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Commodifying Place and Time: Photography, Memory, and Media Cultures around 1850

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Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, when photography had become a favored medium for depiction of the present, improvements in the technologies and quality of printing permitted the mass dissemination of representations of the past, particularly in illustrated newspapers such as the *Semanario Pintoresco Español*, founded in 1836 by Ramón Mesonero Romanos, and Antonio Flores's *El Laberinto* (1843–45). Through consumption of or exposure to illustrated periodicals, it became possible for all classes of readers (but particularly the middle class, the targeted readership) to participate in the project of constructing a collective, nationalizing memory, aided by the concerted didacticism of articles treating venerable statesmen, ancient monuments, historic battles, or regional traditions, along with graphic imagery elaborating narrations that treated the Spanish past and patrimony.¹ Yet at the same time photography had made it possible, “uniquely in the history of pictures,” for consumers from a range of classes to participate in the project of describing “a discrete parcel of time . . . [which] is always the present” (Szarkowski 4), and to record anything in that present: “shop windows and sod houses and family pets and steam engines and unimportant people” (2). Technological advances in steam power and machinery permitted the rapid distribution of both illustrated periodicals exploring the national past, and photographs depicting the national present. Thus both past and present, memory and witness, were crucial to media competing for consumers in an expanding entertainment marketplace. Inherent in urban modernity at mid-century was rapid change, brought by the force and speed of technologically altered and multiplied objects and spaces over which individuals held little control. These developments took place in urban sites that increasingly, as depicted in a range of texts, images, and photographs, seemed to those experiencing them to embody “changes” having “little to do with personal . . . activity or will” (Rice 101). The new media of photography and illustrated periodicals captured cultural tensions around collective ownership of memory and modern experience in the

rapidly shifting present: around the losses occasioned by, and the visible work of, the changes brought by industrialism.



Fig. 1. Frontispiece to *Madrid al daguerreotipo*, a collection of humorous *costumbrista* essays that appeared in 1849 in Madrid.

This essay explores two problems that photography presented to writers at mid-century: the impact of speed and mechanization on the capture of truth and on the work of memory; and the question of authenticity introduced by the spread of images produced for the mass market. I will be referring to a variety of visual artifacts drawn from period media, in conjunction with a discussion of Madrid *costumbrista* texts by Mariano José de Larra, Ramón Mesonero Romanos, and Antonio Flores, all of whom (Larra as a journalist, Mesonero as a publisher and urban activist, Flores as a journalist and publisher) thought quite a lot about relationships among memory, media, and markets in the modern city. I will contend that Larra and Mesonero theorized representation of the “real” and the work of remembering in the construction of reality, in response to new technologies and visual media and to their impact on readers’ changing experience of time and place. Antonio Flores tackled the question of how best to represent “reality” in modernity, problematizing the technological enhancement of vision that the camera seemed to offer to viewers worked on by market forces and increasingly constituted through flows of commodities, signs, and

images. I read Flores's *costumbrista* articles on photography as resistance to a collective consumerism around machined verisimilitude, and as a critique of the commodification inherent in mass culture. And, I would argue that the temporality of modernity, conditioning that particularly modern awareness of experience as fragmented and discontinuous, and of reality as located beyond limits of place and time, is not born as an epistemological and aesthetic problem toward the end of the century, but rather, long beforehand, as we see in both *costumbrista* writings and writings on photography from the 1830s onward which interrogate the memory work and truth conditions underlying mass media representations of "reality."

Speed, Time, and Changing Technologies of Representation

The great American modernist Gertrude Stein said, "The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen" (456). Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, writers and artists grappled with the seeing introduced into their time by the new medium of photography. Across Europe photography was embraced as a tool for representing things seen in a range of registries, such as the portrait, the documentary of public works, the folkloric, or the erotic. Yet photography was debated heatedly with regard to its status *vis à vis* existing representational technologies, such as painting or engraving. The capacity of "sun pictures" to imitate life seemed to promise possibilities of hitherto untheorized realism, even as its precise mechanization seemed to force a re-assessment of traditional artistic practices for the interpretation of reality. Some commentators celebrated photography as a boon to science, an "objective" means of documentation; but others lamented it as a negation of the artist's contribution to representation, which had always been imagination, specialized knowledge of aesthetics, and highly trained manipulation of select techniques in diverse media (such as oil painting, lithography, or woodcut printing). A famous example of the latter view is the gloomy commentary made by the French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, who lamented in 1859, "if [photography] be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends on the addition of something of a man's soul, then it will be so much the worse for us!" (13).²

Long before Baudelaire's warning, though, speed and mechanization had become of great service to that artistic "soul." The late eighteenth-century invention of lithography permitted graphic artists to sketch images with rapidity and reproduce them with facility, so that multiple impressions could be generated within hours as opposed to days. And there were new needs for images that transcended "art" and "soul": for example, between 1834 and 1855, the creation of Spanish schools of industrial, agricultural,

mining, and transportation engineering led to the wide availability of charts, graphs, plans, and tables in pamphlets and periodicals. The related impetus toward advances in printing facilitated the insertion of illustrations into what, by the 1830s, was becoming one of the most important of modern media: that is, the newspaper. Increasingly, coffee houses and reading rooms made a range of newspapers available to patrons, who sought fast access to information in what Poe called “the rush of the age” (qtd. in Hayes 449) and Mesonero termed “los tiempos de rápida transición y de movilidad que alcanzamos” (“Mi calle” 20) (the times of rapid transition and mobility that are upon us).

