trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Modernist Photography in Mexico: Modotti's Letter

Didier Aubert

Photography reinvented itself in Mexico between the two World Wars, through numerous exchanges between foreign and national artists and writers. This "Mexican moment" of photographic modernism was shaped by left-wing politics, ideas of Mexicanidad spreading at home and abroad, and the emergence of documentary forms.

PUBLISHED	March 11, 2024
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	English
COLLECTIONS	Women artists
TOPICS	Visual Arts
SPACES AND PLACES	Europe · North America
PERIODS	The Atlantic Space Within Globalization · The Consolidation of Mass Cultures
KEYWORDS	artistic movement, communism, modernism, photography, press
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/modernist-photography-in-mexico-modotti-s-letter/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Didier Aubert

Associate professor of American Studies · Théorie et histoire des arts et des littératures de la modernité · Université Sorbonne Nouvelle · France

Didier Aubert teaches American Studies at Sorbonne Nouvelle University. He is a MERA fellow at the Center for the Study of Material & Visual Cultures of Religion (2016-2021). His essays on photography and photojournalism across the Americas have been published in various international journals including Visual Studies, and Etudes Photographiques. He co-edited Refaire l'Amérique in 2011 and L'Amérique des Images in 2013. He is a member of Transatlantic Cultures' editorial team.

On July 9^th, 1931, Italian-born photographer Tina Modotti, then in Moscow, wrote a letter to her Mexican friend and one-time student Manuel Álvarez Bravo. After inquiring about various people both of them knew, she moved on to "*asuntos de fotografía*." The short paragraph she devoted to these "photographic topics" clearly signals, in retrospect, the end of Modotti's career as a photographer, more than a decade before her death. Yet it also provides a privileged viewpoint to survey Mexico as one of the most vital and influential centers of photographic modernism in the Atlantic region. For two decades, from the moment Modotti and US photographer Edward Weston reached Mexico (August 1923) to the exhibit entitled *Mexico: 8 Photographers* at the New York Museum of Modern Art (December 1943), a small group of foreign and national photographers made post-revolutionary Mexico an international capital of modernist photography.



Julio 9, 1931.

Estimado Manuel: le agradezco su carta de mayo 12. Habían pasado muchos meses sin que tuviera noticias directas de México ni siquiera P...[ilegible en el original] ya no me escribe no entiendo el porqué tanto más que yo he seguido haciéndolo.

Lo que me comunica de A.R.M. [Antonieta Rivas Mercado] no me sorprendió mucho, porque veo en ella el prototipo de la clase parasitaria (y por lo tanto decadente) y de las mujeres que a fuerza de inquietudes espirituales (por falta de inquietudes materiales) se volvió tan complicada hasta llegar a lo patológico. Y esto último es precisamente el resultado de una clase en decadencia.

Claro que hay mucha tragedia en esto, pero no menos de la que hay en los que se suicidan por hambre – y hasta los periódicos burgueses del pasado invierno nos decían que los suicidios por hambre, sobre todo en los USA, habían llegado a ser un fenómeno colectivo. Lástima que sobre todo cuando las dos son tan importantes. Además ya no quiero ni tengo ganas de usar más la Graflex. Quiero una Leica. Por lo tanto he aprovechado de una oportunidad de un amigo que se va a USA y se llevo mi Graflex para venderla allá: aquí no se pudo por el formato. Tan pronto se venda la Graflex compro una Leica y tal vez entonces me será más fácil hacer algo. De todos modos me sorprendió a mí misma la indiferencia con la cual vi alejarse mi pobre y fiel compañera de trabajo.

Vi en los periódicos de México algunas reproducciones de fotos de [Agustín] Jiménez y yo también pienso en lo que usted llama "árbol genealógico". Me causó mucho gusto oír que usted sigue usando la cámara.

Bueno ahora debo cerrar, siempre tengo prisa y aquí hay que seguir el ritmo bolchevique. Cariñosos saludos a su señora y a usted un cordial handshake* *de su amiga*

T.

**handshake, apretón de manos en inglés.*

Letter from Tina Modotti to Manuel Alvarez Bravo, July 9th 1931. Alquimia 3 (May.-Ago. 1998), p. 40.

