

# A Landslide of Images. A Story that is Not History 2014-2015\*

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## Resumen

Analysis of the way the protest movement triggered by the enforced disappearance and murder of students from Ayotzinapa was activated by the public impact of certain images and the creation of a public space of demonstration likewise constructed with images.

**Palabras clave:** Ayotzinapa, disappeared, protest, Mexico.

*When you criticise your country you are in fact criticising yourself*

Alejandro García Padilla  
Gobernador de Puerto Rico, 24.10.2015

\* The author has decided to not reproduce the images in this article. The text of this article is the revised form of a lecture given at “Simposio internacional: La imagen contemporánea: del espacio simbólico como hegemonía al espacio simbólico como problematización”, with the speakers Luis Camnitzer, Alfredo Jaar, Mari Carmen Ramírez, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz. Teatro de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras. Sunday, 25 October 2015, 9:00 am. - 6:00 pm. Since this lecture comments on images available from public media, images whose copyright status is unclear or complex, the reader is directed to the Internet to view them.

## 1. The incidents

On 26 September 2014 one of the most brazen violations of human rights on this continent occurred, triggering a period of confrontation and protest in Mexican society. The law enforcement authorities of the city of Iguala in the state of Guerrero used firearms to attack approximately a hundred students and activists from the Rural Normal School of Ayotzinapa, who had entered the city with the intention of commandeering a series of commercial buses to take them to the commemoration of the massacre at Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City in 1968.

This “hijacking” of transport units is part of a curious *modus vivendi*, where schools that have gone through a radical politicisation for decades maintain a constant negotiation with the authorities and a training of their students as political cadres by means of actions that are focused on various visible symbols of local capitalism [1]. This time, however, the routine degenerated into a ferocious and unprecedented massacre. The law enforcement authorities of Iguala used firearms to stop the students/activists. In the ensuing, extremely unequal confrontation, in which the students only had stones to defend themselves with, the police killed six persons in the street, including the members of a football team whose only mistake was to also have been in the city on

a bus. Not content with this aggression, the so-called enforcers of the law took 43 of the students as prisoners and made them “disappear” without any judicial record of their arrest. Since then, in the midst of a political crisis that has overwhelmed the structures of the federal government, and which put an end to the illusion of a neoliberal modernisation promised by the government of Enrique Peña Nieto, the assassinations of September 2014 and the enforced disappearance en masse of members of the staff from the Ayotzinapa Normal School, have provoked a political and moral crisis. This incident, without a doubt the greatest political crime that has occurred in Mexico since the bloody repression of the student movement in 1968, has also caused a profound crisis in the notions of justice and truth.

The case has exposed the monstrous judicial inefficiency and indifference affecting the country, which is experiencing a maddeningly paradoxical period of alleged economic growth compounded by a brutal intensification of inequality and insecurity. We have a combination characteristic of our times, where liberal reconversion coincides with the industrialisation of common graves and the increasing resort to violence for the control of territory, and where foreign investment in the maquiladoras [sweatshop factories] cultivates around them lands of death, femicide, and the identification of labour unemployment and murder. The routine of a formidable degradation, well summed-up by the figures cited in October 2015 by the High Commissioner of the United Nations when describing the human rights crisis in Mexico as truly exceptional for a country that, at least nominally, is not at war:

For a country that is not engaged in a conflict, the estimated figures are simply staggering: 151,233 people killed between December 2006 and August 2015, including thousands of transiting migrants. At least 26,000 people missing, many believed to be as a result of enforced disappearances, since 2007. Thousands of women and girls are sexually assaulted, or become victims of the crime of femicide. And hardly anyone is convicted for the above crimes (Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, 2015).

Which straw is the last straw? How can four dozen young people occupy a place, a face, weight, in the midst of this formidable arithmetic of indifference? To a large extent, because their case was activated by the infinite weight of several images. As increasingly occurs in the agitations of today’s social body, in the case of the students of Ayotzinapa the image acts as the agent of absolute evidence and interminable pain. The following comments explore some of the edges of this historical role, not because there is a lesson to be learned from what is, ultimately, an inexorable disgrace, but for the characteristic mode in which a certain politicisation of emotion is carried out nowadays by the mediation of all kinds of battles of images.

