Mickey, Marginality, and Mexico: Mariana Yampolsky's Final Photographic Narrative[1]

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Abstract

Mexican photographer Mariana Yampolsky's final photography exhibition casts aside typical visualizations of her adopted country to foreground the marginal voices that react to global forces. Yampolsky's photographic narrative engages directly with ideas promoted in Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's key work on cultural imperialism: *How to Read Donald Duck*. This analysis of her photographic text will show how Yampolsky's visual representations of the subaltern provides further and distinct evidence of Dorfman and Mattelart's assertions regarding the introduction of foreign symbols into a Latin American context. Additionally, her work demonstrates how the popular classes appropriate these symbols, adding to them *mexicanidad* and additional meaning created by the subaltern.

Keywords: Mariana Yampolsky, Latin American photography, Visual Narrative and the Subaltern, *How to Read Donald Duck*, Mexican photographers

In his introduction to *Spanish Visual Culture: Cinema, Television, Internet*, Paul Julian Smith argues that cultural studies have taken a visual turn.[2] Much of the effort in understanding that visual turn in Hispanism has involved the study of filmic narrative. On the other hand, notwithstanding its noted relevance and ubiquity, a smaller portion of the analytical discussion on the visual to date has been proportioned to the ample use of photography: an element one encounters daily in magazines, advertising hoardings, books, personal photography, or other technologies of mass-production and reproduction (Rampley 1-4). One of this essay's intentions is to widen the critical dialogue regarding one of Mexico's key photographers: Mariana Yampolsky, in order to suggest new approaches for understanding her visual production and how it engages with other dialogues on the visual.

In Jesús Martín-Barbero's analysis of mass media in the formation of national culture found in *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*, he argues that cultural and political mediations have not been recognized in the history of mass media. He proposes that the writing of the history of the mass media would need to be undertaken from the perspective of cultural processes involving the communication practices of both the subaltern and hegemonic social movements (Martín-Barbero 50). Making reference to the 1980s and beyond, Barbero argued that the world-wide crisis of capitalism would be accompanied not only by a pretending to standardize world culture, but that mass culture would "be riddled with new tensions that had their

origins in the different national representations of popular culture" (51). Mariana Yampolsky's final photo exhibition offers insight into Barbero's suggestion by exploring some of the symbols of mass media in Mexico and evidencing those tensions. However, even more specifically, Yampolsky's work engages directly with Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattellart's study: *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in Disney Comic.*

Written and published at a time when Disney comics with anti-Allende messages were being imported into Chile from the USA (Contantinou 34), *How to Read Donald Duck* has been a text of profound impact in Latin American and further afar (McClennen 14). Translated into thirteen distinct languages, John Berger's review of the English-translation of the text called it a "handbook for de-colonization" (478). John Tomlinson suggested that the book maps out the way in which Disney can be confronted (42). In her study of Ariel Dorfman's work, Sophia McClennen described the book as a "blueprint for cultural criticism" (274), noting that much of his work paved the way for other culture critics such as the already mentioned Jesús Martín-Barbero and Carlos Monsiváis (274). In *The Expedience of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*, George Yúdice also identifies *How to Read Donald Duck* as one of the guidelines for cultural criticism on Latin America, noting the complex interchanges of culture and dependency (86). Familiar with Dorfman and Mattelart's bestselling writings on imperialism and comics from her readings and intellectual discussions, Mariana Yampolsky's visual text allowed her work to take that "blueprint," as described by McClennen and others, and use it to map out her visual essay on the growing influence of Disney in Mexico in the 1990s (Poniatowska pers. comm.). Concerned that Disney was carrying out what she described as a "segunda conquista/second colonization" of her country, she allowed the "handbook for de-colonization" to guide her work and she began to photographically document what she considered to be the invasion of Disney images in Mexico as well as local graffiti, which she deemed to be the "gritos desesperados de una cultura dominada" (Aurrecoechea 257). Her nuanced work would prove to be less polarized than Dorfman's 1971 publication (McClennen 257), and allows the reader to observe how the subaltern appropriates and can even be subversive with their usage of these images. Importantly as well, this photo exhibition allows us to comment on how individuals reacted to the images: one of the considerations John Tomlinson argued was a missing (yet key) element regarding our understanding of the Mattelart and Dorfman text (Tomlinson 43). Yampolsky's photo narrative lends vital visibility to the subject of both the growing influence of non-native iconography in Mexico as well as "creating conditions of visibility" for the subaltern (Coleman 160). Yampolsky's final photographic exhibition recognizes that the hegemonic attempt to make opposition invisible

(Coleman 174), but Yampolsky's images remind the viewer of the change of the cultural tides in Mexico: suggesting with her "this has been", the possible "yet to come" (Coleman 179).

