Gaunt Heroes: Deathly Business in a Civil War[1]

Adriana Gómez Aiza
Bookend Seminar, March 30, 2023

Dr. Adriana Gómez-Aiza is the Distinguished Visiting Professor of Politics and Fulbright-García Robles Mexico Studies Chair.

Today, we are said to be immersed in a digital era, an age of overflowing images, codes and semiosis.[2] Visual registers have turned into an epitome of information exchange, the medium *par excellence*. The clichéd phrase "one look/one picture is worth a thousand words" encapsulates this belief.

ROUTES TO VISUAL ARCHIVES

Many are the angles to approach the subject and linger on such claims. One of the discussions centers on the connecting principle of cognition and communication by visual means. Debates on the philosophy of language are good examples of the profundity and variety of topics involved in that principle. Some of the key questions on how visual language and knowledge generate and convey meaning are the correlation between sensorial channels and the origins of language, the complexity of multimodal learning processes and communication, the distinctions between oral and visual information and transmission, the different ways to store and access visual data, and questions on objectivity and interpretation as well as the reliability and durability of registries.[3]

Those questions exceed our goals here. However, some remarks on concepts help to support our understanding of photographic materials and narrow down the interpretation.
First, consider the corporeal experience of the visual. Visible reality supposes the ocular-mind's anatomic and physiological capacity to perceive chromatic stimuli from the surroundings and one's own body. These are immediate sources of "raw data" stored in someone's mind. Visual memories are mediated sources of codified representation since they are given meaning and value: data codified through an association of one's own personal perception with its outcomes. When confronted with a visual realm, the mind correlates with what was previously experienced to decipher new "raw" data.

Then, there is communication: the representation of processed information, of evidence with added meaning and value, of data transformed into codes and passed onto someone who

undergoes the visual experience firsthand. This "passing onto" someone else a visual experience involves a third party and implies a learning process: a guided reasoning through the branding of the surrounding reality and the acceptance of the training agent´s perspective, sharing visual information by building a common ground of re-presentation granted by language and made accessible through different registries, media, and technical support.

No matter the topic, images represent more than the visual exhibition of reality. Images include the teachings of the agents that gave us access to those images' meanings and values. That is, they are meaningful and valuable for certain people, at certain times, in certain ways. Hence, the question of intentionality--implicit, explicit, and non-implied--becomes relevant as it discloses denoted and unintended contents. The discursive potential of visual documents is great.

Every type of visual production and media used has followed their own path. Photography first emerged in photo-sensible formats, heliographic prints, and daguerreotypes; then, it evolved into silver gelatine, acetate film and digital data. From the start, photography was considered *the* objective recording of facts, capturing the reality untouched by the point of view, interest, or skills of anyone and therefore considered a primary source of reliable information and a trustworthy scientific and professional activity. Realist and mimetic paintings became a matter of taste and vocation rather than need. The camera worked better for seizing precise images of reality.

This core idea ranked photographs highly in society. They offered evidence that helped verify facts and testimonies, no matter the perspective and area it was applied (e.g., science, sports, legal). They illustrated and reinforced written information--qualities highly valued in education, publicity, and media production (e.g., textbooks, advertisements, TV, and cinema). Photographs also enlarged public communication to wider audiences, including the illiterate.[4]

The use of photographs in mass publications became the fastest and more direct channel to share information with the public. Whereas the printing press had increased and improved the possibilities of mechanical mass production, reproduction, and the circulation of illustrations, engravings, and drawings, photography facilitated the inclusion of fast-produced images in newspapers, magazines, chronicles, and manuals.[5] The instant camera introduced opportunities for highly vivid shots by recording bodies in movement, the very act of living as it occurred.

In less than fifty years, the chance of capturing "something happening right there" with a camera and having multiple copies of that shot reproduced in mass publications transformed the way portraits were made and information was told. Renowned studios and photographers competed with amateurs and professionals in the fields of journalism and publicity. Initially, photographers concentrated on landscapes, architecture, and family and personal portraits, which were shot in a studio in still poses. The instant camera made spontaneous shooting possible, and people forgot

about poses, too; the daily press turned into an assiduous consumer of photos for periodical publications because people bought those publications.

