

“WE HAVE ENTERED A THIRD [VISUAL] PERIOD OF HISTORY”: *Thoughts on the Study of Photography* by John Mraz

INTERVIEWER’S PREFACE

As the area of visual studies grows within the field of Latin American Studies, one area of especially rapid expansion is Latin American photography. In this interview (July 1, 2015; Mexico City) John Mraz, a pioneer in the study of Mexican photography, not only shares the story of how he came to undertake the study of visual history, but also reveals important lessons he has learned over the course of his study and career. He offers both cautions and encouragement for those interested in the study of the still image, a guide through the research concerns of this visual age.

In the words of Rubén Gallo, director of Latin American Studies at Princeton University, long-time Mexico City resident John Mraz is “undoubtedly the world expert on Mexican photography.”¹ In his 40-year career, he has earned a level-three status from the Sistema Nacional de Investigadores, the Mexican national research body, a sure sign of prestige within Mexican universities that is achievable only by researchers of the highest standards and diffusion. He is the author of five books and co-author of four others, along with more than 150 articles, chapters, interviews, and review essays on the history of Mexico and Cuba as represented in photography, cinema, video, and digital imagery. These have been published in English, Spanish, German, Italian, French, Portuguese, Catalan, Galician, and Korean. Mraz has also directed six videotapes, three films, a digital production, and more than 20 other audiovisual projects on Latin American history. The productions are distributed in the United States, Europe, and Latin America in Spanish, English, French, and Catalan. Further, he served as the curator, essayist, and consultant for 15 photographic exhibits on Latin America, displayed in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. His reflections are essential reading for those embarking on the study of visual history in Latin America, as well as those already deeply entrenched in this field.

Nathaniel Gardner

1. Promotional statement on the cover of John Mraz’s *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012). 459

NG: *How did you get into the analysis of photography?*

JM: It was somewhat serendipitous. My dissertation in History was on the representation of history in Cuban cinema, and I presumably would have continued working in cinema here in Mexico. But it really goes back to 1971, when I made my first audiovisual, “The History of Mexico as Seen by the Muralists.” At the time, I was moving directly into doctoral studies from a BA program in the University of California at Santa Barbara. I got slides of the murals from the art library, which I put together with music and some texts by Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes. It was probably pretty bad, but I had discovered how I wanted to do history. From there, I went on to co-direct several Super-8 films in the early 1970s: *Coming Apart: America in the 60s*, *Cracks in the Wall: America in the 50s*, and *Todo es más sabroso con . . .*, a film essay on the continuing neocolonialism in Mexico. I had decided: this is what I am going to do—I’m not going to do anything else. I was in intellectual history before, but once I had found what I really wanted to do I put all my eggs in that basket.

I had worked at a variety of jobs, one at a steel mill, and went to different colleges before coming back to academia, so I was already a mature student when I finally got to the University of California Santa Barbara in 1967. I’d started university in 1961 at UCLA, dropped out, and then spent semesters at Whittier College and Mexico City College in quick succession. Realizing that I was not yet ready for college, I volunteered for the Army draft in 1963. When I got out of military service in 1966 I worked in dam construction to make money, and eventually returned to a junior college, Orange Coast College, for a year before being accepted again at the University of California and entering UCSB as an undergraduate in 1967.

I studied first with a very conservative professor in Portuguese empire history, and focused on Brazil. It was through my work with him that I got directly into the PhD program in 1970. That year a Chicano professor, Jesús Chavarría, arrived in the History Department and founded the first Chicano study center in the United States. He was charismatic and intellectually stimulating, a Marxist who had written a book on the Peruvian socialist José Carlos Mariátegui. He was my only real mentor, both academically and politically.

I decided to focus on Latin American history through film, and chose a thesis topic based on *La Decena Trágica*, Mexico City’s ten tragic days in February 1913. The dissertation was to be a history told through documentary film footage and photographs. I used my studies in split-brain theory—the idea that

one side of the brain reads words and the other images— to defend the project, arguing that a film could portray the experience of the time better than the written word and thus would be an important way to represent the pressure on the populace of Mexico City to accept Huerta's dictatorship. I marshalled other theoretical justifications as well, stimulated in part by Hayden White's groundbreaking notion that all histories are just narrative forms.² However, the project was stopped short by the director of the History Department's graduate program: "You are not going to make a laughingstock of this department." Thus, in 1975 I was granted a Regents' fellowship, a terminal MA degree, and told to go away.

