**A Mexican *Angelus Novus*, Popular Culture as Archive and Historiography**

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Los Presagios de Moctezuma (1994-95), a film by Paolo Gasparini (1934-) and Carlos Monsiváis (1938-2010), was first screened at the "XIX Art History Colloquium of UNAM: Art and Space". The film is a postmodern and interpretative adaptation of a pre-Columbian legend about Moctezuma II dating from the Siege of Tenochtitlan. The visual material of Los Presagios, which consists of black and white photographs taken by Paolo Gasparini, is displayed in a slideshow. In addition to the pictures, the film incorporates inter-titles containing epigraphs, descriptions, and quotes taken from Moctezuma II's legend to mark the transitions from one omen to another. In matters of content, Gasparini's pictures mainly depict daily life and popular culture in Mexico City. Likewise, Gasparini's montage evokes the phenomenological experience of walking around the metropolis. Finally, the script, written and narrated by Carlos Monsiváis, describes the chaotic nature of urban life in Mexico from the perspective of a chronicler-daneur.

The myth that inspired the film narrates the eight omens that Moctezuma II foresaw before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. In the Florentine Codex, these omens refer to atypical natural phenomena—meteor showers, for example—that were interpreted as signals of the Mexica culture's eminent destruction. Rather than being an explicit adaptation of the legend, the film is a commentary of the act of foreseeing itself. It explores the experience of being visually exposed to the chaos of the metropolis. Given Gasparini's and Monsiváis's obsession with the Mexican capital, Los Presagios portrays the city's urban reality as the contemporary equivalent of Moctezuma II's premonition. In this way, the viewer, who plays the role of the pre-Columbian emperor, is forced to observe a succession of images depicting the overwhelming daily life in the Mexican capital.

In addition to the legend quotes, an epigraph introduced at the beginning of the film invites the viewers to think about Moctezuma II's story from a theoretical approach that insists upon the importance of seeing. This epigraph cites a famous passage of Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," an essay that criticizes modern Europe's obsession with progress. In particular, the film quotes Benjamin's identification of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (Figure 1) as the Angel of History. Klee's watercolor features a winged character whose gaze directs to the right, while his lower limbs are slightly tilted to the left. Benjamin's description of Klee's angel emphasizes the fundamental role that sight plays in the writing and documentation of history. In addition to citing Benjamin's text, Gasparini identifies a low-relief on the façade of the Church of Saint Hippolytus (hereafter "low-relief") as a Mexican
equivalent for the *Angelus Novus*. The photograph depicting this figure constitutes a leitmotif of the film that, similarly to Klee’s painting, is used for problematizing history.

The incorporation of Benjamin’s epigraph in the film alludes to its relationship with contemporary Mexican historiography. Benjamin’s oeuvre served as a means to critique the dynamics of knowledge and power in the writing of Mexican history, specifically the accounts of the Mexican Revolution (1910-17).6 Benjamin’s texts inspired Mexican scholars to recognize the “fragmentary character of the historical method [...] introducing a question mark into documentary and archival work.” This paper explores how the photographs displayed in *Los Presagios* and their montage respond to Benjamin’s historiographic impact in Mexico. In particular, this essay analyzes three aspects of *Los Presagios*: Gasparini’s identification of a Mexican *Angelus Novus* and its implied historiographic stance; the archival mechanisms of popular culture; and lastly, Gasparini’s pictures as evidence of such mechanisms. In conclusion, this paper argues that the pictures and montage of *Los Presagios* demonstrate how Mexican popular culture creates visual archives.