Newspapers incorporating illustrations became “ágiles difusoras de todo tipo de información icónica, junto con las estampas sueltas” (agile disseminators of every kind of iconic information, together with various prints) that were often marketed in conjunction with periodicals, and stimulated “una acumulación de motivos iconográficos sin par en la historia” (Alonso Martínez 102) (an accumulation of iconographic motifs without par in history). In 1836, three years before the invention of photography, Mesonero’s founding of the *Semanario Pintoresco* permitted mass audiences to share in the consumption of an integrated media experience oriented toward the informational possibilities of the modern *now*. Conceived of as distinct from other visual recreations available to contemporary audiences (such as theatre, magic lantern exhibitions, dioramas, or *mundonuevo* peepshows), the illustrated periodical invited readers and viewers to embrace an ideology of modernity through the dissemination of images and articles about science, industry, architecture, geography, history, and current events. Unlike previous newspaper formats, in which “typography was the dominant voice of news, and images were interlopers” (Barnhurst and Nerone 59), illustrated periodicals utilized a variety of technologies for a new regime of news illustration, avoiding the “conceptual boundary” that such publications had maintained between image and text (60), amplifying print imagery’s aesthetic and symbolic functions and developing “otra no menos importante: la informativa” (Alonso Martínez 102) (another no less important: the informative).

By the 1840s, the technologies available for illustrated news were woodcuts, engravings in wood and metal, and lithography. Woodcuts and wood engravings were “the favored media for printers of news illustrations,” according to Barnhurst and Nerone; and following the patent of the stereotype process, consistency of image size, and routinization of production enhanced the capacity for wood engravings to serve as the “realistic” image complements to text typography’s up-to-the-minute, modern “voice” (62). Indeed, the mechanization of production “permitted predictable manufacturing schedules, and allowed the (believable) claim to authentic representation” of images “drawn or photographed at some point from life” (62). Production of this new medium of the modern, realistic

“now” was collective; it involved the contributions of a range of artists and engravers, and of printers, writers, and editors, all of whom experimented with technologies and processes. In this way the illustrated newspaper was intended to stimulate local and national productivity not only among the readers it sought to convince of the benefits of industrialism, but also among autochthonous artists (commissioned to create woodblock engravings), writers (of text content), and craftspeople (involved in the stages of the printing process).³ Though early illustrated periodicals depended on available images, the incorporation of graphic art into the *Semanario Pintoresco*, and later newspapers, such as *El Laberinto*, was a novel exercise in meeting consumer demand for already existing media. Publishers, writers, and artists collaborated to copy established media (such as portrait busts or natural history prints), to draw on existing fine arts conventions (such as those of landscape painting), and to develop a market-responsive repertoire of wood engravings and stereotype casts for the new graphically enhanced matrices of the illustrated newspaper.

What could the illustrations in newspapers help make visible? In 1844, an anonymous writer in the *Semanario Pintoresco* commented that woodcuts and other graphics in periodicals help “abreviar el tiempo que se emplearía en volver a leer lo que se hubiese escapado de la memoria, y refrescarla con una sola Mirada . . . [y] representar las cosas ausentes . . . cual si estuviesen ante nosotros” (“Utilidad” 58) (shorten the time one would spend on re-reading that which had escaped one’s memory, and refresh it with a single glance . . . [and] represent absent things . . . as though they were right before us). According to the anonymous author, woodcut illustrations were superior to photography because, although photographs could aid in “seeing” things, or in visualizing presence, they did not bring into play what he termed “remembering” (“refrescar la memoria”) that is, re-creating reality with the aid of imagination. While there was a collective memory around saints’ lives, Bible stories, and feast days already fed by a popular print repertoire, the engravings included in periodicals would provide a new didactic framework for collective memory among audiences comfortable with media such as *aleluyas* “halfway between oral and print culture” (Galí Boadella 41).⁴ In fact (projected the anonymous writer), future generations of any literacy level will enjoy the advantage of being able, through the illustrated periodical, to develop a relationship to history and the past through the “exacta transcripción” (exact transcription) transmitted through the “buril, la litografía y los grabados de todas clases” (60) (engraving, lithography, and every type of print).

In the newspaper medium, visual and verbal accounts of the real and the authentic together were judged according to their capacity to clarify, articulate, and make readers’ understanding and recognition more lucid (Barnhurst and Nerone 63). Illustrations were understood to offer a level of exactitude more than adequate for the purposes of complementing text in the

