
LIGHT FROM THE REMOTE PAST TO ILLUMINATE OUR FUTURE PATH

Humberto Ortega-Villaseñor* and Alvaro F. Ortega González

*University of Guadalajara, Department of Literary Studies & Department of History,
Calle Guanajuato 1045, Artesanos, 44260 Guadalajara, Jalisco, México*

(Received 14 February 2017)

Abstract

There are a number of ancient fundamental concepts — Teotl, Truth-root, Flower and song, and God-infused heart — that provide lifeblood for Mexican aesthetics, and that have their roots in the Cosmology of one of the cradles of human civilization: Mesoamerica. This modest essay sets out first to assess the importance of the seminal studies made by Father Ángel María Garibay and Professor Miguel León-Portillo in the context of foundational approaches to pre-Columbian aesthetics. Next, it weighs the contributions to the field made in this century by numerous researchers and scholars from different countries who have shed new light on these concepts and helped to unpack them and relate them to Mexico's cultural wealth and diversity. Subsequently the paper explores the mystical-religious, shamanic and pantheistic aspects of this Cosmology in order to analyse their impact on the ancient aesthetic canons and on the artistic vision and vocation of contemporary Mexicans, especially artisans. Finally, the historic weight of the concepts analysed here is verified or corroborated, as well as their cosmological link through the conduit of the humanistic legacy of Quetzalcóatl and recent discoveries in the temple dedicated to his memory in Teotihuacan.

Keywords: mystical-religious, artistic vision, cosmological link, sacred aesthetics

1. Introduction

There are many limitations that keep us from objectively assessing the past of civilizations that arose in places like Mexico and the rest of the American continent. These lands were colonized in remote times (in the 16th century), and the process was long and drawn-out, leading to the fragmentation of valuable cultural objects, the destruction of the language written down in numerous codices, and the suppression of the learned men who know how to read them. Compounding the misfortune, the documents that the post-Conquest chroniclers had access to dealt only with cultural manifestations that had already been abandoned [V.M. Hernández Torres, *Ángel María Garibay Kintana: La vida sencilla*, in *El pensamiento latinoamericano del siglo XX ante la condición humana*, J.L. Gómez-Martínez (ed.), A. Saldino García (coordr.), Digital

*E-mail: Huorvi@gmail.com

version, started in June 2004, <http://www.ensayistas.org/critica/generales/C-H/mexico/garibay.htm>, consulted May 2, 2013, ISBN: 0-9763880-0-6].

However, as the erudite Italian archaeologist, anthropologist and ethnologist Laurette Sejourné has observed, the onslaught of critics who challenged the historical validity of the written documentation written in Nahuatl both before and after the Conquest has been rebuffed by archaeological discoveries made over the last 100 years, and by painstaking, impassioned studies undertaken by several generations of researchers of Anthropology, Astronomy, Astrophysics, Archaeology, Epigraphy, Iconography, Morphology and Symbology; these scholarly efforts have overcome the obstacle that blocked any serious approach to the Nahuatl writings and Mesoamerican archaeological remains. Once the temporal discrepancy between them was solved, the two kinds of evidence have revealed an astonishing vitality. In this way, the myths shed light on the old stones, which now pulsate in all their signs, while the songs, chronicles, codices and the progress being made in deciphering Mayan glyphs give voice to the ancient texts, transforming them from tantalizing enigmas into the echo of a stunning fullness of thought [1].

2. Cosmology, Teotl and the metaphor of the root

On this basis, a solid group of scholars of the Philosophy of the Ancient Mexicans now concur that at the heart of Nahuatl philosophy lies the idea of a single, dynamic, life-giving, eternally self-generating and self-regenerative sacred power, energy or force: what the Nahuatls call *teotl* [2-7].