UCSB had an excellent library on Mexico. It was there that I first saw the Agustín Casasola albums, began to make historical documentaries with other graduate students, and co-curated an exhibit of historical photographs. At that time it was very difficult for grad students to be accepted in history conferences, but we were allowed to show our films at them. I became more and more deeply involved in the visual perspective. A lot of visual experimentation was going on then in the University of California and California State University systems: Paul Vanderwood and Brad Burns were writing on cinema; Carlos Cortés, Leon Campbell, and Patrick H. Griffin were making films. All of them, especially Paul, were very supportive of my struggle to do history with modern media.

My conviction that I would use images to teach history became stronger through the first classes I gave at UCSB, which were held at Ventura Community College in 1974–75. My night class, from 8:00 PM to 11:00 PM, was composed largely of adults—firemen, secretaries, policemen, housewives—people who would come in after working all day. The very first night I got up to lecture them from behind the speaker's podium, as my professors did, and saw their eyes began to drop like shutters. So I decided that starting with the next session we would first talk about the assigned reading, then go and get some coffee. On returning to the classroom, I turned out the lights and showed them slides while reading accounts about say, the Civil War, letters from prisoners in Andersonville, for example. They loved it. From then on that became my method for teaching history because it offered the possibility for students to interact with something they could see for themselves, as well as hear participant accounts, instead of having to listen to a professor expound on topics with which they really had no way of interacting.

2. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

Although I had been thrown out of the UCSB History doctorate program, I learned that Jesús Chavarría had been talking to David Sweet, a History professor at UC Santa Cruz, who found my work on using photos and film to do history interesting. In 1975 I went up to Santa Cruz to talk with David about the possibility of continuing my studies there. During my visit, I met Julianne Burton, who was just becoming a big name in the study of the New Latin American Cinema. David and Julianne made the pitch to the graduate school that I should be admitted in History, although there was really no graduate program in that discipline. The graduate dean counterargued that I would never finish the dissertation or amount to much of anything in the academic world (I learned of this only afterward).

However, new history journals with an interest in modern media were appearing, and I was supporting my application to UCSC with published texts. I had published an article on the Cuban film *Lucía* in *Film & History*, and another, on how to make historical films, in *The History Teacher*. Having articles accepted for publication was unusual for grad students in that period. That experience taught me something I always emphasize in talking with young professors and graduate students who want to work in modern media, citing Bob Dylan: “To live outside the law, you must be honest.” If you are doing something new, you have to produce more than scholars who are following beaten paths in order to convince your peers that you are not a fraud, an epithet applied to me on more than one occasion during my graduate studies.

After a year at UCSC, I was finding it hard to make ends meet, so I re-examined my plan to make a 16mm film for the dissertation, because it was very expensive. I settled on the representation of history in Cuban cinema, and spent five years at UCSC, mainly in Film Studies. The person I worked with the most was Janey Place, one of the first in the United States to get a doctorate in Cinema Studies. She worked on visual style, and helped me find a method for my madness. I finally finished my dissertation in 1986, while I was living in Mexico, and it was based largely on the method of visual analysis I learned from her. For a period, I continued to direct visual productions at UCSC, making audiovisuals on Latin American history, as well as videotapes and photographic exhibits.

I left UCSC in 1980, but I hadn't yet finished my dissertation and had little or no opportunities for a job. I met Eli Bartra while living in Berkeley, and she invited me to move to Mexico in 1981. I had kept my hand in making video, filming the hotel and restaurant workers' strike in San Francisco, as well as acts in solidarity with the guerrilla in El Salvador, for a leftist video collective. I was also making video for an ethnography project with the National Institute of Education, which was my day job. That background was enormously helpful

for me in getting my first work in Mexico, which was in television. And this is another thing I say often to students: working in visual studies can open up many opportunities beyond teaching.

In 1982, I got a position at the Centro de Estudios Históricos sobre el Movimiento Obrero Mexicano (CEHSMO). Meeting CEHSMO's founder and director, Enrique Suárez Gaona, was my first experience with what I call Mexico's "enlightened administrators." I had applied for a job in publications, but when he saw my resume he appointed me Coordinador de Historia Gráfica, and provided me with the money to buy photos from archives, the equipment to copy them, and assistants to work with me. I also curated an exhibit, continuing to work with images from the standpoint of a historian. I was using them in terms of the ways their "transparency" offered the opportunity to do visual social history. For example, I did a historical ethnography on nixtamal workers in 1919.³