work of telling a good (hi)story, of commemoration, and of the building of national awareness among readerships. Indeed (as the author pointed out in the *Semanario* article), the graphic imagery illustrating print articles is most useful for continually renovating a shared sense of national memory among readers: “El fuente de los jóvenes es la memoria, y es preciso en tanto que se puede, servirse de esta parte del alma, para abastecerla y para instruir la en las cosas que han de contribuir a formar su juicio” (58) (the fountain from which youths imbibe is memory, and it is necessary to enhance and make use of this part of the soul to the fullest extent possible, so as to replenish it and program it with the things that will contribute to young people’s capacity to form judgment). The great value of illustrations in newspapers was not their “realism,” but their work in providing readers with “an artificial archive of memory images—a primitive form of total recall of the sort that contemporary scholars ascribe to later visual media” (Barnhurst and Nerone 64). Ángel Fernández-Ríos, who in 1847 took over editorship of the *Semanario Pintoresco Español*, informed readers the same year that “continuaremos sacando del olvido y consignando en nuestro periódico antes que la acción del tiempo los haga desaparecer, los monumentos de todos géneros que yacen esparcidos por el reino” (“Introducción” 2) (we will continue to rescue from oblivion and feature in our newspaper every type of monument found throughout the kingdom, before the workings of time make them disappear). But the illustrated periodical also claimed authority with regard to images of *contemporary* experience: “Illustrated news promised the sort of picture that one would have come away with had one actually been at the event—clear, with the force of memory” (Barnhurst and Nerone 64). Papers such as the *Semanario Pintoresco* and *El Laberinto* intentionally combined imagery of current subjects (such as portraits of contemporary writers and depictions of new institutional spaces) with the illustrations accompanying articles on ancient and historical items of interest. The goal of illustrated periodicals was to provide a medium through which to bring together both memory *and* seeing in a variety of formats, within a nationalizing framework for learning from the archives of history and from the force of current events; this was the purpose (according to that anonymous author) of “las obras pintorescas que en el día se publican” in newspapers (60) (the picturesque works published nowadays). Indeed, Antonio Flores, addressing readers of *El Laberinto* in 1845, promised that the publication would include “biografías de personajes célebres antiguos y contemporáneos, nacionales o extranjeros” (biographies of celebrated persons, whether ancient or contemporary, national or foreign) as well as entries treating “historia, literatura, filosofía, viajes, novelas, poesías, bellas artes, industria, agricultura y comercio” (history, literature, philosophy, travels, novels, poetry, fine arts, industry, agriculture and commerce), with imagery and text *together* making it possible to “generalizar toda clase de conocimientos” (“Advertencia” 193) (spread every type of knowledge).

Media innovators such as Mesonero and Flores hoped that illustrated newspapers would enhance the development of citizenship, through the consumption of images of history and contemporaneity in both verbal and visual transcription formats.

Representing the Modern Present

Modern audiences were developing a taste for novelty, technological innovation, and speed of production, and photography was only one of several new media that appealed to these desires. Actual witness—on-the-spot recording of impressions—was what artists and writers in a range of media increasingly longed to capture. But one limitation of the photographic medium was that, unlike an artist, who can render life-like images of *both* present and past people and events, a photographer could depict *only* what was immediately in the frame at the moment of exposure. “Sun pictures” could record the world in astonishing detail, but (it seemed) did so without any contribution from the refining force of human memory and the capacity to imagine the past. Non-photographic print media (woodblock engraving, lithography, illustrated newspapers) served as refining instruments of national memory; but they also met the desire for novelty, bringing cheaply-produced imagery of an insistent present into wide circulation among readers and viewers in the form of everything from devotional prints, to circus posters, to matchbox labels. There was a synergy among all types of print media, fed by developments in lighting, gas, electricity, and steam power, which, in turn, gave “impetus . . . to various branches of trade and science—glass-making, chemistry, optical lenses, etc.”⁵ The result was an expansion of markets for visual products conveying a wide range of information about the rapid changes of contemporary urban life. The proliferating publicity flyers, sandwich board ad men, photo albums, train schedules, illustrated tourist guides, photographic calling cards, packaging—all were materialized calls for viewer and consumer attention in the *here and now*. The rush of the age, the mobility of constant transition, demanded media capable of transmitting information about, and imagery of, availability in the moment.⁶

Indeed, this was one of the most salient aspects of modernity to observers in the 1840s and 1850s: the media-rich environment of urban centers, in which aural and visual stimuli competed for consumers. Whether in Madrid, Paris, London, Mexico City, or New York, there was so much to see, and in so many formats and venues: broadside notices, street signs, billboards, newspaper illustrations, shop windows, photographs, crowds.⁷ And these new claims on attention intensified the awareness of dislocation and rapid change becoming characteristic of modern culture. Illustrated

newspapers were one response to this consumer mandate, a medium through which to integrate history and imaginative remembering with the new cultural value of rapid turnover.

Certainly, *costumbrista* aesthetics struggled with this new challenge of representation in, and of, time. In his 1862 *Tipos y caracteres*, Mesonero argued that the sort of seeing required by modernity was mechanical, electrical, capable of the velocity of light:

En vano el pintor fatigado [persigue la sociedad del siglo] . . . la sociedad se le escapa de la vista; el modelo se le deshace entre las manos; imposible sorprenderle en un momento de reposo; y sólo echando mano de los progresos velocíferos de la época, del vapor, de la fotografía y de la chispa eléctrica, puede acaso alcanzar a seguir su senda rápida e indecisa (“Adiós” 202)

(In vain the exhausted painter [chases this century’s society] . . . society slips from his sight; the model crumbles in his hands as soon as he would grasp it; it is impossible to capture it in a moment of rest; and only by making use of the velociferous advances of the age, of steam, photography and the spark of electricity, might he perhaps manage to track its rapid and oscillating path)

