

From the Prehispanic Codices to the Engravings Inspired by Poems

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Abstract

This article debates the importance of shaping a community's identity and the artist's identity within one culture starting from the Prehispanic pictograms - where the sense allows itself to be discovered as the image is internalized, this double sense being similar to the reading of the works of Mexican artists Jose Guadalupe Posada, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo similar to the engraving of the poems of Nichita Stănescu by Mircea Dumitrescu.

Keywords: codex, engraving, identity, duality, Jose Guadalupe Posada, transdisciplinarity

„Between drawing and writing, the limit is so instable,
that sometimes you do not dare to pronounce yourself”
J. G. Fevrier, *The Origins of Writing*

Regarding the ritual discourse of the old Mexicans, a special place is taken by the semantic synonymy, within the Nahua culture, of *huehuetlahtolli*, the word inherited by Tradition, from the old times, and *neltiliztli*, the „truth” (1), meaning „stability”, „establishment”, „rootedness” (2). The concept of truth also means the unseparated view on things, bringing them together, the agreement, underlying, in the same time, „funcția de legătură” (3) between nowadays and the old times. Hereby, *neltiliztli*, the truth, corresponds to the hereditary knowledge and also to the assertive character of the people, meaning that the masters of tradition and also the Mexican well-known researchers like Miguel-Leon Portilla and Patrick Johansson shared and reflected upon.

Through the codices it has been passed over the Prehispanic cosmivision, having as a generator principle the duality Ometeotl, the masculine and feminine energy existing in all that has been created. The emergence of one world has as basis the idea of death through sacrifice of foundation and as experience received from the ancestors, transmitted through the oral tradition, pictograms and traditional dances and rituals.

The narration of one event implies the story of that event *as if it happened* in that particular way, suggesting a crossing of the intentionality of fiction and history, one borrowing from the other, combining therefore the legibility and the visibility in the historical representation in a similar way between the characteristic of the metaphor „to set before our eyes” (in the sense used by Aristotle) and the persuasion of the rhetoric a bridge is created between what Paul Ricoeur names „the living metaphor” and “the existence of the things”. (4) In our terms, between the identity and the rhetoric of the identity (its discursive representations) the contact is created by the ritual, the initiated reading.

We understand the reading of the codex, on one hand, and the reading of the levels of reality and of the reality „remodelate prin scris” (5), on the other hand, from a much larger perspective, of transdisciplinarity, based on the ontological postulate (the Level of Reality of the Object and the Levels of Reality of the Subject, and the Hidden Third as a crossroad between the flow of information and the flow of consciousness), the logical level (the included third as mediator between the levels of reality) and the epistemological level (the open unity of knowledge based on values: tolerance, solidarity and wonderment). Thus, the Prehispanic codices and the book brought by the Spanish monks belong to different levels of representation and reality, to a certain context and have specific laws of organization.

The passing from non-verbal language to knots, notches and written signs to the pictograms represents a journey of the written memory of mankind with the goal of its establishment, settling in un-forgetfulness. Marcel Detienne, analyzing the way in which the “mythical thinking” of the old Greeks understand the term of truth (*aletheia*), observed that, within the pre-philosophical, poetical, prophetic scheme, there is a strong bond between truth and memory, and their opposite is not the untruth thing, the false of the sentences, but the forgetfulness (*lethe*). That is the way in which the truth of the prophet or the truth of the poet (being often one and the same), of the mythological and cosmological story, world-founder from *illo tempore*, is not for a moment a subject to doubt, through them, the truth is to be known to the world, saving it from forgetfulness. (6)

In order to interpret carefully the Prehispanic pictograms, we should consider, from the beginning, the fact that the pictogram „notează experiența, nu și limbajul”. (7) The Prehispanic codices do not have a guide to explain the meanings of the images and colors. The disciples receive a poor explanation, being encouraged to meditate by themselves, to value the image in their interior, to let it work inside. In the same way, the authentic content, the essence of the oral tradition cannot be recorded, neither to write it down entirely in order to serve to the next generations. Everything is transmitted through word of mouth, through practicing the memory, in the right moment for each stage in which the human is being transgressed, in terms of age, aperture and its apprehension.

