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Death and Disruption in the Photography of the Decena Trágica

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Abstract:

This essay takes as its focus the intense violence of the *Decena Trágica* (Tragic Ten Days), a short, brutal episode in the armed Revolution, where the coup to overthrow President Francisco I. Madero in February 1913 brought the chaos and destruction of war into the centre of Mexico City. The visual link between the Mexican Revolution and death will be explored, assessing whether such imagery could be seen to provide a counterpoint to the hegemonic 'official' vision of the Mexican Revolution that was employed in the shaping of Mexican national identity in the period of national reconstruction that followed its military phase.

Key words:

Death, Disruption, Fragmentation, Photography, Revolution, War

Death has a long and rich visual history in Mexico, which finds expression across multiple genres. Visual depictions and representations of death are, of course, by no means unique to Mexican culture, but the visualisation of death in Mexico has responded throughout its history to specific social, political and cultural circumstances. The principal research objectives of this project are to explore the visual link between the Mexican Revolution and death, and investigate its role in the foregrounding of death as a theme in Mexican visual cultures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, assessing whether such imagery could be seen to provide a counterpoint to the hegemonic 'official' vision of the Mexican Revolution that was employed in the shaping of Mexican national identity in the period of national reconstruction that followed its military phase. Fieldwork, funded by the Dorothy Sherman Severin Early-Career Fellowship in Lusophone-Hispanic Studies, which I was awarded in September 2010, was carried out at the Casasola Archive in Pachuca, Mexico, during April 2011. The focus of this essay is Mexico City in February 1913, and the intense violence of the *Decena Trágica* (Tragic Ten Days), a short yet brutal episode in the armed Revolution, where the coup to overthrow President Francisco I. Madero brought the chaos and destruction of war into the centre of Mexico City.

The *Decena Trágica* stands out as a rare moment during the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution, in which the fighting took place in a location accessible to photographers. Consequently, the photographs of this episode in the conflict document the direct effects of the violence on bodies, buildings and streets. Unsurprisingly, there are more images of death in this section of the Casasola Archive than in any other section dedicated to the Revolution. Photographically documenting death, capturing the moment of viewing it first-hand so that others may view it later,

is another difficult undertaking, not least because it requires engagement with an unpalatable reality through the act of deliberate looking:

> ¿Quién quiere ver, quién puede ver el cuerpo (amado) yacente, desmembrado? La muerte, sin embargo, y su representación concreta, su contundencia, es lo que se espera: la prueba última del conflicto. Las imágenes de la guerra están salpicadas de sangre; la tierra, cubierta de cadáveres. (Debroise 2001, 148)

I will examine two photographs taken during this period, and suggest several potential readings of these images in relation to the notion of fragmentation, taking physical bodies and landscapes, such as the city, as points of departure. My analysis will explore the tension between the presence and absence, visibility and invisibility of bodies and objects in the two photographs, and propose that images such as these and the many others that have not to date been reproduced on a wide scale or accorded iconic status by their ubiquitous presence and their depictions of familiar or notorious figures, are equally fascinating and deserving of scholarly attention. Issues around memory, history, and spectatorship will receive attention. I will also examine the symbolic function of corpses and objects, and of the photographs themselves.

The Casasola Archive is one of Mexico's principal photographic archives, and is considered an invaluable national resource. Noble (2010) gives the figures for the number of photographs of the armed Revolution held in the archive at 'some 37,661 images made during the armed phase of the conflict between 1910 and 1923, out of an overall total of 484,004' (3). The collection contains photographs taken by more than 480 photographers (Mraz 2000, 2), including Casasola himself. Agustín Víctor Casasola (1874-1938) began his career as a press reporter during the *Porfiriato*, working as a young man for several Mexico City newspapers. He took up photography as a way to 'ilustrar sus artículos periodísticos' (Escorza 2010,

unnumbered page). Over a period of years, Casasola amassed a huge collection of images, documenting daily life and society in Mexico City, and worked for the newspaper *El Imparcial*, for which he took pictures of then President Porfirio Díaz attending official functions in the capital. This is an important point, elaborated on by Mraz (2000) and Noble (2005; 2010): Casasola has come to be regarded as *the* photographer of the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution, but in fact during this time he dedicated himself primarily to documenting the official activities of powerful politicians. This is not to discount the value of photographs taken by Casasola himself as social documents, however: as Mraz points out, 'nos pueden ofrecer pistas interesantes para entender el pasado' (Mraz 2000, 3). Casasola founded an agency, the Sociedad de Fotógrafos de Prensa de la Ciudad de México, to look after the interests of press photographers and protect their professional activities from fierce competition. Over the ensuing years he continued his work as a Mexico City photographer, recording events including the *Decena Trágica*, and also collected photographs taken by other photographers documenting many aspects of Mexican social and political life.

