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*Visions of the Sun: Modernist Mexico's
Transnational Horizons*

A centre will form in Mexico, and its light will shine across the world...

—Victor Serge, 1943

After years of exile spent between Turkey, France, and Norway, Leon Trotsky was finally granted asylum in Mexico, where he lived from December 1936 until August 1940, when Ramón Mercader murdered him with a crack to the skull from a shortened ice-axe. “In the whole history of the Russian Revolution, and in the history of the labour movement and Marxism,” reflects Isaac Deutscher, “no period has been as difficult and sombre as the years of Trotsky’s last exile.”¹ And yet, it was during this infamously wretched phase in communist history that Trotsky produced one of his most affirmatively universalizing documents: the “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art,” published in Mexico City on July 25, 1938. An aesthetic imprint of the fourth international, this document was not signed by Trotsky himself—because doing so would have broken the terms of his asylum—but instead co-signed by its other two authors, André Breton and Diego Rivera. The manifesto’s articulated goal was to extricate artistic creation from the rapacious onslaught of a triple-headed beast comprising the fascist regimes led by Hitler and Mussolini, the reactionary imbecility championed by Stalin, and the philistine decadence of the democratic-capitalist states. In its view, the program for revivifying a truly revolutionary art would have to organize itself universally, by leaping national borders to gather an army of artist-comrades from all over the geopolitically subdivided and unevenly developed globe. For that reason, such a program would have to be pragmatically if not politically transnational. “The aim of this appeal,” we read, “is to find a common ground on which all revolutionary writers and artists may

¹ Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929-1940* (London: Verso, 2003), 413.

be reunited, the better to serve the revolution by their art and to defend the liberty of that art itself against the usurpers of the revolution.”²

Singularly, this manifesto reproduced the stated goal of transnational reunification in the organic process of its composition, which involved multiple layers of mediated communication between the three authors, all of whom spoke and wrote in different languages. And it was not just Trotsky, Breton, and Rivera. Here we must emphasize the inestimable role and artistic expertise of the authors’ wives, or what Diane Scillia calls “the distaff side of the three couples,” which added considerably to an already complicated linguistic melange.³ Party to the manifesto’s inception as well as its execution were Natalia Sedova, a trained art historian; and the two celebrated painters, Frida Kahlo and Jacqueline Lamba. Here is Scillia’s account of their verbal interaction, which only begins to hint at the erotic energies that further animate the group dynamic:

With Frida, Rivera would speak Spanish (she spoke to Trotsky in German), but with Natalia, Rivera would use Russian or French, and with Jacqueline he would speak French or English. They all (Rivera, Kahlo, Lamba and Sedova) were interested in art and they all could follow a conversation in French, but even Frida was uncomfortable speaking French in front of Breton. She was bored with Breton’s arrogance and pretensions, and she was not at ease with Natalia, who knew about the affair with her husband. Frida and Jacqueline (who spoke English together) acted out while the men talked of theoretical things.⁴

These six personalities, all speaking different tongues, were concentrated into the published document in whose material composition Breton and Trotsky had the greater hand. Indeed, Breton drafted the original text in French and under

² This and subsequent references to the Manifesto are from “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art,” https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/works/rivera/manifesto.htm.

³ Diane Scillia, “A World of Arts, Politics, Passion and Betrayal: Trotsky, Rivera, Breton and Manifesto Towards a Free Revolutionary Art (1938)” in *Does the World Exist?: Plurisignificant CIPHERING of Reality*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer, 2004), 452.

⁴ Scillia, “A World of Arts, Politics, Passion and Betrayal,” 452-3.

Trotsky's instruction, after which Trotsky went to work with revisions by pinning it to a corkboard and surrounding it with annotations, relevant newspaper clippings, and other pieces of his own writing. The document we read today was the result of Trotsky's final distillation (not to mention that of its subsequent translators). And it is this, the filtration of artistic discourse through Trotsky's singularly heightened revolutionary intelligence, which makes the manifesto unique in both its aesthetic and its social ambitions. "It seems," reflects Breton, "impossible to me that all genuine artists would not receive such a declaration with relief and, if they should be revolutionaries, with enthusiasm."⁵ Here the comparable yet distinct energies of modernism and communism had become more thoroughly enmeshed than ever before.



Trotsky, Rivera, and Breton in Mexico City, 1938.

But, at first glances, the manifesto might not seem quite so unique as it really is. We already know that modernist and communist manifestoes often find themselves drawn together in their elaboration if not their ideals. As Martin Puchner has shown in his overview of their mutually reciprocal association, a study whose history ranges from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to Guy

⁵ André Breton, *Free Rein*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline D'Amboise (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 46.

Debord: “through their common reliance on manifestos, the socialist internationals and transnational avant-garde movements found themselves in an intimate, if contentious, alliance from which neither could entirely escape.”⁶ Or, as Alain Badiou has put it, the avant-garde’s “organized and often vigorously sectarian dimension already forges a link—at the very least an allegorical one—between artistic avant-gardes and politics (in which communist parties also presented themselves as the vanguards of the popular masses).”⁷ Exceptionally, however, it was here, in and around Mexico City during the late 1930s, that Trotsky’s exhortations closed the extant feedback loop between modernist and communist manifestoes, synthesizing the two into a shared vision whose aims are formulated, in the manifesto’s final sentences, as a chiasmus: “The independence of art—for the revolution. The revolution—for the complete liberation of art!” My purpose with the present essay is to show that this chiasmus is not just a restatement of the well-known association between art and politics, and neither does it merely accentuate an abstract homology or historical parallel between the two. It is, rather, a sign of their theoretical integration, the desire to become one—and, moreover, such a desire is peculiar to the whereabouts of its realization.

