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Guerrilla Warplay: The Infantilization of War in Latin American Popular Culture

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Quizá sólo el juego y el sueño son metáforas imperecederas de la existencia.
—Christopher Domínguez Michael

Introduction

Two tiny yarn slits that serve as eyes peer at me from their blank white face swathed in a black yarn “ski mask.” Drawn to the militant little figure that clings so sternly to its miniature wooden rifle, I hand an indifferent merchant the requisite five-peso coin in exchange for the curious toy. Close observation of my newly acquired relic of the Zapatista rebellion reveals stylized indigenous patterns woven into the mini-warrior’s rough clothing. The childlike simplicity of the doll makes it endearing, almost innocent in its oversight of detail. Nevertheless, despite its diminutive size, not much bigger than my finger, my new doll exudes a belligerence that I admire despite my ambivalence to its political symbolism. With an amused shrug, I slip it into my pocket and continue browsing in the bustling San Cristobal market.

It is not until I unpack my bag many months later in my Maine apartment that I am forced to confront the claims and contradictions bundled tightly in such an innocuous package. The harmless little Zapatista now held vigil at my windowsill, determinedly guarding the utterly unpoliticized woods of Brunswick from any unexpected military affront. How could I reconcile this sinister little toy with the 1997 Acteal massacre in southern Mexico that took place just weeks after my departure? Had I simply made a playful purchase, or was I harboring the unlikely mascot of a new type of revolution?

The unlikely choice of a child’s toy as a vehicle for political propaganda, especially in the form of armed warfare, is troublesome. It seems that childhood, the last bastion of innocence, is not and never has been safe from the politicized arenas of war (or anti-war) propaganda. The combination of seemingly contradictory images of warfare and childhood in the form of toys serves either to make war accessible to children or to minimize the reality of war in the view of adults, based on their psychological associations with child-related imagery and innocence.

Zapatista dolls, Che Guevara imagery, and Mexican lotería cards are among elements of visual culture originating in Latin America that permeate the global market. The present goal is to employ a set of theoretical tools to the dolls, games,
toys, and childlike images of war in Latin America in order to understand the many levels on which these relics of material culture are produced, distributed, consumed and understood. The special category of childhood and its exploitation in popular culture must be questioned, deconstructed, and re-politicized according to the Latin American reality.

In Latin America, many recent studies have identified children as the social group most severely affected by war, especially citing children growing up in Central America in the 1980s as suffering from symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some pioneer studies have even drawn attention to the problematic use of children and child-related images in war propaganda; both sides of the conflict have historically played upon public sympathies, relying on images of the child to justify their armed participation in conflict. I contend that not only do the more subtle manipulations of childhood through toys and childlike images take advantage of the infantile medium, but that the consumer is also complicit; thanks to the inextricably linked realms of production, distribution and consumption envisioned by Marx, the ideological baggage that each toy or image packs is perpetuated by the consumer whether consciously or unwittingly.

In recent war-torn societies in Central America and Mexico, children embroiled in the traumas of civil war assign meanings of play, war, or work to objects such as guns according to their experiential context. For those children safe from the immediate danger of war in their daily lives, the proliferation of war-related toys and images in popular culture brings violence into their environment and helps to insert war into their worldview. Such infantilized representations of warfare serve to normalize violence for children, contributing to a Foucaultian institution detailed below that ultimately defines all of their thoughts and actions within the context of war. In addition, the confusion between childhood and adulthood that takes place within this institution of war, and which ultimately leads to the emergence of child warriors, finds its locus in the material culture of war, such as guns and military or guerrilla clothing. Marx provides his own interpretation of the way that children come to terms with the world through contact with objects, material artifacts that symbolize the greater institutions and schema that control the child’s life. The child, a being in opposition with the world and negotiating his or her existence from the outset through struggle and resistance, assigns meaning to all objects in his or her path, develops a fantastic realm which s/he must spend the rest of his or her life confronting. The symbolic weight borne by material culture manufactured for children therefore has an impact on the rest of humanity.