The pictograms must be read together with other complementary documents, which decode the significance of the things transmitted with the help of the image.

The fieldwork of the anthropologists registers with the aim to conserve the customs, beliefs, traditions that are facing extinction giving birth to the research theme that proves the richness of the culture, the cultural neighborhood that establishes with others cultures, the differences, the uniqueness etc. But for the tradition, when these costumes are not transmitted through word of mouth to another generation, they lose their

truth (in the sense of establishment within the life of community) or camouflage under new forms, simplified or even profane, familiars, as Mircea Eliade observed. (8)

The sacred wrapping in codices represents the offering and the knowledge needed for the human being to connect to the divine energies. There is a ritual wrapping, a phrase that describes, in our opinion, the sense of *actuar-reflexionar* – “to act – to reflect“, where the act of reflecting upon means „a împături asupra sine însuși” (9) – specific to the Prehispanic and traditional knowledge, a concept-of-power that reflects the duality under the diverse forms of manifestation. The knowledge of the meaning, folded and unfolded, at the same time, represents the introversion of the message, a journey that everyone covers in a different way in order to reach its meanings. The reading of the sacred book represents a journey to the depth of the message, in the sense of „creșterii minții ca loc al înțelegerii și al asimilării”. (10)

For a representation to be understood, the awareness of the ritual connection between the viewer and the one-that-let-himself-be-seen is necessary. All the pictograms and the stylized drawings are deciphered with the help of the ritual discourse that accompanies it. The Prehispanic traditional culture confers more attention to the ritual discourse, under the form of *huehuetlahtolli*, discourses learnt by heart and uttered in different circumstances, on different themes, just like the theme of death, discourse that „v-au fost lăsate, vă sunt încredințate de bărbății și de femeile de demult, au fost înfășurate cu grijă, înmagazinate în măruntaiele voastre, în gâtlejurile voastre”. (Codexul florentin, VI 35). (11)

Tlamatini, the one who mastered the knowledge of the signs of the codices, was working in harmony with *tlacuilli*, the painter, balancing and trying a correspondence between words and colors in order to transmit the sacred message, within the Nahua culture, according to the masters of tradition, like José Ascencio Islas Hernández, who continues nowadays the reading of the codices. The introversion of the message is linked to the attentive listening of what the text and color have to say to each one of the readers of the specific reality.

Maintaining the knowledge of the entire civilization, through a complex codification, the codices were created until XVIIIth century, two centuries after the invasion of the Spanish, by a *tlacuilo* who refused to sign his name on the codex he made, because there was the belief that the entire knowledge represented belongs to the entire community (12).

In the Codex Borgia, there is a representation of the Earth, a snake in the right side and another in the left side, but if you pay attention (13), there is only one snake that looks towards us, it is that understanding that unifies any image of the duality and, ultimately, any representation (which brings back or which recognizes).

The way of initiation implies a paradoxical experience. André Scrima interprets the presence of the image of the shell of the snail, identified above the entrance to the cell from Antim, to be in analogy, in the sense of the itinerary, of the introversion of the cell’ space by the monk, which is inside him, carried by him . (14)

The image of the shell as folding up and unfolding from where the divine energies come out (The Anthropomorphic Figure, The National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City) is similar to the one mentioned by André Scrima and to be found at Kahrye Djami, where the sky, and therefore, the cosmos, enfolded as a roll, and

the book, written inside and outside and sealed, are in a „conatural” relation within this duality of folding up and unfolding of the creation, within the potential and manifestation. (15)

The duality is reflected in the structure of the Prehispanic codices, their *laminae* are folded up as a harmonica, written on both sides, with the clear intention of a ritual unfolding from left to right, from the centre to the edges, the framing of the signs while it is read. When the Spanish came, the way of representation changed, transforming the codex in an illustrated book, where the decoding of the message through the accompanying text deprives the lector from the personal and necessary effort to interiorize the message, the colours.