A new profession, photojournalism, had finally taken shape, and Mexico offered an ideal setting. First, professionals (national and international) committed to photographic production, attending people who preferred illustrated newspapers, magazines, or journals. People enjoyed consuming scripts accompanied with pictures rather than plain texts. Second, two major historical events were untangled that captured public lenses worldwide: the organization of the Centennial Commemoration of the Independence War in September 1910, and months later, the rise of a civil war against the elite that had been ruling the country for the previous thirty years. Early twentieth-century Mexican photojournalism became a trend thereafter in Mexico and other countries.

FROM ILLUSTRATION TO TESTIMONY

The Archivo Casasola was founded in 1912 by the Casasola brothers, Agustín Víctor and Miguel, photographers and collectors of photographic materials of any sort: negatives; printed images produced by their own or any other amateur or professional photographers; purchased or donated original shots, edited copies, reprographics of private albums or the public press.[6] The Casasola descendants continued the collection for three decades, up to 1972, when the archive was bought by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). This triggered the foundation of the Fototeca Nacional four years later by the INAH a specialized branch taking custody of Mexico's visual patrimony.

As the INAH received it, the Archivo Casasola amounted to half a million images capturing moments of a huge variety of topics: daily life, portraits, social types, arts, sports, sceneries, shows, fashion, labor, social mobilizations, public commemorations, uniforms, institutions, architecture, civil engineering projects, archaeological sites, workshops, housing, landscapes, rural-urban contexts, technology, tools and gears, weapons, and so on. Today, the Fototeca houses more than 900,000 images.

The Fondo Casasola is one of the forty-three collections in which two centuries of photographic materials have been organized. Its fame goes far beyond the quality of visual materials, their thematic variety, and temporal span. It offers the largest and perhaps best-preserved compilation of historical photographs of the Mexican Revolution worldwide. Acquiring and preserving this collection became a national interest, and this is why the INAH bought the archive in the first place. This very fact discloses the importance of the archive, for images corresponding to the Civil War represent just a tiny part of the whole collection.

The photographs of the Civil War are roughly dated from 1895 to 1945, bearing witness to the socio-cultural life that surrounded the Civil War and its outcomes, with 1908 and 1929 being the anchoring points of the intensive armed conflicts, including the murder of different revolutionary *caudillos*. During those decades, an estimated five hundred photographers focused their lenses on the Civil War. Their authorship remains unknown since very few people signed their materials at that time. Some research is being done to find out and assign authorship, but this is a titanic goal and not our purpose in this paper.

Images can be sorted out in three major arenas according to their subject matter: the socio-economic and cultural background of the war, the armed conflict proper, and the national reconstruction process. Such divisions do not stand for a chronological accommodation of events, but for parallel processes that often share the same temporal span. The martial and bellicose aspects of the Mexican Revolution were among the most recurrent foci of the cameras at the time: political leaders, militaries, caudillos, armies and troops, men in combat, guns and artillery, trains and machinery, battlefields, damaged buildings, health care workers and injured fighters, and of course, casualties and death.

Around the armies,[7] we can find soldiers with their families, women and children feeding and loving their fellow countrymen going to battle--no matter the social class or the band they were enrolled in--and women and children wielding rifles and guns as part of the military. But we can also find fatality and desolation: the actual corpse or pieces of someone's body, left with no name; the places of decease; the objects associated with the passing; and the mortuary rituals and monuments dedicated to the memory of those lost in battle.

Body remains, typically of young males, and cadavers strafed in combat are spread in a field or lying in a street, a ditch, along the tracks of railroads, or hanging from posts or trees, or shot against a wall, rolled inside palm mats, gathered in platforms, in a morgue room, piled up for incineration in the open air, or carried by wheelbarrows or trucks. Details show deformed silhouettes of burnt bodies, abandoned bones and skeletons, round-shaped eyes sticking out of the orbits of a decapitated head, features twisted in pain, expressionless faces in mortuary costumes. Some lie in coffins to be buried in a cemetery; others go to dissection, autopsy, or exhumation.

