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Tale of the Origin

OF A MEXICAN MYTHICAL TALE

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Visible Language 32.3

Brizuela, 234–255

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The cover and gesture of the presentation are rhetorical.



Understatement

A small title represents a huge story.

Allegory

The format of the book is based on the cosmic relation 13:20, which represents the Aztec science-religion philosophy.

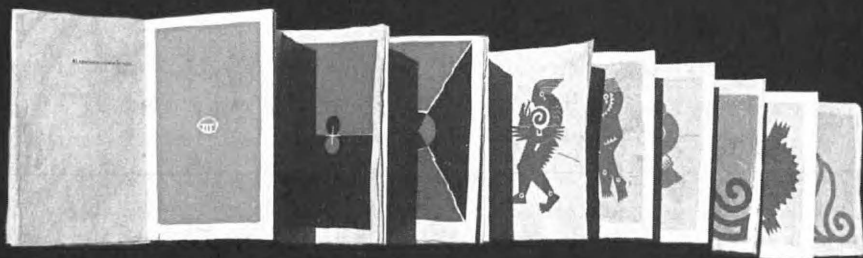
Metonymy

The *amate* paper represents the ancient culture, while the cord represents the idea of rustic, hand-crafted work.

Parallelism

The structure reveals a continuous rhythm.

INTRODUCTION



This article attempts to analyze an interpretation of a Mexican mythical tale using visual rhetoric.

While rhetoric has long been used in literary analysis, only recently has it been used by graphic designers to organize visual messages and to explain how viewers make sense of images.

Rhetoric considers how messages are addressed and constructed. It redefines its content, tone and intention. The manner in which the visual text is constructed prefigures the way in which the reader will examine the material.

Individual elements in a visual text might have a sense or meaning when they are alone, but once they become part of a visual system, their meaning changes based on that specific context. Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican revolutionary, is an icon that acquires different meaning depending on who uses it and how it is used – a symbol of rebel groups in Chiapas, hero for the official party, symbol of the leftist parties.

What I will establish is that it is not possible to analyze a message only through its parts, because every part influences the whole.

ANCIENT MEXICAN TRADITION

Since the Earth's creation, in accordance with the Mesoamerican tradition, there have been five different stages, illuminated by five different suns. These suns were incarnations of the god representative of each time. Each of these historical stages has finished, tragically, with a cataclysm so devastating that every single vestige of civilization was erased with each cycle.

The everyday life of ancient Mexicans was ruled almost entirely by their religious thoughts. They had a bipolar cosmogonic idea of the universe. They believed that everything had its opposite, creating a balance. For them, life existed because of death, so if they have a god representing life, they should have one representing death. The story of the creation of the world states that all the things were created by four original gods that were the descendants of the original couple, which in fact was a dual god, mother and father. This idea of the four original *Tezcatlipocas* colored the number four with a mystic aura. This number is repeated again and again.

Some anthropologists call the Aztec system of philosophical thought a science-religion, because there is such an intimate relationship between them. Aztecs were very accurate astronomers and mathematicians, they had a counting system based on twenty units. Their religious calendar consisted of thirteen months of twenty days each, based on the cycle of the moon. Their civil calendar consisted of 360 days with a complement of five "empty" days dedicated to worship and sacrifice.

They knew how to make paper out of bark and to use that material along with vegetable and mineral resources to make paint. They wrote their own history on long pieces of *amate* paper that later were called a *codex*, because they were written in a code that could be read only by a few. Codices were folded several times to one side and then to the other to make an accordion-like package that could be easily unfolded.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Tale of the origin is a graphic and poetic synthesis of the Aztec cosmogony, that narratively shows an interpretation of the mythical creation of the world. *Historia del origen* aims to recreate a myth, to pay homage and to promote knowledge of the ancient Mexicans. In a sense, a modern book designer is paying homage to the ancient codex designers called *Tlacuilo*. The reader is expected to enjoy the discovery of a new way to understand an ancient tradition and to appreciate that Mexican culture has a rich heritage worthy of rediscovery.