In 1982 incoming President Miguel de la Madrid dismantled CEHSMO. Enrique encouraged me to take the photo archive with me when I left, as it would only be mothballed. Soon after, I met the rector of the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (UAP), Alfonso Vélez Pliego, who was another visionary. He suggested that I bring my project on the visual history of Mexican workers to Puebla. In 1984, I entered the Centro de Investigaciones Históricas del Movimiento Obrero at the UAP. It was then that I began looking at the photos by the Hermanos Mayo, not only in relation to workers' history, but also as to the brothers themselves as "authors" of working-class photography and photojournalism.⁴

Although I was still working on my dissertation in Cuban film, I continued to think about Mexican cinema, taking copious notes on the films I saw on television and in theatres. However, one of the problems of studying film in the 1980s was that you had to watch film on its own time, when it was available to be shown and there was a fixed place to show it, while you could look at photographs on your own time. But that wasn't always easy either—the director of the UNAM Fílmoteca essentially closed off any possibilities of my working with their materials. However, Eleazar López Zamora, founding director of the Fototeca Nacional, invited me to write a book on whichever

3. John Mraz, "En calidad de esclavas": obreras en los molinos de nixtamal, México, diciembre, 1919," *Historia Obrera* 6:24 (1982): 2–14.

4. Los Hermanos Mayo was a collective of Spanish photojournalists, made up of two sets of brothers. Paco, Cándido, and Julio Souza Fernández were brothers, as were Faustino and Pablo del Castillo Cubillo. Together they formed a photo agency in Spain, Hermanos Mayo, which later transferred its activities to Mexico where its members sought refuge after the Spanish Civil War. Their archive in the Archivo General de la Nación contains 5 million negatives.

of their archives interested me.⁵ That’s one of the incredible things about working in Mexico: some myopic bureaucrats may shut you out, but there are enlightened administrators who will nonetheless invite you to do projects for their institutions.

Around 1988 I accepted Eleazar’s invitation and decided to write a book about the photojournalist Nacho López (Ignacio López Bocanegra). Until then, I had seen photographs only as a useful tool to write or teach about history, or as something that belonged to the art world—something on the margins. I hadn’t yet conceptualized photography as the center of the visual world—now the hypervisual world—and it is! With the invitations I received, and the support offered me, as well as my research position, which gave me time for my projects, I moved more and more into photography. I’m fortunate that I did, because in Mexico there is an exceptionally large and vibrant community of people studying photography, and struggling with how to advance its investigation. Informal and formal seminars have been taking place since the mid-1980s and continue today. It is much more exciting that other visual fields, such as art or film, because we are inventing the methodologies as we carry out projects, and there is a great deal of sharing, of generosity. We are at a more primitive stage in the study of photography, and that makes it much more interesting. I saw photography as a very open and dynamic field, but the invitations were also an important stimulus. I was invited by Pati Mendoza, director of the Centro de la Imagen and also a visionary, to curate an exhibit on the New Photojournalism of Mexico in 1996, and then by the INAH director to curate the National Exhibit on the Centenary of the Mexican Revolution in 2010. At the time, I was also writing regularly about photography in *La Jornada Semanal*, a weekly supplement to the newspaper *La Jornada* in magazine format that everybody in Mexico read in the early 1990s. That enabled me to be a public intellectual in a way that would have been difficult as an academic in the United States.

NG: *What changes have you seen in the study of photography over the past 40 years?*

JM: In History, the changes have been enormous: over the last 15 years or so good historians have begun writing seriously about photography, rather than just using photographs as illustrations. Of course, this new attention to photography is occurring across all of the disciplines. The sciences have been much more open to photography than any of the humanities. Visual anthropology also has a long bibliography. In Mexico, and to a certain extent elsewhere, in Brazil, for example, young historians are now doing very solid

5. National archive of photographs in Mexico. Fototeca Nacional del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

work in photography. I think that it is part of the hypervisual world in which we live, and has to be incorporated. The great universities like Harvard, Yale, Oxford, the Sorbonne, or UNAM don't have positions for people who are using photos to do studies in the humanities or the social sciences. Where positions do exist, at Princeton, for instance, they are usually in History of Art.

For a long time, I too felt that the history of photography was a sub-discipline of the History of Art, but I was disabused of that idea during a UNAM doctoral defense. A woman had written a brilliant PhD thesis on Winfield Scott, based on photo archives. She was pursuing her degree in the Art History Department because there was nowhere else one could study photography in the UNAM. The woman had gone through archives in the United States and Mexico, constructing an excellent thesis.⁶ When the time came to decide if she should be awarded honors for her dissertation, I argued for giving her that recognition, but the art historian denied it, saying, "No, she did not prove the aesthetic value of the photos." I started laughing, saying that those photos were made to sell real estate and tourism in Mexico, and had no aesthetic value.