Source: https://revistas.inah.gob.mx

A few months after Modotti and Weston settled in Mexico City, the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros already celebrated them as "world- famous photographers"—a remarkable premonition rather than an accurate assessment at the time, in spite of Weston's early career as a portrait photographer in California. [1]

Twenty years later, in her monograph on Weston, historian of photography Nancy Newhall quoted another glowing praise by French painter Jean Charlot:

> *"It was the good fortune of Mexico to be visited, at the time when the plastic vocabulary of the Renaissance was still tender and amenable to suggestions, by Edward Weston, one of the authentic masters that the United States has bred."* [8]

The couple's influence on Álvarez Bravo and thus indirectly on his wife Lola as well as Agustin Jimenez, Bravo's friendship with Henri Cartier-Bresson (France), and the latter's connections with such influential colleagues as Paul Strand (United States) and Pierre Verger (France), now constitute one of the standard and most remarkable chapters in standard histories of photography. Conversely, pictures published in Mexico, France and the United States by these men and women played a substantive role in establishing Mexican art and culture—both modern and pre-Colombian—as legitimate topics of art history beyond national frontiers. As is well-known, Mexican visual and political cultures were also influential in shaping modernism in the United States. This contribution came, to a large extent, through the publication and exhibition of photographs.

What, then, does Modotti's "asuntos de fotografía" tell us about the circulation, transmission and evolution of modernist photography in the Atlantic region in the 1920's and 1930's? A closer look at her letter and career can help explain the way photography reinvented itself in Mexico between the two World Wars, and to understand how the young nation embraced the medium as a way to promote its "renaissance" in Europe and the United States. The following essay will focus on four key aspects of photography's "Mexican moment": its connection to left-wing politics, the role played by this group in spreading ideas of *Mexicanidad* in Europe and the United States, the emergence of documentary as a category of modernism, and some of the ramifications of the original groups, as illustrated by the "8 photographers" chosen by the MoMA in 1943 to represent "Mexican" photography.

Politics: *"no es posible hacer dos cosas sobre todo cuando las dos son tan importantes"*

The first thing Modotti tells Álvarez Bravo in her 1931 letter is that she hasn't found time to take a single picture, because of her involvement in politics (she was an organizer for the International Red Aid in various European countries). An Italian teenager from Udine, Modotti had joined her father in San Francisco, where he ran a short-lived photo studio, in 1913. Like countless other Italian immigrants, she had first tried to make a living as a seamstress and had lived in a community with a vigorous working-class political culture.

Yet it was her experience in Mexico, between 1923 to 1930, which made her both a photographer and a political activist. Two years before becoming a member of the Mexican Communist Party in 1927, she had started working as a translator for *El Machete*—the organization's official organ, while photographing Soviet dignitaries, such as ambassador Stanislav Pestovsky, who were supporting the magazine. By 1928, Modotti was producing some of her most openly propagandistic pictures, which were soon visible in international left-wing publications such as *The New Masses* in the U.S. (four covers between October 1928 and September 1929) and the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* in 1928. In 1929 her first solo show was organized at the newly-reorganized Universidad Nacional Autónoma, and advertised as "the first revolutionary photographic exhibition held in Mexico." Her work was shown at the Berkeley Museum of Art, and the Mexican government included some of her pictures as part of the photography exhibit at Sevilla's Ibero-American Fair, along with photographs by Álvarez Bravo and Frida Kahlo's German-born father Guillermo.

EXTERNAL MEDIA

View online: https://www.gettyimages.fr/detail/photo-d

Tina Modotti. Woman with Flag. A.I.Z. Vol. 10, n. 17, 1931. Private Collection.

Source: Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

By that time, however, Mexico's government had considerably restricted the Communist Party's activities. By the summer of 1929, *El Machete*, which had been the main protagonist of several of Modotti's pictures, had been closed down. A few months later, she was suspected of being involved in the death of Cuban communist leader Juan Antonio Mella, and in a conspiracy to assassinate President Ortiz Rubio. Modotti was forced to leave the country which she had adopted as her home. She travelled to Berlin, where she worked briefly with the agency Unionfoto GmbH Berlin. In October 1930, she reached Moscow and, for all intent and purposes, her photographic career was over.

Although not to the extent of Modotti's unparalleled story, the interplay between left-wing politics and photographic modernism was a key feature in the experience of most of her foreign colleagues who chose to work in Mexico in the 1920's and 1930's. When she first travelled by herself, in 1922, she carried prints made by her lover Edward Weston, himself a successful studio photographer with a well-established reputation in pictorialism. Their friend Ricardo Gomez Robelo had returned to his native land to participate in José Vasconcelos' ambitious cultural policy in the service of the post-revolutionary government. Robelo helped Modotti arrange an exhibit of Weston's work at the Academia de Bellas Artes.

