

Suffering Bodies and Scenes of Confrontation: The Art and Politics of Representing Structural Violence

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This article argues that a visual focus on suffering bodies can obscure the power relationships that result in inequality and injustice through (1) obscuring the mechanisms and perpetrators of violence, (2) not disrupting dominant conceptual frameworks, and (3) not leaving room for solutions. I use a corpus of films made about and by a Mexican social movement in San Salvador Atenco to ask a practical question: How might we represent issues of structural violence without focusing on images of suffering and victimization? The solution that these films present is a focus on what I call “scenes of confrontation.” [Atenco, documentary film, Mexico, social movements, structural violence]

In March 2009, I sat with Ana Maria¹ on the balcony of the farmer's commission building overlooking the center of San Salvador Atenco, a small farming community on the outskirts of Mexico City made famous by a social movement, the *Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra* (The Peoples' Front in Defense of Land, or FPDT). She told me about the ups and downs of Atenco's struggle over the last many years and the more than 20 documentary films that had been made about Atenco and the FPDT at that time. Through testimonies and photographic evidence, many of the films detail how police committed multiple human rights abuses (including arbitrary detentions, sexual assaults, and home invasions) in 2006. Ana Maria and I could hear the fireworks and celebratory canon fire of a local festival parade coming closer to the plaza as we talked, giving a visual example of the point she was trying to convey:

This is my people [*pueblo*]: the traditions, the music, running happily like this. For me, this is life. I know that the powerful people put all of this down. They put it down and they say that we are drunks, that our children are snot-nose brats; that our women can be the spoils of war. But fortunately, despite what the media and the powerful people say, here we are again celebrating, jumping, running with a lot of happiness. This is how I want to see my

people always. We will rise up again despite repression because repression doesn't matter. We are going to continue forward.

Her words illustrate a very perplexing tension in local people's relationship with their representation in many of the documentaries made about them: most of the dozens of FPDT members with whom I was discussing documentary films between 2007 and 2009 did not personally like the documentaries that focused on the horrific acts of police violence perpetuated against the community. This is despite the fact that human rights abuses were a central focus of the FPDT's struggle at the time, and the FPDT frequently strategically used documentaries depicting themselves as victims in public forums.

Only a month earlier, Ana Maria and others had stood uncompromisingly outside of the Supreme Court building day after day to pressure the resolution of human rights cases from 2006. Lawyers submitted several documentary films as evidence in these cases because they contained detailed testimonies and photographic evidence of abuses. Members of the FPDT also often screened films that depicted themselves as victims of violence during public events to raise awareness of the court cases. And yet, during the bulk of my fieldwork living in Atenco from 2008 to 2009, and my intermittent fieldwork with the FPDT from 2007 to 2014,

when I asked residents of Atenco to name the most important documentaries about themselves, not once were the documentaries detailing human rights abuses brought up. In my experiences of dozens of political events at which the FPDT screened documentary films, activists often even left the room or wandered away for the duration of film screenings in order to avoid seeing them. The sentiment that Ana Maria articulates in the quote above, a preference for images of the FPDT as powerful, happy, celebrating, and productively creating change, was widespread among members and allies of the FPDT throughout the Atenco region.

The films that activists from Atenco most often cited as their favorites were the videos made by a local videographer, also a member of the FPDT. These films emphasize political marches, local festivities, and forceful confrontations with police instead of depictions of repression. The first image reproduced here, for example, a still from the film *La Tierra No Se Vende . . . Se Ama y Se Defiende* (Land Is Not for Selling . . . It Is for Loving and Defending) (FPDT 2002) depicts the FPDT gleefully running down a downtown street in Mexico City during a political march in much the same way that people were periodically running at the head of the procession that Ana Maria refers to in the quote above. The videographers who made this film told me that they purposefully cultivated this visual connection between local festivals and political marches in order to show how their method of political demonstration is rooted in local traditions (Figure 1).

This local preference for representing Atenco in moments of strength and celebration poses some difficult challenges to anthropologists, filmmakers, and photographers who are interested in visual depictions of inequality or injustice. On the one hand, allies to marginalized people like the *campesinos* (peasant farmers) of Atenco wish to create images that the people in them are proud of. On the other hand, these same allies are generally motivated by a desire to expose the systems of oppression that make life difficult and often violent for these same marginalized populations. These two representational goals are in considerable tension if people being filmed or photographed do not like depictions of themselves as oppressed people who live in violent or unsatisfactory conditions. In the case of Atenco, filmmakers from outside the area who wanted to help the FPDT in their political battles almost without exception chose a strategy of visual representation that included depict-



FIGURE 1. Members of the FPDT run down a Mexico City street during a political march. Still image from *La Tierra No Se Vende, Se Ama y Se Defiende* (FPDT 2002).

ing the FPDT as victims of state oppression and violence. In turn, most activists I spoke with from the FPDT felt uneasy about this strategy of representation even as they recognized its political utility.

In this article, I revive a critique of what Susan Sontag has called “images of suffering” (1977:20) in light of the corpus of Atenco films. I do this not to paralyze or chastise those making images that depict suffering and violence in an effort to make injustice visible and work toward ending it. Instead, I wish to ask a practical and constructive question: How might anthropologists, filmmakers, photographers, and other artists represent issues of injustice and inequality without focusing on images of suffering bodies and victimization?