All of a sudden, as we say in Mexico, "*Me cayó el veinte*" (figuratively, the penny dropped), and I finally got it. I realized in a flash that the history of photography is not a sub-discipline of Art History. To be generous, I would say that only 5 percent of photographs ever made were taken by artists. What are we to do with the rest? How are we going to study family photography, photojournalism, landscape photography, organizational photography, imperial photography, subaltern photography, revolutionary and postrevolutionary photography, Indianist and Indian photography, photography of and by workers, or the photography produced by companies for their own purposes? The list will become even longer as we define the different genres or functions of photography, and every one of them will need its own methodology to analyze it. My sense is that we need to develop rigorous approaches to this hypervisual world, and that students want the different disciplines to allow them to pursue analyses of visualities. I think that those are the big changes, and I would have to say that the transformations have occurred in terms of concrete projects more than theoretical speculation.

The real advances have been made in histories such as those done in the United States and Europe by Alan Sekula, Sally Stein, Chris Pinney, Peter Hales, Deborah Poole, James Faris, Martha Sandweiss, James Krippner, and

6. This dissertation has been published as a book. Beatriz Malagón Girón, *Winfield Scott: retrato de un fotógrafo norteamericano en el Porfiriato* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2012).

Parvati Nair, among others.⁷ Among the important scholars in Latin America are Rebeca Monroy, Patricia Massé, Alberto del Castillo, Fernando Aguayo, Rosa Casanova, Ana Mauad, Carlos Alberto Sampaio Barbosa, Daniel Escorza, Ariel Arnal, Miguel Ángel Berumen, Magdalena Broquetas, José Antonio Rodríguez, and Samuel Villela.⁸ A few general works by historians also make contributions, for example, those by Boris Kossoy, Robert Levine, and Peter Burke.⁹

Analyzing photos in their contexts is the key; contextualization is the royal road. When I argued for contextualization in a seminar I attended with literary studies scholars, one of them would respond with “And decontextualization,” seemingly oblivious of the fact that 99 percent of the photographs we have to work with are *already* decontextualized. I think that it will be interesting to see how and where these studies develop, because I don’t think that the changes will come within the great universities until the need becomes so obvious that they will cherry-pick the top people in the field, as Princeton did with Martha Sandweiss. The world we live in has changed dramatically, and we have to recognize that, incorporating visual studies rigorously into our work. Kevin Coleman is a good example of a young historian who is working rigorously in photography and history. I think his book on Honduran

7. Alan Sekula, *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948–1968* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 1983); Sally Stein, *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute, 1987); Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997); Peter Bacon Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); James C. Faris, *Navajo and Photography: A Critical History of the Representation of an American People* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Martha Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); James Krippner, *Paul Strand in Mexico* (New York: Aperture, 2010); Parvati Nair, *A Different Light: The Photography of Sebastião Salgado* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

8. Rebeca Monroy Nasr, *Historias para ver: Enrique Díaz, fotorreportero* (Mexico City: UNAM; INAH, 2003); Patricia Massé Zendejas, *Simulacro y elegancia en tarjetas de visita: fotografías de Cruces y Campa* (Mexico City: INAH, 1998); Alberto del Castillo Troncoso, *Ensayo sobre el movimiento estudiantil de 1968. La fotografía y la construcción de un imaginario* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora; UNAM, 2012); Fernando Aguayo, *Estampas ferrocarrileras. Fotografía y grabado 1860–1890* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 2003); Rosa Casanova, *Guillermo Kahlo: luz, piedra y rostro* (Toluca: Fondo Editorial Estado de México, 2013); Ana Maria Mauad, *Poses e flagrantes: ensaios sobre história e fotografias* (Niterói: Universidade Federal Fluminense, 2008); Carlos Alberto Sampaio Barbosa, *A fotografia a serviço de Clío. Uma interpretação da história visual da Revolução Mexicana (1900–1940)* (São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2006); Daniel Escorza Rodríguez, *Agustín Víctor Casasola. El fotógrafo y su agencia* (Mexico City: INAH, 2014); Ariel Arnal, *Atila de tinta y plata. Fotografía del zapatismo en la prensa de la ciudad de México entre 1910 y 1915* (Mexico City: INAH, 2010); Miguel Ángel Berumen, 1911. *La batalla de Ciudad Juárez, Vol. II, Las imágenes* (Ciudad Juárez: Cuadro por Cuadro, 2005); Magdalena Broquetas, ed., *Fotografía en Uruguay. Historia y usos sociales, 1840–1930* (Montevideo: Centro de Fotografía, 2011); José Antonio Rodríguez, *Fotografías en México, 1872–1960* (Madrid: Turner, 2012); Samuel Villela, *Sara Castrejón: fotografía de la Revolución* (Mexico City: INAH, 2010).