Yampolsky's visual essay examines the increasing appearance of cartoon and comic book characters in public spaces in Mexico from the mid-1990s to 2000 and provides public visual evidence of some of Dorfman and Mattelart's key concerns regarding cultural imperialism in Latin America. This is especially true regarding their analysis of consumeristic discourse, the introduction of an iconography that lacks permanence, and the imposition of US models in Latin America.

Sophia McClennen argued that *How to Read Donald Duck* had a mission to raise consciousness (253), so Yampolsky's art desires that the viewer to engage with her photography critically. Yampolsky re-contextualizes the images studied by Dorfman and Mattelart by showing how the subaltern appropriate them. Yampolsky's visual narrative suggests that while certain patterns might be appropriated among the popular, that these patterns and symbols can also suffer a transformative process; one that evidences a mixing of global symbols with patterns of *mexicanidad* as well as marginality, suggesting new insights to Dorfman and Mattelart's observations.

An American immigrant to Mexico (b. 1925) who arrived after completing her university studies in Chicago, Yampolsky worked in several cultural projects in Mexico (such as El taller de Gráfica Popular) and can claim artistic roots in the field of photography that reach back to Edward Weston and Tina Modotti. In her final years as a photographer, Yampolsky observed that the change in economic politics following the implementation of the NAFTA agreement appeared to modify the visual environment in Mexico as Disney imagery began to grow there exponentially. She captured the manifestations and converted them into the focus of her final exhibition that was held in Casa México in Madrid in 2000.

Weston and Yampolsky were both inspired by unique and individual creations. Perhaps this is the reason they both distained mass-produced toys. Weston makes his thoughts on the subject very clear through an observation made on Christmas day in 1925:

> It is raining, the city presents a forlorn aspect, especially the *puestos* which should be so gay. This year they hold more junk than ever, cheap tin toys, German and Japanese, hardly a thing worth buying except the piñatas which are gay in color, fantastic or funny in conception. It is remarkable that such plastic beauty can be achieved from the use of tissue paper. (Weston 143)

The emphasis is obvious in the artist's statement: it was the hand-crafted colourful art such as the Mexican piñata that is valued, whilst the mass-produced toys from afar are eschewed. Mariana Yampolsky's capturing of the public manifestations and re-appropriations of recent, mass-produced cartoon and comic book images from their northern neighbor underlines the artist's

alarm for the unusual way in which their incursion on Mexico is portrayed. Her work underlines Dorfman and Mattelart's statement:

> Disney has been exalted as the inviolable common culture heritage of man; his characters have been incorporated into every home, they hang on every wall, they decorate objects of every kind; they constitute a little less than a social environment inviting us all to join the great universal Disney family, which extends beyond all frontiers and ideologies, transcends differences between peoples and nations, and particularities of custom and language. (28)

However, while Dorfman and Mattelart raise their concerns (and objections) from evidence they encounter in comics to be read, Mariana Yampolsky further explores the confirmations of Dorfman and Mattelart's ideas that are visible in the public domain. McClennan argues that Dorman and Mattleart's book identifies the pivotal role of mass-produced culture and its influences on society, and Yampolsky's photo narrative explores this notion further by offering evidence of this with her photography. She examines how these new symbols are manifested and re-appropriated by the subaltern in Mexico, offering additional insights into these notions. Likewise, while the Dorfman study approaches the official narratives, Yampolsky does not foreground the official globalized discourse. Rather, she focuses on how the marginal make use of these increasingly ubiquitous symbols and the information these symbols might offer regarding the subaltern experience. Yampolsky's non-invasive approach to photography allows the viewer to be aware of the immediacy and quotidian nature of her photography, and it suggests an effort to show a connectedness with the local context. This helps her to produce the narrative of appropriation and modification that is studied here.

It would be fair to state that Mariana Yampolsky manifests a marked concern regarding the loss of autochthonous sources of inspiration art and, to a lesser extent, those methods that created them. She also promoted the notion that the appropriation of foreign models somehow corrupts the region's tradition of serious art, replacing it with messages of Disney and consumerist notions as identified by Dorfman (70-71). Yampolsky centers her entire project on images that are linked to the cycle of market consumption, evidencing items for purchase or in consumer-related messages. The artist's work manifests that while the appropriation of global symbols appears to displace the local, these symbols also suffer a transformative process that give a certain visibility to the local as well. Perhaps the most prevalent of these is the suggestion of chaos associated with the adoption of new symbols.

Chaos

Reflective of the upheaval of politics and culture that accompanied the entrance of the NAFTA era, the theme of chaos stands out as one of the clearest ways in which these important symbols are portrayed with difference. Knowing that the authorized vendors of Disney merchandise sell and exhibit their branded wares in manners that follow a mandated pattern, the photographer focused on the non-authorized discourse formed by buyers and sellers of the popular classes. Mariana Yampolsky captured these unauthorized Disney figures from different points of view of the popular. In so doing, the cartoon characters often become the center of this chaos – possibly a reference to some of these exchanges operating on the fringes of, or outside, the law. A few examples clarify this further.