The tone of this work is poetic – it is an interpretation of an old story recreated by the graphic expression of the author. Production of the codex-book is limited to just ten copies that have been distributed as an “artist’s book.” The typography used for the text was designed by the author who wanted to imitate the movement of the architecture and sculpture of Aztec artists. It is printed on *amate* paper that is exactly the same as was used by the Aztecs to construct their codex. The work measures, when folded, thirteen by twenty centimeters. It consists of text and very synthetic and abstract images printed in primary colors with the graphic work retelling the symbolic concepts of the ancient Mesoamerican science-religion.

The whole “book” is based on the cosmic relation 13:20. The relations among these two numbers determine all astronomic and religious calendar cycles of the Mesoamerican people. The work is also based on the number four, a mystic number which represents the four directions of the universe with its four basic colors: red, black, blue and white; the four sacred elements – paradoxically repeated in every culture in the world – water, earth, fire and wind. These elements according to the tradition, were created by the four original gods named *Tezcatlipocas*, who were descendants of the original couple (*Omecihuatl* and *Ometehcutli*).

Another important concept is the use of the double spiral that represents the origin and growth to other planes of consciousness.

The “book” has a continuous and never-ending reading. When one finishes one side, the reader in a natural way, continues reading the other side of the paper and so on. This is analogous to the spiral – a never-ending continuum of movement.

TALE OF THE ORIGIN

The creators

Before the origin there was nothingness.

*Then movement started –
the one that gives principle and end.
The movement produced the place
of the black and the red
wherever movement starts and ends.*



Metaphor

The symbol of the zero stands for the nothingness.

Metaphor

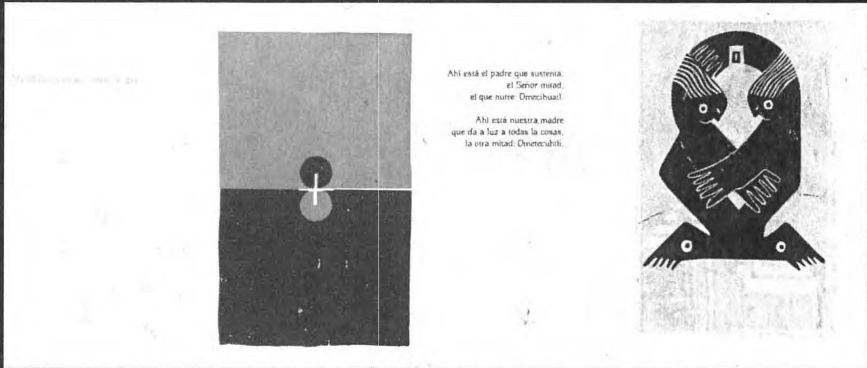
The spiral represents beginning and end.

Metonymy

The movement is presented by the spiral.

*There is Omeyocan –
the place of two...*

*There is the father who sustains,
the lord of the half,
the one who feeds: Omecihuatl.
There is the mother
who gives birth to all things –
the other half: Ometecuhtli.*



Analogy

Two colors are compared with two genders expressing the duality of things.

Metaphor

The *plus* symbol represents the union of two.

Allegory

The entire idea of the creation is based on the dance of Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli.

Analogy

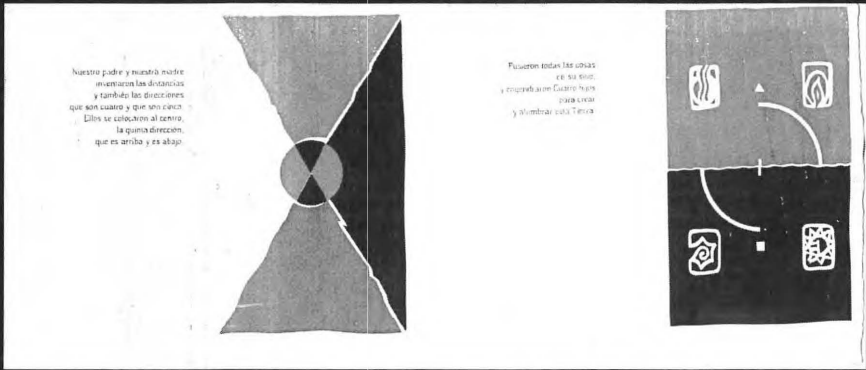
Two colors are compared with two genders expressing the duality of things.

Metaphor

The *plus* symbol represents the union of two.

