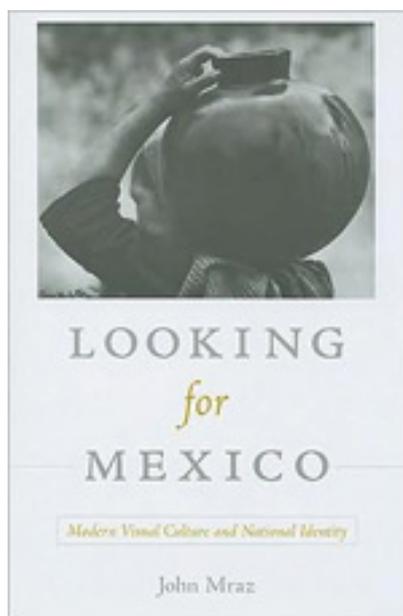


Looking for Mexico and Errant Modernism

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Mraz, John. *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. 360 pages; 53 illustrations. \$84.95 cloth.

Gabara, Esther. *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 376 pages; 74 illustrations. \$94.95 cloth.

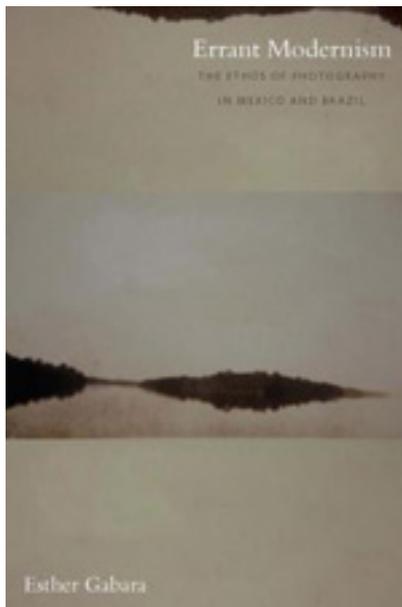


Where does modernity originate? Along what south-north or east-west paths does it travel in the early to mid 20th century? How accessible to hegemonic state projects are the methodologies, aesthetics, and practices of photography that are called modernist? Are certain technologies inherently modern or can all of them be turned also to the reification of essentialist, even retrograde, representations of the nation? Are modernist aesthetics necessarily apolitical or are they especially suited to progressive interventions? What is the relationship between the modern and the popular? How does all of this contribute to definitions of *lo mexicano* in Mexico during and after the Revolution? New books by John Mraz and Esther Gabara address all of these questions.¹

Mraz is well known for his encyclopedic knowledge of Mexican visual culture, and his prolific scholarship presents this knowledge from various angles. In this book, he begins with the Porfiriato and ends in this century. He addresses multiple visual genres, including films, *tarjetas de visita*, photography, magazines, and more within a frame that encompasses both Mexican and non-Mexican production of visual culture. His central premise is that “over the past 150 years or so, modern visual culture has increasingly become the site where Mexican identities have been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed” (250). This

frame and the galloping pace of the book offer insight into his perspective, as does his statement that he ends the book with two filmic representations of Frida Kahlo's life because they offer "an opportunity to explore transculturalism in the twenty-first century as Mexico and the United States grow ever closer" (6). For Mraz, modernity and modernization are isomorphic, both increasing rapidly and irreversibly at a fast clip as time goes by. Like some theorists of globalization, he seems to view this process as linear and teleological, resulting in a coming together of Mexico and the United States over time; however, I find arguments that modernity and modernism are more cyclical and textured convincing, perhaps emerging in one place but being articulated more forcefully in others, claimed by hegemonic projects and reclaimed by social actors who turn them to projects of resistance against the same projects.

For Mraz, certain technologies, such as photography, are inherently modern although not inherently progressive, and he does an excellent job of detailing the hegemonic uses of photography in the construction of decidedly anti-popular images of *lo mexicano*. He writes, "I define visual modern culture as that produced by technical images and sounds," with massification as a necessary component (3). Even while offering richly detailed descriptions of the uses of modern technologies for the production of *la historia patria* via *la historia gráfica*, he too frequently locates the origins of modernist thinking outside of Mexico. For example, Mraz describes photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo's lack of recognition in the United States during much of his very long career, until a modest exhibition of his work in Pasadena, California in 1971 and a massive retrospective at New York's MOMA in 1997. At the same time, he emphasizes that contemporaries including Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Paul Strand, and Henri Cartier Bresson "acknowledged his capacity" immediately (89–90). While Weston and Strand had achieved some success in photography prior to their travels, Cartier Bresson was still a young photographer and not yet world-renowned for his talent at capturing "the decisive moment" when he briefly traveled to Mexico, and Modotti was more infamous than famous when she crossed paths with Cartier Bresson. That Mraz corroborates Alvarez Bravo's worth by reference to now-famous foreigners situates the United States and Europe as the arbiters and authorities on both taste and modernity. Further, Mraz's argument that the United States and Mexico are growing closer over time is not persuasive; it is arguable they grow ever further apart, with the "Mexican renaissance" of 1921–1941 representing an all too brief moment when modernism was viewed perhaps not as originating in Mexico City, but certainly as being more vibrantly and powerfully articulated there than anywhere else in the world.