If, as the manifesto’s authors are surely right to insist, “we cannot remain indifferent to the intellectual conditions under which creative activity takes place,” perhaps it is not to be wondered why, of all places, Mexico should serve as an essential site for communism’s chiasmic amalgamation with the artistic ambitions of modernism. “In a certain sense,” writes poet-diplomat Octavio Paz, “the history of Mexico, like that of every Mexican, is a struggle between the forms and formulas that have been imposed on us and the explosions with which our individuality avenges itself.”⁸ Like the London of 1914 or Paris in the 1920s, from the Anglo-American viewpoint and especially during the 1930s Mexico served as a volcanic beacon in late modernism’s categorically transnational imagination: an exotic third space, exploding with political agitation and artistic

⁶ Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4.

⁷ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 133.

⁸ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings* (New York: Grove, 1985), 33.

potential, the so-called “oldest country in the New World,” or in Breton’s phrase “the Surrealist place par excellence.”⁹ This sense of a specifically Mexican transnationalism is alive in numerous familiar episodes from modernist aesthetics. That is what we encounter, for instance, in John Dos Passos’ field reports, in Malcolm Lowry’s inebriate fantasia, in D. H. Lawrence’s plumed serpent, in George Oppen’s exilic carpentry, in Wallace Stevens’ lyric Yucatán, in Luis Buñuel’s filmic wanderings, in Charles Mingus’ Tijuana jam sessions, in Orson Welles’ tracking back and forth across the border, right down to Roberto Bolaño’s infrarealist epics of the multitude, whose vital operations fall between the capital city and the quasi-fictional Santa Teresa. To some extent, then, the planetary field of modernist practice is, as these examples collectively attest, materially supplemented by the sovereign landmass between North and South Americas, or by what Carlos Fuentes calls “the sacred zone of a secret hope,” the cradle to a mode of existence both real and imagined—in short, a concrete expression of the utopian social substance from which modernism emerged.¹⁰

On the other hand, it will be just as important to emphasize the determinant role played by Mexico in the irreducibly communist motivations for the manifesto, namely its Soviet pedigree: “nor,” that document reminds us, “should we fail to pay all respect to those particular laws which govern intellectual creation.” As it was for artistic modernism, Mexico became one of the privileged sites in communism’s transnational imagination, therein shaping its own laws of creation, for it registered prominently in the minds of some of the USSR’s most influential figures. During the 1920s, both Stanislav Pestovsky and Alexandra Kollontai worked as Soviet diplomats to Mexico. Pestovsky published two books on Mexican history for a Soviet readership, and Kollontai’s immense fame led to an even greater interest—naturally for the USSR but also for the USA—in Soviet-Mexican relations. Vladimir Mayakovsky, the Futurist poet, also spent time in Mexico during 1925, and his accounts became the subject of lyric verse that variously lamented what he took to be Mexico’s post-revolutionary integration into capitalist modernity. “Heroism,” reads one poem, “is not for now

⁹ Both quotations are taken from Frances Stonor Saunders, “Mexican Modernism and the Politics of Painting,” *Guardian*, 29 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com>.

¹⁰ Carlos Fuentes, *Myself With Others: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1988), 14.

/ Moctezuma has become a brand of beer / Cuauhtémoc—/ a brand of beer.”¹¹ All of this would only fail to make good on Sergei Eisenstein’s fated excursion to Guanajuato and the film he could not complete there. While that film will be discussed later, for now we can agree with William Harrison Richardson, for whom it was through these specifically socialist statespersons that the “Russians came to know more about Mexico than they ever had before.”¹²

“The independence of art—for the revolution. The revolution—for the complete liberation of art!” What that final chiasmus might register, then, is the site-specific confluence of two forces—modernism’s revolutionary art and communism’s art of revolution—whose combination into this manifest speech-act amplifies their shared sense of utopianism, propelling both toward an improbable though attainable goal: the universal liberation of life and art from the axiomatics of capital. At a moment in history when both modernism and communism were making themselves increasingly statist, shoring up differently in Russia, North America, and elsewhere, Trotsky sensed a mutually utopian destination whose dispensation is categorically international but whose essence, I will want to show, remains uniquely Mexican. There are good historical reasons for this, not least of which is Mexico’s presence in the global imagination as a revolutionary state easily accessible from the United States over both land and sea. More specifically, however, and to borrow an argument from Laura Mulvey, the integration of modernism and communism in Mexico also derived from the coincidence of Emiliano Zapata’s world-historic land reforms—which can be viewed as willing the reorganization of social life back into villages—with the indigenous artists’ atavistic return to ancient Aztec forms. “It is for this reason, among others,” Mulvey is right to insist, “that it was possible for political and artistic avant-gardes to overlap in Mexico in a way they never could in Europe.”¹³ Beginning from these historical circumstances, the present thesis is that Mexico not only helped integrate the transnational aspirations of modernism and communism as a utopian theory, but that it also

¹¹ Quoted in William Harrison Richardson, *Mexico Through Russian Eyes, 1806-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 127.

¹² Richardson, *Mexico Through Russian Eyes*, 98.