In some cases, parts of an anonymous body are the only remains left; other body remains become relics of recognised and admired owners. Some receive honorary afterlife treatments: funeral and memorial ceremonies; erection of monuments and altars, busts and facial mortuary masks, their personal belongings set up in a museum glass case; or in a sacred shrine, their names in public buildings, parks, or streets, etc. Not to mention the composition of musical pieces, artistic or literary expressions, cinematographic production, best-seller biographies, and inclusion as historical

characters in official textbooks. The field of study is large, yet none of the latter practices of commemorating the death will be mentioned further here.

The Fondo Casasola contains each of these images. Its richness, from general matters to punctual items' details, required imposing some criteria of registry and classification to describe the realities portrayed in the visual objects. The Fototeca Nacional recovered photographic material collected under certain order and logic by the brothers Casasola and their heirs. Next, using information left by the Casasola family, the Fototeca applied its own system of registration and classification to the collection. Some materials have been digitized and are available for research on digital media.

The whole system is complex, and checking the accuracy of the information provided by technical tags is an enormous task. Young graduates join a team of researchers working on updating and documenting those images. The work implies knowledge and recognition of items and persons, places, dates and epochs, roles and occupations, authorship and style, composition, aesthetic quality, and so on. Other things, like techniques to produce the image, material support, dimensions, state of preservation add information that single out features, clear doubts, and provide answers the image itself does not.

After becoming acquainted with the photographs, there is the titanic duty of recognising copies; close ups and originals from the same focus frame and lenses; shots that differ in angle, frame, and moment by the same author; and those that were taken by different lenses and authors who had the same objective in mind. Finally, we come to the sorting of cross-references in the technical tags. Perception and criteria play crucial functions: individual researchers who approach the Casasola legacy with an objective in mind help detect and correct mistakes, update data, and provide further accuracy to the catalogue and documentation of photographic registries and their technical tags.

Still, it is another type of perception and criteria that matters here. Out of the information provided by the Fototeca Nacional, it was necessary to build a database to depurate, filter, and detect potential cases for analysis. That is, the specific set of materials, chosen from a vast universe of images, narrowed down to a study case: the representation of military casualties, death, and political murder during the Mexican Revolution. The above descriptions already suggested the need to apply norms to delimit and select the photographic materials and topics of discussion that somehow involve the label "death" from the Casasola collection.

EXEMPLARY DEATHS

Death has been depicted everywhere since time immemorial. There are good explanations why some depictions became common, more central, increasingly useful, or the opposite: less relevant and sporadically forgotten in certain historical contexts. Those depictions were traced or sculpted on stone walls, ceramics, buildings, canvas, textiles, parchment, paper, or whatever material upon which the image of death could be stamped. Photosensitive materials joined the list from the first half of the nineteenth century onward, recovering old-aged *vanitas* and *memento mori* traditions by which artists emphasised the ephemeral character of life in general, and human life in particular. In Mexico and other Latin America countries, the posthumous portraits of infants and children who died a premature death gave rise to the *angelitos* funeral ritual tradition.[8]

So called mourning and mortuary portraits tended to idealise death in the walls and albums of elite families and those who could afford the price for a photographic studio to keep the memory of their beloved ones. Simultaneously, *postmortem* camerawork gained a place in educative, judicial, legal, and forensic usages; and soon, the photography of death found an open field in periodical journals. At the turn of the century, the rise of a civil war in Mexico offered vast sceneries that gave other meanings to funerary photography. It became a testimony bearing witness of facts that confirmed to people, then and now, the outcomes of war.

Photographs of the Mexican Revolution show violent deaths and the costs of armed confrontation, but the violence each image contains is of a different order. Some are explicit and others implicit; some are subtle, others crude. Yet, the focal point is the body, whether that body is present or not. This key difference first ordered the great variety of images of death during a war: if the body of a dead person, or its fragments in the least, is shown in "flesh" or not.

In each representational category (e.g., with or without corporal remains) further differences emerge. There are as many classificatory groupings as photographic information allows, and this depends on the question one posits upon an image. This very fact conditions the type of answers one can elaborate on when analysing a photograph. Here, the questions by which categories were delimited are about the correlation between the representation of death, civil war casualties, and political murder.