Consider the following figure. The association of Disney to chaos by placing its characters at the center of a chaotic montage is not limited to the commercial. Indeed, the collection observes the famous mouse in the middle of a private home among a confusing combination of household items. However, even more poignant is the portrayal the mouse in a market scene. A young girl gazes at what appears to be a jumble sale. On top of various items for sale, a handwritten paper announcement offers a discount for those who wish to purchase more than one item. Many of the items are children's toys or clothing. On top of all of them is a Minnie Mouse. Casually located in a skewed position on top of the heap, this plush toy is queen of the mess and has possibly been placed above the other wares in the hopes that the easily recognized figure will attract potential buyers. Unlike a personalized *juguete* like the ones Weston portrayed in his *Daybooks*, this toy reminds the viewer of any number of movies, comics, or sundry mediums in which its visual clones might have appeared. Hence, this item at the center of the chaos is one that connects to everyone and everything and, at the same time, to no one and nothing.

The next photograph that obliges the viewer to consider how the subaltern reorganized and represented hegemonic images so that, instead of new-world order, they represent disorder. This visual critique involves a store window. Store windows at Christmas time in Mexico have long since been a favorite subject matter of Mexican photographers wanting to condemn the commercialization of that time of year and underline the poverty that affects thousands of children whose Christmas will be unlike the ones pictured in movies, novels, television programmes, or any number of visual reminders of what a "normal" Christmas should look like. Héctor García masterfully portrayed a young girl pressing her face up against a store window attempting to look in on a display of modern Western toys in the window in his photograph *Las Muñecas* taken in 1946 in the neighborhood El Bondojito in Mexico City (22). Nacho López also created a biting

piece of social criticism with his photo essay that observed the lives of Mexican children living in dire poverty at Christmas time (Mraz 89-91).

Mariana Yampolsky's approach to this theme is straightforward and provides an important twist to the established narratives. Instead of following Héctor García's model of capturing a carefully arranged store window that mirrored the likes of the well-established department stores in the USA, Yampolsky establishes a link between the portrayal of a Disney character among the popular and chaos. (Figure 1) This she does by capturing a store window that has the message painted on it in bold and carefully painted script: "El Espíritu de la Navidad". Filling the bottom of that same store window is an enormous pile of chaotically strewn stuffed Minnie Mouse figures. So high does the conglomeration of the plush toys reach, that it becomes difficult to read the word Christmas due to the abundance of Minnie Mouse toys behind the letters. The message is apparent: the excess of the Disney character makes Christmas opaque. The chaotic Mexican collection of USA-fuelled iconography has blocked out the traditional Christian *Crèche* or *Nacimiento* scenes once abundantly found during that season in Mexico (Yampolsky and Mendez 311). The haphazard way in which the Disney characters have been dumped in the front of the store window, creating a chaotic mess of toys instead of a careful, well-thought, display that could have been possible; also suggests the flood of Disney imagery that Mexico had been experiencing. It also proposes a general abandon of aesthetics in the strong current of neoliberalism that dominated Mexico in a post-NAFTA era, all resulting in the chaos captured in the photograph.

(Figure 1)

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The final photograph representing chaos to mention also comes from another shop window. A sewing shop, or *mercería*, can often be a one-stop-shop that offers any number of household items related to sewing and decoration. Their shop windows can also frequently exhibit a wide variety of items and can be viewed as representative of the small, often family-run, businesses that suffered from the introduction of the NAFTA policies. In the image Mariana Yampolsky captured, we see that Mickey Mouse is only marginally figured as a set of stickers. Multiple elements fill the image: heart stickers, a pencil box for a young child, a watch, a sticker for prohibiting parking. The scene is a veritable *cabinet of curiosities*. However, Yampolsky's main message in the very center of the image is a sticker saying: "Viva Mexico". (Figure 2) If there is one phrase that symbolizes Mexican nationalism or Mexican identity, this is that phrase. Immortalized by one of the fathers of the Mexican state, Miguel Hidalgo, this statement is one of the sparks that ignited the liberation process that lead to national Mexican independence. Its public cry is an integral component of Mexican Independence Day celebrations. The phrase is a celebration of *mexicanidad* condensed into only two words. A Mexican can use it as he or she desires: as a symbol of pride or as an ironic statement. For a foreigner to use it wrong is a serious transgression. Yampolsky appears to employ it to assert her adopted Mexican identity. Elena Poniatowska, celebrated Mexican writer, occasional artistic collaborator, and close friend of Mariana Yampolsky confirmed that the artist rejected the idea that she was a foreigner in her adopted country: "la enfermaba que la consideran gringa" (Poniatowska 39). Hence, not only was she a naturalized citizen, Yampolsky also considered herself a Mexican in terms of identity, and this photo confirms this as she uses the patriotic phrase to make a key point. We observe that the sticker "Viva Mexico" is turned on its side and slightly upside down. Right next to it are the Disney stickers. The fact that almost all of the other artefacts are right side up only emphasises the upside down portrayal of the nationalist phrase and its connection to the Disney images even further. Amid the chaos in the *cabinet of curiosities*, Mexico is on its head. Right next to Mickey Mouse, order is not as one would expect it. Yampolsky's photograph asks what has happened to Mexico since the famous mouse had been allowed to cross their side of the border, and the suggested answer is that new tensions have emerged as foreign images from mass media have taken root: Mexican identity has been turned upside down. The global begins to displace the local, and chaos is on the rise. This suggestion of chaos in the NAFTA era is amplified even further when one considers the order and progress suggested by the pre-NAFTA photograph taken by Max Kozloff (an American photographer whose work was well-known to the *Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía*):[3] "Vidriera con efectos de ferretería" in which one observes the careful and clean display of items from another small Mexican business (Naggar and Ritchin 179).