¹³ Laura Mulvey, “Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd edn (London: Palgrave, 2009), 96.

provided the conditions of possibility for artworks to concretize the manifesto's theoretical incitements and especially its transnational imperatives. In other words, I propose that observation of the manifesto's artistic antecedents will reveal that its authors were not just projecting a future vision but also responding to the aesthetic regime being produced around them. That regime is equal parts modernist and communist, as well as it is distinctly a product of Mexican self-expression.

Our formal hypothesis is that this aesthetic regime, with its fusion of modernist and communist transnationalism, will enjoy exemplification in specifically visual art. While leftist thinkers from Walter Benjamin through Jacques Rancière have theorized the political immanence of the modernist image, my sense is that in this instance visual imagery promotes itself ahead of other genres and modes of art for some very practical reasons. Not least of these reasons is that visual artworks sidestep the hopeless babel of competing languages—witness the manifesto's composition—and in so doing they might also overcome the barriers of illiteracy. In its appeal to the imaginary as opposed to the symbolic, visual art attains the capacity to transcend national, cultural, and economic boundaries. While this, too, is peculiarly emphatic in 1930s Mexico—just as it was in 1920s Russia—where visual art served as a principal medium for social discourse precisely because of its capacity for mass appeal without requisite literacy, here that immediate social reality might be used to leverage a more general theory about the visual as such. Recall Fredric Jameson's well-known thesis on the essentially pornographic quality of the visual field under late capitalism. "Were an ontology of this artificial, person-produced universe still possible," he insists, "it would have to be an ontology of the visual, of being as the visible first and foremost, with the other senses draining off it; all the fight about power and desire have to take place here, between the mastery of the gaze and the illimitable richness of the visual object."¹⁴ My proposition is that, just as socialism is the state's forceful expropriation of private capitalist enterprise, the artworks discussed here enact a dialectical transformation of the visual field, making aesthetic reclamations in the name of communist imminence. Indeed, these artworks all envisage a hard-won beauty efflorescing in stark contrast to

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

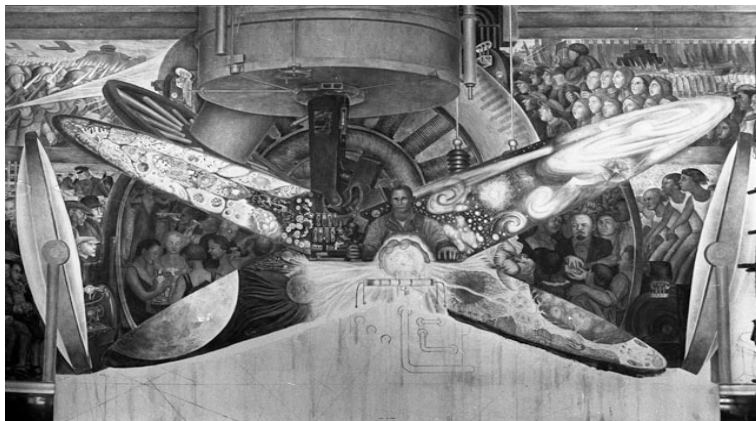
the alternatively horrifying and banal visions of life under multinational capitalism. What we will see, however, is not the natural beauty which Hegel once banished from aesthetic contemplation and which Adorno would later describe as “ideology where it serves to disguise the mediatedness as immediacy.”¹⁵ Rather, in these artworks, beauty is the transnationally communicable sign of a deeply felt utopian impulse. Not escapism through the past but a promise for the future.

Drawing these opening remarks to a close, we can now turn to some familiar artworks, scanning them anew for signs of both revolutionary independence and transnational vitality, all cohering within a dialectic of visual beauty. These artworks are a mural painted by Diego Rivera, two photographs taken by Tina Modotti, and a film directed by Sergei Eisenstein. All three artists embody an ethos of transnationalism, travelling in multiple directions between the USSR, the USA, and Mexico, in the confluence of whose vastly different cultures Rivera, Modotti, and Eisenstein all create and evolve their aesthetic. With these three artists, all working in Mexico prior to or contemporaneous with Trotsky’s time there, we encounter objective proof of the program the manifesto seeks to advocate, in artworks whose aesthetic energies mobilize across national, geological, and cultural boundaries. Here aesthetic pleasure rallies with political intransigence. “We know very well,” reads the manifesto, “that thousands on thousands of isolated thinkers and artists are today scattered throughout the world, their voices drowned out by the loud choruses of well-disciplined liars.” The following artworks supply the concrete materials out of which statements like that are composed; they are the material substance of its knowledge, as both necessary to its hypothesis and expressions of its goal.

Diego Rivera: Muralist of the Absolute

In 1927, Diego Rivera travelled to the USSR on invitation to celebrate the first decade of the Bolshevik Revolution. There he accepted commission to paint a mural for the Red Army Club in Moscow, but he was deported the following year due to artistic and political disagreements with the Soviet establishment. “I

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London & New York: Continuum, 1997), 68.



Photograph of Rivera, “Man at the Crossroads,” 1934.

suspect,” he would later reflect, “that resentment on the part of certain Soviet artists brought about this unhappy turn.”¹⁶ This suppression was not peculiar to Stalinism. It would repeat itself soon after in one of global capitalism’s cultural epicentres. In March 1933, Rivera was commissioned to paint a mural for the foyer of the R. C. A. Building of the Rockefeller Center, in Manhattan. Because that mural, entitled “Man at the Crossroads,” contained an image of Lenin clasp hands in solidarity with workers, which Rivera refused to remove despite Nelson Rockefeller’s demands, the artist was paid in full, forced to abandon his work, and escorted from the building. At midnight on Saturday, February 9, 1934, the mural was demolished and the plaster hauled away in oil drums. What remains of it today are photographs of the work-in-progress and our own inferences based on Rivera’s subsequent recreation of the mural, undertaken a year later in Mexico and using those photographs as a guide.