Weston's decision to follow Modotti in 1923 was largely motivated by their affair and the success of this first exhibit, but also by a sense of frustration with cultural and political conformity in California, as well as a growing urge to reorient his work, both thematically and aesthetically. *"My disgust for that impossible village of Los Angeles grows daily. Give me Mexico, revolution, smallpox, poverty, anything but the plague spot of America – Los Angeles"* (cited in Maddow, 83). Although no one has ever claimed that Weston's work was primarily inspired by Mexico's socialist politics, he often commented favorably on the cultural activism he experienced there, as opposed to the complacency of his native land's celebrations of mass consumption. When he met Diego Rivera, he was not only impressed by his stature or eager to hear anecdotes about Matisse and Picasso in Paris: it was the vitality of Mexico's state programs of artistic and cultural education that made him reflect ironically that his country's own *"government 'of the people, by the people and for the people' [didn't] foster great art."* [2] Mexico City was a cultural capital compared to California's provincialism.

A similar curiosity attracted the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and his U.S. counterpart Paul Strand one decade later. As had been the case with Weston, Strand was invited in 1932 by one of the artists associated to the Mexican government's Secretariat of Public Education, the composer Carlos Chávez. He brought with him fifty prints that were exhibited at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in February, and Strand was visibly touched by the "democratic character of the people who came." [3] The popular appreciation of his work contrasted strongly with his experience as a modernist pioneer in Stieglitz's New York gallery, and his involvement in Mexican public education and cultural policy continued with a contract as an elementary school teacher, and then as Director of Photography and Filmmaking for the Mexican Department of Fine Arts of the Secretariat of Public Education. This appointment resulted in *Redes* (1937), a collaborative fiction acted by real-life fishermen in Alvarado. Although this project was ultimately completed without Strand, it contributed to strengthen his political commitment as a photographer and filmmaker, as his later involvement with Frontier Film (1934) made clear: more dramatically even than

Weston, he felt increasingly foreign to the U.S.'s political and cultural climate, and ended up choosing exile in Europe in the early 1950's, after the Photo League, which he had helped create, was listed as a subversive organization by the U.S. Attorney General. Strand's social and political commitment was thus largely influenced by his Mexican years.

In France, Henri Cartier-Bresson was already close to left-wing artists and organizations such as the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires before he reached Mexico in July 1934. Hired for his first real job as a photographer to document an expedition exploring potential itineraries for the Panamerican highway, Cartier-Bresson immediately felt at ease in the social and political effervescence that he encountered there. Although the survey mission never took off, he stayed for almost a year and began to develop his idiosyncratic style while getting to know major figures of Mexican arts and politics such as the painter Ignacio Aguirre, Rivera's former wife (and Weston model) Guadalupe Marin, or African-American writer and activist Langston Hughes.

When he returned to France, he started collaborating with such publications as the Communist daily *Ce Soir*. Two of his closest friends and colleagues in Paris, David Seymour (born in Poland) and Robert Capa (who had emigrated from Hungary) also ended up publishing important photo essays from Mexico at the end of the decade, as they made their way from Civil War Spain to the United States. Seymour crossed the Atlantic from Sète (France) to Veracruz aboard the S.S. Sinaia with Republican exiles (1939) and his pictures were just as unmistakably "modernist" in style as they were political and newsworthy in content. On assignment for *Life*, Capa documented Mexican Communism and the 1940 presidential elections. Some sources suggest that the two men, who had met Modotti in Spain, also tried in vain to convince her to pick up the camera again. Yet, as she had written Álvarez Bravo from Moscow, she no longer believed she could practice politics and photography at the same time.

"Mexicanidad" at home and abroad: *"Vi en los periódicos de México algunas reproducciones de fotos de* [Agustín] *Jiménez"*

The circulation of photographs, whether in the form of prints to be shown and exhibited, or published in books and the illustrated press, contributed decisively to what has been called in the case of the United States "the enormous vogue of things Mexican" (Delpar). Even in Europe, Modotti's letter informed Álvarez Bravo, some of their colleague Agustin Jimenez's pictures could be found. Although Mexico's cultural influence in the 1920s and 1930s was largely based on monumental art—whether pre-Colombian pyramids or muralism, photography played a decisive role in making these works, as well as Mexico's popular culture, available for publics in Europe and in the United States. Here again, Weston and Modotti must be considered pioneers.

In 1926, Mexican-American writer Anita Brenner embarked Weston, his son Brett and his "assistant" Tina Modotti on a research trip commissioned by the Secretariat of Education. Their mission would result in *Idols behind Altars*, first published in 1929 in the United States, and which celebrated native Mexican culture and its resistance to colonial power. Although Modotti's actual contribution to the iconography remains disputed, this project quickly lead to others. *Mexican Folkways*, edited by anthropologist Frances Toor, was published in Mexico, yet it was bilingual and directed at an international readership: it featured reproductions of Rivera and Siqueiros' murals taken by Modotti.