(Figure 2)
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A famous, though possibly apocryphal, anecdote states that Fidel Castro, who planned key phases of the Cuban Revolution on Mexican soil, made the claim during the NAFTA era that Mexican children would more easily recognize Mickey Mouse than their national heroes (Cawthorne n.pag.). At the time of its occurrence, the alleged offence led the Mexican Embassy to recall its ambassador from Havana until a full explanation was offered. However, the past leader's possible comment is not new, as it simply echoes Dorfman and Mattelart's observation that Yampolsky's visual essay used as a guideline: "It has been observed that in more than one country Mickey Mouse is more popular than the national hero of the day" (28). Yampolsky's pictures ask the analytical question: if this "última conquista"[4] were allowed to continue as it has in the past few years, how many, folk, national, indigenous or other symbols would remain among the increasing tide of mass-produced North American Culture?

Kitsch and Mexico

In his essay that describes the state of research on culture and power, Nestor García Canclini argued against the concept of Deductivism being used to study the role of popular culture in Mexico. He believed it was insufficient to do so because this method established that: "to analyze culture was equivalent to describing the manoeuvres of dominant forces" (García Canclini 21). Yampolsky's photo narrative supports Canclini's view on Deductivism to a degree since the images

she has captured focus on how the cultural is modified among the popular: the subaltern appropriate and transform the imported imagery so that it is present. However, her work also suggests that this discourse has been changed to the extent that we see the traces of the dominant within the popular culture, yet we also observe the marginal's modifications of the dominant's symbols. This might include a change in its location of discourse and or the re-framing of that discourse within the popular as we noted earlier (García Canclini 24). This subaltern modification is perhaps most strongly evidenced as we observe Yampolsky's photographs that capture how the images associated with globalization are transformed into examples of Mexican Kitsch.

In Mexico, the exact definition of Kitsch is slightly fraught with difficulty. Normally, it is a given that Kitsch is an English word that has been adopted from German to "describe Art or *objets d'art* characterized by worthless pretentiousness" (OED). Others have described Kitsch as being linked to mass-production, lowbrow art, or popular art (in the sense of the people). Since the word's popularization in English and Spanish in the twentieth century, it has often been linked to certain forms of Mexican art. Writers such as Carlos Monsiváis, an avid collector of Mexican Kitsch art (Tuckmann n.pag.), have linked Kitsch to many modern cultural manifestations in Mexico. Cultural critic Linda Egan has described Kitsch as a "source of cultural identity for the Mexican Masses" (47). The notion of the term Mexican Kitsch has been used in several articles to describe art, decoration, and culture in Mexico; but while a shared sentiment among individuals points to the existence of such an art term, the precise definition of Mexican Kitsch has not yet been clearly defined - not even in the 2011 book which focuses directly on the topic: *Mexican Kitsch* (González and Fernández n.pag.). It is the Kitsch art from Yampolsky's exhibition art that best evidences how the subaltern have appropriated the mass media images and modified them within their local sphere, evidencing as well how these images both displace past images of *mexicanidad* while reshaping the new adopted ones. Indeed, the appearance of these images demonstrates how the marginal classes blur the lines of national identity (García Canclini 29). This loss of a narrative of natural history via its replacement by ever-changing icons in search of novelty is one of Dorfman and Mattelart's concerns as they study the advancement of Disney within Latin America (80-84). Yampolsky evidences this replacement in the physical environment she captures with her photographic lens.