The work itself—or at least its photographic remediation—is a visual apprehension of the absolute: it presents a wholly integrated world, an historical totality in which the communist left vies aggressively for the future against militarized forces of the capitalist right. At the level of represented content it is less transnational than it is international. Because of its almost baroque detail

¹⁶ Diego Rivera, with Gladys March, *My Art, My Life* (New York: Dover, 1991), Kindle edition.

this mural is overwhelming to behold, an effect that surely would have been amplified by its sheer size, but nevertheless it remains governed by an incredibly rigorous logic of structure.

The central figure, the man in a boilersuit, provides a vertical axis. He divides the mural's two halves symmetrically, articulating them as inversions of one another. In front of the man, at the very midpoint, is a glowing atom, which is framed between two enormous looking-glasses each on the photograph's outer margins. Stretching from the atom along diagonal vectors are two "elongated ellipses," as Rivera would describe them, which feature atomic reflections of one another: the cosmos, on one, and microbes, on the other.¹⁷ Importantly, both the cosmos and the microbes feature on either side of the man, reducible to neither his left nor his right: in this iteration of the painting they are the politically neutral stuff of nature. Together those ellipses, having emerged from the atom and in line with the looking glasses—one of which must be a telescope and the other a microscope—are the two scalar extremes of scientific materialism, the upper and lower bounds of an intelligible universe. They are also the two strata between which humankind is known to have evolved, and between which takes place the historical situation of the 1930s. That situation is depicted in a series of individuated panels as the antagonism between communism and capitalism.

To the man's left, and at the top of that cosmic ellipsis, are the assembled forces of a revolutionary parade: a sea of bodies and faces and flags. Immediately below that panel is what appears to be a team of dark-skinned athletes. And, just inside of those athletes nearest to the central figure, is Lenin, figurehead of the Russian Revolution, engaged in communion with, again, dark-skinned workers. To the man's right, at the top of the microbial ellipsis, is a battalion of shock-troopers, flanked by a tank and with several bombers flying overhead. It is more difficult to make out what is happening in the panel below, but what we can see in its upper right corner is a policeman with a truncheon raised over head, beating down the figures beneath him which, by contrast to the athletes on the opposing panel, appear as inertly quiescent. To be sure, Rivera describes this panel as depicting "unemployed workers in a demonstration being clubbed by

¹⁷ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*.

the police.”¹⁸ And, finally, anterior to Lenin and the workers, is a scene of bourgeois decadence: a troupe of sickly women in fashionable dress throwing back cocktails. Later, when repainting the mural, Rivera would include Nelson Rockefeller's father, the teetotaler John D. Rockefeller, Jr., drinking with the women. While each three-panelled side serves as a mirror inversion of the other, the resulting juxtaposition would be even more pronounced if we could see this in color: in the reconstructed mural, the right side is flooded with necrotic green and brown; and, in sharp contrast, the communist side is awash with brilliant red. With or without color, what we are seeing here are two destinations for humankind: left or right, communism or capitalism, life or death.

We now return to the man and the atom. The man is not just at the centre of the universe. He is also its controller: his right hand is planted firmly on a lever, which presumably determines the vast industrial machinery that surrounds him. From his hand we can follow a crankshaft up into the overhead drum, which controls a series of wheels and cogs and turbines and cantilevers. There is something dynamic to the vast machinery, a kind of industrial immanence: you can almost feel the weight of the turns, were this assemblage to begin rotating, and thereby redirecting the universe around it. The man is, as indicated by his boilersuit and heavy gloves, an industrial worker, which coheres with the Marxist-Leninist conception of the industrial proletariat as the site on which capitalism would render its own self-abolition by way of revolution. However, while the industrial worker is in control, what he controls is made visible by the atom: his universe is illuminated by the ellipses that atom casts off in all directions. That the atom is also held firmly in hand suggests another kind of technology, the kind that pertains exclusively to intellectual labor. In the union of large-scale industry and atomic particle physics, then, is the alliance of intellectual and physical workers, of what Rivera describes as “mechanical and scientific power,”¹⁹ with whose combined strength the universe can be known and navigated. Look, too, at what is on either side of the atom. The gloved hands of the industrial worker and the hand of science are echoed in the adjacent panels: in a communal gesture, Lenin joins hands with the workers; and, by contrast, the hands at the bourgeois party clasp only their drinks. The means of

¹⁸ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*.

¹⁹ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*.

decision, the hands, are retained and redistributed under communism or, under capitalism, they individuate and reduce to an alcoholic stupor.

