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John Cabot University

Department of Art History

Bachelor of Arts in Art History

Cultural Translation:
The Nexus of Mexican Muralism and Italian Futurism in Orozco's *Katharsis* mural

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Abstract

In the early to mid-twentieth century, Mexican muralists emerged as pivotal figures in the discourse on art and politics following the Mexican Revolution, coinciding with the rise of the Muralist movement. This discourse explored themes such as the academy's "buen gusto," the advent of modernism and avant-gardes, the revolutionary aftermath, and the concept of "Mestizo" in Mexican identity. Concurrently, Mexican muralists engaged directly with European avant-gardes, enriching their artistic perspectives with influences from Italian Futurists and French Cubists. However, despite the significance of Mexican muralism, little scholarly attention has been directed towards José Clemente Orozco, one of the central muralists of the time, and his connection to European avant-gardes. In the interest of addressing this scholarly gap, this thesis proposes a case study of Orozco's *Katharsis* mural as a means to explore a new perspective on the intersection, translation, and critical engagement between Mexican muralism and Italian Futurism despite their ideological disparities. Through an examination of artistic techniques, political ideologies, and international artistic exchange, this thesis aims to unravel the multifaceted dynamics that shaped Orozco's contribution to the movement.

Dedication

To Mom and Dad, for their unwavering support, encouragement, and belief in me throughout this transformative journey away from home. Your love and guidance have been my beacon of strength.

I would also like to dedicate this work to Professor Linford, whose exceptional mentorship, has played an integral role in shaping me into the dedicated researcher and passionate art historian I am today.

Additionally, I dedicate this thesis to Valeria Khvostova, whose unique ideas and unwavering commitment to excellence have been a constant source of inspiration and motivation throughout my journey as an Art Historian, it has been an absolute pleasure sharing this with you.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my beloved family and cherished friends for their enduring patience, understanding, and love that have sustained me through the triumphs and challenges of this academic pursuit. Your support has been invaluable to me.

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List of Abbreviations

INBA	Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes
UNAM	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
PNR	Partido Nacional Revolucionario
SOTPE	Sindicato de Obreros, Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores

Introduction

In the field of Art History, the period from the early to mid-twentieth century stands as a transformative one, marked by unprecedented socio-political upheaval, artistic renaissance, and cultural exchange. Nowhere was this dynamic interplay more pronounced than in Mexico, where the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910 to 1920) ignited a fervent dialogue on art, culture, and national identity. At the heart of this discourse emerged the Mexican Muralist movement, a revolutionary wave of public art that sought to capture the spirit of post-revolutionary Mexico while engaging with international artistic currents.

Amidst this backdrop, the mural *Katharsis* by José Clemente Orozco emerged as a central object of inquiry, offering a window into the translation and critical engagement between Mexican muralism and European avant-gardes, particularly Italian Futurism. Despite its significance for the development of Mexican art, Orozco's connection to European avant-gardes remains relatively unexplored in scholarly discourse, presenting a gap in the study of Mexican art and history. This thesis addresses Italian Futurism in particular because scholarship regarding Mexican muralism often limits the significance of European "influences" to French Cubism in the movement's development. However, when examining José Clemente Orozco's murals, mentions of Italian Futurism arise without evident connections, suggesting a gap in scholarly literature. Therefore, it is essential to explore the potential relationship between Orozco and Italian Futurism and its consequences for Mexico's artistic and cultural landscape.

This thesis endeavors to address this gap through a focused examination of Orozco's *Katharsis* mural, situating it within the broader context of post-revolutionary Mexican art and its

dialogue with European artistic movements. The central research question guiding this study is: In what ways does *Katharsis* manifest a convergence of artistic principles comparable to those found in Italian Futurism? In other words, how do disparate ideologies find visual correspondence in certain artistic choices?

To answer these questions, this thesis adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from cultural art history and political theory. By utilizing a combination of archival research, visual analysis, and comparative study, this research aims to unravel the multifaceted dynamics that shaped Orozco's muralist technique, introspection, and its relationship to European avant-gardes. Furthermore, it seeks to contextualize *Katharsis* within the broader narrative of Mexican muralism, exploring its significance in the evolution of national identity and artistic expression in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Hence, this thesis aims to be pertinent for several reasons. Firstly, it seeks to fill a notable gap in the scholarship by providing an analysis of Orozco's connection to Italian Futurism, shedding light on overlooked aspects of his artistic development. Simultaneously, it opens the debate to larger and more complex intersections between Mexican muralism and international artistic currents, contributing to a deeper understanding of the global exchange of ideas in the early twentieth century. Finally, in an era marked by renewed interest in cultural exchange and global interconnectedness, this study holds relevance for scholars and enthusiasts alike, offering what I hope is a timely exploration of the enduring legacy of Orozco's artistic vision and its resonance in contemporary discussions on art and identity.

1. Mexican Muralism and Avant-Gardism after the Revolution:

A Literature Review

Culture as Politics: Mexico and Italy, 1909 - 1935

The cultural and artistic expressions of early twentieth-century Mexico played a vital role in initiating debates surrounding the country's sociopolitical landscape, unique cultural shift, and political development. Art historians and art critics have played a crucial role in fully engaging with Mexico's post-revolutionary years. The intersection of political turmoil and societal changes created a favorable environment for the emergence of new forms of artistic expression and activism.

This period witnessed major changes in politics, economy, and society, in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. Its goal was to overthrow the established dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, which had been in power from 1876 until 1911, and to establish a democratic and egalitarian society.¹ Following the revolution, the Mexican muralist movement gained prominence, with a focus on public art and education, which was in line with the ideals of the Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos. He believed that public art played a crucial role in integrating society and supporting the new government. In the years following its development, the Mexican art movement evolved into a state-sponsored avant-garde with a strong ideological

¹ John Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012) 93–95.

foundation in the 1920s and 1930s, mainly in the capital city of Mexico.² The primary goal of this movement was to restore and reconstruct a Mexican identity that was rooted in the nation's precolonial past. Dr. Atl, José Vasconcelos, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros believed that art had the potential to disseminate political messages and mobilize social change.³

This belief was equally central to Italian Futurism. The sociopolitical and economic landscape of Italy pre- and specifically post–World War I served as a fertile ground for the emergence of the first Italian avant-garde. Amid economic disparities, social unrest, and political fragmentation, a group of artists and intellectuals sought to depart from conventional norms and actively embody an art that permeated all facets of life, thought, and tradition. Initially, the movement emerged as both a quintessential avant-garde movement by challenging traditional aestheticism and established social institutions governing art production and display, while embodying transgressive artistic approaches to engage mass audiences through various popular media.⁴ In 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti spearheaded Italian Futurism, challenging the perceived stagnation of Italian culture and championing the revolutionary potential of technology, speed, and industrial progress.⁵ Marinetti's foundational manifesto catalyzed the movement, envisioned the avant-garde as a platform for the obliteration of historical continuity and memory, sparked an avant-garde literary movement, and envisioned Italy's cultural and political rebirth.⁶ In this sense, Futurism's fusion of art and social transformation aimed to

² José Vasconcelos, and H. W. Hilborn. "José Vasconcelos (1881-)," in *The Modern Mexican Essay* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 95–109.

³ Hal Foster, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 90-98.

⁴ Christine Poggi. *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.

⁵ Foster, *Art Since 1900*, 90-98.

⁶ Pizzi Katia, "Futurismo and the machine," in *Italian Futurism and the Machine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 28-30.

bridge high and low culture, reaching the masses through mass media dissemination, as it sought to challenge traditional aestheticism and engage mass audiences.⁷

The movement's artistic experimentation encompassed the fragmentation of form, manipulation of time and space, and the portrayal of dynamic movement, responding to Italy's perceived "art crisis" by repositioning art at the core of society with alternative aesthetic languages suited to the modern age.⁸ This era marked the avant-garde's alignment with media culture, a fervent celebration of technology, an *anti-passatista* or anti-traditionalist stance, a vehement rejection of past cultural norms, and the distortion of bourgeois cultural legacies. Despite their initial rejection of tradition, as Italian Futurism evolved, some members expressed more nuanced views of tradition in their work. While still advocating for innovation and progress, they acknowledged the value of certain aspects of tradition that aligned with their vision of a modern Italy. Therefore, Marinetti's reconciliation with tradition faced opposition within the movement, leading the secessionist movements and debates over ideological stances, ranging from revolutionary to conservative after 1922.⁹

Antonio Marasco emerged as a key figure in this dissent, challenging Marinetti's leadership and advocating for a more radical, independent Futurism. Marasco's group sought to break away from what they viewed as the ossification of official Futurism, emphasizing the need for continual innovation and genuine artistic expression. These tensions ultimately led to the fragmentation of the Futurist movement, with dissenting voices rejecting Marinetti's leadership

⁷ Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 1-2.

⁸ Vivien Greene, ed., *Italian Futurism 1909-1944. Reconstructing the Universe* (New York: Guggenheim, 2014), Introduction and Chapter 1.

⁹ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books, 1996), 241.

and seeking to revive Futurism's revolutionary spirit under new banners like that of *Nuovofuturismo*.¹⁰

Marinetti's visionary rhetoric and actions symbolized Futurism's embrace of "artificial optimism," epitomizing a desire for radical societal transformation amidst themes of destruction and violence, reflecting a struggle to forge a new identity amidst societal upheaval.¹¹ This moment reflects Futurism's struggle to reconcile its revolutionary origins with attempts to align with the political establishment, namely the rise of Fascism in Italy. While initially critical of Fascism's conservative elements, Marinetti and the Futurists eventually all aligned themselves with Benito Mussolini's regime. For some, this alignment was pragmatic: Fascism was a means to achieve the avant-garde goals of societal transformation and cultural renewal.¹²

Notably, Mexican muralism and Italian Futurism, despite originating in different contexts, with distinct aesthetics and opposed political ideologies, shared significant connections in their social and political aspects. Both movements emerged as responses to periods of profound societal change and upheaval, to engage with and transform their respective national identities. Italian Futurism, born amidst the rapid industrialization and political turmoil of early twentieth-century Italy, embraced modernity, technology, and the cult of progress, seeking to promote the same. In this sense, both movements showed a strong commitment to social and political engagement, using art as a tool of societal transformation and to address pressing social issues. As a result, this comparative approach helps us understand how culture and politics interact, highlighting the commonalities between the movements while simultaneously opening the debate on how they signify differently.

¹⁰ Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 243-244.

¹¹ Poggi, 33-35.

¹² Berghaus, 35-40.

