

Book Reviews

SAMUEL STEINBERG. *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco: Afterimages of Mexico, 1968*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016. 266 pp.

Tlatelolco, 2 October 1968. More than a mere place and a date, these words have acquired another significance in the past forty-nine years: they symbolize the student massacre at the hands of the Mexican state. In his book, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco: Afterimages of Mexico, 1968*, Samuel Steinberg takes these words along with the cultural production on the massacre and questions the construction of the Mexican 1968 we know today. “What if 1968 did not take place and has no place? What if the thing we associate with the signifier 1968 can only be or remain in its very place?” (20). These questions guide Steinberg’s book as he offers new readings of the canon of the Tlatelolco massacre, including works by Octavio Paz and Elena Poniatowska, noting that some of these critical interpretations might be unpopular as he aims to deconstruct an event nearly five decades in the making. Alongside these canonical pieces, Steinberg inserts different perspectives on the Tlatelolco narrative, such as those of Jorge Volpi and the artist Francis Alÿs. Divided in six chapters, each dedicated to a different form, Steinberg dissects an event that according to him has been created under a sacrificial narrative in which the students’ defeat is the prominent narrative.

Photopoetics at Tlatelolco begins with analysis of works by Octavio Paz and José Revueltas on the student massacre. Steinberg discusses the repression of the student movement itself, a political phenomenon that has been replaced by the massacre as the ultimate signifier of 1968 in Mexico. Revueltas points out the unfinished nature of Tlatelolco, an event that will continue to be discussed and remembered. Steinberg begins his deconstruction of this event through Octavio Paz, who quit his position in the Mexican Embassy of India as protest in addition to writing a poem and an essay dedicated to the massacre. Steinberg’s critique of Paz’s response to the massacre at Tlatelolco highlights the sacrificial narrative that has set the tone of many of the subsequent writings on the subject. We have failed to see the student movement for what it once was, suggests Steinberg, and we are stuck in a “sacrificial and melancholic subjectivization” of the massacre (37). This leads to the second chapter centered around *Días de guardar* (1970) by Carlos Monsiváis in which the representation of the Tlatelolco massacre steps away from what has been said.

Monsiváis, unlike Revuletas and Paz, talks about the present and shifts his focus to the students, highlighting the absence of an archive and rejecting the sacrificial narrative previously proposed. In his chronicles on Tlatelolco, notes Steinberg, Monsiváis refuses to represent the defeat of the movement and violence of the massacre. In this chapter, Steinberg also analyzes the use of photography in representations of Tlatelolco as an extension of eye-witness accounts; unlike other forms, photographic evidence cannot be contested. At the same time, Monsiváis interacts with the photography used in his chronicle, depicting the pain and discontinuity that has formed around the massacre representations.

The third chapter is dedicated to the testimonial novel, *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) by Elena Poniatowska, perhaps the most well-known work of the Tlatelolco studies. Poniatowska uses photography along with her testimonial narrative, one that Steinberg classifies as a “melodramatic interpretation” of Tlatelolco. The use of melodrama in the chronological organization of the novel as well as the authority achieved through the photographs and testimonials, aim to give place to a sense of collectivity. However, this collectivity, as Steinberg points out, is created once again through the failure of the movement, the same moment that has come to define the event of October 2, 1968 in Mexico.

More than twenty years after the fact, the film *Rojo Amanecer* (1990) by Jorge Fons explores the events at Tlatelolco. In his fourth chapter, Steinberg analyzes the film, claiming that it “parasitically draws its own authenticity from the act of appropriation” (116) since it maintains the sacrificial discourse created around the massacre. Unlike the literature analyzed in previous chapters, the cinematic representation of Tlatelolco is created decades later, offering a reenactment of the event created by that same literature. Neither the massacre nor the student movements appear in *Rojo Amanecer*, contributing to the “cleaning” of the memory of the massacre that clenches to the image of defeat.

Chapters five and six are dedicated to new interpretations of Tlatelolco, starting with Jorge Volpi’s novel *El fin de la locura* (2003) and followed by two performance and installation artworks by Francis Alÿs, *Cuentos patrióticos* (1997) and *When Faith Moves Mountains* (*Cuando la fe mueve montañas*) (2002). Steinberg considers Volpi’s novel to be the last of the novels of Tlatelolco. He mentions

'68 (2004) Paco Ignacio Taibo II, in which the writer expresses the impossibility of writing such a novel since it cannot represent a pure account. Volpi, however, succeeds at creating the novel that portrays Tlatelolco objectively due to the writer's generational gap. As Steinberg emphasizes, Volpi has no direct attachment to Tlatelolco '68, therefore allowing him to create the "great totalizing novel" (151) of Tlatelolco. The artist Francis Alÿs also counts on this distance from Tlatelolco: his generation and place of birth give him an outsider view. Steinberg starts by analyzing his piece *When Faith Moves Mountains*, and then *Cuentos patrióticos*; the latter was part of an exhibit at the memorial dedicated to the Mexican 1968. Alÿs, says Steinberg, offers a "reflection that does not limit itself to the voice of the witness, the search for evidence, or even the cynical assertion of our present's continuity with 1968" (180). We have stepped away from the initial representations of the Tlatelolco massacre, that have created the name and the event, moving towards what Steinberg defines as an an-archeological moment.

With *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*, Samuel Steinberg contributes to the ongoing conversation around the Tlatelolco student massacre. He quotes Revueltas in the first chapter of his book as the Mexican writer declares the eternal continuity of Tlatelolco. Steinberg adds to this continuity, first by questioning the canonical representations of Tlatelolco and bringing to light the construction of an event that has been reproduced for almost fifty years, leaving aside other factors such as the student movement itself. At the same time, Steinberg assures the continuity of Tlatelolco that Revueltas points to by bringing to the table works that intend to reject previous representations of Tlatelolco and redirect a discussion that will continue as Tlatelolco is reinterpreted by other artists.

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