Even though, for its resolute internationalism, this mural is not particularly Mexican in theme or content, its national singularity nevertheless shines through in the visual logic of its form. Specifically, the panoramic detail and the narrative didacticism of this mural are indigenous to the home of its creator. The form borrows from both pre-Columbian Olmec and Aztec traditions, from Colonial-era Christian propaganda, and from nativist reactions against European classicism. It was only after 1921, however, that José Vasconcelos, the “cultural caudillo” of the Mexican Revolution, began to promote a secured government backing for muralism, conceived of as a means to glorify the Revolution and Mexico’s cultural identity to a largely peasant nation subject to mass illiteracy. Contrasting with the indigenously Mexican form, then, much of the mural’s depicted content is distinctly American, in that the machine of history is that of Ford-esque large-scale industry, the kind Rivera would soon paint on the walls of the New Workers’ School in New York and again for the Detroit Institute of Arts. Mexican nativism and American industry thus combine, in this image, to produce a vision whose aesthetic force derives not from its competing particulars but, rather, from its totalized whole. That whole is as beautiful as it is didactic, in its pleasing symmetries and interlocking curvatures; in the balance of its halves and in the illuminating brilliance cast off by the ellipses, which together give the industrial worker the outward appearance of something almost angelic; and finally in the brilliant vitality of the communist panels overwhelming their murky antithesis, with scenes of collectivism reflected in a visual harmony altogether absent from the somewhat more imbalanced images of degradation and disarray.

Conceivably this, the mural’s visualization of political struggle, is why, in a 1938 letter to the *Partisan Review*, Trotsky nominated Rivera as the artist to have inherited the Russian Revolution’s utopian legacy, its universal ambition and its transnational program. While Trotsky would reproach both “Rockefeller’s lackeys” and “the Kremlin clique” for similarly disallowing the artist to produce his work in the USA and USSR, the exiled Bolshevik nevertheless recognized the singular import of Rivera’s formative location. “In

the field of painting,” he insists, “the October revolution has found her greatest interpreter not in the USSR but in faraway Mexico.”²⁰

Tina Modotti: Between Text and Image

Tina Modotti first made her celebrity in America, as a silver screen actress and then as a photographic model, working with Edward Weston with whom she would eventually learn the art of that medium. Her one serious venture into literary modernism appeared in the May 1923 issue of the *Dial*, one of the principal organs of modernist ideology. Her contribution to the magazine was a lyric titled “Plenipotentiary,” which can be read hypothetically as a statement of aesthetic intent, portending some of the tendencies that would only be realized and developed in her subsequent Mexican photography. Here is the poem in full:

I like to swing from the sky
 And drop down on Europe,
 Bounce up again like a rubber ball,
 Reach a hand down on the roof of the Kremlin,
 Steal a tile
 And throw it to the kaiser.
 Be good;
 I will divide the moon in three parts,
 The biggest will be yours,
 Don't eat it too fast.²¹

Two sentences bespeak a subdivided globe, sliced up by war and revolution and heading toward another war, and they describe the enunciating voice's desire to transcend those subdivisions. The playfulness of the that first sentence's simile (“like a rubber ball”) does not detract from the geopolitical divisiveness of the place-names, “the Kremlin” and “the kaiser,” two emblems of superannuated absolutism, one of which had been seized by the Bolsheviks and reborn into socialism while the other serves as the sanctuary for a failing capitalism, where it

²⁰ Leon Trotsky in Edith Kurzweil, ed., *A Partisan Century: Political Writings from Partisan Review* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 17.

²¹ Tina Modotti quoted in Patricia Albers, *Shadows, Fire, Snow: The Life of Tina Modotti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 105.

was rapidly decaying into fascism. Perhaps that is why only one of these proper nouns is capitalized. The second sentence, directed apostrophically to a singular “you,” retains the airborne view from the first, reflecting those geopolitical divisions onto the moon itself, which is partitioned three ways, with the largest part being delivered to the listener. The warmly maternal tone of that sentence positions its listener as puerile and childish, the youngest of the world’s siblings, upon whom the speaker bestows the “biggest” part of a romantic celestial entity, the moon—which, at this moment in history, was becoming an object of scientific fascination, as a future destination for humankind’s knowledge. In other words, the speaker takes the greatest part of an unknowable future and hands it to the socialists, doing so with a warmly affectionate caution. It was in Mexico, where Modotti had already visited, that she would soon make good on the transnationally utopian but lyrically abstract aspirations given articulation here.

Modotti had travelled to Mexico in February 1922, for the burial of her American husband, Roubaix “Robo” de l’Abrie Richey, who was working as an artist in Mexico City. “In doing so,” writes Margaret Hooks, “she was plunged into the heart of the artistic revolution,” immersing the American aesthete in Mexican folk traditions.²² Several months later, in July 1923, Modotti, Edward Weston, and his son, Chandler, sailed to Mexico, where her aesthetic as a photographer would mature alongside her organizational work for the Mexican Communist Party. In its initial form, that aesthetic comprised an admixture of sharp geometric shapes and lines, a tendency toward intimate interiors, and an enthusiasm for the erotic curvature of sculpted bodies. In this way her photography is remarkably similar to the paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, whose relationship with Alfred Stieglitz might serve as an analogue for that of Modotti and Weston. In Modotti’s aesthetic we can sense also the almost overwhelming influence of Weston, who conceived of himself, in Carol Armstrong’s withering hyperbole, as “Grand Master of the Photographic Beautiful,” but this influence works both ways: in his aesthetic we can also sense the determining presence of Modotti’s own innovations, from which Weston found much to learn. “It was from Modotti,” writes Armstrong, “that Weston got the idea for the close-up,

²² Margaret Hooks, *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 53.

frontal, view-to-the-core photograph, rather than the other way around.”²³ Importantly for us, Modotti's aesthetic predilection for photographic beauty was not abandoned as her photographs became increasingly political, or politically committed, without ever assuming the role of propaganda as such. To be sure, her eye for patterns, for sharp lighting, for signs of love and sensuality, were all sublated into a photojournalism where scenes of Mexican life and labor were shot as objects of both modernist formalism and compositional beauty.