Machinery and speed seemed to capture fleeting reality: “fotografía” and “daguerreotipo” became synonymous with the nearly instantaneous capture of a lived, actual reality otherwise lost to the leisurely imaginings of the painter or poet. Mesonero argued that, in such an age, *costumbrista* “painting” (that is, observation and description) required the aid of new technologies and photographic accuracy:

válganos . . . los procedimientos velocíferos del siglo en que vivimos . . . préstenos el daguerreotipo su máquina ingeniosa, la estereotipia su prodigiosa multiplicidad, el vapor su fuerza de movimiento, y la viva lumbre de su llama el fantástico gas. . . . (“El Pretendiente” 62)

(let us make use . . . of the rapid processes born of the age in which we live . . . let the daguerreotype lend us its ingenious mechanism, the stereotype its prodigious multiplicity, steam its force of movement, and fantastic gas the vivid light of its flame. . . .)

The daguerreotype symbolizes a new immediacy in seeing, facilitated by mechanical guarantors of rapidity and accuracy; accordingly, the contemporary *costumbrista* must adapt his or her vision to a newly heightened, machine-driven sense of the real.

A decade prior to this invocation, Larra and Mesonero wrote several articles in which they theorized *costumbrista* verbal depiction of “the real.”⁸ In an 1832 *Escenas matritenses* piece, Mesonero proposed to “presentar al público español cuadros que ofrezcan escenas de costumbres propias de nuestra nación” (“Las costumbres” 39) (present to the Spanish public paintings that might present scenes of our own national customs). And in an 1836 review of the *Panorama matritense*, Larra praised Mesonero’s *costumbrismo* and pointed to his ability to “exponer a nuestra visión el estado de nuestras costumbres” (expose to sight the state of our customs) and to “retratar más que pintar” (II, 992, 994) (portray more than depict). In this conceptualization of *costumbrista* vision, the methodological vocabulary is drawn from visual praxis: *costumbrismo* is to *see* customs, and *present a portrait of*, national subjects; it creates “cuadros,” and “ofrece escenas.” Further, *costumbrismo*’s focus on the customs and subjects of “nuestra nación” integrates the practice into the project of national civic formation claimed by illustrated newspaper. Yet even as he calls Mesonero “uno de nuestros pocos prosistas modernos” (one of our few modern prose writers), Larra accuses Mesonero’s pictures of “weakness,” due to “la sobra de meditación, o del temor de ofender” (an excess of meditation, or of a fear of giving offense), which deprives them of “una animación también necesaria” (994) (an equally necessary animation). “Animación,” according to Larra, is achieved through tensions between what is shown and what is only suggested, or between what *seems* to be depicted, and the reader’s understanding of *costumbrismo*’s necessary metaphorical work: “el escritor de costumbres necesita . . . formarse una censura suya y secreta que dé claro y obscuro a sus obras, y en que el buen gusto proscriba lo que la ley permite” (992) (so as to give chiaroscuro to his works, the costumbrista writer must . . . develop a secret and personal form of censorship, in which good taste functions to proscribe what the law permits). Larra isn’t referring only to elegance in writing; rather, the link between “animation” and “chiaroscuro” theorizes visibility as an allegorizing framework implicating the national or the local in a “secret censorship,” thereby opening the *costumbrista* text to interpretations beyond the frames of reference at hand in contemporary society.

Larra asserts that *costumbrismo* is an ideal medium with which to attempt to represent current, lived reality, for its orientation toward a particular audience—the urban middle class—renders it a “modern” genre entirely of its time (I, 985).⁹ In fact, the phenomena attendant on “modernity”—the growth of that very middle class, industrialization, expansion of commerce, the increase in contacts among diverse people—all are, according to Larra, precisely what made *costumbrismo* possible (986). Thus *costumbrismo* is a modern representational genre because its depictions offer current readerships images of social behaviors situated in specific local or national frameworks of up-to-the-minute technological and commercial

change. Though Larra is not thinking of photography, his emphasis on the importance of specific details recognizable to an audience at a specific time and place reflects the desire of 1830s readers and viewers for media of immediacy, and the attractiveness of representational forms that could both capture, and make possible the widespread sharing of, the experience of witness.

Critical readings of *costumbrismo* have focused on the history and aesthetics of the depiction of types so important in the genre.¹⁰ The critical emphasis on typology recognizes *costumbrismo* as a modern—that is, middle class-oriented—practice while situating it as an early stage of a long nineteenth-century journey culminating (according to the prevailing literary-historical narrative) in the totalizing novels of realism and naturalism.¹¹ Yet the *costumbrista* peopling of scenes with a range of social types did not offer contemporary audiences a nascent form or rehearsal of “realism.” Larra’s and Mesonero’s readers enthusiastically consumed *costumbrista* types, precisely because those brief sketches, like magic lantern exhibitions and peepshows, and photography a few years later, aimed at creating effects of immediacy, and of reality experienced in the moment—a reality of technological advances, rapid change, and new representational frameworks. As Crary has pointed out, early nineteenth-century optical toys and visual recreations were central components of a mass-culture of “realism” that *preceding* the invention of photography (17). *Costumbrismo* appealed to audiences in this climate, its “animation” popular with audiences eager for new media that used reality effects to explore tensions between what is seen, and what lies beneath the surface.

