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# MODERN, MODERNITY, MODERNISM: The Shaping of Brazil's Soul

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Toni Dorca

To produce a paper remotely close to scholarship after visiting a country for only three weeks would be presumptuous, even if I have read papers and attended seminars. Before discussing issues pertaining to Brazil's past, present, and future, I would first of all need a thorough command of the Portuguese language. I would also need to have a more extensive knowledge of Brazilian cultural history and the idiosyncrasies of its people, and an acquaintance with the different regions that constitute its vast territory. Since I do not meet any of those requirements, I feel the best solution would be to divide my essay into three separate categories: a personal narrative of the trip; a summary of my research regarding the literary manifestations of Brazil's *modernista* movement; and, finally, a report on the discussions that took place in the seminars between Brazilian and Macalester scholars. It is my hope that I can bring the three parts together and shed some light upon the problematic notion of Brazil's quest for modernity at the threshold of the twenty-first century.

## I. Impressions of a Trip: Brazil '97

Narration is, by definition, a selective process that consists of giving shape to certain past events at the expense of others. It is almost impossible to determine (at least for me) the mechanisms by which the mind operates, and why a particular episode remains in our consciousness while another disappears into the realm of forgetfulness. What do I remember most about Brazil?

The beauty of the people? Their hospitality and kindness? Our culinary adventures (eating at a *churrascaria* was definitely one of the highlights of the experience)? Or perhaps the noise in São Paulo, the joggers in Ipanema, or the rain in Salvador? My perception is made up of fragments, and I am not sure if I will have the ability to compose a more or less objective portrait of the country. Besides, since Post-Structuralist thought has made us all aware of the rhetorical nature of language, there is probably no such thing as a totally reliable account of the past. Trying to recapture it would entail no more than an act of (self-)deception, doomed to failure from the onset. What to write, then? Perhaps, as I intend to do in this section, just a personal reflection.

The first four days took us to the University of Campinas (UNICAMP) to conduct meetings with university professors from an array of disciplines and geographical areas. Later, we moved to São Paulo for a couple of days and then split to pursue our independent projects. I remained in São Paulo for another half a week before continuing on by bus to Rio de Janeiro, where I stayed for a week. We regrouped in Salvador for the closure of the seminar, and from there we flew back to the United States. Aside from Campinas, which served as a wonderful meeting site but did not provide us with real contact with Brazilian life, I had the opportunity to spend time in three important urban centers: São Paulo, a megalopolis of 17 million people, famous for the work ethic of its people (the *paulistanos*) and their passion for food and clothes; Rio de Janeiro, a city of 7 million people who enjoy a more relaxed pace and like to spend time on the beach practicing their cult of the body; and finally, Salvador, a city of 3 million in the northeast state of Bahia, which contains a vast majority of Afro-Brazilians who have been able to preserve some of the customs (music, food, etc.) and identity of their African ancestors.

As a native of Spain who has lived in the United States since 1989, going to Brazil was a reencounter with a way of life I could easily identify with. Immediately after my arrival, I felt at home. It was not so much that lunch was the main meal of the day or that bathrooms came equipped with the omnipresent bidet or that soccer (and not baseball, alas!) was the national pastime. Something deeper, more ingrained — a distinctive manner in which people behaved — struck me with an air of familiarity.

From a simple personal experience, it was pleasant to recognize so many aspects of my own identity in another part of the world.

The realization of these similarities did not prevent me, though, from developing a more acute sense of internationalism as well. The direct immersion in a new environment put before my eyes the way nations are molded by the weight of history and tradition, and how the present is nothing but an outcome (natural or imposed by others) of the past. To put it in other words, by penetrating the soul of Brazil (even at a superficial level), I understood the implications of colonization, of what it meant to be forced to adopt a foreign cultural model and make it your own. If in Brazil I rediscovered (just in case I had forgotten) my identity as a proud descendant of the Romans, a Latin, I also apprehended the effects of five centuries of cultural, political, and economical devastation in Latin America in the name of the principles of Western civilization. Therefore, while I had the privilege of ascertaining the nature of my true self, I also felt embarrassed for the exploitation to which we submitted other people. Simultaneously, then, I was delighted and ashamed to find out who I was and what my ancestors had done in the course of history.