Modotti, "Mexican Peasants Reading *El Machete*," 1929.

Here I want us to examine one of Modotti's 1929 photographs, an image which seems to exemplify the transnational tendencies of revolutionary art. This photograph, "Mexican Peasants Reading *El Machete*," takes the cross-cultural dissemination of radical ideology as its subject matter. T. J. Clark uses this photograph to exemplify modernism's historical opacity when speculating that fragments of the modernist past "will soon be as incomprehensible as scratches

²³ Carol Armstrong, "This Photography Which Is Not One: In the Gray Zone with Tina Modotti," *October* 101 (Summer 2002): 27.

on Mousterian bone.” For him, it expresses a forcefully willed collectivism almost entirely absent from subsequent conjunctures. “This is a world, and a vision of history,” he writes of modernism in general and on this photograph in particular, “more lost to us than Uxmal or Annaradapurah or Neuilly-en-Donjon. We warm more readily to the Romaneque puppets on God’s string, or the kings ripping blood-sacrifice from their tongues, than to workers being read to from *Izvestia* or *El Machete*.”²⁴ The remarkable irony of this fact deserves additional emphasis. What might fail to communicate between then and now is precisely the matter of universal communication, the attempt to forge a language of cross-cultural dissemination. Indeed, this photograph depicts the conveyance of radical thought between possibly illiterate peasants, mediation of the exclusionary symbolic into the inclusive imaginary, and it reflects that conveyance or mediation in its own composition.

The seven sombreros, all of which overlap and obscure the others, provide a border for the newspaper. This border both encloses the scene, transforming the exterior and potentially agrarian workplace as signified by the sombreros and the sunlit contrast of their shadows into something more intimate, like a darkened interior. Those sombreros are, in Modotti’s photography, a principal emblem of socialist collectivism, whose uniform circularity and sheer size makes them ideal for overhead shots of workers moving together as one and drawing strength from their mobilization as a multitude. Here, that iconic circularity contrasts with the angular shapes of the newspaper, a rectangle that has been folded into multiple smaller rectangles, whilst simultaneously corresponding with the glare of its bright exposure: its dazzling whiteness is a reflection of theirs and vice versa, in what might be taken as a visual metaphor for enlightenment or illumination. The headline text reads “¡Toda la Tierra, no pedazos de Tierra!” or, in English, “All the Land, Not Pieces of Land!” This Zapatista slogan thus acquires self-reflexivity within the photograph where, as Deborah Caplow interprets it, we are bearing witness to “the process of disseminating information and propaganda to rural workers, whose interests are articulated by the headline of the newspaper in

²⁴ T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 6-7.

the photograph.”²⁵ While the communicative loop is enabled and articulated by the composition, whose formalism and intimacy recall the domestic scenes and curvatures of Modotti's earlier work, here the potentially static composition is offset and disturbed or perhaps even catalyzed affectively by the presence of life, intruding via that one visible face.

Depending of the size of the print it would be easy enough to overlook that face, positioned at the very top of the image just right of center, and yet it changes so much of what we are seeing. That face is what Roland Barthes would describe as an unintended “partial object” through which the entire image speaks: “the detail which interests me is not, or least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; it occurs,” he claims, “in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful; it does not necessarily attest to the photographer's art; it says only that the photographer was there.”²⁶ The direct eye contact between the face and the lens here attests to Modotti's authorial presence. But how should we interpret that expression? To my eyes, the face signals interrupted concentration, and perhaps even aggression directed at the photographer, suggesting a degree of animation, annoyance, or even agitation: displeasure in having one's listening interrupted, in learning that political education here doubles as being made to pose for the gringo photographer. There is also a gendered dynamic in this, given Modotti's well-known trajectory of transforming herself from a perceived object of beauty, an actress and a model, into an artist intent on capturing beauty. While the photograph's composition is redolent of Modotti's early work under Weston, and in that way it retains a sense of the beautiful, this returned gaze from within the field of vision arguably supplements the photograph with Modotti's own visually absent beauty, suggested here in the photographer's marked presence. That presence is what offsets the quiescence peculiar to the early still-lives, infusing the vision of ideological illumination with revolutionary immanence. “The images are posed and composed,” writes Mulvey of Modotti's propaganda

²⁵ Deborah Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print* (China: University of Texas Press, 2007), 132.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), 47.



Modotti, "Mella's Typewriter," 1928.

photographs, "but the gaze of the subjects themselves strikes directly into the camera and out of the print."²⁷

While Trotsky does not discuss Modotti's photographs, there is at least one notable intertext that requires mentioning here. Also that year, in 1928, Modotti photographed the typewriter of her lover, Julio Antonio Mella, a Cuban revolutionary who would soon be murdered on January 10, 1929. One of the reasons for Mella's assassination is the widespread belief that he had fallen under the influence of Trotsky, thus breaking from Stalinist orthodoxy, and his death would therefore resemble or even foreshadow that of the Soviet exile. When viewed retroactively from within this context the photograph acquires an added level of frisson, and with that the dialectic of Modotti's aesthetic, the political discord animating her photographs' beauty, is given full amplification.

²⁷ Mulvey, 97.