*Our father and our mother created the
distances and also the directions
which are four, which are five.
They placed themselves at the center
of the fifth direction
which is above and below.*

*They put everything in place,
and engender four descendants
to create and to light up this earth.*



Synecdoche

The four colors, red, black, blue and white represent the four directions – the whole universe. The circle in the center is in place of Omeyocan.

Antithesis

Joining together the opposites: earth and fire – the two poles.

Ellipsis

The circle is composed of just two parts.

Synecdoche

The four Tezcatlipocas are represented by four different icons.

*Tezcatlipoca – the smoking mirror –
the lord of the north and black
the lord of the night and sorcerers.
The donor of life, supreme father,
creator of the word and the fire,
the Almighty,
the everlasting young,
the warrior.*

*Quetzalcoatl – the feathered snake –
lord of the white and the west,
lord of light and sacrifice,
supreme priest, the oldest.
Creator of the corn and the wind.
The one who returns to himself:
the everlasting.
He is the end and the beginning.
Creator of the days and the skies.*



Allegory

The sign of the smoking mirror replaces one foot, representing one passage of the character's legend.

Personification

A god is represented as a human.

Apposition

The circle between the arms is inserted as the name of the divinity, Tezcatlipoca.

Synecdoche

The bracelets on the arm and the big earring are signs of royalty.

Metaphor

The crossed arms represent the wings of a bird – the feathers represent the sky and wind.

Apposition

The symbol of Quetzalcoatl (the spiral between the arms) is inserted in the figure as the name of the divinity.

Synecdoche

The head of the snake stands for the entire creature.

*Huitzilopochtli – lofty hummingbird –
lord of the south and the blue,
lord of the sun: the one who dawns,
defeater of the night and the moon,
lord of thunder and storm,
lord of the flowers war,*
who eats hearts and blood.*

*Tlatauhqui Tezcatlipoca –
red mirror's smoke –
lord of east and ground,
dressed with human skin,
lord of penance, of renovation and spring.
The red, who condemns.
Lord of half moon and bonfire,
the snake of clouds, the impatient.*



Apposition

The sign of the sun between the arms represents the name of the character.

Allegory

Huitzilopochtli is in an ascending position, giving form to the sunrise.

Metonymy

Huitzilopochtli's mission is to carry the sun, representing the light and the dawn.

Ellipsis

It is possible to complete the idea of sun beams, even if they are not present.

Metonymy

Tlatauhqui is on his knees, in a position of penance and sacrifice. He is looking to the east which represents his origin. He embraces a seed that is the representation of new life, growth and change of form.

Metaphor

The human skin that Tlatauhqui Tezcatlipoca is wearing as a suit, represents the life in this world, the dead and the survival of spirit.

*The four descendant Gods created the water,
the first element.*

*From water was born Cipactli –
the alligator –*



Metonymy

The movement of the water represents this liquid entity.

Alliteration

The repetition of the rhythm of the lines, creates an illusion of movement.

Anastrophe

The normal position of the alligator is dislocated to emphasize the continuity of the circular shape.

Repetition

The serrated edges around the body of the alligator are repeated to show the aggressive character of the beast.

- * *The different Mexican groups of the plateau organized battles called guerras floridas. The motive for these battles was to capture young warriors for religious sacrifice.*

*Cipactli gave rise to the earth,
to Coatlicue,
the second element.*

*Tezcatlipoca made the fire –
donor of light and warmth,
the third element.*



Metonymy

The dented shape of the figure recalls the origin in Cipactli.

Gradation

The spiral shape seems to be pushing or growing up.

Synecdoche

Fire is represented by a flame.

Gradation

The lines are growing from right to left.

Parallelism

The lines composing the figure are the same but change position rhythmically.

TALE OF THE ORIGIN II

From the suns that have illuminated the earth

*Quetzalcoatl placed the air,
the fourth element.
Breath of life,
spasm, movement.*

*Half sun in the sky,
Kingdom of shades.*



Metonymy

Wind is represented by movement.

Parallelism

The lines composing the image are the same but change position rhythmically.

Parallelism

The figures composing the sun are the same but change position rhythmically.

