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Martin Parr in Mexico: Does Photographic Style Translate?

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Abstract

This study analyzes Martin Parr's 2006 photobook, *Mexico*. Parr is a British documentary photographer best known for a direct photographic style that reflects upon "Englishness." *Mexico* is his attempt to understand this foreign country via his camera. *Mexico*, as a research subject, is not a problem to solve but an opportunity to understand a photographer's work. Parr's Mexico photography (technique, photographic content, and interest in globalization, economics, and culture) is compared to his previous work to explain how Parr uses fashion and icons to represent a culture or class. This article argues Parr's primary subjects, heads/hats, food, and Christs, are photographed without excessive aesthetic pretensions so that the thrust of Parr's message about globalization can be more evident: Mexico maintains many of its traditions and icons while adopting American brands.

Introduction

English documentary photographer Martin Parr has a knack for finding the absurd in everyday life, and he records his observations with his camera. His view of the world is colorful—a hyper-rich kaleidoscope of colors representing the culture Parr has his eye attuned to at the moment. Parr’s frequent subjects are people adapting to globalization by adopting aspects of foreign consumer culture or a perceived class culture. While the loss of a distinct, isolated culture might be mourned via a critical analysis of imperialism, Parr finds the sad humor in it.

When Parr covers a new subject like Mexico, he brings his photographic style along with him. For Parr, a new assignment involves a mix of old technique and new subject matter, and the resulting images are a hybrid of this mix. His work can be described as a celebration of the snapshot aesthetic. While a snapshot is a simple recording, Parr uses the snapshot aesthetic as a deceptive device for making his photographs appear to be objective recordings. His photography is deceptive because its depth is easily overlooked. Many of the images are simply boring when viewed on their own; they achieve their meaning through their viewing as a collection and through the interplay of intertextuality within them.

Examinations of photographers often beg the questions, “How are the photographers’ images made?” “What messages do their images communicate?” Parr uses accentuated colors of everyday subjects to get the viewer’s attention and an everyday snapshot aesthetic to hide the force of his visual analysis of globalization. In brief, Parr’s photographs show intersections of Mexico and globalization, especially with respect to the influence of the United States, and they also reflect the evolution of his photographic style, i.e., his devices for communicating. Parr is able to make his images collectively interesting, especially in light of a snapshot aesthetic, because of (1) the technique, using a flash to highlight the subject and processing the images to make them hyper-saturated; (2) the content, which is unusual, with plates of food and hats as examples of some of his favorite choices; and (3) his visual address of globalization, economics, and culture by *not* photographing the extreme poor—the usual route for documentary photographers. By relying on these three characteristics of Parr’s photography, the author frames Parr’s 2006 book, *Mexico*, as a collective statement about a culture in flux due to the direct influence of its neighbor to the north, the United States, as well as the general influence of other drivers of globalization. Thus, *Mexico* is not a research problem to solve but an opportunity to understand a photographer’s work.

This article uses a layered analysis instead of visual rhetoric to analyze the photographs in *Mexico* because a layered analysis enables the author to look at documentary photography from multiple directions rather than just the photograph *as* text. This layered analysis is composed of the perspectives of history (What is Parr’s earlier work? How does *Mexico* relate to this earlier work?), the relevant political economy (How does Parr’s work address the political economy of his subjects, past and present?), and the cultural rhetoric (What symbols from a culture has Parr found and chosen to represent?). This analysis leads to the themes of heads/hats, food, and Christs.

Photography as Communication

A layered analysis offers different perspectives to aid the subjective researcher in identifying different tendencies and practices of the photographer and the meaning of photographs. While visual rhetoric analysis tends to lead the researcher to ask, “What do I see?” a layered analysis inspires the researcher to ask different questions, such as, “What photographs

or techniques existed before the taking of these images, and can they be related? What is the broader social context in which a photographer has to work, and how does the photographer react to this political and economic environment? What cultural symbols does the photographer encounter, and how do they relate to symbols previously photographed?”