## **2. A sign underlined by its crossing-out**

The first image is horrible to the point of unbearableness, so much that I will only show it veiled, neutralising it sufficiently to make it possible to reflect on it [2]. In effect, this is an image whose evident intention is to annihilate the will and prevent reflection by burying its observers in an

intolerable vertigo of terror. What is interesting is that, in the case of the recent Mexican crisis, this expected result led to an unexpected scandal.

When the traces of the violence were still fresh from the day of the crime, between 11:00 pm and midnight of 26 September, the image of a sixth cadaver began to circulate through the Internet that was marked by an intolerable disfigurement [3]. Thrown into the street in plain view of everyone, positioned this way precisely so that it could be perceived as a legible sign, the assassins had left in an alley in Iguala the body of a student without a face. The image of this flayed victim, his gaze emerging from a mash of bones and blood, immediately entered a place whose name in this context acquires an ironically insulting significance: Facebook. Indeed, this “book of faces” had become the home of a face without a face, and in a place that had been designed for the exchange of banalities and flirts, and which the victim himself had used for this purpose, it was his wife, the mother of a two-month old baby, Marissa Mendoza, who recognised him exposed in a virtual and indecent morgue. The statement made by Marissa to the press upon recognising the body of her husband contains sensitive edges that have to be registered in all of their turmoil:

Various photographs were uploaded on the Internet, on Facebook, among them, the one of Julio César. Then, since I recognised his clothes, recognised part of his body and everything, I discovered that it was him. [...] I felt very sad that I would never see Julio César again and many images came to me, like if I had been there with him at the moment when they did that to him, that they removed his face entirely, while he was alive, torturing him in the cruellest manner, because he did not have any bullet holes, only many blows, on his chest, his waist, his hands (Arteaga, 2014)

A seeing that surpasses seeing; a body deformed in order to convert it into a trigger of “many images”.

This image, impossible to see and to not see, whose authorship has not been claimed at all (neither that of the assassination and mutilation, nor that of the photographs of the body), penetrated in the last days of September 2014 the minds and bodies of those of us who saw it on all types of websites in a paradoxical operation: It fell to Julio César Mondragón, the flayed student, to give a face to the thousands of victims without a face, and to mobilise society to finally recover some of those faded faces. There are innumerable acts, blankets, sayings, counter-images, that in one way or another have attempted to symbolically and politically recover this stolen face. Often in a self-conscious manner, superimposed on blankets or murals, the agent of protest has been conceived as a reinstatement of this empty face: as the new “face” to fill the space of this stolen face, of this absent sign. That is how powerful the plea of this image was.

What is hardest to conceive, however, are the conditions of this ominous sign: How the elaboration of that extremely painful sign was derived from the interference between a series of communication systems that never would have imagined themselves operating in the public sphere. In June 2015 Mondragón’s face was still the subject of controversy, because the

local forensic authorities from the state of Guerrero attempted to explain the flaying as a post mortem occurrence caused by “harmful fauna that is found in the location”, a version of the events immediately rejected by the indignation of the family members, the students, and the social movement (Petrich, 2015). The response to this investigation, nevertheless, uncovered a catastrophic fact: The seriality of the flaying, the multitude of cases where in effect the determining mark of an abandoned cadaver in Guerrero and other Mexican states was its missing face. The belonging of this gesture of torture and disfigurement to a game of repetition and differentiation of a communication code.

As I have had to note elsewhere: “Every death has a multiplier effect. For this reason, the executions do not have the victim as their only addressee. They are and they establish a perverse system of communication” (Medina, 2009, p. 20). As intolerable as it may be for us, there is more than enough evidence that leaving flayed cadavers is a more or less frequent form of messaging between, or from, the criminal groups that have gradually been taking control of the routes and regions of this bloodied country called Mexico. It is not the only message, nor an unarticulated message, like a scream: Removing the face of an enemy is only one component of a repertoire, one letter of an open alphabet that has regional variations, group dialects, imitative and exclamatory forms, punctuation, spelling mistakes, and even underlinings. All around Mexico bodies appear every day that, in one or another way, operate as signs, as messages and, we could say, as necro-grams of terror. Often they are accompanied by what the press calls “narco [drug trafficker] messages”, written on cloth, paper, or vinyl, wrapped around, holding, or pointing at bodies or parts of bodies, in a communicational link where the cadaver is simultaneously the illustration of a saying, a cryptogram of the implied, or a sign of exclamation and emissary. This continuous flow of messages naturally spreads through a variety of communication media, following a logic that José Alejandro Restrepo already referred to some time ago when discussing the keys of the Baroque and Counterreformation tradition of images, the “grammar of the bodies” of the Columbian violence after 1950:

