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**THE SEMIOSPHERE
OF THE HERO IN THE
ARTWORK**

**“THE REVOLUTION”
BY FABIÁN CHÁIREZ**

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Abstract: In the present work, we seek to problematize how the figure of the national hero, when resignified from a different perspective than the traditional one, creates controversy within the social and personal imaginary, because official discourses and the hegemony of values are at stake. The case study is the painting *La Revolución* (2014) by the Mexican artist Fabián Cháirez who makes a bold proposal of Emiliano Zapata, leader of the Liberation Army of the South during the Mexican revolution movement at the beginning of the 20th century. Likewise, a comparison will be made of said work with political caricature, an artistic expression that rethinks the way of seeing characters and public institutions. The methodology is with the help of the semiotics of culture and Yuri Lotman's semiosphere model. The theoretical framework is based on the contributions of C.S. Peirce, E. H. Carr and Andrés Ortiz-Osés to better understand the functioning of the categories of semiosis, history and hero within discourses in society.

Keywords: Semiosphere, hero, signification, art, Emiliano Zapata, Fabián Cháirez.

INTRODUCTION

National heroes are instrumental for the shaping of a State, since they allow for emblematic characters of the historical path to be immortalized and flaunted by the population, which leads to a way of social regulation that fosters a collective identity around its actions and attributes.

Each country constructs its heroes based on its own context: From the events which ascertain it as a nation peculiar individuals rise who, according to their roles and actions in specific moments, made a fundamental change in the conditions of that territory.

The following document focuses on Mexico, a democratic country which has undergone various historical stages: As

part of the Mesoamerican territory until it was conquered in the 16th century by the Spaniards and was transformed into a colony. On the first part of the 19th century it declared its independency, and at the beginning of the 20th century a civil war took place in response to a dictatorial regime. In each of these episodes, various national heroes appeared; one of them is Emiliano Zapata.

Zapata is one of the most iconic Mexican heroes, his image has been portrayed for a century as a reflection of combat and endurance; but at the end of 2019, an art piece: "La Revolución" by the Mexican plastic artist, Fabián Cháirez, captured the revolutionary leader from a different perspective, causing a shock for his most faithful followers, which caused social mobilizations and intervention by the Mexican authorities.

In the first part of the text, the concept of the hero will be described, its relationship with the myth and how it brings together identity and values within a social imaginary based on the role of History. Subsequently, a contextual framework will be made about Emiliano Zapata, the actions he carried out during the Mexican Revolution, his public image and the function that the State has had to make him a national hero.

Within the third part, the case study of Fabián Cháirez is exposed, the methodology to be used will be from the semiotics of culture, with the help of the semiosphere model of the Russian Yuri Lotman. Said proposal is a scheme that shows how discourses (or in Lotman's words, texts) shape the culture of a social group. As support, the example of political cartoons is used, which are also speeches that challenge historical tradition and the conception of innumerable characters.

WHAT IS THE HERO?

The character of the hero is a recurring

element in every society due to its capacity to bring together various meanings. Its origins are rooted on the myth, since it allows to provide, amongst other features, a social order, and it offers coherency to reality through the narrative it presents, which includes very powerful symbols and (mental) images.

The hero gathers essential values for the context in which it develops; for that reason, they are unifying elements at a social and personal level. Let's go back to mythology, where each of its presented heroes provided behavior guidelines to follow: Prometheus is a titan who helped mankind. He represents the savior and the boldness. In Hebrew tradition, David is the symbol of courage, since he defeated the giant Goliath. At the same time, this symbolic attribution granted to them allows for those mythical characters to transcend and prevail through time. The narrative they carry can empathize with various contexts – beyond those in which they were originally created.

How is a hero defined? There are many possible answers to this question, but for the purpose of this research, the approach by Spanish philosopher Andrés Ortiz-Osés will be used: “The hero is [...] a savior [...] who gathers in its behavior the opposites which are normally apart: the individual self and the collective other, me and the world, the reality and the ideal, the interior and exterior. Through its emancipating mission, the opposites meet in a mixture or conjunction that is close to sacred” (Ortiz-Osés, 1995:385). In essence, a hero is someone who enables things to transform, who takes the future of a community, with everything it entails, in its hands.

If we transfer this into the field of the national history of a territory, it becomes evident that the role of the heroes is fundamental, since they are the saviors who had contributed to the development of that

culture, and who enable, by providing them this quality, the reproduction of official discourses on their behalf. One example: during the presidential elections of 2018 in Mexico, the now President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, took as a flagship of his campaign and current government the image of Benito Juárez – President of Mexico in mid-19th century -, who is considered a hero because of his reform to separate the Church from the State. It was and still is commonplace for Obrador to reference Juárez, emphasizing his achievements, character, and quotes like: Respect for the rights of others means peace.

