



ARCH 206 – HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE

ASSIGNMENT 1 _ HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

Evaluation: 25%

SERPENTS & SKULLS _ *A SHORT STORY BY ITALO CALVINO FROM HIS BOOK MR. PALOMAR*

This assignment is to present the 2 points of view discussed in Calvino's attached short story and to give your opinion on Historical Interpretation.

- Follow Mr. Palomar's through Mexico and collect images of what he encounters in his journey through Tula. (i.e. Tula, Quetzalcoatl, 4 carved columns, chac-mool, wall of the serpents....)
- Present Mr. Palomar's friend point of view
- Present the school teacher's point of view
- Present which point of view in your opinion is more valid (Note: there is no correct or wrong opinion. The argument is what counts.)
- Assemble your work on a single PDF Poster Type with images and text of no more than 200 words

Serpents and skulls

In Mexico, Mr. Palomar is visiting the ruins of Tula, ancient capital of the Toltecs. A Mexican friend accompanies him, an impassioned and eloquent expert on pre-Columbian civilizations, who tells him beautiful legends about Quetzalcoatl. Before becoming a god, Quetzalcoatl was a king, with his palace here in Tula; a line of lopped-off columns remains, around an impluvium, a bit like a palace of ancient Rome.

The temple of the Morning Star is a step pyramid. At the top stand four cylindrical caryatids, known as "Atlases," who represent the god Quetzalcoatl as the Morning Star (through a butterfly they bear on their back, symbol of the star), and four carved columns, which represent the Plumed Serpent, the same god in animal form.

All this has to be taken on faith; for that matter, it would be hard to demonstrate the opposite. In Mexican archeology every statue, every object, every detail of a bas-relief stands for something that stands for something else that stands, in turn, for yet another something. An animal stands for a god who stands for a star that stands for an element or a human quality, and so

on. We are in the world of pictographic writing; the ancient Mexicans, to write, drew pictures, and even when they were drawing it was as if they were writing: every picture seems a rebus to be deciphered. Even the most abstract, geometric friezes on the wall of a temple can be interpreted as arrows if you see a motive of broken lines, or you can read a numerical sequence, depending on the way the key pattern is repeated. Here in Tula the reliefs depict stylized animal forms: jaguars, coyotes. Mr. Palomar's Mexican friend pauses at each stone, transforms it into a cosmic tale, an allegory, a moral reflection.

A group of schoolchildren moves among the ruins: stocky boys with the features of the Indios, descendants perhaps of the builders of these temples, wearing plain white uniforms, like boy scouts', with blue neckerchiefs. The boys are led by a teacher not much taller than they are and only a little more adult, with the same round, dark, impassive face. They climb the steep steps of the pyramid, stop beneath the columns; the teacher tells what civilization they belong to, what century, what stone they are carved from, then concludes, "We don't know what they mean," and the group follows him down the steps. At each statue, each figure carved in a relief or on a column, the teacher supplies some facts and then invariably adds, "We don't know what it means."

Here is a *chac-mool*, a very popular kind of statue: a human figure, half reclining, holds a tray; on this tray—the experts are unanimous in saying—the bleeding hearts of the victims of human sacrifice were presented. These statues in and of themselves could also be seen as good-

natured, rough-hewn puppets; but every time Mr. Palomar sees one he cannot help shuddering.

The line of schoolboys passes. And the teacher is saying, "*Esto es un chac-mool. No se sabe lo que quiere decir.*" ("This is a *chac-mool*. We don't know what it means.") And he moves on.

Though Mr. Palomar continues to follow the explanation of his friend acting as guide, he always ends up crossing the path of the schoolboys and overhearing the teacher's words. He is fascinated by his friend's wealth of mythological references: the play of interpretation and allegorical reading has always seemed to him a supreme exercise of the mind. But he feels attracted also by the opposite attitude of the schoolteacher: what had at first seemed only a brisk lack of interest is being revealed to him as a scholarly and pedagogical position, a methodological choice by this serious and conscientious young man, a rule from which he will not swerve. A stone, a figure, a sign, a word reaching us isolated from its context is only that stone, figure, sign, or word: we can try to define them, to describe them as they are, and no more than that; whether, beside the face they show us, they also have a hidden face, is not for us to know. The refusal to comprehend more than what the stones show us is perhaps the only way to evince respect for their secret; trying to guess is a presumption, a betrayal of that true, lost meaning.

Behind the pyramid is a passage or communication trench between two walls, one of packed earth, the other of carved stone: the Wall of the Serpents. It is perhaps the most beautiful piece in Tula; in the relief-frieze there is a sequence of serpents, each holding a human skull

in its open jaws, as if it were about to devour it.

The boys go by. The teacher says: "This is the Wall of the Serpents. Each serpent has a skull in its mouth. We don't know what they mean."

Mr. Palomar's friend cannot contain himself: "Yes, we do! It's the continuity of life and death; the serpents are life, the skulls are death. Life is life because it bears death with it, and death is death because there is no life without death. . . ."

The boys listen, mouths agape, black eyes dazed. Mr. Palomar thinks that every translation requires another translation, and so on. He asks himself: "What did death, life, continuity, passage mean for the ancient Toltecs? And what can they mean today for these boys? And for me?" Yet he knows he could never suppress in himself the need to translate, to move from one language to another, from concrete figures to abstract words, to weave and reweave a network of analogies. Not to interpret is impossible, as refraining from thinking is impossible.

Once the school group has disappeared around a corner, the stubborn voice of the little teacher resumes: "*No es verdad*, it is not true, what that *señor* said. We don't know what they mean."