## II. *Modernismo Brasileiro*

My field of specialization being nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spanish literature, I was interested in exploring the last two hundred years of Brazil's literary history. In particular, and since I had just taught a course titled "The Avant-Garde in the Hispanic World," my curiosity was stirred by the vanguard movements in Brazil during the 1920s and 1930s. To my surprise, though, I soon found out that the comparative analysis presented me with difficulties in terms of periodization. While European and Latin American texts are unanimous in dating the rise of Modernism at the turn of the century, followed almost immediately (usually as an outgrowth) by the *Isms* (Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, etc.), the situation in Brazil is somewhat unique.

According to the canonical view, *modernismo* originated in São Paulo on February 13, 15, and 17 of 1922, when a group of

artists, writers, and intellectuals gathered at the Teatro Municipal to exhibit their paintings, recite their poetry, perform their music, and deliver lectures. Three sections were designated "Painting and Sculpture," "Literature and Poetry," and "Festival of Music." The participants in what is now known as the Week of Modern Art included the writers Graça Aranha, Ronald de Carvalho, Mário de Andrade, Álvaro Moreyra, Oswald de Andrade, Menotti del Pichia, Renato de Almeida, Luís Aranha, Ribeiro Couto, Moacir de Abreu, Agenor Barbosa, Rodrigues de Almeida, Alfonso Schmidt, Sérgio Milliet, Guilherme de Almeida and Plínio Salgado; the musicians Guiomar Novaes, H. Villa-Lobos, Octavio Pinto, Paulina de Ambrósio, Ernani Braga, Alfredo Becheret, Frutuoso, and Lucília Villa-Lobos; the sculptors Victor Brecheret, Hildegardo Leao Veloso, and Haarberg; and the painters Anita Malfatti, Di Cavalcanti, Ferrignac, Zina Aita, Martins Ribeiro, Oswald Goeldi, Regina Graz, John Graz and Castello. Their familiarity with the artistic manifestations in Europe, coupled with their criticism of Brazil's academic institutions (which they viewed as outmoded) had much in common with the subversive attitudes of their Spanish American counterparts. Thus, the peculiarities of Brazil lay not so much in the use of a different terminology to account for similar phenomena (*modernismo* coincides, both chronologically and aesthetically, with the Avant-Garde in France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Spain, and Latin America) but in the apparent delay with which Brazil embraced a distinctive modern view regarding literature and arts.

It took me a while to realize that the magical year of 1922 was that of the first centennial of Brazil's declaration of independence. Because literary historians have a tendency toward symmetry, I reasoned, maybe it should not come as a surprise that they decided to link the beginning of an aesthetic revolution in 1922 to the political sovereignty Brazil achieved one hundred years earlier. The point I am trying to make is that cultural historians, in an effort toward coherence, tend to disregard the continuities that mold the succession of artistic manifestations. Coups d'état do not occur in literary history; on the contrary, poetics changes slowly, sometimes even regressively, either affirming or reacting against a specific *Weltanschauung*. Evolution, rather than revolution, constitutes the basis of aesthetics, a

circumstance that precludes any authoritative claims at exact periodization, including of course that related to *modernismo*.

Furthermore, well before 1922 there were already indicators of an artistic renovation that was unequivocally modern in its goals. Francisco Foot Hardman<sup>1</sup> traces Modernist attempts to rediscover Brazil's national identity back to the end of the nineteenth century, while at the same time condemns the reductive institutionalization of *modernismo*: "[T]he meanings of Brazilian Modernism, as a broad tendency, have also been given a narrowly uniform character deriving from the values, themes and kinds of language associated with the group of intellectuals and artists who, in 1922, organized the Week of Modern Art in São Paulo."<sup>2</sup> In his classic book on *modernismo*, *The Modernist Idea*, Wilson Martins draws a parallel conclusion worth quoting here as well: "Contrary to what has been thought for so many years . . . it was the Modernists who created the Week of Modern Art and not the Week of Modern Art that created Modernism."<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, the Week of Modern Art, for all its significance, can serve only arbitrarily as the starting point of a new sensibility. If not, we would have to assume that Brazil was not *modernista* in the first half of February 1922, and then all of a sudden it *was*. The absurdity of this proposal supports Cyana Leahy-Dios's strong indictment against positivist methods applied to the study of literature in her presentation "Literature Education in Brazil: Reflections upon a Theme."<sup>4</sup> Even though she offers no clear alternative to positivism, she is certainly right in denouncing its prevalence in the curriculum as "a pseudo-scientific objectivity in a systematized, descriptive model."<sup>5</sup> Rather than the chronological rigor displayed in our anthologies, my own suggestion emphasizes instead the irregular unfolding of *belles-lettres* along the historical continuum.