Recent research continues to engage with the movement and its impact on Mexico's intellectual and social development turning point. This significance extends beyond the national realm, resonating as a marker of international influence. Philosopher Luis Villoro, in *Cultura, Ideas y Mentalidades*, elaborates on this narrative. Villoro describes the culture of Mexico's specific epoch spanning from 1910 to 1960 as "inauthentic" due to the imposition of foreign influences.¹³ While these influences provided continuity with the cultural past, they did not align with the "authentic" culture of the Mexican people. To support this claim, Villoro highlights the rise of two movements that aimed to challenge imposed cultural norms and restore an authentic portrayal of the nation's inherent reality. On one front, this defiance entailed a rejection of positivism, exemplified by Futurism as well, while concurrently witnessing a resurgence of interest in European metaphysical philosophies. On another front, the movement entailed the rejection of European influences, emphasizing a concerted effort to rediscover and preserve Mexico's putative traditions and heritage. Villoro's overview of the movement's roots is crucial to this research. It highlights a desire to break free from oppressive cultural constructs and simultaneously rediscover a posited authentic "essence" of Mexican culture and national heritage.¹⁴ Despite this, a crucial question arises: how did the predominant beliefs and values of the time influence every aspect of Mexican culture? Additionally, in what ways did the effort to break away from established traditions become visible and tangible within this specific historical period?

¹³ Edmundo O'Gorman et al., *Cultura, Ideas y Mentalidades* (Ciudad de México: El Colegio de México, 1992), 239-262. [Translation mine.]

¹⁴ O'Gorman, *Cultura, Ideas y Mentalidades*, 262-263.

The Cultural Epicenter: Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts

To address these questions, a pivotal consideration lies in the significance of the private and public buildings in the city. Juan José Bremer, the Palace of Fine Arts director in Mexico City, offers a detailed historical and descriptive account of the Palace of Fine Arts, a venue that continues to host important cultural events and boasts a significant collection of murals painted by influential artists from the first and second generations of Mexican muralism. Some of these artists include Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco from the first generation; Jorge Gónzales Camarena, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, and Rufino Tamayo from the second generation.¹⁵ Its multifaceted and contentious history has not only transformed it into a symbol of Mexico City but also an emblem of cultural ambitions and achievements in national life. It is noteworthy that the Palace was not the sole significant public building in the development of Mexican muralism nationwide; other venues such as public schools, libraries, and halls also played crucial roles as initial platforms for murals intended for public display.

Nevertheless, the Palace of Fine Arts was a prominent landmark in the center of Mexico City. It played a crucial role as a major cultural institution and a distinguished venue for artistic expression. Bremer and his colleagues assert that the Palace, originating in the early twentieth century, served as an emblematic representation encapsulating Mexico's historical heritage, emerging as one of the monuments "that merge into a synthesis full of meaning: a rich past, a dynamic present, and a promising future for the new generations."¹⁶ Additionally, they note that the architectural design, attributed to Adamo Boari, draws inspiration from European styles such as neoclassicism and Art Nouveau. Moreover, the construction of the Palace was interrupted by

¹⁵ Juan José Bremer et al., "Palacio De Bellas Artes," in *Artes de México*, no. 191 (Ciudad de México, 1976), 3–100. Translation mine.

¹⁶ Juan José Bremer et al., *Artes de México*, 50-55. [Translation mine.]

the Mexican Revolution and was only completed in 1934 under the supervision of architect Federico E. Mariscal. Revered as a paramount cultural symbol in Mexico, the Palace holds significant historical and artistic importance. Orozco's mural was specifically commissioned to make a public statement, marking an important moment in Mexican cultural history.¹⁷

Pioneers of Modernism and Muralism: Siqueiros, Rivera, and Orozco

In the years following its construction, the Palace of Fine Arts was a subject of critical reception and debate regarding the role of public edifices in post-revolutionary Mexico. Fausto Ramírez, a scholarly member affiliated with the Aesthetic Research Institute at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), conducts a thorough examination of the impact of modernism on the trajectory of Mexican art, with a specific focus on the concerted efforts to cultivate a distinctive national identity through artistic expression commonly conserved in public edifices. Ramírez underscores various aspects, including the notable practice of embellishing public buildings, a reinvigorated appreciation of colonial heritage, as well as panoramic and landscape painting. Additionally, he also acknowledges the pivotal role played by Germán Murillo (better known as Dr. Atl), identified as a catalyst for the advancement of modern art within the Mexican context, and explores his relationship with the National School of Fine Arts. In this context, the argument initiates a reassessment of historical traditions, aiming to establish a connection with national culture. Hence, Ramírez's observations initiate a reflection on how modernism played a crucial role in the shaping of a distinctive Mexican artistic identity, and how this is similarly manifested in the European avant-garde. In particular, this influence can be observed through a shared emphasis on individual expression, juxtaposed with the establishment

¹⁷ Bremer et al., *Artes de México*, 3-15. [Translation mine.]

of a profound connection to the cultural and traditional heritage of the nation.¹⁸ Furthermore, it is worth examining Affron's arguments, which delve into how architectural projects such as the one under discussion, played a pivotal role in shaping national identity.

Matthew Affron, a distinguished art historian specializing in modern art, presents an essay dedicated to the examination of modern art in Mexico spanning the years 1910 to 1950. His work underscores the pivotal significance attributed to muralism and the discernible influence exerted by avant-garde movements. In this sense, murals assume a position of profound importance as a multifaceted medium for artistic, political, and social expression. Affron argues that during this era, functionality transformed the aesthetic realm, allowing artists to operate on a monumental scale while simultaneously exerting a substantial influence over the collective consciousness and the shaping of national identity. Hence, this influence was primarily achieved through the conveyance of messages steeped in themes of revolution, social transformation, and additional cultural narratives.¹⁹

Esperanza Garrido contributes to another line of research associated with the evolving themes among emerging among Mexican muralists. She contends that the movement was directed toward disseminating educational principles and promoting ideals related to patriotism and social equity. More specifically, the movement sought to “educate the senses, taste, intellect, and spirit of the individual and the community in general.”²⁰ Just as seen with Italian Futurists on the other front. The intentional facilitation of unrestricted public access to these impactful and artistically robust creations served as a conduit to engage the public's interest, fostering a

¹⁸ Fausto Ramírez, *Modernización y Modernismo en el Arte Mexicano* (Ciudad de México: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas UNAM, 2008), 49-68.

¹⁹ Matthew Affron, “El arte moderno y México, 1910-1950,” in *Pinta la revolución: arte moderno mexicano 1910-1950*, Tomo I. (México: Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022), 13-24.

²⁰ Esperanza Garrido, “La pintura mural mexicana, su filosofía e intención didáctica.” In *Sophia, Colección de Filosofía de la Educación*, no. 6 (2009): 53–72. [Translation mine.]

profound connection between the art and its audience. Moreover, Garrido argues that this method also involved the embellishment of public buildings with mural compositions, aspiring to enlighten the perceptual, cognitive, and spiritual faculties of both the individual and the collective. In her exploration, she emphasizes the preeminent triumvirate within the movement: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. She addresses two primary issues: firstly, the intricate challenge of achieving harmonious integration between painting and architectural elements. These artists often grappled with this challenge by implementing strategies such as surface modification, the use of reflective materials, and the conception of immersive mural installations enveloping the observer. All strategies encompass the noble ambition of communicating ideas and messages through their pictorial creations.²¹

Bridging Continents: Cross-cultural Exchange between Mexico and Europe

Mauricio J. Hernández, a professor of political science, undertakes an exploration of the discourse surrounding identity in the section titled “The Identity Debate: Europe and the Popular” within his thesis. His examination revolves around the narrative of identity and its profound impact on Mexican art. Central to this discussion is the recognition of the intrinsic value in acknowledging the rich diversity of cultural components that have played a formative role in shaping artistic production within Mexico, encompassing both European and other popular influences.²²

Firstly, the San Carlos Academy emerged as a notable center for artistic activity; it was founded to impose European taste and train artists in Neoclassicism for the European artistic

²¹ Esperanza Garrido, “La pintura mural mexicana, su filosofía e intención didáctica,” 69-72.

²² Mauricio J. Hernández, “El muralismo mexicano y la imagen del Estado posrevolucionario. Una perspectiva desde San Ildefonso” (MA Thesis, El Colegio de México, 2019), 46-60.

tradition, celebrated for its pedagogical propagation of European techniques and stylistic paradigms. Simultaneously, there existed a keen acknowledgment of the significance of popular and folkloric elements within Mexican art. This duality is exemplified through the pioneering work of José Guadalupe Posada, whose œuvre testified to the prevailing social and political milieu, encapsulated through a distinctly popular perspective. Adding another layer to this narrative, Dr. Atl emerged as an influential figure and later became a direct role model for the muralists, particularly Orozco, in the aftermath of the Revolution. This element assumes crucial significance for the thesis as it introduces how the revolution ushered in transformative changes in pedagogical and creative paradigms, fostering a heightened alignment between artistic endeavors and the intricate construction of the nation's identity deeply engaged with popular culture.²³ This interplay between European and popular influences becomes a dynamic thread connecting various aspects of the formation of Mexican art and identity.

Remarkably, Hernández undergoes a noteworthy shift in focus, directing his examination towards a narrative that underscores the trajectory of Mexican artistic expression significantly shaped by representations imposed during the colonial era. Hernández posits that even after the attainment of national independence, consensus on Mexico's cultural identity within the realm of arts remained elusive. It was only with the ascent of liberal ideologies and the consolidation of authority that a true exploration into Mexican customs, landscapes, and narratives commenced. Of particular note is the emergence of an idealized vision of indigenous heritage prominently featured in academic and classical painting. A deliberate effort was made to advocate and propagate popular art education. This strategic initiative sought to reassess Mexican popular art, aspiring to synthesize it with modern painting and cultivate a national artistic ethos. This

²³ Mauricio J. Hernández, "El muralismo mexicano y la imagen del Estado posrevolucionario. Una perspectiva desde San Ildefonso," 49-60.

synthesis found expression through initiatives like the Exhibition of Popular Arts organized by Jorge Enciso, Best Maugard, Francisco Cornejo, and Roberto Montenegro in 1921 during Mexico's centenary of independence. The event sought to underscore the importance and beauty of Mexican popular art.

Another pivotal effort in this context was Dr. Atl's edited book, *Las Artes Populares de México*, commissioned by the International Relations Secretary Alberto J. Pani. Examining this historical context is crucial for my research. Specifically, it reveals how the reception of nationalist art during this phase paved the way for the muralist movement, which later became a defining force in Mexico's artistic landscape. Zooming out, it also highlights a shared consensus among artists, intellectuals, and bureaucrats regarding the significance of popular art. This understanding underscores the integral role of popular art in aesthetic appreciation, setting the stage for a broader exploration of this research.²⁴

Echoes of Futurism: Unveiling Ideological Alignments with Estridentismo

Sergio Moya, a distinguished scholar and associate professor at the University of Chicago, complements this argument by investigating Mexico's manifestations of Futurism. His analysis is encapsulated in his chapter "42. Mexico" within Günter Berghaus *Handbook of International Futurism*. Moya's overarching objective is to furnish an informative overview, thereby contributing to the open-ended debates concerning the multifaceted influences of Futurism in Mexico. Moya contends that the introduction of the Futurist movement in Mexico transpired during the 1920s, marked by Mexican writers and artists engaging with the aesthetic principles practiced by Italian Futurists. This assertion gained substantial support from the

²⁴ Hernández, "El muralismo mexicano," 97-109.

emergence of the *Estridentista* movement in the country, an avant-garde literary and artistic movement that responded to the social and political transformations following the Mexican Revolution, often drawing parallels with the ideals of Italian Futurism. To reinforce this connection, Moya delves into a variety of poems and literary texts by Manuel Maples Arce, the founder of the Estridentista movement.²⁵ This scholarly essay explores the complex process of cultural translation within the context of Futurism in Mexico. The changing landscape of artistic movements, as well as their interaction with sociopolitical transformations, is crucial to understanding subsequent developments in Mexican Art. This includes the muralist movement and its incorporation of various avant-garde influences such as those of French Cubism, Russian Constructivism, Estridentismo, and Italian Futurism.