The corpus of Atenco films is very useful in examining this question for a few reasons. First, there is a large number of films made about the FPDT from a variety of filmmakers with different relationships to Atenco. Some are from the area and are active members of the FPDT (like the videographers mentioned above). Others are professional or semi-professional filmmakers who consider themselves part of the movement, but do not take part in its everyday struggles. Still others are professional filmmakers (from Mexico and beyond) who consider themselves sympathetic to the FPDT, but whose relationship with the movement is quite tenuous. Furthermore, this variety of filmmakers has also utilized a diversity of representational strategies in depicting the

FPDT across many years and through many different stages of activism. This means that the history of *Atenco* films is long enough and the body of films numerous enough to provide a useful and diverse body of work to analyze.

Second, the FPDT is a group of marginalized farmers that is deeply and very thoughtfully engaged in a dialogue about global power and visual representation. Although not very well known in the United States, since 2001, it has been as common to find “*Atenco*” on the front page of Mexico’s national daily newspapers as “*Ferguson*” has been in the United States since 2014. As a movement so frequently depicted in both national commercial news media as well as social documentaries, members of the FPDT are also keenly aware of how visual representations of the movement have worked for them as well as against them over more than a decade of struggle. Many of the social documentaries made about the FPDT even discuss its visual representation in commercial news media as part of a strategy of oppression. In the quote above, for instance, Ana Maria cites the commercial news media portrayals as part of the violence against the FPDT.

Drawing from examples of the *Atenco* films, I argue below that relying on images of suffering bodies as a visual strategy of depicting injustice or inequality is at odds with making systematic social, economic, and political oppression visible. I argue that images of suffering bodies tend to naturalize connections between violence and already marginalized peoples. Furthermore, they do not ultimately work to make structural violence visible by (1) obscuring the mechanisms and perpetrators of violence, (2) not disrupting dominant conceptual frameworks, and (3) not leaving room for solutions. I offer this argument not as a critical indictment of ethnographers like Paul Farmer (2005, 2010) or Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) who have struggled with these issues and come to different conclusions, but as a means to help us as anthropologists, photographers, filmmakers, and artists create even better, more useful, and more accurate portrayals of how power operates in people’s lives.

I propose a different visual strategy that is drawn directly from the visual preferences of most people in *Atenco*: a focus on what I call “scenes of confrontation,” in which mechanisms and perpetrators of violence are brought into frame, and in which inequality is not naturalized as inevitable, but as continually and dynamically reproduced. I argue that the visual strategy of utilizing images of suffering bodies is at odds with the theoretical framework of structural violence to understand oppression.

Revival of a Crisis?

For more than a century, photographers have been hovering about the oppressed, in attendance at scenes of violence—with a spectacularly good conscience. Social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them (Sontag 1977:55).

(Liberal) documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position (Rosler 2004[1981]:178).

The crisis of representation in anthropology that occurred primarily in the 1980s (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986) was closely tied to issues of visual representation and the critiques of thinkers and artists such as Susan Sontag and Martha Rosler. The quotes above are representative of these very incisive critiques that are skeptical of relatively privileged outsiders creating representations of marginalized populations in order to expose inequalities in social, political, and economic systems.

In her original (1977) publication, Sontag acknowledges that such images of suffering can sometimes work to arouse consciousness among relatively privileged populations, or those who are not victims of the violence being depicted. She also argues that through overuse and overexposure to images of suffering and atrocity, “‘concerned photography’ has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it” (Sontag 1977:21) among most contemporary audiences. Revising and making her argument more explicit more than 20 years later, she writes:

People don’t become inured to what they are shown—if that’s the right way to describe what happens—because of the *quantity* of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling . . . The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers—seen close-up on the television screen—and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. [Sontag 2003:102]

In other words, people of relative privilege representing the suffering of marginalized others to relatively privileged “folks back home” seems to be doing something to help people in trouble, but often misses its mark and

results in reproducing unhelpful (and often racist and/or sexist) inequalities reminiscent of colonialism. To say that this is old news in the disciplines of sociocultural and visual anthropology would be a breathtakingly radical understatement. And yet, images of the suffering bodies of marginalized others abound in written ethnographies, art photography, activist films, and the myriad forms of journalism that seek to use those bodies as visual evidence to expose injustices and inequality. It comes as little surprise that people who do not wish to eradicate systems of global inequality use images of suffering. What comes as a greater surprise is that those with a very sophisticated critical understanding of structural inequality and a desire to eradicate it (or at least minimize it) also often choose to use images of suffering bodies.

The work of Paul Farmer, for example, who has popularized (in academic as well as activist milieus) the conception of “structural violence” as an analytical framework has been critiqued for his frequent use of images of suffering and victimized bodies in his public lectures and activism (Farmer 2010).² I focus on Farmer in part because I find the analytical conception of structural violence very useful in trying to understand the very systems of inequality that many advocates are attempting to depict visually. He also, to his own admission, often uses images to illustrate his conception of structural violence that concentrate on the bodies of suffering people rather than the structures he hopes to make visible. Farmer defines structural violence, an analytical concept he traces to Galtung (1969) and liberation theology (Farmer 2010[2001]:354), as “a violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order . . . In short, the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression” (Farmer 2010[2001]:354). As a doctor and an activist actively engaged in helping sick people get better from very curable illnesses such as tuberculosis and diarrhea, or successfully managed in the case of HIV, his analytical concern is to emphasize how impoverished people get sick and die in overwhelmingly disproportionate numbers because of global systems of social, political, and economic inequality. The evocation of “violence” in his conceptualization refers to anything that harms bodies unnecessarily. Someone dying of old age in their bed is not violence, but someone dying of AIDS due to the unaffordable cost of medication is violence. The term *structural violence* draws attention to the idea that people are dying violent and unnecessary deaths and those responsible are not assassins and murderers, but social, political, and economic structures that prevent particular populations from having access to clean

water, basic healthcare, living wages, and safe living conditions. If there is one emphasis in Farmer’s extensive body of work and political influence, it is that eradicating poverty would be a much more effective way to cure most public health problems around the world than any effort involving doctors and drugs.