The historical context addresses how and why photography is practiced in a particular form. The inclusion of historical context serves to explain that modern practices of photography are developmental—they emerge and evolve over time rather than appear independently of earlier practices. Understanding the history of photography, then, even at a minimal level, is beneficial for understanding contemporary practices because it helps to identify the significance of the practices. For example, Parr uses certain amateur color films because of their color reproduction, despite the fact that such color reproduction is considered by some to be excessive compared to that produced by professional portrait film. His ring flash originated in dental photography but is now popular with fashion photographers for producing relatively few shadows. This contextual approach is found both in journalism history, in “Developmental” history¹, as discussed by Startt and Sloan (1989), and in photography criticism, in the form of “stylistic interpretations,” as presented by Barrett (2006). The Developmental approach is evident in Carlebach’s historical surveys of photojournalism (1992, 1997).

The political economy perspective is especially beneficial for the study of Parr because he frequently photographs representations of changing societies. For example, *The Cost of Living* (1989) book and exhibition critiqued Thatcherism and the effect of government policies on the working class. Parr responded to Thatcherism and all that accompanied it by photographing the middle class. Williams wrote, “It is about anxiety on a quiet but nevertheless colossal scale ...” (2002, p. 209). A political economy perspective aids in the examination of work like *The Cost of Living* and *Mexico* because such a perspective offers a different context within which to discuss the photography. While the historical context is about photography, the political economy perspective addresses the social forces that often provide the motivation for photographers’ projects.

The third and final perspective is the cultural rhetoric. This perspective tries to link the visual style with the culture that is the subject. It essentially asks: “What is the relationship between *what* is looked at and *how* is it looked at? What is the system of representation for the social symbols?” This is also important for studying Parr because Parr frequently photographs the mundane. While photojournalists tend to utilize an objective journalistic approach to feature the more dramatic representations of social problems, Parr—as a documentary photographer who can use the long form medium of books and exhibitions—focuses on everyday objects like American logos on baseball hats worn by Mexicans.

A cultural perspective is important when looking at the work of Parr because he is primarily concerned with culture—how it is lived through consumption and fashion (including ordinary dress)—and how culture is represented in images of food and Christ figures, which is to be discussed in the description and analysis section. Therefore, an understanding of how the photographs are cultural artifacts about cultures aids in the analysis. Such an approach is evident in the work of Trachtenberg (1990), who has situated documentary photography within an historical context that illuminates its social function.

¹ The use of a capitalized Developmental history is to distinguish the theory from the actual developmental process.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative analysis of the photographs in *Mexico*. The author does not assume any objectivity in identifying themes in Parr's book. Documentary and art photography are subjective practices, and the analysis of photographic style and meaning is also subjective.

The analysis of *Mexico*'s photographs first involves the author identifying categories into which to place the images. A photograph can appear in more than one category. The categories are not predetermined but emerge through repetition of identification. As more and more photos are identified as having common characteristics, categories emerge for analysis. A category can be the result of a style or content. The categories, as themes, are identified in the description and analysis section with examples of photographs.

The photographs are placed in categories based on their content. However, the analysis discusses not only the content but also the style used to represent it. As such, this study uses an emerging themes methodology as well as a criticism of the techniques of photography, which relies on a different form of expert knowledge than commonly practiced in qualitative methods. The use of the three layers comes in the analysis of the examples. This approach requires the author to ask how each image might be pertinent to the history, political economy, or cultural rhetoric. The findings are not explained separately but are woven together because the goal of the layered analysis is to appear seamless.

Parr Before *Mexico*

The starting point for this background discussion, Parr's book *Think of England* (2000, reprinted 2004), is a good source for contextualizing *Mexico* because *Think of England* was originally published just six years before *Mexico*, and, like *Mexico*, it contains a good number of photographs with and without people. The cover [image](#) for *Think of England* is of the national flag tied to a red and white line. The flag covers the head of an older woman in a horrid, floral print dress sitting on a fold-out chair. The woman and the background are blurry. Their placement and sharpness are reflective of Parr's interest in creating symbols of national culture. *Think of England*, as well as other works, demonstrates how Parr uniquely tackled a typical subject.