Elizabeth Boone [2, p. 105], ethnohistorian, Mesoamericanist and academic, with a specialization in pre-Columbian art from the University of Tulane, writes: “The real meaning of [*teotl*] is spirit -- a concentration of power as a sacred and impersonal force”. According to Jorge Klor de Alva, “*Teotl* ...implies something more than the idea of the divine manifested in the form of a god or gods; instead it signifies the sacred in more general terms” [4, p. 7].

Moreover, this Cosmology is processual. What does this mean? *Teotl* is properly understood as ever-flowing and ever-changing energy-in-motion - not as a discrete, static entity. *Teotl*, and therefore the unceasing evolution of the Cosmos, are characterized by what some scholars, such as John Maffie, call “dialectical polar monism”. A monism that maintains that: (1) the Cosmos and its contents are substantively and formally identical to *teotl*, and (2) that *teotl* manifests itself primarily as the unceasing, cyclical oscillation of polar, but complementary opposites [J. Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy IEP, A Peer Reviewed Academic Resource*, J. Fieser & B. Dowden (eds.), <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aztec/#SH2d>, consulted November 5, 2014].

This duality takes the shape of unending opposition between contrary, mutually interdependent and mutually complementary polarities that alternately divide, dominate and explain diversity, movement and the momentary arrangement of the Universe. Given its essentially processual and dynamic nature, *teotl* cannot be properly characterized as being, or as non-being, but as

coming to be. Being and non-being are simply two dialectically interrelated manifestations or facets of teotl, and as such, they cannot be applied to the principle itself (Teotl).

3. Pantheistic, shamanic, mystical-religious and aesthetic elements

Nahuatl philosophers also conceived of teotl from a pantheistic perspective. What does this mean? (a) Everything that exists constitutes an utterly inclusive and interrelated oneness; (b) this oneness is sacred; and (c) everything that exists is substantially identical and thus one with the sacred. Regarding pantheism, see [8-10]; all three offer interpretations that are very similar to pre-Hispanic metaphysics.

As Eva Hunt explains: “Reality, nature and experience were nothing but multiple manifestations of a single unity of being... The [sacred] was *both* the one and the many... It was also multiple, fluid, encompassing of the whole, its aspects were changing images, dynamic, never frozen, but constantly recreated, redefined.” [9, p. 55]

To take this concept one step further, the unceasing generation-and-regeneration of the Cosmos by Teotl is also unceasing self-transformation-and-retransformation of being. The Nahuatl understand this process in two different but closely related ways. One is tied to Aesthetics. Teotl is a consummate artist who continuously models itself and remakes itself both internally and as the cosmos. The Cosmos is Teotl’s *in Xochitl, in Cuicatl* (‘flower and song’). The Nahuatl use *in Xochitl, in Cuicatl* to refer to human beings’ creative, artistic and metaphoric activity in general, emulating these components of teotl itself (for example, making poetry, singing, playing music, painting/writing — the Nahuatl saw painting and writing as analogous activities). “As *teotl’s* ‘flower and song’ the Cosmos is *teotl’s* grand, ongoing artistic-cum-metaphorical *self-presentation*; *teotl’s* ongoing work of performance art or ‘metaphor in motion’” [11].

The cosmos is teotl’s *nahual* (‘disguise’ or ‘mask’). The Nahuatl word *nahual* comes from *nahualli*, meaning a shaman who changes shape (alluding to its indigenous shamanic roots). The ongoing evolution of the Cosmos and its multiple aspects are none other than self-maskings or self-disguisings of this principle [6, 12-14].

Teotl manifests itself and disguises itself before human beings in a dizzying array of artistic-shamanic forms: the apparent materialness of that which exists, i.e., the static appearance of entities such as human beings, mountains, trees, insects, etc. This is an illusion, since each and every one of them is simply one more facet of teotl’s sacred movement.