In many ways, Farmer directly answers Susan Sontag’s call “to set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering” (Farmer 2003:102–103). Farmer quotes this very sentence in his rumination on his own use of images of sick and suffering bodies in his public lectures and activism (2010[2005]:488). Farmer’s own conclusions are that the use of such images is problematic but sometimes necessary in order to stir privileged populations to do something about global systems of inequality.

The problem of making structural violence visible is that the social, political, and economic structures that are to blame for the violence are very difficult to photograph because they are very difficult to see. Farmer argues that images of people suffering and recovered from illness personalize and humanize these global processes and “testify to deep questions of history and political economy” (2010[2005]:514). In other words, he advocates for images of suffering bodies as only the start of a conversation for a more sophisticated analysis than the photographs themselves can provide. This is a strategy Sontag also mentions (2003:103).

More than 30 years ago when anthropologists, filmmakers, and photographers began to take each other to task for reproducing colonialism in their methods of representation, the immediate solution seemed to be reflexivity to mitigate the unsavory political implications of their work. Even though many visual anthropologists were already engaged in reflexive practices (Ruby 2000:164), particularly caustic critiques partially paralyzed what was a flourishing field of visual anthropology and ethnographic film in the 1970s. Rather than paralyze representational practices, I argue that the visual depiction of structural violence need not settle for a qualified visual strategy heavily bolstered by written or spoken analysis. Reflexivity is a good strategy for many reasons, but it is not the only option. As the robust traditions of feminism and visual anthropology have argued, we should take the lead from the marginalized peoples who already work to make the abstract forces of structural violence visible. Rather than scenes of suffering or self-reflexivity, the FPDT of Atenco provides a possible third strategy for visually representing structural violence.



FIGURE 2. Still from *¡Tierra Sí! ¡Aviones!* (Gringoyo Productions 2002).

Three Eras of Filmmaking in Atenco

The history and context of the Atenco films, as well as the trends in allied visual representation of the FPDT, can be divided into three chronological eras based upon the shifting political agendas, reflected in the organizational, celebratory, and human rights themes in the respective documentary films. The FPDT crystallized in 2001 when the federal government expropriated the vast majority of the land in the Atenco area to build a new international airport for Mexico City. This first period (from October 2001, when the decree was announced, through August 2002, when the decree was abrogated) represents a phase of using documentary films to organize against the federal government. The three documentary films³ created during this time portray the plight of Atenco from the perspective of the FPDT in an effort to gain political support for their movement. They portray the social movement as an honest, deserving, and genuine population with moral authority and popular will on their side against the absurdity and corrupt power of the federal government. Because they were primarily meant to help the FPDT's organizational goals, I refer to these films as organizational films.

This first phase of organizing took place after the EZLN (the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, or the Zapatista Army for National Liberation) had taken up arms to protest the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement and Plan Puebla-Panama in 1994. The FPDT is very different from the EZLN in substantial ways (it does not identify as indigenous, it is not armed, they have never declared autonomy, the local political contexts are very

different), but the FPDT did see itself as broadly connected to the Zapatista movement in the sense that they were both working against global trends in neoliberal development projects. Some important members of the FPDT also told me that they had been deeply moved by the activism of the EZLN and had spent time in Chiapas to support the uprising after 1994. There is a kinship between the two movements that positions the FPDT within the extensive transnational network of Zapatista supporters and has helped it attract international sympathizers (including North American, South American, and European filmmakers).

When the FPDT won and the decree was abrogated in the first days of August 2002, each of the three filmmaking teams who made the organizational films put out a second film recounting the previous nine months of struggle and celebrating the victory. For several years afterward, these three new films served as the documents that told the story of the FPDT. They remained relevant because the FPDT did not disband when the decree was abrogated, but continued to play an influential role in local politics and served as inspiration for social movements across Mexico and around the world interested in organizing against their own unwanted development projects. The FPDT was a success story, and these films documented their success. They portrayed the FPDT as strong adversaries to be reckoned with who triumphed over the seemingly overwhelming power of the state. These films paint a mythic history of David triumphing over Goliath, of a small organization of peasant farmers succeeding against immense odds. I refer to these films as celebratory films.

The third phase of films began in 2006 as Atenco was engulfed in a complex series of events that resulted in thousands of armed police forces entering the town, beating anyone who happened to be in the street, and arresting hundreds of people (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH) 2006; Organización Mundial Contra la Tortura (OMCT) 2007). This repression happened very shortly after a large delegation of Zapatistas, under the banner of La Otra Campaña⁴ (The Other Campaign), visited Atenco, and the two movements made headlines proclaiming their mutual support. La Otra Campaña supporters rushed to the aid of the FPDT, and many of them were caught up in the repression. International supporters were deported,⁵ and police arrested many members of La Otra along with members of the FPDT.

The nine full-length documentaries produced between 2006 and 2010 denounced human rights abuses and described the plights of political prisoners. The films made soon after the repression⁶ are rich with documentation of politicians' lies, suspicious political

alliances between politicians and police involved in the attack, and above all, exhaustive detailed descriptions of physical human rights abuses, including sexual assaults. The later ones⁷ feature complex legal strategies and irregularities, and long scenes of people standing outside of courthouses listening to lawyers, as well as, again, in-depth descriptions of bodily harm. Because of their concentration on creating visual evidence of physical human rights abuses, I refer to these films as human rights documentaries.