Though some might consider Kitsch a ubiquitous phenomenon in Mexico, it is not a word normally associated with Mariana Yampolsky's art or photography. A photographer who was interested in capturing the surprising, the unexpected, and the uniqueness of her adopted country; Yampolsky's work is linked to highbrow art. Her interest in architecture and indigenous culture in Mexico led her to capture the popular in a wide variety of contexts and the element that is

ultimately transmitted in much of her work is that of individual and identity. In many instances, her work evidences how different communities and individuals adapt to their environment and create uniqueness that is sometimes inaccurately described as magic by some critics (Agosín). The huts made from slabs of the maguey plant (Yampolsky 1982, 26), a bus being recycled so that it forms an integral part of a brick wall (Yampolsky 1993, 293); the simple embroidery stiches on a funerary cloth (Yampolsky and Poniatowska 1985, 64), all manifest the presence of the individual and their own personal creativity in the environment which they inhabit. Most of Mariana's photographs manifest this clear evidence of Mexican originality, ingenuity, and even eccentricity. Hence, the majority of her photography captures the exact opposite of what might be considered by some to be Mexican Kitsch.

Notwithstanding, this does not mean that Mariana was blind to the notion of Kitsch in her adopted country. Quite the opposite is true. The word Kitsch, though it exists in Spanish, is highbrow vocabulary: to be encountered more in classes on art history at universities or by art critics writing for cultural supplements. The notion of Kitsch ismore widely expressed in Mexican Spanish by the word *cursi* (among others). This knowledge helps the reader understand Mariana Yampolsky's vision of Mexico even further when one considers the following intimate view of the artist. Whilst reviewing Yampolsky's photography at the Yampolsky Foundation with her widower, Arjen van der Sluis, he explained to me that his late wife had an expression she would often use when she came across a situation or an item that appeared to stretch the limits of good taste: "How *cursi* can you get?" (van der Sluis pers. comm. July 2013) This phrase, that manifests both her Mexican and her American cultural influences, not only clarify that Yampolsky did indeed clearly understand Kitsch when she encountered it, but she also preferred the colloquial Mexican word to describe the phenomena.

Why then, when she had eschewed capturing such art in her photography before, did Mariana Yampolsky's final exhibition underline the Kitsch comic and cartoon images Dorfman and Mattelart claimed were replacing the autochthonous? Some of the answers to these questions are revealed when one studies how Mariana portrays her photographs that include examples of Mexican Kitsch.

Part of Mariana's fascination with the Mexican toy imagery that Disney presents surely comes from her work she undertook with Leopoldo Méndez when creating an extensive and detailed catalogue of popular art: *Lo eterno y lo efímero del arte popular mexicano*. These two volumes which are heavily illustrated with beautiful color photographs of thousands of Mexican objects, evidence a substantial inclusion of toys as examples of Mexican folk art: each one is featured as a uniquely shaped piece of art meant for physical and aesthetic enjoyment. Indeed, toys even enjoy

their own section of Mariana Yampolsky's book. The contrast between the uniqueness, imagination, and individual creativity found in those toys and the repetitive appearance of Disney imagery that occurs in Mariana's final photo narrative is evident: one is considered art with spirit and creative merit, the other an example of routine blindness, and loss of history rooted in the constant renewal of cartoon iconography as suggested in *How to Read Donald Duck* (Yampolsky and Méndez 270). Two examples that clarify this point can be found in Yampolsky's photographic exhibition considered in this article.

Consider the photo of a store that appears to specialize in selling piñatas. The piñata is perhaps the quintessential Mexican toy. The star of any Mexican party even in the present, the custom of breaking open a piñata at a birthday party is said to have begun to celebrate the birthday of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli, one of the creators of the Mexican race according to Mexican mythology. First made of decorated clay pots, the humble piñata was later created from *papier maché* and decorated with seven cones which turned it into a star: converting it into a religious symbol of man's attempt to overcome mankind's struggle against the seven deadly sins. Doing so, it became a syncretic piece of Mexico when it combined European traditions from Lent and pre-Colombian Aztec practices. Yampolsky's photograph captures the piñata of the present day. Here, the star with religious overtones (though still encountered in our times) has been replaced by another type of sacred family made from paper, cardboard and paste: Mickey, Minnie, and Pluto (Figure 3). The three, along with other piñatas, look out upon the street; inviting the pedestrian to purchase them as their favorite party piece. The syncretic cultural icon Weston had once admired in his *Daybooks* as a bastion of Mexican artistic reserve had succumbed, at least in part, to popular global imagery in Yampolsky's day.

(Figure 3)

