue of the incomplete (249). Moreover, Segre argues that the archeological fragment is the legacy that the Mexican Revolution bestowed on the project of modernity and a recurrent

motif used to interrogate and circumscribe identities in the work of numerous artists.

The strengths of this study are Segre's visual and hermeneutical examinations that cover the problematic discourses ascribed to visual technology as well as a discussion of photography's poetical associations as an archeological fragment, a veil, and as a metaphor for human skin. Its extensive bibliography and suggested list of further readings should also be mentioned. As a book that presents itself as an introduction to Mexican visual culture, its shortcomings are Segre's dense writing style, its disjointed methodology and organization, and, most of all, the missed opportunity to historicize the development of a "fundamentalist mexicanicity in the visual arts," a notion that the author presents as given. It is also disappointing that the book does not include a conclusion tying together the interconnections between chapters and themes, something Segre sets out as one of the intentions of the book in her introduction (1). These points aside, *Intersected Identities* presents a compelling and diverse discussion of the ways in which Mexican artists have questioned their position in relation to historical uses of mechanically reproduced art forms, between disciplines, and official visual discourses. It should be of interest to specialists on Mexican history and visual culture in general.

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