**A Mexican *Angelus Novus*, or a Mexican-Benjaminian Historiography**

Immediately after the first inter-title of the film, which contains Benjamin’s epigraph, the photograph of the aforementioned low-relief of the Church of Saint Hippolytus is introduced. An opera aria serves as background for this picture and the following inter-titles, providing a dramatic atmosphere for this visual sequence. The overwhelmed expression of the pre-Columbian character constitutes the picture’s main subject and further evokes this drama. His eyes and mouth are wide open, as if he witnessed a disgraceful event and screamed. The high-pitched aria, in fact, seems to come from his mouth. After this image, another photograph appears, this time depicting an elderly lady with a noticeably deep gaze, covering her mouth with the cloak that hides her hair. The montage of these two faces creates a visual rhythm that invites the viewer to observe the characters’ gazes and wonder what it is they are looking at.
In this sense, a second inter-title of the film provides an answer: "In what nowadays is considered the center of Mexico City, there is a monument in the Church of Saint Hippolytus that represents an Indian of pre-Columbian times, with an appearance and an expression as terrified as Klee's angel, it would seem that he was contemplating the same omens that Moctezuma II foresaw on the eve of the Conquest." Los Presagios, therefore, identifies the indigenous figure of the first picture as a Mexican Angelus Novus. The image of this character urges the viewer to continue looking and to remember Benjamin's words. As such, it is clear that this Mexican Angelus implies a historiographic stance built upon the German author's writings. For this reason, before exploring the historiographic dimension of the Mexican Angelus, it is important to better understand the significance of Klee's painting for Benjamin's work.

Paul Klee's Angelus Novus depicts a geometricized angel of open eyes and mouth whose gaze and limbs face opposite directions. This painting has a rather simple composition, a uniform ochre palette, and precise dark lines that define the figure's shape. According to Walter Benjamin, the figure of this angel represented history at the crossroads of the past and the future, since the Angelus "would like to pause for a moment so fair [...] but a storm [...] drives him irresistibly into the future." Benjamin defined progress as the storm that forced the Angelus to move forward and leave the disasters of the past unattended. By drawing attention to the negative side effects of modern Europe's obsession with progress, Benjamin was criticizing modernity itself.

Indeed, according to the Chilean historian Jorge Larraín, "Modernity does not respect its own past and regards itself as the result of a transition from the traditional to the new." With respect to this, the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman has described how the European elites transformed modernity into a point of reference for writing
and interpreting universal history. Furthermore, Benjamin defined the modern perception of time as a stratigraphic system that idolatrized the future by rejecting and contradicting all past initiatives and values. An excess of self-sufficiency and ego, characterized this historical period. After the outbreak of WWII, which Benjamin thought to be inconsistent with the cult of reason that ruled modernity, the German author revises and denies the benefits associated with progress and industrialization. By describing how the horrified angel is pushed by the storm of progress, Benjamin underscores the importance of looking backward. He eventually advocated for a transformation of that "orientation toward the future into an orientation toward the past." 

Likewise, there are multiple dimensions to Gasparini's choice of a Mexican Angelus. For instance, there is an evident visual similarity between Klee's and Gasparini's picture. Legend of the Farmer (Figure 2), the low-relief depicted as the Mexican Angelus, represents an indigenous man being carried to Moctezuma II's palace by an eagle. As the image reveals, the fusion of the bird's wings and the figure's limbs make him appear as an angel. In addition to the feathered wings, the open eyes and shouting mouth of the Amerindian character resemble the facial expressions of Klee's Angelus. Furthermore, the eagle that lifts the figure, as evinced by the direction of its wings and neck, acts as the storm of progress. The farmer's bent legs and his stretched torso, which form two converging diagonals, exacerbate the physical discomfort of the character struggling to stay on the ground. Like Klee's angel, the Mexican Angelus is trapped in two realms.

Moreover, Benjamin was particularly driven by Klee's decision to incorporate an old and religious source into his pictorial language as this gesture contradicted, to some extent, the modernist attempts of reversing conventional aesthetics. In fact, for Benjamin's eyes, Klee's Angelus referenced the Jewish narrative of God creating angels that would praise him and immediately perish. Consequently, in addition to representing modern history's partition between the past and the future, Klee's Angelus Novus embodied the harmonic coexistence of these two moments. As Rosalind Krauss has argued, Klee's Angelus synthesized Benjamin's own version of an "end of history," as he rejected the idea of a linear time progression, while keeping alive the utopian possibility of changing the future through the awareness of the past. This last idea evolved into the figure of the politically engaged historian, who would actively transform society by documenting the past.