*Tezcatlipoca made himself the sun,
the first sun to shine.
He reigned for many centuries,
the Sun God Tezcatlipoca.*

*One day “four-jaguar” –
Quetzalcoatl with his stick –
was knocked down from the endless sky,
the first sun to shine.
As a revenge Tezcatlipoca came back,
dressed as a jaguar to devour men.
There were giants living on the earth
which became depopulated the day
of “four-jaguar.”*



Synecdoche

Tezcatlipoca is represented by the placement of his symbol, the “smoking mirror.”

Parallelism

The lines composing the figure are the same, but change position rhythmically.

Metaphor

Tezcatlipoca is represented by the jaguar. The jaguar is an animal with mythical attributes always related to divinity.

*Quetzalcoatl became the sun,
the second to lighten the Earth.
The humans ate pine nuts
until a day of "four-wind."*

*The jaguar appeared again
throwing the sun, Quetzalcoatl,
that second sun,
out of the universe.
A great wind arose,
it was Quetzalcoatl himself
leaving in his revenge
monkeys to populate the Earth.*



Synecdoche

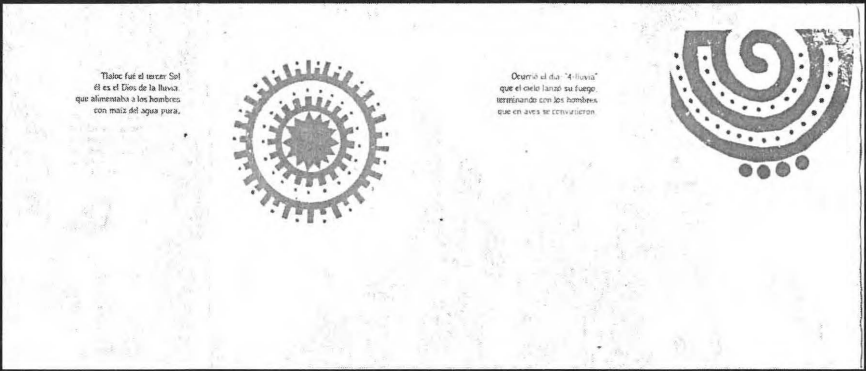
Tezcatlipoca is represented by the placement of his symbol, the spiral.

Parallelism

The triangles composing the figure are the same, but change position rhythmically.

*Tlaloc was the third sun.
He is the God of the rain,
who feeds the men
with corn from pristine water.*

*One day "four-rain,"
the sky threw his fire,
ending with men
who became birds.*



Parallelism

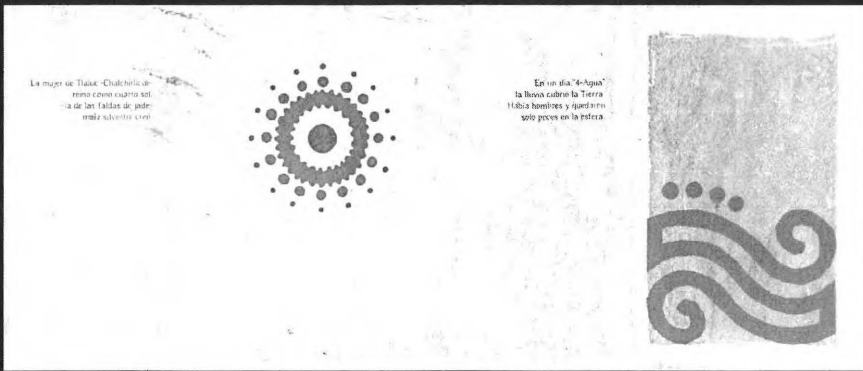
The lines composing the figure are the same, but change position rhythmically.

Gradation

The round shape, seems to be growing.

*The wife of Tlaloc, Chalchitlicue,
ruled as the fourth sun,
the one of the jade skirt
created wild corn.*

*One day "four-water"
the rain covered the Earth.
There were men and then
only fishes in the sphere.*



Parallelism

The dots composing the figure are the same but change position rhythmically.

Gradation

The dots seem to be decreasing.

Metonymy

This sun is related to water which is represented by a circular form with dots as drops.

The Earth was left dark for the fourth occasion.

“When everything was night, when there was no light as yet, the Gods came together there in Teotihuacan.”

There was elected the fifth sun.