From the Baroque period to our present era of the “society of spectacle” we are witness to the indisputable triumph of the image and of the prominence of the body with its tremendous power of seducing the masses. (Restrepo, 2006, pp. 19-21)

As repugnant as it might seem to us, accustomed to the comforting hypothesis that the bodies of the dead are emissaries of silence, those marked, inscribed, lacerated, mutilated bodies, which the executors deposit on our streets, respond to an agreed-upon logic, a code reinforced by its repetition. Those who tortured, assassinated, and disfigured Julio César Mondragón intended to leave him plainly in sight as a grotesque artefact, an embodied image, that had two objectives at least: employ a code for which we lack the key, addressed to other assassins, members of the police, and Mafiosi, perhaps the members of one or another mafia group, at the same time as to have a local public effect: spread and expand terror, establish a territoriality, define the sovereignty over the city of Iguala, a sovereignty that the assassinated students and disappeared victims apparently disobeyed in a certain manner, without precisely knowing what they had done.

The function of these signs is to communicate and silence. In this case, as the recent report by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (GIEI) from September 2015 claims, a probable explanation for the ferocity of the attack against the students is that they had hijacked, without knowing it, a bus employed by the drug traffickers for transport to the north of the country, and this death signifies the punishment for breaking an iron law.

Yet this sign, being linguistic, floats and is re-inscribed. If the assassinated and “disappeared” students were victims of a tragedy caused by a deadly misunderstanding (of applying the techniques of political and ideological protest, the protocols of a relationship with “the bourgeois state”, to a space now controlled by a mafia that has become the state, where drug trafficking and government authorities have fused, where the rule of law has been replaced by the constant exhibitionism of force), then reciprocally, in a new grammar the acts of criminal violence are transformed into an unexpected context. This victim/image intended to instil local silence and terror has produced an magnifying effect: it is re-inscribed as politicisation, as indignation, as scandal, as protest. It turns into the sign-summary of the state of things, whose explosion displaces, in expanding waves, the entire political-police structure.

### 3. Omnivideo

We have entered an era where being socially connected entails the omnipresence of the electronic record, via the control of our economic, spatial, intellectual, and emotional interactions by electronic imperial espionage, and the progressive transformation of the world into a permanent video set. Hardly an act exists that is not recorded, at least its shadows, in some moving image. The result of this hyper-connectivity is paradoxical: due to logistic error, technological circularity, or civil counter-espionage, acts of corruption and violence as well as historical falsifications carried out by governments and corporations are continually being exposed in networks and in the media. Occasionally the panopticom traps its own inventor and the records of vigilance, in what could be termed a “Watergate” effect, lead to a general political crisis. They can convert themselves into a potent political catalyst.

In this line, it is fitting to add a second image, similarly re-inscribed, also full of hidden nooks, much less frightening, but no less perverse. It is, in all aspects, a much more simple image: a video surveillance that, as occurs all around the world, did not capture in flagranti the law-breaking citizen, but the authorities.

Around 5 October 2014, a week after the massacre and the disappearances, the media and the social networks emitted a series of fleeting images. The sequence from a video surveillance camera only lasts a few seconds and captures the rapid passing of the vehicles of the Iguala municipal police transporting, at full speed, some of the disappeared students in their pick-ups. The image reveals its remote and non-human character in its mechanical movement, the brusque manner in which the camera, remote-controlled, follows the path of the police vehicles at full speed. Beyond the stories, before the students who were attacked or their leaders were

able to begin articulating their own (and occasionally complex and thus slippery) version of the events, or the parents of the disappeared aroused the protest movement, this video triggered a second shock. As though the addressee of the digital photograph could not be a manipulable being, the video has become a practically irrefutable testimony: its effect is to multiply the sighting, to transform spectators into witnesses, to transport itself as a metaphor (and never more appropriately, thrown from outside the forum) of the civil eye. In the brief second that it captures, in effect, the students being moved by the police, this video establishes in a definitive manner the responsibility of a state crime: beyond any kind of legal or political accusation, it corroborates the public guilt of an enforced disappearance and the hecatomb of the massive moral collapse of the system of political parties.