As we can see, in the final analysis Teotl moves and works as a “metaphor of the root or the truth” to which Stephen Pepper [15] alludes, and that Alfredo López Austin [16] calls an “archetype” and “logical principle” that governs the unifying “coherent core” of Nahuatl philosophy. Teotl encompasses metaphysical, epistemological, moral and aesthetic facets inasmuch as it

functions simultaneously as primal source, object, and/or level of reality, knowledge, value, rightness, and beauty [<http://www.iep.utm.edu/aztec/#SH2d>].

4. Conception of human beings as linked to Teotl and to Aesthetics

So, what can be said about human beings, art and culture? That all of these concepts have an impact on their lives. Thus, humans cognize knowingly if and only if they cognize with well-rootedness-cum-alethia. They cognize with well-rootedness-cum-alethia if and only if their cognizing is well-rooted in teotl. The Nahuas conceived well-rootedness-cum-alethia in terms of burgeoning [17, 18]. Conscious knowledge is a kind of cognitive flourishing. It is the flower of an organic process, a blossom unfolding within a person's heart. When it occurs, teotl manifests itself and makes itself known. As a generative manifestation of teotl, human knowledge represents one of the ways or paths by which teotl makes itself known faithfully, genuinely and truthfully here on Earth. Consequently, human knowledge directs itself consciously, which means it understands, manifests, embodies, promulgates and expresses this concept.

Human beings come to know teotl by using their heart – not their head or their brain. Located between the head and the liver, the heart is the only organ qualified to achieve the proper balance between the reason of the head and the passion of the liver, and this balance is essential for understanding teotl. On this basis, Nahuatl *tlamatimies* turn to 'flower and song' (poetry, writing-painting, music) to emulate and disseminate this principle. 'Flower and song' comes from a heart ritually prepared to embody and present the proper balance between reason and passion, masculine and feminine, active and passive, etc.

The balance would come to be symbolized or emblemized by Quetzalcoatl, the 'Feathered Serpent', who in the final analysis is none other than the expression or metaphor of a profound humanism symbolized in a being who lifts himself up out of his own limitations to become teotl, to become divine in life. This is why Quetzalcoatl runs through or ties together each and every one of the cultures of Mexico that fall under the catch-all category of Mesoamerican culture (starting with the Olmec culture, as shown by Sejourné [1]). Thus, the figure also functioned as patron god of artists and sages. In its blending of attributes from birds (the sky) and serpents (the Earth), the 'Feathered Serpent' symbolized the union of opposites, of man and woman. In fact, Quetzalcoatl's joint patronage of sages and artists suggests his ultimate identity, and the equivalence of wisdom and artistic excellence. As Rafael Acosta de Arriba reminds us: "Octavio Paz performs an exercise of visual archaeology about pre-Hispanic art, trying to integrate Mesoamerican art and civilizations to an up-to-date, erudite and interconnected understanding of his studies of Mexican literature. ... When Paz points out that art survives societies create by them, simultaneously he offers us the ritual in stone of those civilizations: architecture, statues, and other artistic or religious productions, as bridges to access a culture of translation from the past, a sort of transmutation or metaphor

of the original. He emphasises the value of Mexican Revolution in retracing this way to the profound change of vision that Mexicans reached about his past.

Using pre-Hispanic art as a basis, Octavio Paz undertakes an exercise in visual archaeology with his studies of Mexican literature, in an attempt to integrate Mesoamerican art and civilizations into an updated and erudite understanding, full of interconnections. ...When Paz states that art outlives the societies that create it, he offers us at the same time the rituality of those civilizations carved in stone — architecture, statues, and other artistic or religious productions — as bridges to a culture of translation of the past, a form of transmutation or metaphor of the original. Retracing the path that Mexicans took toward a profound redefinition of their own past, he underscores the importance of the Mexican Revolution.” [19]