Why are heroes so important for the history and politics of a country? Without a doubt, because of the features they present. Let's make a list of some of them, using the work of Mexican academician Rosa Azucena Mecalco (2019) as a reference: They are beings of extraordinary qualities which distinguishes them from the common folk, they act with stoicism, they are not intimidated by sacrifices, they build a model of conduct and encourage social recognition, and even if very relevant, on many occasions, also the incomprehension.

Due to these characteristics which distinguishes them, heroes affect the identity of not only one person, but the whole group, hence their fundamental role in the construction and continuation in a project of a nation:

Nationalism has in the teaching of history a powerful tool for the dissemination of symbols that represent for different generations of individuals the identity of their own community or country [...] and it consolidates itself thanks to government propaganda to achieve at least two goals: 1) To shape collective consciousness, 2) To awake feelings of loyalty towards the State-Nation. (Púnzo, 2011:47)

And amongst the symbols mentioned by Ángeles Púnzo (2011) as part of the

patriotic and national design, heroes can be found. They transform almost sacred entities through the established history which encourages an understanding and approach to them through a pathway that is canonical and almost completely inflexible. This is the case of Emiliano Zapata, object of study of this research.

CAUDILLO OF THE SOUTH

As it was mentioned before, one of the critical phases of Mexican history was the civil war at the beginning of the 20th century, which is colloquially known as “Mexican Revolution”. It started on the 20th of November, 1910, and achieved the overturning of the regime of then President Porfirio Díaz, who had stayed in power for over three decades (1876-1911). It also allowed for the enactment of the Mexican Constitution that remains in force to this day. Likewise, it provided better rights for farmers, and other sectors of the population, like the working class.

Throughout the Mexican territory, those groups of underprivileged people, dissatisfied with the situation brought upon them by the dictatorship of Díaz, were the ones advocating for the civil war onset, since they had enthusiastic leaders who motivated and represented them, the main ones being: Francisco Villa, at the northern part of the country, Francisco I. Madero at the capital city, and Emiliano Zapata in the state of Morelos.

The geographic location of the region where Zapata carried out his main operation lead to his sobriquet “Caudillo of the South”. Some of his achievements were the enactment of The Plan of Ayala, which sought to improve the living conditions of farmers, focusing on labor and land ownership. One of his slogans was: “Land and Freedom”, since he aimed to help the indigenous peoples move away from

social and economic inequality, and to be considered as having the same citizen status as the rest of the population.

He is recognized as a national hero due to his fight against despotism, but also because of his unwavering and fierce attitude: at the beginning of the civil war he worked with Madero, but later emancipated to further his own agenda, since he realized that landholders refused to yield to the petitions of the indigenous people. He was wary and had few allies, but the population commended him; this situation made President Venustiano Carranza to start perceiving him as a threat, then sending Colonel Jesús Guajardo to put a halt to the movement, which lead to an ambush in which Zapata lost his life in April 1919. But his legacy was so great that the agrarian reform he fought for became a reality during the office of Lázaro Cárdenas, from 1934 to 1940.

The images of Zapata during his life helped him consolidate himself as a hero even more. On the photographic record of the civil war it is possible to find evidence of how he -usually- presented himself during public appearances. Riding a stallion and wearing a very peculiar attire: Traditional charrería fatigues which include a wide-brimmed hat, coat, shirt, tie, belt, boots, spurs, and a revolver holster. This description would be incomplete without the moustache and short, slicked hair (Figure 1).

These elements made Zapata into a powerful symbol, not limited to the period of armed conflict, but one which transcended into the following decades, resulting in many attributes to be added with the passage of time, like: righteousness, courage, generosity, macho, flirty, humility, strength, masculinity; hero. Many of these meanings had no direct relation to the life and work of the guerrilla fighter, but they were added from the perception of the popular consciousness.



Figure 1. Photographs of Emiliano Zapata. Source: Pinterest.

From his actions –and tragic death- during the civil war, he became a national hero. The official history of Mexico positioned him as a great leader with enormous qualities, with the sole aim of improving the lives of those in need:

The roar of “Zapata is alive; the fight thrives” can be heard in every public demonstration of the country; the slogan “Zapata is alive” is also written in every small town all over Mexico. The ideas about Zapata are deep-rooted into the Mexican working classes. Zapata’s legacy is so strong that his name was used to give an identity to the most relevant indigenous and folk social movement of modern Mexico, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) [*Zapatista Army of National Liberation*]. The cornerstone of Zapata’s legacy might be due to him being recognized as an authentic leader of the folk who never betrayed his ideals, nor the people he fought for (Martín, 2013).