Photography, *Publicidad* and the Question of the Real

At mid-century, through articles conceptualizing a “sociedad del vapor” (or “steam-driven society”), Antonio Flores harnessed *costumbrismo*’s power of “animation” and put into practice what Larra had called “chiaroscuro” and “secret censorship.” In volumes three, four and five of his 1863 collection *Ayer, hoy y mañana, o la fe, el vapor y la electricidad*, Flores created “chiaroscuro” by imbuing effects of witness and immediacy into allegorical narratives treating the social impact of commercialization and industrialization. In these volumes treating “hoy” or the present, Flores’s *costumbrista* cuadros of “la sociedad del vapor” are an extended allegory that tropes—that is (to reiterate the language of Larra’s “*censura secreta*”) turns discourse toward both what is visible, and what lies below the surface—a nation dependent on increasingly sophisticated energy, technological, and financial apparatuses, but incapable of harnessing such advances so as to heal itself of the social and political conflicts of the

previous fifty years. Even as he retains the visual vocabulary of *costumbrismo* (that is, of “cuadros” and “dibujos”), Flores states in the introduction that his *costumbrismo* will focus on, not types, but “el magnetismo que hace bailar las mesas y los veladores, el ferro-carril que nos roba los parroquianos llevándolos a escape por esos mundos de Dios, y el telégrafo eléctrico que nos quita los pensamientos como un verdadero jugador de manos” (xx) (the magnetic energy that moves tables and nightstands, the railway that robs us of our neighbors and speeds them away into God’s wide world, and the electric telegraph that steals our thoughts like a true sleight of hand artist). The *cuadros* in what Flores calls his “museo del vapor” (“Epidemia” 6) (steam museum) are to be experienced as a “torbellino” (whirlwind) that analogizes the furious pace of change brought by new forces and technologies (6).

In the essay “Los gritos de Madrid,” Flores situates the city within the repercussions of amplified industrial productivity, emphasizing the social changes brought by ventures such as mining, metal smelting, and the building of railroads. Madrid in this essay rings with sounds generated by the mechanized presences of modernization that have supplanted the human “cries” or “voices” of street hawkers and urban life. Madrid becomes no longer a city of people, but rather, a city of residual effects of mass production, where human beings are dwarfed and drowned out by the “gritería descompuesta y atronadora” (incoherent and thundering racket) of “el mundo industrial y mercantil” (7) (the commercial and industrial world). The shouts of traditional street vendors are weak within the monstrous cacophony that culminates in “el áspero galopar de las incansables máquinas de vapor” (8) (the harsh galloping of the tireless steam engines).

Flores depicts the *sociedad del vapor* as conditioned by a culture of *publicidad*. *Publicidad*, or the proto-culture of advertising and marketing to the masses, was becoming, at mid-century, what Wicke calls “a center of knowledge production, a determining economic site, as well as a representational system” (1). In a culture of *publicidad*, visual media intersect with machine-power and advances in printing technologies, and are harnessed by commercial interests toward the shaping of citizen-consumers. Flores depicts a Madrid transformed by the culture of *publicidad* from a web of places and people, into an array of commodities everywhere on display and apparently up for sale: as he puts it in the essay “Retratos en tarjeta,” “nadie se escapa de ser retratado y de ser vendido” (120) (nobody escapes being portrayed and sold). In the culture of *publicidad*, which Flores describes as “el alma de esta generación” (“Los escaparates” 193) (the soul of this generation), everything and everyone is available to the desire to look, and to consume by looking. Yet *publicidad* obscures what Marx called “the secret of our own social products” (I, 85), offering fetishized commodities as a means of dissimulating real work, real relationships, and real problems. In numerous essays from *Ayer, hoy y mañana*, Flores explores the ways in

which *publicidad* impedes the public's capacity to discern originating contexts, and argues that commodification threatens to obliterate a necessary moral component from cultural meanings around the visual.

For example, in "Retrato al daguerreotipo," Flores explores the linked problematic of machine-driven production and the commercialization of seeing made possible through the harnessing of light (that is, photography). Previously, artists spent their time "haciendo cuadrículas y educando la vista para copiar la naturaleza" (24) (drawing grids and educating their sight so as to copy nature). Now (Flores observes), one uses pencil only in servile functions, "sin otro oficio que el de apuntar las señas de una casa o alguna operación mercantil" (24) (without any purpose other than that of jotting down a house number or performing some commercial calculation). The dissemination of photographic imagery responds to a new marketplace of images as products. What contemporary consumers want to buy is not connection to an individual artist's skill—that "trained vision"—but the cheap use of light to reproduce images "con una perfección envidiable" (24) (with an enviable perfection). A photographer may well have been originally a painter (this had been Daguerre's situation, after all), and (as López Mondejar points out) "muchos pintores acabaron por dedicarse a la fotografía, lo cual no deja de ser decisivo en la calidad de los primeros daguerreotipos, realizados por profesionales que conocían los fundamentos básicos del retrato" (*Historia* 23) (many painters ended up dedicating themselves to photography, which remains a decisive factor in the quality of early daguerreotypes, which were made by professionals who knew the basic fundamentals of portraiture). Yet painters could not compete with photographers in the new middle-class market for affordable portraits, when representation of the object seemed most perfectly rendered via a technology which guaranteed resemblance by being what Arnheim called the "product of this object itself, the same way that the illuminated objects in reality imprint their image on the photographic layer" (qtd. in Kittler 41).¹²