5. Cosmic wealth and cultural diversity in harmony

All of these considerations give us insight not only into the cultural and civilizational legacy of the principles and concepts emblemized in Quetzalcoatl, passed down over the millennia, as we know from archaeological discoveries and the protocols of historical archaeology; we also grasp what led Octavio Paz to seek out specialized information in order to gain solid, in-depth knowledge of these archaeological stones, as a way to grasp the spiritual complexity of the peoples who created them, and of their mentality, “in a research effort that has features of scientific inquiry” [19]. We can also clarify two aspects that we feel need to be highlighted here:

- a) On the one hand, the expressive fidelity, originality and incidence that characterize the aesthetic canons of each of the cultures making up the mosaic of this civilizational heritage. In this sense, as Guillermo Bonfil Batalla writes, we are dealing with “a complex and diversified process, the knowledge of which is constantly enriched with new archaeological and historical findings but that is undeniably profuse and widespread, with profoundly differentiated aesthetic profiles and canons” [20].
- b) On the other hand, we have the manifest spiritual and expressive wealth, diversity and strength that seem to have set down deep roots in Mexicans’ aesthetic sensitivity, not just in terms of the wide range of artistic expressions that exist in the country, but also in terms of the cultural objects that are still handcrafted by millions of people all over the country. This speaks of a persistent, impassioned vocation for arts and handcrafts in Mexico.

In this respect, an enormous debt is owed to historical archaeology, because it gives us a solid foundation to build on. As Joel W. Palka, professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois, points out: “the archaeology of indigenous historic sites in Mesoamerica has contributed significantly to the study of indigenous culture change, especially where written sources lack information on native societies. In many cases, archaeology provides the only

data on historic sites and indigenous peoples or it nicely complements historical and ethnographic information.” [21, p. 335]

The same researcher provides evidence to back up our assertion about handcrafts, although there is no denying that the introduction of goods from the Old World fundamentally transformed local native economies all over Mesoamerica. Joel Palka makes the following incisive observation: “The presence of European goods was negligible in many rural areas. Native items, particularly ceramics and stone implements, survived or were little transformed in form, manufacture, or function. The effects of the conquest were less apparent socially and materially as the distance from colonial towns increased. In other rural zones [...], cultural autonomy prevailed and the impacts of European colonization were felt later [...] At the same time, indigenous cultural elements, including domestic life and local economies, continued with fewer changes.” [21, p. 336]

6. Cosmogenesis of Mexican aesthetics in general

All of this suggests that the depth of the concepts we have analysed in this paper must surely have permeated the creativity not only of artists working in the media of the word, music and the performing arts, but also of craftspeople creating the profusion of popular art forms so prevalent in Mexico today: many symbols, objects, techniques and crafts have endured the passage of time, while others have evolved at their own rhythm as they have come into contact with canons, materials and technologies from other latitudes and cultures [22]. As Rafael Acosta has made clear, Octavio Paz himself “touches on important elements of the relationship between the present day and Mesoamerican civilizations, between the sensitivities of the former and the symbols of the latter. He contends that this art follows a logic of the shapes that is translated into a cosmology.” [19] “In this way, the otherness of the Mesoamerican civilization is resolved by its opposite: thanks to modern aesthetics, these remote works of art are also our contemporaries.” [19]

Carlos Romero Giordano manages to relate the prodigious, complex cultural process on the everyday level to the collective imaginary and memory of indigenous peoples in vivid, straightforward terms: “In the Christian religion, indigenous artists found a new outlet for their creativity within the new order, in the form of a syncretism that began to take shape: the paste made from the pith of corn stalks would no longer be used to represent their deities, but rather to fashion crucifixes of impressive beauty and realism (...) Handcraft production was enriched with new raw materials, forms, designs and colors, due primarily to European, African and Asian influences that left their mark in different ways. Glass, wrought iron, maiolica-style pottery as well as stringed instruments, among other manual activities, were gradually incorporated as artistic media, increasing the already prodigious options.” [22, p. 33-34]