Modotti's photograph, which depicts the typewriter in close-up and diagonal to the rectangular frame, reprises the interplay of circular shapes and angular lines we encountered in the previous image, with the keys and the spool framed by metal casings and the fanned type bar. Of significance here is the visually obscured text, "inspiracion / artistica. / en una sintesis / existe emtore la," which translates to "inspiration / artistic. In a syntheses / exist between the."²⁸ These words, which Modotti would quote again in the brochure for her own exhibition in December that year, are from the Spanish translation of Trotsky's "Revolutionary Socialist Art," published in 1924. In English the text would read: "Technique will become a more powerful inspiration for artistic work, and, later on, the contradiction itself between technique and nature will be solved in a higher synthesis." That dialectic, between technique and nature, is what we have seen reflected in the pleasing contrasts between the circular and the angular, and it is what materially conditions the beauty of Modotti's photographs. Here, with Mella's typewriter and its translated text, the aesthetic pleasure in those formal features is what instantiates the incomplete sentence without need for linguistic translation or even visual presence.

Sergei Eisenstein: Socialist Arcadia

If Rivera and Modotti both forged a transnational language, a visual syntax at once modernist and communist and also a product of Mexico, it was in response to the 1917 Revolution and the dictates of the Bolsheviks that Sergei Eisenstein engineered a comparable feat. By adapting early Hollywood's parallel editing into Soviet montage Eisenstein inaugurated a new grammar for the moving image, a form in which the combination of filmic shots would prove just as meaningful to the audience as what those shots depict. Montage served as a lingua franca whose universal value was its evasion of both mass illiteracy and regional dialects in speaking directly to droves of impoverished and immiserated workers, achieving exactly what "Mexican Peasants Reading *El Machete*" set out to depict and enact. Together Eisenstein's 1920s films constitute what the director would refer to as an "ideological victory in the field of form," a successful repurposing of commodity capitalism's medium of choice to serve in

²⁸ I take this information and the translations from Letizia Argenterì's excellent book, *Tina Modotti: Between Art and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 119.

the utopian project of mobilizing socialism across borders.²⁹ It was thus under the red banners of socialism and alongside twenty million Soviet citizens that cinema marched headlong into political modernity.

After an international tour through Europe and America beginning in 1928, including several months spent in Hollywood where he failed to launch any new projects, Eisenstein travelled to Mexico, where he planned to shoot an epic film about the national history: *Que Viva Mexico!*. He would later describe the film's inspiration and its projected narrative in these terms:

So striped and violently contrasting are the cultures in Mexico running next to each other and at the same time being centuries away. No plot, no whole story could run through this serape without being false, artificial. And we took the contrasting independent adjacency of its violent colors as the motif for constructing our film: 6 episodes [...] held together by the unity of the weave—a rhythmic and musical construction and an unrolling of the Mexican spirit.³⁰

Though the film itself failed to reach completion, it nevertheless marked a transformation in the director's aesthetic, an augmentation whose signal feature was the introduction of a pleasing social lassitude and with it the efflorescence of an erstwhile muted beauty. If given control of the editing Eisenstein would very likely have made this film more disjunctive than what we now have of it. Nonetheless, that the film was designed as a "unity" of adjacent opposites forged not through dissonance and conflict but, rather, through "a rhythmic and musical construction" is itself a departure from the earlier works. It also brings this film, unique within Eisenstein's oeuvre, into near harmony with what we have seen from Rivera and Modotti, both of whom weave together disparate threads of "the Mexican spirit" into unstable presentations that self-consciously interrupt or animate their own totalizing aspirations.

The atypically abstract and even decorative opening sequence is a good indicator of the evolving aesthetic. Monumental images of pyramids and ruins are framed

²⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, *Selected Works, Volume 1* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2010), 59.

³⁰ Eisenstein, *The Film Sense* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1969), 251.

in long shots and intercut with frontal close-ups of Aztec and Mayan statues. And, within these opening images of ancient architecture is the vertiginous depiction of a pyramidal staircase that visually echoes the famous Odessa Steps sequence from *The Battleship Potemkin*, upon which Eisenstein once staged an energetic montage of bloody insurrection. In Mexico, however, the tone is not explosive but contemplative; it is that of the sightseer. The ascent here is slow and measured, and could hardly be any more dissimilar to the shambolic descent under gunfire from *Potemkin*. Moreover, the humans that appear amidst these ruins are motionless in their apparent replication of the statues. Metaphor has replaced montage, with visual similarities enjoying exploration within the individual frame as opposed to opposites undergoing synthesis through the edited sequence. When we are eventually given a frontal close-up of a human face, it does not signify revolutionary combat as it did in Odessa, and neither does it cohere with the truly fearful imagery of the statues here in Yucatán. It signifies feminine beauty.

That beauty infuses the entire film, but it is nowhere more apparent than in the following segment, "Sandunga," set in the natural paradise of Tehuantepec. This segment is tonally akin to Paul Gauguin's Tahiti and Henri Rousseau's jungle in its exuberant exoticism. Before the intertitle announces its name, we are presented with a series of cross-fades between palms, ferns, and the ocean, replete with local fauna, including an alligator, monkey, and a bird. These images introduce an attractive Mexican woman who is first seen washing and combing her hair, using river water, before rowing a canoe downstream where she meets her lover. The woman and her lover stretch out together in a hammock wearing only skirts. Shadows accentuate the shapeliness of entwined bodies. They are shot from two different angles: from above, adopting the perspective of two tropical birds which re-enact the tryst, and from behind the man, as though to emphasize the woman's beauty from the perspective of her lover. In a subsequent shot of her face, in close-up, he sets a necklace made of frangipanis around her neck and we are given two match-cuts: in the first, the flowers become an expensive piece of jewellery; in the second that piece of jewellery becomes the man in the hammock.