The act of play, during which the child is the sole agent, is the vehicle by which violence becomes normalized at an early age. In his 1928 essay “The Cultural History of Toys,” Walter Benjamin interrogates the child-orientated nature of toys, emphasizing the adult’s role in production and therefore manipulative intent in creation of the object, as well as the child’s agency in modifying the intended purpose through the process of play. This problematizes the adult/child binary by deconstructing the different roles that toys take depending on changing
contexts. On one hand, the infantile medium of a toy, when purchased and possessed by an adult, allows the adult to take on a childlike innocence. In this sense, manufacturers of war toys rely upon favorable associations with childhood in order to permeate a wider market. On the other hand, the war/play tension embodied by the war toy minimizes the negative impact of armed violence by couching it in the stylized, simplified images of a plaything. Thus, the war toy manipulates society’s image of childhood as a way to market itself, and then shatters the safe haven of childhood by associating it with violence.

**Zapatista Dolls**

The mass production of Zapatista-related merchandise in Chiapas in the wake of the 1994 uprising at once plagues and promotes the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) political cause. Those capitalizing from the sale of guerrilla goods range from gringo hippies to impoverished indigenous women and children who have astutely taken advantage of the political climate and international sympathies by manufacturing and selling politicized handicrafts. Zapatista dolls emerge as the most globally recognizable commercial relics of the political struggle that some have come to refer to as the “first postmodern revolution.” Nevertheless, Daniel Nugent cautions against a glib postmodern reading of the movement for fear of dismissing much of the historical structure to which the movement adheres; instead of viewing Zapatista proliferation in the global market as a sign of utopian aspirations, he insists that the movement be seen as “a pragmatic response to real historical conditions.” Taking this into consideration, the production of war toys in the Zapatista context assumes considerable ideological weight. The innocuous guerrilla replicas have brought the Zapatista message to unsuspecting corners of the globe, have been the subject of critical artistic explorations, and have been openly criticized by Subcomandante Marcos himself as being disrespectful of fallen rebels; nevertheless, the masked EZLN spokesman silenced himself on the issue upon realizing that most people buying the dolls did so in solidarity with the movement.

Subcomandante Marcos’ acknowledgment of the ideological marketing potential of the doll reflects a mentality that fits that of Walter Benjamin regarding *aesthetics of violence*, delineated in his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Initially a cultural technique perfected by fascists and Nazis in the early twentieth century, politics were aestheticized through image production; in response, communists countered the cultural campaign by politicizing aesthetics, inserting their own political agenda into popular culture until artistic production became inseparable from politics and vice-versa in an ongoing competition to spread propaganda and mobilize the people. Likewise, the Zapatista dolls emerged as politicized handicrafts from the context of a political culture in Mexico saturated with imagery sanctioned by the national official party, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). The dolls are unique in that they have no oppositional counterpart, yet they represent a stark contestation to official party
slogans emblazoned across public and private walls in even the most inconspicuous rural sites. In this way, Zapatistas enter into the visual culture of violence; despite the noble premise behind the original conception of the doll, its reproduction within the political realm only perpetuates the notion of ongoing violence.

According to Marx’s commodity paradigm, production is the predominant element in the production-distribution-exchange-consumption cycle. While all of the components are interdependent, those in charge of production exert more control over the commodity than other participants in the chain. Nevertheless, in the context of the San Cristobal marketplace (or any other marketplace featuring Zapatista dolls, for that matter), “blame” for the distribution of war iconography in the form of toys cannot be meted out to vendors alone. The degree of demand on the part of consumers (and here I am complicit), regardless of the intent behind the purchase, will only have a positive impact on production. In fact, with each successive embroidered warrior purchased, the novelty diminishes a degree, and the polemic masked, blank-faced little bundle comes closer to becoming yet another deity in the depoliticized pantheon of Latin American kitsch.

Zapatista representation in the form of a doll, traditionally recognized as a child’s toy, presents a problematic issue undertaken by Phyllis Plattner in her artistic contribution “Challenging Notions of ‘Other,’” part of a recent exhibit in the Sarah Spurgeon Gallery at Central Washington University. The exhibit, titled “What a Doll! Dolls as Masquerade: Identity in Flux,” critically tackles some of the social and political issues raised by dolls as a form of popular culture. The subtitle of the exhibit, “Dolls as Masquerade,” suggests Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. The Zapatista dolls are popular and pervasive, and although they purport to promote violent insurrection as an effective means for social change, their diminutive size and impotent wooden weapons make a mockery of armed rebellion. The legitimate human rights and social justice demands of the EZLN are profaned, ridiculed and reduced to a universally recognized symbol of child’s play. The Zapatista appropriation of ski masks (reminiscent of a typical hoodlum), Mexican military-issue camouflage uniforms smuggled into the highlands over decades, and frequently makeshift weaponry seem to call into question various images traditionally associated with state-sponsored or individual terror-
ism. The guerrilleros themselves have appropriated the material elements of military oppression intended to evoke fear and respect, ultimately subjugating these visual symbols into their own vision of war. Army-issue fatigues, usually a striking symbol of a police state’s hegemonic control, have their meaning inverted when donned by a young indigenous woman carrying a wooden replica of a rifle and accessorized with a strip of locally woven brightly-colored cloth. The resulting pastiche of terrorist elements, when juxtaposed with elements of Maya textile weavings, tempers the effect that each of these prototypes of terror would evoke in their “pure” form; all of the above consolidated into the figure of a doll ultimately diminishes the power of institutionalized terror and converts it into an object of play.