9. Boris Kossoy, *Fotografía e historia*, Paula Sibilia, trans. (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca de la Mirada, 2001); Robert Levine, *Images of History: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Latin American Photographs as Documents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989); Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

photography is absolutely brilliant.¹⁰ In it, he creates an interface between the imperial photography of the United Fruit Company, the subaltern imagery of a local Honduran photographer, and the family photography of Palestinian immigrants, in a very accessible history.

I fear that students are getting turned off from history, in part because historians are not engaging with modern media. We are learning very different ways of thinking about the world and our field of academia is not giving us the tools to understand that. This is a tragedy, because we are losing our brightest students who intuitively recognize that the visual is what is happening. My fear is that history could very easily be marginalized in the same way that classics was in the twentieth century. Everybody studied classics in the nineteenth century, and the same could be said of history in the twentieth. But, I think history could very easily be left behind. I come back to history again and again because I am a historian and that is the way that I approach the world. I believe that if we want to talk about photography we have to talk about contextualization because contextualizing is something historians do. The study of history teaches us that we are products of our time, that the way we perceive the world is a product of the historical context in which we have grown up, and that our vision is a product of our class, our gender, and our race. That, in turn, teaches us that if we change the historical context we change ways of perceiving and thinking about the world.

NG: *Which other theoretical studies on photography have you come to admire? Why?*

JM: I believe that the theoretical approaches of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag are still suggestive, but I think the work of Vilém Flusser and his idea of “technical images” is fundamental today.¹¹ He described the world as having moved through three phases. The first was a visual phase; the second was a textual phase created by the invention of lineal writing, and we are now moving into another visual phase, with the invention of photography. This visual phase is going to be very different from the first phase because of the technical processes we now have. It is all changing so rapidly with digitization and the Internet and social media that you have to look now to scholars such as Fred Ritchin, who I think has certainly written among the best books about

10. Kevin Coleman, *A Camera in the Garden of Eden: The Self-Forging of the Banana Republic* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016).

11. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977); Vilém Flusser, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*, Anthony Mathews, trans. (London: Reaktion Books, 2000); Flusser, *Writings*, Erik Eisel, trans; Andreas Ströhl, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Nancy Ann Roth, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

the new visual world.¹² Ariella Azoulay is also an important theoretician.¹³ I believe that technical images show us the world as scenes rather than processes. A photograph is not a narrative: you read it very differently from the way you read lineal texts. You don’t read a photograph left to right or right to left, or top to bottom. You read a photograph as a whole and you discover elements in it. It is a very different way of thinking. As Flusser says, it is “image thinking” rather than “writing thinking.”

NG: *What are some of the more salient dangers of treating the study of photography like the study of literature?*

JM: I really feel like that is a dead end. I was part of a five-year seminar, The Itinerant Languages of Photography, which originated at a highly respected university. Most of the people invited were from literary studies, because the scholars who obtained funding for it and directed it came from literary studies. Academics from the United States, Great Britain, Mexico, Spain, Brazil, Argentina, and other countries participated. Throughout the meetings, nobody ever talked about the “languages” of photography because nobody has the tools to do that. What they ostensibly focused on was the itinerancy of photographs—a very useful concept, a very important notion. I gave the opening lecture at the first meeting, about the itinerant icons of the Mexican Revolution. Over the next three days, I didn’t understand a thing. Everything was focused on Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, and a host of other postmodern literary theoreticians. My thought was that these are not visual people. They have no background in looking at images because they are not really interested in images, but just apply literary theory to the study of photography.

I believe that the best way to analyze photographs is to compare them to other photographs, but this approach requires that you have significant experience with images, a large catalogue of pictures in your head. This kind of analysis allows you to ask, “How does this photo convey meaning?” For example, if we want to understand how Nacho López photographed the *piropo*—the “compliments” men give to women in the street—we have to compare his depiction to a similar image, one by Ruth Orkin. Nacho’s photo of a beautiful woman walking in Mexico City in front of a bunch of men who “compliment” her is shot from a low angle.¹⁴ This angle gives her power—she is delighted to receive the piropos the men direct toward her. You can

12. Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1999); Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2009).

13. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Books, 2012).

14. This image is taken from the photo-essay “Cuando una mujer guapa parte plaza por Madero,” first published in 1953. Mraz’s discussion of this image can be found in *Nacho López: Mexican Photographer*, 117–121.

see López's intention by comparing his photo to the high-angle shot by Ruth Orkin of a woman in Italy being besieged by her "admirers."¹⁵ In Orkin's photo the woman is trapped by the men and the physical context of buildings that loom over her; the high angle reinforces the offensiveness of the piropo. Both are directed photos, indicating explicitly the intention of the photographers, but it is only by comparing the two that you can talk about the meanings each creates.

In my experience, literary scholars are steeped in postmodern theory that I find impossible to read or understand. I think it is a fundamental mistake to import literary theory, which is often obscurantist, to talk about photography. Further, I always remember what Nietzsche said regarding the difference between those who are profound and those who wish to appear profound: those who are profound express themselves in the clearest way possible so you can see to the depths of their profundity, whereas those who wish to appear profound express themselves in the most obscure ways so that you cannot see that they have no profundity.¹⁶ At my age, and with my work, I feel that if I do not understand something, it is not my problem. Flusser is not easy but he is worth breaking your teeth over. I am not sure that is true of literary theory, above all as it is applied to photography. Walter Kaufmann, the translator of Nietzsche and Hegel, once wrote that having to work very hard to understand somebody like Hegel can make you think that the author has a lot to say; his own opinion was that in spite of his labors Hegel did not have so much to offer.

I believe that every discipline has to develop a visual side. A friend of mine in literary studies, Cynthia Steele, said to me that every time a position opens in her department, there is a fight between whether it will go to a literature scholar or somebody in film studies. And what do the students want? They want film. There is perhaps the false idea that film is easier; in truth, films are very difficult to analyze, because they are fundamentally a visual medium. Photography is even more difficult because it offers no narrative. However, I think that the top students choose to study the visual because they recognize that we live in a visual world today.

In the United States and Europe scholars from literary studies are beginning to dominate the study of photography. In reviewing my own bookshelves, I discovered that half of my English-language books on photography were written by literary studies academics. It is they who review manuscripts for

15. This photograph by Ruth Orkin is commonly titled "American Girl in Italy."

16. "Being profound and seeming profound: those who know that they are profound strive for clarity. Those who would like to seem profound to the crowd strive for obscurity. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Vintage Press, 1974), 201–202.

publication and the books eventually published, and they will probably soon be editors of series on photography. How do they review histories of photography? They ask: Where is Derrida? You didn't cite him, so it must be that you have no theory. This emphasis on theory leads to misunderstandings of historians' tasks. For example, a reviewer of my book *Photographing the Mexican Revolution* criticized my concern with establishing the photos' authors, and decried my ignorance of the critique levied by theorists Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Geoffrey Batchen about borrowing auteurist principles from art history. However, the whole focus of my book was to end the myth that Casasola had made all the photos of the Revolution in his archive, and to establish who had made them, and for whom. In the midst of a revolution you are on one side or the other, so every army had its own photographers. In that book, I rewrote the photographic history of the Mexican Revolution, but the only thing the reviewer saw was the absence of theory.

Furthermore, historians and art historians have a very different approach to theory. I read theory. I reread Nietzsche often. I read Flusser and theoreticians from the Frankfurt School, and photographic theory. But we historians use theory as a scaffolding to construct a house. Once it is built, we take the scaffolding down. We don't mention the theorists who have inspired us to write the kind of history we did. And why should we? Theory is important in opening up new questions, leading you to conduct research that you might not have done otherwise. It's not there to be applied like a grid. This is “textolatría” as Flusser calls it—idolatry of the text. That period in history is simply over. We need new thinkers who are interested in the visual.