VIDEO

View online: https://archive.org/details/idolsbeltar00bren

Anita Brenner's « acknowledgement », the author of *Idols Behind Altars (1929)* calls Edward Weston and Tina Modotti "masters of their craft" and writes that they "shared the commission" of providing photographs for the book.

Source: Archive.org

Remarkably enough, it seems that it was the publication of Modotti's more personal work in the same magazine which prompted a young Manuel Álvarez Bravo to get in touch with her. What is certain is that he took over her position as photographer for *Mexican Folkways* after she left. A spectacular example of his role as a cultural link between the U.S. and Mexico can be found in an article on muralist painting published by *The American Magazine of Art* in July 1934. Its author, the classically-trained painter George Biddle, had visited Mexico, worked with Rivera, and was influential in creating Franklin Roosevelt's public art programs. His essay celebrated the possibility of a new American art, and included two reproductions of murals by Pablo O'Higgins and Julio Castellanos photographed by Álvarez Bravo.

VIDEO

View online: https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.1349/page/n3

This book-form edition of Mexican Folkways (1947), published in New York, included 25 photographs credited to Lola Alvarez Bravo, 2 to Fritz Henle, and 1 to Manuel Alvarez Bravo

Source: Archive.org

Along with Brenner and Toor, a third woman played an important role in the cultural exchanges between Mexico and the United States: journalist Alma Reed, whose articles in the *New York Times* had forced Harvard's Peabody Museum to return stolen Mayan artefacts to Mexico, put up an exhibit of Weston's photograph in her newly created Delphic Studio in October 1930. Her 1932 book on Jose Clemente Orozco, published in New York was the first ever published on the muralist: it was also illustrated by both Weston and Modotti, who had helped the painter advertise his mural work in the United States by sending prints as early as 1929.

This type of commissioned or illustrative work was only one aspect of the photographers' contribution to the cultural renaissance of Mexico. The celebration of native culture that was the heart of a new *mexicanidad* was also decisive for their own aesthetic pursuits. Both Weston and Modotti were looking for ways to include vernacular and popular Mexican culture in their visual expression of modernity, in contrast with the romanticized vision of Hugo Brehme's pictorialist photobook *Mexico Pintoresco*, which was so successful in 1923 that it was published in several languages.

Weston, for example, called his work "a fight to avoid [Mexico's] natural picturesqueness." [4] Modotti, planning in a 1929 letter to Weston what would become her UNAM exhibit, echoed similar feelings, combined with a sense of duty, not only to her art but also to her adopted nation:

> *"[...]casi que le debería al país una exposición, no tanto por lo que yo he hecho aquí, sino en especial por lo que aquí se puede hacer, sin recurrir a las iglesias coloniales y a los charros y a las chinas poblanas y a la basura similar que practica la mayoría de los fotógrafos."* [9]

Later discussions of the photographic forms of *mexicanidad* given shape by Álvarez Bravo (and later his ex-wife Lola), Paul Strand, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, have constantly grappled with the issue of authenticity and exoticism, identity and *otherness*. At the time, Rivera recognized Weston and Modotti as transnational artists. Weston's "extreme modernity" combined "the plasticity of the North and the living tradition of the land of the South," which made him a thoroughly "American" modernist. As for Modotti's "abstract," "intellectual," and "Italian temperament," it "flower[ed] perfectly in Mexico." [5]

In foreign contexts, visual tropes of revolution and history, religion and folklore, race and class, were conveyed through various prisms. Strand's work was reserved to a small audience in the exclusive fine art photogravure portfolio published in 1940. In the May 10, 1937 issue of *Life* magazine, an article entitled "An American Photographer Does Propaganda Movie for Mexico" claimed that Strand's images "constitute[d] some of the loveliest photographs that ever came out" of that country, adding that "the virtue of the film as propaganda lies in its simple demonstration that workers must organize." In the dual context of Roosevelt's *New Deal* and *Good Neighbor Policy*, Strand's celebration of a strengthened Mexican democracy could thus gain a four-page layout in the United States' most influential magazine.

In France, it was Álvarez Bravo's work that was given remarkable exposure, not so much because he knew Henri Cartier-Bresson as because he met André Breton in 1938. The French writer dubbed Mexico the surrealist country *par excellence* and presented some of Bravo's photographs in an exhibition entitled *Mexique* in March 1939. His essay "Souvenir du Mexique" was published with a selection of ten Álvarez Bravo pictures, which were then reintroduced and recontextualized for the Mexican public in a show curated by Breton the following year.