In tandem with Moya's investigation into Futurist-related manifestations in Mexico, Rubén Gallo, a renowned literary critic, provides a meticulous analysis of the *Estridentismo* movement, recognized as Mexico's pioneering avant-garde movement, in his chapter "Wireless Modernity Mexican Estridentistas, Italian and Russian Futurism." Gallo postulates that this intellectual and artistic endeavor was significantly shaped by its affiliation with Italian Futurism while bearing resonances with Russian Futurism. This exploration aims to illuminate pivotal facets characterizing the movement, emphasizing its concentrated examination of themes related to national identity, internationalism, modern technology, and the cultivation of avant-garde artistic expressions. Drawing parallels between Italian Futurism to Russian reception, both share a fascination with the concept of speed and a steadfast celebration of the dynamism inherent to the modern context. Gallo underscores the assimilation of these influences in literature and art as well. This assimilation, he argues, served as an extension of the revolutionary aspirations of both

²⁵ Sergio D. Moya, "42. Mexico," in *Handbook of International Futurism*, ed. Günter Berghaus (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 684-697. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110273564-042>

movements. The overarching objective of the Estridentistas, as highlighted by Gallo, lay in achieving a harmonious amalgamation of political and artistic revolutions, thereby striving for a synthesis of these transformative forces.²⁶ In addition, Gallo's chapter highlights the influence of Russian avant-garde practitioners and *literati* on the ethos and creative endeavors of the Estridentistas. It also provides valuable insights into the complex network of influences that shaped the movement, revealing the multifaceted intersections and interactions between Mexican avant-garde movements and their European counterparts.

Additionally, Elissa Rashkin dedicates the opening chapter of her book *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico: The Avant-Garde and Cultural Change in the 1920s* to the Estridentista movement's defining characteristics. Rashkin's focus is on an examination of the role and significance of manifestos within the broader avant-garde movement, with a specific emphasis on their resonance and manifestations within the Latin American context. Her analysis positions the emergence of Estridentismo as a distinctive literary and artistic movement, delving into themes such as the inherently subjective nature of truth and meaning, the intrinsic value assigned to emotion and an experimental spirit in the realm of art, and the call for a new aesthetic that authentically reflects the "zeitgeist" of modernity.²⁷ Notably, Rashkin underscores the overarching objective of Mexican poet Manuel Maples Arce in encapsulating the "essence" of the modern spirit. This departure from the romantic notion of aestheticized disengagement emphasizes the interrelationship between the individual and society. Furthermore, she contends that Maples Arce's manifesto adeptly mirrors the ethos of modernity by resolutely embracing the

²⁶ Rubén Gallo, "Wireless Modernity: Mexican Estridentistas, Italian and Russian Futurism," *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 2012), 141-170.

²⁷ Elissa Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico: The Avant-Garde and Cultural Change in the 1920s*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 21-36.

unadulterated components of contemporary life while simultaneously rejecting conventional aesthetic paradigms.²⁸

Dr. Rashkin provides more information about Estridentista literature in her book chapter titled “Politics and the Avant-Garde.” In this chapter, she conducts an in-depth analysis of the literary works of Maples Arce, with a particular focus on his influential work, *Urbe*, published in 1924. In this text, Dr. Rashkin’s analysis of the poem delves into the socio-political atmosphere of the Mexican Revolution to uncover the complexity of the relationship between politics and literature during this period. Positioned as a catalyst within the milieu of Estridentismo and avant-garde movements, the poem’s impact was instrumental in solidifying Maples Arce’s position as a preeminent figure in Mexican literature.²⁹ Rashkin’s analysis also highlights the emergence of different literary movements, such as Estridentismo and proletarian literature, which were both influenced by the Mexican Revolution and delves into important topics, including homophobia, and the challenges that *ante litteram* LGBTQ+ writers faced during this transformative period. To the exclusion of visual arts and cross-cultural negotiations, Rashkin’s scholarly pursuit brings forth the intersections between politics and literature specifically during this transformative period. To a certain extent, Mexico had already demonstrated cultural manifestations across various platforms, including newspapers, books, and manifestos.

Literature by María Fernández, associate professor of Latin American art and postcolonial/decolonial theories at Cornell University, largely extends to a critical examination of the vibrant period of the Estridentistas (1921-1927). Her focus is on the nuanced dynamics of the movement’s perspectives on communication networks, particularly emphasizing the role of railroads, telegraphs, and radio in shaping their outlook. The meticulous scrutiny conducted by

²⁸ Elissa Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico: The Avant-Garde and Cultural Change in the 1920s*, 25-36.

²⁹ Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico*, 113-129.

Fernández further explores the Estridentistas' adept assimilation of ideas from Italian Futurism, underscoring their effective repurposing and adaptation within the unique Mexican context. Moreover, Fernández's examination highlights a palpable tension within the literary corpus of the Estridentistas, as their depictions of communication networks juxtapose utopian possibilities with the emotional toll exacted by the march of modernity. She underscores their appropriation of elements from the Futurists, particularly in their rejection of tradition and their profound admiration for the machine and the literary components of advertising.

Fernández, however, emphasizes the importance of delineating discernible divergences that distinguish the Estridentistas from Italian Futurism. These divergences manifest in various aspects, including their stance on violence, their engagement with the past, their conceptions of patriotism, and their perception and portrayal of women. Unlike the Futurists who exalted war and destruction, the Estridentistas directed their energies toward dismantling antiquated cultural structures and challenging established personalities.³⁰ Fernández's research adds greatly to our comprehension of the complex relationship between the two movements. It not only reveals their mutual impact on each other but also emphasizes the unique characteristics that distinguish the Estridentistas from other artistic and intellectual currents of the time.

Contributing to Fernández's insights, Rashkin's seminal work, "Stridentist Art and Artists," offers an overview of the Estridentista movement and its progressive influence on the visual arts, particularly in the Mexican landscape of the 1920s. She meticulously examines key artists affiliated with the movement, elucidating their noteworthy contributions and emphasizing the collaborative nature inherent in their creative endeavors. The exploration begins with Jean Charlot and progresses to Fermin Revueltas, celebrated not only for his vibrant personality but

³⁰ María Fernández, "Estri-Dentistas: Taking the Teeth out of Futurism," in *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, eds. Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 342-371.

also for his impactful mural at the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* located in Mexico City—a portrayal that underscores his integral, albeit occasionally volatile, role within the Estridentista milieu. Special attention is accorded to Revueltas’ involvement in the design of covers, layouts, and advertisements for the influential publication *Irradiador*. Subsequently, the narrative delves into the artistic contributions of Leopoldo Méndez, recognizing his early collaboration with the Estridentista movement and groundbreaking advancements in printmaking. Méndez’s noteworthy role in *Horizonte* and his poignant depictions of social conflict within his art are duly emphasized. The discussion extends to German Cueto, a sculptor and versatile artist positioned as a central figure in Mexico City’s cultural milieu. Cueto’s unique artistic creations, particularly his masks, are intricately analyzed concerning diverse artistic traditions and subjected to psychological interpretations. Lastly, the exploration encompasses Tina Modotti’s avant-garde approach to photography and her collaboration with the Estridentistas, accentuating her innovative representations of industrialized landscapes and the nuanced interplay between the human figure and the machine evident in her photographic works. While no mention is made of Tina Modotti’s relationship with Edward Weston, potentially another bridge to European and the US modernism, Rashkin’s focus is to scrutinize the evolving critical reception of the movement, shedding light on the reevaluation of its enduring contributions to Mexican modern art and the burgeoning recognition afforded to the movement within the esteemed confines of Mexico’s museums.³¹ The Estridentista movement had a multifaceted nature and made significant contributions to the visual arts landscape of post-revolutionary Mexico.

Moreover, in her contribution to the book *A Critical History*, art historian Tatiana Flores offers a chapter entitled “Murales Estridentistas,” wherein she delves into the inherent tensions and

³¹ Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico*, 77-91.

notable affinities between Estridentismo and the burgeoning muralist movement. Flores examines the dynamic interactions and collaborative endeavors that unfolded between Manuel Maples Arce, the prominent figurehead of Estridentismo, and the early generation of muralists, including Fernando Leal, Jean Charlot, and Fermin Revueltas. The examination of their respective works reveals a stylistic diversity and structural tensions, indicating a lack of unanimity concerning their conception of avant-garde and Mexican art. However, Flores contextualizes their murals in alignment with the principles articulated in the *Actual No. 1* manifesto by Arce, enabling the recognition of their works as experimental propositions and contemplative reflections on the most pertinent avant-garde models relevant to the Mexican context.

Flores thereby posits that these prevailing tensions suggest that the ideals espoused by Estridentismo may not have been adopted or relevant within the post-revolutionary Mexican milieu. The muralists, acting as government employees, were acutely conscious of their social and educational mission, a factor likely influencing their artistic choices. This observation initiates a field of discussion for the research at hand, indicating a discernible evolution toward a more revolutionary ideological stance. It signals the potential necessity for Estridentismo to engage with broader socio-political movements to preserve its contemporary relevance and profound societal impact.³² Upon revision, the scholarship prompts a reevaluation of Estridentismo's trajectory and impact in post-revolutionary Mexican art and ideology.

The cultural and artistic scenes of early twentieth-century Mexico and Italy were closely linked with sociopolitical changes and ideological shifts. This led to the emergence of unique

³² Tatiana Flores, "Murales estridentes: Tensions and Affinities between Estridentismo and Early Muralism," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, eds. Alejandro Anreus, Robin A. Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 108-124.

avant-garde movements, such as Mexican muralism and Italian Futurism. Despite having different origins, aesthetic principles, and opposed political views, they shared significant connections in one important sociopolitical aspect: both movements arose as responses to specific periods of change.

As we move on to the next chapter, our focus will be a close visual analysis of the mural titled *Katharsis*, created by the Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City. The exploration goes beyond mere aesthetic appreciation and delves into the interplay between art, politics, and society. It sheds light on how different ideologies were materialized in his artistic choices. Orozco's mural, created during the post-revolutionary era in Mexico, and amidst the rise of the Mexican muralist movement, offers a compelling case study to understand how art served as a medium for sociopolitical statements and fostering social change. This thesis aims to uncover how Orozco's specific artistic choices resonate with the ideological underpinnings of Mexican muralism and how they compare and contrast with the aesthetic principles of Italian Futurism despite their ideological oppositions.