Think of England and [The Last Resort: Photographs of New Brighton](#) contain many of the same kinds of photographs found in *Mexico*, which are discussed in the next section. Parr's interest in heads with hats is evident in his photobooks. In *Think of England*, the people wearing hats are frequently the members of the upper class. There are the ornately decorated ladies' hats and men and boys with top hats. Their hats are seemingly integral to the polo and horse riding rituals they observe, and both male and female participants wear the appropriate sporting headgear. Part of Parr's message appears to be that how we dress reflects who we are or are trying to be.

Objects of a national kitsch culture appear in his work with frequency. *Think of England* contains an image of ceramic children, dogs, and horses, as well as images of sickeningly cute postcards of pets and rows of cups adorned with Princess Diana's face. Other objects attracted Parr's interest in his native land, especially cell phones and glasses. Based on its original publication date of 2000, Parr must have found the increasingly public use of cell phones foreign to his concept of polite England. His subjects' collections represent their identification with their culture—a collector of a Princess Diana cup aspires to be the princess or close to her while

recognizing in the purchase that the aspiration is unachievable. These devices of representation are also found in Parr's work in the photographing of popular destinations; many such photographs are compiled in his photobook *Small Worlds* (2007, originally published in 1995). In one such photograph, small reproductions of famous Italian statues are hawked outside of the Colosseum in Rome.

Parr's representations of food in his England photographs are a component of ritual rather than a study in cultural difference. Parr has tabletop photographs from England, and his native studies show the presence of food in human activity. Food is part of the tableaux of life in *The Last Resort: Photographs of New Brighton*. The food indicates the subjects' lower cultural status because of the context. [Page 18](#) shows a man watching his baby vainly trying to drink a can of Coca-Cola, but the girl has difficulty, and the sugary beverage rolls down her face and chest to land on her now-sticky leg. In the photograph on [page 23](#), a girl working at an ice cream counter turns to the camera with displeasure as younger kids impatiently wait their turn for a treat. In the page 36 photograph, a boy steps on rocks covered by shallow water, and to the side of him, the ground is littered with abandoned food packaging. In contrast, the wealthy in *Think of England* do not eat because they seemingly [live on champagne](#).

Description/Analysis

This section contains two subsections that (1) describe Parr's *Mexico* and identify themes and (2) relate Parr's work in *Mexico* to his previous photographs. The aim of this section is to describe and analyze the content and style of Parr's photography and to place it in the broader contexts of photography and social commentary.

Description of themes in Mexico

Parr's *Mexico* contains 77 color photographs without captions or page numbers. A brief introduction by Rogelio Villarreal is the sole contributing text. Almost all of Parr's photographs fall into at least one of four content categories: heads/hats, food and Christs. Some images appear in more than one category.

Heads/Hats

Parr's snapshot aesthetic is evident in his photographs of heads. The dominant technique is a straight-on portrait that lacks personal context for the subject. Parr's approach is the opposite of a photojournalistic environmental portrait. Parr does not allow the viewer to think about living conditions or the spatial environment; instead, he directs the viewer to look at the person's face. Parr's portrait subjects are not totally isolated from the rest of the world, however. Parr is fascinated by the American influence on his Mexicans, which is evident in their choice of hats. Hats are the one part of a wardrobe that Parr returns to over and over again. Importantly, however, if Mexicans were walking around wearing hats of Mexican futbol (soccer) teams, the viewers don't see those hats in Parr's photographs. What Parr shows is the infiltration of United States' culture by making portraits of men with hats from Mexico's northern neighbor. The first of the heads and hats photographs is like most of the others—a man stares at the camera with a moderate smile ([Photograph 23](#)). In making this snapshot portrait, Parr calculatingly broke most of the rules of portraiture. The light is blasted straight at the subject; the moderately blurry,

textured wall distracts too much; and a thick, dark vertical line is just off the man's ear. Parr follows his own photographic rules so the viewer looks at the content in the absence of pleasing aesthetics. Because of this, the man's Coca-Cola hat becomes vital content.