In spite of a few exceptions in Modotti's or Álvarez Bravo's work (his first break came when he won an industrial photography contest in 1925), it was mostly pictures focusing on Indianness, pre-Colombian history and Mexico City's popular culture which appealed to foreign publics. As had been the case with Cartier-Bresson originally, it was the Musée ethnographique du Trocadero which sent Pierre Verger to Mexico in 1936. Both men also knew of each other through the Alliance Photo agency. Two years later, Verger published simultaneously in Paris and Mexico a book of 170 photographs with a preface by ethnographer Jacques Soustelle (*Au Mexique,* 1938). It was a significant example of the way the Museum had come to consider ethnographic photography both in documentary and aesthetic terms, a visual culture serving both science and a larger public.

Other related examples confirm that history, exoticism and aesthetics were often associated in photographic exploration of Mexico. Laura Gilpin's trip, 1932 in Mexico, produced a series of slides of Yucatan that were shown at American Museum of Natural History, and were later bought by the Library of Congress. As a landscape photographer, she also contributed to the recognition of a Southwestern visual culture, in the shadow of such artists as Weston, photographer Ansel Adams or painter Georgia O'Keefe. An architect from the University of California, Esther Born also spent several months in Mexico taking pictures and collecting postcards of *mexicanidad*. But her travels and research resulted in a much more original photographic project, in the form of a book on entitled *The New Architecture in Mexico* (Wm. Morrow & Co., 1937). The striking duality of her work, which looked both at the colonial churches photographed by Strand as well as Juan O'Gorman's functionalist buildings, is indicative of the diversity of Mexico's visual modernism.

“Quiero una Leica”: Modernism, *“anti-graphic”* and documentary photography

Cartier-Bresson's Mexican photographs were first shown through the Department of Public Education in March 1935, in an exhibition shared with Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who became a close friend. The same show was then adapted for the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. Moving across the border, this exposition moved from a public to a private institution, and added photographs by Walker Evans (April-May 1935). With this seminal event, Levy attempted to define a certain photographic style stretching from Mexico to New York and Paris, and called it "documentary and anti-graphic photographs." The term "anti-graphic" was mostly relevant in terms of what these photographers were *not* doing, and contributed to a vital discussion about the nature of the photographic image which also signaled a transition in modernist photography.

All of the "Mexican" photographers of the time responded to this evolution in their own way. Levy's definition of "anti-graphic" was in fact largely influenced by Cartier-Bresson's approach: he had first used the term in a 1933 solo show of the French photographer's work. He wrote at the time that this quality in was "unanalyzable," except as a "residuum." A photograph could be called "anti-graphic" when of all the usual formal criteria of "good" photography (classic composition, darkroom techniques) had been left aside. Levy offered that the new photographic modernity relied on ambiguity and accident, discarding "consideration and polish" which seemed precisely to define what photographers like Weston, Siqueiros and Strand had long defended as the very definition of modernism (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 Oct. 1933).

It is hard not to link this definition to the technological revolution of the Leica and the 35 mm format which had been adopted by Cartier-Bresson and was becoming the basis for "instantaneous" photography and street reportage. Both Cartier-Bresson and Álvarez Bravo produced a body of work in the street of Mexico City which seemed to be "more dynamic, startling and inimitable," to quote Levy, than Weston and Strand's "straight photography," which implied pre-visualization, large format negatives and high quality contact prints. Cartier-Bresson had already published photographs taken in Spain in the illustrated weekly *Vu*. His mastery of the small-format Leica camera made his work magazine-ready, whereas the most spectacular outcome of Strand's work was the luxurious portfolio *Photographs of Mexico* (New York, Virginia Stevens, 1940) which was anything *but* "anti-graphic."

Levy’s label is useful not as a reliable aesthetic category, but rather as an entry point in a discussion that had originated long before him. In 1928, already, a review by Catalan writer Marti Casanovas had defended Modotti’s work claiming that her ability to create "pure" artistic photography was in no way detrimental to its social content and propaganda value ("Las fotos de Tina Modotti: el anecdotismo revolucionario," *¡30- 30!*, 1 July 1928, p. 4). Her work was hailed as *both* graphic and documentary, making it in effect "transcendental" and political. For the 1935 exhibit, Levy reintroduced "documentary" as a companion term to "anti-graphic," thus signaling the continuation of a debate over what could be broadly-termed photographic "realism" as an artistic and political category. A few years later, in *La querelle du réalisme* (Editions sociales internationales, 1936), French poet Louis Aragon—himself influenced by the official Soviet doctrine of socialist realism—singled out Cartier-Bresson's Mexican work as a model of politically significant work grounded in authenticity. Increasingly, the modernity of Álvarez Bravo and Cartier-Bresson’s "street" photography would be legitimized by expositions in institutions such as Mexico's Sociedad de Arte Moderno (Álvarez-Bravo, 1945) and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Cartier-Bresson, 1947).