Noble, in her 2010 study on iconicity and memory in the photography of the Mexican Revolution, examines the role of some of the most iconic; that is, the most heavily reproduced and widely circulated, photographs of the Revolution, in the shaping of Mexican national identity and perceptions of history. Among these is *Francisco Villa en la silla presidencial*, taken in 1914, which, she argues here and in a 2005 essay, has become *the* image of the Mexican Revolution: 'Rather than representing one, albeit pivotal, moment in the conflict, *Villa en la silla* has come to stand for the whole event' (Noble 2010, 70). The potentially subversive suggestion of the power of popular revolt to overthrow the ruling elite has, in this image, been overwritten by the

post-Revolutionary state's mythologizing gaze, through which a more conservative ruling class appropriated the image of popular heroes such as Villa and Zapata to 'underwrit[e] a hegemonic conception of post-revolutionary national identity' (Noble 2010, 69), that is to say, the image has been employed in the service of the official, state-sanctioned version of history that set out to create a unified sense of Mexican national identity in the wake of the destruction and fragmentation caused by the armed conflict.

The extrapolation of meaning that signifies the whole, i.e. the Revolution itself, from one photograph both confers a great power onto a single image, and strips it of its power to tell of a specific event, namely, that which it shows, obviating other potential readings in the process. The individual photograph, though, is not the whole, but a fragment of it, a visual interruption in the flow of events as they bleed into one another, making its subject appear illusorily separate. Noble asserts that the repetition of such images tells on the one hand of the images' use in state ideology as overriding their historical content, and on the other of a 'profound sense of anxiety of those with access to hegemonic power in the face of these images as sites of trauma' (Noble 2010, 74). Following this line of argument, the repeated exposure of some images may serve to reduce their impact as signifiers of traumatic moments in a nation's history, acting as a kind of official coping mechanism as well as a tool that may be employed in the production of hegemonic versions and visions of traumatic events. A crucial question must be posed here around the implications of the visibility or invisibility of traumatic events, since as acknowledged above, visibility alone does not guarantee that the historical information documented in photographs will necessary be perceived. If inscription into a hegemonic discourse may alter a photograph's meanings, it can become incorporated into a master narrative whose

active interest is to sanction a specific set of values. This phenomenon is clearly evidenced by the disproportionality of quantity to visibility of photographs of the Mexican Revolution. Canales phrases this enquiry concisely: '¿es la visibilidad fotográfica una garantía de transcendencia y la invisibilidad una versión del olvido? (Canales 2009, 51). The complexity of the relationship between photography, memory and history makes it impossible to give a clear-cut answer, due to the multiplicity of historically specific factors whose interplay causes the tensions explored in scholarly studies to date, not just of the Mexican Revolution specifically but of war photography in a wider sense, and the photography of death.

In 1910, Mexico was at the start of a decade-long period that is described as the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution. The cultural, linguistic and social diversities of the territory, however, not to mention its size, complicate any attempt to attribute a unifying categorical term such as 'Mexican' to its peoples, or indeed to describe 'Mexico' as a nation. In fact, as Folgarait argues, prior to the Revolution,

> nationhood was barely that, such that the new forces in play from the first military engagements of late 1910, through the period of armed conflict that lasted roughly until 1920, never clarified what definition of nationhood was being overthrown, or if there had ever been enough of a "nation" to experience a crisis. (Folgarait 2008, 9)

So, Mexico at this time was already arguably a composite of fragments, and the period of restructuring and re-negotiating of power relations that began with the armed phase of the Revolution brought about further fragmentation. As observed by Folgarait, the Mexican Revolution has received detailed attention in many recent scholarly studies. Rather than clarifying our picture of events, however, this close looking at the Revolution has revealed its complexity and intricacy, and the re-reading

of events and movements that took place in Mexico at this time has effectively de-stabilised previously accepted visions. As he states:

> Gone forever are the dominant interpretations of earlier studies, when theories of monolithic certainty offered consistent and consoling maps of this history. (Folgarait 2008, 4)

Lomnitz speaks of the immensity of the scale on which the violence of the Revolution was felt, in his comment that 'the scale of the killings was unprecedented' (Lomnitz 2005, 383), which coupled with the complexity of this period in Mexican history reinforces the sense that, like Mexico itself, rather than being a singular entity with a unified identity, the Mexican Revolution combined many smaller entities and multiple identities, dynamic, geographically and politically disparate. However, it was not just the number of deaths (estimated at around one million) that made the Mexican Revolution unique: new transport technology (namely, the rail network) enabled the rapid movement of troops around the country, and the phenomenon was visually documented in film and photographs on a hitherto unknown scale, by photographers from inside and outside Mexico.

The documentation of war in images is complicated by various factors. At the turn of the twentieth century, photography was gradually becoming the dominant form of visual representation used in the press and advertising, the consequence of a perceived veracity resulting from its apparent objectivity and realism. Photographic technologies were also undergoing advances, such as lighter cameras, that were beginning to allow photographers to travel more easily than before, and the introduction of photographic film allowed multiple images to be captured relatively rapidly. War photography, however, is arguably a war in itself, with the reporting of conflicts being subject to timing, location, climatic conditions, and unreliable

equipment, not to mention the risk to the photographer of being injured or killed in the attempt to document the fighting. Debroise describes this difficult fragility in the following way:

> La guerra … es en extremo difícil, por no decir imposible, de fotografiar. Más que nunca, el fotógrafo lucha contra el tiempo. Prever, aprehender y detener las destrucciones en el tiempo exacto, justo antes de la desaparición irremediable, es un particular ejercicio fotográfico. (Debroise 2001, 147-8)

The impossibility of being present at all of the battles due to the logistical inconvenience of carrying heavy equipment, added to the fact that much of the armed conflict took place outside the capital city, means that many of the photographs of the Mexican Revolution show surrounding and connected events such as 'despedidas', scenes of troops departing on trains to take part in battles whose action remains tantalisingly invisible: 'A pesar de su fuerza emotiva … estas fotos no son propiamente de la Revolución sino de la reacción' (Mraz 2000, 3). Due to these practical limitations, it is not easy to record battles as they happen. The photographer tends to arrive after the action has taken place, capturing the aftermath: rotting corpses on an abandoned battlefield testify to what happened to leave them there, but we can only imagine what that destruction looked like as it occurred.

The violence of the *Decena Trágica*, though, was intensely photographed, marking the moment when 'la presencia de la fotografía en la lucha armada se vuelve múltiple y omnipresente (Debroise 2001, 151). This development, as indicated above, was aided by the urban location of the fighting, which meant that there was no need for photographers to travel long distances to get shots of either the action or the aftermath. Photographs of this brief episode in the Revolution's armed phase show the direct effects of war on the city's architectural and human landscapes: the destruction

not just of soldiers but civilians, and the ruining of buildings, from landmarks of national political and symbolic significance in Mexico such as the Palacio Nacional, to ordinary streets and houses. Unlike many of the bodies in the Casasola Archive’s photographs of deaths during the armed phase of the Revolution, the corpses on view in these images are not just those of assassinated military heroes, prominent political figures, or prisoners executed by hanging or shot by firing squad. The photography of this episode of the Revolution shows the effects of war on ordinary people, displacing both the glorifying tradition of looking at dead heroes and leaders displayed ceremonially, their corpses stuffed into the military uniforms they wore in life, and also the use of photographs to document the punishment of criminality.