Plattner reworks the concept of the Zapatista doll by re-contextualizing its physical presence in her exhibit; whether suspended against a pastoral background or nestled among a random assortment of other dolls and playthings, the black-clad wool warrior stands out jarringly. In the introduction to her artwork, she muses over the contradictions inherent in the dolls; she sees them as embodying a range of cultural and intellectual concepts ranging from “fantastic” and “cute” to “ethnographic,” and wonders if they are “playthings, soldiers… attackers?” The ability of a rustic doll to raise so many questions speaks to the powerful and complex psychological associations between the material object and children as a social category.

A war doll such as the Zapatista bridges the gender divide that has long characterized the world of playthings. Baby dolls reconcile little girls to the domestic realm, while toy soldiers and guns have incited bellicose behavior in boys for centuries. In her feminist manifesto The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir postulates that the doll serves a particular role, especially for girl children, contributing a gender component to the discussion. With a nod to Freud, she suggests that the doll acts a physical extension of the girl’s body that serves as a substitute for the boy’s penis. The doll represents the role that the girl must play in society as a nurturer and caretaker. The Zapatista doll complicates the usual guise of the babydoll, with its face masked in black and clutching to a wooden tool of war. Furthermore, de Beauvoir asserts that the doll serves as an object for a girl’s vindication of her relationship with her mother; with the doll she can act out symbolic punishment and affection, reclaiming power in the mother/daughter relationship. Likewise, upon purchasing the guerrilla doll, the consumer reestablishes his or her relationship with the ideology of war. The purchase and ownership of a tiny Zapatista shows that in some way the consumer has come to terms with war; the possession of the artifact becomes a visual banner of the promotion of violence, albeit with the ultimate goal of social justice. The Zapatista doll either conflates femininity and violence, or symbolically unites the consumer’s desire for war with its sanitized, infantile manifestation.

Either interpretation has troubling implications for the ease with which violence inserts itself into popular culture in toy form. The legitimate human rights and social justice demands of the EZLN are reduced to a universally recognized
symbol of child’s play. Marx criticizes the association of marginalized social groups with the immaturity of childhood. Historically, in Latin America, indigenous groups have suffered condescending analogies to children based on perceived infantile qualities observed by the hegemonic power. The predominantly indigenous Zapatista uprising already runs the historical risk of losing public viability, and the further association of the political movement with children’s playthings further imbues their ideology with the “undeveloped” nature of childhood. Nevertheless, a brighter interpretation sees Zapatista subversion of war imagery playing on the popular conflation of childhood and innocence as a way to undermine the state-sponsored terror frequently associated with military uniforms and weaponry.

La lotería
While Zapatista dolls are a favorite novelty among tourists in the street markets of Chiapas, there is nothing innovative about war-themed toys in Mexican history. Author Rómulo Velasco Gallegos cited an 1829 police report complaining that in this post-Wars of Independence decade, the children in the streets were still “consumed by war,” playing “scandalous games,” fashioning toy guns and enacting battles in the streets. In fact, throughout much of the nineteenth century the nation was consumed by civil and international war, so much so that war-related toys seemed a logical representation of Mexican society at the time, and could not simply be attributed to the commercial agenda of manufacturers. Here we may recall Benjamin’s concept of dialectical images, aesthetic elements of culture that function as a politicizing tool between the producer and the consumer; in this case, the dialectical image is the war toy, and the “non-participating and truly impartial persons” targeted by the politicized object are the children. The toy serves as an ideological bridge, normalizing concepts as abstract as war and nationalism and connecting them to the daily realities of community and play.