In every textbook about Mexican history the caudillo of the south always makes an

appearance. Also in political ceremonies and the media. There are numerous monuments, streets, and public places named after him. This has consolidated even further the symbolic construct of the heroic savior in the minds of people. But problems arise when somebody brings a new perspective of this character which undermines these portrayals; just like the Mexican plastic artist Fabián Cháirez did.

WHEN HEROES TRANSFORM

In 2019, the Secretariat of Culture of Mexico organized an art exhibition at the Museum of Palacio de Bellas Artes, to pay homage to the civil war leader on the hundredth anniversary of his death. The exhibition was called “Emiliano. Zapata después de Zapata [Emiliano. Zapata after Zapata]” and it presented a selection of portrayals of the caudillo from various artists throughout a century: “The exhibition unfolds diverse and sometimes contradictory transformations of the images of Zapata as

a hero of the Mexican Revolution, a racial symbol, a guerrilla fighter or the symbol of feminist fights and modern activism” (Museum of Palacio de Bellas Artes, 2019).

The last words on the caudillo are fundamental: the symbol of feminist fights and modern activism. Since the versatility found in the symbol of Zapata inspired a wide array of social groups to reinforce their ideals, both in the political and cultural areas. This was used to divide the exhibition in four sections which sum up what this paladin personifies in the collective consciousness: 1) The peasant movement leader, 2) The making of the National Hero, 3) Migrant images, 4) Other revolutions.

In the last section, a piece of art was placed which brought about an unexpected controversy: *La Revolución* [The Revolution] (2014) from Mexican painter Fabián Cháirez (Figure 2), who decided to shatter every criteria of portrayal from this icon of the

nation: Zapata is presented naked, with a body-language of self-eroticization, riding his stallion (the animal has an erection). The artist decided to use a bright pink for the traditional charro sombrero, and instead of boots, he is wearing high-heels with a revolver-shaped heel, a sash with the colors of the Mexican flag surrounds the body of Emiliano.

This piece of art soon became the focus of media attention since the grandson of Emiliano Zapata, Jorge Zapata González, along with members of the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores Agrícolas (UNTA) [National Union of Farm Workers], held a public demonstration both in front of and inside the museum, asking for Cháirez’ piece of art to be taken down since they considered it as slander to the memory of the guerrilla fighter: “We will sue the artist, and also the administrator of Bellas Artes, for presenting our general in such a way [...]. For us, as a

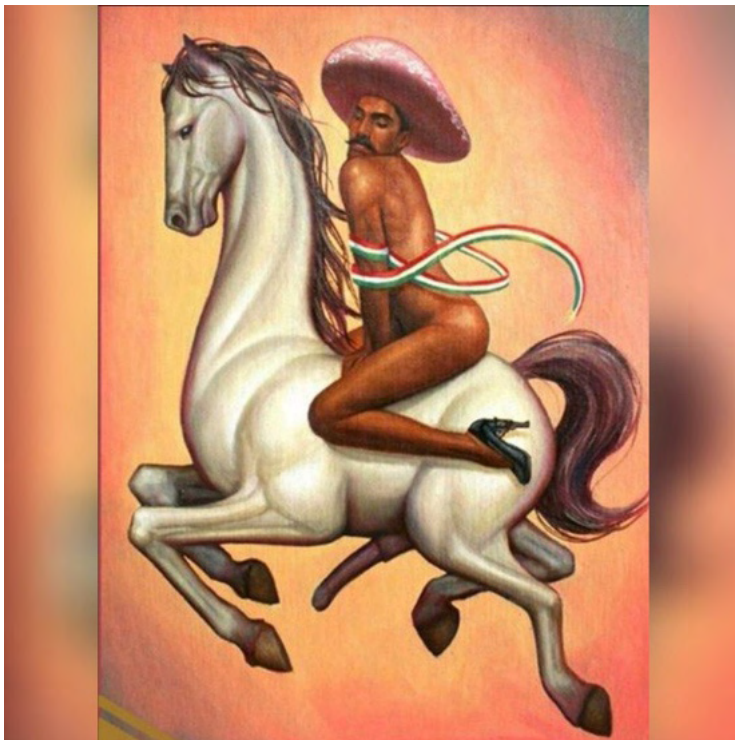


Figure 2. *La Revolución* (2014) Fabián Cháirez. Source: Milenio.com

family, this belittles our general by portraying him as gay” (Zapata, 2019).