The photograph captioned *Interior de una casa destruida* (fig. 1), was taken by Eduardo Melhado. It shows a room that has been destroyed by a shell: a huge hole has been ripped in the wall, and furniture lies in splinters strewn across the floor. No building name is given, so it is impossible to narrow down the location to a specific district or street in Mexico City. However, the objects in the photograph provide some clues as to the kind of space this was. It appears to be a comfortable interior: the upholstered chair and the wallpaper connote a certain degree of wealth on the part of

the users of the space, and the picture frame leaning against the wall in the left of the shot, though empty, is ornately fashioned. This is not a scene typical of this kind of interior, however, because no people are present in the photograph, either posing to commemorate some personal occasion, or caught unawares as they engage in some activity in the space, such as conversation, or reading. The setting is real, though it is impossible to know the extent of the photographer's intervention in the scene. Did Melhado photograph these objects exactly as they lay after the shell struck the building's exterior, or has the scene been altered for aesthetic reasons in order to photograph the objects in the room in a more symmetrical arrangement? It must be asked at this point whether the potential that the photographer has intervened in the scene may adversely affect the perception of the veracity of the photograph's documentary function? It has long been recognised that photographic images have, since the inception of the technology, been subject to manipulation on some level, be it by doctoring of the photograph (very easy now with digital technologies), or by the presentation of certain elements in a space by centralising them in a shot, thus drawing the viewer's gaze toward selected objects and away from others which may be equally powerful symbolically. Here, the symmetry and aesthetic appeal of the arrangement of the formal elements in this scene has a mesmerising effect, which draws the eye into close examination of the details of the destruction of the room, from the bulky yet ornate carved wooden furniture to the textures of the wallpaper and the exposed brickwork. The objects seen here are, of course, connected by the very fact of being framed together in the shot to the exclusion of all that lies outside it, and Melhado’s act of photographing the scene, whether altered or not, is by its nature an aestheticisation of the space, though this aestheticisation is one of a destroyed, disrupted space. This privileging of broken things by their inclusion in the

photographic frame undermines the idea of 'posing' for a photograph in order to document pleasant events in personal or family history. The documenting here of fragments, the traces of what this room looked like before its destruction, foregrounds the disruption of private space and shows absence to be a direct effect of violence. Following Sullivan's ideas around the 'vocabulary of objects' (Sullivan 2007, 204) in Latin American visual cultures, that is to say, the ways in which pieces of domestic furniture, for example, are employed by artists and take on meanings beyond their physical function, the connotative potential of the objects in Melhado's photograph can be unpacked.

Metonymy, according to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) definition, is a process by which a part may not only stand for the whole but also provide understanding. In this way, an object such as a body or body part may function not only as a form of rhetorical shorthand, but also as part of a symbolic system by which meanings are transmitted so that, for example, a corpse may come to stand not only for one dead individual and provide information such as we can glean from details of dress (or undress) and location, but for other dead people and even for death itself (see Folgarait 2008). Metonymy functions not just at the level of what is shown in a photograph, but the photograph itself is metonymical: as 'the part, an excision from the pro-filmic world, comes to stand in for the whole: all that was in front of the camera at the moment of capture, but fell outside the limit-frame' (Noble 2010, 49). Despite the incredibly large number of photographs that were taken of the Revolution, relatively few images have been reproduced, so that views of Mexican history and national identity have been shaped by relatively few 'iconic' images. Berumen, for instance, comments that:

> la idea de la revolución que largo tiempo había dominado mi imaginación provenía de unas cuantas imágenes que se habían publicado de manera reiterada durante sesenta años. (Berumen 2009, 19)

Given the intensity of the attention focused on Mexico during this period of great upheaval, it seems paradoxical that so few photographs of the conflicts have been analysed. As Folgarait succinctly puts it, ‘we have been taught to look *through* rather than *at* such historical photographs’ (Folgarait 2008, 5). Photographs are often presented in historical books as illustrations of the events described in the text, rather than as texts in their own right, so that their meanings are effectively overwritten by the captions allocated to them and the text on the pages.

What, then, can be learned from such an image? It is, after all, just a photograph of a room, it does not tell us anything about the people who had inhabited it, or give any indication as to whether it was strategically significant or merely unfortunately located, caught in crossfire or hit by a wayward shell. Debroise argues, using the example of photographs from World War One showing soldiers engaged in non-combative activities such as cutting each others’ hair, that war photographs that do not show death and destruction ‘no nos dice[n] nada sobre la guerra’ (Debroise 2001, 148). I contest, however, that this photograph, though it shows no flesh and bone, gains immense pathos through its ‘apparent pointlessness’ (Folgarait 2008, 12). It is an illustration of the futility of war written in the absurdity of the scene, objects thrown across a space and photographed in their new haphazard arrangement, rendered un-useable by their fragmentation and re-placing in new spatial relationships to each other, some having been destroyed by the force of the impact that has invaded the space while others appear undamaged. The absence of human bodies from this image is symbolic of death’s removal of individuals from social life, with the broken

furniture standing for the fragmentation of human bodies that is the direct consequence of such intense violence. The intactness of the chair on the right of the shot, surrounded by debris created by the blast through the wall, is poignant, troubling, and somewhat surreal evidence of the arbitrary and random nature of destruction.