The tricky thing about the visual is that it looks so easy. People think that anyone can take photographs, and that anyone can analyze them. Janey Place told me a story about some visual style analysis work she conducted during her PhD studies at UCLA. She had argued that there is a visual hint of a romantic relationship between John Wayne and his brother's wife in John Ford's most famous film, *The Searchers*. Her thesis director said that was nonsense. So Janey showed the film to him without sound, demonstrating how the wife touches John Wayne's coat in an endearing way. She proved her point, and her thesis director then said, “But that's obvious!” Well, yes, it was obvious, but only once he was shown it. That is what is difficult about visual analysis. It looks easy, but the moment that you have to sit down and really write in a rigorous way about photography nothing is easy at all. Any discipline that teaches you to look carefully at an image is important. The elements that create meaning in photography—the angles, the focal planes, the illumination, and so on—are relatively limited, but all is mediated by the content of the photos, and the understanding of content is always context-bound. There are contents

whose meaning would be very apparent to Mexicans but not at all apparent to someone who did not have the experience of living in Mexico.

I am not saying that people in literature can't do good work. For example, Mike Weaver, who came from literary studies, did a wonderful job as editor of the journal *History of Photography* at Oxford University from 1991 to 2000. But, rather than focusing on postmodern theory, with which he was well acquainted, he emphasized ways in which to learn to look carefully at a photo. Mike could take a photo and suggest multiple meanings for the image. I can't do that. I don't have that flexibility of mind, and wish I did. I think that researchers could use their literary training to search among those alternative readings. To some extent, that may have been the impetus behind The Itinerant Languages of Photography project I mentioned earlier. However, we most often retreat immediately to what we feel secure in. People shy away from admitting that they might not know how to read a photograph or that they do not know many photographs that could serve as references. But one wonderful thing about an image is that everybody is going to read it from their own personal history—their class, gender, race, and age—and they bring all that when they look at it. The very act of interrogating photographs helps us become visually literate. The world is controlled today through media. If people cannot decipher the messages that are being put into their heads by images, those messages enter their heads as mere ciphers that stimulate consumption.

NG: *If you were able to go back in time and change one of your past projects, which one would it be? How would you change it?*

JM: I would have published some photo-essays in the book *Nacho López: Mexican Photographer*. That was a major mistake on my part. I already had copies of the photographs thanks to Eleazar López Zamora, who sent a photographer with me to the Hemeroteca Nacional. I think that the University of Minnesota Press would have let me include them, and getting permissions wouldn't have been a problem. However, when Minnesota finally accepted the book, I didn't want to complicate things by insisting that they publish the photo-essays as well as the photos—I was just happy to get the book published. To have included some published essays would have enlarged the book's dimensions, and the photo-essays should be there as visible evidence. Those of us who are working on visual culture face difficulties unique to our studies, from finding good reproductions or having them made, to securing the rights to publish them, to convincing the publisher that the story can be most effectively told with images. All these steps require time, energy, and money, but we must be willing to struggle to include the maximum number of images possible. In the end the visual has to be made visible.

The great thing about photography is the way in which it documents the mundane. Nobody writes about the mundane, nobody paints the mundane, but a photo automatically captures the mundane. In Mexico, I often show a photograph of preparations for a feminist protest there in 1971. One of the men is wearing a T-shirt from Boston University, which I use to demonstrate the “Americanization” of Mexican culture.¹⁷ I pose a situation and a question: “You are a historian in the year 2050. What do you find in this photo that is a significant commentary on Mexican culture?” Mexicans very rarely identify the T-shirt; they simply don’t see it. I don’t think even the Mayo brother who took the photo intended to capture that. He was just taking a photo of the preparations for the march. But it is a significant testimony to neocolonial culture.

NG: *What advice would you give a scholar interested in embarking on the study of photographic analysis?*

JM: I would look at lots and lots and lots of photos, and I would begin to develop some kind of system. That should be considerably easier today with computers. I would try to learn what is important in a photograph. How can I find that in other photographs? How can I begin to extend my possibilities for talking about a photograph by comparing it to other photographs? That to me is the most important thing. I wouldn’t lose my time reading in postmodern literary theory, or semiotics, or psychology of perception, and I would be wary of most visual theory in terms of learning how to analyze photographs.

Those readings aren’t going to tell you how to look at a photograph. The only way to learn how to look at a photograph is to look at a lot of photographs and talk to photographers. One of the most important things would be to become a photographer yourself. It should be absolutely fundamental, but I don’t take photographs. Despite the fact that I would learn a lot by taking photographs, my position is in history and you can’t photograph history—you can only photograph the present. So, I dedicate myself to writing about photography, but I prefer to express the “artistic” side of me by making movies when I can.