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As a second example, consider the following photograph from Yampolsky's final exhibition. This is a close-up of a photo that was taken near the USA/Mexico border. In the foreground, we observe three images: a clay statue of an Indian woman and two lamps, one of Mickey and another of Minnie Mouse. In the background, we are able to observe clay pots made of black clay from southern Mexico. While the black Oaxacan pots and small statues of Indian woman are, and have been, standard features of wares to sell to tourists and locals alike in many areas of Mexico, Yampolsky captures these items with two individuals who appear to be overtaking their presence: Mickey and Minnie Mouse.[5] (Figure 4) The very bright tones of the two Disney-inspired lamps in this photograph underline their presence even further in this image. Whilst wares such as these, often made in small factories that operate without the proper permissions, are occasionally seized, and destroyed by authorities in a symbolic crackdown on copyright infringement, Yampolsky's photograph confirms that the appropriation of new symbols have begun to encroach on the space of older symbols of *mexicanidad*. These images also make an additional point regarding subaltern narrative. Whilst Dorfman and Mattelart's critique of Disney argues that the working class is never seen in their published comics (59), Yampolsky's visual narrative adds a new insight into their critique because she shows the presence of the working class via the visual capture of their unauthorized merchandise and its informal mode of sale. This display of the *unofficial* iconography, the irregularity of its size, shape, and method of employ serve to visibly reminds the viewer of the subaltern who create and sell such items, partially eliminating the invisibility of such processes. Her work lends them visual voice as it increases our understanding of Dorfman and Mattelart's observations on Disney in Latin America by incorporating a new text that reveals another side of the phenomena. Yampolsky's photos include what had previously been excluded from the official discourse: the marginal.

(Figure 4)
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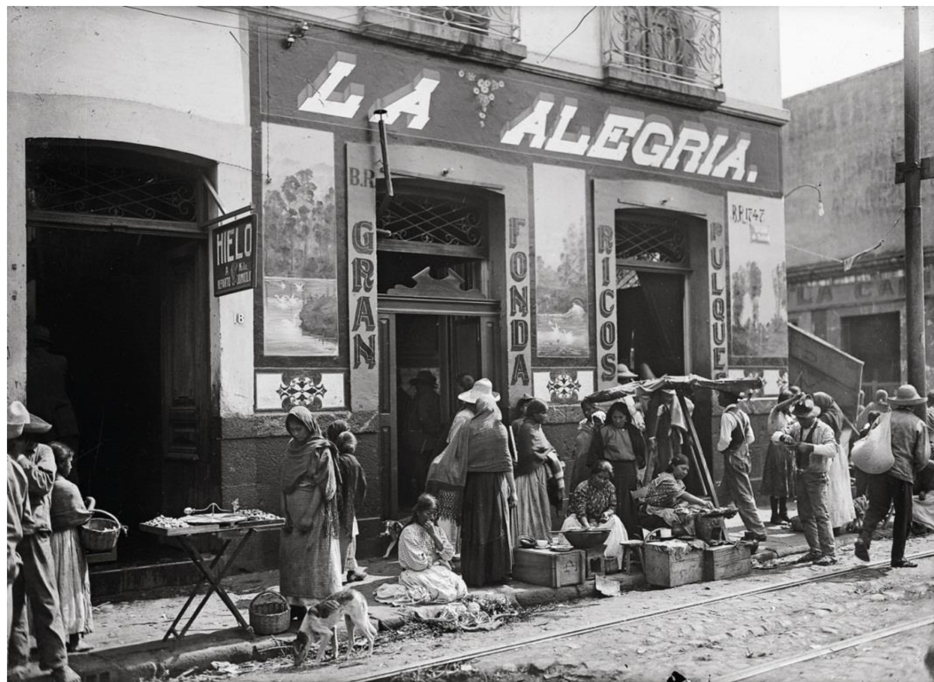
Timothy R. Robbins' essay "From Mexican Onda to McOndo: The Shifting Ideology of Mass Culture" suggests that Latin American cultural producers react in two possible ways to the invasion of USA mass-culture: to envision western/USA mass culture as hegemonic domination, or to discard cultural imperialist criticism and focus on the individual interactions to these new forces (Robbins 15). In practice, Yampolsky's images display evidences of both reactions described by Robbins in the collection of photographs under consideration. Robbins' study finds that Alberto Fuget's novel, *Mala onda*, converts North American Culture into a fetish that allows the status quo to be maintained (35). Yet, Yampolsky's photographs manifest distinct examples of how engagement can be both individual (by showing subaltern adaptations of symbols) and displace what was commonly accepted in the past as national (ie. by evidencing the individually crafted lamps or piñatas that replace older national symbols of culture). The artist's visual narrative evidences Dorfman and Mattelart's suggestion that Disney replaces the whole of history by inundating the past (and the future) with the Disney structures of the present (86).

If indeed, Kitsch is about mass-production and lowbrow art; in Yampolsky's photographs the viewer also becomes aware that while productions that evidence the subaltern may even be small, it is clearly manifest that what *is* being mass-produced is the image base. The fact that Disney imagery began to surface in many areas also underlines the growing Kitschy presence of Mickey Mouse characters in Mexico. This would suggest that perhaps the greatest aesthetical concern manifested by Yampolsky's final photo exhibition was in fact the loss of traditional folk-art imagery as images from mass media invaded its terrain. Her visual narrative suggests that important local sources of inspiration for the artist's imagery seemed to be giving way to kitschier modifications

of the global. Her work argues that whilst Mexico may always have art that is *cursi*, to have a Mexico dominated by a Kitschy version of Disney characters created by the popular classes would surely signal a turning point in the conception of Mexico among locals and foreigners alike. This is a point she strongly underlines with her focus on images on walls and architecture in her visual essay.