2. *Katharsis* in Perspective: José Clemente Orozco's Mural for the Palace of Fine Arts of Mexico City

Revolutionary Roots: Unveiling the Context of the Mexican Revolution

The Mexican Revolution stands as a watershed armed conflict in Mexican history, starting on November 20th, 1910, and concluding in 1917 with the promulgation of the Mexican constitution and the establishment of a thoroughly restructured political system. The *Porfiriato* was a period of dictatorship under President Porfirio Díaz, which lasted from 1876 until its dissolution in 1911. The Díaz government, despite fostering economic prosperity, faced widespread discontent among the Mexican population due to evident inequalities in policies favoring foreign capital over national interests, and the absence of protective legislation for workers.³³

In 1910 Francisco I. Madero contested the Díaz presidency; however, the election was marred by fraud and manipulation by the Díaz regime. Despite Madero's popularity and his calls for democratic reforms, Díaz secured re-election by declaring himself the winner of the election. This led to widespread unrest. Madero responded by proclaiming the "Plan of San Luis Potosí," catalyzing an armed uprising led by figures like Francisco Villa and Emiliano Zapata, demanding free elections and agrarian reforms to protect the rights of the working class. Later, Díaz found himself in exile, and Madero assumed the presidency. However, Madero's failure to fulfill

³³ Alan Knight, "Introduction," in *The Mexican Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 10-35.

promised reforms prompted persistent uprisings led by Zapata, ultimately resulting in the succession of Venustiano Carranza. Carranza convened a congress that drafted the new Mexican constitution, officially promulgated in 1917,³⁴ ushering in a transformed political, economic, and social organization. More specifically, it introduced a tripartite division of powers, initiated agrarian reforms, mandated the separation of Church and State, and saw the establishment of the first political party, the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario or National Revolutionary Party (PNR)*.³⁵

Hence, the revolutionary era in Mexico heralded a pivotal transformation in governance, ushering in a comprehensive restructuring of the country's political landscape and paving the way for subsequent socio-political developments, including the monumental undertaking of mural painting in public spaces, a cultural phenomenon intimately tied to both early twentieth-century nation-building and a resurgence of wall painting in Europe and the United States in the late 1910s. Amidst the transformations, the Palace of Fine Arts (Palacio de Bellas Artes) emerged as a prominent venue for public art, serving as a space for the artistic endeavors of luminaries like José Clemente Orozco. Orozco's *Katharsis* mural from 1935, is located on the third floor of the Palace. It can be found on one of the lower sections of the vaulted ceiling of the central dome of the building. The mural illustrates one of Mexico's post-revolutionary identity narratives and offers a poignant reflection on the nation's socio-political journey and cultural resurgence.³⁶

³⁴ John Mraz, "The Zapatista Movement and Southern Cameras," in *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*, 1st ed. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2012), 93–121.

³⁵ Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, 20-25.

³⁶ *Guía Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes* (Ciudad de México: Ediciones EL VISO, 2018), 46-60.

Katharsis: Decoding the Commission and Decorative Program

Katharsis or *Catharsis* (figure 1) emulates fresco and was executed between 1934 and 1935 using oil on canvas (446x1146cm) over a transportable metal frame. It is currently part of the permanent collection in the Palace of Fine Arts in the center of Mexico City.³⁷ The construction of the Palace itself took thirty years and began under Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship in August 1904. It was built to replace the demolished National Theater of Santa Anna, which previously stood on the main avenue *Cinco de Mayo*, now *Bolívar* Street.³⁸

Due to the Mexican revolution and subsequent political events, the completion of the murals was delayed until the post-revolutionary period, under the presidency of Alvaro Obregón. The project gained momentum in 1934.³⁹ The mural was commissioned by the headquarters of the *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA)*, which was under strict government management, particularly by the Ministry of Public Education's department headed by José Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos aimed to leverage public art to promote education and instill a sense of Mexican identity and history.⁴⁰ Orozco's mural was not the only decorative commission for the Palace: Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo, and David Alfaro Siqueiros were also called upon to revive mural painting under government sponsorship. The Ministry of Culture, in partnership with the government, emphasized the launch of public initiatives focused on meeting the population's needs. These initiatives particularly emphasized educational public art projects, with a special focus on Mexican history.⁴¹

Additionally, as Diego Rivera affirmed in his letters:

³⁷ *Guía Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, 106.

³⁸ *Guía Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, 15.

³⁹ *Guía Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, 16-21.

⁴⁰ José Vasconcelos and H.W. Hilborn, *The Modern Mexican Essay*.

⁴¹ Bremer, "Palacio de Bellas Artes," 20-21.

The rise of Mexican painting is undoubtedly and undeniably linked to mural painting, not because mural painting had not been practiced throughout the nineteenth century in Mexico and that hundreds of square kilometers of walls were not filled in all parts of Europe with public and private buildings. [...] But for the first time, aesthetically and politically revolutionary painters had access to the walls of public buildings in the country, and for the first time in the history of painting in the entire world, the epic of the people was brought to those walls, not around mythological or political heroes, but by the masses in action.⁴²

Rivera recounts, the emergence of the *Sindicato de Obreros, Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores*, a group that swiftly gained renown for their contributions to the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria*.⁴³

This marked a pivotal moment when art began to take on a social function. Nevertheless, Rivera noted the lack of interest from newspapers, which dismissed their work as lacking the “fabulous and sensational” appeal they favored, adhering to esthetically conservative standards. Criticism extended to their use of the walls on public buildings as canvases. Yet, Rivera championed public art as essential to integrating art into the everyday lives of Mexicans, challenging its confinement to elite spaces, such as “the walls of the rich” or closed galleries and museums. He highlighted the disdain of academic painters and professors, who derided their focus on realism and social themes, considering it an aesthetically displeasing “cult of ugliness.” Rivera recalled

⁴² Diego Rivera, *Textos de Arte*, eds. Xavier Moyssén and Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas (Ciudad de México: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1986), 68-70.

El auge de la pintura mexicana está indudablemente ligado a la pintura mural, no porque la pintura mural no se hubiera practicado durante todo el siglo XIX en México y no porque cientos de kilómetros cuadrados de muros no estuvieran llenos en todas partes de Europa en edificios públicos y privados[...] Pero por primera vez en la historia de la pintura del mundo entero se llevó a esos muros la epopeya del pueblo, no alrededor de héroes mitológicos o políticos, sino por las masas en acción” [My translation].

⁴³ Rivera, *Textos de Arte*, 63-70. *The Sindicato de Obreros, Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores (Union of Workers, Technicians, Painters, and Sculptors)*, commonly referred to as the *SOTPE* was a labor union established in Mexico in June 1924 with its Manifesto by David Alfaro Siqueiros and signed by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Xavier Guerrero, Fermín Revueltas, Ramón Alva Guadarrama, Germán Cueto y Carlos Mérida. The manifesto repudiated easel painting as “aristocratic” and glorified monumental art as being public property. It played a significant role in the Mexican muralist movement by advocating for the rights of artists and workers, as well as promoting social and political causes through art. Within the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School)* in Mexico City, the *SOTPE* commissioned several prominent Mexican muralists, including Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco to paint murals that depicted various aspects of Mexican history, culture, and society. These murals aimed to educate and inspire students of the institution while also serving as powerful statements about Mexican identity and the country’s revolutionary ideals.

the sentiments of the critics who believed muralists “forgot to paint beautiful young girls with useless white hands [...] They said that [their] paintings of indigenous women, with large breasts feeding their children, were vulgar and that our paintings of the Revolution and work were ugly and horrible.”⁴⁴ Moreover, they faced political attacks, being dismissed as anarchists or communists, and were constantly ridiculed by the bourgeoisie. Despite this, Rivera observed a growing recognition among the Mexican audience of the power of their murals in tandem with the revolution, which, according to Rivera, turned out to be “more powerful than war and more long-lasting than religion.”⁴⁵

Between 1934 and 1935, Mexico faced significant instability driven by a range of social issues, including protests by ironworkers’ organizations revolting against the working and salary conditions. Concurrently, the Mexican Muralist movement gained momentum, with artists like Rivera and Orozco returning from studies and commissions abroad. During this period, Rivera and Orozco embarked on a collaborative commission for the Palace of Fine Arts, where Orozco revealed a monumental mural characterized by depictions of fratricidal conflicts and scenes of perversion and violence, apparently aiming to capture the tumultuous atmosphere of the revolution.

⁴⁴ Rivera, 69. “Se les olvidó pintar a hermosas mujeres jóvenes con manos blancas e inútiles [...] Decían que sus cuadros de mujeres indígenas, con grandes pechos amamantando a sus hijos, eran vulgares y que nuestros cuadros de la Revolución y su obra eran feos y horribles.” [My Translation].

⁴⁵ Rivera, 69-70 “Los mexicanos estaban despertando al hecho de que algo estaba sucediendo de mucha importancia para la nación: un arte que iba de la mano de la Revolución, más poderoso que la guerra y más duradero que la religión.” [My Translation].

Mural Panorama: Composition Overview

In *Katharsis*, Orozco deliberately paints in a heroic, larger-than-life scale, nonetheless demonstrating a keen awareness of sharing space with murals by Rivera and Siqueiros. He achieves this by adeptly using a pair of columns to partition the composition into three distinct sections. The mural's narrative unfolds along two principal diagonals, guiding the viewer through a dynamic interplay of organic and geometric forms. Organic elements such as human figures, corpses, and the background fire offer a counterpoint to the geometric precision of machines, weapons, flags, and metallic devices. Orozco's meticulous rendering of figures and the manipulation of luminosity from foreground to background imbue the mural with an intense and concise color palette, oscillating between warm and cool tones. Upon first glance, the composition is marked by a compelling presentation of elements. Dominant hues such as red, complemented by natural skin tones, are juxtaposed with shades of grey, brown, green, and black. This deliberate orchestration of color enhances the mural's overall impact, underscoring Orozco's adept command of both form and narrative.