What made this remote witnessing special was its political correlative. Behind those municipal police who “disappeared” the students, and probably turned them over to the assassins, was a local government that had originated from a leftist party. José Luis Abarca, a local jeweller, had reached the local mayorship of Iguala propelled by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD, Party of the Democratic Revolution), the organisation that arose from the electoral fraud committed against Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1988. Suddenly, the party that had espoused the electoral premises of the left from 1980 to 2000 (and which had identified democratic transition with the advancement of popular causes), seemed at one stroke to be nullified, seemed an accessory to the massacre as well as the embodiment of the amalgamation of state and mafia. That Abarca and his wife had had themselves photographed with all types of politicians, including President Peña Nieto, from the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Revolutionary Institutional Party), was the moral coup de grâce for the entire political apparatus, which had joined together to promote the neo-liberal reforms of 2013 and from then on in the public eye had symbolised the fusion of state and mafia popularly known as the narco-estado [drug trafficker-state].

In the public eye a rapid synthesis was made that naturally did not appear solely in the form of images, but also in words, stories, and a militant hate towards the police. To the horror of those of us from a social-democratic background, in one of the first demonstrations the student militants attacked Cárdenas and one of the leading critical intellectuals of the country, the former Trotskyist Adolfo Gilly. The ethos of the protests in 2014-2015 oscillates between the civil, anti-political party scepticism of a section of the disillusioned middle class, and an anarchism addicted to the violent outbreaks and physical clash of the proletarian youth masses. This hotchpotch, united with the Zapatistas’ promotion of a digna rabia [dignified anger], drives the protest movement to continuous coalition and friction between the agendas of social mourning and the assertion of human rights on the one side, and on the other of the expectation of revolutionary subversion or at least of social and symbolic retribution. A rupture that in the long run will dilute and fragment the protest movement, polarised between the so-called “pacifist demonstrators” and those who claim the clash with the police as “free expression”. All of this fanned by the irresponsible and strategic use of force, the jailing of militants, and the counter-insurgency of the national and local authorities.

In any case, all of this process ends up being condensed in another image: This time in the form of an action-text. On 22 October 2014, in the midst of the ferment of demonstrations that combined pacifist and discursive sectors with contingents addicted to the physical clash, and under the permanent threat of police repression, a group until then anonymous, and which today claims to be part of the collective “Rexiste” [Resist], carried out an action with paintings and candles in the Zócalo, the main public square of Mexico City. In a tightly coordinated action they occupied the southeast corner of one of the largest and most important political squares in the world, in order to write in giant capital letters no less monumental a slogan that was hoisted as a civil verdict: “FUE EL ESTADO” [It was the State] (“RexisteMX, 2014). A prickly, productive, and dangerously ambivalent phrase that operates, the same as the disappeared students, like a pivot-concept, like a floating signifier, like a foundational sequence. Because on the one hand it specifies, rejecting the denial of the State’s judicial apparatus, the conviction already verified by the video from Iguala: The 43 students of Ayotzinapa were the victims of a crime of state par excellence, a crime without statute of limitations: the enforced disappearance. Yet, on the other hand, in a confusion – also theoretical – that reinforces the refusal of the judicial apparatus to realise a credible investigation, the phrase bolsters the social conviction that the crime was organised by a conspiracy at the highest level, a direct action of the presidency and possibly of the army. It transforms into a fact, perhaps against the available evidence, but which can once again be put into a circulation in broad sectors of society, the necessarily vague, politically unspecific, demagogically unquestionable idea of the assumed “ethical obligation” of the revolt.

Is there an alternative? Perhaps to follow in these phrases expressing the inexpressible, what at one point Diego Tatián suggested for Argentina: that statements such as “found alive” and “thou shall not kill” “are not reductive statements, but rather are able to present the unrepresentable, designate the decantation of a common pain that in no way can be expressed but in this manner.” (Tatián, 2007, p. 83)

#### 4. Objects and glimmers of an absence

I have attempted with hesitant steps (partly due to the difficulty of digesting an experience that has still not faded away) to put into words part of the indisputable impulse that images can have in activating, by means of emotions as diverse as the horror before pain, the scandal of evidence, or the suture of identification, the social body.