But Flores points out that photographs only *seem* to provide a more precise realm of information storage. While it is true, as Kittler observes, that "media can reconstruct bodies beyond the systems of words, colors, or sound intervals," that is, beyond the limits of the "grid of the symbolic" (41), in "Retratos en tarjeta" Flores insists (in the great humanist tradition of satire) that precise replication of the *appearance* of a body, in no way guarantees the viewer's understanding of the ethical or moral *implications* of that body in space and time. Through backgrounds, accessories, lighting and pose, the photographer might attempt to suggest characterization for a sitter. But the artificiality and arbitrary nature of photographic studios' props and backdrops meant that even the most mechanically exact photographic renderings did not have the capacity to provide information about the social truth of a person photographed (Darrah 36).¹³ Though painting and drawing also make copies, they are, according to Flores, (paradoxically) "original"—

that is, original interpretations, the products of an artist's individual imagination and use of materials to record particular objects. Thus photography, which is the production of replicas without "the aid of painting"—that is, *without* a thinking, perceiving artist's intervention to supplement the loss of the original—opens the disturbing potential for the unreflexive presentation of false content as real.

Criticizing commercial portrait photographers who promise to capture "true" images, Flores relates a series of sittings during a typical studio day. He describes a young man having his portrait taken: he first arranges his hair, then he adjusts his hat; he sits still seven seconds, and the camera takes in his image. But as soon as the young man rises and exits the sitting area, "los dependientes del establecimiento quitan la decoración del bosque, y tres venados y un jabalí, y dos perros, que habían puesto allí para dar mayor verdad al cuadro" ("Retratos" 110) (the studio assistants remove the forest decoration, three deer, a wild boar and two dogs, all of which they had placed there to give the scene greater truth). According to Flores, in the commercial studio, photography (supposedly a medium possessed of greater truth than painting), produces images whose truth derives from unreality: a middle-class *cualquier* poses as a politician or diplomat treating matters of world importance, surrounded by a set of unrolled maps; a man asks for a backdrop and props that would suggest he is deep inside a mine; a woman requests staging that would make her seem to be a *poetisa*; and so on (110–17). Such portrait staging, which involved "categorizing" a sitter, was pioneered by Disderi at mid-century (Darrah 34). Flores decries not only the "standardized poses" and "typing of subjects" (34) essential to commercial photographic portraiture, but the way in which the unthinking camera takes in such scenes and replicates them with every (and only) thoroughness of attention to surface detail—resulting, it seems, in fiction authorized by the "pure truth" born of "pure light."

Szarkowski suggests that the exquisite detail rendered possible by the action of light, seemed to lend the everyday subjects of daguerreotype studio portraits importance—an effect enhanced through the backdrops' incorporated conventions of painting, the medium for recording history and events of note (2). The introduction of painted backdrops into studio photographic portraits "revolutionized the concept of picture making and created the illusion of another reality" (Neal 13).¹⁴ The added props used in photography studios were conventions of theatrical stage decoration, designed both to heighten the backdrop's claim to verisimilitude and to enhance the recognizability of the photographically captured assemblage as a "scene." Daguerre, himself obsessed with verisimilitude and the appearance of "truth," is said to have placed, at one point, trees and live animals in front of a painted mountain in a diorama scene (Dolan 49). While the London daguerreotypist Antoine Claudet patented painted backdrops in December 1841, the use of painted representational backgrounds in studio

photographic portraits became common in the 1850s, with the introduction of mass-produced *carte de visite* miniature portraits (Wyman 2). Wyman speculates that the nineteenth-century popular demand for photography “amidst painted scenes, props or constructed environments emerges less out of photography’s technological evolution and more out of the theatrical, dioramic, panoramic, and pedestrian-mall experiences of the nineteenth century” (2).¹⁵ Fontanella points out that the mid-nineteenth-century Spanish public did not just “visit” spectacles, but rather engaged in a new training of their senses, with particular focus on new ways of relating the sense of sight to the understanding (*Historia* 21). For example, the diorama’s spectacle of light effects “no servía simplemente de diversión visual, un fenómeno de luz en movimiento” (did not serve simply as visual entertainment, as a phenomenon of moving light), but also was construed by period audiences as “constituyendo toda una realidad independiente y aparte de lo que pudiera representar” (constituting an independent reality entirely apart from that which it might represent): that is, “el observador de entonces aceptaba semejante espectáculo como guía de sus poderes perceptivos e interpretativos . . . más allá de lo que ya sabía intelectualmente que era la verdad” (22) (the observer of the period accepted such a spectacle as a guide to his or her perceptual and interpretive powers . . . beyond that which he/she intellectually knew to be the truth). Audiences responded to daguerreotypography’s extraordinary level of light-saturated detail with interpretive skills brought to fine arts, theatrical, and spectacular media of representational verisimilitude. In part the tremendous success of studio photography at mid-century was due to its demand for a new multi- or intermediated visual literacy around settings and scenes that drew on viewers’ understanding of the conventions of print texts, scenography, painting, and visual spectacle.

