Improvisations of a Tropical Cartesianism

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Translated by Micaela Kramer

For centuries, a myth has been constructed about tropical countries: the further they are from the center of Western Enlightenment discourse, the more precarious the application of Cartesian reason as a method of life or as a form of intellectual and social organization becomes. Countries in the tropics are thus precarious by nature. They have survived by hanging onto their exotic outlets of expression and their singular stratagems: colourful gadgets from the Third World, sunny simulacra that are impervious to the great narratives of European civilization. As with the invention of the Orient, exposed by Edward Said, hot and humid lands have been permanent sources for pre-fabricated discourses about clichés. These discourses have underscored the low expectations of originality or autonomy for artists and intellectuals from these countries in the sphere of global debates about aesthetics or knowledge.

Perhaps it is still the case today that, for certain currents of thought, the countries of the Third World — especially those connected to the tropics — only form a part of the canon of Art History when their exotic component supplants prejudices and resistances or, when within this perspective, the influence of canonical culture is removed, as in the case of Machado de Assis or Jorge Luís Borges.

In such a dated perspective, which has nonetheless corroded much of the twentieth century, improvisation — that is, the intellectual product inspired by the occasion itself and accomplished suddenly, without preparation (as defined by the Aurélio Dictionary) — was the only possible manner of production in places with a precarious Cartesianism. Among improvisers, you can find the sambista de partido alto, the versifier of Northeastern Brazilian cordel literature, the favela shacks, what Latin-Americans have accomplished with the soccer ball, what Africans do with beads and stones as beauty accessories, and popular art from across Latin America. Because improvisation is often the driving force of an invented identity (as are all national identities), joy, spontaneity, and laziness have always been applied as adjectives in novels, films, music, and other works.

For instance, in 1935, Claude Lévi-Strauss testified in his monumental Tristes Tropiques to the tropical apathy and melancholy of the ex-colony, to which he had been introduced during the months when he lectured at the University of São Paulo. Besides the indigenous tribes in the country’s interior — his object of study — the French ethnologist didn’t find anything noteworthy. Improvisations — a sad and silent tropic in the shadow of global modernity.

II

Fifteen years after Lévi-Strauss’ visit, however, Brazil and Latin America were experiencing the pinnacle of their constructivist avant-garde. In the 1950s, Argentineans, Chileans, Peruvians, Venezuelans, and Brazilians distinguished themselves in the administration and renewal of design, architecture, semiotics, gestalt, and the circulation of information and people connected to European constructivism (Russian, Dutch, Swiss, and German). This was the moment when tropical improvisation gave way to other representations of the art and thought of Third World countries. Beginning with cultural movements such as the concrete and neo-concrete, unprepared improvisation gave way to the rigor of invention. One witnessed the emergence of cities, movements, avant-garde artists, and new elements that subverted the great Western narrative about art and introduced other actors, facts, and discourses to the world. Finally, a new perplexity emerged that had its origin in the tropics.

In Inteligência brasileira — a beautiful, small book published in 2009 — the Swiss philosopher and critic Max Bense (born in 1910) was travelling across the country (Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, Belo Horizonte and other cities) during the 1960s, taking notes in the form of a journal. In his book, we see that he recorded — in a tone that ranged from stupefaction to a certain Eurocentric skepticism — this key moment of transition from praise for improvisation to the explosion of the invention of form. For him, Brazil founded a unique model during the 1950s and 60s: a risky and creative “tropical Cartesianism.” Contrary to the pernicious cliché that
placed the country as an exotic land in the tropics, a country whose engine was this peculiar way of improvising to cope with the demands of a hegemonic rationality in the era of technique and industrial capitalism, the Brazil he visited and depicted in his journal was a country that had just finished building a capital from scratch — Brasília — with perfect architectural and urban diligence, a country living on the edges of a political convulsion and a cultural effervescence that still defines its arts today. Bense witnessed and dissected a creative atmosphere where the inventor and the calculator lived together, producing cities and tongue twisters from Brasilia to Guimarães Rosa, from Reidy to Clarice Lispector, from Volpi to Concrete Poetry. For the Swiss thinker, this was Brazil’s contribution to the twentieth century: a neo-concrete sense of incorporating street people to the severe, academic principle of constructivism; a population in constant flow towards the discovery of its limits and the creation of new possibilities for change, new standards of action, new forms of living e.g. Descartes in the tropics and Paulo Leminski’s Catatau. Bense thus narrated another modernity that was being fashioned in Brazil, a modernity that pulsed and expanded his certainties and his Western European “reason.” In the preliminary note to the book, he states:

What is happening is that there is a progressive Brazilian intelligence that maintains internal and external links with Europe, America and Asia, and develops, in an original and innovative fashion, themes, styles, discoveries, attitudes and experiments worthy of our full attention, which reveal no decrease in their interest and which, furthermore, show themselves to be free of metaphysical decadence and of barbarism. (11)

III

The other’s gaze is always generous and cruel: generous because it hungers for scrutinizing alterity; cruel because it is ready to point out the deviation, the difference, the grotesque. When this gaze focuses not on easily understood everyday life, but on large structures and values that define a civilization, these two aspects, generosity and cruelty, become even clearer. Despite their inverted signals, Lévi-Strauss’s and Bense’s gazes bring the European, Cartesian point of view to a Brazil split in its dialectic between the “two Brazils”—an archaic, rural one and a modern, urban one.

When this dialectic began to be seen from the critical point of view of Latin-American intellectuals, it acquired different colours and forms. A series of categories displaced this seemingly irreconcilable contrast and wagered on the—at times conflicting, at times pacific—superimposition or cohabitation of these extremes. Over the last few decades, key concepts such as Silviano Santiago’s “entre-lugar” (in-between space), Nestor García Canclini’s “hybridization,” or, to go farther back in time, Fernando Ortiz’s “transculturation,” have become innovative and inclusive means of escape for those who were considered “peripheral”: outside the canon, outside the global language, outside the cultural market. For these authors, archaic characteristics, the improvisation of the bricoleur, and indigenous and African traditions should not be contrasted with industrialization, with mass culture, or with the risk of invention; they should all be the ingredients for the same broth, for a dynamic that manages to handle disparate data under the same logic of assimilation and permanent overcoming. In a certain way, these authors are in dialogue with Bense and with his idea of a “tropical Cartesianism.” Instead of searching for authenticities, demarcating regionalisms, or fragmented local identities; instead of negating popular culture; instead of stifling the tropical heat and silencing the latent poverty of the large cities, the Latin American intellectual and creator assumes his/her specificity as another modernity, an alter-modernity, in the twentieth century Western world.

IV

Today, from the north to the south of the globe, everyone is pregnant with possibilities. The reinvention of improvisation—not as a productive weakness but as a creative potency—marks an increasingly large and established presence in a cultural production that originates in the urban peripheries of Latin America. This process is connected intimately to the expansion of digital culture and to the democratic, global access to technology and knowledge. Larger possibilities generate bold results in the molding of an independent, questioning, autonomous thought. In the renewal of the social practices of these countries, improvisation must be understood today no longer as a circumstantial intellectual product, but as a weapon of strategic adaptation of Enlightenment Reason to the demands of a recently formed nation in the Americas. Improvisation is not an exotic adjective, but rather a tactic of adaptation to the creative velocity and demands of the digital globe.
Notes

1 “Samba de partido alto” is a sub-genre of the samba, which emerged in the 1930s in Brazil. “Sambista de partido alto” refers to a musician from this genre.

2 Cordel literature is a northeastern Brazilian genre, defined by the Michaelis dictionary as “cheap literature hanging on a line in a street market.”

Works Cited