Similarly, the Mexican Angelus also relates to Benjamin's ideas against stratigraphic history. The Church of Saint Hippolytus, on whose lateral façade Legend of the Farmer is located, constitutes both an urban icon of Mexico City, given its central location; and a historical icon, because of the foundational moment that it commemorates. The church was built after Saint Hippolytus, the first patron of the city, whose homage was celebrated on the same day of the last Tenochtitlan warriors' rendition.
This building certainly proves the origin of Mexico City as a city of contrasts, where natives and Spaniards became Mexicans.\textsuperscript{20} Not in vain, in \textit{Los Presagios}, Carlos Monsiváis describes the overlapping of the Spanish and autochthonous cultures as Mexico's foundational moment.\textsuperscript{21}

In this context, \textit{Legend of the Farmer} illustrates the syncretism of dominant and peripheral narratives and iconographies, as a pre-Columbian story was incorporated in a Catholic church.\textsuperscript{22} The Mexican \textit{Angelus} embodies a cultural and historical simultaneity that contradicts the modern stratigraphic vision of history which was so strongly rejected by Benjamin. Nevertheless, \textit{Legend of the Farmer's} colonial character seems incompatible with Benjamin's criteria for selecting Klee's work.

Since modernity is usually conceptualized as a rupture with tradition, using a colonial artwork to define a contemporary historiography, does not seem to acknowledge the value of the new. Given that the Mexican muralist movement would appear as a natural choice that actually speaks of a modernization process in Mexico, it is clear that Gasparini's interpretation of Benjamin's text is free. As a response to the Eurocentric character of Benjamin's theses on history, Latin American scholars have developed rather creative readings of his work.

According to Ignacio Sanchez Prado, Benjamin has played a key role in Latin America's process of assimilating material modernity and dealing with the effects of dictatorial political regimes.\textsuperscript{23} In Mexico, the philosopher Bolivar Echeverria played a key role in explaining how Benjamin could be applicable to the local context.\textsuperscript{24} As such, "The point is that in Mexico the Benjaminian paradigm is invoked within a particular set of philosophical and critical traditions in order to rearticulate forms of thinking and living silenced by colonial and national history."\textsuperscript{25} In other words, Echeverria's reading of Benjamin helped place Mexican canonic historiography under scrutiny, triggering historical accounts of the ordinary and the non-official.\textsuperscript{26} Since the struggle to bring together high and popular culture has been a permanent concern of the Mexican post-revolutionary governments and intelligentsia, this interpretation of Benjamin offered a historiographic solution for such problem.

Thanks to Benjamin, the accounts of Mexican history written since the Mexican Revolution, were questioned as representatives of an elitist macro-narrative.\textsuperscript{27} By way of example, Gasparini could have selected the figure of Quetzalcoatl as a priest in Diego Rivera's canonic \textit{History of Mexico} (1929-35) as the film's \textit{Angelus Novus}. Given the mural's fame and political location at Mexico's National Palace however, choosing it would have entailed Gasparini's alignment with official Mexican history. Conversely, \textit{Legend of the Farmer} embodies Benjaminian historiographic principles. Gasparini's choice of a Mexican \textit{Angelus Novus} involved favoring the non-official over the institutional.
Gasparini’s decision also relates to his interest for popular culture’s imagery—which resembled that of the “pictures generation.” His main historiographic contribution consisted of portraying the status of images in contemporary Mexico, and of eventually revalorizing their role in the documentation of national history. As way of example, Gasparini’s photographs in *Los Presagios*, which depict local newsstands lined with diverse pictures or the overlapping of advertisement banners, evince the omniscient presence of visual culture in public and private spaces. By bringing popular culture closer to discussions about historiography, *Los Presagios* contributes to the attempts of articulating high and low culture. Demonstrating how Gasparini’s photographs evince the archival power of popular culture, will constitute the main topic of this paper’s following sections.

**Popular Culture: A Chaos that Archives**

In *Los Presagios de Moctezuma*, Paolo Gasparini’s photograph and film montage recreate the characteristic chaos of life, space, and society in Mexico City at the turn of the twenty-first century. This urban chaos, which was a common denominator of modernity worldwide, greatly impacted filmmaking. Since Benjamin, filming the city became an obsession of modern art. Moreover, as the historian Anthony Vidler asserts, cinematic technologies allowed what the author calls “metropolitan movement” not only to be imitated, but to be integrated into the films’ technique and content. Rather than making a motion picture however, Gasparini decided to put together a slideshow. This decision to privilege the individual image (the photograph) over the film, not only relates to Gasparini’s expertise, but also to his decision to incorporate the aesthetics of popular culture in his film. Furthermore, in *Los Presagios*, Gasparini also reproduces the audiovisual overstimulation that characterizes walking in the city, and viewing at it.