Around 1930, Weston gave his version of the modernist ethos which had earned him a cover of the *Irradiador* published by the *Estridentista* group: his photograph of an Ohio factory was textbook industrial modernism, the kind of photograph Charles Sheeler made in Detroit and Álvarez Bravo for the Totelca competition that had launched his career. Siqueiros had celebrated Modotti and Weston's achievement as the "purest photographic expression" of modernity. In 1931, as he was about to publish his aptly titled *The Art of Edward Weston*, the US photographer still defended the role of the artist's all-powerful vision as the creative force which made the most of the medium's specificity. Realism, to Weston, was not social and even less socialist although he admired his Mexican friends' political commitment. In a short declaration for *Experimental Cinema*, he conceded that lightweight cameras were able to "stop a bullet's flight." Yet the "objective, the physical facts of things" (a remarkably redundant phrase) were merely means to express "the primal, subjective motive" or the representation of an "abstract idea." [6] His role as an artist was to convey his vision through the camera in purely photographic terms, never to reproduce an elusive "reality."

VIDEO

View online: https://archive.org/details/experim15cine

Edward Weston, « Statement, » Experimental Cinema (3 February 1931): 14-15.

Source: Archive.org

Weston's defense of modernist photography as a celebration of photographic "purity" is a well-known chapter in the history of the United States' "straight photography" movement, stretching from Paul Strand's portfolio in *Camera Work*'s last issue (June 1917) to the *F:64 Manifesto* signed by a group of California photographers in November 1932 (a group Weston belonged to). Evidently, it must also be understood as part of a transnational modernist movement which compelled most artists of the time to define their own aesthetic and political positions (Álvarez Bravo submitted a couple of prints to Weston, who was in charge of the American selection for Stuttgart's 1926 *Film und Foto* exhibit). This wider context does not change the fact that Weston's Mexican experience constituted a turning point for him. In his *Daybooks*, he recorded how his visit at the Museo Nacional helped him refine his approach, midway between the "purely scientific and commercial uses" of photography and the "conventionalized nature, superb forms [and] decorative motives" of painting.

> *"That the approach to photography must be through another avenue, that the camera should be used for recording life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh [...] I feel definite in my belief that the approach to photography is through realism - and its most difficult approach."* [10]

By and large, in spite of *Experimental Cinema*'s insistence that Weston's work sent "a permanent message to future proletarian technicians ... against the bourgeois 'technique.'" (*Experimental,* p. 13), Weston's definition of "realism" failed to include a social and political dimension that Modotti already found crucial. In her only published statement about photography, in 1929, she did celebrate "honest photographs, without distortions or manipulations" in terms reminiscent of Weston's, but she also used the word "documentary," which her former partner was always reluctant to use:

> *"Photography, precisely because it can only be produced in the present and because it is based on what exists objectively before the camera, takes its place as the most satisfactory medium for registering objective life in all its aspects, and from this comes its documental value. If to this is added sensibility and understanding and, above all, a clear orientation as to the place it should have in the field of historical development, I believe that the result is something worthy of a place in social production, to which we should all contribute."* [11]

Documents play a role in "social production" and "historical development," and the transformation of a socially-determined visual culture emerges in Modotti's letter to Álvarez Bravo as affected by technological changes, various media markets and national cultures, but also the way photographic *practices* evolve. As a cultural and political worker, she tells her friend that she must change her tool (her "work companion") to keep her relevance:

> *"Ya no quiero ni tengo ganas de usar más la Graflex. Quiero una Leica... Tan pronto se venda la Graflex compro una Leica y entonces me será más fácil hacer algo. De todos modos me sorprendió a mí misma la indiferencia con la cual vi alejarse mi pobre y fiel compañera de trabajo."*

Once again, these lines are easy to understand in retrospect as telling signs of a growing disenchantment with photography. Yet her decision to sell her Graflex is mostly a response to the evolution of photographic culture that she experienced first-hand in Germany. When she first arrived in Berlin in May 1930, she was initially surprised to find that she couldn't find film and paper for the camera format of her Graflex. She also quickly realized that her "propaganda pictures" would not be in demand since most people had cameras and "worker-photographers" (a movement initiated by the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* in 1926) were already doing this kind of work more efficiently than she ever could, since they documented their own lives. What's more, she considered that photojournalism was "a man's job" and that she was not "aggressive" enough to pursue this new form of photographic work (Letter to Weston, 23 may 1930).