This is where Gabara's work represents a powerful contribution and corrective. It is important to note that Gabara's book focuses on what she calls "the ethos of photography" in both Brazil and Mexico, but in this review I will refer only to the sections on Mexico. Gabara offers a theoretically sophisticated argument that "in the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, photography played a crucial role in eliciting questions about the forms of ethical responsibility and the promises of innovative aesthetics. Once the camera changed hands, from foreigner to native [...] modernists retook photography's naturalized function as a privileged medium of modern representation and used it to alter the very image of modernity" (1). For Gabara, modernism in Latin America is not "charted as a historical progression toward abstraction [...]. It is not characterized by a particular attitude toward cosmopolitanism or nationalism, nor does it faithfully reject or celebrate modern technologies" (7). This is a very different framing than Mraz's and opens up a space for the contradictions and multidirectionality, or "mosaic of paradoxes" (Alfredo Bosi's term), inherent to modernism (7).

Gabara articulates a theory of "ethos" as "a way to theorize a set of modernist practices, both photographs themselves and photographic concepts and language in literature that simultaneously engages ethics and aesthetics" (6). This concept enables her to evade old and static arguments about whether true modernism was better represented by the aesthetic formalism of Weston or the "critical nationalism" of figures like Mário de Andrade, who named his practice as such. Further, her notion of ethos contributes to her development of a theory of "errant modernism," building on Roberto Schwarz's notion of "ideas out of place":

The titular concept of *errancy* thus begins by tracking the movement and disruptions of these key ideas out of place, rather than by judging their originality or condemning their submission to influence. Errancy [...] is first a question of wandering, but also implies an error, which in the case of Latin American modernism is often an intentional one. (13)

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She later adds to the notion of errancy, writing, “[Mário’s practice of] *errar* makes possible a unique theory of the local that combines nationalism, far-ranging Americanism, and cosmopolitanism” (46). Gabara manages to disentangle economic modernization and modernism, powerfully demonstrating that modernism does not radiate out from centers to peripheries, but rather is articulated, disarticulated, critiqued, muddled, and messed up as it bounces back and forth between hegemonic and progressive projects.

Gabara deploys García-Canclini’s (1995) use of the “popular,” viewing it as a product of a particular moment in Latin America’s recent history when university reforms produced a more enduring relationship between elite and mass culture than in other modernist locations. She examines the ways that modernism’s dialogue with mass culture is less than a flirtation or cooptation but something rather more substantial. (This is an assertion we see also in Mraz, but framed more simply as picturesque vs. anti-picturesque approaches to *lo mexicano*). In this way, she implicitly raises the question as to whether what she refers to as errant modernities are the same as what Valentina Napolitano calls “vernacular modernities.” Napolitano writes, “the transfer of knowledge between different actors, and the appropriation—as well as the circulation—of knowledge becomes important terrain for understanding how modernity and its failure are reinscribed, reimagined, and reproduced” (2002: 15). While Napolitano’s work is a recent ethnography of a semi-urban neighborhood in Guadalajara, there are rich connections between what she sees as “modernization without democracy” in the failure of the Mexican revolution to deliver on its promises of equality, and what Gabara sees as the failure, earlier in the century, of the Mexican state to deliver on the promises granted by the Constitution of 1917 (137).

While the terms “vernacular” and “popular” build more clearly on an established tradition in Latin American and Latin Americanist scholarship to emphasize the concerns and perspectives of those most disadvantaged by the inequalities produced and perpetuated in economic “modernization,” Gabara’s use of a different term, errancy, simultaneously represents her most provocative, productive, and frustrating stance. Gabara makes productive the ways that Latin American modernists get modernism too late or “wrong” according to canonical European and North American conceptions. She also interestingly puts both popular classes within Latin America as well as Latin Americans in general on an equivalent field, engaging notions of modernism always from the fringes of what is considered to be its origins or legitimate place, in the North or among the elites. Further, she makes interesting connections between this errancy and notions of promiscuity, vulgarization and the gendered conceptualizations of the always effeminate “*bellas artes públicas*.” Nonetheless, I fear the very sophistication of her theories may cause some readers to get her basic argument backwards and interpret her notion of errancy as an old-fashioned view of Latin America actually getting modernity “wrong.” The irreverent and at times hilarious connections she draws are sometimes cloaked in such a subtle theoretical frame that this book may not be accessible to those who are not already predisposed to her revision of conceptualizations of modernity. In this way, Mraz’s far more accessible and less theorized

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frame may, for some readers, be more effective at least in that it leaves less room for reader interpretation, even while it does not go nearly so far, and does so in a substantially different direction than Gabara's text.

Alyshia Gálvez is a cultural anthropologist (PhD, NYU 2004) whose work focuses on the efforts by Mexican immigrants in New York City to achieve the rights of citizenship. Professor Gálvez joined the Department of Latin American and Puerto Rican Studies at Lehman College/City University of New York in the Fall of 2007, as an Assistant Professor. Her book *Guadalupe in New York: Devotion and the Struggle for Citizenship Rights among Mexican Immigrants* was released in December 2009 by New York University Press. Other recent publications include "Traveling Virgins/Virgenes Viajeras," a special issue of the journal *e-misférica* which she co-guest-edited; the anthology *Performing Religion in the Americas: Media, Politics and Devotion in the 21st Century* (Berg/Seagull 2007); and articles in *Social Text*, *International Migration*, *e-misférica* and *Revista Enfoques* (Chile). She is currently working on a book manuscript based on research on the experiences of Mexican immigrant women in New York City's public healthcare system during pregnancy and childbirth which is in contract with Rutgers University Press. In addition, she is guest curating an exhibition at Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ, entitled: *Mexican Modernities: Art and Revolution, 1920–1941*.

Notes

¹ Of particular interest to scholars of performance studies is Gabara's astonishing historiography in the "Epilogue" on Don Carlos Balmori, a character "played" in events known as *balmoreadas* in the 1920s by Concepción Jurado, also known as Conchita, a remarkable "performance artist *avant la lettre*."

Works Cited

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