With paint, printed materials, laser projections, graffiti, as well as with images projected in the street, the marches and clashes that have punctuated the activity of sombre protest at the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015 have been populated by words, images, and ghosts. The names of streets in the city have been substituted by names alluding to the disappeared and students, the protests are activated by interventions with signs and slogans emitted by laser, and the demonstrators traverse the public space with effigies of the disappeared, just like with national flags shrouded in the black of mourning. Aside from the songs and choruses, the shouts and

“roll calls”, there is a constant interference of body-images, acts-signs, politicised numerals. Contrary to common sense, in these demonstrations there is no distinction between virtual reality and physical reality, to the extent that space and so-called hyperspace are linked into a single space of representation. One has the sense that the physical space of the march is duplicated in the emissions of the social networks, and therefore the demonstration itself behaves like the evanescent walking surface for the electronic messages of the universal screen of our telephones and computers. This was a space of demonstrating that is transformed, multiplied, technified: the correlation to a society where the lives of the bodies and the circulation of images are flows linked by a multitude of mediations and constituted by the figure of the glimmer.

This figure of the physical and virtual character of the agitational process is demonstrated by the new grammar of the monument. In April 2015, seven months after the enforced disappearances, the passage of bodies and voices not only left behind murmurs and demands. In total secrecy, while a demonstration was taking place, a group that decided to remain anonymous occupied a particularly notorious corner of the Boulevard de Avenida Reforma in order to plant a metallic monument three metres high, made of steel painted red. Designated by its own creators as an “anti-monument”, the gesture remains standing in the public street, without official authorisation, the synthetic advertisement of the social networks. A sign framed in the synthesis of the hashtag: “+43” inserted itself in the same boulevard that contains various of the country’s most important monuments and sculptures, an avenue that serves, in its way, as the altar of patriotic history. The metallic graft, which ultimately has had to be respected by the authorities because of pressure from citizens and intellectuals to preserve it, was not a mute sign: It was accompanied by a manifesto distributed, not surprisingly, via Internet, that digital labyrinth that, augmented into the immaterial public square, has become the theoretical hypertext of any act of public significance:

If a monument refers to a past event that is necessary to grasp (in Latin momentum means “remember”), the project +43 is the construction of an “Anti-monument” because it does not aspire to perpetuate memory, but to alter the perception that an incident is immovable. +43 can be defined as a permanent protest and demand for justice from the State in public space. +43 aims to demand attention from passers-by who cross through the area daily. It is an Anti-monument because it is a transgression and a demand from the State that wants to forget – and wants us to forget! – the terrible reality of the daily violence that it subjects us to and that has taken the lives of more than 150,000 people and has made more than 30,000 +43 disappear. [...] +43 is an Anti-monument because it is destined to be removed when the State explains the more than 150,000 homicides and returns alive the more than 30,000 + 43 disappeared. (Communiqué of the Antimonumento, 2015)

We are not in the territory of art but in that of the overflowing passions of the public sphere: in an interchange of faces always harried by the possibility that the observer decides to join those as “one more.” Naturally, a mobilisation is not made by a series of visual objects, but by bodies and the signs that traverse those bodies. Yet even so, it appears to me to be difficult to argue against one of the characteristics of the mobilisations that traverse the grave social crisis of Mexico of this decade, is the ascertainment of the clashes of the visual imagination and the dispute to



control this space of intervention. The setting-into-motion of a political field inhabited by ghost effigies.

## Notas

1 The best and more trustworthy account of the incident is offered by the “Informe Ayotzinapa” [Ayotzinapa Report] prepared by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts named by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

2 The journalist Blanche Petrich reported: “This terrifying image began to circulate in the early hours of the morning, before the Public Ministry of Iguala arrived at the place where the body was to realise a first visual inspection and to remove the cadaver. The crime was presumably committed in a dirt road near a Coca-Cola warehouse and a tennis court, a place known as the Callejón del Andariego. The police report registered the hour of the discovery as 9:55 am. It is not known that the police of the state of Guerrero or the Federal police conducted a cybernetic investigation to trace the photograph’s path through the social networks. As regards the hour when the image was uploaded to the social networks, the adolescent brother of Julio César, Lenin Mondragón, was, according to the testimony of his uncle Cuitláhuac, the first to realise that his brother was dead, recognising his shirt, his scarf, and his hands in the photograph of the flayed youth. It was the morning when the rest of the family still nursed hopes that the young man was still alive.” (Petrich, 2015)

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