Two went to the ritual –

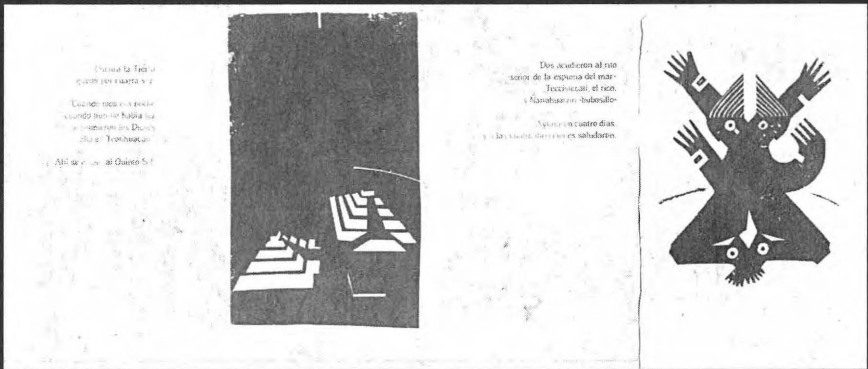
Lord of the sea foam –

Teccistecatl, the rich

and Nanahuatzin – the face with pustules.

They fasted four days

and saluted the four directions.



Metonymy

The pyramids of Teotihuacan are placed to represent the reunion of the Gods.

Metaphor

The darkness represents uncertainty and emptiness.

Antithesis

Two antagonistic characters are united as one.

*Four times tried Teccistecatl
and he failed all four.*

*Nanahuatzin closed his eyes
and without thought he jumped,
immolating himself in the bonfire.*

The fifth sun arose.

*Teccistecatl, upset, then jumped in the fire
becoming the moon by the luck of a rabbit.*

*The fifth sun is hungry, the fifth sun is angry.
To move on he requires a sacrifice of a life,
to drink for him the blood, to pull out a heart.
It must be holy war, he must be honored.*

*The fifth sun is now
and shines at this very moment.*

*His reign must end one day –
“four-movement.”*



Allegory

Placing the sun in the landscape tells a different story.

Antithesis

This image unites the idea of the two sides: life and death – dark and light.

Metonymy

The four directions are represented by the arrows.

CONCLUSION

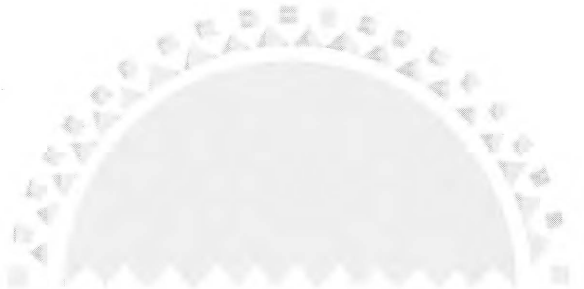
The pages of this work are filled with a spirit – the spirit of ancient Mexico. The images are designed to reveal this. But Mexican identity is not due to a particular use of rhetorical resources. Visual rhetoric also does not operate alone in its signification. All the representations that deliver some meaning are fed by the reader of the visual text. The reader must have an appropriate background of knowledge to animate the text in a particular manner. Even if all that the reader has is what is printed on those pages, the visual text comes alive only when the reader identifies signs that are familiar or that capture interested attention.

The rhetorical figures help to analyze how the text is constructed and how some parts of the visual text refer to significant ideas through their representation. Metonymy, allegory and repetition are the most commonly used figures. Metaphor is always present, but it requires deeper background knowledge for precise interpretation. The degree of connotation found in metaphors requires a stronger effort by the reader to find the path that leads to cognitive relations.

In the act of constructing the visual text, the author reveals a hidden structure that reinforces the strength of the work. Rhetoric is a supporting structure that both gives coherence and is a path for interpretation. Any reader must interpret to understand a text. If background knowledge is not sufficient to make an interpretation, rhetoric can deliver clues for opening either a visual or verbal text.

Here rhetoric has been used retrospectively. It needs to be considered more in the conscious construction of a message – to go beyond an analysis of what is already designed.

Alejandro Brizuela is the chairman of the Graphic Design Department at Universidad de las Américas Puebla. He has done graduate work in Belgium. A continuing interest is the study of theories of design including semiotics and interpretation.



P R E - C O L U M B I A N S T A M P S



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