Paolo Gasparini’s artistic production is usually concerned with documenting the urban character of Latin American metropolises, usually Caracas, La Habana, or Mexico D.F. He started his career as an architectural photographer and slowly shifted to representing the region’s ideological contradictions. According to the nature of his work, Gasparini is a flaneur obsessed with the “evidence of experience.” In fact, his main objective resided in confronting official narratives by documenting the experience of ordinary individuals in ordinary spaces.

For example, in one of the film stills depicting the Mexican *Angelus*, the colonial figure appears in the left side of the picture, overlapped by the stand of a street vendor that has invaded the church’s surroundings. The eye-level angle of the picture and its two-point perspective allows the viewer to contemplate the two sides of the same corner: the colonial low-relief located in the left wall and the street stand occupying the right one. In this photo, the imagery of Mexican popular culture, i.e. holy cards, cigarettes, and candy, compete with the *Angelus*’s visual and material solidity.
While the *Farmer* is a figurative work, the geometric shapes of the well-organized merchandise, resemble Mondrian's most popular compositions. While the colonial low-relief has a clear narrative, the products are arranged after formal aspects: circular shapes occupy the left side, while squared ones are on the right area. Still, this classification also respects the nature and functionality of these different objects.

Despite the compositional and conceptual contrast of these images, rather than being interpreted as contradictory, they should be understood as complimentary. In fact, Gasparini's photograph demonstrates what Monsiváis has described as the crowds' ability of “destroying all harmony and simultaneously creating a hidden harmony where we, eventually, end up recognizing ourselves.” The coexistence of these images exemplifies the archival force of popular culture aesthetics. This section discusses the relationship between kitsch and Latin America's hybrid cultures, explaining how the chaos of popular culture eventually creates visual archives.

Similarly to Monsiváis's description, Nestor Garcia Canclini has asserted that “Despite attempts to give [Latin American] elite culture a modern profile, isolating the indigenous and the colonial in the popular sectors, an interclass mixing has generated hybrid formations in all social strata.” These hybrid formations arguably resemble the European kitsch, noting that Clement Greenberg claimed that it requires a “matured cultural tradition” from which to borrow, transform, and build upon. For Greenberg, kitsch is, therefore, referential and historical, and implies an act of borrowing from the past and the official, and adapting it to a contemporary, non-elitist, and popular taste.

The context that gave origin to the European kitsch is not however, identical to the Latin American. Like the development of cultural institutions in the region created narratives of origin of national identity, rather than appropriations of ready-made historical legacies, Latin American kitsch is also a matter of origins. The proliferation of kitsch is not the product of decentralizing a “mature cultural tradition,” but the side effect of constantly attempting to construct an identity through images and bombarding the population with them. As asserted by Canclini, the “internal contradiction and discrepancies [of Latin American art] express sociocultural heterogeneity and the difficulty of being realized in the midst of conflicts between different historical temporalities that coexist in the same present.”

Each political project that has designed a new cultural identity, has also designed a new national imagery that kitsch has referenced. In the Latin American context, the contemporary visual chaos that Crimp Douglas and David Joselit have attributed to digital reproducibility and the emergence of the contemporary digital media, can be traced long before, to the same origins of the national identities' creation processes. As way of example, it has been argued that Gasparini depicts the Latin American overlapping of ideological planes. In relation to the aforementioned photograph of the *Angelus* and the street stand, one could recognize that capitalism and Catholicism

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dare represented in the image. Even if the strategic location of the stand seems to
gontradict the laws of the Church (Jesus’ cleansing of the temple), it eventually
provides the religious communities with important supplies as water and candles.
As evinced by Gasparini’s picture, the commercial and the spiritual are the two faces
of the same coin. Moreover, Mexican kitsch allows this paradoxical combination of
deo logical plains to be possible and acceptable.

As a result of these common superpositions of images and ideologies, Latin American
culture is kitsch. Hybrid cultures, which are a central component of the regional
dentities arise through interclass mixing, according to Canclini; furthermore, these
hybrid cultures also result from the historical character of the kitsch. Moreover,
Monsiváis himself has described this hybridity as chaotic. In The Chaos Rituals the
author questions the urban disorder of Mexico, concluding, “such disorder relates to
the overcrowding and mass society that characterizes the city.” Based on Monsiváis’s
assertions, Mexican popular culture is perceived as chaotic.

