

Subjunctive Aesthetics: Mexican Cultural Production in the Era of Climate Change

Carolyn Fornoff

reseñada por

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Mexico has responded to climate change in varied and often contradictory ways. Across different sectors of society, attitudes toward the crisis diverge widely, reflecting a complex picture of how Mexicans perceive its impact on their country, Latin America and the broader world. While many artists and intellectuals have overlooked the issue, others have taken it seriously and explored it deeply in their work. This tension—and the broader absence of critical attention to climate change in Mexican cultural studies—is precisely the gap Carolyn Fornoff aims to address in *Subjunctive Aesthetics: Mexican Cultural Production in the Era of Climate Change*, a monograph which underscores how relevant the problem is, not only aesthetically, but also socially.

Fornoff draws on thinkers like Amitav Ghosh, Samuel Delany, and Anna Tsing to develop her concept of “subjunctive aesthetics”: an artistic framework that moves beyond realism to imagine how the world *could* be after the ravages of climate change and capitalist extractivism. In contrast to depictions of the world as it is, this approach foregrounds possibility, counterfactuals, and alternative futures. In a moment when climate crises seem to offer only dystopian outcomes, the artists studied in this book open imaginative spaces for hope, resilience, and resistance, which offer a myriad of possibilities besides a dead end. Much like the grammatical subjunctive mood, these works are rooted in material conditions, yet they propose multiple probable futures instead of a single, inevitable path.

Focusing on cultural production from 2012–2022—a decade spanning the presidencies of Enrique Peña Nieto and Andrés Manuel López Obrador—Fornoff highlights a revealing paradox: although these two leaders presented themselves as ideological opposites, their environmental policies were strikingly similar. Due to Mexico’s desire to belong to the “developed” nations, both presidents endorsed international

environmental agreements, yet simultaneously supported large-scale extractivist projects, often in partnership with Canadian and state-owned corporations. These ventures have led to the exploitation of over half of Mexico's territory by foreign companies, exposing a fundamental contradiction between environmental rhetoric and practice.

Fornoff's analysis encompasses a diverse array of artists and media, including the poetry and visual art of Verónica Gerber Bicecci, the multimedia work of Naomi Rincón Gallardo, the poetry of Karen Villeda, Maricela Guerrero, and Xitlálitl Rodríguez Mendoza, and the films of Everardo González, Betzabé García, and Laura Herrero Garvín. She also examines anonymous graffiti, YouTube series, and initiatives like Cine Móvil ToTo, whose renewable energy strategies shed light on the film industry's carbon footprint. This breadth underscores how deeply ecological concerns are woven into contemporary Mexican art, even if they have been underrepresented in academic discourse. While earlier figures such as Alfonso Reyes and José Emilio Pacheco engaged with environmental themes, Fornoff notes that their work did not employ the subjunctive framework that defines the more recent cultural responses she explores.

Ultimately, Fornoff argues that subjunctive aesthetics does not offer utopias, but rather imaginative possibilities grounded in material reality. While art is not the same as activism, the author argues that it possesses a distinct political force capable of reshaping how we perceive the world and its future. Through alternative narratives, language, and aesthetics, these works challenge dominant ideologies and foster new ways of thinking. Realist depictions of ecological collapse remain vital, but so too are subjunctive approaches that ask: *What if?* For instance, what if the assassination of activists didn't mark the end of their causes? What if the structures we take for granted could be otherwise?

By embracing doubt, speculation, desire, and imagination—core elements of the subjunctive mood—these artists offer a vision of hope and resistance. Their work refuses the defeatist notion that the Earth has no future (and humanity must colonize another planet), and instead reclaims imagination as a powerful, grounded response to crisis. Fornoff's book suggests possibilities and different ways of thinking about humanity, territory, and its environment. Art is then not a means to show evidence, but the place where humanity mourns, imagines, feels, and dreams.

Subjunctive Aesthetics uses ecocriticism in a novel way to understand how contemporary artists are talking about ecological crisis in Mexico. Even if political leaders and society at large remain in many cases unbothered by a potential catastrophe, cultural production plays a prominent role in how the public thinks about climate change and its ramifications. Hence, subjunctive aesthetics do not consider imagination as a retreat from the real, but a crucial form of resistance insofar as it is grounded in the real without succumbing to pessimism; on the contrary, it uses reality and imagination to present a viable future.