All of these circumstances certainly contributed to her "indifference" to the separation with her "faithful workmate," but also to the realization that the new visual world brought about by the availability of small format cameras and the illustrated press had profoundly transformed the way photography could do social and political work. In Levy's gallery as well as the radical press, documentary and photojournalism seemed to be the new forms of committed photographic expression, and Modotti sensed it much more acutely than her teacher Weston. Photojournalism and documentary were increasingly shaping "the field of historical development" to which she had so eagerly contributed.

"yo también pienso lo que usted llama 'arbol genealógico'": photography in Mexico after Weston and Modotti

Modotti had already left one of her cameras to Álvarez Bravo when she left Mexico, a symbolic transmission which was also an invitation to pursue her work. This is the last "photographic topic" she mentions in her 1931 letter: *"yo también pienso lo que usted llama 'arbol genealógico'. Me causo mucho gusto oir que usted sigue usando la cámara."* These remarks point to the artistic and technical legacy she left to the Mexican photographers who were to follow. Although it is fair to say that photography had been

a medium of choice for discourses of Mexican identity since the Porfiriato, and even more decisively during the revolution, Modotti and Weston's work marked the beginning of an influential chapter in the history of the medium, which affected both the national culture and definitions of modernism abroad—a modernity which combined a purely "photographic" vision with narrative and politics, imagination and folk culture, rural communities and the "elemental expression" of the "primitive race". [7] In Mexico, Weston became both a modernist and a Californian photographer, far removed from the New York scene. Tina Modotti did work she could never replicate elsewhere. Strand redefined his political vision in a fishermen's community, away from the urban monuments of his earlier film, *Manhatta* (1921). Cartier-Bresson invented a peculiar style of street photography as a brand of social realism tinted with a surrealist's wit.

Mexico's "errant modernism" (to use Esther Gabara's term) reconfigured the colonial discourse of modernity, both in its European and nationalist forms, to question perception and truth, by mixing categories of "avant-garde" and popular, realism and fiction, and by constantly revisiting history and myth. It is often said that Álvarez Bravo "reanimated" Weston's abstractions, reintroducing narratives and fiction in documentary fragments. Agustin Jimenez, placed by Modotti's letter on the "family tree" of Mexican modernism, exhibited his work at the Galeria Moderna in 1931, and contributed photo essays to various Mexican publications, including *Mexican Folkways*. After having presumably worked with Sergueï Eisenstein (himself an admirer of Weston's work) on the filming of ¡*Que viva México*! (1930), he became one of Luis Buñuel's collaborators in the 1950's. At least one other name should be mentioned as belonging to Modotti's family tree: Álvarez Bravo's wife, Lola. Originally her husband's assistant, she started working independently after their divorce. She became chief photographer for *El Maestro Rural* (Department of Public Education) and then at the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura. In 1943, her photographs of murals by Orozco and Alfredo Zalce were included in the *Mexican Art Today* exhibit at Philadelphia's Museum of Art. She would also photograph Pierre Verger in the 1950's.

It was also in 1943 that the MoMA opened *Mexico: 8 Photographers*. Predictably, pictures by Edward Weston, Paul Strand and Manuel Álvarez Bravo were shown. A representative of the younger generation, Antonio Reynoso (who seems to have been one of Álvarez Bravo's students), was also included. The other four photographers in the show had less sustained connections with Mexico, except perhaps Anton Bruehl, who already had established a solid reputation with his studio and magazine work: his 1932 Mexican journey was financed by Orozco's U.S. publicist Alma Reed, who published the visually stunning *Photographs of Mexico* the following year. Born in Germany, Fritz Henle was a successful photojournalist who still worked with large-format cameras and published numerous photo essays and books on various countries, including Mexico.

The last two photographers were more directly "political" in their approach, albeit in profoundly different ways: Bradley Smith, like Henle, published his work in mass-circulation magazines. In its May 1944 "Picture of the Month" section, *Popular Photography* titled one of his photographs "Pan-American Youngsters": it showed a crowd receiving U.S. healthcare supplies in Mexico City. This photograph was actually part of the MoMA's exhibit, underlining the role of the Museum in the nation's cultural diplomacy. As for Helen Levitt, she was a left-wing street photographer connected to the *Photo League*, who acknowledged Cartier-Bresson's influence. Yet her work in Mexico was somewhat of an anomaly: it was the only foreign country she ever photographed.

VIDEO

View online: https://books.google.fr/books?id=vWIzAQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA1&pg=PA29#v=onepage&q&f=false

Popular Photography, May 1944, p. 29.