An overview of the evolution of European consciousness since the end of the eighteenth century to today will allow us to understand how modernity goes hand in hand with the rise of the bourgeoisie as a dominant class. The Industrial Revolution, which was launched in England in the second half of the eighteenth century and later spread to the Continent, is usually regarded as the decisive episode in the triumph of capitalism. The massive exodus from the rural areas to urban centers resulted in the creation of another new class, the proletariat,

whose destinies (for better or for worse) have ever since been dependent upon those of the bourgeoisie. Factors such as the expansion of the cities throughout the nineteenth century, the increasing vitality of a middle class that was gaining access to leisure, the progressive political and religious freedom, and the resurgence of nationalism also played an enormous role in the configuration of modernity. Slowly, and according to the degree of sociopolitical reforms in each nation, more and more people started questioning the legitimacy of the government and the church, thus giving way to an exaltation of individual consciousness against the dictates of institutionalized power. The relativism of values may be said to have originated as a consequence of this primacy of the self over the establishment.

How would literature and the arts react to the transformations taking place in the economic and political spheres? Following Peter Bürger's well-known thesis in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,<sup>6</sup> the period between Romanticism and the Avant-Garde exemplifies an increasingly autonomous conception of art, freed from all sorts of nonaesthetic purposes (religious, moral, social, political, etc.). Art detaches itself from life and loses its subversive content. The artist alienates himself or herself from society and seeks refuge in the realms of Beauty. In this respect, Modernism culminates at the beginning of the 1900s the process that was initiated at the turn of the eighteenth century with the disintegration of the Enlightenment and the eclosion of the first Romantic schools in Germany. In the case of poetry, for example, the stress is progressively placed upon the formal aspects of language; instead of being judged for the conceptual or representational value of their work, poets are praised for their creativity in the use of far-fetched, unique images. Poetry becomes, in the words of José Ortega y Gasset, "a superior algebra of metaphors," in which words do not *mean* anymore; they simply *are*. Rather than offering a homogeneous vision of the world, the insights of the poet present themselves in fragments filled with humor and irony. According to Bürger, what differentiates Modernism from the Avant-Garde has to do with the latter's attempt to not only push to the limit the playful potentialities of language, but, especially, to reintegrate art with social praxis. Bürger's distinction seems to me of paramount importance when applied to the specificity of Latin American van-

guards, including of course *modernismo*. We shall return to this dualism in just a moment.

Now that we have established the theoretical basis of Modernism within the larger context of modernity, let's direct our attention to the foundations of a modern Brazilian state and its repercussions in the artistic arena. At the end of the nineteenth century, the two biggest challenges facing the country were the question of slavery, which was not abolished until 1888, and the development of a free labor market along with an efficient, urban transportation net. Without being too precise about dates, one may say that approximately between 1889 (proclamation of the Republic) and the decade of the 1930s (the so-called Vargas Revolution took place in 1930), the effects of industrialization were undeniable, especially in the southeast region. In the 1920s, the city of São Paulo surpassed Rio de Janeiro in production of manufactured goods, a circumstance that helps explain why *modernismo* took root more strongly in São Paulo than in the *carrioca* state of Rio de Janeiro. These changes in the social, political, and economic arena gave new impulse to the historical question of Brazil's national identity, as evident in the double nature of *modernismo*: a revolution in the artistic consciousness on the one hand, and, on the other, a reexamination of the intrinsic constituents of the nation as an independent entity.

I decided to limit my research to some of the most relevant journals of the *modernista* period in the 1920s. I was fortunate to have access to facsimile editions in the Center for Cultural Documentation (CEDAE) at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), and in the library of the Institute of Brazilian Studies (IEB) at the University of São Paulo (USP). I consulted several journals,<sup>7</sup> four of which were interdisciplinary in scope, combining poems and reviews, critical essays, and manifestos about recent events in the world of art, literature, cinema, history, politics, etc. A thorough study of these journals is obviously beyond the reach of this essay, but I would like at least to provide some examples of the bipolarity between "modern" and "national" that characterized *modernismo*. Graça Aranha, in an article published in *Estética* in September of 1924 titled "*Mocidade e Esthética*" (Youth and Aesthetics), explains how the aim of young artists will be that of "modernizing, nationalizing and universalizing Brazil."<sup>8</sup> In the inaugural manifesto of *A Revista*,