In the foreground of the composition, Orozco strategically situates three reclining female figures, with particular attention to the one known as "La Chata"⁴⁶ (*figure 2*). In Mexico "Chata" is a nickname commonly used to refer to women either as "short," "flat," or "damaged." While it is unclear if the colloquial nickname corresponds to its particular use during the Mexican Revolution, it is noteworthy to mention it as it adds to her importance in *Katharsis's* subject matter. Indeed, this woman embodies the archetype of a high-class prostitute. Adorned with pearls around her neck, wearing heels, and presenting a macabre smile with carefully but

⁴⁶ Mary K Coffey, "Angels and Prostitutes: Jose Clement Orozco's Catharsis and the Politics of Female Allegory in 1930s Mexico," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 185–217.

exaggerated makeup application, “La Chata” projects an image of opulence that starkly contrasts with her underlying destitution. The deliberate choice of a green palette for the lower section of her body imparts an unsettling quality, evoking decaying flesh. She is presented in an unconventional and dramatic diagonal pose, with her legs open at the highest point, while her head is the nearest element to the foreground, gazing directly at the viewer. With her ostentatious jewelry and excessive makeup, “La Chata” is depicted grotesquely, and her laughter takes on a disconcerting quality, perhaps directed towards an ambiguous subject—be it the viewer, societal norms, or the broader audience of the country itself. The juxtaposition between glamour and squalor embodied by the character of “La Chata” offers a poignant commentary on societal contradictions, particularly as it pertains to social exploitation in the pursuit of foreign capital. As a high-class prostitute, “La Chata” symbolizes the exploitation for economic gain perpetrated by individuals in positions of power or by foreign interests seeking to capitalize on local resources or labor. Hence, Orozco’s portrayal challenges viewers to critically engage and examine the layers of representation at play, such as the interplay between economic interests, societal norms, and individual agency. Perhaps, this depiction of women diverges from the idealized and romanticized portrayals of women in academic art. It also serves as a critique of the social and political realities of the time, specifically calling out the hypocrisy of social reform and postrevolutionary development, and the government’s attempt to moralize.

In this light, it is relevant to introduce Umberto Boccioni’s 1911 *La Risata* or *The Laugh* (figure 3) since it presents a thematic resonance with Orozco’s portrayal of “La Chata” in *Katharsis*. In *La Risata*, a female figure dominates the upper left section of the composition amidst a group of women and “viveurs” engaged in a lively conversation around a café table. This woman is notable for her large-scale torso and the pronounced emphasis on her facial

features as she erupts into uproarious laughter.⁴⁷ Draped in a blue dress, adorned with a prominent red hat and gleaming rings, she exudes an almost as ostentatious and disconcerting aura akin to the portrayal of “La Chata.” Examining *La Risata* within the context of Futurism’s prevailing ideals of the time, particularly regarding notions of love, luxury, and lust is crucial. On one front, Futurism openly disdained conventional notions of women, romantic love, and *lussuria* (lust).⁴⁸ On another front, early futurist artworks sought to negate and dismantle the symbolist fascination with idealized women, whether noble, ideal, or femme fatale. Nevertheless, Boccioni’s pre-Futurist work evinces a staunch resistance to the allure of lust while simultaneously asserting his masculinity. Although he confessed to enjoying Parisian cabarets, cafés, and concerts in 1906, where he encountered prostitutes who served as inspiration for works like *The Laugh* and *Modern Idol*, despite finding “delight” in their company he devoided any genuine sensual allure as he affirmed that they “did not hold any sensual attraction to [him]; they [were] too different from the women [he had] always observed and these seem[ed] like objects.”⁴⁹

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Boccioni made multiple interventions on *La Risata*. Unfortunately, no photographic evidence exists of the painting’s original appearance as exhibited in the 1911 Arte Libera exhibition. During the exhibition, the painting became the target of an attack when an individual decided to intervene on the still-wet paint, arguing that this way it was “more complete, or at least it [was] more pleasing to his artistic freedom.”⁵⁰ This intervention altered the painting’s original composition. Subsequently,

Boccioni began exploring the possibility of enhancing vision through the simultaneity and superposition of aspects // rather than a superior form of total knowledge, however,

⁴⁷ Poggi, 179-180.

⁴⁸ Poggi, 181.

⁴⁹ Poggi, 187.

⁵⁰ Poggi, 205.

simultaneity implied the evocation of memory and affect, grasped on the model of scientific transparency (x-rays) but achieved through the artist's intuition.⁵¹

Our understanding of the original version and its variations primarily derives from private sketches, where the laughing woman consistently occupies a central position within the composition. Despite their contrasting styles, ideologies, and placement, this portrayal prompts a comparison with Orozco's depiction of the female figure. Both artists employ the female figure as a focal point, albeit with seemingly divergent intentions. While Orozco delves into the explicitly grotesque in portraying "La Chata," Boccioni's *La Risata* potentially presents a more idealized yet possibly satirical representation of bourgeois life and futurist ideals. The first sketch (*figure 4*) initially features a solitary laughing woman adorned with a large hat, surrounded by five men exhibiting varied reactions to her laughter. In the subsequent sketch (*figure 5*), Boccioni introduces a second woman with a similarly ornate hat, depicted from behind, along with additional details such as glasses and plates and distant diners, providing a clearer context of the composition. Finally, in the final sketches (*figures 6 and 7*), Boccioni's portrayal of the laughing woman takes a potentially vulgar turn as he elevates the viewpoint, enlarging the decorated hat of the prostitute who now faces away from the viewer, gesturing with exaggerated arm movements. Meanwhile, the woman facing her reclines to reveal her chest, emitting a broad, exaggerated toothy laugh seen from a lower perspective. Conversely, the men appear to no longer share in the amusement but instead are overshadowed by the physical presence and exuberance of the women.⁵²

Therefore, in the final work, the prostitute reclines, exposing her pale face and engaging her entire body in the act of laughter, which Poggi suggests may unconsciously convey a form of

⁵¹ Poggi, 206.

⁵² Poggi, 206-208.

sexual exposure.⁵³ Amidst other symbols, at the composition's center, a large-scale yellow feather resembling a spray of fireworks captivates attention. These untamed plumes, adorning their hats, signify frenzied excess, vanity, and the fetishistic allure of the prostitutes, contrasting with Boccioni's portrayal of the male figures merely as admirers, restrained and inexpressive, almost masking their true emotions.

Moreover, the final version incorporates dazzling rays of what it looks like artificial light, casting illumination from multiple angles. A third laughing woman emerges on the right side of the canvas, holding a cigarette to her vividly painted red lips, adorned with exaggerated makeup. Her bejeweled hands gesticulate animatedly in the conversation, adding to the scene's vibrant energy. Notably, another point of comparison arises with Boccioni's depiction of the female figure in *The Mourning*, (figure 8) exhibited alongside *The Laugh*. Here, he contrasts the expressive disparity between the states of mind of the elderly and the youthful laughing prostitutes, portrayed with caricatural qualities reminiscent of both "La Chata" and the adjacent woman (to her right). This is particularly evident in Boccioni's sketch (figure 9 comparison with figure 16), where a series of multiplied, disfigured faces or masks recall Orozco's recurring theme of decadence and degradation, epitomized through the portrayal of high-class prostitutes.⁵⁴

In light of this, Boccioni's focus on individual female figures is apparent, while smaller-scale geometric elements populated the rest of the composition, symbolizing the dynamics of modern urban life. The exaggerated smiles and make-up of the women contribute to the theme of laughter, reflected in the painting's title, and serve to explore the theme of violence and abjection inherent in the laughter of the *cocotte* and her entourage, echoing Orozco's representation of the female figure. Both artist's sketches and final composition underscore an apparent obsession

⁵³ Poggi, 208.

⁵⁴ Poggi, 207-210.

with extravagant decadence and vulgarity, manifested through the disfigured, morbid aspect of convulsive laughter.⁵⁵

Furthermore, to “La Chata’s” right side in *Katharsis*, Orozco introduces a juxtaposition of symbolic elements that enrich the narrative complexity of his composition. Two shotguns and a knife handle are positioned prominently, with one shotgun showing signs of decay in its deteriorating wooden handles. Next to these implements, the head of a second female figure emerges from the ground, bearing disfigurement that suggests mortality. One eye gazes away while the other turns inward, and the disheveled wig atop her head evokes 18th-century aesthetics, possibly serving as a critique of European decadence and its forceful imposition of “buen gusto.”

Drawing our attention further to the right within the foreground, we encounter a third female figure set against the backdrop of an open vault. Rendered in a palette of cool mechanical blue tones, this figure exists in a state of cold detachment amidst a tumultuous scene of suffering and mechanized entities. Bald and metallic characters reminiscent of distressed corpses populate the scene, with one figure carrying a lifeless body and another appearing to engage in a stabbing motion. In stark contrast, positioned at the right edge of the composition, a warm-toned bald human head emerges as a focal point. Seemingly detached from the surrounding chaos, this figure gazes outward, conveying exclusion from the tumultuous scene communicated through both color and gesture.

In the central nexus of the composition, a pivotal confrontation unfolds, one that symbolizes a profound socio-political dynamic. Two colossal figures engage in combat, one depicted naked and the other clothed. This juxtaposition serves as a poignant allegory for the

⁵⁵ Poggi, 209-212.

pervasive social and class struggles that precipitated revolutionary upheaval and led to fratricidal conflict. The naked and clothed figures encapsulate the stark disparities that underpinned this transformative societal shift. Positioned to the left of this central conflict emerges a hybrid character, embodying an amalgamation of human and mechanical components. Comprised of chains, drills, and gears this entity wields a menacing arm brandishing a knife, resembling a dagger. In the act of attacking a group of individuals, the hybrid figure introduces an additional layer of narrative complexity. The targeted assembly is heterogeneous, featuring some individuals portrayed as resilient protesters and others rendered lifeless, in the aftermath of resistance. The composition thus encapsulates the multifaceted nature of societal discord, intertwining human struggles with the mechanized elements that contribute to the themes of industrialization, technology as warfare, and dehumanization.

Diego Rivera, renowned alongside José Clemente Orozco as a prominent muralist, garnered substantial commissions in Mexico City and internationally. His affinity for creating murals extended notably to educational institutions, public centers, and colleges, mirroring Orozco's interests. One significant project was the mural *El hombre controlador del Universo* (figure 10), at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, where both artists collaborated. Despite not getting along particularly well, they held mutual respect and admiration, while also recognizing differences in their artistic styles and approaches to depicting Mexico.⁵⁶

In 1943, a significant rift surfaced between the two muralists and art critics. Rivera defended his colleague Orozco from a document published in the *Boletín del Seminario Mexicano de Cultura*. The criticism aimed at Orozco suggested a failure in form, resulting in a portrayal characterized by painful and grotesque exaggeration akin to caricature. In response,

⁵⁶ Rivera, *Textos de Arte*, 297-298.