Although Charles Merewether has described “the archive [as a] repository or ordered
system of documents and records, both verbal and visual, that is the foundation from
which history is written,” the Latin American popular culture also functions as an
archival mechanism. In general, visual archive’s mechanisms relate to photography’s
ability to register real life events with assumed absolute accuracy. Visual archives
consist, therefore, of images depicting historical events through time and space,
purportedly able to provide documentary evidence of their development. Although
he archival mechanisms of popular culture are not institutionally structured, the
chaos generated by kitsch and cultural hybridity implies and visually records a
toexistence of times and traditions. Such material simultaneity of ideological planes
provides evidence of the political and social changes that have taken place in Latin
America, eventually creating visual archives.

A Mexican Angelus Novus, or Popular Archives and Montage

The juxtaposition of images in Los Presagios, the montage of Gasparini’s photographs,
provides evidence for the archival nature of Mexican popular culture. The chaos of the
city, in addition of constituting a subject matter of his pictures, informed Gasparini’s
archival practices.

At any rate, Gasparini’s images usually portray quotidian life in the metropolis,
ocusing on depicting Mexican popular culture as found in public spaces, where the
taste of the crowd overlaps modern urban design. For example, the encounters of
Mexican essentialism and Americanization in popular culture are common subject
matters of Gasparini’s work. In one of Los Presagios’s pictures (Figure 3), Gasparini
depicts a man wearing a sweater stamped with the American and Japanese flags. Not
only does this character indicate globalization and the development of a kitsch that
reconciles contradictory ideologies, but also of a chaotic way of arranging images. The display of magazines outside this appliance shop in fact reveals how pictures—covers in this case—of contrasting scales, subject matters, and fonts, constitute one image. Just as in a collage, the magazine covers appear overlapping each other and arranged in multiple axes. As the displays include different issues of the same magazine, there is also a coexistence of the old and the new. In addition to relating to the discontinuity of the modern world, as described by Lewis Kachur when talking about the origin of collage, the stand’s disarticulation of reality evinces the archival dimension of Mexican hybridity. The superposition of objects eventually creates a visual repository of primary images that speaks to the history of the city. The montage of Gasparini’s photographs in the film certainly resembles the collage-like arrangement of images in this street stand.

In the visual arts, montage refers to a disparate juxtaposition of images, that “is associated with the discontinuity of the modern world,” as does collage. Montage is a rupture against the naturalistic impulse that gave origin to painting and photography as media devoted to reproducing reality’s visual unity. It implies a fragmentation of such unity, and reordering its wreckages in a way that even if evokes a reality, does not imitate it. Gasparini’s montage in Los Presagios is nevertheless rather mimetic as it emulates the popular culture’s collage-like aesthetics.

It is important to consider the place that this photograph portraying a magazine stand occupies in the film’s slideshow. In fact, this picture is preceded by the image of a mestizo boy wearing a Woody Woodpecker t-shirt, and followed by the depiction of a King Kong advertisement. The editing of these three images extrapolates the chaotic display of the magazines to the realm of the film’s montage. Not only does the contradictory combination of subject matters speak to the heterogeneity of popular taste, but also to the transition of the images. Since each picture slowly dissolves

Figure 3. Paolo Gasparini, Film still from Los Presagios de Moctezuma, 1995.
faints) into the next one, the rhythm seems to replicate the overlapping of magazine covers of the shop.

As such, it is clear that Gasparini achieves two goals by emulating popular culture's arrangement of images. The first is to evince how popular culture registers itself through the cultural hybridity of Latin American kitsch. The second is to incorporate his archival mechanism in *Los Presagios*'s montage as a way of proving its alignment with the non-official historiography triggered by Benjamin's writings. Gasparini's final intention resides in declaring his sense of belonging to the visual culture that he depicts, and thus, brings documentary photography closer to low culture's imagery. Although if this branch of photography has historically dealt with topics of daily-life and social conflicts, its conception and circulation were associated with mediatic and political institutions.

