

Presentación

Modernity in Whose Name?

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In *Modernismo Nordestinado*, Catrin See Franz traces the Pre-history, so to speak, of the tropicalia movement back to its formative precepts in the North-eastern state of Bahia: the predominantly black hinterland, a place associated with African traditions, supposedly forgotten by the modernisation of the nation in its transition from sugar cane to coffee production which in turn fuelled the industrialisation of the South and in particular São Paulo. See Franz argues that despite having been initiated by the (white) cultural elite, highlighting particularly the figure of architect Lina Bo Bardi, such precepts were the product of an engagement with the vernacular and popular traditions on the one hand and an interest in opening access to high culture and education to the masses on the other. The paper posits an interesting counter history to the predominant version of popular engagement within Brazilian art which invariably focuses on the activities of Hélio Oiticica and his involvement with the favela Mangueira. In See Franz paper we find several possibilities for the construction of historical narratives that relate (in a specific manner) to wider events whether in terms of aesthetics, literature, music or politics.

One such instance which I would like to develop here at the risk of digressing is that of Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (1964). The film invokes Euclides da Cunha's historical novel *Os Sertões* (1902) written as an account of the Canudos war in the late 19th century. A popular uprising of sorts, caused by the sheer misery experienced by the people of the northeast whose utter poverty was only exacerbated by drought and the economic shift of the country which privileged the South, during the years following the declaration of the Republic.

The Canudos community was led by a self proclaimed prophet (like in Rocha's film) who combined his catholic fervour with a monarchic rhetoric which ultimately led to its brutal demise, following several republican army attacks. The positivist rhetoric of order and progress that the new republic declared showed its violence towards the miserable, backwards, illiterate but also superstitious and politically reactionary masses.

Canudos exemplifies the difficulty and complexity of the subject at hand in this conference, modernity in Latin America. If we consider Glauber Rocha's arguably most iconic scene in his later film *Terra em Transe* (1967) where the poet gags the worker from speaking, we find perhaps the Tropicalist answer to the romantic leftwing vision of the heroic proletarian (As Rogerio Duarte was quoted in Catrin's paper: *Decompartimentamos tudo*).

As suggested by Fabiola Martinez, modernity in Latin America cannot be considered other or alternative to an original version of itself. Its contradictions are not singular, that is, are not a product of its implementation outside its proper or natural (European in other words) conditions but are merely specific. This is a question that Maria Iñigo's paper raises and which I will return to shortly.

One could suggest for example an approximation between the violent ruthlessness of the Brazilian early republic with current US and EU policies in the middle east as specific instances of the use of brutality in the name of modernity. The impossibility of a binary, an either/or, position towards such conflicts suggests the urgency of the issues at stake. In this context the following question could be posed: can we really blame modernity itself for the dreadful consequences perpetrated in its name?

It is also in this sense that seemingly contradictory approaches towards abstraction appear in several papers. Its emergence within Latin America is reported as canonical and invariably distinct from the vernacular elements that permeated the more overtly hybrid qualities of Figurative or Surrealist art. Yet, like modernity itself, the hybrid is contingent on agency. When the hybrid emerges as the implicit signifier of the singular, of the authentic, then we also witness a perverse re-appearance of the binary relationships it purportedly denies.

Fabiola Martinez discusses how two seemingly antagonistic genealogies of modernism in Mexico, Abstraction and Surrealism would find their relation to place through the evocation of the Pre-colombian past in order to attain a sense of "cosmopolitan *mexicanidad*". The accusation that equated Abstraction with anti-patriotism appears in several other contexts. An interesting question emerges here. Can we not equate the search for an association with a pre-colombian past, Monteiro's isomorphic connection with the Asirian cultures and the antropophagite quest for a cultured savagery with a common desire for a sense of lost authenticity? Antropofagia (as well as transculturalism, despite and interestingly not mentioned today) appears in this sense as the other side, the antagonistic genealogy of geometric abstraction for example. Yet this is a necessary other, one which imbues the specificity of abstract geometrical avant-gardes in Latin America.

Mara Sánchez Llorens approached Clark and Artigas through their expressions of the term "freedom", and in this sense it might be interesting to relate Pedrosa's and Herbert Read's thoughts on freedom and modernity.

Danger, transcendence and perdition, are brought together in Heidegger's thoughts on technology, and by extension modernity itself, in not such a dissimilar way in which the "desperation and tragic contradictions" of life encompassed by science and technology appear in Mario Pedrosa's writing on Abstraction in Brazil throughout the 1950s. Pedrosa's *The Problematic of Sensibility* stated for instance that:

"In effect this art does not aim at embellishing life but to harmonise it, to take it out of its desperation and tragic contradictions. It aims at interpreting life in terms of the natural, antinatural or hipernatural world, created by the science and technique that encompasses it. Its task consists exactly of finishing that terrible dichotomy between intelligence and sensibility; to fuse them again as when man became for the first time conscious of his destiny and of his being and of these as being distinct. Even the concretists, the geometrics or constructivists, search [...] a form of knowledge that has been abandoned by western civilisation; they want to rejuvenate it by means of new symbols, of intuition-forms still unknown whether of imaginary or extraperceptual origins (2005: 102)."

Pedrosa, in other words, considers the primal truth to be the moment in which the self, or consciousness of being for itself, becomes detached from the awareness of humanity's historical progression, its destiny.

Herbert Read in his essay *Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism* (1949) saw precisely this aspect of Sartre's philosophy as representing "an advance in philosophical rectitude where the possibility of detaching oneself from a situation in order to take a point of view concerning it [...] is precisely what we call freedom". And aligning himself with Heidegger, Read continues:

"It can be argued with force that precisely such a capacity for detachment is the cause of our social disease, our disunity, and aggressiveness; but it must be admitted that our major advances in scientific thought are also due to the development and use of this faculty. But there is a danger inherent in detachment which the existentialist fully realises. It is the danger of idealism" (1952: 143).

For Read the revolutionary Transcendentalism inherent in Existentialism amounted to an ontological state of detachment and to the possibility of the individual's will to reconnect with "primal truth". The association of Pedrosa's thought with that developed in parallel by Herbert Read is useful in the sense that such an association points to the problem that the centre-periphery binomial poses.

Maria Iñigo following a concise theoretical overview on how the category of the modern has been continually reassessed within postcolonial thought, concludes by in-

voking the figure of the native, whether the noble savage or the antropophagite, appears within and throughout the modern imaginary, continuously reassessed and reconfigured like the notion of modernity itself within the critical and political analysis of the present.

I particularly appreciated Lori Cole's approach to the question "what is an avant-garde" posed by the Madrid-based journal *La Gaceta Literaria* in 1930. Her critique of the integrity of European Modernism and its genealogies is particularly useful in understanding the dynamics of the Latin American case. Interesting in Cole's analysis is again the legacy of the Purist nationalist ideology that emerges through references to *L'Esprit Nouveau* or implicitly through *Grecia Magazine*, whose very name suggest the inherited western tradition that the Purist rhetoric saw as rightfully their own. The very nationalism of European avant-gardes, as opposed to what is usually assumed to be their claimed universality, became the model for Latin American's own claim of specificity and at times singularity.

It is in this sense that we can consider perhaps the artists Cecilia Farjado-Hill uses as case studies. Not as excluded from the grand narratives on Latin American art or as subjective expressions from the periphery of the periphery, but through the metaphor of the duality of the centre/periphery gaze as context setting, she is able to emphasise the specific, or particular cases of suffrage, who ultimately should be considered not based on the politics that has driven them to produce but the particular way in which it has been articulated, that is to say, the way in which it becomes art.

Bibliography

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