Yet according to Flores, *carte de visite* photographic portraits in particular are antithetical to the development of civic and social understanding permitted by history painting, or by the graphic illustrations elaborating the text content of periodical articles. Mid-century consumers, crazed for the consumption and circulation of small photographic portraits, apparently no longer share the “preocupaciones de antaño” (preoccupations of yesteryear) that moralists such as Juan de Zavaleta held with regard to painted portrait miniatures (“Retratos” 109), for in the seventeenth century (Flores points out), the circulation of miniature portraits was understood to lead to the warping of memory and to delusion among those who possessed them (110). Were Zavaleta alive around 1850 “en este siglo de los retratos de tarjeta, y los más pequeños aun de sortija, y los de llave de reloj, y antes de saludarle las gentes le hubiesen pedido su retrato de tarjeta” (in this century of *carte de visite* portraits, and even smaller ones for watch fobs and keys, if [before greeting him] someone were to ask him for his portrait), he would no doubt remind nineteenth-century consumers that “en el silencio de

un retrato faltan los desabrimientos de un enojo, y . . . locas con el amor las damas *regalan con veneno* la memoria” (109–110) (a photograph’s silence fails to register a passing passion, and . . . love-sick women lavish its poison on what they recall). The desire to buy, possess, exchange, and look at multiple miniature portraits causes the consumer to forget the original objects and circumstances of those portraits: a tiny photograph of a sitter reveals nothing of one’s emotional or physical connections to that sitter (the photograph’s “silencio”), and is devoid of information (as Darrah had pointed out) about the sitter’s “social truth”—which permits the photograph’s use as a fetish rather than as a medium for memory and history (“*regalan con veneno la memoria*”).

The photograph’s voiding of social context becomes absurd in the case of a woman wishing to pose as a ballerina enacting an expressive scene. She demands that the photographer depict her dancing the role of a young woman whose “*pasión no tenía límites*” (“Retratos” 116) (passion knows no limits) and whose image is caught “*al momento en que sale del convento loca de alegría y de amor, porque la dicen que va por fin a unirse al que ama, a pesar de la oposición de su padre*” (117) (at the moment when she leaves the convent crazed with happiness and love, as she has heard that she will finally be united with the one she adores, despite her father’s opposition). Conveying such a complicated story, and capturing such an inflated desire, are impossible in a studio *carte de visite* photograph; in the end the sitter must content herself with the photographer’s scanty props for the category “theatre” (“*diez o doce ramilletes de flores y seis coronas de laurel*”) (ten or twelve bunches of flowers, and six crowns of laurel leaves) and for the category “convent” (“*lo único que se hizo fue poner en el fondo una capilla de género ojival, con una verja como de convento de monjas*”) (117) (the only thing done was to place an ogive-arched altar in the background, with a grating like those found on nunnery windows). These serve to depict some elements of the story fabricated by the sitter; but the end product—the photograph—will reveal neither the sitter’s vanity and feverish imagination, nor any information about who she is both before and after her desired pose. The question becomes, then, what is the photograph, what is its truth? As practiced in Madrid in the 1850s (argues Flores), the only truth of the mass-produced *carte de visite* portrait is that it authorizes fictions and obstructs the necessary work of origin in the construction of social perceptions. But this is a larger problem of the culture of *publicidad*. Barnhurst and Nerone comment that nineteenth-century consumers of mass circulation print media—and both newspapers and photographs were print media—became “more and more socialized into the ‘land of desire’” that *publicidad* was “helping to create” (61); in this sense mass media have always played a role in distorting consumer perceptions of the reality of events within a given socio-political context. Flores uses *costumbrismo* as a means of exploring these phenomena, arguing that in the culture of desire fed by *publicidad*, the

mass distribution of photographic portraits on calling cards thwarts consumers' and viewers' perceptions of the "original."¹⁶

Clients who bring their money to daguerreotypists are buying a kind of supercession of the original, a replication ensuring, as Flores asserts, that one does not have to "entregar su imagen a la inconstante volubilidad de los ríos, y su cuerpo a las corruptoras entrañas de la tierra" ("Retratos" 108) (surrender one's image to the inconstant volubility of the rivers, and one's body to the corrupting bowels of the earth). The "reality" that photography promises is not just technical but conceptual; it is the modern idea of arresting change and trumping time, an outcome desperately desired by what Flores describes as "esta humanidad y . . . este siglo que tanto anhelan prolongarse y alargar la vida" (108) (this humanity and . . . this century that so desperately desire to extend themselves and prolong life). Mid-century observers of photography comprehended that the camera image "would survive the object, and become the remembered reality" (Szarkowski 3). As an antidote to commercial photography's false claims about objects, Flores fantasizes about a machine he calls a "pistógrafo" ("Retratos" 119). It would take pictures in the blink of an eye without any function accorded to the "volition of the photographed object" (119). The *pistógrafo* would snap lightning-fast images of a bird in flight, a sneeze, a mountain in the distance—of the ephemeral or of the impossible to grasp. It would generate images of unrepeatable moments, which would be, for that very reason, the most accurate possible representations of the real, even more accurate than painting because the *pistógrafo* would capture actual occurrences which, as they are unpremeditated, are the only means of preserving for posterity the essence of the rapidly changing world (119).¹⁷