In tlilli in tlapalli, (“in black and red”) the way the codices were known in the Prehispanic period, „Codex Dresdensis, Codex Peresianus, Codex Troano, Codex Cortesianus” are „pictate pe foi îndoite ca niște paravane” (16). After the conquest, the codices continued to be realized from „corteza del arbol llamado amate”. (17)

Analyzing the portrait of *tlacuilo* from the Prehispanic period, Perla Valle observed the fact that this started from the preparation of the bark surface of *amate* and the marking of the lines, applying with skillfulness the colors, obtained from the mineral pigments, among the colors they used, „el azul llamado matlalli, el amarillo y el bermellon, ademas de la tinta fina que se obtenia de aceche (o aceite de vitriolo) o del negro de humo”. (18)

The majority of the Prehispanic codices have been destroyed, in the sense of burning the establishing memory, of the truth of the civilization in order to subjugate, the place of Prehispanic culture being occupied by the images of the catholic religion. The themes of the Prehispanic codices were diverse, from the geographic position to history, ceremonies, calendar and the divine energies. After the meeting of the two cultures, another type of codex appeared, a mixed one, combining glyphs, letters, numbers and images of Catholic religion. (19)

The codices of Borgia type are codices that belonged to the collector Stefano Borgia who saved from extinction a lot of documents of Prehispanic origin. The name of the codices, as we know nowadays, do not have anything to do with their content, but with the place where they were discovered or with the name of the presumed finder, and few of them describe, in a certain degree, the content. (20)

One of the codices with a historical theme, Telleriano-Remensis (a codex that belongs to the Nahua culture) and Huichapan (codex otomi), of colonial origin, represent the passage from the representation specific to the native world to the representation of the world of the conqueror, with its own system of representation; one of the colonial codices presents the native’s inserts in order to „dar a sus pueblos un lugar – un buen lugar – en el mundo y el regimen que les habian sido impuestos”, (21) the author opposed the linear time of the Spanish to the circular one of the Prehispanic, where the periods of 52 years „se empalman y sobreponen”, repeating the elements of the previous year in the following stage. (22) With the arrival of the Spanish, the size, the content started to change and, of course, the page settings of the visual elements.

According to Joaquin Galarza, the intent to evangelize the natives was possible also with the help of the image of so-called “Testerian manuscripts”, realized by native *tlacuilo*, „sistema mixto inventado o descubierto por ellos”, (23) creating pictograms through which the doctrine of the Catholic religion was represented on codices, a thing

not so easy to create, taking into consideration the fact that there were difficulties on both sides: the Spanish people had to learn Nahuatl and the native, Spanish and Latin, some of them following the evangelizing lesson, using and making the analogy with the Prehispanic representations. (24)

José Guadalupe Posada (1852 – 1913), Mexican engraver, realized an essential recovery of the skull symbol, after its camouflage for 300 years under the form of Franciscan skull. The natives identified themselves profoundly with his engraving, because it created a bond with the Prehispanic period and it was also a meditation upon the Mexican identity, as in painting was accomplished by Diego Rivera, where Catrina was represented in *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (*Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Central Park*, 1946-1947), and in writing, in “The Labyrinth of Solitude” by Octavio Paz.

Paraphrasing the title of one story written by Edmundo Valadéz, „La muerte tiene permiso” („Death has permission”), death retakes its place in the Mexican life imaginary as part of its profound identity. Through the symbols of the skull and skeleton, Posada creates a language of a new mythology of the imaginary characters or from real life where passions and vices are being exorcised through laughing.

Thus, through the reading of the engraving, a decoding different from that of the codex is necessary, but in the sense of re-conquest of the place of the Mexican people within their own cultural space.

Using the expression of Juan Larrea, death becomes “national totem” (25), in Mexican culture, through which the entire force of the people and, in the same time, the ancestors’ memory are asserted. Thus, the nation is a concept-in project, meaning that it is always „en proceso de llegar a ser”, having as a central symbol, in Mexican case, the death. (26)

At one level of understanding the Posada engravings, choosing the skull as an emblematic image to represent the Mexican world has to do with the context of the year Posada was born, when there was an epidemic of plague that killed a lot of people, as Agustín Sánchez González observed, having a profound historical connotation.