The human rights documentaries represent physical abuses in a very different way than the earlier organizational and celebratory films. Although there are instances of human rights abuses (including police violence, arbitrary arrests, and the deaths of activists) in the earlier films, the films do not dwell on them. For instance, a woman is shown with blood running down her face having been hit in the head with a police baton, but she needs no help, and instead yells aggressively into the camera of a television reporter who asks her what happened. The instance of a man killed by a combination of police violence and diabetes is represented by hundreds of people carrying his coffin in a funeral procession cum political march. The unlawful arrest of a movement leader is depicted by his triumphant, but shaky, return to Atenco as he is ushered through a sea of people to a community stage after his release. By the time he reaches the stage, he is holding a machete in one hand and a microphone in the other. These are not images of victimization as much as images of injustices that spur immediate counteraction.

The human rights films also feature very few people from the FPDT describing personal physical harm. These films are rife with the visible evidence of human rights abuses, and yet with one or two exceptions, all of these images of victimization are of people not from Atenco and who were not members of the FPDT. They are overwhelmingly urban supporters of La Otra Campaña and the FPDT who became involved in the conflict. The films do not emphasize this fact; the only way that it is noticeable to me is that over the last seven years, I have personally come to recognize the vast majority of the people in the films.

There are a few overlapping explanations for this trend. Most plainly, local residents (especially members of the FPDT) were scared of retribution and further oppression at the time that these post-2006 films were made and may have avoided speaking to filmmakers who were seeking out testimonials. Compounding this fear is the fact that it was not people from the community who were producing these documentaries, but “outside” filmmakers who did not have established relationships of trust with FPDT members. On a more con-

ceptual level is the fact that most members of the FPDT whom I spoke with as part of this research did not often speak of the repression as *individual* human rights abuses. Instead of seeing the individual body as a locus for suffering and violence, they spoke of the abuses in terms of a collective punishment or vengeance against the community as a whole for winning a battle over the government four years previously.

When taken together, these explanations paint a portrait of a wave of documentaries largely made by relatively privileged filmmakers from outside Atenco (both from within and beyond Mexico) who were well-meaning, but who generally had a different set of representational priorities than members of the FPDT and other local community members. I do not mean this analysis as an indictment of these films, for which most members of the FPDT are grateful and which have, without question, helped them and their subsequent struggles to release political prisoners and adjudicate human rights abuses. Elsewhere (Hinegardner 2009, 2011), I have enumerated why these films were produced and how valuable I believe they were and continue to be. Additionally, it is difficult to see how films of this era could be about anything other than suffering and victimization. Filmmakers would have had to work very hard to recast such horrific instances of police violence as anything other than a story about victimization. However, it is also significant that there was an incredible proliferation of films about the FPDT after 2006. The human rights documentaries also traveled much more widely than the previous films and among much more privileged audiences.

In short, the story about victimization and suffering conversed much better with relatively privileged middle-class Mexican and international audiences in ways that stories about triumphing over adversity and the evils of a corrupt government did not. In turn, the lack of local interest in making or appearing in these human rights documentaries reveals a local trend of not valuing the repression as the most important historical moment to represent their plight or the collective challenges that they face.

Suffering Bodies

In an effort to build an analytical tool that might be useful in making critical interventions in other contexts, I argue that a visual focus on victims and victimization fails to make structural violence visible in three significant ways: first, it obscures the mechanisms and perpetrators of violence; second, it reinforces dominant conceptual frameworks instead of disrupting them; and third, it leaves little room for solutions.

First, a visual focus on suffering bodies—emaciated brown children with swollen bellies, for example, or a black man lying in a hospital bed bathed in blood—obscures mechanisms and perpetrators of violence by simply leaving them out of the frame. Images of suffering bodies can be seen as the visual equivalent of the common journalistic headline, “She was raped,” a phrase that feminists have criticized for over 30 years (Meloy and Miller 2010; Penelope 1990; Stanley and Robbins 1977). These feminist scholars argue that the passive voice erases the rapist from the story, transforming the victim/survivor into both the object and the subject of the violence. When looking for an explanation of how this could have happened, the reader of such a headline has nowhere to look in the narrative other than to the victim herself. While there is a perpetrator implied in the sentence, the phrase, like the image, leaves an ambiguity that can raise questions about what the victim could have been doing that contributed to the assault: Was she out alone at night where she should not have been? Was he involved in drug trafficking and gangs? In the case of the Atenco human rights documentaries, focus on individual suffering bodies lends itself toward asking similar questions: What were these college kids doing in such a dangerous place as Atenco? What could they expect from getting involved with such a contentious social movement? Or, in the overlapping case of the sexual assaults: What were these young women doing standing up to the police in the first place? Using images of suffering bodies to illustrate injustice or structural violence locates all of the violence, the shame, and the danger of the violence in the suffering body of the victim rather than in the assailant for the simple reason that the assailant is nowhere to be seen.

Some images of suffering bodies more heavily imply a perpetrator than others. Even though he or she is not in frame, someone must have beaten or shot the man lying in the hospital bed. The existence of a perpetrator is not as clear in the case of the emaciated children. If the purpose of an image is to make structural inequality or structural violence visible, the degree to which an image (or a set of images) can bring perpetrators into the frame is one axis along which we can analyze whether it is successful. If the purpose of an image is to draw attention to the social, economic, and political structures that result in violence (assault, sickness, starvation, etc.) for some populations, then the image has failed to the degree that these structures are not represented visually in the frame. Images can quite easily miss the mark by implying the presence of an absent force such as sexism, racism, dispossession, or the unequal application of law.