As a second prove of the mimetic character of *Los Presagios*'s montage, the film's editing, supposedly connected by the narrative thread of Moctezuma II's eight omens, does not guide the spectator through the urban monstrosity of the Mexican capital. Instead, the montage exacerbates the metropolis's overstimulation, its aesthetic diversity, and its entangled social and spatial dynamics. The constant appearance of the Mexican *Angelus* urges the viewer to be confused in the face of popular chaos, to be as overwhelmed as he is. For instance, in addition to the sequence of images, the scene's music background—The Doors's "When the Music is Over" and Monsiváis's narration—make it difficult for the spectator to concentrate on a single aspect of the film. Such confusion emulates Gasparini's phenomenological experience in Mexico City and seems to contradict the main functions of a montage.

Indeed, montage is a cinematic technique that articulates the spatial relations in a visual production, as it transports the viewer from one location to the next. Moreover, it enables the dialectical development of a film's narrative or conceptual content, as first theorized by the Soviets in the 1920s. A film's montage conveys its meaning by the syntagmatic juxtaposition of images. There is not a clear boundary between narrative and concept in Gasparini's work; therefore, the montage, instead of serving as a conceptual and narrative clarifier, seems to obscure the purpose of the film. Since the film's images do not follow a predefined account of events, *Los Presagios*'s is hard to read. For example, when recreating Moctezuma II's first foreshadow, which refers to the sight of a comet, the film displays a set of images depicting luchadores, families in an archeology museum, a subway station built in a colonial plaza, among others. Given the dysfunctional nature of the images' sequence, one could argue that *Los Presagios*'s anti-narrative style relates with Dada photomontage, rather than with popular culture.

In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* (1919), Hannah Höch illustrates Dada anti-narrative: the playful arrangement of the figures, while compositionally well-balanced, appears
arbitrarily selected and juxtaposed, especially given the disjunction between the image and its name. As asserted by Benjamin Buchloch, during the 1920s the Dadaists started critiquing the inaccessibility and lack of political character of their "absurd" compositions, which seemed to target a bourgeois audience.\textsuperscript{57} According to the German art historian, Höch's \textit{Meine Haussprüche} reveals the artist's shift towards a more intelligible language, given the horizontal composition of the montage and the relative correspondence of the images and the text, e.g. the expression that "Death is a Dadaish matter" is located above a crucifix.

In the context of this revalorization of a more accessible montage, which would facilitate the comprehension of their artworks, it is obvious that Gasparini's montage was influenced by the Dada. This movement's mistake lay in introducing chaos within a population identified with a different language.\textsuperscript{58} Their shift toward a more intelligible narrative proved that in order to succeed outside the realm of cultural elites, emulating the popular was necessary. Therefore, Gasparini's montage reproduces the chaos of popular culture, which described by Monsiváis, is incomprehensible but familiar ("a secret harmony"). "In spite of everything," asserts Monsiváis in \textit{Los Presagios}, "twenty million people do not leave Mexico, because there is nowhere else where they would like to go."\textsuperscript{59}

Against the scholarly efforts to untangle the chaos of Mexico City and explain it from an outsider perspective, as Néstor García Canclini has attempted, Gasparini decides to archive the popular culture with its own mechanisms.\textsuperscript{60} His montage does not intend to translate. His production constitutes a rupture with the official representations of the city's history, which seem to reproduce the chaos of popular culture, but that eventually, order it. In this process, Gasparini reacts to previous artistic initiatives that ostensibly employed chaos as an archivial mechanism.

As a way of example, Diego Rivera's \textit{History of Mexico}—the mural whose central figure could have been a good \textit{Angel of History}—illustrates an early intention of demonstrating the archival potential of popular culture's chaos. In addition of purportedly representing all Mexican history, the pictorial language of the mural exemplifies Rivera's "exaltation of popular heritage in Mexican culture."\textsuperscript{61} This fresco puts on display the agglomeration of historical characters, moments, and traditions distinctive of Mexican popular culture, of its chaos and hybridity. Rather than organizing the events in chronological order, the canonic foundational moment of Mexico—the eagle holding the symbol of life and war that stands for the conventional snake—appears in the center of the composition. In spite of being separated for more than a century, the revolution and the independence surround this scene, suggesting that both events transformed national identity with the same force. This chaotic and overcrowded juxtaposition of people, times, and places, embraces popular collage-like aesthetics and uses it to document the history of the country, thus acknowledging its archival potential.
However, this mural aimed to depict the complete history of Mexico. In addition to promulgating a political project and a visual identity, it created an official discourse that supposedly explained everything and included everyone. In Rivera’s mural, history, both as a discipline and as a pictorial genre, is translated into the visual terms of popular culture. Its fictionality favors certain narratives and characters over others. The hierarchization of figures and moments undermines the main benefit of a chaotic composition, where the individual loses itself in the indistinctiveness of the crowd, of mass society. The mural is an archive that looks popular but that is official.