While the latter type of jewellery serves as a metonym for accumulated wealth, the surrounding scene presents us with something undeniably paradisiacal,



The Battleship Potemkin.

Que Viva Mexico!



“Sandunga” match-cuts.

against which that necklace seems out of place, unnecessary, and perhaps even unwelcome—unfitting within a visual economy drawing its power from arcadia. Real wealth, according to this scene, is to be found in blissful indolence and erotic connection. This resurgence of beauty as political alternative is not just a matter of gendered essentialism, and neither is it a fetish for nature, though we should remain suspect of both. Instead, what we are seeing here is an archetypally socialist inversion of the relations of production and or reproduction. “In a characteristic reversal,” writes Masha Salazkina, “what seems like the most conservative essentialist position in the reconstruction of the premodern as the natural leads to the unexpected conclusion that that which is natural is, in fact, not patriarchy but matriarchy, and a complete reversal of all the gender roles and norms of representation.”³¹

As we have seen with Rivera and Modotti, beauty is not simply a force of nature but is, instead, a dialectical category. Something similar can be argued for Eisenstein’s film, in which that opening episode, “Sandunga,” undergoes a punitive inversion in “Maguey,” a pre-revolutionary antithesis to this earlier fable of an unimpeded eros and of matriarchal empowerment. In it, a young man brings his bride-to-be to a towering hacienda in order to receive the landlord’s customary blessing. It is heavily implied that one of the landlord’s drunken guests either rapes or attempts to rape the young woman. She is taken captive and her fiancé is expelled. Soon later, the young man and three of his friends mobilize an armed assault on the hacienda but, outgunned and outnumbered, they are driven off into the desert, pursued by the landlord, his men, and his daughter. After a long, tense battle, three rebels, including the young man are captured and a fourth, wounded, hides amongst the cacti. The three captured rebels are buried alive to the chest and the landlord’s men ride horses over them, trampling them to death. The young woman, held captive during the battle, is set free, only to discover her lover’s broken corpse protruding from the desert and already attracting flies. She collapses under the weight of grief.

More than just narrating class warfare, this sequence delivers a formal counterpoint to the beauty of “Sandunga.” The editing during the gunfight and

³¹ Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein’s Mexico* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 70.



Horror in "Magüey."

the executions is fast-paced, rapidly cutting between different perspectives and shot-types, intensifying the inchoate chaos it depicts. Moreover, while "Sandunga" used natural beauty as a complement to sexual love, here nature, caught before the cavalry charge of the ruling class, is brought to destruction. Specifically, the sequence includes multiple shots of cacti leaves gouged, torn, and exploded by bullets intended for human flesh; and, in alternating shots between human combatants and wounded cacti, the film makes clear that the natural world has, in this sequence, become a visual metaphor for the fate of life and limb within capitalism's unassailed and altogether masculine class structure. Though this film modifies Eisenstein's earlier work, the aesthetic ideology retains its transnational potentiality and remains ultimately communist, taking shape in a vision of arcadia made possible only by the suspension of humankind's compelled servitude to capital. That is the irreducibly utopian dimension to what might be censured as a kind of romanticism, not just in Eisenstein's film but also in Rivera's mural and Modotti's photographs, the affective energy with which beauty charges the very possibility of humankind's liberation from capital.

Coda: Victor Serge, Repeating Trotsky

Victor Serge arrived in Mexico just over one year after assassination of Trotsky, his long-time correspondent and ally in the struggle to wrest the socialist apparatus back from Stalin. Serge spent the final six years of his life in Mexico until death by cardiac arrest in 1947. Like the historical personage with whom we have now spent some time—Trotsky, Rivera, Modotti, Eisenstein—Serge embodied the spirit of transnationalism and, in his dual role as political revolutionary and historical novelist, he too sensed that Mexico might still serve as the furnace in which these two commitments might be reformed as one. Indeed, that mutually determining relationship between aesthetics and politics sustained itself beyond the 1930s. In his notebooks, Serge records an encounter with one of José Clemente Orozco’s murals, a blazoned image of Quetzalcoatl flanked by the tattered flags of the Mexican Revolution. His description echoes that final chiasmus from the Manifesto. “Art fertilized, right down to the architecture, by great mass movements.”³² But it is not just the interpenetration of art and politics that Serge was experiencing here. It is also, and perhaps more importantly for us, the visual emblem of that dialectical antagonism we have seen unfold differently in Rivera’s mural, Modotti’s photographs, and Eisenstein’s film. “Revolutionary inspiration,” he reflects, “prevails over the betrayals and the disillusionments, art is at times its revenge.”³³ This is how we might group together the irreducibly heterogeneous phenomena of painting, photography, and film, in which diverse visions of beauty enact their “revenge” on the greater context of political reaction to which these specifically Mexican artworks respond. In these artworks and their shared energy Trotsky’s Manifesto, like Serge’s subsequent affirmation, finds its material antecedents; and, given the shared compositional circumstances, no wonder it was written in Mexico.

³² Victor Serge, “Mexican Notebooks: 1940-1947,” *New Left Review* 82 (July-August 2013): 35.

³³ Serge, “Mexican Notebooks: 1940-1947,” 35.