Walls and Architecture



(Figure 5)
Pulquería en Tacubaya Wikimedia Commons: labelled for public reuse

One of the general themes of Mariana Yampolsky's oeuvre is architecture. This family-driven focus is present from her earliest photographs to her final ones.[6] *La casa que canta*, Yampolsky's first book, is a prime example of her deep interest in the buildings that individuals create and occupy. In *La casa que canta* the reader encounters not only unique materials and designs that point to Mexico's ability to produce distinctive edifices, but also to the potential for these pieces to be viewed in an artistic light.

Yampolsky's final visual narrative also repeats this same architectural focus. Of the fifteen photographs, nine of them feature walls and two of them are worth special comment because they clearly evidence the blurring of national lines and their replacement by Disney as Dorfman and Mattelart identified in *How to Read Donald Duck*. To understand how this blurring is manifested, it is relevant to speak about Edward Weston and his *Daybooks*. One of the leitmotifs in Weston's *Daybooks* was the names of *pulquerías* (32). Ubiquitous during the 1920s while he was living in Mexico, *pulquerías* were not only the common watering hole for many Mexicans at the beginning

of the twentieth century who would drink the fermented *aguamiel*. They were also areas heavily adorned with popular art. (Figure 5) Thus, the typical *pulquería* could exhibit any possible combination of public art, many of which were very nationalist in nature and had its influence on the muralist movement. Weston's friend, Diego Rivera had spoken highly of them on more than one occasion.[7] As the Mexican muralist movement rose to international status, so did the tendency to paint murals on public buildings. Many of these were schools and libraries that began to feature murals that commemorated national heroes such as Benito Júarez, Miguel Hidalgo, or José María Morelos: mirroring the images and symbols also featured in the murals commissioned to the great Mexican muralists.

The dates from the Yampolsky archives confirm a transformation in the murals of the popular after NAFTA's entrance. Where once patriotic heroes stood, Disney characters presided. Some of them obeyed certain logic. Take for instance a photo from Yampolsky's exposition of a store that sells gifts and candy. We cannot see its name, which is just out of frame. However, what is entirely in focus is a picture of a well-painted Minnie Mouse who invites us to enter the toy store. In some ways, her presence mimics the *pulquerías* of yesteryear. Just as many of them showed the elaboration of the drink they sold inside: pulque, Minnie's presence also signals a brand of choice regarding children's toys in Mexico in the new NAFTA age. However, not all murals captured follow such logic. A Kitschy painting of an uncommonly thin Mickey with a hamburger in his hand outside a local restaurant also shows that this image is often appropriated by the popular for other random promotional purposes that deviate from canonical configurations of the character. (Figure 6) Images such as the one just mentioned blur the lines in both content and form of what is national and what is global, and show Mexican adaptations of such symbols by the marginal classes.

(Figure 6)
Archivo Fotográfico Mariana Yampolsky
Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero
Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México

Dorfman and Mattelart argue that Disney attempts to replace other forms of discourse: "In the Disney world, Mickey Mouse is the first and last image of permanence; he is the all-encompassing, self-contained law" (92). Yampolsky captures this process of replacement by suggesting Disney imagery's ubiquity in modern Mexico while also representing the marginal and the clandestine through a focus on subaltern visual discourse (Yampolsky and Méndez 269). Yampolsky's photographs document the subaltern's adaptations and argue that while Disney imagery has made its presence strongly felt, the subaltern discourse has not disappeared: it has simply made use of the new signs. In Mexico, a significant number of unlicensed producers operate, generating a large amount of the material that Mariana Yampolsky has captured. These informal markets that the photographer captures not only signal the sub-employment experienced by large sectors of Mexican society; they also create a type of parody: of imagery, of production, and of benefit. Within that parody lies one of Yampolsky's strongest critiques this photographic exhibition creates. After having spent a lifetime collecting folk toys in small towns and villages made in family-owned cottage industries, Mariana Yampolsky observed their replacement with imported images and icons that were devoid of the qualities and visual imagery they previously possessed. Though the economic benefit of the works of these past and present industries may be debatable (Yampolsky and Méndez 269), Mexico was still actively producing imagery whose iconography represented national life to a certain extent. However, the more recent changes modified the visual narrative in Mexico as it repeated imported visual references that were increasingly abundant in urban life instead of the imaginations of the rural.