Rivera penned a letter defending Orozco from the critics. Rivera argued that the critic's perceptual limitations hindered their ability to grasp the profound dynamism inherent in Orozco's composition. He contended that the critic failed to recognize the fine geometric structure governing the vitality of life in motion, a structure intrinsic to Orozco's representation. Despite its potential to appear strange to some, Rivera asserted that Orozco's work manifested "a tragic power through its deeply ordered movement amid intense violence."⁵⁷

Amidst these artistic and ideological exchanges, the rift that emerged in 1943 underscored the inherent complexities in interpreting their respective artistic visions. Rivera's steadfast defense of Orozco's work against a specific critique exemplifies the artistic and political solidarity of the Mexican muralist movement. Consequently, this clash of perspectives serves as a backdrop to Orozco's intricate and symbol-laden mural composition. In this sense, Orozco's background employs vibrant and dynamic lines to delineate a colossal fire curtain stretching across the expanse from the far right to the left of the composition. Concurrently, in the upper right corner, an incendiary and revolutionary red flag flares alongside figures exhibiting expressions of palpable suffering. This meticulous rendering of the background is rich with symbolic significance. The prominently positioned flag suggests a representation of Communism, juxtaposed against individuals in states of anguished expression, devoid of apparent prospects for appeasement.⁵⁸

Amidst this chaotic tableau, scenes unfold wherein men endure the piercing impact of bayonets, while others, slight and frail, succumb to the crushing force of machines or are subjugated by them. Orozco's use of symbolism in his mural extends to the elemental

⁵⁷ Rivera, *Textos de Arte*, 298-299. "Extraño tiene que serle, y le es, el tremendo poder trágico, demoledor de mitos, del gran Orozco; poder ordenado en su movimiento, profundamente ordenado en medio de su gran violencia." [My Translation].

⁵⁸ Mary K Coffey, "Angels and Prostitutes," 200-217.

significance of fire. The symbol of fire is a reminder of the mural's title, *Katharsis*, and its connection to the overall work. In the mural, fire is not portrayed solely as a destructive force but also as the agent of catharsis and purification. Therefore, fire serves as the element that synthesizes all the meanings of the vast variety of elements in the mural.

The mural's chaotic blend of elements coalesces into a symbolic representation of fire, representing a transformative purging. Orozco adeptly channels the rich symbolism of fire to infuse the scene with a profound narrative unity, underscoring the connection between chaos, destruction, and the potential for renewal embedded within the vast array of elements comprising the mural just as the notion of destruction as purification was a standard Futurist trope, as evidenced in Marinetti's 1909 manifesto.

An examination of the portrayal of the machine in *Katharsis* also necessitates a comparative analysis with the representations of technology and industry found in murals within the Fine Arts Palace, as well as in Futurist artworks. The ideological underpinnings shaping the representation of the machine diverge significantly across these contexts. Futurists such as Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Russolo (*figure 13*) sought to encapsulate the dynamism, speed, energy, and modernity inherent in industrialization. Their works employed fragmented depictions of machines in motion through geometric shapes, bold lines, and a vibrant color palette, ultimately conveying an exalted image of the machine as a symbol of progress.

In contrast, Orozco's representation of the machine in *Katharsis* assumes a critical position vis-à-vis industrialization, technology, the machine age, and Capital. Orozco, concerned with the socio-political ramifications of rapid modernization, abstains from glorifying the machine. Instead, he presents it as a double-edged entity, possessing a dual capacity for progress and destruction. Notwithstanding these distinct ideological orientations, it is noteworthy that

there exist resemblances between his and the Futurists' color palette and their common use of fragmentation (in both cases achieved through the repetition of elements) to convey movement. Additionally, a commonality emerges in the subject matter, particularly regarding the machine, although with markedly different sociopolitical signification. This convergence of formal elements prompts a double-edged consideration of how disparate ideologies can find visual correspondence in certain artistic choices.

Consider David Alfaro Siqueiros's 1939 mural for the *Electrical Workers Union Building* (figure 14) and Diego Rivera's 1934 mural *El Hombre Controlador del Universo* (*Man at the Crossroads*)⁵⁹ (figures 10-12) in the Palace of Fine Arts. Both testify to the use of variations of machinery elements within the muralist movement, offering distinct perspectives on the role of technology in society. Siqueiros's work *Retrato de la Burguesía* (*Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*) utilizes machines as central motifs to voice a powerful critique of capitalism's exploitation and dehumanization of the working class. In this case, the towering, angular forms of the machines dominate the composition while simultaneously dwarfing the figures of the workers at the bottom of the three murals, symbolizing the relentless and impersonal nature of industrialization.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Rivera's mural was originally commissioned for the Rockefeller Center in New York by John D. Rockefeller Jr. However, it was ultimately destroyed by Rockefeller's orders upon noticing that Rivera had radically changed the composition of the mural and included a large-scale portrait of Lenin in his composition, which was understandably not a favorable depiction for the capitalist magnate and signified an immediate rupture with the Rockefeller family. Consequently, Rivera seized the opportunity to recreate the mural in Mexico

⁵⁹ *Hombre en la encrucijada* or *Man at the Crossroads*, originally commissioned in 1933 for the Rockefeller Center in New York

⁶⁰ *Guía Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, 60.

City's Palace of Fine Arts in 1934. Notably, Rivera's celebration of Marxist-Leninist ideology resonated throughout many of his murals, which aimed to champion socialist ideals and critiqued capitalist exploitation. These artworks frequently depicted historical figures like Lenin and Marx, alongside workers and peasants, as heroes of the proletariat. Concurrently, Rivera underscored the pivotal role of machinery and the industry, symbolizing the collective strength and potential of the working class, while also acknowledging its detrimental aspects. In other words, the bold and dynamic depictions of various machines symbolize industrial progress and technological advancement, while simultaneously representing the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism.⁶¹ The central figure in Rivera's mural, a towering man 'controlling' the universe, serves as a powerful metaphor for humanity's ambition and desire to shape society through science and technology. By juxtaposing the achievements and dangers of such ideals of 'progress', Rivera invites viewers to contemplate mainly the ethical implications of human control over forces of nature and the cosmos.⁶²

In this light, *Katharsis* emerges as a violent and somber mural encapsulating the adversities of the industrial age, illustrating the dehumanizing impact of a society fixated on the roles of producers and consumers, neglecting fundamental human needs for connection and comprehension. This somber tableau serves as a poignant political commentary, synthesizing elements of protest, conflict, and suffering – a narrative intricately woven with the pains uncured in the pursuit of dignity. It is juxtaposed with a systemic response that perpetuates violence and repression rather than addressing the underlying societal strife.

The mural delves into the darker facets of society, with Orozco elevating its portrayal to symbolize moral degradation. His depiction of female figures, particularly those identified as

⁶¹ *Guía Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, 84-89.

prostitutes, is not born of disdain but rather stems from a double-edged understanding, acquired through his bohemian experiences, that these individuals are not to be blamed for their circumstance's larger context of capitalist and political corruption. Orozco strategically utilizes these representations to convey a broader commentary on individuals who, in their pursuit of privilege, inadvertently contribute to the erosion of the collective future, all the while existing as a facet of societal mockery amid the chaos. These prostitutes, then, become emblematic of the broader societal predicament—signifying that if the world is in a state of decay, a purification process, or “catharsis,” is imperative. In subsequent sections, this notion is delved into more extensively and contemplates how the overthrow of tyranny may necessitate violent, explosive upheaval replete with cold and unpalatable moments, marked by significant losses and betrayals. The mural provocatively explores the potential trajectory toward a turbulent journey toward a new social order.

It is important to acknowledge that the mural's title, *Katharsis*, did not originate from Orozco himself but was proposed by the art historian Justino Fernández to underscore the concept of purification achieved through fire, a motif and symbol resonant with sacred significance. There has been significant commentary on the mural's initial designation as “The Struggle, the War, and the Disintegration.” Another noteworthy aspect is the mural's medium: fresco on a transportable metal panel. This choice is intriguing, as it initially conveys an industrial character, evoking associations with fire and factories. However, it is crucial to clarify that the transportability of the medium does not imply an intention for the mural to be relocated to other venues. On the contrary, *Katharsis* remains an integral part of the permanent collection at the Fine Arts Palace, alongside other murals. Orozco was aware of the palace's structural challenges, including continuing structural collapse, and having experienced losses in his works

before, he aimed to ensure the enduring legacy of his creation. Diego Rivera, on the other hand, observed the challenges they both encountered with the allocated mural space. To preempt potential issues with their final composition concerning their preparatory drawings. (*Figures 11-12 and 15-16*), he recommended this medium to Orozco.⁶³

Orozco's œuvre centered on articulating the ethos of the modern industrial era, from capitalism and exploitation to civil and world war, offering a starkly realistic depiction of the poignant cultural and social realities of the time. His art encapsulated the profound rupture in the political, industrial, and cultural aspirations brought about by modernity, illustrating the annihilation caused by violent conflicts. In contrast to the Futurist movement's embrace of technology and speed as signs of social and industrial progress, Orozco's *Katharsis* takes a critical stance. The mural serves as a powerful counterpoint, prompting viewers to confront the ethical and moral dilemmas associated with technological progress and rapid industrialization.

Luis Cardoza y Aragón, a Guatemalan poet and essayist who spent much of his life in political exile in Mexico, developed a deep fascination with Orozco's art, particularly stemming from his poetry and Orozco's description of his work as "a painting is a poem and nothing more."⁶⁴ Hence, his works suggest timeless symbolism and humanism as seen in poetry, amidst the echoes of the modern age. In 1934, he had the opportunity to meet Orozco, but their friendship had already blossomed through a series of letters and extensive essays discussing Orozco's murals. In his collection of dialogues with another prominent Mexican poet of the time, Jorge Cuesta, Cardoza mentions that Orozco's art represents "a kind of universal betrayal and departure from immediate historical sentiments. [...] It presents a universal and timeless

⁶³ *Guía Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, 107.

⁶⁴ Luis Cardoza y Aragón. *Orozco*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005), 51-52. "Una pintura es un poema y nada más" [My Translation].

manifestation that runs between the waters of time, but deeply and freely, in a different line that is not altered or moved by numerous currents.”⁶⁵ Interestingly Cardoza’s commentary aligns with his observation that Orozco:

Seeks to disappear as a man to present what is related to his painting, to painting. Private life, anecdotes, controversies, he ignores the ties and unties them in one fell swoop. He tries to erase himself, but he shows himself in every line of his autobiographical texts.⁶⁶

Thus, Cardoza underscores Orozco’s endeavor to transcend personal narratives and focus on the core of the painting itself. Orozco’s attempt to erase himself and convey social and political themes through his art underscores the profound impact of his work beyond individual experiences. Thus, these insights reinforce the idea of a double-edged understanding of Orozco’s *Katharsis*, portraying it as a work that embodies both collective sentiments and Orozco’s introspection. Hence, the mural serves as a poignant reminder that progress often exacts a toll, urging reflection on the human cost of swift societal transformations. It furnishes a lens through which to examine divergent perspectives on progress, humanity, and the societal repercussions of both rapid industrialization and change. With its subtle technical affinities, the mural stands as evidence of Orozco’s divergence from Futurism’s techno-optimism, opting instead to confront the darker, unresolved consequences of societal evolution.

⁶⁵ Cardoza y Aragón, *Orozco*, 12.

“La pintura de JCO es una de esas obras donde se manifiesta una especie de traición universal y de infidelidad a los sentimientos históricos inmediatos. [...] El veía la obra de Orozco como una manifestación universal e intemporal que corre “entre las aguas del tiempo, pero profunda y libremente, en una línea distinta que no alteran ni conmueven las corrientes numerosas.” [My Translation]

⁶⁶ Cardoza y Aragón, 60.