Images of witnesses around corporal remains are the most abundant. The witness type of photograph includes soldiers in custody of war prisoners to be executed or in the act of being shot. When the framing shows corporal remains, some images present bodies and carcasses--fresh or rotten, one or many. They are exposed to the public view, but nobody is around to look at them (see figure 1, figure 5). Another set of photographs depicts the opposite: witnesses and the dead. The corpses in these photographs may be whole or mutilated, dressed or naked, disregarded, gathered,

aligned, or wrapped up. Yet, they are being observed by someone--civilian, religious, or military--whether or not the faces of the dead, or those staring at the dead, are visible (see figure 2, figure 6).

Figure 1. Corpses of men lying on farmland.

Figure 2. Men and cart with remains of combatants.

When bodies or corporal remains are out of sight, the camera focuses on the customary treatment of death and grieving rituality under two modalities. Some photographs portray objects and personal belongings that substitute the corpse of the deceased, a practice occurring with identifiable deaths whose bodies were subtracted from the public view (see figure 3, figure 14). Many of these photographs have to do with charismatic and acclaimed leaders--intellectual, artistic, religious, political, or military. Closely related are the images of commemorations, ceremonies, and anniversaries around death (see figure 4, figure 7). Mourning festivities are mostly associated with well-known personalities.

Figure 3. Celso Ledezma and other men search the belongings of Madero and Pino Suárez.

Figure 4. Public servants in the monument to Obregón.

The differences described so far require a couple of additional remarks. One relates to the intentions and uses behind the representation of death. Photographs show a dead body or group of bodies displayed for the public gaze, which is why those photographs were possible in the first place. They register not only the death of someone, but also the purposes (or lack of them) of those who carelessly abandoned corporal remains (see figure 5) or made them ready for the view of others. A dead body works as a sentence, making it evident that death brings about messages of war, especially if a cadaver is displayed for people to view it (see figure 6, figure 8).

Figure 5. Cremated body besides pieces of foil.

Figure 6. Alfonso de la Huerta
executed by federal troops.

There are also the intentions the photographer envisioned when choosing the scenery and framing of the sight that would be shot. Such intentions are undeniably relevant. The photographer kept a record of both the casualties of civil war and the people involved in it, the register of those who experienced death themselves and those who viewed a dead person nearby and reacted to that image (see figure 7, figure 9). Reactions, including having corporal remnants (un)available to the public gaze and the public compensating for that lack through substitutions, thus become meaningful, verging on the reliquary function of both the ritual practice that accompanies funeral endeavors and the photographic image, particularly when it is the image of a loved one (see figure 8, figure 13).

Figure 7. Francisco Villa cries at
the tomb of Fracisco I. Mader.

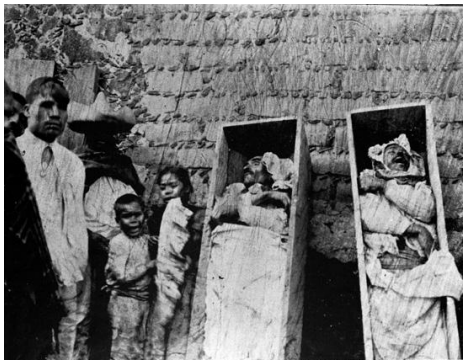

Figure 8. Shot by Zapatista troops in Ayotzingo.

However, a photographer is far from merely representing the events of death and disclosing different ways of reacting to it. One thing is the specificity of fatalities and rituals captured by a camera, the facts themselves (or raw data), and another is the composition of the death scene and where/how these images are exhibited (perception, appropriation, and consumption). In other words, we need more than the image to make sense of a photograph. As the photograph turns out to be one among many other primary sources, historical contexts gain weight.

Contrasts found in the way death is represented, in general and around certain characters, make it evident that some differences between images correspond to societal and contextual rankings: the value posited in public individuals and events under distinctive parameters that depend on times, places, social sectors, and of course, photographers. Those values are significant if one is to account for the reality shown in a photograph.

For instance, it is startling to find the same dead personality treated in rather opposite fashions: by displaying a decapitated head (see figure 9) or under funeral wreaths in the senate chamber (see figure 10). Similarly, recognised revolutionary leaders received divergent treatments.