The Atenco human rights documentaries are not uniform in the absence of perpetrators. Most show some images of police actively beating people, which certainly brings perpetrators into the frame as actors. One notable example, *Romper el Cerco* (Canalseisdejulio and Promedios 2006), even spends a large portion of the film drawing connections to politicians who must have ordered the attacks and “naming names” of high-level perpetrators. This is an excellent strategy because it draws the attention of the cameras away from the person being beaten and toward the people not only holding the batons and tear gas, but also the people ordering their use. It is, of course, much easier to draw these connections in a feature-length documentary with a voice-over than in a single photograph, or even in a series of still images.

The overwhelming message of this corpus of the Atenco human rights documentaries however, is that the people of Atenco are victims. The strategy is successful insofar as it constructs people as innocent and not deserving of being beaten, arrested, and sexually assaulted, but they largely fail in visually representing the precise mechanisms and perpetrators of the violence. The victims, not the perpetrators, are willing to talk to the cameras and so the films easily linger on them. Meanwhile, the local preference for showing people from Atenco as dancing and running happily forward despite repression never manifests itself. In a grim illustration of the emphasis on victims over perpetrators, in 2009, the Supreme Court of Mexico ruled that human rights abuses had been committed in Atenco in 2006, but that no one could be held responsible because the individual perpetrators could not be identified. In the court cases, as in the documentaries that were admitted as evidence in the cases, victims were made visible and identifiable, but the perpetrators were not, and so no one was indicted (Aranda 2009).

The second unhelpful characteristic of images of suffering bodies and victimization is the failure to disrupt dominant conceptual frameworks. Kleinman and Kleinman (1996) have criticized using images of suffering African bodies to raise money for nonprofit organizations, arguing that images of suffering naturalize the victimization of already oppressed populations, actually reinforcing the hierarchies that photographers and filmmakers may have meant to criticize. They argue that audiences in the Global North view images of suffering bodies in the Global South and connect those bodies with suffering and violence. At best, these images communicate the idea that the suffering bodies need to be protected and saved. At worst, they reproduce the idea that these bodies are worthless, inhuman, and wretched. In other words, images of sick and

suffering African bodies do not disrupt dominant narratives about the necessity and goodness of a strong state, the superiority of the Global North, or the inevitability and desirability of economic “development.” In a more general sense, they do not confront privileged viewers with how they might be implicated in systems of oppression. Although images of starving black children or helpless brown women might be shocking to audiences that do not have frequent face-to-face contact with people in these situations, they are also easily legible to privileged audiences. The fact that marginal populations suffer is a primary dominant, even banal, contemporary narrative.

In his series of televised lectures criticizing journalistic conventions, Pierre Bourdieu (1999) argues that the only way that a televised news story can be communicated in the short time period allowed is if the audience is already familiar with a basic trope in which to fit the story. Nothing analytical or challenging to dominant narratives can be explained in five minutes. Using Flaubert’s (2011[1911]) conception, he calls these dominant narratives “received ideas”:

By the time they reach you, these [received] ideas have already been received by everybody else, so reception is never a problem. . . . Communication is instantaneous because, in a sense, it has not occurred; or it only seems to have taken place. [Bourdieu 1999:29]

If viewers can immediately and unambiguously decipher a clear meaning in an image, commonplace dominant narratives have not been disrupted and what Bourdieu calls “thinking thought” (Bourdieu 1999:29) has not been achieved. Viewers do not see the world in a complex or analytical way, but have only received visual confirmation of a story they already knew. In other words, the lack of analytical thinking is dangerous because it reproduces, rather than challenges, the hierarchies through which power operates.

When applied to the context of the Atenco human rights documentaries, we see that images of suffering and victimized bodies do not fully disrupt dominant conceptual frameworks. It might be shocking that thousands of policemen would arrest, beat, and rape indiscriminately, but they also fit with a narrative easily accessible to privileged audiences through available “received ideas”: poor people are powerless victims incapable of helping themselves, and they need the help of enlightened privileged protectors. Dominant frameworks justifying the rightness and goodness of civilized protectors remain firmly in place. International audiences are able to be thankful that they are not subject to

the barbarism of the Mexican state, and the national Mexican left-leaning intelligentsia can rest secure in the knowledge that if only the protection of the country’s poor were in their hands instead of the Right’s, such atrocities would not happen. Neither privileged audience has to risk a serious examination of how they are implicated in the violence as people who utilize international airports (erasing the people and land that were already there), who profit from the economic exploitation of workers and farmers, and who benefit from social hierarchies that do not question their social, political, and economic privilege. In short, images of suffering bodies reinforce rather than disrupt the social, political, and economic structures of power that result in significant violence in the lives of people like Ana Maria.