“[...] Busca desaparecer como hombre para presentar lo relacionado con su pintura, con la pintura. La vida privada, anécdotas, polémicas, las soslaya o las ata o desata de un solo golpe. Intenta borrarse, pero se enseña en cada línea de sus textos.” [My Translation]

3. Exploring Cultural Identity Through Art

Construct Authentic Mexicanness

In this context, Mexican culture from the 1910s to the 1960s demands a reassessment of some of the terms and concepts used to understand its various dimensions. Going back to Villoro's perspective illuminates an ongoing debate regarding the "authenticity" of Mexican culture during this period, often questioned due to the pervasive influence of foreign elements inherited from the colonial era.⁶⁷ While these influences provided continuity with the cultural past, they did not necessarily align with the authentic essence of Mexican identity. Muralism emerged as a pivotal tool in rejecting European influences while simultaneously preserving Mexican tradition and heritage. This rejection stemmed from a collective consciousness that grew out of the very European artistic education disseminated by the San Carlos Academy. Paradoxically, it was through this European-based education that the Mexican muralists became increasingly aware of the need to distance themselves from European aesthetic norms and embrace their own cultural identity. The foundation laid by European artistic education catalyzed the subsequent rejection of European influences in post-revolutionary Mexican muralism. Therefore, rather than a contradiction, it represents a complex interplay between European education and the assertion of Mexican identity in the artistic sphere.

The significant role of Germán Murillo, also known as Dr. Atl, in shaping emerging Mexican pictorial identity and the Muralists in particular cannot be overlooked. Orozco himself

⁶⁷ Edmundo O'Gorman et al., *Cultura, Ideas y Mentalidades*, 239-262. [Translation mine].

acknowledged Dr. Atl's influence in his autobiography, recalling their encounters amidst public controversies.⁶⁸ Dr. Atl's bold and audacious approach, infused with the spirit of the Second School of Paris, served as a beacon for aspiring artists, offering a departure from traditional "romanticism" towards a more contemporary and internationally resonant form of artistic expression.

In those evenings among young painting apprentices, a revolutionary spark ignited within the Mexican art scene. Until then, Mexicans had been viewed as colonial "servants" or subjects, deemed incapable of creative originality or independent thought. The prevailing belief was that everything had to be imported from a European metropolis, as Mexicans were seen as inherently inferior. Orozco recounts that while they could paint, their work was often constrained to mimicry of European styles prevalent in Paris, as most critics were Parisian. He believed that aspiring Mexican artists could never hope to achieve equality with foreigners and that those who sought recognition abroad often did so out of desperation, if they ever remembered their nationality, to ask for help in times of trouble, despite "consecration." Despite their hard work, their efforts were often seen as exotic curiosities. However, after witnessing Dr. Atl's fervor, they began to question the legitimacy of the colonial paradigm imposed upon them. It became clear that their colonial status was merely a façade perpetuated by international merchants. While they received instruction from European masters, Orozco and his contemporaries realized that they were equally capable, if not more so, of artistic innovation.⁶⁹

Since then, Mexican muralism has often been classified as "popular art" while representing a "folkloric" aspect of Mexican culture. However, it is crucial to delve deeper into the significance embedded within these terms and recognize that they encompass more than their

⁶⁸ José Clemente Orozco, *Autobiografía de José Clemente Orozco*, 1945.

⁶⁹ Orozco, *Autobiografía*, 20-25.

surface definitions suggest. While “popular art” typically refers to anything involving or relating to ordinary people or the entirety of a country’s population, and “folkloric” denotes the depiction of “traditional stories, beliefs, and customs of a group of people,” Orozco’s work challenges and transcends these Eurocentric and antiquated definitions. Indeed, while rooted in traditional Mexican art, Orozco’s murals serve a dual purpose. They not only depict Mexican history but also redefine the role of art, transcending mere political messaging and social critique. Previously, Orozco had employed caricatures for propagandistic purposes, yet his evolving perspective and experiences propelled him towards creating murals that challenged not only the government’s political narratives. His works not only challenged the government’s prescribed narrative but also catalyzed his audience to engage with the broader social and historical context critically. Orozco’s murals thus emerged as transformative agents, reshaping societal perceptions and fostering a deeper understanding of Mexican identity and heritage.

In this, Orozco credits José Guadalupe Posada as being one of his primary, if not initial, sources of inspiration for pursuing art. Posada, a Mexican artist, printmaker, and illustrator prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries left a significant mark on Mexican art and culture. He is renowned for his creation of “Calaveras,” or skeleton-like figures, particularly the iconic “Catrina” figures associated with the “Día de Muertos” (Day of the Dead) celebration.⁷⁰ Posada’s work extended across various themes, often engaging these skeletal figures in satirical depictions of societal norms, political figures, and cultural practices of the time, which were frequently featured in newspapers. As such, Posada played a pivotal role in popular culture through his highly accessible and widely distributed artworks, providing a platform for social commentary while establishing enduring iconic imagery for the masses, and

⁷⁰ Orozco, *Autobiografía*, 11-15.

for the Mexican muralists, the new avant-gardes. As Hernández suggests, it was only with the rise of liberal ideologies and the consolidation of authority that a “genuine” exploration into Mexican customs and narratives began.⁷¹ Posada’s work thus serves as a precursor to popular art education, which emphasized a new focus on the political dimension of a new “social art” that aimed at shaping a new citizenry and instilling new values and shared history.

To further distinguish Mexican muralism from Italian Futurism, it is essential to highlight their differing attitudes toward folk art and their respective approaches to nation-building. Unlike the Futurists, who showed little interest in folk art and regional identities, Mexican muralists embraced and celebrated traditional Mexican art forms as integral to the nation’s cultural form. While folk art in Italy often denoted regional identities, the Futurists rejected this notion in their pursuit of a unified, modern Italian nation devoid of historical or regional ties. However, despite these differences, both movements shared a common belief in the power of public art to educate and shape future society. While Mexican muralists used their works to challenge political narratives and promote social consciousness, the Futurists aimed to inspire a new vision of modernity through their avant-garde aesthetics. In this sense, the idea of public art as a tool for shaping collective identity and values resonated with both movements, albeit manifested in distinct artistic and ideological expressions.

Functionality and National Identity: Art as a Vehicle for Cultural Identity

In early twentieth-century Mexico, the emergence of the muralist movement signaled a profound shift in artistic expression, placing a strong emphasis on its social function and the cultivation of national identity. This focus on social function was pivotal, as mural paintings

⁷¹ Mauricio J. Hernández, “El muralismo mexicano y la imagen del Estado posrevolucionario,” 46-60.

were commissioned for public spaces such as government buildings, schools, and public plazas, serving not only as aesthetic adornments but also as educational tools, platforms for social commentary, and vehicles for the dissemination of cultural and in some cases, political ideologies. The overarching intention was specifically to foster a collective consciousness and shape a new national identity, drawing inspiration from prehistoric Mexican tales, the Mexican Revolution, and the post-revolutionary era of social transformation.⁷² These themes provided a framework for embodying fundamental principles, including the cultivation of a refined “taste” that diverged from the colonial ideology of *buen gusto* promoted in the “New Spain” of the eighteenth century, as well as the cultivation of intellect. Consequently, the objective was to engender a new public consciousness and citizenry, irrespective of literacy levels, acknowledging the transformative and educative power of visual imagery.

Artists such as the Mexican muralist triad utilized their monumental works to convey messages of social justice, indigenous pride, and national unity to a wide audience, embodying Mexico’s rich cultural heritage and historical narratives from pre-Columbian art, indigenous traditions, and revolutionary struggles. These artists sought to instill a sense of collective pride and solidarity among the Mexican people while asserting Mexico’s cultural autonomy in the face of European influence. Diego Rivera emphasized the importance of contributing to public art as the only means, or at least the most significant one, to educate and foster collective consciousness as it attempted for the first time, to present something both of and for the people and the masses in action. Additionally, Orozco took a similar stance, recognizing the transformative potential of murals to challenge societal norms and provoke critical thought, offering a poignant commentary on political oppression, economic exploitation, and social

⁷² *Guía Museo Del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, 69-73.

injustice. Ultimately, this emphasis on the functional aspect of art for national identity played a pivotal role in shaping the artistic practices of the muralist movement, leaving an indelible mark on Mexican art, and history.

Politics and Estridentismo

In this regard, José Clemente Orozco's profound awareness of the pivotal confrontations of the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath shaped his artistic vision, as he experienced firsthand the transformative aftermath, including significant governance reforms and a renewed focus on education, particularly art's educational value. Concurrently, the literary movement of Estridentismo sought to synthesize the transformative forces, aiming to reconcile the individual and society with the dynamism of contemporary life, echoing themes present in Italian Futurism on the portrayal of the spirit of modernity. Nevertheless, Orozco and the broader tradition of Mexican muralism testify to art's potential as a catalyst for social transformation beyond the confines of the easel. By engaging with public spaces and confronting viewers with uncomfortable truths, muralism becomes a powerful tool for fostering dialogue, introspection, and collective action.

Both Italian Futurism and Estridentismo movements emerged in the early twentieth century and embraced modernity, technology, and the machine as essential aspects of the bustling modern experience. Fascinated by rapid technological progress, urbanization, and the pace of modern life, they celebrated industrialization and transportation as symbols of progress. Like the Italian Futurists, the Estridentistas outlined their principles in manifestos, advocating for the abandonment of traditional artistic conventions in favor of new, dynamic forms of expression reflecting contemporary energy and vitality. Engaging in multidisciplinary approaches

encompassing literature, performance, and occasionally visual arts, both movements were politically charged, seeking social and cultural transformation with a sense of urgency and activism. However, while Italian Futurism aligned with right-wing and, after 1922, with Fascist ideologies, the Estridentistas were associated with leftist and revolutionary movements in Mexico.

Moreover, post-revolutionary Mexico witnessed the rise of revolutionary artistic ideas, spurred by the Mexican government's emphasis on public art in accessible spaces such as public buildings. The creation of the *INBA* murals was born of a profound reflection on the nation's socio-political journey and cultural resurgence. Despite Orozco's professed disinterest in politics, his work often aligned with government ideals of social justice and decolonized national identity, albeit in a distinctive manner from his colleagues Rivera and Siqueiros. Orozco's work as a caricaturist for prominent newspapers profoundly impacted his approach. Despite demands, he continued his unique work of social commentary.

However, this facet of his artistic career invited criticism of his muralist work, blending social commentary and imaginative flair, evident in *Katharsis* by its caricatured and grotesque portrayal of the female figure. His work espoused a critical perspective, and inviting viewers to question symbols and narratives, encapsulating diverse elements integral to Mexican national identity. Unlike mere historical narration, *Katharsis* offered a direct critique, challenging viewers to engage with its provocative imagery and themes. Although Orozco claimed to have no particular political affiliations, despite living in a society governed by a blend of nationalism, socialism, and populism, all within the context of an authoritarian regime that aimed to establish a modern, unified, and independent nation-state. However, there is an apparent contradiction in his position, as evidenced by his murals and autobiographical writings.