The most famous Mexican diversion that tinkers with images of violence is the memory card game La lotería, a game with roots in Aztec culture; in its popular form, it has persisted since the last half of the eighteenth century. In its original form, the lottery was conceptualized as a part of the informal economy designed to supplement New Spanish colonial revenue. The childlike figures on each card helped to ensure that the game be perpetuated in its modern form as a game for children. The figure of El Soldado (The Soldier), accompanied by his dubious pirate friend El Valiente (The Brave One), inconspicuously enjoys a spot in the game alongside other such quotidian objects as La Pera (The Pear), La Bandera (The Flag), y El Sol (The Sun). In the classic nineteenth-century “Don Clemente” rendition of the game, El Soldado stands in full military glory as one of the quintessential symbols of Mexican national identity. The stylized, colorful images are designed in a clearly understandable, viewer-friendly way in order to appeal to players, meanwhile presenting simplified symbols of the child’s “world of things,” which Marx envisions as the basis for understanding of institutions.
As a game of memory, the rules create a Foucaultian-style institution, in which the child must recite by rote the incantation that accompanies *El Soldado*, and continually reinforce his image in the memory bank as an omnipresent element of that child’s daily life. Within this game, all of the elements of the prison institution as detailed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* are present: control of space (standardized size and arrangement of the cards); minute-by-minute control of activity (children are encouraged to respond instinctively to the phrase that accompanies the image); repetitive exercises (the game consists solely of matching cards and waiting for the caller’s next phrase); hierarchies (the competitive goal is to win, and s/he with the most matches wins); normalization of judgment (the rules of the game do not allow for deviations or creative thought); and finally, panoptic (on two levels: the caller watches all of the players, as the players remain focused on the cards; and each individual player reigns over the set of cards and therefore the images they represent as they fit into boxes and categories). Although arguably the game consists of equally as many “positive,” “negative,” and “neutral” images, the normalization of the images through controlled production includes the normalization of at least one image of war (*El Soldado*) and another of violence (*El Valiente*), and both are associated with positive moral character. In this way, a seemingly innocent game of images and memory can serve as a tool.
of acculturating the child to nationalization projects in which war is promoted as a national value. Nevertheless, upon production of La lotería in the United States, El Soldado was deemed offensive enough to be removed (at least temporarily) from the deck.

In an interesting twist, La lotería has been re-interpreted and refashioned according to the current political climate in Mexico by Juan Felipe Herrera and Artemio Rodriguez in their 1999 publication Lotería Cards and Fortune Poems: A Book of Lives. The author and artist bare the thinly veiled nationalist propaganda of La lotería’s original version to reveal a new face; Rodriguez’s new cards include such politically charged images as El Zapatista, El Mojado (The Wetback), and La Migra (The Border Patrol). Doubtless these cards no longer specifically target a child audience; the catchy phrases accompanying the images have stretched into lengthy poetic musings often with adult themes. While more politically critical, the authors have broken the institutionalizing power of the game by abandoning its rules and regulations; therefore, its implicit power will not be as widespread as the original “institutional” version, according to Foucault. In El Soldado’s most recent manifestation, Rodríguez morphs the original images of the “Don Clemente” version into a new politicized aesthetic in woodcutting. His El Soldado wears the same Mexican-issue military fatigues, but this time stands atop a pile of naked and dismembered corpses, his face writhing in an agonized expression. His rifle has a bayonet attached, accented dramatically by flames the flames of hell that thrust jarringly upward behind the figures. However, the still-stylized, almost cartoon-like simplicity of the woodcutting medium make this very adult lottery card attractive to younger eyes. It is no longer a subtle manipulation of the “world of things” with which the child must grapple to construct his or her fantasy world of institutional symbols. Its visual appeal overrides the violent content at first, allowing for easy reception of war (or anti-war) propaganda by children and adults alike.

Che Guevara

A third example in popular culture of the infantilization of war imagery occurs with the exaggerated visual proliferation of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, most notably the photographic likeness captured by Cuban photographer Alberto Korda in 1960. While his iconic semblance graces an endless array of political and non-political artifacts of material culture alike, we will deal with the images of Che that have been rendered “child-friendly.” The aesthetically pleasing Korda photograph, much unlike more haggardly visages of Guevara captured by less fortunate journalists, has become as simplified and iconic as La lotería cards; in its silkscreen version, the two-tone wistful guerrilla looks almost cherubic. In Cuba, the correlation between children and Che is inescapable. Since his death in Bolivia in 1967, Guevara’s immortality through photography has reached an ideological peak symbolized by the ubiquitous Korda photo in every Cuban classroom; children between fourth and seventh grade assume the moniker of “pioneers,” paying tribute
daily in the anthem “Pioneers for Communism/We will be like Che.”