At another level of understanding, Posada represents, through his works, a new type of reading of Mexican identity, of whereness, of the intimate relation with death, „que se mueve entre lo reverente y lo burlesco” (27) expression of the process and ritual scheme of the representations: from the Prehispanic cosmogony reflected in codices, passing through the moralistic meaning imposed by the Catholic religion brought by the Spanish people, after the clash of the cultures, and *reconquista*, this regaining brought by Posada, who retakes the ancestral meaning and also brings the clear distance from the conqueror’s religion.

Between the two levels of representation and reality – the Prehispanic one and the Catholic one - which show two different visions, there is a tension that it is solved through the third inclusive of the identity discourse of the representations of Posada.

Just like Frida Kahlo creating her identity through the multiplication of her portrait in different aspects, creating in the same time the alterity, the double, the duplication, „la posibilidad de escapar de su unicidad”, (28) but also the fulfillment in that twinning of the two realities (one in potentiality and another one, actualized) which is, in her case, under the sign of death, the double being „el núcleo fundamental de

cualquier representación concerniente a la muerte”, according to Edgar Morin (*L’homme et la mort*). (29)

The identity of a culture, reflected through the codices, the identity of one nation, reflected through the totem of death in the engravings of Posada, in the painting of Rivera and the writings of Octavio Paz and the artistic identity of Frida Kahlo, all of them have as basis, a reading of the reality on different levels, being always connected with the idea of establishment and truth, a paradoxical state of continuous searching and assertion of the dualities existence-death, I-the other. If the first level is about the identity of the community, in the sense of intersubjectivity, the second level of reading belongs to the identity of the artist, to his/her link with the entire collectivity in the sense of reverberation and self construction through this duality of the look of the creator and of what is created through understanding.

The artistic identity, on the other hand, is understood as an identity sign of the nation which talks with the other identity signs. The self-portraits of Frida Kahlo and the entire work of Diego Rivera, with a profound understanding of Prehispanic and Mexican vision, have a direct link to the permanent construction of the national identity.

The representation of the ironic and satiric lyrics named the “calaveras” reflects this reading-in-dialogue of the writing and the image like in “La Catrina” and “La Calavera garbancera”. It is an encoding under the image of the message and the understanding developed in writing. The graphic aspect in the works of Posada, according to Felix Baez-Jorge, is accompanied by a philosophical aspect.

Retaking one of Edmundo Valadéz’ title, „Death has permission”, the character represented by Posada under the skeleton and skull form is dead, therefore is allowed to talk about him as a dead person. On the eve of Days of the Dead, in México, „sacan calaveras, sacan versos, burlando, festejando la persona que supuestamente murió”. (30) This symbolic death of a person alive, through irony and satire happens in a specific period and through two elements in dialogue: the engraved drawing and the written word.

An important study about **José Guadalupe Posada** is, without doubt, *La afrodita Barbuda: Literatura plástica en la perspectiva antropológica* written by Felix Báez Jorge, first of all because it observes the fact that the work of Posada must be known in order to understand the Mexican identity, the Mexican mentality. (31)

The works of the artist Mircia Dumitrescu, from the series *Nichita, Today*, inspired by the poems of Nichita Stănescu, are not meant to represent the word through image, in a tautological way, but to communicate through the engraving the atmosphere that his poetry imprints and transfers through a profound level of understanding, unseen by the uninitiated reader: the one that rises from its own poetical laboratory, from the *viva voce* that the poet used to practice.

Mircia Dumitrescu, The Series „Nichita Azi” (1982-2008), I – XXVIII, wood engravings, d.m./ d.h. 35cm x 200cm.

Licence website: http://mircia.ro/?page_id=255.

The Prehispanic codices and the works of José Guadalupe Posada, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo contribute to the construction of the identity of one culture, to its

foundation and truth, and also to the identity of the artist acknowledged in his/her community.

The reading of the codex and the reading of the engravings and the artistic works demand the acquaintanceship with an alphabet, an approach of reading of these works and with the reality they represent, in other terms, the codex and the works mentioned here demand an initiative look in reading and re-reading.

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