The arrangement of the objects also cultivates a sense of the ridiculous that jars uncomfortably with the image as a documentation of brutal violence: the chair and picture frame on either side act as bookends to the central area, where the shelves stand next to the hole in the wall. This is of a very similar height, only slightly higher and wider than the piece of furniture beside it, and the two contrasting forms have a rather aesthetically pleasing symmetry despite the context within which they were photographed. The chair and frame to either side of these features draw the eye into the centre of the composition, and the contrast between the brightness of the light, and the dark wood of the furniture is striking. We cannot see out of the hole in the wall, only that it is a hole, a void that has been created by an interrupting force from outside the space in which the photographer is standing, and our search for clues as to what is outside in the street, or even any basic spatial indication of which storey of the building we are on, is frustrated by the brightness of the light shining in. We can see only that it is daytime; any attempt to glean further information is frustrated by the walls, which act to enclose the space and severely reduce the depth of the field of view. The hole itself forms a rough ellipsoid with jagged edges, communicating an immediacy that opposes the neat and delicately-worked curves and angles of the wooden furniture. The contrast between these contours and the positive and negative spaces of the shelves standing beside the hole in the once-solid wall, neatly and simply encapsulates the effect of the intrusion of war into the domestic realm and its

effect upon not just objects but bodies: where once there was presence, now there is absence. This, again, connotes death.

Photography's complex relationship to history and memory is evidenced by the ways in which photographs of the Mexican Revolution have been used in the production of state-sanctioned historical narrative, despite their potential for subversive readings and their status as reminders of traumatic events. A paradox has been noted by Noble and Folgarait, whereby iconic images become, on the one hand, slaves to this master narrative, and on the other, have all the weight of history projected onto them. A re-examination of such photographs, and an uncovering of lesser-known images, then, proves extremely fruitful in the current revisionist drive in scholarship of the Mexican Revolution, so that 'the image [can] operate more as a historical participant and less as a spectator' (Folgarait 2008, 7). Photography is central to the ways in which the Revolution was reported, viewed, and imagined, as it was occurring and later on. Photographs become documents, historical testimonies attesting to the events they capture. Photographs with a documentary function are taken to objectively record the events they depict, illustrating history through an unmediated lens and, problematically, functioning as 'witnesses to history' (Folgarait 2008, 5) as opposed to being considered to be deeply entwined with it and also engaged in a complex and potentially troubling relationship with what is shown. John Ellis discusses the notion of the photograph (and by extension, individuals who view it) as witness, and examines photography's particular power to show, to expose something to the viewer in a way that written text cannot. In this way, not only is the photograph itself a witness, but, by extension and implication, 'through the photographic image, we are drawn into the position of being witnesses ourselves' (Ellis 2000, 10). A photograph is a mechanical reproduction. It has a physical form that gives the impression of

having actually been present at the event it shows, and this lends it weight as a document, an apparently objective visual relaying of historical information with an assumed verisimilitude (the use of photographs to illustrate written histories certainly speaks to this). It comes to stand as evidence, a three-dimensional entity functioning as a screen through which the past can be viewed directly. According to Roland Barthes, the press photograph is read as a document that informs the viewer as to the events depicted, leaving no space for alternative meanings and connotations to be divined from the evidential. But, as many studies have shown, neither the photograph itself nor the uses to which it is put, may be considered objective. Barthes deconstructs the myth of objectivity in documentary photographs by exposing the interventions that occur at the levels of the image's production and reception:

> On the one hand, the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms … on the other, [it] is not only perceived, received, it is *read* by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs. (Barthes 1977, 19)