In this sense, it is not absurd to assert that Quetzalcoatl lives on in the present day, and not just in certain contemporary rites and dances among indigenous peoples, especially the *Coras* and *Wiraxika*. Jesús Jaúregui maintains that even today “the feathered serpent is represented in its antithetical manifestations: shamanic arrow with rattles or scorpion tail, peyote and *kieri* (thorn apple), Morning Star and Evening Star, daytime Sun and nighttime Sun. This symbolic complex recalls the original cosmic struggle between light and darkness, widespread in Amerindian mythology.” [23]

In the same way, *teotl* is alive in people of indigenous or mestizo origins who make use of the benefits of agave by transforming its fibres into woven material, or who eat squash or use the gourds as receptacles; or in those who work with clay and become potters, or who turn cotton into unique fabrics. The gods deserve only the very best of the things produced on the face of the earth. Thus jade – heart of the mountain - is carved in a way that is commensurate with its eventual purpose, perhaps to adorn its creators; gold, considered the perspiration of the Sun, heavenly dross, is bound to undergo a transformation process leading to the perfection of its intricate filigree, painstaking work that befits the sacred origin of the material [22].

In its ongoing oscillation between beauty and functionality, pleasure and service, the handcrafted object teaches us lessons of sociability. In the context of celebrations and ceremonies, it radiates with even greater intensity and integrity. In celebrations, the collectivity communes with itself and this communion is achieved through ritual objects that are almost always handcrafted. If the celebration implies taking part in the original time – the collectivity literally distributes the commemorated date among its members as sacred bread-handcrafts represent a kind of celebration of the object, transforming the utensil into a sign of participation [24].

7. Tomorrow’s aesthetics and legacy

This topic takes on unique importance when we consider that Mexico is the second-leading producer of handcrafts in the world, and that Romero Giordano estimates a total of over 5 million craftspeople in the country, most of whom live in indigenous towns and communities, and in urban centres. This is a strikingly relevant fact that suggests a stubborn determination to affirm Mexico’s deep-rooted culture.

“Indifferent to borders and political systems, handcrafts outlive republics and empires: the pottery, basket-weaving, and musical instruments that appear in the frescos of Bonampak have outlived the Mayan priests, the Aztec warriors, the colonial friars and Mexican presidents ... Craftspeople defend us from the unification of technique and its geometric deserts. By preserving differences, they preserve the fruitfulness of history. The history of handcrafts does not revolve around a succession of inventions or of unique (or allegedly unique) works. Handcrafts do not actually have a history, if we understand history to be an uninterrupted series of changes. Between their past and their present, there is

no break, only continuity. Modern artists set out to conquer eternity; designers, to conquer the future. Craftspeople, on the other hand, surrender to time. Traditional but not historical, tied to the past but free of dates, the handcrafted object teaches us to mistrust the mirages of history and the illusions of the future. Craftspeople are not interested in conquering time; they prefer to go with its flow. By way of repetitions that include imperceptible but real variations, their works endure.” [24, p. 137-138]

It would seem that these millions of Mexicans, compelled either by need or by creativity, have refused to ignore or cast aside the trail blazed centuries ago by pre-Columbian artists imbued with genuine mysticism and an uncommon vision, which called for one-minded devotion, immense patience, and rigorous technical and cultural formation in order to attain excellence. As Miguel León-Portilla explains: “With his dual formation in the Nahuatl cultural legacy and in artistic technique, the artist aspired to become a special being who could ‘converse with his own heart’: *moyolnonotzani*, a concept repeated in practically all the texts. Invoking over and over his own inner ‘mobility’ – his heart (*yóllotl*) – and drawing on the doctrines of his religion and the ancient thinking, he would not rest until he discovered for himself the symbols and metaphors, the ‘flowers and song’, that would give root to his life and finally be incorporated into inert material so that the people in general could also grasp the message.” [25]

For some strange reason, *teotl* (transfigured) seems to live on discretely in the uniqueness of each object created by these Mexican hands, and to re-emerge forcefully from those age-old places with such enigmatic names as Teotihuacan, which in Vetancourt’s interpretation means *place where the gods are worshiped*, and that Veytia translates as *abode of the gods*. The word is made up of the root *teotl*, god, combined with the linking elements *ti*, *hua*, which denote possession, and the suffix *can*, place: *place of those who possessed gods*, *place of the god-worshippers*.