A third way that a visual concentration on suffering bodies can obscure structural violence is by not leaving room for solutions or alternatives to the dominant frameworks outlined above. Ronit Avni, for example, characterizes many of the films she helped to produce through WITNESS, an organization dedicated to documenting human rights abuses, this way:

I felt that the endless hours of footage featuring rumbling tanks, bombed-out buses, home demolitions, wailing parents, masked militants, shooting soldiers, and cries for revenge—those signature images broadcast regularly from the region—convey an overwhelming message to viewing audiences that the conflict is intractable, the populations militant and irreconcilable, and the situation beyond hope or help and even outside the realm of moral concern. [Avni 2006:209]

In short, she argues that continual images of victimization and suffering bodies may increase violence in the region and close off pathways toward resolution.⁸

Images of suffering bodies do not easily imply that the people depicted have any agency to change their plight. This is perhaps one of the reasons that they are such effective tools in fundraising campaigns. However, they can also create a sense of hopelessness, wretchedness, and despair—a sense that nothing can be done. The Atenco human rights documentaries, as useful as they were to the FPDT, generally have precisely this tone of despair and hopelessness. This is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, this tone did draw attention and resources to the plight of Atenco. However, they did not effectively make visible the social, economic, and political structures that resulted in such violence. Political prisoners were released and the state admitted that there

were human rights abuses, but Atenco is still struggling against unwanted development projects that are slowly displacing people from their farmland in 2014.

If images of suffering bodies do not make structural violence visible to relatively privileged audiences, what can? How does one take a picture of the mechanisms of something as abstract and complex as racism, economic inequality, or patriarchy? What is there to look at?

Scenes of Confrontation

Instead of using a framework of suffering and victimization, the organizational and celebratory films about the FPDT chose to represent structural violence through what I will call “scenes of confrontation.” Unlike a representational strategy relying on victimization and suffering, scenes of confrontation draw perpetrators of structural violence into the frame as actors, and “victims” are shown as strong and capable adversaries defined by more than just the characteristics for which they are marginalized. Although I conceive of the representation strategy very broadly to include a wide spectrum of possible visible confrontations, it is inspired by the FPDT’s use of dramatic confrontations between themselves as an organized resistance with representatives of the state. I argue that the FPDT’s scenes of confrontation disrupt dominant narratives that naturalize the benevolence and invincibility of the state and the inevitability (and desirability) of economic “development.” Through portraying action and destabilizing dominant narratives, scenes of confrontation also leave open the possibility for productive solutions, rather than hopelessness and despair. The example of the organizational and celebratory Atenco films is only one example of how scenes of confrontation might be effectively utilized.⁹ However, an examination of how local actors themselves choose to visually represent the aspects of structural violence and inequality that are salient for them can be very useful to anthropologists, filmmakers, and photographers who wish to find new and less exploitative ways of depicting those forces for privileged audiences. Figure 3 shows members of the FPDT theatrically and purposefully staging themselves for cameras.

In drawing attention to confrontation as a productive space for representation and investigation, I do not wish to confuse it with instigating violence. Civil disobedience can be nonviolent and yet create public confrontation that has many different possible outcomes, of which retaliatory violence is a possibility, but not an inevitability. Furthermore, this reactionary or retaliatory violence is not the choice or the desire of the nonviolent



FIGURE 3. Still from *¿Qué Hicimos? ¡Vencimos!* (Vicente and Anonymous 2003).

confronting subjects. McAdam (1996) calls the dramatic staging of confrontation “strategic dramaturgy.” He argues that Martin Luther King Jr., a paragon of Western nonviolent protest, chose Birmingham, Alabama, as a key site to stage acts of civil disobedience in 1963 because he knew that he could count on the Commissioner of Public Safety, “Bull” Connor, to respond to acts of civil disobedience with violent racism (McAdam 1996:348). He writes:

The key lay in King’s ability to lure segregationists into acts of extreme racist violence while maintaining his followers’ commitment to nonviolence. . . . The juxtaposition of peaceful black demonstrators and virulent white attackers created powerful and resonant images that triggered critically important reactions. . . . The media were drawn to the drama inherent in the attacks. [McAdam 1996:354]

McAdam argues that as the civil rights movement moved north and no longer faced dramatic, public confrontations with racist authorities, the attention the movement had received and the political pressure that it created lessened significantly. In McAdam’s view, the violent reaction of Bull Connor was a productive outcome because it created symbolic confrontations between clearly identifiable perpetrators and nonviolent protestors that could visually represent generally invisible structural violence in national media as discrimination by unreasonable and violent people against deserving, morally upstanding African Americans.

The films about Atenco that were made during the first two phases of the FPDT’s organizing, even though



FIGURE 4. A child holding a machete at a political event in Atenco. Still from *Atenco No Se Vende, Se Ama y Se Defiende* (FPDT 2002).

they were made by three very different producers (a local *campesino* member of the social movement, a semi-local professional filmmaker, and a foreign professional filmmaker), all concentrated on images of strength and productive confrontations. They are filled with images of men driving tractors and riding horses, children chanting political slogans, senior citizens marching with farm implements, and thousands of people flooding streets, running, dancing, and singing. These images are punctuated with physical confrontations with police in which the abstract structural violence that caused their initial complaints becomes an immediate physical reality. Lines of police barricade their entry into spaces of power (Mexico City, government buildings, even the offices of particular government officials) and are willing to use violence to prevent the FPDT's entry. These scenes make clear the implicit and lurking violence that is mobilized when those subjected to structural violence challenge the conditions of their existence. Instead of dwelling on images of beaten bodies as victims, however, these early films show the protestors triumphing over police, breaking through their lines and continuing on their way after small skirmishes—a little bruised and bloodied to be sure, but triumphant. The violence used against them to gain entry is contrasted with the very restrained actions they take when they do gain entry: they demand a meeting or deliver a piece of paper or verbal demand.