Folgarait also identifies this extraction of meaning from the visual text, which has been suggested or imposed by the text that the image is used to illustrate. The photograph, in such cases, is not seen as a commentary in and of itself, rather it is used to accompany a written text, whether it sits within the genre of a newspaper article or a historical treatise, but as Ellis contends, 'the act of witness is never itself unmediated' (Ellis 2000, 11). This, crucially, leaves space for images to be re-examined, and also for multiple readings to be elicited from photographs, freeing them from hegemonic interpretations. Scholars including Noble have drawn upon aspects of Roland Barthes' essay *Camera Lucida*, a meditation on photography

revolving around the author's own experience of looking at photographs, in order to reflect upon the effects on the viewer of looking at images taken long ago. Barthes describes his own experience of looking at a photograph taken of his mother as a young girl, that he looks at after her death. He develops his ideas on the layers of meaning that can be read from photographs, using the term *studium* to describe the informative content of an image, for example, details that give historical information about the way people lived and died at the time the photograph was taken, and *punctum* to describe other, connoted meanings. An object or a body in a photograph may thus be 'inscribed with a meaning far beyond what its inherent physicality connotes' (Sullivan 2007, 205). Artists and photographers have long employed objects in this way, overwriting the functional with symbolism. Simple domestic objects such as household furniture and other items, for instance, clothing, a chair, a table, or a wardrobe take on additional significations. Artists, such as the neo-conceptual Mexican artist Teresa Margolles (b.1963) have used apparently mundane objects such as items of clothing and furniture, to talk about the intense trauma to the individual and the social body, caused by violent death. As Sullivan explains: 'Destroyed, violated or reconfigured domestic items may serve as allegories of disrupted lives and traumatic reshapings of daily existence' (Sullivan 2007, 216). In this way, the anxiety of war and the fragmentation and disruption it causes, can be overlaid onto the presence of objects in a space so that their original intended function is shifted and replaced with other, more distressing meanings. Photographs such as this one documenting the trauma of the Decena Trágica in the fragmentation of things, can be seen to participate in the broad artistic history of visual inscription of meanings onto seemingly banal objects in its documentation of the intrusion of war into the streets and interior spaces of Mexico City, forcibly overwriting their

functional meanings with those associated with war. Segre (2007) proposes that Mexican photography itself has a long history of interest in fragmentation and remains, which she calls its ‘own archaeology of fragments’ (Segre 2007, 259-60). She traces this history in the images of the great photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo and other visual artists, to expose their fascination with the fragmented and disrupted. Despite the multiplicity of symbolisms that can be perceived in the photographed objects, and the photograph itself as an object, however, the agency of both photographer and photograph in inscribing meaning cannot be underestimated. This both undermines the notion that photographs are objective, and calls into question the status of iconic photographs. Arguably, by this token, many photographs could be seen as iconic if viewed under the right conditions (though iconic photographs by definition have to be scarce in number so as not to dilute the strength of their meanings). This image’s focus on a non-military, domestic space stands as a counterpoint to the iconic photographs of the Revolution by dint of the room’s very ordinariness.

The absence of either living or dead bodies from this photograph suggests death as the absence from social life. The broken furniture takes on a metonymical function, by means of which its fragmented state connotes the destructive effect of war and trauma on individual bodies and by extension the body of the nation (or social body). The photograph itself, as a physical entity, is also a metonym, standing for everything that happened outside the shot. The image possesses a poetic quality due to the way in which the shot is framed, with the furniture and the hole in the wall compositionally linking brokenness, emptiness, and absence. Sontag writes: ‘To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the

street' (Sontag 2003, 7). Death is an absent presence in this photograph, told in the language of fragmented objects.

The photograph *Incineración de cadáveres en Balbuena* (fig. 2) is attributed to Casasola. On the left is a large pile of incinerated corpses, obviously recently burned because smoke is still emanating from the pyre. Bodies of people killed during the violence of the *Decena Trágica* were burned to prevent the spread of contagious diseases through the city. This tells of both the scale of the destruction, in that many people must have died in order for sufficient risk of pollution by the corpse to exist for the mass burning of bodies to have taken place, and also, along with many of the other photographs taken during this brief but intense period of conflict, provides evidence of the scale of the destruction. It is not possible to tell from what is shown in the scene that the fighting took place in a highly populated urban area, but the caption locates the scene. Another image showing the burning of bodies that, like the one being discussed here, appears in several photographs shows a single corpse that has been incinerated and is lying in the street, presumably at or near the scene of death. Segre describes scenes from a 1913 newsreel, that documented the events of the Mexican Revolution, making direct reference to the disruption of life in Mexico City