On the other hand, photography as a medium offers the advantage of fragmenting the reality by capturing details of larger views. If Rivera offers an official metanarrative of Mexico that assembles a fragmented history, Gasparini favors the documentation of individual and ordinary stories. Since the Latin American interpretations of Benjamin riggered the appearance of microhistory as an alternative to the official discourse of cultural and political elites, Gasparini archives with “the end of history” in mind. He is aware of the potential of atomized narratives; moreover, his micro-depictions of popular culture do not require an order, since they represent and emulate an organic disorder.

Furthermore, Gasparini also resisted “de-centralized” official metanarratives. Since it can be difficult to compare a photograph to a mural given the scale and circulation differences, contrasting Gasparini’s pictures to a favorite medium of popular culture sheds light on how official narratives permeate visual culture. The multiple albums of Mexican posters commissioned by Mexico’s Department of Tourism (Departamento de Turismo de México) during the twentieth century popularized a rather organized version of the capital city. In an official travel poster titled México D.F. (Figure 4), the flurry of ordering the convoluted nature of the metropolis is evident.

Despite the fact that the image brings different distant sites of the city together, thus depicting an inaccurate geography of the place, amalgamating different images to create a new one (almost emulating a collage), this aesthetic decision simplifies the chaos of the city. It transforms it into an easy-to-see, picturesque and touristic miniature of the metropolis. The pedestrian-free roads, the absence of traffic, and the volitionary narrative of the image accommodate the city for the eyes of the outsider spectator. From the background to the foreground, and from the old to the most recent, the advertisement depicts Teotihuacan, a colonial cathedral, the Palace of Fine Arts, an art deco skyscraper, and a modern train. Even if read from top to bottom, there is a hierarchical order that simultaneously coronates the newest and the oldest. Although the format of the image supposedly facilitates its incorporation into public spaces, its natural spatial organization betrays the urban disorder of Mexico. As such, even if Gasparini’s work makes part of a general desire of recording the city, he favors the depiction of the multiple micronarratives that constitute it, instead of depicting the urban icons. These micronarratives are evidently, those of popular culture.
In conclusion, the Mexican Angelus evinces Gasparini’s alignment with the Mexican Benjaminitian historiography. In fact, Gasparini contributed to what philologist Mabel Mora describes as “the general process of replacing a concept of history understood as official archive and utopian progression, with micro-stories or minimal stories that speak the much more contained language of the individual.” In fact, the Mexican Angelus represents contemporary scholars’ attempt of criticizing the dynamics of power surrounding the country’s official narratives, and of favoring the stories of quotidian life.

Paolo Gasparini’s pictures in Los Presagios evince how the aesthetics of popular culture create visual archives by arranging images in a collage-like aesthetic that incorporates heterogeneous material. Moreover, by depicting the display of Mexican kitsch in the city’s public spaces, the historical and hybrid character of popular culture is exposed. Gasparini’s decision to legitimize kitsch is evinced not only by depicting popular aesthetics but also by emulating them in the film’s montage. Such feature desacralizes the role of the artist as documenter of the city, as he embraces the disarticulation of history as a metanarrative able to generalize and rule the ordinary without mixing with it.
in *Los Presagios de Moctezuma*, Gasparini certainly demonstrates how the aesthetics of popular culture constitute and inspired visual archival practices that acknowledge the value of ordinary narratives, thus reducing the gap between high and low culture. Gasparini, therefore, suggests that popular culture can provide some answers to the conflicts related to how to create a Benjaminian Latin American history. Moreover, *Los Presagios*'s pictures and montage reveal how vernacular spaces can directly contribute to understanding the larger picture, as they speak to the difficulties of assimilating modernity in Latin America and developing an identity subject to constant change.

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NOTES


In relation to the collaboration between these two artists it should be noted that the photographs and film montage were Gasparini's responsibility, while the textual voice was Monsiváis's work. Gasparini has affirmed that Monsiváis's texts were highly influential on the film's montage. See Águeda Cerón, "Sin Perder de Vista, aolo Gasparini," Cuartoscuro, last modified February 26, 2016, http://cuartoscuro. om.mx/2016/02/sin-perde-de-vista-paolo-gasparini/.