Images of people, especially senior citizens and children holding machetes (as shown in Figure 4), are particularly prominent in these early films and were a primary visual representation of the confrontations that

the FPDT was trying to create. Members of the FPDT told me that the machete has been such a powerful visual representation because it is an implement with rich historical and cultural connotations of Mexican *campesinos*. The force that it suggests is the force of a rural disenfranchised group of farmers willing to fight with the meager tools available to them. Activists explain that even though machetes are often used during political actions to defend themselves against police, it would be ludicrous to think that a machete could overpower the technology and weaponry of an armed police force. Just as machetes signify that in Atenco there are no high-tech farm machines like combines, the tools also imply that the strongest weapon they have against oppression is appealing to a morality in which a simple, rural, Mexican way of life is valued and can win out over the high-tech rationality of industrial capitalism and a neoliberal state.

In other words, machetes are strong visual symbols in part because they are physically weak weapons. As in rural areas in the United States, guns are quite common in Atenco and make very loud appearances on appropriate festival days, but over the last seven years, I have absolutely never seen guns being brought to a political march, either in person or represented in images. There is, however, considerable firepower brought to marches and local festivals in the form of fireworks and small cannons. In downtown Mexico City, these cannons and large bottle rockets make a strong enough sonic wave to set off dozens of car alarms with each blast. Even so, these rockets are never shot at the police, and the canons are never loaded with anything more than gunpowder. They are exclusively noisemakers. In short, even though the FPDT has access to stronger weapons, activists choose to hold machetes (and sometimes use them) because of the moral and cultural authority that comes from utilizing simple farm implements.

Unlike the images of suffering bodies, the use of machetes and confrontations with police in these early films creates visual confrontations that make structural violence visible. They tell a story of physical violence with clearly defined perpetrators (riot police and government officials) who are drawn into the frame of the camera. Sometimes activists break through security in government buildings to physically pull these perpetrators (reluctant, but unhurt) from behind their desks, and bring them outside to display them to cameras. The portrayal of "confrontation" rather than "victimization" or "suffering" successfully articulates the situation (including its causes and possible outcomes) in a dramatic, visual framework and grammar with clearly defined subjects, verbs, and objects. The complex and subtle structural mechanisms of differentially applying

the law to different populations is replaced with very concrete and literal instances of physical violence; police are a clear representation of the state, and their show of force is an unambiguous visual depiction of state coercion. The visual confrontation has a melodramatic sensibility of an oppressive, villainous state determined to crush an honest, authentic, yet powerful rural Mexican way of life. They make mechanisms of structural violence visible by strategically and purposefully juxtaposing the almost space-age technology of riot police (body armor, plastic shields, tear gas canisters, plastic bullet guns, and even large water-spraying tanks) with the iron-age technology of machetes. This is successful whether there is an actual physical battle: the confrontation is a visual juxtaposition. The images clearly illustrate the structural violence at the root of the protestors' complaints (ideas of modernity and economic development that attempt to erase the nonmodern and undeveloped) while also endowing the protestors with agency to combat this violence.

In this way, these organizational and celebratory films depart from Maple Razsa's (2014) depiction of "riot porn." People do know this term in Atenco, and I know intimately that some members and allies of the FPDT use short pieces of film depicting violent confrontations between protestors and police in exactly the way that Razsa describes in the context of activists from the former Yugoslavia:

In these militant videos, unlike in human rights videos, suffering bodies were not represented as helpless victims. On the contrary, activists sought out, watched repeatedly, even valorized, unruly and insubordinate bodies, especially those confronting state violence. Activists came to use video images, in other words, as a kind of "affective pedagogy" (Allen 2009:170): to facilitate emotional relationships with activists elsewhere, to steel themselves for physical confrontation and to cultivate new desires and therefore new political subjects. [Razsa 2014:497]

Indeed, the population of antiglobalization activists that he depicts from the late 1990s and early 2000s significantly overlaps with the international population of Zapatista and FPDT supporters who became entangled in the 2006 repression. It would not be surprising to discover that some of Razsa's interlocutors were present for that very confrontation. Even those who watch and use riot porn, however, would not classify the organizational and celebratory FPDT films as riot porn. The affective pedagogy of the Atenco films is centered on sentimentality, pride, and hope, not the blood-pumping excitement of riot porn. Additionally, as Razsa so accu-

rately argues, the purpose of riot porn is that through viewing, it creates new subjects that did not exist before. The organizational and celebratory Atenco films are popular locally because they are seen as a more accurate representation of how local people already saw themselves, not what they wished to become through a visceral mimetic experience.

Because they more closely resemble how FPDT activists see themselves, these scenes of confrontation usually raise uncomfortable questions for relatively privileged audiences. Regardless of whether the viewer may think the images are positive or negative, they disrupt an idea of the state as benevolent and invincible. They show that the government is heavily invested in preventing *campesinos* from entering the city and are willing to break their own laws to prevent it. They also disrupt ideas that economic development will inevitably erase *campesinos*, who are irrelevant and powerless against economic forces and the state. They show that in a very practical way, machetes and horses really can be more useful than tanks, even in an urban context. For this reason, these images are not easy to look at. They are uncomfortable. Many middle- and upper-class Mexican and foreign viewers have told me that these images are frightening and disturbing to them. Using Bourdieu's (1999) framework, this is how we know that the images are communicating something.

These scenes of confrontation also leave room for solutions. Instead of communicating that the situation is hopeless (or that economic development is the only way out of suffering), they make immediate and practical solutions to structural violence painfully clear: open this door, give us a meeting, let us enter the central square, do not assault us. These practical, immediate demands make visible the everyday barriers that maintain the structural inequalities and injustices that result in violence against particular populations. After all, the doors, meetings, and public spaces are not closed to everyone. In creating the space for these simple, immediate solutions, they also leave open the possibility that inequality, injustice, and even suffering in general are not inevitable and are actively maintained and literally policed by specific, real actors in the world. Because these solutions involve listening to the woman with the machete, however, the potential solutions may be scary or hopeful depending on the viewer (possibly both). Even so, both emotions leave room for alternative outcomes besides complacency or despair.