Luis Cardoza's observations on Orozco further underscored this duality, as it "showed every bit of himself," highlighting the artist's nuanced portrayal of history, social commentary, and personal perspective. Thus, this amalgamation offers a view of Orozco's interpretation of Mexican identity and socio-political dynamics, reflecting his individual judgment and artistic vision as *Katharsis*, serves as a multifaceted exploration of Mexican identity, blending historical narrative with personal interpretation and social critique.⁷³

Alma Reed, an American journalist and social worker, worked as a correspondent in Mexico. She believed that Orozco could produce a "good revolutionary art,"⁷⁴ but only if he did not align himself with any particular group that considered itself superior. From another point of view, Reed suggests that Orozco was able to express his political views and social commentaries through his sensitivity in portraying the negative aspects of his own country. This is evident in his use of varied symbols and narrative techniques in his work, as can be seen in *Katharsis*.

Visual Correspondence Across Disparate Ideologies: Artistic Choices in Mexican Muralism and Italian Futurism

Orozco's mural beckons a considerably nuanced examination, urging us to scrutinize its symbols and representations from a dual perspective. The portrayal of the female figure, the machine, the incendiary flag, and other elements within the mural demand careful consideration of their multifaceted meanings. Beyond mere visual representation, these symbols encapsulate deeper socio-political commentary and technical intricacies, including the vibrant color palette, and the strategic use of repetition and fragmentation to evoke movement. Yet, delving into these

⁷³ Cardoza y Aragón, *Orozco*, 12.

⁷⁴ Cardoza y Aragón, *Orozco*, 12. Alma Reed, 22 "Un buen arte revolucionario" [My Translation].

dual-edged meanings prompts a broader inquiry: what implications do these symbols in *Katharsis* hold for Mexican society and its cultural evolution?

In this context, Mexico's artistic production aimed to transcend mere History painting or even historical representation, serving as a reflection of the nation's cultural amalgamation and the forging of a new Mexican identity. Central to this evolution was the acknowledgment of diverse cultural components, fostering the emergence of a more inclusive and dynamic citizenry. Notably, the portrayal of the female figure in *katharsis* serves as a poignant commentary on social contradictions and the hypocrisy inherent in post-revolutionary development. In stark contrast, the depiction of women in Italian Futurist art systematically espoused a more conservative and misogynistic view, reflecting divergent societal attitudes and values.

While Mexican muralism and Italian Futurism held contrasting ideological stances and aspirations, intriguing parallels can be drawn in their visual and technical approaches. Despite Orozco's lack of direct interaction with the Futurists during his career and experience in the United States, any possible close interaction and/or close connection to Europe were rare. However, his occasional visits to Europe, guidance from Dr. Atl, and shared training with figures such as Rivera and Siqueiros, who themselves had direct contact with French cubists for example, highlighted the interconnectedness of artistic influences. French Cubism, renowned for its revolutionary approach to form, space, and perspective specifically, significantly impacted avant-garde and international artistic movements, challenging traditional artistic conventions. Thus, while Orozco may not have directly engaged with Italian Futurists, his awareness of the avant-garde roots, facilitated by his associations, suggests an understanding of these movements. Although Orozco drew primary inspiration from earlier sources, his exposure to European art undoubtedly shaped his muralist style, where the Estridentistas served as a primary bridge

between these two movements, fostering dialogue and collaboration, thereby bridging the gap between Mexican muralism and Italian Futurism.

The double-edged messages embedded in Orozco's *Katharsis* offer compelling evidence of the muralists' embrace of diversity as a cornerstone of their artistic vision. Orozco's deliberate departure from a colonial narrative of Mexican history reflects a conscious effort to empower the Mexican people with a voice in the post-revolutionary era. Additionally, his acknowledgment of his colleagues' work at the Palace of Fine Arts underscores the collaborative nature of Mexican muralism, emphasizing the collective endeavor to reshape national identity. In contrast, the Italian Futurists maintained a more stringent adherence to their movement's principles, suggesting a less flexible ideological stance in this sense.

In essence, while Mexican muralism emerged as a response to the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, signifying a desire to redefine national identity and social values, and Italian Futurism arose against the backdrop of the tumultuous political climate of early twentieth-century Italy, characterized by the emergence of various political factions, including socialist and anarchist movements, which clashed with conservative forces and the monarchy. Unlike many twentieth-century art movements, Mexican muralism did not provide a "common" response as seen in other avant-gardes. While both movements shared origins in socio-political upheaval, Mexican muralism introduced a new/different approach, distinct from other avant-gardes. It demonstrated that art, in tandem with its post-colonialist context, could transcend the confines of traditional art education to forge new identities with profound societal impact. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced in Mexico, where motifs and connotations familiar to contemporary international audiences emerged, albeit under unique conditions. Therefore, Orozco specifically, aimed to address pressing issues of social inequality, indigenous rights, and cultural heritage

through monumental public artworks. Orozco's *Katharsis*, epitomizes this endeavor, serving as a testament to the multifaceted nature of Mexican identity and the transformative potential of art. By integrating and reinterpreting European-based artistic principles, Mexican muralists reshaped collective consciousness, fostering unity and pride among the Mexican people.

Additionally, *Katharsis* stands as a testament to the avant-garde nature of both the Mexican Muralism and Italian Futurism movements. By challenging traditional artistic conventions, artists like Orozco paved the way for a redefinition of modern art, creating a new audience not only for the interests of Mexico but for the transformation and creation of a new citizen for modern art and the modern world. This cultural rebirth, born of conflict and war, transformed art into a powerful tool for political and social commentary, where the themes and work were deeply politicized, transcending mere aestheticism to catalyze social change.

In tracing the lineage of Mexican Muralism and Italian Futurism, we uncover a shared narrative of overcoming perceptions of cultural inferiority. As mentioned before, both movements emerged from the ashes of conflict, seeking to assert their cultural identities and challenge established norms. Through *Katharsis* and adjunct works, muralists like Orozco and their Italian counterparts strove to surpass the limitations imposed by colonial legacies, reclaiming their cultural heritage while embracing the possibilities of the modern world.

Conclusions

In exploring the interplay between Mexican muralism and its dialogue with European avant-gardes, notably Italian Futurism, this thesis has revealed the convergence, translation, and critical engagement between disparate artistic and ideological currents during the early to mid-twentieth century. Through a focused examination of José Clemente Orozco's *Katharsis* mural, we have endeavored to unravel the dynamics that shaped the evolution of Mexican art and its relationship to international artistic movements.

The central research question guiding this study sought to explore the ways in which *Katharsis* manifests a convergence of artistic principles comparable to those found in Italian Futurism despite their political divergence; in other words, how to understand the fact that disparate ideologies can find visual correspondence in certain artistic choices. Through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing art history, cultural studies, and political theory, we have delved into Orozco's muralist technique, stylistic influences, and the broader socio-political context of post-revolutionary Mexico.

The analysis elucidates that *Katharsis* indeed exhibits echoes of Italian Futurism through its dynamic composition, vivid color palette, and thematic exploration of modernity, industrialization, and technology, notwithstanding the inherent political disparities and ideological gaps between the two movements. Notable elements within the mural, including the portrayal of machinery and humanity as emblematic of dehumanization, the critique and social commentary of bourgeois values through the representation of female figures, and the depiction of the harsh realities faced by workers, underscore Orozco's commitment to

employing mural techniques as a conduit for social transformation within the emerging post-revolutionary Mexican identity and the new modern citizen at large.

Moreover, Orozco's departure from futurism's techno-optimism is evident in his nuanced portrayal of the darker, unresolved consequences of societal change in Mexico. By confronting themes of violence, inequality, and human suffering, Orozco in turn, offers a critique of progress that transcends mere aestheticism, inviting viewers to reflect on the ethical and moral implications of rapid societal change.

Furthermore, this study has underscored the significance of Orozco's connection to European avant-gardes and the effect of literary movements like Estridentismo in shaping his artistic vision and contributing to the broader narrative of Mexican muralism. While Mexican muralists drew inspiration from European art during their studies and travels, they also maintained a distinct political and cultural perspective that enriched their artistic expressions. This dialogue between Mexican muralism and European avant-gardes highlights the interconnectedness of global artistic currents in the 1920s and 1930s, and the transformative power of cultural exchange in shaping artistic movements.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. While the analysis provides valuable insights into the translation of Mexican muralism and Italian Futurism, it is not exhaustive enough. Future research could explore additional case studies and comparative analyses to further elucidate the dynamics of direct artistic exchange and ideological translation in the early twentieth century. Additionally, a deeper investigation into the reception and impact of Orozco's work both in Mexico and abroad could offer valuable insights into its enduring legacy and relevance in contemporary discourse.

In sum, this thesis has shed light on the complex intersections between Mexican muralism and one European avant-garde in particular, offering a nuanced understanding of Orozco's contribution to the dialogue between art, politics, and identity in post-revolutionary Mexico. By examining *Katharsis* as a case study, we have uncovered the enduring legacy of Orozco's artistic vision and its resonance in contemporary thinking on art and identity. As we look to the future, the implications of our findings extend beyond the confines of this study, inviting further exploration and dialogue on the transformative power of art in shaping cultural identity and fostering societal change.

Figures

Figure 1: José Clemente Orozco. Katharsis or Catharsis, 1935. Fresco on a transportable metal frame, 1146 x 466 cm. Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City.

Figure 2: José Clemente Orozco. Katharsis, 1935. "La Chata" (Detail).

Figure 3: Umberto Boccioni. La Risata (The Laugh), 1911. Oil on Canvas, 110.2 x 145.4 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 4: Umberto Boccioni. Sketch 1 for La Risata, 1911. Pencil on paper, 12.1 x 19.8 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Herbert and Nannette Rothschild (Poggi, 2006)

Figure 5: Umberto Boccioni, Sketch 2 for La Risata, 1911. Pencil on paper, 11.5 x 15 cm. Private Collection. (Poggi, 207)

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Figure 7: Umberto Boccioni, Sketch4 for La Risata, 1911. Pencil on paper, 11.5 x 10.6 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Herbert and Nannette Rothschild (Poggi, 209)

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Figure 9: Umberto Boccioni, Sketch for Mourning, 1911. Ink on paper, 21 x 15.6 cm. Private Collection (Poggi, 2012)

Figure 10: Diego Rivera. El Hombre controlador del Universo or Man at the Crossroads, 1934. Fresco on a transportable metal panel, 480 x 1145 cm. Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.14391932>.

Figure 11: Diego Rivera. Sketch 1 for El Hombre controlador del Universo, 1934. (Detail).

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Figure 15: José Clemente Orozco, Katharsis, 1934. Sketch 1. Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes Catalogue.

Figure 16: José Clemente Orozco. Katharsis, 1934. Sketch Drawings 2. Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes Catalogue.

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