Cuban children thus feel the daily burden of promulgating the weighty revolutionary inheritance left to them by Che. Every year from October 8-28, students nationwide celebrate the obligatory Jornada Ideológica Camilo Che, in honor of revolutionary martyrs Camilo Cienfuegos and Guevara; children are excused from school to throw flowers into the sea, and the only television programming from morning to night is documentary material of Che’s life. Perhaps due to the austere aesthetics of socialism or the rigid institutionalized control that Fidel Castro exerts over the images of the revolution, Che’s reproduction across the island remains standardized, with little room for artistic manipulation.

While propagation of Che’s image is intended to parallel the spread of Marxist values, its overflow into the global consumer market directly contradicts the non-materialist values that Che ideally embodies. Through constantly convoluted popular cultural reproductions, “Che the man” (whose book *Guerrilla Warfare* details tactical insurgent practices) becomes farther and farther removed from “Che the icon” (as seen on t-shirts, miniskirts, Vodka labels, album covers, and even Brazilian swimsuit models). After so much commercial exposure, Che’s political edge has dulled to the point that anyone who fancies him or herself a nonconformist can use clothes to express solidarity with Che. Not surprisingly, in February 2003 the boutique of men’s-streetwear company SSUR released a custom-designed Che Guevara action figure, complete with fatigues, a cigar, a beret, a miniature diary and a government-issue pistol. Whether or not the manufacturers marketed this revolutionary doll to children bears little significance; more than ruptur-
ing the troubled capitalist/communist binary, it both trivializes and exculpates this symbol of armed revolutionary fervor by masking it in the incontestable innocence of childhood.

**Conclusions**

Many Latin American children are subject to the institution of war, whether on the more innocuous level of games such as *La lotería*, or the intensely real context of surviving a massacre. Seemingly innocent war-related toys make war a friendlier, more accessible option, marketable to a broad spectrum of society. Marketing war through toys, such as the Zapatista dolls or Che figurines, may seem to serve the noble purpose of promoting issues of social justice on a globalized market, but the broader implications are the removal of the war image from its immediate context through a series of intertextualized references and the subsequent loss of meaning. The various ideas assigned to the war toy through each successive purchase, as well as through the ritual of play as performed by the child, constantly remove the object from the original meaning assigned to it during production. However, the historical and psychological associations with war triggered by visual war symbols such as guns clash with society’s preconceived notions of childhood as a special category marked by innocence when the two sets of ideologies converge in the form of a toy.

The material relics that emerge from violent spaces of guerrilla warfare have found their way into popular culture and are consumed at an ever-alarming pace by tourists and the international community at large. The production/consumption dialectic makes all parties in contact with these elements of material culture agents of the ideology of violence that the toys embody. Representations of war through dolls ultimately trivializes the issues surrounding armed conflict, conflating them with other icons of popular culture until they blend into a kid-friendly arsenal of politically desensitized kitsch. In addition, the psychological and symbolic sets of ideas historically associated with dolls troublingly feminize the image of violence. Making war adorable leads to complacency; justifying armed conflict through cute toys and dashing revolutionaries tempers the most impassioned pacifist. The infantilization of war-related issues has a powerful and life-changing impact on the children that are used to market war in the first place.

**Notes**


5. Ibid 132.


15. Ibid 319.

16. Marx and Engels 142-144. Marx critiques Saint Max’s historical renditions of categories of development as metaphors for different racial groups. Saint Max likens the “Negroes” to children, a comparison that we can here extend to the Tzotzil and Tzeltal indigenous groups that predominate in the Zapatista movement.


18. González y González 104.

19. Ibid 103.

20. Wolin 125.


23. Herrera and Rodríguez, xv. *La lotería* has seen many versions, but the most lasting has been the “Don Clemente” version introduced in Mexico in 1887; this version is still in production.

24. Ibid xiv.


27. Ibid.

28. Herrera and Rodríguez 83.


31. Ibid 53.

Works Cited