Conclusion

Scholars cannot and should not ignore that suffering exists. However, we must make choices about how to

depict the violence that results in suffering. Representing it through images of victimized bodies is a choice that, intentionally or not, has consequences. My hope is the Atenco documentaries can inspire us to find creative new focal points for representing structural violence. Scenes of confrontation do not have to be limited to the theater of social movements or to a theater of confrontation with state agents. Humor, satire, animation, or fictionalized recreations can all bring perpetrators and mechanisms of structural violence into frame in ways that do not limit scenes of confrontation to scenes of confrontation with the state. The challenges of representing injustice and inequality point toward the necessity for creativity in our depictions of it. Effective visual representation is about making innovative visual choices that challenge viewers' expectations. Without being confronted or challenged in some way, viewers are not required to think analytically and nothing is made visible that was not already apparent. It is up to anthropologists, filmmakers, photographers, and other artists to develop scenes of confrontation that challenge dominant perceptions in creative and productive ways.

This final point brings us back to Ana Maria's preferences for representing herself and Atenco: "celebrating, jumping, running with a lot of happiness. This is how I want to see my people always. . . . Repression doesn't matter." In the contemporary context of image production, it may be that the most transgressive, shocking, and disruptive images for privileged audiences to see are those that celebrate marginalized populations as forceful rather than weak, and rather than pleading for the audience's involvement, visually confronting them with how they are already implicated in structures of violence.

Notes

- ¹ A pseudonym.
- ² Farmer (2010) describes these critiques himself in his 2005 Tanner Lecture on Human Rights, reprinted in *Partner to the Poor*. Many of the critiques are simply disgruntled audience members and museum visitors who did not want to be confronted with ugly, misshapen, or impoverished people. This same lecture, however, takes as its central tension a deeper personal ambivalence to using these images that seems at least in part prompted by comments that he has received personally from Arthur Kleinman and Philippe Bourgoise.
- ³ *La Tierra No Se Vende . . . Se Ama y Se Defiende* (FPDT 2001), *Rebelión de los Fulgores* (Klan Destino 2002), *¡Tierra Si, Aviones No!* (Gringoyo Productions 2002).
- ⁴ As 2006 was an election year, this "Other" campaign was meant to highlight the degree to which electoral politics

was not helping the majority of impoverished Mexicans. La Otra traveled throughout the country meeting with diverse social movements to create a network of leftist social movements that were interested in creating a new form of politics outside of the electoral system.

- ⁵ It is illegal in Mexico for foreigners to protest against the government. This means that any foreign nationals caught up in political demonstrations are immediately deported and prevented from returning to Mexico for five years.
- ⁶ *Seis Testimonios* (Anonymous 2006), *Romper el Cerco* (Canalseisdejulio and Promedios 2006), *Atenco, Un Crimen de Estado* (Colectivo Klamvé 2006), and *Todos Somos Atenco* (IndyMedia.org 2006).
- ⁷ *Atenco a Dos Años* (Colectivo Klamvé 2008), *Llamado Urgente por la Justicia* (Centro ProDH 2008), *Chiapas, Oaxaca, Atenco* (Comisión Civil Internacional de Observación por los Derechos Humanos 2008), *Atenco 3: La Sentencia Detrás de la Sentencia, la Exoneración de los Cupables* (Colectivo Klamvé 2009), *Justicia, Tierra y Libertad para Atenco* (FPDT & Campaña Libertad y Justicia 2009).
- ⁸ It is for this very reason that Avni broke with WITNESS to start her own organization, Just Vision.
- ⁹ See, for example, Greg Berger's corpus of work as Gringoyo (<http://www.gringoyo.com>) in which he creates humorous confrontations using his own body to bring perpetrators of violence into frame.

Filmography

- Atenco a Dos Años*
2008 Colectivo Klamvé. Arte, Música y Video, distributor. Mexico.
- Atenco, Un Crimen de Estado*
2006 Colectivo Klamvé. Arte, Música, y Video, distributor. Mexico.
- Chiapas, Oaxaca, Atenco*
2008 Comisión Civil Internacional de Observación por los Derechos Humanos. Mexico.
- Justicia, Tierra y Libertad para Atenco*
2009 Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra and Campaña Libertad y Justicia. Mexico.
- La Sentencia Detrás de la Sentencia, la Exoneración de los Cupables*
2009 Colectivo Klamvé. Arte, Música y Video, distributor. Mexico.
- La Tierra No Se Vende, Se Ama y Se Defiende*
2002 Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra. Mexico.
- Llamado Urgente por la Justicia: La Voz de las Mujeres de Atenco*
2008 Centro ProDH, dir. Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez, distributor. Mexico.
- Rebelión de los Fulgores*
2002 Salvador Díaz, dir. Klan Destino. Mexico.
- Romper El Cerco*
2006 Canalseisdejulio and Promedios, dir. Canalseisdejulio, distributor. Mexico.

Seis Testimonios

2006 Anonymous, dir. IndyMedia.org, distributor. Mexico. ¡Tierra Si! ¡Aviones No!

2002 Greg Berger, dir. Gringoyo Productions. Mexico. Todos Somos Atenco

2006 IndyMedia.org. Mexico.

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