by the intense conflict of the *Decena Trágica*, and the fragmentation caused by the intrusion of violence, documented in the photography of this period of the Revolution as 'shots of incinerated corpses in the streets of the capital […] the stench of the still fuming remains forcing onlookers to use their hands as protective masks' (Segre 2007, 243). Photographic fragments such as the image mentioned here, show the destructive effect of war upon no-longer-living bodies, and the reaction of the living to the dead. Troubling scenes such as this, which as its presence in a newsreel montage suggests, must have been shown to a public shortly after the photograph was taken, have been passed over by later presentations of the Revolutionary war as heroic and glorious, with the new ideological and political Mexican nation being constructed on the rubble of these forgotten deaths. Visual histories have tended to look away from these anonymous deaths, focusing instead on heroes and mythmaking, the elevation of a few images and individuals to iconic status by the, as Noble has put it, 'obsessive repetition' of very few images whose pervasive presence has obscured alternative versions and visions of not only these oft-viewed icons, as we have seen, but of the Revolution as told in many other photographs such as the one above, which is briefly mentioned by Segre. Such photographs, highly unsettling images that document the fragmenting and ruining effect of war, constitute 'a visual lament on the transitory and corrosive nature of man's passage' (Segre 2007, 246), embodied in the broken remains of structures and landscapes, both architectural and human.

The bodies in this photograph have no distinguishing individual features: they have been erased by the fire to become a visual manifestation of the way that death erases individual consciousness; the physical form reduced to charred flesh and burned bone, dehumanised. There are no clues as to these individuals' profession or social class, which would otherwise be indicated by clothing (note the pile of what appears to be

items of clothing just in front of the pyre), and the scene is shot from too far away to be able to clearly discern anatomical details of the dead. This contrasts uncomfortably with the observers of the scene. They all wear similar items of clothing: jackets, shirts, hats; but the differences in tone between lighter and darker shades contracts with the sameness of the dead bodies. The difference and distance between the living and the dead is also highlighted through their posture: the living men are all standing in a variety of apparently relaxed stances and appear not to be in physical contact with one another, whereas the dead are tangled chaotically, contorted by the heat of the fire. There is a marked contrast between light and dark, with the paleness of the smoke causing the tonal uniformity of the charred bodies to be further emphasised. The contours of the bones beneath their flesh are picked out by the shadows falling across taut skin, different from the onlookers' outlines, which are softened by the texture of the fabrics they wear. The asymmetry of the composition, with the dead far more numerous, spatially further into the foreground and occupying a greater area than the living, accords a sense of imbalance that evidences war's relationship to mortality. These unidentifiable dead bodies could be seen to stand in not only for other people killed during the *Decena Trágica*, but also universally for all the dead, a screen onto which other deaths may be projected, their individuality subsumed into a more expansive symbolic collectivity. Folgarait develops this idea in his analysis of a photograph taken in Ciudad Juárez in 1913 by Walter Horne, of a man who has been executed by firing squad. He suggests that the individual dead person becomes an emblem for all of the dead, not just those of his own social class who would resemble him through similar modes of dressing, but people from all backgrounds who had died recently, as he had (indicated by his still being in the location where he was executed and the corpse’s lack of decay). The unexpectedness of this death of a young

man dressed in civilian clothing, Folgarait argues, symbolises the disruption of the social order that is characteristic of a revolution: ‘We see the results of a damaged, abused and inarticulate social order by seeing its remains’ (Folgarait 2008, 12). This man is a broken fragment of a fractured nation. The burned bodies in *Incineración…* tell us not who they were, only that they are dead. But this is enough for the photograph to have impact.