Be extremely stubborn about defining what you are going to do. It is not easy and we want to take the easy way out. A serious scholar once brought me an article about a book of photos of the Japanese royal family from around 1900,

17. John Mraz, “Mexican History in Photographs” in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Gilbert Joseph and Timothy Henderson, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 295–331. The photo he refers to is on page 304.

and asked my opinion. My reply: “You don’t talk about the images at all. You talk only about the cut lines of the photos. That is OK, there is information there. But what is going on in the images?” I’ve had to point out the same things to my students. I insist: “Don’t cite the cut lines. That’s the easiest thing in the world to analyze. Look at the photos. Find out what is happening in them, and find a way to talk about them.”

I don’t think that it is at all easy to write about photography intelligently. You can see those who try to do so in their work. You can see them struggling to find ways to speak intelligently about photographs without taking refuge in some highfalutin theory that doesn’t really say anything about photographs.

NB: *If you could keep only one of your projects, which one would it be? Why?*

JM: My exhibit and book *Photographing the Mexican Revolution* might be the best thing I have done. But I would love to have had ten years to do the research, rather than working within the limitations of a curator. As a historian you are very uncomfortable with those limitations. I would also like to have had my curatorial vision respected by the INAH, rather than censured.

NG: *Is there anything else you think we should add to this interview?*

JM: I’d like to talk about the kind of resistances you meet when working in photography and modern media. First, of course, is the resistance within academia itself. I think that the most intelligent response to my petition to do a film for my dissertation was from a professor who said, “I have never made a film. How can I determine how much and what sort of research has to be done to make a film?” I thought that was an honest response, though it didn’t resolve my problem. However, there are now historians who have bridged the walls of academia, and can judge dissertations that utilize modern media.

You will also encounter tremendous resistance in terms of interpretation. For instance, in the first talk I gave on Nacho López, I showed the picture of the beautiful woman and the men giving piropos that I mentioned before. When I stated that I thought that the photo was directed, López’s widow stood up at the back of the room and said, “That is completely wrong. I was with Nacho when he took that photo. He saw the woman. He got out of the car. He shot the photo. He got back into the car and he drove off. I asked him if he got a good photo and he said, ‘We’ll just have to wait until I get it developed.’” Later, I asked their daughter when Nacho and her mother met. She said that it was in 1960. Well, the photo I was talking about was made in 1953, and there

is no question that the photo was directed when you see it in the context of the whole photo essay.

That is the problem with directed photographs. Most people don't realize that the majority of the great photojournalistic images have been directed to some extent.¹⁸ The photographer has somehow affected the scene. You can see this in the famous Robert Capa image of “Militiaman in his Moment of Death.” I would say that we now have an idea of what happened there: the militiaman was posing for Capa when he got shot, and Capa captured that instant. We see the complexity of the question: it is both a directed photo and a man in the moment of his death. Almost every time I have given a lecture on directed photography or even mentioned the issue of direction, some photojournalist who is present will contradict me, saying that such a photo is not photojournalism. They don't understand the complexity of the concept of photojournalism, in which we are comparing an artist, such as Sebastião Salgado, who takes 3,000 photographs a day and works six years on one project, with a photojournalist who works for a daily publication, and gets assigned five orders a day. How can we compare them?

One thing to bear in mind is the function of a photo at the point in time when it was taken. For example, the Hermanos Mayo bought their 35mm film in huge reels that they cut and loaded themselves, and they always kept their negatives. When they went to cover something, they shot 70 photos, out of which they picked five, printed them, and sent them off to be published. The 70 negatives went into their archive. So, for instance, if one of the Mayos was going to cover the president's breakfast, and on the way saw a street scene he liked, he shot it. Those random images went into an archive called Images of the City; it contains half a million negatives! Now, how is Mayo functioning at that moment he takes the picture? Well, he is a photojournalist going to cover the president's breakfast, but at the moment of taking the street photo, he is functioning as what I would call a documentalist. I don't want to say documentary because all photos are documentary. It is the nature of photography to be documentary.

In that same sense a photograph is an image but an image distinct and unique in its particularity. Why would we want to take away that uniqueness? After all, isn't it the really new thing this medium brings us? Why do we want to turn it into another form of art? That is fine for people that want to study art. I have no problem with that, but we cannot deny the unique capacity of the photograph, whether it is made through digital or chemical technology,

18. See John Mraz, “What's Documentary about Photography? From Directed to Digital Photojournalism,” *Zonezero Magazine*, www.zonezero.com, July 26, 2002.

to capture the phenomenological world. I think that is where theorists such as Flusser are so important in terms of signaling a fundamental break with the past.

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