The Florentine Codex was originally titled *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España (The Universal History of the Things of New Spain)* written by Bernardino de Sahagún in 1590. Moctezuma II's legend appears in the first chapter of the book's fifth volume. See Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (Madrid: Alizanza, 1988).

5 Ibid.


7 Ibid., 44.

8 Paolo Gasparini and Carlos Monsiváis, Los Presagios de Moctezuma, directed by Paolo Gasparini (Mexico D.F.; Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, 1995), Film. Original text in Spanish cited in the film: “En lo que ahora es considerado el centro de la ciudad de México, en la iglesia de San Hipólito, se halla un monumento que representa a un indio de la época prehispánica, con aspecto y con expresión tan aterrada como el ángel del cuadro de Klee”.

9 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History.”


13 Ibid., 160.

14 For a detailed version of the legend see: Fray Diego Durán, Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y islas de Tierra Firme, vol. 1 (Mexico D.F.: Editora Nacional, 1951), 516-17.


18 Werckmeister, “Walter’s Benjamin Angel of History,” 244. Werckmeister has noted that “the angel of history has become a symbolic figure for the contradiction-laden alignment of life, art, and politics to which left-wing intellectuals have tended to aspire” (244).


20 Barbara E. Mundy, “Mapping the Aztec Capital: The 1524 Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan, Its Sources and Meanings,” Imago Mundi 50 (1998): 11?33. In her work, Mundy has made clear that Tenochtitlan and New Spain lost the nomenclature battle against Mexico (15).
1. Gasparini and Monsiváis, *Los presagios de Moctezuma*. Original text in Spanish is narrated by Monsiváis: "Instalada sobre las ruinas de un imperio, la ciudad de México encontró en ese hecho un hacerse entre ruinas su primera y única definición".


3. Benjamin has had a strong influence in Brazil and Chile, particularly in relation to the historicization of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship.

4. Bolívar Echeverría was the first translator of some of Benjamin's texts into Spanish, and the author of *La mirada del ángel: en torno a las tesis sobre la historia de Walter Benjamin*, (Mexico D.F.: UNAM, 2005).

5. Sánchez Prado, "Reading Benjamin in Mexico," 43.

6. Ibid., 44.

7. Ibid.


9. Ibid., 76.


16. Ibid., 775.


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 167.


22. Ibid.
Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 54.

Larrain, *Identity and Modernity in Latin America*, 34. Larrain describes national identities as having two components, a public and official one, and a private and daily-life one.


I refer to essentialism as the fixation of a national identity centered on the pre-Columbian past. See Larrain, *Identity and Modernity in Latin America*, 158-59.


Ibid.


Ibid.

In *Los Presagios*, the original text was rephrased by Monsiváis as "Y Moctezuma se asustó mucho cuando vió las estrellas y los gemelos."

"The Dadaists were united not by a common style but by a rejection of conventions in art and thought, seeking through their unorthodox techniques, performances, and provocations to." Dawn Ades and Matthew Gale, "Dada," Grove Art Online, s. d., accessed August 8, 2017, http://www.oxfordartonline.com.libproxy.tulane.edu:2048/.


A transcendental difference between Latin America and Europe, resides in how the postcolonial countries have struggled to define narratives of origin and national imageries, while the European countries established theirs before colonial expansionism (ix). See Sven Schuster, ed., introduction to *La nación expuesta: cultura visual y procesos de formación de la nación en América Latina*, ed. Sven Schuster (Bogotá, D.C.: Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2014), ix.

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3 Mabel Moraña, "El culturalismo de Carlos Monsiváis: ideología y carnavalización en tiempos globales," in *El arte de la ironía*, ed. Moraña and Sánchez Prado, 22. Original text in Spanish: "El proceso general de reemplazo de una concepción de la historia entendida como archivo oficial y como progresión utópica, por microrrelatos o historias mínimas que hablan el lenguaje mucho más acotado de lo individual" (22).

4 Sebastián Faber, "El estilo como ideología: de la rebelión de Ortega a los rituales de Monsiváis," in *El arte de la ironía*, ed. Moraña and Sánchez Prado, 82.