The anonymity and visual sameness of the entangled mass of corpses in this image has a two-fold and contradictory effect of, on the one hand, reducing individuals to objects through the dehumanising effect of not naming, and the brutality of war, and on the other, paradoxically, according these bodies a universal meaning by which they become metonyms for death itself, the fate that awaits all of humanity. Death is often perceived as the great leveller, erasing social differences in its reduction of the bodies of rich and poor alike to decayed, destroyed remains. This is a misconception, as social differences persist after the death of the body, with individuals of high status being written about in history books, and memorialised with statues, ornate mausoleums, or even simply more eye-catching headstones. This is evidenced in very stark terms in the photography of the Mexican Revolution: dead military and political figures tend to be named, whereas people of lesser stature, such as ordinary civilians, tend not to be. The exception is the execution photograph, where condemned criminals are sometimes named individually, for example in a February 1916 photograph attributed to Casasola, captioned *Alfonso Aguilar, desertor de la revolución Constitucionalista, antes de ser fusilado* [cat. no. 6331]. In most cases, though, executed individuals are defined by their crimes rather than their names.

Due to the ferocity of the fighting and its location in a densely populated major city, it is likely that the bodies in this pyre belonged to people from different social

backgrounds, though it is impossible to say with any certainty. Their lack of distinguishing features is a gruesome reminder of the most terrifying fact of death; that is, the end to individual consciousness: their singed skulls and empty eye sockets no longer the seat of cognitive, emotional or physical functioning of the body and mind. This stands in stark contrast to the other group of people in the photograph, the crowd of onlookers on the right of the shot, standing a small distance away from the pyre, looking either at the remnants of the fire or towards the camera.

The burning of bodies in a public, urban space is certainly not the kind of phenomenon that would be commonly observed. It is, in itself, a disruption of the normal life of the city, so the presence of a crowd of onlookers is to be expected. Their gaze is directed at the pyre, and the framing of this scene within a photograph invites us to join them in looking, establishing a circularity of gazes and engaging in a visual relationship. We all look across boundaries: the crowd is a part of the captured scene, but looks across the boundary between life and death. They stand slightly away from the pyre; a small distance separating them spatially from the dead bodies, no doubt to guard against the threat of physical pollution by the corpse and what it stands for metonymically, death (although airborne particles from the fire are also potentially dangerous!). We, as viewers of this photograph in another time and place, are further distanced in physical terms, yet drawn into the image by our compulsion to look and by the allure of the photograph's ability to show. This photograph shows us a horrifying reality, which we regard from a 'safe' distance in the sense that corpse pollution is not a risk, but not safe in the sense that we are contemplating our own mortality, reflected back to us in both in the 'look' of the corpses' empty eye sockets and the gaze of the spectators within the frame. The circulation of these looks implicates us in the scene, connected by our own act of looking yet also separated by

the impossibility of directly intervening. What we view is unchangeable, but the ways in which we view it are open to multiple, shifting interpretations depending on cultural, historical, and political context. To elicit multiple meanings from photographs of historical events requires a degree of active engagement on the part of the viewer, in that there must be some contextual knowledge for the photograph to function on levels other than the denotative. The danger here, though, is that a photograph's power to hold meanings as a text in its own right can, as Folgarait and others have shown, be at least partially eclipsed by the presence of written text. As Sontag asserts, 'all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions' (Sontag 2003, 9). She argues that images of horror are capable of functioning without the need to be explained by a caption or any other accompanying text, stating that 'the case against war does not rely on information about who and when and where; the arbitrariness of the relentless slaughter is evidence enough' (Sontag 2003, 9). Images such as the two analysed here carry connotative meanings that reach far beyond the physicality of the objects and bodies being displayed, speaking of the disruption and fragmentation caused by the intense violence of the Decena Trágica, a brief episode during a traumatic period in Mexico's history.

To briefly conclude, a question must be asked: As a response to the privileging of certain images, what can photographs such as the two examined above, that have found themselves eclipsed by visual icons, add to our knowledge of history and the events of the Revolution? As Berumen explains, the repetition of display and viewing of relatively very few images has serious implications for national memory and identity. A scholarly re-examination of the past therefore allows us to

> indagar las posibles razones y mecanismos por los cuales una enorme cantidad de fotografías no circuló en su momento [y] reflexionar sobre las implicaciones que ello ha tenido para la memoria visual. (Berumen 2009, 19)

The supposed objectivity of historical master narrative may thus be called into question, creating space for alternative (re)visions. This act of making visible by re-visiting, has significant implications in its potential for images to contest the official version of history, perhaps even to provide a counterpoint to the mythologising effect of heavily reproduced, iconic images.

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