The cadaver of some appears in a kind of angelical elegance (see figure 11), whereas the body of others is exposed, naked to the camera in a sort of distasteful reproach (see figure 12). Yet, years later the very same leader reappears in the national scene with the glory he was first denied. The former and the latter personalities were controversial characters, and so is their photographic registry.

Figure 9. Aureliano Blanquet´s head
exhibited in the Chamber of Deputies.

Figure 10. Military and deputies mount an honour guard around
the coffin of Aureliano Blanquet in the port of Veracruz.

Figure 11. Doctors who performed the autopsy on the body of Venustiano Carranza.

Figure 12. Corpse of General Francisco Villa, murdered in Parral, Chihuahua.

Two ideas linger vividly out of those contrasts: baring death as a punishment on the one hand, and the force of ceremonial healing on the other. In the first case, images are forceful, shocking, and intimidating because of the explicit body-punishment relationship and the straightforward message (bodies may even have labels attached so that witnesses recognise the dead person). As an exemplary death, the image of fatality aims to intimidate those who question the authority and strength of their opponent. In the second case, images diverge in the handling of death and corporeality, depicting the lack of a corpse or body remains. Spaces or objects show nothing implying murder, much less punishment. Or perhaps, and this is a keystone, that absence could be considered another sort of chastisement.

Similar patterns of representation with the absent dead body of national figures suggest such a possibility. No photograph of the cadaver of Francisco I. Madero (see figure 13) or Álvaro Obregón (see figure 14) was found in the Casasola collection, nor in any other collection under the Fototeca's custody. Both presidents were betrayed: Madero, the first democratically elected president, was killed during Victoriano Huerta's *coup d'état*; Obregón paid dearly for his attempt to

rule the country again, ignoring the fact that the Civil War had started in opposition to political re-election. At the time, a religious persecution campaign was launched by the government, inflaming animosity among the populace. Theirs was a political murder, another type of exemplary death, with their corporal absence being counteracted by the overwhelming presence of public mourning ceremonies.

Figure 13. People in the place where
President Madero was murdered.

Figure 14. Cutlery that Alvaro Obregón used
during the banquet where he was killed.

In the context of war, people confront life and death by expanding or nullifying the limits of the permissible. The image of death--a full flesh corpse or its complete absence, by direct experience or by watching a photograph--functions as a showcase; they are images of strength and power. To contemplate the pain and degradation of others nourishes the fear of suffering the same fate. The body is exposed to the public to produce a warning message, the chance an enemy may have to cause or spare death.

However, images of death also represent the possibility of waving the rewards of memoir, the administration of respect for the integrity and honour of those defeated. Subsistence, in other

words, is likely either as the potential to keep oneself alive or as the prospect of having oneself praised by historical memory and mournful rites that overcome historical silences. The sights of death--pain and degradation, torture and exhibition, failure and betrayal, muteness and oblivion--demonstrate the extraordinary permissions war gives to transform the logic of victimization into the "miracle of surviving."[9]

Not all deaths are exemplary, and some exemplary deaths are more meaningful than others, depending on whether the body can be identified, if the location and date can be determined, who or what surrounds the corpse, what is going on around the dead body scenery, why the photo was taken, and how it entered circulation. Authorship, intention, production-consumption form the core of what is called the “biography” of a visual document. Photographs contain part of that information. Another part depends on previous classification and tagging processes, and the last bit, on research being conducted under specific targets.