Parr trades aesthetics for simplicity in these portraits. The two subsequent photographs (Photographs [24](#) & [25](#)) are of two men with moustaches, wearing similar baseball-style hats. The first man wears a red hat with the words, "USA," a picture of a basketball, the Nike swoosh, and the profile of a bird. The background is black, so Parr probably made this image outside in the dark. The next image is of a man wearing a different styled shirt but of the same blue and green colors. His hat reads, "addidas," and he stands in front a black background on one side and something made from bricks on the other side. Like the photographs before it, this photograph is horizontal, but the dominant elements, the heads and hats, are ordered vertically. This use of space increases the appearance of amateurism because such space is typically considered "improperly" used negative space.

The significance of the heads with hats becomes more evident through repetition of content and style. [Photographs 26 and 27](#) each display a man looking to his left while wearing a baseball-style hat advertising a National Football League (NFL) team. Photograph 26 is unusual in that Parr left the shadow from the brim of a New York Jets' hat on the subject's face. His hat is for the New York Jets. The man in Photograph 27 has his hat turned around so the back is showing, and it reads, "COWBOYS." While the previous three men, who look older, stare at the camera, these two men look away. The older men appear confident, while the younger men look bored and a bit lost in purpose.

There are other photographs of heads, including more men in NFL hats, and there are a few photographs of people wearing different styles of hats. However, this sequence is significant because there are five photographs placed together in a similar style, something Parr does not compose anywhere else in the book. In these five photographs, the heads are separated from the body to reveal more detail in the faces and hats. The hats are incorporated, presumably because Parr intends to highlight the odd experience of traveling to one culture and being exposed to a third one. These hats are not native to the culture—they are cultural imports, even if they might have been manufactured in Mexico.

The flashed (the technique) heads (the content) of different subjects reminds us of class differences (globalization) between the native laborers and tourists. For Parr, two kinds of people wear hats in Mexico: the native laborers in baseball hats and the tourists, who need enough room to put their cameras under their brims. His flash also serves a practical purpose—without it, the relative exposure of the face to the background will be quite different. Exposing for the shadowed face will make the background excessively light. Flashing the face helps to balance the light, although Parr will sometimes over-flash the face (relative to the background) and expose for the face in order to make the background darker than the face, which will make the face jump out more than if the light is balanced.

Food

Parr's instinctive photographs of food—a more consistent return to the snapshot aesthetic—demonstrate his cultural shock because his photographs appear simpler when the subject seems so foreign. The first photograph in the book is a visual slap in the face. Stylistically, it is vintage Parr—food is on a table. This time, however, the food is not English fish and chips but instead, bright green limes on a white plate, a black bowl containing green

soup with a white plastic spoon, and a green and red shaker for seasoning. This plethora of green is set against a red and white, checkered tablecloth. The image communicates through color rather than design. It is a surprise to see this photograph as the first image because the colors are few in number but rich in saturation, and there is no subtle progression to the drama. The following three images (Photographs [2](#), [3](#), & [4](#)) implement the repetition of pattern. Photograph 2 is of nine doughnuts with a simple, green floral design with a creamy white and red center. Photograph 3 is a mix of Photographs 1 and 2 because it relies on the red and green colors again, and there are two stools against a brick background. The wall is lime green, as are the stools' legs. On the seat of the left stool is a painted pineapple, against the colors orange and red. The right stool's top was painted with an eight-slice blood orange. Photograph 4 is most similar to Photograph 2—it has approximately 10 pies in simple aluminum pans and a cheap, white plastic spoon on each pie. The image is almost a sibling to the photo of the doughnuts but with less color.

The significance of these images is how Parr attempts to photograph the unusual in the snapshot aesthetic's direct and simple manner. Two additional examples are of chicken feet. [Photograph 35](#) displays uncooked chicken feet wrapped, on a disposable plate, marked at \$4.64 Mexican pesos. Its neighboring photograph shows cooked chicken feet on aluminum foil. Neither are images that even photography connoisseurs are likely to hang on their walls, but the photographs reinforce Parr's surprise at *what* is food in Mexico.