Yampolsky's photographs foreground the transposition of imported imagery onto national elements such as *pulquerías* and piñatas in a way that underlines the transformative process of border crossing (Tsolakis 39-50). This artist's work confirms and goes beyond *How to Read Donald Duck*'s critique of Disney iconography and narrative because it extends past the good vs bad perception of the cultural blueprint Yampolsky used for inspiration (McClennen 257). She shows how the subaltern inject their own discourse into these symbols when they appropriate them and link them to elements such as chaos or kitsch. Since most of the imagery she included in this visual narrative was being produced in Mexico without proper licensing, one could point to the subversive nature of these markets because they appropriate the images of the hegemonic and use them for their own benefit. Patterns and other figures of folk or popular art in Mexico were being substituted with images imported from their neighbor to the north. As imperfect copies and parodies of their northern neighbor begin to flood Yampolsky's adopted homeland, the artist began to register those changes with her photography and demonstrate that while patterns were appropriated, they did not often consolidate or conform to hegemonic patterns as Carlos

Monsiváis suggested they might (12). Hence, Yampolsky's photos offer a new twist to Monsiváis as well as Dorfman and Mattelart's ideas on the adoption of new cultural symbols in Mexico, suggesting how photography can offer new insights into culture and the subaltern.

The artist's narrative on Disney and the marginal submits visual evidences of ideas offered by past and recent cultural theorists as well as building upon their framework to offer further insights. While Tomlinson's question regarding how the Chilean reading public (indeed, how the Latin American and other reading publics) read Disney comics is yet to be answered in full (43, 50), we can argue that Yampolsky's work uses Mattelart and Dorfman's ideas as a model. As an exhibition, her cultural production allows for the public's reaction to this cultural statement to be measured (minimally) and some conclusions can be drawn from the public reception of Yampolsky's final visual narrative. As I observed the images from Mariana Yampolsky's final exhibition, I learned that it had received a cold reception and was deemed unsuccessful – despite its favor among some critics in Mexico (van der Sluis pers.comm. July 2013). Yampolsky's last photographic exhibition contains a clear message on authenticity, identity, and art: an early theme within the body of her work; and it does so in a way that suggests this final work is a type of *concerned photography*.[8] In her estimation, the individual can bring a level of spirit that is impossible to reproduce on a scale of mass-production: "The machine is blind and routine bound; it substitutes ability and muscular strength but it will never be able to invade the field of the spirit" (Yampolsky and Méndez 270). Hence, Yampolsky favors the individual. Whilst mass-production creates economic benefit, her photographs argue that the loss is obviously one of individuality and spirit: qualities often commented, but nearly impossible to quantify. What spirit one might ask? In this case, Yampolsky's images agree with Dorfman and Mattelart's dialectics. This, of course, is why national phrases are placed on their head and cartoon characters sit beside national symbols. Yampolsky's visual narrative, like Weston's written and visual narratives, evidences concern with what disappears artistically at the grassroots level as markets globalize and how this occurrence changes the visual context within Latin America.

Consequently, this article underlines the role of photography in the visual turn that cultural studies in Hispanism has taken and has evidenced the key role that photographic narrative plays in showing the tensions between the representation of the global and local in addition to identifying and recognizing the cultural processes of subaltern expression. Yampolsky's visual discourse places special emphasis on the marginal and its appropriations as well as individual use of hegemonic symbols, offering unique insights into local symbols of globalization in Mexico. These photographs serve as an additional reminder, as was also evidenced by Ariel Dorfman and Armand

Mattelart's study when it was censored, that the questioning of these symbols or their value can encounter unforeseen reactions along the way.

Notas

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[1] This article is linked to the research network "Traducción, Ideología, Cultura" based at the Universidad de Salamanca and forms a part of the research project "Violencia simbólica y traducción: retos en la representación de identidades fragmentadas en la sociedad global" (FFI2015-66516-P; MINECO/FEDER, UE), which operates thanks to a grant from the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad del Gobierno de España and the Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional.

[2] Stephen Hart takes this notion even further by arguing that Hispanic film has taken an important digital turn (Hart 439-451). This is an important concept that needs to be considered in the digital turn of photography as well, but will not be covered here.

[3] Max Kozloff was one of two USA photographers invited to participate in the 1981 international colloquium held in Mexico City to debate the importance of photography as a social and cultural practice (Selejan 283-302). Mariana Yampolsky's work was well known to the *Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía* as well.

[4] This is a term used by Yampolsky to describe her exposition (Vander Sluis pers.comm.).

[5] The pieces' value, suitability, and ability to represent Mexico could easily be the debate of another cultural essay.

[6] Yampolsky's focus on architecture within her art is of little surprise when one learns that her uncle Boz was an award-winning architect and that the photographer herself has openly admitted that his influence had an impact on her artistic vision (Guzmán 61-81).

[7] The name of one of the *pulquerías* (*Los Hombres Sabios sin Estudio*) appears both in River's article (in 1926) and was recorded in Weston's *Daybooks* entries from 1923, suggesting that if they didn't converse about this *pulquería* directly with each other, they at least wandered on the same path in Mexico City at some point.

[8] Photos with a humanitarian impulse that desire to educate and change the world, not just record it. www.icp.org

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