Although the etymology confirms the enigma that the city was discovered and named by the astonished Mexicas, it also corresponds to a revered sanctuary whose condition seems to explain not just its cosmic and pre-historic existence crystallized in the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, but at the same time the promise of a mythic return in today’s world and in the future. The Temple contains, in the tunnel of stars that leads to its inner chambers – an astounding discovery only recently announced in October 2014 - the most unexpected and profuse offering of artworks from Mesoamerican civilization ever uncovered (50,000 objects), all under the cosmic sign of *Teotl*: the Truth-root, the Flower and song, and the god-infused hearts who left their starry architectural beauty to perpetuate this magnificent urban centre that wished to serve as a beacon for the future path of culture and Humanity.

References

- [1] L. Séjourné, *El Universo de Quetzalcóatl*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1962, 6.
- [2] E.H. Boone, *The Aztec World*, Smithsonian Books, Washington DC, 1994.

- [3] L. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1989.
- [4] J. Klor de Alva, *San Jose Studies*, **5** (1979) 7-21.
- [5] J.D. Monaghan, *Theology and History in the Study of Mesoamerican Religions*, in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, J.D. Monaghan (ed.), Supplement 6, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2000, 24-49.
- [6] H.B. Nicholson, *Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico*, in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, G. Ekholm & I. Bernal (eds.), vol. 10, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1971, 395-446.
- [7] R. Townsend, *The Aztecs*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2009.
- [8] M. Levine, *Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity*, Routledge, London, 1994.
- [9] E. Hunt, *The Transformation of the Hummingbird Cultural Roots of a Zinacantan Mythical Poem*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977.
- [10] I. Nicholson, *Firefly in the Night: A Study of Ancient Mexican Poetry and Symbolism*, Faber & Faber, London, 1959.
- [11] P. Markman and R. Markman, *Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, 90.
- [12] P.T. Furst, *Actas del XLI Congreso Internacional de Americanistas*, **(3)** (1974) 149-157.
- [13] W. Gingerich, *Chipahuacanemiliztli, The Purified Life in the Discourses of Book IV, Florentine Codex*, in *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan*, J. Tosserand & K. Dakin (eds.), BAR International Series, Oxford, 1988, 517-544.
- [14] B.R. Ortiz de Montellano, *Aztec Medicine, Health and Nutrition*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1980, 308.
- [15] S. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972, 364.
- [16] A. Lopez Austin, *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist*, University Press of Colorado, Niwot, 1997, 440.
- [17] P. Kondrla and P. Repar, *Komunikacie* **19(1)** (2017) 20-22.
- [18] G. Brotherston, *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1979.
- [19] R. Acosta de Arriba, *Revista Excelencias*, **4** (2009), on line at <http://www.revistas-excelencias.com/arte-por-excelencias/editorial-4/reporte/octavio-paz-y-la-critica-de-arte>.
- [20] G. Bonfil Batalla, *México profundo. Una civilización negada*, Grijalbo, Mexico City, 1989, 254.
- [21] J.W. Palka, *J. Archaeol. Res.*, **17(4)** (2009) 297-346.
- [22] C. Romero Giordano, *México desconocido*, **247** (1997) 30-41.
- [23] J. Jáuregui, *Arqueología Mexicana*, **9(53)** (2002) 64-69.
- [24] O. Paz, *Revista Colombiana de Psicología*, **5-6** (1997) 133-139.
- [25] M. León-Portilla, *Los antiguos mexicanos a través de sus crónicas y cantares*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1983, 169-170.