What Cannibals Eat For Dessert: Aftermaths of Modernism in Latin American Urban Planning

Horrid cities!
Vanities and more vanities…
No wings whatsoever! No poetry whatsoever! No joy whatsoever!
Oh! the agitatings of absences!

Mario de Andrade, in *Hallucinated City* [Pauliceia Desvairada]

Modernity has taken contrasting connotations and left distinct marks on the cities of Latin America throughout the centuries. As of the 1920's, the modernist movement introduced in the region perhaps the most evident form of the modern city: the self-conscious city which anticipates its future rather than looking at the present. The interplay between artists, architects, and governments formed a set of urban ideals based upon principles laid over by modernist manifestos, such as Oswald de Andrade's *Cannibalist*[1] *Manifesto* in Brazil and the *Manifesto Issued by the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors* in Mexico City. But these ideals were concretized—quite literally—in a more authoritarian and pragmatic way, often against the original movement. The essays by Beatriz Jaguaribe, James Scott, and Rubén Gallo all analyze how, to different levels, these modernist urban endeavors have failed—or, at least, failed to signify the freedom and the creative power of Latin America.

In Brazil, Oswald de Andrade's *Cannibalist Manifesto* (1928) is one of the richest compilations of the modernist ideals. This is the second time Oswald publishes a clever, exotic, and revolutionary manifesto, as the *Brazilwood Poetry Manifesto* (1922) was also of his authorship. But, while this earlier Manifesto argued for an "export-quality poetry" whose source

[1] Oswald, in fact, uses the term *Antropofágico* ("Anthropophagic"). Whereas one might argue, as the translator Leslie Barry, that this word is a synonym for "Cannibalist," I believe Anthropophagic has a deeper Anthropological meaning, as it evokes the rituals undertaken by indigenous people more clearly—especially to a Brazilian Reader. In my essay, however, I use the term "Cannibalist" in order to be coherent with Barry's translation.

was original Brazilian content such as history, popular culture, and everyday life (Barry, 35), the later one "offered a satirical model of cultural appropriation: no longer imitators or subservient colonial subjects, Brazilians were now cultural cannibals who devoured the more savory bits of European culture and cooked them together with African and Indian ingredients into an overwhelming cultural concoction" (Jaguaribe, 302). Oswald's Modernism was a ratification and a radicalization of the Brazilian national identity in an autonomous and original way: cannibals who do not obey European philosophy, religion, or even logic. In essence, this is an attack to the european-like art produced in Brazil during the nineteenth century, the "progressivist positivist 'modernism' endorsed by the scientific elite of the Belle Époque" (Jaguaribe, 303). The Gracchi's mother, the virtuous woman in Classical Antiquity who raises their children as citizens and to whom many of Brazilian Arcadian poets refer, Father Vieira, the Portuguese priest whose speeches shaped the Brazilian baroque canon, and José de Alencar's knight-like indian Peri, from the Brazilian Romanticism world-wide famous work (and further on opera) *The Guarani*, are just a few symbols of the lettered city that Oswald was trying to shake.

That is not to say, however, that the Brazilian Modernism was a popular movement. The vernacular did democratize the language when compared to the cultism of the Baroque, but the mix and match of tupi-guarani and Freudian references was alien to the poorly-educated reader. The bit of Europeanism that Oswald chose to devour was a barrier he installed in this newly-built city of letters. In the words of Angel Rama, the modernist letrados were a "socially more heterogeneous group that *retained a vision of itself as a cultural aristocracy* but incorporated powerful democratizing cross-currents" (112). The intellectuals who composed the lettered city were still a compact group (Rama, 113). As a counterpart, the *Manifesto Issued by the Syndicate*

of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors in Mexico City, 1922, is a more bottom-up introduction of Modernism in Latin America. Careless about the form and with little pompous references, this collective-authorship document argues against the "so-called easel art and all such art which springs from ultra-intellectual circles, for it is essentially aristocratic." The main idea remains from Oswald: art should be an original expression of national identity.

In the early twentieth century, there was nothing as identitary as the city. Scholars such as Nicolau Sevcenko agree that Modernism in Latin America was an urban phenomenon. It was only possible because of the pre-existing city, but it also tried to revolutionize it. Oswald writes: "and we never knew what urban, suburban, frontier and continental were" (39). The "urban scleroses" (42) of the period were caused by the Haussmanized, European design of Rio de Janeiro. Several modernists attempted to describe their "ideal city" by parodizing and subverting the importance older letrados have given to nature. Perhaps Mario de Andrade's *Hallucinated City* is the greatest example of this trope: the book is a collection of poems addressed to or about the city of São Paulo, setting the poet's homeland apart from "horrid cities" with no poetry nor joy. But, even within its Indianist facet, Modernism was urban—as Mario's *Macunaíma* leaves the Amazon Forest to fight the giant Venceslau on the streets of São Paulo. As modernists use and transform the European-like Latin American city, their principles turn into guidelines of urban planning.

In this urban ideal designed by the *Cannibalist Manifesto*, there was no space to "the predominant architectural forms of the 1920's that either reproduced eclectic buildings or recultivated colonial roots with a neocolonial architecture" (Jaguaribe, 302). Dealing with Modernist Architecture, Beatriz Jaguaribe's essay *Modernist Ruins: National Narratives and*

Architectural Forms narrates how Modernist buildings came to life in Rio and analyzes how they did not serve up to their promised ideals—becoming, essentially, modernist ruins. Jaguaribe looks initially at the rise of Getulio Vargas to power, in 1930, and how he promoted the construction of several "public buildings that were to reflect the edification of the nation according to an assortment of notions concerning the nature of the modern and its linkage to a national ethos" (296). This ethos variously embraced concepts such as "modernization, egalitarianism, developmentalism, and civic-mindedness" (303). Jaguaribe lacks in her essay a formal definition of modernist architecture, but these are likely its appropriate guidelines.

Buildings such as the Federal University (UFRJ) and the Ministry of Health and Education (MES) were the materialization of Oswald's *Cannibalist Manifesto*: they insert elements of Brazilian history into an imported functionalist architecture in order to reinforce a "national epic narrative" (305) which is, in fact, brand new. The modernist building "sought to encompass a multicultural heritage not by folklorist appropriation but by means of the evocation of *atemporal universal forms* that expressed its historical process" (305). As Jaguaribe points out, these buildings "would appear to have been inaugurated daily" (308), but "they cannot age gracefully because the very notion of aging is incompatible with their functionality" (309). In her reading, the decay of the MES building symbolizes the death of the modernist utopia, a "dream of reason in what was perceived to be the city of chaos" (312). Jaguaribe's view of architectural modernism deems it a self-contradictory movement as "in their [of the modernist buildings] rebellion against the action of time, they manifest a denial of death and a negation of history" (301). The MES, however, was not the climax of modernist architecture. By investigating its further manifestations, we can construct a different story for the formation of modernist ruins.

James Scott in his book *Seeing Like a State* associates one of these manifestations—the High-Modernist architecture—to the controlling modern state, which simplifies the population in order to improve their legibility. Scott borrows the term high-modernism from David Harvey (author of *The Right to the City*), who describes it as "the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders under standardized conditions of knowledge and production" (Scott, 377). In city and regional planning, Scott deems French architect Le Corbusier responsible for the formalization of high-modernism, pointing out his affection for geometric forms, standardization, orderly functionalism, and, eventually, utopic plans. The "textbook example" he uses is Brasília, the capital of Brazil constructed on the 1950's. Brasília is "about the closest thing we have to a high-modernist city, having been built" (118): shaped like an airplane to signify Brazil's "taking off" towards a new future and geometrically planned with *superquadras* of standardized apartment buildings, the city is a perfect fit for international living standards yet despised by its citizens.

Are these high modernist principles Scott identifies in the capital a consequence or a negation of Oswald's *Cannibalist Manifesto*? Brasília was still a dream of reason, in a way that approximates it to the architectural trend Beatriz Jaguaribe is describing. At the same time, the modernist literary movement had on its agenda the "simplification" of language: the preference for the vernacular Brazilian Portuguese, more than a pronominal placement matter, reflects the letrados' efforts towards increasing the legibility of the lettered city they were trying to build. However, Brasília is a city that does *not tupi*. Whereas the ruins of MES and UFRJ once brought the modernity to Rio de Janeiro, a central spot in Brazilian urban history, the new capital bears no connection to the physical space it is located nor does it make any "reference to the habits,

traditions, and practices of Brazil's past or of its great cities" (Scott, 119). The idea of modernity, in Brasília, "necessarily implied a disdain for what Brazil had been" (Scott, 119). In terms of urban life, Scott points out that "Brasília was designed to eliminate the street and the square as places for public life" (120). But "streets form the stage on which political activism, love, and even avant-garde literature perform the daily rituals of modernity" (Gallo, 67). Brasília becomes an ironic modernist ruin, as the utopia of a new Brazil it promised denies that "what we really made was Carnaval" (Andrade, 40).

If Brasília and the modernist ruins represent the death of an utopia, the other side of the coin is narrated in the essay *Tlatelolco: Mexico City's Urban Dystopia*, by Rubén Gallo. In Mexico City, the massive housing complex of Tlatelolco is idealized and constructed by the architect Mario Pani under the commission of the government. It is a modernist enterprise on all senses. Pani bases his design on Le Corbusier's Radiant City, and we can even sense that his justification of expelling "all those living in poor neighborhoods" (Gallo, 55) and the ambition of the project are grounded on the "monumental expression of art" proclaimed by the 1922 Mexican modernist manifesto. Gallo's essay analyzes the relationship between this modernist conception of Tlatelolco and the 1968 massacre of student protesters that took place in the complex. As he claims, the complex "was designed to control the living environment, leisure activities, and even the movements of its inhabitants" (59), and this "architecture of control" allowed the Mexican army to trap the students easily. In light of Gallo's tale, we should also ask ourselves whether Jaguaribe and Scott account for the full story. Scott does propose that, in Brasília, "the effect of the plan was to design out all those unauthorized locations where casual encounters could occur and crowds could gather spontaneously" (121-125). Especially if we think of Brasília as the

promise of modern Brazilian politics, the 1964 military coup is a signal that the capital is not simply a failed utopia, but also the center of a 20-year-long dystopia.

In a certain way, Gallo and Scott create different villains for the same evil deed. The former focuses his text on Pani, and how this Mexican-born architect potentially colluded with the corrupt government and designed a totalitarian apartment complex *inspired* by Le Corbusier. The latter chooses to describe the "caricature of high-modernism" (104) that is the French architect, elucidating the influence of his ideas over Niemeyer and Costa's project with little mention to the two Brazilian planners. As we read them together, we can ask ourselves how much of the transformation of modernist ideals into urban dystopias is endogenous to Latin America, and how much is a product of European ideology. Complicating this matter, Jaguaribe points out that "only in relatively young peripheral countries would it be possible to create a new historical horizon based on a new architectural mythology" (304), supporting Scott's claim that "the long-established cities of the West, their traditions, their interest groups, their slow-moving institutions and their complex legal and regulatory structures could only shackle the dreams of a high-modernist Gulliver" (117). The notion of Latin America as a periphery in the twentieth century is central to the arguments of Jaguaribe and Scott, but seems to be challenged by Gallo.

Jaguaribe, Scott, and Gallo all describe the process through which the failed utopias of Latin American Modernism become *lieux de mémoire*, places in which a country's cultural memory has been inscribed (Gallo, 63). Jaguaribe sees the modernist ruins in Rio, nowadays, as "monuments that resymbolize our historical trajectories by fabricating a myriad of dialogues with the recent past" (312). But, more than being written onto urban history, they are devoured once more, as some parts of it remain savory. Tlatelolco's transformation into a vertical garden

illustrates the possibility of "turning dystopian nightmares back into utopian dreams" (Gallo, 67). Modernism in Latin America was responsible for the design of a city with wings—but it also contributed to the rise of cities with poetry and joy. From the readings, the question of whether Brasília, the MES, and Tlatelolco would ultimately be praised or criticized by Oswald de Andrade and his peers remains open. Pani claimed his purpose was to promote a city "in which residents would live in orderly happiness" (Gallo, 67). He might have ignored, however, that even "before the Portuguese discovered Brazil, Brazil had discovered happiness" (Andrade, 42).

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