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ByRodrigo Nunes

Two recent London shows offered divergent narratives of 20th century artistic modernism. Here, Rodrigo Nunes contrasts the Barbican's Tropicália – A revolution in Brazilian Culture season with the V&A's Modernism: Designing a new world 1914-1939. Arguing against the latter's reductive caricature of modernism as simply an authoritarian and ultimately dystopian attempt to impose utopia on an unready world, he situates modernism as immanent to the wider imperatives of capitalist society in transition. The questioning, non-teleological exploration of potentials and limits which characterised the Brazilian modernist 'moment' of the '60s suggests that another modernism was and remains possible

The exhibition Modernism: Designing a new world 1914-1939 at the Victoria and Albert Museum has sparked a critical reaction in the press which hinges on the permanence, or otherwise, of artistic Modernism. As a consequence of the curatorial decision to focus on the period between the two world wars, the debate has been underpinned by a narrative that sees Modernism rise out of the ashes of an old world destroyed by the First World War, promise a new one through the marriage of art and industrialisation, and finally reveal this new world to be a dystopia leading only to more destruction and suffering.

[IMAGE]

'Design for the Villa Stein De Monzie', Vaucresson Le Corbusier (1887 - 1965)

This narrative excludes various threads from a definition of Modernism (Dada, Surrealism, Secession), reducing the Modernist event to a utopian program of the transformation of social life through technological development, functional design and planning. This operation of reduction reinforces a political equation of Modernism and totalitarianism that serves the double purpose of presenting Modernism as: i) a project imposed by authoritarian means on a moment of radical transformation that is inseparable from capitalist development, rather than as itself playing a part in constituting that moment of transformation; ii) posing questions which are impossible or impertinent in our present, 'liberal-democratic' world.

An escape from this equation, and a different understanding of modernism, can be found in the thread linking 1920s Brazilian Modernism to late-1960s Tropicália. This increasingly celebrated Brazilian cultural movement is currently the object of a festival at the Barbican. In the subterranean history and practice of the Tropicalistas, Modernism can be re-proposed as a historically and socially immanent sensibility attuned to the limits and potentials of the present; a response to questions thrown up by processes of social transformation ('modernisation') and an attempt to intervene in them. Unlike the 'Modernism' caricatured at the V&A, Tropicália maintained a problematic relation to the form of the cultural avant garde/political vanguard, which may or may not take the form of a transcendent, teleological project. In this sense, the permanence of artistic Modernism becomes a question of the pertinence of the problems posed and the form, if not the content, of their answers.

Pau Brasil

Of the two manifestos that announced the transformation of the world, in Paris I came to know the least important, that of Futurist Marinetti. Carlos Marx had escaped me entirely.[1]

Modernism is neither an accident nor an invention. The beginnings of Brazilian Modernism are dependent on the process of modernisation brought about by the booming coffee export market and the incipient industrialisation of Sao Paulo. It has its official starting date in the Modern Art Week of February, 1922. Taking place in the traditional Municipal Theatre of Sao Paulo, it was almost exclusively reliant upon the rural aristocracy and urban bourgeoisie of that city to provide its supply of artists, funders and (often bemused) audience. Its two precursors were respectively an exhibition by Anita Malfatti, who returned from her trips to Europe and the US a 'Modernist', and the publication of *Pauliceia Desvairada* by Mario de Andrade. The polemics that followed both had at their centre a young journalist, poet, novelist and aristocrat called Oswald de Andrade.

As writers, ideologues and agitators the Andrades (no relation) would come to be considered the main figures in Brazilian Modernism. In the heroic years immediately before and after the Modern Art Week, however, Oswald was arguably the most important. He had the connections – in the press, among patrons and with the European (particularly French) avant garde. Having traveled to Europe constantly for a decade, he was also well informed about the latest developments on the Old Continent.

These years of Brazilian Modernism transposed the ambivalences of European Modernism to the Brazilian context – with the added ambivalence of this transposition. On one hand, as with the Italian Futurists (coming from a rather peripheral country themselves), it seemed to be the external aspects of modern life which fascinated people like the two Andrades: planes, automobiles, speed, high rises. On the other hand, allegiance to the European avant gardes' attack on cultural tradition was seen as a way to break the complete cultural dependency of the Brazilian upper classes on an ossified notion of what a 'civilisation' should be like, a notion inherited mostly from France. This resulted in a permanent tension between a dialogue with the international scene and the questioning of what a Brazilian cultural 'identity' could be. At the same time this was a tension between embracing modernisation and appealing to an idea of the 'primitive' – untouched, pre-colonial, non-European – that would correspond to 'Brazilianness'.

The meaning of modernity was famously questioned by Kant in the essay 'What is Enlightenment?'. Kant's answer is tied to a teleology of human reason, speaking of humanity's passage to maturity: autonomy from all externally imposed doxa or authority, replaced by the free use of reason which both required and imposed a process of social transformation and *Bildung*. The contradictory position of the political vanguard/ artistic avant garde is implicit here: they mirror each other as, in the name of human liberation, they intervene 'from outside' to start the process that will produce the necessary changes; they set out to produce autonomy, but their intervention produces and reproduces heteronomy. They do so through the selection of the elements to be conserved and the ones to be discarded, the 'modern' and the 'archaic' (which in art also implies a certain relation between 'high' and 'low' culture, as in politics between 'existent behaviours' and 'political project'). Their goal is the overcoming of heteronomy – for the avant garde, the overcoming of art as a sphere separate from life; for the vanguard, overcoming political heteronomy in a new way of living. However, this project must be carried out through means that contradict the goals – for the avant garde, overcoming art by artistic means; for the vanguard, resorting to authoritarianism. In other words, it presupposes a certain relation between activity (the programme, the intervention that creates the future, autonomy) and passivity (the given, the material to be transformed, heteronomy), where one pole slips back into the other ceaselessly: the avant garde is blind to its own passivity (situation, prejudice, privilege) and to the heteronomous effects of its own intervention.[2] In a country like Brazil, these tensions are compounded by the relation to the colonial experience, with the layers of meaning it adds to any idea of the 'modern'.

In the case of the Sao Paulo group of Modernists, in the transition to the 1930s these tensions would lead to a fracturing which saw Getulio Vargas' conservative revolution put an end to the 'Old Republic' and create the conditions for large-scale industrialisation and (if far from total) social and institutional modernisation. In 1928, Oswald de Andrade penned the Anthropophagist Manifesto, where the primitive – which, true to the Brazilian cultural tradition, is identified with the indigenous – is portrayed as a vital capacity to absorb and transform anything external to it, reshaping it to its own ends, without allowing itself to become imprisoned by anything that might restrain its vitality:

'Against the histories of man which begin in Cape Finisterre. The undated world. Untitled. Without Napoleon. Without Caesar. (...) The migrations. The flight from tedious states. Against urban sclerosis. Against the Conservatories, and speculative tediousness. (...) The transfiguration of Taboo into totem. Anthropophagy. (...) Against the social reality registered by Freud, dressed and oppressive – reality without complexes, without madness, without prostitutions and without penitentiaries of the matriarchy of Pindorama.'[3]

While a group of artists gathered around him, another one coalesced around the 1929 Verde-Amarelo Manifesto, named after the colours of the Brazilian flag. The primitive here is identified with the Tupi Indians (while Oswald oscillated between Tupis and Caraiabas) as the indigenous nation which had 'objectively' ceased to exist (i.e., been exterminated) but 'subjectively' remained as the centripetal force in the Brazilian nation. Whereas the anthropophage was active, a Nietzschean aristocrat, the Tupi's strength lay in being malleable, capable of entering into different mixtures.[4] Instead of the openness that Andrade saw as the supreme quality, there is here an attempt to define an objectively given 'national identity', which is sentimental, flexible, consensual. Whereas the power of Andrade's Indian was parody and ironic carnivalisation, this Indian is the subjective glue that brings Europeans, Africans and Indians together in a heroic race:

'Tupi nationalism is not intellectual, it is sentimental. (...) It does not fight religions, or philosophies, because all its strength is in its sentimental capacity. (...) We accept all conservative institutions, as it is inside them that we will produce the inevitable renovation of Brazil, as the soul of our people has done throughout four centuries in all its historical expressions.'[5]

Plinio Salgado, one of the members of the Verde Amarelo group, would become the leader of Integralism, the local version of Fascism, and go to jail in 1939 for trying to topple President Vargas (who ironically had a lot of sympathy for Mussolini, from whom he borrowed the Labour Charter). Made poor by the 1929 crisis, Oswald de Andrade eventually read Marx and became a member of the Soviet-aligned Brazilian Communist Party in 1931. Throughout the strongly Statist Vargas years, Mario de Andrade stayed away from both camps and exercised various different public functions, working in the forging of a national identity and the transformation of the roles of the Ministries of Education and Culture – which included commissioning their new headquarters in Rio de Janeiro from a team of architects led by a certain Le Corbusier.[6]

Modernism, the narrative

We are concretists. Ideas take over, react, burn people in public squares. Let us abolish ideas and other paralyses. For charts. To trust the signs, to trust the instruments and the stars.[7]

Could this be the universal narrative of Modernism in its tropical version? The years of social and cultural upheaval of the 1920s come to channel their emancipatory and emancipated forces into the totalitarian twins of Fascism and Stalinism in the 1930s – with perhaps a pragmatic third way signaled in Mario de Andrade's choice to work with the status quo to promote possible changes.

Returning to the Modernism show at the V&A, it is clear that the distribution of rooms and material reinforces the received wisdom. The first sections gesture to the alternative currents which the exhibition subsumes under the larger unity called 'Modernism'. All these strands bear the word as their name, preceded by different adjectives: 'Spiritual', 'Dionysian', 'Social', 'Rational'... Modernism. It is after one walks past Gropius' motto and injunction – 'Art and Technology: the new Unity' – that the synthesis is operated, and the exhibition moves into the terrain it has defined for itself. The unification called for by the director of the Bauhaus happens under the sign of Fordism, which appears to offer the material conditions for the ideals of endless reproducibility (and thus democratisation of access) through standardised, 'unselfconscious' design: the dream of a just, rationally organised society is tied to the promise of the machine to guarantee its material bases – on the condition that society, in return, organise itself according to the machine. When Gropius travels to the United States in 1928, he has a meeting with the Taylor Society and visits a Ford factory; in a 1931 visit to the USSR, watching children perform in one of the many 'mechanical ballets' of the time, photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White is taken aback by Soviet 'machine worship'. [8]

Perhaps one of the keys to the critical reception of the V&A show lies in its treatment of architecture and planning. The 1927 Wohnung exhibition in Frankfurt is a who's-who of the cutting edge practitioners of the period – and no British architect is present. Almost directly opposite the (ironically named) Bauermeister's poster for that show – a red cross painted over an example of the ornate architectural style the Modernists wanted to abolish – a video projection of Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton's film 'Housing Problems' addresses the dire condition of the Victorian 'back to back' terraces in the UK. It is dated 1935. It was only in the reconstruction of the post-war period that British Modernism (in architecture) began in earnest.

[IMAGE]

Still from Anstey and Elton's 'Housing Problems' (1935)

Some of the reviews and public reactions to the V&A exhibition indicate to what extent the debate on Modernism in the UK remains overdetermined by perceptions of Britain's council estates. [9] Omnipotent Modernist architects and planners are the culprits for one of the most odious visual aspects of British urban life, and to blame for most of the social ills that plague the constructions they left behind. 'Their' paradise has turned out to be 'our' hell.

Here the problem with the show's narrative becomes apparent. By turning Modernism into a project in the minds of some young artists and designers who had the chance and the skill to mould the world according to their vision – by portraying it as an idea rather than a material process, as a 'movement' rather than a 'moment' – we miss the complex interrelation between whatever there was of utopianism in the Modernists' work and the larger context, requirements and imperatives of their time.

Suddenly any urban design with wide, straight roads, huge commercial and living areas separated by multi-purpose transport hubs – all of which look more or less the same as they try to fulfill most efficiently their function of housing the most people for the least cost, facilitating the movement of the largest amount of people and goods etc. – appears as the decision of some totalitarian planner, rather than the inscription in design of the imperatives of the fast-changing world around them. Modernists did not create the modern world, they provided it with an appropriate form; the material premises for this process were given outside the heads of artists and planners – in technological development, the massification of wage labour, the massification of production brought about by mechanisation, the need for expansion of conditions of reproduction to as wide as possible a segment of the workforce, the need and ability to expand and compress time and space. Faced with a Europe which had been razed to the ground after the First World War, they simply had the best opportunity to rebuild it according to the new terms and conditions that applied.

Again, it is no coincidence, then, that Modernism (or what the show calls by the name) only starts in the UK in the post-war period, when the need to rebuild and to provide affordable housing for workers was so great. One reviewer who accuses the show of being ‘the most terrifying exhibition I have seen, because it is politics disguised as art’ effectively rewrites history by reducing the whole phenomenon to this:

‘British modernists, many of them refugees from the continent, gained a foothold only when they won the ear of government after the Second World War, claiming that they could build a socialist utopia cheaper and faster than the free market.’[10]

It sounds as if it was the utopianism and professional self-interest of an émigré coterie that created Keynesianism and the welfare State, and not the need to find a solution that could accommodate – physically and politically – a growing working class by tying it to capitalist productivity, while materially organising society in ways that facilitated production and circulation: the Fordist machine and the social machine shaping each other. If one accepts that British Modernism equals council housing and the welfare State, then one should also mention that its end is spelt by the large-scale capitalist reconfiguration that begins with Thatcher.

Sure enough, some of that design was just a bad idea, for reasons intrinsic and extrinsic. Nevertheless, it is rather disingenuous to blame Modernism alone for all the social problems that council estates suffer from today without any reference to how the world developed around them. No-one talks about finding needles and crackpipes in the Barbican complex; this does not, however, prove the superiority of its design over the Aylesbury estate in Peckham.

The exhibition comes to an end with a suspense that can be resolved in the visitor’s mind: the rationalist utopia that wanted to create a new world and a new form of life came to an end with the large-scale totalitarian madness of the 1930s and 1940s; all we have inherited from it was slick design, cool lamp shades and furniture that are highly appreciated by connoisseurs. In accepting this traditional narrative where Nazi-Fascism and Stalinism (or council estates) cancel each other out, the exhibition naturalises their excluded third term and result – capitalism in its current, globalised form. And thus the story comes to resemble very much the political debate of the 1980s-90s: we gave ‘it’ – Modernism, Socialism, the welfare State... – a chance, it did not work; let the market decide what to conserve and what to discard from it. Killing Modernism is a way of killing the debate and letting the world follow its ‘natural’ course.

Is it possible to find alternative narratives to this one? Can different meanings be given to the experience of those years, and more complex histories of the period be written?[11] Can the Modernism–totalitarianism equation, and its pacific benediction for victorious capitalism, be escaped?

Tropicália, or Panis et Circencis

Only anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. (...) I am only concerned in that which is not mine. Man’s law. The law of the anthropophagous.[12]

Why has Tropicália become fashionable? Three answers spring to mind: the international revival of the music associated with it, which started in the 1990s with David Byrne’s Luaka Bop label; the interest in one of its greatest stars, Gilberto Gil, incumbent Brazilian Minister of Culture and one of the world’s most public champions of free and open source software; and, more cynically perhaps, a contemporary anthropophagic need for cultural producers to find inspiration and hip credentials in some exotic tropical countercultural movement of the 1960s. Should the latter apply at all, it misses the point about Tropicália on two important accounts.

First of all, as Flora Sussekind accurately points out in the excellent catalogue of the exhibition which is presently at the Barbican, Tropicália was not a ‘movement’, but a ‘moment’.[13] The exhibition, lacking a narrative, captures this well.[14] Alongside some works to which the label can be applied without hesitation, there is a juxtaposition of contemporary or slightly precursive works which help understand the threads that led into and out of Tropicália, both horizontally and vertically.

In terms of the internal debates and trends within Brazilian cultural production of the 1950s and 1960s, the show gives us Concrete and Neoconcrete poetry; in the visual arts, Constructivism and Neoconstructivism, as well as the group around the Rex Gallery in Sao Paulo; and the architecture of Lina Bo Bardi – the only conspicuous absences being the Cinema Novo (New Cinema) of Glauber Rocha and others, and the Musica Nova group, who advocated the introduction of serialism, concrete music, etc. in a scenario dominated by the ‘nationalist’ style.[15] This ‘internal causality’ produced a web of references and mutual citations that would be carried into Tropicália.[16] It was Helio Oiticica who made the first programmatic attempt to identify overall emerging patterns or common problematics, in a text in the catalogue of the New Brazilian Objectivity exhibition he co-organised in 1967, where his work Tropicália was first presented. His summary was: ‘general constructive will’; overcoming of the support in favour of the object and the public as participant; active engagement with socio-political questions; ‘the tendency towards collective action and the subsequent abolition of isms’; new formulations of anti-art.[17]

In terms of socio-political context, what the exhibition fails to present is fully covered by the catalogue. The 1960s began with the cosmopolitan urban middle-class dream of bossa nova, a promise of modernisation and national development whose backroom was the steady intensification of social tensions: the rise of an industrial proletariat, the opposition between urban and rural elites, no political and institutional renewal, the creation of a mass market alongside old and new social disparities. The political glue that held the mosaic of modernisation and archaism together was the populist ideology created by Vargas in the 1930s and ‘50s, cementing a centrist, patriotic alliance between ‘modern’ bourgeoisie and the Communist Party. During the presidency of Joao Goulart, however, this alliance started crumbling under the pressure that came from the workers’ needs for basic reforms (such as on land ownership), the fear ‘conservative modernists’ had of a revolution seemingly in the making, and a growing right-wing reaction to what was seen as social and cultural anomie. Goulart zigzagged from camp to camp, until the military coup in 1964 presented a new solution to the equation: severe repression of workers and peasants, and a technocratic regime of extensive modernisation that managed to reconcile international (essentially US) interests, national development and the capillary support (and preservation) of very archaic arrangements of power.

Between 1964 and 1968, however, there was an unexpected result of over a decade of political fermentation: the expansion of access to information and education, the growth of a cultural mass market (TV, radio, cinema) and various parallel processes of audience development – the most famous of which being the Popular Centres of Culture (CPCs) set up by the National Students Union. The void left by the elimination of official (political) populism by the regime and the exposure of its flaws by the coup was filled by a cultural debate whose tenor caused Roberto Schwarz to note that ‘[d]espite the existence of a right-wing dictatorship, the cultural hegemony of the left is virtually complete’.[18] After a wave of demonstrations of growing intensity, it all came to an end in December 1968 with the Institutional Act 5, which sealed the start of the fully-fledged repressive regime that was to last until the 1980s.

This is why the relation of Tropicália to other cultural expressions around it appears as an internal debate of the left. The kind of art that had been produced in the CPCs sought a direct relation to the poor public, neglecting formal exploration in favour of didactic clarity, and (theoretically) bypassing mass media and art institutions. It dealt directly with social reality and the mechanisms of exploitation

in ways that did not shy away from Manichaenism.[19] Since for left-wing populism anti-imperialism had always been more important than anti-capitalism, these manifestations had also been bred within a certain notion of 'authentic' Brazilian culture, derived from folkloric and popular sources. 'Authentic' were the tambourine and the acoustic guitar; a famous episode of the period was a march of 'Brazilian music' against electric guitars'. [20] It is in the problematisation of a Brazilian specificity, or the specificity of the avant garde within the conjunctural specificity of Brazilian culture, that Tropicália meets Oswald de Andrade's anthropophagy; at that moment, this was a very political question.

This is the second point not to be missed about Tropicália: one should not be fooled by the bananas and palm trees; all exoticism here is deliberate. The encounter with Modernist Anthropophagy meant the absorption of international trends – happenings, the Living Theater, Pop Art, pop music, black power, long hair – in order to produce new syntheses that questioned notions of national 'identity' and the moment the country was going through. In order to do this, the 'national' elements to be chosen would not be the ones romanticised by the left in the quest for authenticity, but precisely those discarded by it (or by the technocratic elites) as the symbols of bad taste and backwardness. In a sense, even after the shattering of populism produced by the coup, a certain complicity between left and right had remained that admitted some external influences (the jazz harmonies introduced by bossa nova) while rejecting 'typically' Brazilian elements (the music consumed in the suburbs) in the name of 'good taste'.

Instead of looking for a dialectical way of resolving contradictions, Tropicália embraced disjunctive synthesis. International and provincial, traditional and contemporary, sophisticated and tacky, handmade and mass-produced – all elements belonged together in their dissonance, because such was the universe they belonged to. This is why juxtaposition, cliché, scandal, allegory, parody, anti-formalism, quotation and carnivalisation compose the Tropicalist language par excellence. (It may also help explain Gil's interest in the intellectual property debate today.)

The break between Tropicália and the artistic solutions favoured by the left until then mirrors another break taking place at the same time. The kind of culture produced by the heirs of the CPCs had been severed from what should have been its habitat – instead of playing in front of factories it was now playing for middle class students. Faced with the impossibility of taking their political intervention any further, some of these students were going underground and starting the armed struggle. In turn, the Tropicalists searched for a way out of the artistic and political impasse of those years in a way that was summarised by theatre director Jose Celso Martinez Correa: 'It's not about proselytising anymore, it's about provocation'. [21] From political vanguardism to cultural avant garde.

It is symptomatic that this should come under the sign of a return to Oswald de Andrade, as it is a more general return to the question of the Modernist avant garde. Tropicália's solution to (or way of posing) the problems of Modernism is worth examining for three reasons: 1) its particular configuration of the problematic form of the avant garde; 2) the posing of the problem of 'old' and 'new' simultaneously in terms of Brazilian reality and its insertion in a global context; 3) its relation to mass media and anti-art, i.e., to art's conditions of production and circulation as well as to the outreach possibilities of the avant garde's project of social Bildung.

1) 'Geleia geral' (general jelly) was the title of a Gil song taken from a sentence by the Concrete poet Decio Pignatari: 'in the general jelly of Brazil, someone has to play the role of spine and bones'. The metaphor is a clear expression of avant garde pretensions where the latter is, however, situated not on the outside, formulating a general project, but inside, providing consistency or acting as a catalyst. In 1967 Helio Oiticica saw 'the phenomenon of the avant garde in Brazil' as 'no longer the concern of a group coming from an isolated elite, but a far-reaching cultural issue, of great amplitude, tending towards collective solutions.' [22] The messianic hope of collective transformative action that was

blocked in the political field was transferred to the cultural sphere: the goal of art would be to present a diagnostic whose contradictory weight and formal openness would provoke (re)action and 'non-conditioned behaviour'. The question of 'modern' and 'archaic' (a play on which is central to the whole Tropicalist enterprise) is left open, or further confused, as if the avant garde refused to explicitly play its role of selecting and rejecting. This was identified by some commentators of more orthodox left allegiances as a sign of political defeat, a cultural expression of widespread pessimism and exasperation.[24] What this shows is that Tropicália's politics were not 'revolutionary' or 'reformist' in any traditional sense; they were 'transformative' in their openness and flexibility in dealing with the given, which was not without its own contradictions: Os Mutantes recorded a song for a Shell ad.

2) Any debate on 'modernisation' in a post-colonial country is bound also to be a debate about its place in the world. In this sense, the clash between Tropicália and the left follows the lines of the pre-1967 political climate: the Tropicalists were accused of alienation and pro-imperialism, while defending themselves with Andrade's open, cosmopolitan yet critical Modernism of the 1920s. The terms in which Concretist Augusto de Campos couched the argument are symptomatic: why should Brazil remain the producer of unprocessed, folklorised 'raw materials', and never the exporter of finished products?[25] Caetano Veloso declared he and Gil were merely retrieving the 'evolutionary line' of Brazilian music which had stopped at the samba-jazz cross-pollination of bossa nova.[26] For Oiticica, the time had come for Brazil to present a very specific set of formulations to the global avant garde, yet this specificity came not from a certain 'national identity', but from the relation to a set of local problems. This is one of the most contemporary aspects of the politics of Tropicália: a globalised stance embedded in local problematics and solutions, instead of a uniform 'international style' like Le Corbusier's.[27]

[IMAGE]

Hélio Oiticica, Parangolé 'I am Possessed', 1964

3) The triple tendency towards socio-political engagement, participation instead of representation/contemplation and (therefore) anti-art are threads going through the 1950s and '60s to Tropicália. In the visual arts, the object that replaced the canvas tended to become a 'non-object', a 'project' which required active bodily intervention (as in Lygia Clark's Sensorial objects) and social interaction (as in Oiticica's Parangoles); the 'work' ceased to exist, and the artist was reduced to the 'creative catalyst' of collective situations of 'creative participation' that would produce new meanings and behaviours. The incorporation of popular manifestations, like carnival and favela architecture (Oiticica lived for a while in the traditional samba stronghold of the Morro da Mangueira favela), filtered the introduction of the happening into Teatro Oficina's theatre and the performances of Gil, Veloso and Os Mutantes, as well as the Apocalipoptosis event in which most members of the Tropicalist 'group' took part. The whole thrust is summarised by Oiticica as renouncing the idea that the goal of the avant garde is to produce transformations in the aesthetic field as if this were a 'second nature',

but to seek to erect, through participation, the foundations of a cultural totality, engendering deep transformations in man's consciousness which, from being a passive spectator, would begin to act upon them using the instruments at hand: revolt, protest, constructive work, to achieve this transformation etc.[28]

Given the difference of their media, however, this attitude would lead to very different solutions in visual arts and music. In the first case, it meant moving away from cultural institutions and the commodification of art, the most radical, negative moments of which are to be found in the Rex Group, towards the immediacy of the social and interpersonal relation, the gesture, the 'on the spot'. If on the one hand this represented the search for a participant audience that was beyond the very limited

circle of people who followed the visual arts (for instance, Oiticica's inclusion of Mangueira samba dancers in Apocalipopotesis), on the other, it by definition excluded any possibility of large-scale reproduction that could expand the artist's reach. For the musicians, the latter was the most important question; Caetano and Gil were very upfront about saturating the mass media and taking part in the game: 'we are here to sell. It wasn't us who made our music into merchandise. But it only penetrates when it is sold.' [29] The rapidly growing Brazilian consumer market and the new subjectivities it produced were the lyrical raw material of songs like 'Alegria, alegria' and 'Baby'.

In one case, the overcoming of art inherently restricted the impact of the project; in the other, the possibility of maximising the impact implied an ambiguous and potentially self-defeating relation to the cultural industry. Whereas Gropius envisaged the dissolution of art in technology and technique (whose conditions of reproduction would enable its universal accessibility), Tropicália stood between its dissolution in social life and its dissolution in commerce. While the first option questioned the product and its means of production at once (as Glauber Rocha's 'aesthetics of hunger' had done in a different way in cinema), the second made a tactical distinction that, while admitting to 'using' and 'being used', did accept the conditions of production as given. We can say that Gropius' mistake lay in neutralising technology and being oblivious to its organisation and conditions of reproduction, aspiring to a new form of life that was at odds with the means of its production. It is more difficult to determine if the same thing can be said about the Tropicalist musicians.

This bifurcation and choice is certainly the most important question for any art that was, or intended to be, political in the last ten years. It is very alive in Brazil today among the 'activist' collectives that have appeared since the late 1990s, and it obviously goes beyond a simple dialogue with the likes of Clark and Oiticica: it basically reinstates the avant garde problematic of achieving the end of art as a separate sphere through artistic means. [30]

These questions have become more present since the expansion of the internet, a democratic, many-to-many medium that by bringing the cost of reproduction and circulation of immaterial content next to zero necessarily upsets any attempts at imposing a regime of intellectual property on which commodification can be based; could it present an alternative that was excluded at the time? It seems consistent then that the most remarkable policies of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture under Gil have been the defence of free and open software, a progressive position on intellectual property, and the creation of the Culture Points – the globalised, internet-age response to the CPCs, spread all over the country, many of which are in settlements of the Landless Workers Movement (MST).

These tensions in the Tropicalist project were never really played out as such; at a time when few alternatives were possible, Tropicália (its music aside) ended up a phenomenon for the cultural elite. In the years between 1969 and 1974, most of its participants were arrested, tortured, fled the country, retreated into comfortable fame, drugs or private life, or (like poet Torquato Neto) committed suicide. Oiticica theorised these years in his programme of 'Subterrânia': a complete overcoming of art towards a work that, most roads being blocked, would not be exposed, but 'lived' in the production of 'non-conditioned behaviour'; the cinema of the period, devoid of money and audience, would tend towards improvisation, the negation of form and narrative, and de-aesthetification. Avant garde production as a whole became in the 1970s an underground network of cooperation and circulation. It was only with the Workers' Party victory in the 2002 presidential election that the '68 generation' would come to power – not only Gil, but people like Jose Dirceu, one of the most prominent student leaders of the time. The question as to the continuities and discontinuities between then and now are still very much open.

[IMAGE]

Modernism revisited, again and again

We were never catechised. What we did was carnival. (...) Against the reversible world and objectified ideas. Cadaverised. The stop to thought which is dynamic. (...) Happiness is the 'casting out nines' proof.[31]

Michel Foucault returned to Kant's essay, and the question of modernity, no less than three times between 1978 and his death in 1984. From the second one – which ties it to Kant's musings on revolution in 'The conflict of the faculties' – on, he hits upon a double significance of the question as posed by Kant and of the historical phenomenon of Modernity itself. First, Modernity is the first moment in history to ask about its own meaning as a present with open possibilities before it; two, what must be conserved of it is not a core of substantive prescriptions – that would be 'the most touching treason' of its original thrust[32] –, but a critical attitude towards the present, a permanent questioning of what is necessary and what is contingent about it, what can and what needs to be changed: 'a philosophical ethos that one could describe as the permanent critique of our historical being'[33], 'a critical ontology of ourselves'.[34] In other words, the modern attitude is a constant enquiry into how we can live.

This is perhaps the best answer to the question thrown up by the exhibition at the V&A on whether Modernism has died or lives on. The particular configuration that the show identifies by the name has ceased to be possible, not just due to the failings (or otherwise) of its solutions, but because the conditions that created those solutions and their respective problems have changed. The experience of Tropicália, which belongs in a very different spatio-temporal context, shows that the form of both problems and solution will always keep coming back. Tropicália offers us an alternative narrative of Modernism, not only because it is a minor footnote in the constructed canon, but because it has managed to stay relatively open and flexible. This is by virtue of its own character, and because some of its problems are still to a certain extent ours. Modernism lingers on, in the never given balance between necessity and contingency, passivity and activity. 'The interesting thing is to know how to eat and digest, which are critical acts.'[35]

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FOOTNOTES

1. O. Andrade. *Um homem sem profissao. Sob as ordens de mamae*. Sao Paulo: Editora Globo, 1992, p. 79. Translation and italics mine.
2. This tension is very apparent in the different approaches Kant and Spinoza have to biblical exegesis; against the 'scientific' method of the latter, the former, a champion of autonomous reason, argued that the scholar should rely on the authority of the Scriptures and be liberal with the truth if that served the purpose of highlighting their 'kernel of rationality'. Cf. Y. Yovel, Spinoza and other heretics. *The adventures of immanence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 22.
3. O. Andrade, *Manifesto antropofagico*. Archived at <http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/carnages/manifeste.html>. My translation. Last consulted on May 12th, 2006. Translated by Helio Oiticica as 'Anthropophagous manifesto', In: C. Basualdo (ed.) *Tropicalia. A revolution in Brazilian culture (1967-1972)*. Sao Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005, pp. 206-207.
4. Cf. 'Only the pure elites, though, managed to carry on carnal anthropophagy, which bears in itself the highest aims of life, and avoids all the evils identified by Freud, catechistic evils. What happens is not a sublimation of the sexual instinct. It is the thermo-metrical scale of the anthropophagous instinct.' *Ibid.*, p. 207. On the Nietzschean (or proto-Anti-Oedipus) tone of this passage, one must bear

- in mind what Oswald's memoirs say about Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: 'These two geniuses presided over my intellectual formation.' Idem. *Um homem sem profissão. Sob as ordens de mães*. São Paulo: Editora Globo, 1992, p. 78.
5. M Del Picchia, P. Salgado et al., *Manifesto do Nhengacu Verde Amarelo*. Archived at <http://www.artes.com/sys/artista.php?op=manif&artid=19>, consulted on May 12th 2006.
 6. Mario de Andrade's most important book, *Macunaima*, does, however, subscribe to the idea of the Indian as the picaresque, carnivalesque, ironic hero.
 7. O. Andrade, *Manifesto antropofágico*. <http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/carnages/manifeste.html>. Last consulted on May 12th, 2006. My translation. Translated by Helio Oiticica as *Anthropophagous manifesto*, in: C. Basualdo (ed.) *Tropicalia. A revolution in Brazilian culture (1967-1972)*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005, p. 207.
 8. C. Wilk (ed.) *Modernism. Designing a new world, 1914-1939*. London: V&A Publications, 2006, p. 147.
 9. Two such reviews can be found at <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1734913,00.html> and <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/modernism/story/0,,1749422,00.html>. Reactions are archived in a Guardian blog at <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/modernism/story/0,,1749422,00.html>.
 10. S. Jenkins, For a real exhibition of modernism, skip the V&A and go to Manchester. Archived at <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/modernism/story/0,,1749422,00.html>. Last consulted on May 12th 2006.
 11. One such history could be found in Heidegger's involvement with Nazism, and the inflection it provokes in his thought. His address as the Rector of Freiburg University is the paroxysm of the philosophy of decision of Being and time: the Nazis are the active element that tears the German Volk from its indecisiveness towards its destiny, 'standing strong in the storm'. His disappointment and later estrangement come when he realises that instead of refusing the pull of modernity and technology in favour of more traditional ways of living, the Nazis' programme is one of radical industrialisation and modernisation. This in turn provokes the later thought on Listening and Technology. Cf. R. Safranski, Heidegger. *Between good and evil*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. There is in fact a lot to write on the web of relations between Nazism, modernisation, ecology and conservatism in Germany from the late 19th to mid 20th century.
 12. O. Andrade, *Manifesto Antropofágico*. Archived at <http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/carnages/manifeste.html>. Last consulted on May 12th, 2006.
 13. F. Sussekind, 'Chorus, contraries, masses: the Tropicalia experience and Brazil in the late sixties'. In: C. Basualdo (ed.) *Tropicalia. A revolution in Brazilian culture (1967-1972)*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005, p. 31.
 14. Beyond the exhibition, the whole season of music, cinema and dance organised by the Barbican must be praised for, among other things, providing a rare opportunity to see Glauber Rocha's *Terra em Transe* ('Land in Anguish'), presenting original Tropicalists alongside new Brazilian bands, a brilliant Tropicalia Remixed concert that remade the original album – and the coup de grace of getting Os Mutantes to reform.
 15. Some of the Musica Nova composers, like Julio Medaglia and (above all) Rogerio Duprat, were the acting 'George Martins' of Tropicalist music.
 16. A good example being the name 'Tropicalia' itself: first used as the title of the 1967 environmental structure (a combination of Penetrables) by Helio Oiticica, it would become the name of a song by Caetano Veloso, the title of a collective album (*Tropicalia, ou panis et circensis*) and then be vaguely attributed to various other works, artists and products, to finally be embraced, refuted or problematised by the 'Tropicalists' themselves.
 17. H. Oiticica, *General scheme of the New Brazilian objectivity*. In: C. Basualdo, Op. cit., p. 221.
 18. R. Schwarz, *Culture and politics in Brazil, 1964 – 1969*. Op. cit., p. 280. (Italics in the original.)
 19. A. Boal, 'What do you think of Brazilian theatre?'. In: C. Basualdo, Op. cit., p. 270-271.
 20. A publicity stunt that pitted musicians in the lineage that came from Bossa Nova to Brazilian Popular Music (MPB) against the naïve young rockers of Jovem Guarda (the Young Guard), it

- represented Brazilian vs. ‘imported’ ‘imperialist’ music, as well as quality vs. mass media success. Gilberto Gil, who (like Caetano Veloso) was a fairly conventional musician until his second album, took part in the march.
21. Quoted in: F. Sussekind, ‘Chorus, contraries, masses: the Tropicalia experience and Brazil in the late sixties.’ In: C. Basualdo (ed.) Op. cit., p.40.
 22. Ibid., p. 229.
 23. H. Oiticica; *S.E. Santiago proibido proibir. Revista Idiosincrasia*. Archived at: www.portalliteral.terra.com.br/Literal. Last consulted on May 22nd 2006.
 24. Cf. the texts by Roberto Schwarz, Fausto Wolff and Augusto Boal in the catalogue.
 25. A. Campos, ‘The explosion of “Alegria, alegria”’. In: C. Basualdo (ed.) Op. cit., p. 260.
 26. Legend has it that Gil had the vision of what to do in a trip to the Northeastern state of Pernambuco, where he listened repeatedly to the Beatles’ ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ and the traditional local Banda de Pifanos de Caruaru (the latter can be heard in the song ‘Pipoca Moderna’ of Gil’s album *Expresso 222*).
 27. Gil has recently called Tropicalia ‘the premonition of what we live today, with globalisation and internationalist pluralisation’. Quoted in: C. Dunn, ‘Tropicalia: modernity, allegory and counterculture.’ In: C. Basualdo (ed.) Op. cit., p. 78.
 28. H. Oiticica, General scheme of the New Objectivity. In: C. Basualdo (ed.) Op. cit., p. 229.
 29. Various. ‘Music, research, and audacity – Tropicalism defined through debate’. In: Ibid., p. 243.
 30. Some of these groups and/or experiences: Bijari, Rradial, Atrocidades Maravilhosas, Experiencia Imersiva Ambiental, Catadores de Historias, Media Sana, Laranjas, Esqueleto Coletivo. A directory with links to their web pages or works available online can be found at www.corocoletivo.org; <http://integracaoemposse.zip.net> documents work being developed in a building squatted by the Homeless Movement in Sao Paulo. (Thanks to Cristina Laranja Ribas for suggesting the links). For a very perceptive critique of these from the anti-art point of view, cf. R. Rosas, ‘Notas sobre o coletivismo artistico no Brasil’. Archived at <http://pphp.uol.com.br/tropico/html/textos/2578,1.shl>. Last consulted June 1st 2006.
 31. O. Andrade, *Manifesto antropofagico*. Archived at <http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/carnages/manifeste.html>. My translation. Last consulted on May 12th, 2006. Translated by Helio Oiticica as ‘Anthropophagous manifesto’, In: C. Basualdo (ed.) Op. cit. The ‘casting out nines’ proof is a form of mathematical proof that most students in Brazil learn. Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casting_out_nines. Last consulted on June 1st 2006.
 32. M. Foucault, M. ‘Qu’est-ce les Lumieres?’. In: *Dits et ecrits*. Paris: Gallimard, vol. II, p. 1506. All translations are mine.
 33. M. Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’. In: Ibid., p. 1390.
 35. Ibid., p. 1506.
 36. Decio Pignatari in: Various, ‘Music, research, and audacity – Tropicalism defined through debate’. In: C. Basualdo (ed.) Op. cit., p. 242.