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Silvia M. Pease

Joy as contestation

How does innocent joy become a subtle contestation? Joy is the emotion of pleasure and happiness; and it is increasingly sought as a physical and spiritual ailment for life challenges and crossroads. Interestingly, the Merriam Webster defines Joy “as the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires: delight;” and as “a state of happiness or felicity.”¹

Joy manifests itself in relation to happiness and innocence in several ways. The innocence of a child, of an animal of nature are distinct conditions. How can we sustain that joyful innocence throughout our lifetime? And, how can joy and innocence persist and assist in the subtle contestation of everyday experiences?

This article analyzes the pictorial representation of Frida Kahlo’s “The Dream,” to unfold the nature and reflect upon the notions of joy and innocence as forms of a subtle contestation. How are they represented? By examining the visible and the non-visible as conditions of critical possibility for joy, innocence and contestation, we can reevaluate the interrelation between the notions of life and death in the Mexican culture, and Frida’s personal history. I argue that innocent joy is a quality that articulates a subtle contestation or clandestine activity of freedom.²



Figure 1. Kahlo, Frida. *The Dream*. Oil painting. 2'5' x 3'3', 1940. Courtesy www.fridakahlo.org

How can the notion of passage in the Mexican culture be understood as Huberman's 'intermittent fireflies'? Theorist Didi Huberman states that: "We do not live in one world but between two worlds, at least. The first is inundated with light, the second crossed with flashes" (Huberman 83). He links the concept of intermittent fireflies' movement or the flash to freedom. Thus, he states that incessant fireflies' movements of flickering actions appear in an on-off relationships, and abrupt in-outs (Huberman 81, 83). Can this notion of flickering actions relate to the Mexican belief of life and death? Is passage understood as abrupt intermittent in-outs? In the Western world, death and mourning belong in the privacy, except for the Mexicans. They have a different relationship with the dead and death in general. And, the best example is their celebration of the Day of the Dead³ with vibrant colors and countless manifestations. On the Day

of the Dead, cities are covered with flowers, colors blues, pinks, yellows, purples, oranges, adding to the communal festivities that guide the souls of the living and the dead. Mexicans eat, drink, and celebrate in a joyful elusive manner. Underneath the bright colors and festivities, the historian Octavio Paz in his book *Labyrinth of Solitude*,⁴ states that Mexicans have an utter indifference towards death as a venue to regain the loss of meaning. Pre-Hispanics and Catholics that preceded the modern Mexican culture understood death as a transitory stage from earth to a heavenly life, or a step in the cycle of spiritual renewal. Now, according to Paz, for Mexicans, death is 'unfertile,' inconsequential; and their coping mechanism is to humanize death through lively celebrations. Thus, the skeleton brings laughter instead of sorrow.

In Mexican culture of death and exemplified in Frida Kahlo's 'The Dream,' is a flickering act from life to death and vice-versa, confronted with irony and happiness. Analyzing this painting, the imagery of a skeleton on her bed canopy, which holds dried flowers and explosives that can go off at any time, denotes her refusal to be serious about the notion of death. In real life, Frida had a skeleton on top of her canopy called the Juda Frida's lover, and she referred to it as "...an amusing reminder of people's mortality" (www.fridaKahlo.com). For Frida, death is what Huberman defines as a 'glimpse' or an event or transition flickering from a world to the other. Thus, a glimpse appears and leaves, but before it disappears, leaves a memory or desire, an association or an after image. So, the image of Frida, sleeping with a joyful gaze, represents her flickering passage back and forth between life and death and her joyful subtle contestation of the tragic awareness that sooner or later death will come for us.

So how do we define happiness and joy? Friedrich Nietzsche notes that being active is by necessity counted as part of happiness, when he writes: "men bursting with strength and therefore necessarily active, they knew they must not separate happiness from action," meaning,

happiness relates to the 'self,' and is a type of control one has over our surroundings and experiences (Nietzsche 21). For him, happiness is not a constant state of wellbeing, it is an ideal state of laziness. And, being happy implies to be able to prove the vital strength and overcome adversity in life. For Arendt, happiness, and other emotions, are a necessary form of articulation. She writes: "...not only grief and sorrow but also joy and happiness and all the other emotions would be altogether unbearable if they had to remain mute, inarticulate" (Arendt 96).

In partial agreement with some of these notions, happiness links to joy and it is directly connected to our childhood innocence. It is the capacity to recapture our childhood's innocence and expect anything but pure innocent joy. It is through the ability to preserve the innocence that humans experience joy.

Even though there is an iconographic tension, the depiction of Frida's facial expression, in 'The Dream,' is joyful. Spite of it all, she looks innocent, joyful and free. 'The Dream' depicts probably the most iconic piece of furniture in her house, which is her bed. Frida appears laying on her bed with two pillows, sleeping and covered by an orange cloth. There are veins or green plants growing on her bed, almost as if they are oppressing her physical body and her whole existence. The skeleton, on her canopy, mimics her posture.

And, how does joy become a power of contestation? Joy, for Frida, represents a way to challenge her actual lack of physical freedom due to her semi-paralyzed body. Frida's subtle contestation to the constant palpable danger of death appears in the form of a constant laughter and what Huberman calls 'flashes of innocence' (6). Her body next to the skeleton, with growing plants mimic an intermittent laughter and joy contesting the tragic reality. The parallel body placement and symmetrical layout in 'The Dream' divides the visual space in equal parts as an illustration of both worlds.

Didi Huberman notes that shouts and joy and laughter are symbols of innocence. No doubt, when he quotes Pasolini who describes “joy and laughter were absolutely linked, are suddenly embodied in the night, in the form of a cloud of fireflies: [...] “Everything in them turns to laughter, to bursts of laughter. Never does their virile enthusiasm appear so clear and overwhelming as when they seem to have become once more innocent children because their complete and joyous youth is still present in their bodies (5). Furthermore, Huberman, referring to the subtle power of contestation adds that “...what remains essential, in the comparison established between flashes of animal desire and bursts of laughter or shouts of human friendship, is that innocent and powerful joy that appears as an alternative in these times of triumphant fascism, whether too dark or too well lit (6).

Perhaps, Joy is an extension of happiness or an excess of happiness. Joy is an emotion that gives us a sense of completion. We are where we want to be, and we are doing what we think is the best possible thing to do. However, I would argue that the ability to be joyful is lost for many, and it can be found in innocence. Through joyful childhood experiences nurture joyful adults. Joy is renewed and contagious. Joy is a constant remedy that expands and multiplies, and as such, it facilitates a subtle contestation to life vulnerabilities.

Notes

¹ “Joy.” Merriam-Webster.com/dictionary/Joy (Accessed 3/22/20).

² See Figure 1. Kahlo, Frida. *The Dream*. Oil painting.

³ An iteration of this perception is found in the latest Bond film, *Spectre*, the opening scene of which shows the Distrito Federal overtaken by a parade of dancing skeletons, wearing top hats,

fancy dresses and jewelry, as well as traditional clothing.

⁴ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

⁵ Merriam Webster. Happiness/ a state of well-being and contentment: Joy (Accessed 03/25/2020).

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Figure 1. Kahlo, Frida. *The Dream*. Oil painting. 2'5' x 3'3', 1940. Courtesy of www.fridakahlo.org