It is interesting to note Jorge Zapata’s curious perception regarding the piece of art: he is the one who sees his grandfather as “gay”, when at no point does the painting references directly or in the accompanying text the LGBT+ community. This reminds us of what the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1974) mentions; that signs do not work in an isolated manner, but rather create a meaning for multiple interpreters; that is to say, a symbolic evocation is established which allows a meaning to be created from that network; that is what Peirce calls semiosis: the unlimited dialogue between symbols which adapts according to the space-time environment and the interpreters. In the case of La Revolución, a peculiar semiosis is produced for every spectator which contemplates it: Zapata’s grandson perceives the piece of art as an offense, since he ties signs such as the high-heels or other symbolic elements as “being gay”. This perception is not ubiquitous and each person can make a distinct semiosis. For example, the piece of art had already been exhibited at other art venues

without causing any discomfort, since the semiosis produced there with the spectators was different.

It is also important to note that when the image of a national hero or a very respected character is established, subverting the usual or traditional portrayal with any other element challenges the whole semiosis process. Political cartoons have always been a topic of this discussion. Let’s revise two of these cases (Figure 3).

The one from the French magazine Charlie Hebdo, where cartoons about the prophet Muhammed were printed, resulted in a shooting at the offices of the weekly magazine by Islamic radicals, where a dozen people were killed. The other example is what happened with the American newspaper The New York Times, after it published on its international edition a cartoon which satirized Donald Trump as a blind person wearing a Kippah, being guided by service dog with facial features similar to those of the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, whose leash had a Star of David. The Jewish community expressed great discontent towards the newspaper since the image was



Figure 3. Covers of Charlie Hebdo on Muhammed. New York Times cartoon. Source: Pinterest.

perceived as promoting antisemitism and hate speech; The New York Times proceeded to make a public apology, fire the Portuguese cartoonist António Moreira Antunes, the creator of the cartoon, and to self-censor by refraining from publishing any other political cartoon on its pages.

Something that escapes interpreters/spectators who feel offended with these narratives is: Those are reinterpretations that do not seek to substitute the original portrayal. But it is also a fact that texts which are foreign or with traits “outside” of those usually known by the group are not well received. The Russian linguist Yuri Lotman (1966) calls this phenomenon the semiosphere, which can be defined as a model which presents the organized array of texts which determine a culture. Those texts move inside the space of that semiosphere, some close to the core, which for Lotman is the most deeply entrenched within that social group, others in the borderline, where they can sometimes migrate towards another semiosphere, and also allow new texts to be introduced.

It is in this to and fro that it becomes possible to trace the censorship to which narratives like the aforementioned political cartoon cases have been subject to; or the object study of this research, the piece of art by Fabián Cháirez. Those are texts which do not correspond to the original semiosphere of the referent that they allude to. In the case of *La Revolución*, it is a proposal which does not correspond with the core of meanings which outline a national hero. The piece of art makes a type of entropy when it establishes a discursive noise with the dominant vision of the hero.

Cháirez’s proposal about Zapata was able to have a translation and enter the semiosphere of hero, thanks to the invitation from the Museum of the Palace of Fine Arts for the work to be part of the exhibition. In turn,

there was resistance from the nucleus, where the caudillo’s family and members of peasant organizations protested fervently for the piece to be removed from the premises, since they considered it an insult, in addition to affirming that it offered a distortion of what was the character by showing him “effeminate”.

But the border of a semiosphere is porous, which means -as already mentioned- that new texts can enter. Both museum authorities, art specialists, various media, as well as public opinion, defended that “*La Revolución*” continue in the exhibition. The result of the controversy was that the Ministry of Culture decided to keep the work on display, but with an information card that shows the position of Emiliano Zapata’s family before the representation. This reflects to us how a foreign text cannot enter directly into the core of a semiosphere, but gradually gains acceptance, due to the problems generated by its entry. Figure 4 illustrates the semiosphere model on the national hero and the entry of Fabián Cháirez’s proposal.