[Photograph 52](#) questions what food should look like and the cleanliness of food. This image is of small sugar candies in the shape of 26 white skulls with blue, green, red, or orange coloring. This popular Day of the Dead candy is rather disturbing to someone from a culture that does not celebrate this holiday. What made this scene especially disorienting for Parr are the five bees on some of the skulls. The adjacent placement of [Photograph 53](#) next to Photograph 52 leads the viewer to skip past 53 too quickly. The surprise of Photograph 52 overwhelms the pedestrian quality of its neighboring image of hot sauce bottles, most of which are blurry. Both images use repetition of pattern, but the eye is naturally drawn to the unusual and to the sharper qualities of the bees on candies. There are visual similarities from a formalist perspective of photography, which is one that relies on the form of the subject rather than the content. This is rather ironic because Parr is often unconcerned with form in favor of content. From a formalist perspective, the different colored skulls resemble the different colored tops of hot sauce bottles. The sequencing of these images follows a formalist approach of putting aesthetically-related images together, but the images' meanings are dependent on a view of the content. In this way, Parr's directness reappears at different points in *Mexico*.

Another example of this snapshot directness is in an image of a hamburger wrapped on a disposable plate that is against a white background with holes revealing blackness. The sesame seeds on the bun resemble the holes in the background, a small reference to the repetition of pattern. Because the image is mostly white, the golden bun receives a great deal of attention. Wrapped food suggests a highly mobile society that demands edibles that can be transported and eaten at a later time, which is part of a larger process coined "McDonaldization" (Ritzer, 1983). This representation opposes any traditional thought of Mexico as a slow moving country where people might invest time to eat.

With his flash technique, Parr communicates his fascination with food, which is an important symbol of a culture. In regards to food, Parr's interest in its globalization is how food remains a cultural ritual in taste and, important for the novice tourist, appearance. Parr's flash makes the subject jump forward in a frame, and his saturated colors enhance the exoticism of the

new food. The process of globalization has the potential to wipe out a culture's tradition, or it can expose others to those traditions. The importance of food as a marker of difference or similarity is not just in taste but also in appearance. Thus, Parr does not treat food as a transported product of globalization (because people are transported, and food is local). The tourist is the explorer, and the food is a mystery waiting to be discovered.

Christs

The last category is of Christs. The plural form was chosen over the singular Christ because the Christ figure appears in many different contexts and, at times, more than once in a photograph. Like a convert, Parr latched onto the ubiquity of Christ figures by photographing in his direct style the various places he would find them. For [Photograph 16](#), Parr found three rows of Christ figures, with each one holding a coin. Two similar Christ figurines appear in [Photograph 31](#) next to a Spiderman figurine and one of a child character. If the sacredness of the Christs did not seem compromised by the coins, the placement by Spiderman certainly endows them with a secular and everyday quality.

[Photograph 30](#) is of a table arranged with various Christ and Mary figurines and images for sale. The colors red, yellow and green dominate the table, which is reinforced by a restaurant visible in the background. Across the street from the table is a McDonald's with its red and yellow sign, and it beckons customers with an additional ice cream cone sign. The red and yellow of the sharp foreground table and merchandise interact with the red and yellow McDonald's sign. The capitalistic sale of sacred religious icons, to Parr, is not that different than an American restaurant selling food in Mexico. This is also visible in [Photograph 56](#) with its close-up views of watches with Christ and Mary on each watch—the sacred is subservient to the sale. They might remind the viewer of the snapshots of foods discussed earlier.