founders Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Emílio Moura, Francisco Martins de Almeida, and Gregoriano Canedo stated the goal of their enterprise: "Shall we say that we have an ideal? This consists of the sternest and most determinate nationalism."<sup>9</sup> In other instances, such as *Revista de Antropofagia*, the vanguard interest in primitive cultures served as a justification of Europhobia and a violent defense of Brazil's indigenous substratum. Oswaldo de Andrade's famous "Manifesto Antropofago"<sup>10</sup> exalted the death of European conquerors at the hands of native cannibals as a sign of "Brazilianness." Antônio de Alcantara Machado would adhere to the same opinion in his "Incitement to the Cannibals,"<sup>11</sup> as would Manuel Bandeira in his "Invitation to the Anthropophagi."<sup>12</sup> Even though the sincerity of these statements is questionable due to the burlesque tone characteristic of the vanguards, it is true that they are indicative of a reconsideration of what was to constitute the essence of Brazil's national identity. Going back to Bürger's argument, then, we find in the nationalistic discourse of *modernismo* a conscious effort to again endow art with a social and political mission, which would ultimately lead the nation (and, by extension, the whole Latin American continent) to an era of freedom, prosperity, and dominance.

### III. The Emergence of Globalization

The term *globalization*, I soon noticed when reading the newspapers, has quickly made its way into the intellectual vocabulary of Brazil. Especially since the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a former college professor of sociology, there is a consensus that Brazil has entered an era of expansion since embracing a capitalist system of production. According to some people, mainly industrialists and entrepreneurs, the future of the nation lies in the hands of one capable man, Cardoso, and his ability to lead the destinies of his compatriots in the right direction, that of competition and free markets. Globalization, then, is perceived by the followers of Cardoso's doctrines as a sort of buzzword, a panacea that will redeem Brazil of its past failures and transform it into an economic power in the next century. Even though the nation has always had tremendous promise but has nevertheless been unable to live up to the expectations, today's

breed of neoliberals is convinced that the situation is finally beginning to turn around. The future is already the present, they claim.

And yet, as was made clear in the majority of presentations by our Brazilian colleagues, the country is facing terrible, almost insurmountable problems. French sociologist Roger Bastide's distinction between an "archaic" and a "modern" Brazil, in his influential *Brazil, terra de contrastes*,<sup>13</sup> seems at present impossible to reconcile. In a country of 170 million inhabitants, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population receives 50 percent of the national income, while the poorest 10 percent a meager 0.8 percent. One out of three households is below the poverty line, and this percentage increases to one out of two in rural communities. Children are abandoned on the streets, too many people lack access to minimum standards of education, crime rates continue to be high, and so on. And, what is perhaps the government's main concern nowadays, the mismanagement of land distribution has given rise to the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers' Movement—MST), a political organization of frustrated rural workers that enjoys wide popularity in the country and is even supported by the most conservative Catholic elite. How can one harmonize this evidence with the equally indisputable fact of Brazil's fast growth during the twentieth century? Figures show us, for example, that between 1945 and 1980 the GNP multiplied by 11 and industrial production by 16. At the same time, however, per capita income decreased from U.S.\$3,000 in 1980 to U.S.\$2,900 in 1990. This contrast reflects Brazil's Dr.-Jekyll-and-Mr.-Hyde-like personality, the schizophrenic relationship between the miracles of industrialization and the evils of wealth concentration in the hands of the privileged class. After all, Bastide might be right when he claims that the complexities of Brazilian reality can be grasped only through the prophetic insights of poetry: "The sociologist who wants to understand Brazil not rarely needs to become a poet."

Moreover, one may ask what it is that we talk about when we talk about globalization. If we look back to the Portuguese conquest, we will learn that Brazil was designed to play a key role in the international community from its very inception, as a model colonial enterprise centered on the commercialization of

sugar. Well before the term *globalization* began to circulate in the 1980s, Brazil had already suffered the consequences of its effects on the developed world. But even if we believe that globalization and imperialism are not synonyms, I find it difficult to come to terms with another contradiction: globalization's focus on abstract structures leaves aside the logic of social relations. As Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro reminds us in his *O Povo Brasileiro*,<sup>14</sup> if we want to understand today's historical process we cannot obliterate the existence in our societies of millions of poor people facing the challenges of the global economy. What the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno once called *intrahistory*, that is to say, the consideration due to the obscure, anonymous segments of the population in all parts of the planet, must be given priority over academic conceptualizations of questionable value. If homogeneity and uniformity, at least in the area of business, have become the goals globalization strives for, we ought to emphasize difference and diversity because they are likely to constitute more functional categories of investigation. I cannot help but agree with José Luiz dos Santos's conclusion that "the unlimited emphasis on globalizing processes" might soon come to an end in view of "its conceptual insufficiency and analytic sterility."<sup>15</sup>

Criticism of globalization's threatening effects should not deter us, however, from designing a social paradigm that would ideally satisfy the needs and realities of the developing nations around the world. Maria Lucia Cairra Gitahy and Francisco Foot Hardman stated in their presentation that our current capitalist system has succeeded in producing huge accumulations of wealth, but has been unable (or unwilling) to distribute it in a way that guarantees minimum levels of welfare and dignity to all citizens. Unless we are firmly committed to providing equal opportunity and access to education, reducing the concentration of power and money, improving the living conditions of the marginalized sectors and providing them with more solid political representation, and protecting the environment from the abuses of technology, any apology of progress remains dubious, if not untenable. To establish societies in which only a small percentage of the people enjoy the advantages of modernization constitutes a regression in the course of history. It is probably Brazil's pompous capital, Brasília, which best exemplifies the

paradoxical nature of the postindustrial era in its desire to achieve grandeur at all costs: the center of the political and financial activity of the nation with a population of half a million, enclosed in an urban landscape filled with burgeoning buildings and freeways, and yet surrounded by a circle of poverty and degradation in which 1.5 million people struggle desperately to make a living. In view of the frivolity and immorality of Brazil's political class in the past, one can only hope that the present and the future will, at least, alleviate the pain and suffering of those who are left behind by the triumph of the global economy.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Visiting Brazil turned out to be an incredibly rewarding adventure. This land of contrasts, where poverty coexists with the luxuries of a sophisticated high class, prompted me to reflect on the consequences of massive, uncontrolled industrialization in developing countries. The lack of social, political, and economic infrastructures poses serious problems when transition to a global system does not take into account the vulnerability of the underprivileged classes. I am all for massive production and consumption, provided that adequate controls are established in order to protect the people and the environment. What I experienced in Brazil allows for both optimism and pessimism: optimism because of a skilled work force that will be able to compete globally, and the rise of a social consciousness that proclaims and defends the right of individuals to achieve a dignified existence. But pessimism as well, because without a recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity, which is bound to take a long time, justice and equal opportunity cannot be guaranteed for everyone.

I would like to conclude my essay with a brief mention of the significance of the faculty development international seminar. Within Macalester's internationalist perspective, the broadening of geographic horizons on the part of administrators and faculty is no longer a privilege but a necessity. All of us benefit from exposure to foreign lands, different customs, schedules, peoples, climates, languages, etc. Our teaching is enriched too, since we are able to include new frames of reference in our explanations

instead of relying constantly upon a domestic viewpoint. In the near future, a scholar who contents himself or herself with the comforts of one country, one culture, and one language might become an irrecoverable, irredeemable anachronism.

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## Notes

1. Francisco Foot Hardman, "Between Ruins and Utopias: Veteran Modernists in Brazil (1870–1920)" in *Travesia* 2, no. 1 (1993): 84–113.
2. *Ibid.*, 85–86.
3. Wilson Martins, *The Modernist Idea: A Critical Survey of Brazilian Writing in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Jack E. Tomlins (1965; reprint, New York: New York University Press, 1970), 52.
4. Cyana Leahy-Dios, "Literature Education in Brazil: Reflections upon a Theme" in *Macalester International* 5 (Fall 1997): 110–33.
5. *Ibid.*, 112.
6. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
7. *Klaxon* (São Paulo, May 1922-January 1923); *Estética* (Rio de Janeiro, September 1924-June 1925); *A Revista* (Belo Horizonte, July 1925-January 1926); and *Revista de Antropofagia* (São Paulo, May 1928-August 1929).
8. Graça Aranha, "Mocidade e Estética" (Youth and Aesthetics) in *Estética* (September 1924): 7 (my translation).
9. *Revista de Antropofagia*: 12 (my translation) (full citation unknown).
10. Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropofago" in *Revista de Antropofagia* (May 1928): 1 and 7.
11. Antônio de Alcantara Machado, "Incitement to the Cannibals" in *Revista de Antropofagia* (June 1928): 1.
12. Manuel Bandeira, "Invitation to the Anthropophagi" in *Revista de Antropofagia* (July 1928): 3.
13. Roger Bastide, *Brazil, terra de contrastes* (Brazil, land of contrasts), 2d ed., trans. Maria Isaura Pereira Queiroz (São Paulo: Europa do Livro, 1964).
14. Darcy Ribeiro, *O Povo Brasileiro* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995).
15. José Luiz dos Santos, "Brazil and Globalization: Rome of the Tropics or Nowhere?" in *Macalester International* 5 (Fall 1997): 72.