Commodifying Place and Time

The forces of industrialization seemed to Flores to offer the false promise of an endlessly possible present. Just as steam-driven machines and their "cries" have supplanted human "cries" in the city streets, photography's mechanical use of light has supplanted human criteria of memory. Further, in mounting props and sets by which clients might feign to be what they are not, commercial photographers purvey the voiding of presence. This is the problem with photography; it is impossible to capture "reality" without interference from the client-seller relationship, which in turn is distorted through the market imperative, and which is designed to convert the "retrato" into a product purchased to further the culture of *publicidad*. The commercial photograph generates objects of exchange in the marketplace; as Flores laments, everyone is in everyone else's photo albums, and "el que no tiene amigos, como no puede prescindir de tener álbum de retratos, compra

los que quiere, o los que puede, porque ya nos venden a todos en pública almoneda” (120) (as it is impossible even for a man who has no friends to avoid having a portrait album, he buys those which he desires, or those which he can get hold of, given that nowadays every one of us is for sale at public auction). By mid-century, studio photographs and *carte de visite* portraits were purveyed in response to a mass market; in 1853 the *New York Daily Tribune* estimated that millions of photographic portraits were being produced that year (Szarkowski 1–2), and in 1862, Disderi (inventor of the *carte de visite*) sold 2,300 *carte* portraits in a single day (López Mondejar, *Fotografía y Sociedad* 36). Between 1861 and 1867, three million *cartes de visite* were sold every year in England alone (Darrah 4). Around 1850, everyone wants to sell and buy images of themselves and others. This requires multiple copies—hundreds, thousands, millions—such that what circulates in the marketplace has nothing to do with society, and everything to do with fetishism.

One basic assumption of literary *costumbrismo* was that narrative, on-site “witness” of a described object authorized the truth-value of observation of that object. Thus *costumbrismo* utilized the device of “presence in place” to lend realism to its depictions and maximize their analogy to the truth effects of engravings and photographs as they were developing in print media at mid-century. But as Flores conceived of it, literary *costumbrismo*’s greater truthfulness lay in the fact that it involved a relationship between people—a writer and a reader—that enjoyed a direct connection of mutual recognition in a given place and time—what he called “el telégrafo de Gutenberg” (“Octubre” 156) (Gutenberg’s telegraph). How different from a print medium, such as the advertising flyer, whose bold graphics supplant an itinerant vendor’s *gritos*, and whose anonymous distribution is divorced from the originary relation between body and place, seller and buyer, in a transaction. In his critique of media that compete with *costumbrismo* for consumer attention in the marketplace, Flores depicts a Madrid reeling from the effects of the very modernity Larra and Mesonero had tied to *costumbrismo*’s potential. For in the modern, “steam-driven society,” in the “whirlwind” of photographic images divorced from the civic work of memory and recognition, commodification ultimately becomes the medium of choice to image the here and now.

Notes

1. For more on the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* and the development of the illustrated press in Spain, See: Fontanella; Tuñón et al; Riego; Rubio; Simón Díaz; and Haidt.

2. “S’il lui est permis d’impiéter sur le domaine de l’impalpable et de l’imaginaire, sur tout ce qui ni vaut que parce que l’homme y ajoute de son âme, alors malheur à nous!”
3. In the introduction to the collected issues of the *Semanario Pintoresco* for the year 1850, Angel Fernández-Ríos boasts that the paper is illustrated entirely by native artists, without incorporating a single engraving of foreign origin (“A los lectores” 2).
4. “A mig camí entre la cultura escrita i la tradició oral.”
5. Darrah (11), citing an 1860 commentary on the impact of photography.
6. I have addressed this subject at greater length in “Flores en Babilonia.”
7. For more on this nineteenth-century mediated environment, see Henkin.
8. For a good overview of period theories of *costumbrista* practice, see Ayala. A good discussion of *costumbrista* reactions to photographic realism is found in Fernández (323–47).
9. Good background on the linkage between the middle class and *costumbrismo* in modernity is provided in Escobar.
10. In particular, see Montesinos, and numerous essays in the important bodies of work of Escobar and Rubio Cremades.
11. A similar teleological narrative prevails in film studies, such that visual cultural forms and industries prior to Lumière are termed “pre-cinematographic,” and are inserted into a timeline culminating in the development of moving pictures.
12. Indeed, almost immediately following the invention of photography, artists found a new demand for work copying photographs for the burgeoning print market in engraved and lithographed landscapes and views (López Mondejar, *Fotografía y Sociedad* 30).
13. Perloff asks, “What exactly does one remember” through photographs? “One looks in vain at these obituary photos of men and women, some old, some younger, and even a child or two, for clues about the meaning of their lives” (40).
14. See also Darrah, 31.
15. Ironically, these are the very experiences of urban life that Baudelaire recognized as integral to modernity. See his “The Painter of Modern Life.”
16. For more on this issue, see Haidt, “Flores en Babilonia.”
17. Of course, nearly one hundred years later, Polaroid invented a *pistógrafo*, marketed as the “Land camera.” One wonders what Flores would have thought of disposable *pistógrafos*.

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