The strangest appearances of Christs are found in Photographs [47](#), [48a](#) and [48b](#), which are also examples of his snapshot aesthetic. An inflatable SpongeBob balloon hovers like a cartoon angel over a crucifixion tombstone in Photograph 47. SpongeBob smiles while the Christ figure is tied to the tombstone's cross as if taking pleasure in the suffering. Photograph 48a is another image from a cemetery. Above a different crucifixion is a sign reading, "HAPPY HALLOWEEN," a witch, and paper pumpkins. Some of the balloons in the air are of Barbie and a princess. The second picture on 48 (48b) shows a Christ figure with its arms open wide. Below the figure are representations of pumpkins and a vampire. These are strange sights for someone familiar with how people in the United States and England have typically decorated gravesites—in Mexico, popular culture has infiltrated this particular crevice of everyday life.

Analysis

For years, Parr investigated his native England's class issues, but class was largely discarded as a driving force in making the *Mexico* photographs. *Mexico* is "classless"—not in the sense that class does not exist—but in *Mexico*, Parr has replaced class with 'global culture' as the force driving his work. *Mexico* offers the merger of local, kitsch, and globalization. The viewer does not know where the clothes, cups, and other objects in *Think of England* were made, but their local context is evident. This context is less concrete in *Mexico's* display of cultural integration. Mexico has, or maybe more appropriately had, been the site of cheap labor for the manufacturing of goods to be sold in the United States. As such, it is not surprising that Mexican consumers would adopt some of the cultural products they made for their northern neighbors.

Parr's photographs have often been political economy studies of an unusual sort. Documentary photographers have long been making images of the downtrodden, but often at the expense of the middle class. Parr's poignant comments in the *The Cost of Living* were especially relevant in a Thatcher era that celebrated the importance of maintaining class differences as economic classes (Williams, 2002, p. 207). Parr's middle class imagery was made from a self-reflective perspective. He has been a member of this class that has sought to raise its stature through consumption of the markers of upper class position.

Parr's lack of familiarity with Mexican life made it difficult for him to understand the ritual of food within this culture. He failed to establish a connection between food and people. For example, in his series *Bored Couples* Parr photographed couples sitting at tables in Finland and England, often with food, and looking bored by their company. The less food there is in front of them, the more bored they appear to be at the time. *Mexico* lacks the relationship between food and people found in *Bored Couples*, *The Last Resort*, and *Think of England*. Like much of *Think of England*, *Mexico* reveals what Parr finds novel in his travels. There is a distinct lack of Christs in Parr's previous work, which is indicative of English culture, which typically shows restraint in expressing religious icons and beliefs. Parr has been more interested in the representation of oneself in dress and home, especially in his 1986-1989 *The Cost of Living* project, making the Christ figurines somewhat of a detour based on the culture under investigation. If a parallel can be drawn between the "Mexican-ness" that the Christ figures reflect and the Englishness captured in Parr's photographs in *The Cost of Living*, the English analog to the Mexican Christ figures may well be the furniture, wallpaper, and interior decorating that Parr's photographs of English households tend to feature.

In the background of many images in *Mexico* is the United States. While Parr shoots from an English personal history and cultural influence, "his" Mexico is influenced by the economic and cultural forces of the United States. Comparisons of *Mexico* to Parr's earlier works serve as a stylistic reference point, but uniquely, in this work, it is the United States that plays a role in establishing a Mexican culture. The cultural differences between these two countries are blurred as Mexicans wear clothes supporting American teams and products, and Americans visit Mexican restaurants and hire Mexican laborers.

Conclusion

Martin Parr's photography is surprisingly complex because it appears so simple on the surface. His photographic directness, the snapshot aesthetic, does not usually invite for aesthetic contemplations by the viewer, so the viewer must address the content. His subjects have been investigations of class and culture, but *Mexico* marks a shift towards a concern for the dilution of a culture because of globalization, especially the influence of the United States. *Mexico* is representative of a different social order—one difficult for Parr to comprehend in a larger social context because of his unfamiliarity with Mexican culture. For Parr, Mexico was unusual. Parr must have asked himself what before his eyes was traditional in culture, and what was the result of a global economy. He captures the most visible objects: McDonald's, a Barbie balloon, American baseball hats, and more. Parr, like many people, recognized that globalization and culture are tied together. In the end, for Parr, we all eat, we all make idols of those we worship, and we all seek shade from the sun that exposes us.

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