

(Hi)story in a Subway Car

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Conceiving of the future of a society as synonymous with progress/modernity, ignoring the past and its specters does not mean that they cannot live in it, as ghosts. In Mexico, the official celebrations of the bicentennial of independence and the centennial of the Revolution turned history into spectacle, betting on oblivion. In answer, the MUAC mounted “Spectographs: Memory and History,” another way of conceiving of the dialogue between the past and the present. We will look at one of its four sections, “Archaeologies in Modernity,” titled *“Yellow Capitalism”: (Hi)story of a Sale*.

Walls and windows were covered with objects and videos relating to itinerant sales, the sale of pirate merchandise and junky trinkets in Mexico City subway cars. That is, it deals with the “vestiges” of modernity, the remains of a capitalist upheaval that threw thousands into unemployment, thousands who “reinvented” the economy to try to survive.

The exhibition of objects and videos out of their habitual context leads to an analysis of the roots and structure of what is so commonplace that it has become invisible to city dwellers, particularly for a passengers on transportation like the subway.

Pirate copies of DVD documentaries, books by well-known writers, items that were “the latest thing” like the ones alluding to the commemoration of the bicentennial and centennial (bracelets, earrings in the colors of the Mexican flag, pins that light up) are some of the merchandise behind one display window, as though they were relics or very valuable objects, or stuck to the windows in the room. The disparity among the items is chaotic; but nevertheless, there is order behind the

“Yellow capitalism” makes everything cheaper, and therefore disposable. Most things sold in the subway cost no more than Mex\$15 (a little over a dollar). The low price adds value to the product itself.

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Jota Izquierdo, “Yellow Capitalism’: (Hi)story of a Sale,” 2010 (multimedia installation).

Courtesy of the MUAC



Patricia Pérez

The salespeople's "equipment."



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"The word" and the merchandise.

chaos. It can be discerned thanks to a large yellow diagram that accompanies the exhibition.

The diagram represents two counterposed models that could not exist without each other: "classical capitalism" and "yellow capitalism." "Yellow capitalism," which owes its name to the fact that many of the products sold come from China, uses the supposed modernity that swept away everything in its path without fulfilling the promise of progress and copies the structure of the capitalist economic model to use in its favor. The means of production used before only by monopolies, the owners of everything, are now used freely to copy huge quantities of what the formal economy produces, to be consumed by the "other public."

The analysis deals with the things itinerant salespeople use to distribute and hawk their merchandise. They combine the modern with the rudimentary, the technological with the ingenious. On the one hand, on exhibit is a "model" of the equipment salespeople use to display their products to passengers: a

backpack with an amplifier inside it and a DVD player with a screen. Also, together with the merchandise exhibited, you can see small pieces of paper with "the word" written on it; this is the script describing their "product," sometimes written by hand, other times printed, that the "car-man" or "car-woman" prepares, learns by heart, and recites to the passengers to convince them to buy. This empirically developed marketing strategy is surprising.

Offering the possibility of getting something that would be impossible to purchase in the formal economy is one of the driving forces behind this "yellow capitalism." An example of the "words" exhibited in the show says, "I am putting

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Elsie Montiel



Courtesy of the MUAC

Tania Candiani, *Read Straight Through*, from the "Archaeologies of Modernity" nucleus.



Courtesy of the MUAC

directly into your hands the *National Geographic* documentary called *Olmeccs, Mother Culture of Mesoamerica...* for young students, for children, or for your personal consumption." Documentaries of all kinds, surplus books by world-renowned authors, magazines that, although old, are still useful: in this case, what is being sold is the idea of "culture" and "knowledge" accessible to all.

This new form of capitalism makes everything cheaper, and therefore disposable. Most things sold in the subway do not cost more than Mex\$15 (a little over a dollar). The low price adds value to the product itself, paradoxical as it may seem, since in a country where the minimum wage is Mex\$60/day (US\$5), a trinket for half a dollar or a movie for under a

dollar seems within anybody's reach. The "car-men" and "car-women" also sell the fantasy of having buying power.

There are videotaped testimonies of very experienced itinerant salespeople showing what is sold there and why. "What is sold is whatever's new, what's in fashion or in season," and the basic thing is to stay up to date, says one of the interviewees who goes to Mexico City's Tepito neighborhood to buy his "Chinese trinkets," generally bought by parents for their children as toys. Another young woman explains that subway sales is a job she inherited from her mother, and expresses her criticisms of what she sells: "It's crud, and people like buying it." Another woman describes what people like to purchase: "'brand name stuff,' chocolate candies, batteries, but it has to be 'brand name'."

"Yellow Capitalism': (Hi)story of a Sale" sheds light on a daily occurrence and is an invitation to the viewer, who also may have been tempted to acquire one of the products on offer, to stop and think about a topic generally only discussed in terms of "piracy," as a damaging, pernicious activity, without

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Carla Herrera-Prats, *Official Stories IV*, 2000, from the "Archaeologies of Modernity" nucleus.

going to the bottom of the problem or looking for the causes. "Yellow capitalism" emerges as a copy of an economic model that no longer functions and is expressed through the microcosm that is the subway.

The subway is the city....Almost to the letter. It is the life of everyone trapped in a single great perspective....And it is the horizon of the professions and the crafts, of the orientations and disorientations, of the employments, sub-employments and un-employments....The subway is not a trait of the city; it is, I insist, the megalopolis in all its splendor, housed in its ruins...it is the presentiment of the mall whose origin can be glimpsed in the itinerant salespeople.¹

And isn't "yellow capitalism," with its cheap goods, pirated copies, disposable items, the product of a model in decline in which the remains of a forgotten history are accumulated until today? The specters of "classical capitalism" are manifested through the "car-men" of each of Mexico City's subway lines, and not only through them, but also through the pas-

sengers, who most of the time live in harsh economic conditions, given the continuity of "capitalism in a failed state," while outside of that, from a present in ruins, others continue with their gaze fixed on progress and modernity. **MM**

Consult: www.capitalismoamarillo.net.

NOTES

¹ Carlos Monsiváis, *Apocalipstick* (Mexico City: Random House Mondadori, 2009), pp. 241-242.



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Vicente Razo, *General Interest Publications*, from the "Archaeologies of Modernity" nucleus.

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