Source: Google Books

Mexico: 8 Photographers did not leave an outstanding trace in the history of photography. Yet it testified to the MoMA's continued interest in visual culture from and about Mexico, at a time when the museum was making sustained efforts to legitimize photography as a fine art, while serving the United States' cultural and diplomatic relations with its Southern neighbor. Ironically, of course, Modotti's fame had faded by that time and she was not included in the show. She had died a year earlier in Mexico City.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sire, Agnès, and Clément Chéroux. *Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paul Strand Mexique, 1932-1934*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2012.

Sire, Agnès. *Documentary and anti-graphic photographs by Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans & Alvarez Bravo: [une reconstitution de l'exposition de 1935 à la Galerie Julien Levy de New York]*. Paris: Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Maison Européenne de la Photographie, 2004.

Schuessler, Michael K. "Inter-American Memories: Frances Toor, Alma Reed and the Mexican Cultural Renaissance." *Les Cahiers de Framespa*, no. 24 (March 25, 2017). https://doi.org/10.4000/framespa.4322.

Rashkin, Elissa J. "Idols Behind Altars: Art, Authorship, and Authority in the Mexican Cultural Renaissance." In *Photography and Writing in Latin America: Double Exposures*, 41–58. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006.

Newhall, Nancy, ed. *The Daybooks of Edward Weston. Volume I. Mexico*. New York: Aperture, 1973.

Naggar, Carole. *Mexico Through Foreign Eyes: 1850-1990. Visto Por Ojos Extranjeros*. Edited by Fred Ritchin. 1st edition. New York: Norton and Company, 1993.

Mraz, John. *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10582912.

Lowe, Sarah M. *Tina Modotti & Edward Weston: The Mexico Years*. London, New York: Merrell, 2004.

Locke, Adrian. *Mexico: A Revolution in Art, 1910-1940*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2013.

Landau, Ellen G. *Mexico and American Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Krippner, James. *Paul Strand in Mexico*. New York: Aperture, 2011.

Joschke, Christian. "Le marché transnational des images politiques. Le Secours ouvrier international dans le contexte des agences photographiques soviétiques (1924-1933)." *Études photographiques*, no. 35 (May 30, 2017). http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3691.

Gabara, Esther. *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. http://www.dawsonera.com/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S9780822389392.

Folgarait, Leonard. *Seeing Mexico Photographed: The Work of Horne, Casasola, Modotti, and Álvarez Bravo*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Delpar, Helen. *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935*. Tuscaloosa, London: University of Alabama Press, 1992.

Debroise, Olivier. *Fuga Mexicana: un recorrido por la fotografía en México*. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2005.

Córdova, Carlos A. *Agustín Jiménez y la vanguardia fotográfica mexicana*. México: Editorial RM, 2005.

Angotti-Salgueiro, Heliana. "Portraits et autres représentations dans l'œuvre photographique de Pierre Verger : le voyage au Mexique." *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, January 28, 2014. https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevomundo.66225.

Albiñana, Salvador, and Horacio Fernández. "La óptica moderna. La fotografía en México entre 1923 y 1940." *Caravelle* 80, no. 1 (2003): 63–81. http://www.persee.fr/doc/carav_1147-6753_2003_num_80_1_1402.

Assouline, Pierre. *Henri Cartier-Bresson: L'œil du siècle*. Paris: Gallimard, 2001.

Agostinis, Valentina. *Vita, arte, e rivoluzione: lettere a Edward Weston, 1922-1931*. Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1994.

NOTES

1. Alfaro Siqueiros, "Una trascendental labor fotográfica : la exposición Weston-Modotti," *El Informador : Diario independiente*, Sep. 4, 1925.
2. *Daybooks Vol I.,* 23 Aug. 1923.
3. Krippner, "Trace", 367
4. Quoted in Amy Conger, *Edward Weston in Mexico, 1923-1926* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1983), 24.
5. Diego Rivera, "Edward Weston and Tina Moddoti [sic]," *Mexican Folkways* (Mexico City) 2, no. 6 (1926): 16-17.
6. "Statement," *Experimental Cinema* 3, Feb. 1931, p. 13.
7. *Daybooks Vol I.,* 4 Sept. 1926.
8. Nancy Newhall, *The Photographs of Edward* Weston (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 7.
9. Quoted in *Tina Modotti, Una mujer sin país. Las cartas a Edward Weston y otros papeles personales* (México: Ediciones Cal y Arena, 2001), 192-193.
10. Edward Weston, *The daybooks of Edward Weston*, Volume 1 (New York: Aperture, 1973), p. 55.
11. Tina Modotti, "Sobre la fotografía. On Photography," Mexican Folkways 5, no. 4 (1929): 198.