It is also very important to mention that the style used to portray Zapata is another element to take into consideration to understand that the meaning cannot be the same as the one yielded to official photographs. Cháirez decided to execute a figurative painting in which the features of the leader are not completely realistic, but rather reminds us of expressions like those found in comic books. And by coming back to the example of political cartoons, it can be asserted that by reshaping the portrayal method, the configuration of sense is also changed; it is an approach that aims to have this or that character as referent, but providing it with a different sequence of signs and, by extension, of meanings. In the case of *La Revolución*, the author wanted to reformulate the concept of masculinity in society:

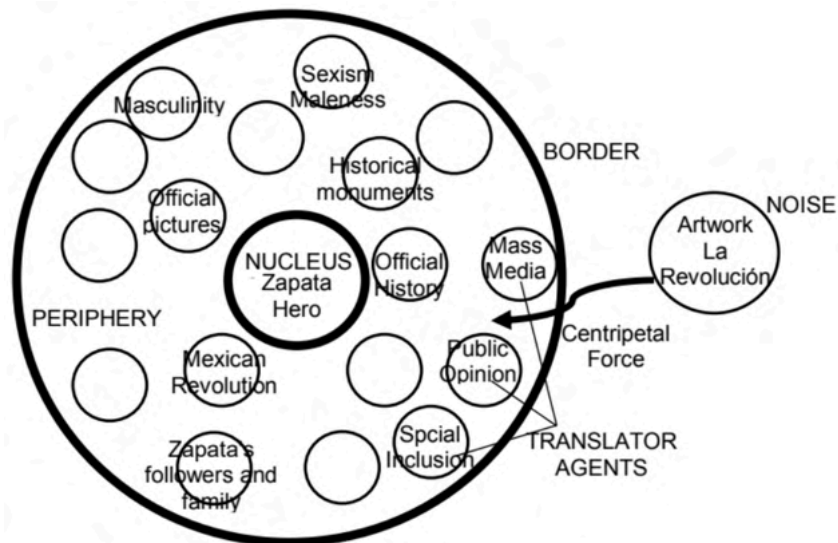


Figure 4. Model of the semiosphere of Zapata as a hero. Own elaboration.

Many people, myself included, do not fit the established referents of masculinity. For this reason, in 2014, I created this piece of art, *La Revolución*, where I placed elements opposite to the dominant masculinity of our country, which became widespread through the cultural industry [...] this exhibition included various representations of Zapata by many artists. In my case, this is what I wanted to present; a different portrayal of this national hero (Cháirez, 2019)

The use of cartoons to satirize certain public figures and talk about sensitive topics is a recurrent practice, since through this style it allows to establish a more effective bond with the spectators, the esthetics experience or, following what Peirce mentions, a sign will never become that which it substitutes, they cannot be assigned the same meanings, even when their structure reminds us of something else: “The sign is in place of something, its object. It is in place of that object, not in every aspect, but only in reference to a sort of idea” (1977:22). It is necessary to bear this in mind; what we see is not Emiliano Zapata, it is not the construct of the national hero, it is an unprecedented portrayal, a new sign.

CONCLUSIONS

The piece of art by Fabián Cháirez exposes the deficit sometimes found in the assimilation of meaning process of narratives generated around us. We are used to one convention of meaning around a sign (or group of signs), and transforming this habit is a challenge, in particular when it deals with signs attached to the history of a territory, as is the case with national heroes, since they are not only signs, but also symbols which, through time, have enhanced the semiosis they generate and they introduce themselves –in many cases- as the core of a semiosphere.

The semiosphere functions as a continuum, which is occupied by various semiotic formations that have different interactions. This model allows us to observe intercultural phenomena, that is, how different cultures (and their respective texts) are related through translation or resemantization. In the case of “*La Revolución*” it allows us to understand how representations outside the canon about some specific idea are considered subversive, but that is not why they should be expelled

or annulled, quite the contrary, they must be integrated into the system so that they enrich sense what is already established.

A postulate of what is termed a pragmatic principle is that truth is the version of reality that best works for us; and in terms of the history of a country, there is always a version of truth which fits the time period: The prevailing institutions and their representatives select the manner in which events surrounding their nation are to be presented. As British theorist Edward H. Carr stated, history is: "A social process in which individuals acting as social beings participate [...] it is the collection of what a time period finds relevant about another" (1985:73). In other words, what we understand as history is just a selective perception.

This is transferred to the figure of heroes, who act as the backbone of sovereignty; in

the case of Emiliano Zapata, it began as the legacy of a great leader who supported the most underprivileged, but suddenly, due to a process of semiosis, this figure became imbued with other meanings, like male chauvinism; a situation that Cháirez aimed to highlight through his piece of art. The same happens with political cartoons which oppose the chain of meanings which are flaunted about numerous personalities.

The event surrounding La Revolución only steers us towards becoming more critical interpreters, to observe the manner in which we assimilate and portray values, and it also allows us to reflect on how heroes are neither immobile nor inflexible figures. It is valid to reshape them and to present a different facet of them, more appropriate to the current times, since this also translates into the nationalist and civic spirit.

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