Death is just one among many topics we can deal with, but it is not the most popular, nor the more abundant theme in photographic registers. Much work still needs to be done with visual archives in Mexico, and everywhere, to enrich our understanding of historical events in the past. Any disciplinary approach would benefit from this and other primary sources of visual information.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Figure 1 Inventory: 643274 Title: Cadáveres de hombres tirados en un terreno de cultivo Place: Mexico City Date: 1915 Author: Not identified	**Figure 2** Inventory: 655691 Title: Hombres y carreta con restos de combatientes Place: Zacatecas, Mexico Date: 1914 Author: Not identified
Figure 3 Inventory: 674593 Title: Celso Ledezma y otros hombres revisan pertenencias de Francisco I. Madero y Pino Suárez Place: Mexico City Date: February 1913 Author: Casasola	**Figure 4** Inventory: 44198 Title: Funcionarios en el monumento a Alvaro Obregón Place: Mexico City Date: July 1943 Author: Casasola
Figure 5 Inventory: 643462 Title: Cuerpo incinerado junto a trozos de láminas Place: Mexico City Date: 1914 Author: Not identified	**Figure 6** Inventory: 46228 Title: Alfonso de la Huerta ejecutado por federales en Sonora Place: Sonora, México Date: July 1927 Author: Casasola
Figure 7 Inventory: 68174 Title: Francisco Villa llora ante la tumba de Francisco I. Madero	**Figure 8** Inventory: 63752 Title: Fusilados por tropas zapatistas en Ayotzingo

Place: Mexico City Date: December 1914 Author: Casasola	Place: Morelos, Mexico Date: 1913 Author: Casasola
Figure 9 Inventory: 40881 Title: Cabeza del Aureliano Blanquet exhibida en el puerto de Veracruz Place: Veracruz, Mexico Date: April 1919 Author: Casasola	**Figure 10** Inventory: 40900 Title: Militares y diputados montan guardia de honor alrededor del ataúd de Aureliano Blanquet en la Cámara de Diputados Place: Mexico City, Mexico Date: 1919 Author: Casasola
Figure 11 Inventory: 503497 Title: Médicos que le practicaron la autopsia al cadáver de Venustiano Carranza Place: Puebla, México Date: May 1920 Author: Casasola	**Figure 12** Inventory: 655854 Title: Cadáver del General Francisco Villa asesinado en Parral, Chihuahua Place: Parral, Chihuahua, México Date: July 1923 Author: Casasola
Figure 13 Inventory: 37399 Title: Personas en el lugar donde mataron al presidente Madero Place: Mexico City Date: February 1913 Author: Casasola	**Figure 14** Inventory: 45191 Title: Cubierto que utilizó Álvaro Obregón durante el banquete en que fue asesinado Place: Mexico City Date: July 1928 Author: Casasola

NOTES

1. Reproduction of photographs authorized by the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.*

2. Attali, Jaques (2004) *Historias del tiempo*. 1st reprint. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

3. Gómez Aiza, Adriana (2016) "Encuentros imaginarios" en A. Morales (coord.). *Culturas visuales en México. Reflexiones y estudios sobre la imagen*: 51-85. Mexico: Colofón, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo.

4. Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba, Ignacio (2010) *Prensa y fotografía durante la Revolución Mexicana*. [Introduction: 9-17], JM. Herrera (coord.). Mexico: Biblioteca Lerdo de Tejada, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público.

5. Ivins, William Mills Jr. (1975) *Imagen impresa y conocimiento. Análisis de la imagen prefotográfica*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.

6. Escorza Rodríguez, Daniel (2014) "*Tengo o hago la fotografía que Ud. Necesite". La fotografía de la agencia Casasola y el fotoperiodismo en México, 1912-1921*. PhD Thesis in History. Mexico: ENAH-INAH.

7. *Around the Army: Mexico's Unsung Revolutionaries* was the title of the photographic exhibit of a selection of 33 images from the Archivo Casasola. Any exhibition benefits from the message photograph containing and articulates that message in larger sentences or statements though a visual sample that helps narrate a history around particular topics and use that narrative in educational or informative contexts. *Around the Army* featured cultural values, distribution of wealth, ethnic segregation, territorial mobility, land reform, political behavior, and educational crusades at the time of the Mexican Revolution. The goal was to show how the contrasting reality and social exclusion people faced in their daily existence ignited the civil war and shaped the symbolic tokens of post-revolutionary nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century. The exhibit opened in the spring term of 2023 at William J. von Liebig Center for Science, Juniata College, with the support of the Fototeca Nacional.

8. Mandell, Elisa (2004) *The Birth of Angels: Posthumous Portraits of Infants and Children in Mexican Art*. PhD Thesis in Art History. California: UCLA.

9. Sontag, Susan (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador.