Introduction

Ambiguous Modernities and Alternate Modernisms

São Paulo possesses the virtue of discovering tree honey in an owl’s nest. Every so often, they send us some ancient novelties of forty years ago. Now, through the auspices of my congenial friend Sergio Buarque de Hollanda, they wish to impose upon us as their own discovery, São Paulo’s, so-called ‘futurism’.

Lima Barreto, 1922

Upon receiving a copy of Klaxon, the seminal literary magazine produced by São Paulo’s modernists around 1922, writer Lima Barreto famously penned the remark in the epigraph. The unusual turn of phrase “tree honey in an owl’s nest” (mel do pau em ninho de coruja) suggests a wrong-headedness bordering on delusion. As a critique of pedantry in others, this ornate figure of speech disguised as colloquialism conceals more than it reveals. Certainly, the flippancy with which the author seeks to dismiss the young provincials is feigned. After accusing them, in the opening paragraph, of imposing novelties of forty years ago, the article reduces that accusation by half, subsequently affirming that everybody has known about the grandstanding of “il Marinetti” for over twenty years. Considering that F. T. Marinetti’s “Manifesto of Futurism” was first published in 1909, even the lower figure proves that Lima Barreto’s charge was either hyperbolic or else his mathematical abilities were atrocious. His resentment of the paulistas’ claim to inaugurating modernism in Brazil is so patent, even to him, that the writer excuses

himself with his readers for “what there is of sourness in this little article”.2

Lima Barreto had every reason to be bitter. Five months later, in November 1922, he would pass away at the age of 41, twice committed to a mental asylum for complications stemming from chronic alcoholism, twice rejected in his ambition to become a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, essentially unable to find a publisher for his later works, several of which were destined to appear posthumously. An Afro-descendant writer of recognized talent but modest social standing, his acerbic criticism and radical politics did little to open doors for his career. As Berthold Zilly has observed, he occupied an ambiguous position, enough of an insider to aspire to become part of the establishment but too much of an outsider to know how to make the requisite concessions.3

Nearly a century after his death, he is revered as one of the great names in Brazilian literature and his claim to modernity finally recognized as having preceded the young upstarts from São Paulo.4 At the time, however, they were the rising stars; he was on his way out; and both sides were attuned to their respective destinies.

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, and even more recently in some quarters, the contention that Lima Barreto’s oeuvre was modern was pointedly rejected. To call it modernist, then, was unthinkable. Rather, it was shoehorned into the category of pre-modernism, along with a hodgepodge of other writers active over the first decades of the twentieth century. That label is so meaningless in its historicist overdetermination that it is best jettisoned right away and altogether. Simply put, no one sets out to be pre-anything at the time they are doing something (unless, that is, the action is done in prophetic vein, à la John the Baptist, or is intended to reclaim a lost tradition, as in Pre-Raphaelitism). To cast Lima Barreto as a precursor of the group of young authors and poets around Klaxon, whom he testily dismissed, is to presume their work is somehow a fulfillment of stylistic or artistic qualities he failed to achieve.

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2 Ibid., n.p.
Introduction

One would be hard pressed, at present, to find a literary critic prepared to defend that position.

I.1 ALTERNATE MODERNISMS

In studies of Brazilian literature, the notion of pre-modernism began to be challenged in the late 1980s. Among others, Lima Barreto, Benjamin Costallat and João do Rio were subjected to revised critical readings and their reputations subsequently revived in the 1990s and 2000s.\(^5\) The epistemological swamp in which they were mired, however, has yet to be drained. If rigid notions of periodization are accepted, how should the modernist inflections, both technical and stylistic, of works produced before the 1920s be categorized? Selective rehabilitation of a few noteworthy authors has so far proved insufficient to liberate others from the no-man’s-land staked out between the feuding clans of ‘modernists’ and ‘traditionalists’ in the bygone culture wars of the mid-twentieth century. For the visual arts, it has done almost nothing. The few attempts in Brazil to address what Paulo Herkenhoff labelled “the modern before official modernism” have so far failed to shift the historiographical imbalance to any significant degree. Eliseu Visconti, Belmiro de Almeida and Arthur Timotheo da Costa, among other artists consigned by modernist histories to the tail end of the ‘academic’, are still pretty much in the same place where Gilda de Mello e Souza left them when she tried to draw attention to the injustice of their plight in the 1970s.\(^6\)

The major obstacle hindering attempts to rehabilitate individual artists as precursors or pioneers is a conceptual one. If modernism is a radical break with the past, as many of its proponents have claimed, then

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anything short of that rupture belongs squarely on the other side of the divide, no matter how much it may tend in a modernizing direction. For all its clever rhetorical appeal, the formulation *modernity before modernism* falls short of dislodging the essential premise of teleological progress towards formal truth. The present book partakes of the belief that there is no such thing as evolution in the history of art. For all that artists borrow from each other and build upon the achievements of the past, which they undoubtedly do, this in no way entails a positive progression. Nor does the borrowing that takes place necessarily imply that some works are wholly original while others are derivative. Influence, as Partha Mitter has pointed out, does not operate in a single direction but, rather, is a process of mutual exchange, emulation and paradigm change.7

Neither does the author of this book subscribe to the orderly periodization of artistic styles through the pinpointing of major works and the dates they were produced. Continuity and rupture, canon and revolution, classic and modern, exist in a dialectical relationship, subject to continual hermeneutical analysis.8 Like any other historical construct, the validity of stylistic categories must be reexamined in the light of documentary evidence and questioned at every turn. Thus, the impossibility of thinking about the significance of ‘modern art’ from within the parameters imposed by modernism’s inflated conception of itself. Any historical evaluation worth its salt must reject the contention, all too often taken as an unspoken assumption, that what is or is not modernist can be determined by distinctive features within the works or aesthetic principles espoused by their makers.9

The present book is not the place for a full-blown discussion of modernism: what it was, when it was, whether to embrace it or bid it farewell. Rather, it aims to contribute one more case study to the larger investigation of cultural modernization as a diverse and dispersed historical phenomenon. Variations in what is meant by ‘modern art’ are not

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Introduction

exclusive to Brazil. Discrepancies of form and style, political and cultural context are routinely glossed over in the unthinking wish to apprehend the concept as a stable and unified whole. The more national and regional histories are brought to bear upon one another in comparative vein, the less coherent the case for a single modernism becomes.10

Given the considerable variations occurring over time and place, it makes more sense to speak of “a multiplicity of modernisms”, plural, as Perry Anderson proposed many decades ago, rather than giving in to selective criteria justifying some exclusive definition of the term, which are always based on more or less “open ideologizing”, as Raymond Williams warned.11 The evidence from a global perspective points to the existence of a series of alternate modernisms, overlapping and intersecting each other from at least the 1890s onwards and constituting a broader field of modernist exchanges. Each of the various components does not necessarily partake of all the formal qualities, theoretical underpinnings and sociological structures that characterize the rest; and any attempt to reduce the plurality of examples to one narrative thread will necessarily result in over-simplification.12 The present book is premised on the assumption that the larger import of modernism in Brazil can only be understood by taking into account other competing currents of cultural modernization existing alongside the generally recognized one. That such alternate modernisms mostly stem from popular and mass culture, while the great names of the canon hail almost exclusively from the elitist


spheres of literature, fine art, architecture and classical music, says much about how the term has been construed in Brazil.

1.2 THE MYTH OF 1922

The real significance of artistic modernization in Brazil has been obscured by the dominance of a mythic narrative of ‘modern art’. Ask any reasonably well-informed Brazilian when modernism began in Brazil, and the reply will invariably revolve around the date 1922. The reference is to the Semana de Arte Moderna (Modern Art Week), a cultural festival staged in São Paulo in February 1922, encompassing musical performances, lectures and poetry readings, as well as an exhibition of about one hundred works of art. Sponsored by prominent figures of the local elite – under the decisive leadership of coffee magnate and art collector Paulo Prado – and staged in the city’s operatic Municipal Theatre, the Semana, as it is familiarly known and hereafter designated, assembled a cast that includes some of the most famous names in twentieth-century Brazilian culture: writers Oswald de Andrade and Mário de Andrade; visual artists Anita Malfatti, Di Cavalcanti and Victor Brecheret; composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, among many others. It also spawned a foundational myth that continues to proliferate in a vast secondary literature, largely of a celebratory nature.13

Despite its enshrinement by scholarship and safeguarding by institutions founded in its memory, the importance of the Semana resides largely

in its legendary status. At the time the event took place, its impact was limited to an elite audience in São Paulo, then a very prosperous but still provincial capital. What happened there hardly made a dent in national debates during the 1920s and 1930s. One of the few organs of the mainstream press to give it attention in Rio de Janeiro, then the nation’s capital and cultural centre, was the magazine Careta, for which Lima Barreto wrote. The periodical was aware of the São Paulo group even before the event took place. In late 1921, it published a piece distancing writers Oswald de Andrade, Mário de Andrade, Menotti del Picchia and Guilherme de Almeida, among others, from the label ‘futurism’, under which they were often categorized, and emphasizing their claim to be considered ‘modernist’. A few months after the Semana took place, an article with a São Paulo dateline, titled “The death rites of futurism”, concluded the event had been a flop and castigated the participants for their pretentiousness. Over one year later, the magazine ran a strongly worded attack on the ‘futurists’ and defence of traditional values in art. The editors were open-minded enough, though, to publish a poem by Mário de Andrade on the same page, under the title “Brazilian futurism in poetry”, thus allowing readers the opportunity to judge for themselves. Careta’s reactionary stance was hardly typical of the mainstream press, which mostly ignored the goings-on in São Paulo. Contrary to the widely held belief that the Semana scandalized bourgeois Brazilian society – a myth propagated strategically, between the 1940s and 1960s, by the remnants of paulista modernism and their heirs – the truth is that the cultural milieu in the nation’s capital had other things on its mind. 1922 was a watershed year in Brazil, overshadowed by the centennial of independence from Portugal and filled with charged political
developments including the founding of the Brazilian Communist Party, the opening of the Catholic think-tank Centro Dom Vital and the failed military insurrection of July 1922 that came to be known as the 18 do Forte revolt. If all that were not enough to put the Semana into perspective, the existence of competing claims to modernism has been grossly underemphasized by the historical literature, particularly in the fields of art and art history. The nature of what constituted ‘modern art’, its applicability to the Brazilian context or lack thereof, as well as divergent expressions of its aims, constituted topics of heated debate over the 1920s and 1930s. The Semana group was one among many postulants to the prize and, by 1928, had itself split up into three divergent currents.

Modern has long been a term of aspiration in Brazil. As an adjective, it crops up occasionally in literary discourse from the late nineteenth century onwards and became a catchword in the Brazilian press during the early decades of the twentieth century, most often to qualify some activity or process as a technological novelty: cinema, airplanes, automobiles, electricity, skyscrapers. The wish to be perceived as modern was already widespread enough by the 1910s that it inspired the name and packaging of a brand of cigarettes called Modernos. It is easy to imagine that they might have been smoked by the characters in João do Rio’s 1911 short story “Modern Girls” (the original title was in English, that most up-to-date tongue in a country where French was still the norm of social grace).

In another contemporary work by João do Rio, the armchairs in Rio’s Automobile Club are described as partaking of “a modernism that asks no leave of Mapple”. The author’s jazz-age, anything goes, conception of modernity only grew more prevalent after the First World War, but its presence as early as 1911 is not without significance.

References to technological modernity or changing social mores are not, of course, equivalent to artistic modernism. It is one thing to thrill in the experience of novelty, or even to condemn it, and quite another to reflect upon how those experiences relate to a historical condition. To develop the consciousness of modernity into an aesthetic creed is yet a further step. Such gradations were likewise present over the 1900s and

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1910s. The historiography of Brazilian modernism has long been aware of episodes in which some full-blown manifestation of modern art – in the restricted sense of the historical avant-gardes – was made available to Brazilian audiences before 1922. The most notorious example is Lasar Segall’s 1913 exhibitions in São Paulo and Campinas. Coming straight from Dresden, where he was caught up in the ferment between the end of Die Brücke and the eventual rise of the Dresdner Sezession (Gruppe 1919), in which he took part, Segall showed at least some works in Brazil that would today be classed as expressionist. These elicited polite applause and occasional misunderstanding from provincial critics who were baffled by how a painter of evident skill could commit such elementary ‘mistakes’. Segall’s is not even the earliest example of links with German Secessionism, the influence of which was felt a decade earlier in Rio de Janeiro, as shall be seen in Chapter 2, through the auspices Helios Seelinger and José Fiuza Guimarães.

The impact of art nouveau, discussed in detail in Chapter 3, is another grossly underestimated aspect of artistic modernization in Brazil. Between circa 1900 and 1914, the craze for a ‘new art’ swept the cultural milieu of Rio de Janeiro at all levels, from cinema to music halls, from commercial advertising to fine art. As early as 1903, the concept of modern art, thus designated, was insightfully discussed by leading art critic Gonzaga Duque. His writings of the period – as well as those of his contemporaries Camerino Rocha, José Veríssimo and Nestor Victor – repeatedly reference what were then considered modern styles and tendencies and, what is perhaps even more telling, purposefully oppose them to the academic output of the past. These critics were attuned to debates in Europe and hastened to align themselves with aesthetic and political currents they admired. ‘The modern’ figures for them as an outgrowth of the scientific and philosophical discoveries of the new century, an inexorable fact of existence that demanded new attitudes and novel responses. There can be no doubt their commitment to artistic modernization was both deliberate and self-aware.

The recurrence of terms like modern art and modernism in Brazilian discourses of the time can only be dismissed if one assumes that a critical

innovation of such import could not originate outside the linguistic spheres of French, German or English. Unfortunately, and despite the challenges posed by postcolonial critiques over the past decades, a propensity still exists to downplay the precocity of modernismo in the Latin American context, especially via the writings of Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, the author credited with coining the term in the 1880s. Darío was the object of overt discussion in Brazilian literary circles and even visited Rio de Janeiro in 1906. The local writer who paid him the greatest attention, going so far as to author a brief volume on his work, was Elysio de Carvalho, poet and aesthete, militant atheist and anarchist, translator of Oscar Wilde, propagandist of Nietzsche and Max Stirner. A few years later, Carvalho would become a police criminologist and take a sharp ideological turn towards Catholic conservatism. A strange combination of qualities, to say the least; yet, this awkward concurrence of modernist and anti-modernist tendencies in a single biography is by no means uncommon among Brazilian intellectuals. The convoluted relationships, professional and personal, that allowed radically divergent positions to co-exist and even mingle in the context of turn-of-the-century Rio are more fully explored in Chapters 2 and 3. Suffice it to say, for now, that the small size and insularity that have long plagued artistic circles in Latin America also made them a prime breeding ground for the sense of alienation and restlessness associated with yearnings for modernity.

Monica Pimenta Velloso was perhaps the first author to formulate plainly the idea that modernism was already in place in Rio de Janeiro long before the Semana. Her 1996 book Modernismo no Rio de Janeiro argues for the recognition of an artistic modernity centred around the distinctive sociability of cafés, magazines and literary salons in the fast-changing urban scenario of the 1900s and 1910s, in which the major players were journalists, illustrators and humourists. The first major work in English to recognize Darío’s precedence was: Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006 [1977]), pp. 69–74.
