

João Miramar: A Fond Memory of Brazilian Culture Industry?

I. Interspersed among the "cinematographic" clips which compose the narrative text of *Memórias sentimentais de João Miramar* one discovers, perhaps not coincidentally, a story of cinematography. In clips 101 and 102 we see João, the "fazendeiro matrimonial", in the company of his mistress Mme. Rocambolah, the Uruguayan Banguirre y Menudo, a nameless Syrian, and the oligarchical backing and good name of "o Britinho", embarked on the career of a "Grande Industrial" as chief stockholder in the "Piaçagüera Lightning and Famous Company Pictures of São Paulo and Around." By clip 120 ("Ultimo Film") the enterprise has collapsed in bankruptcy, meaning, for the would-be industrialist João, a loss of the considerable family fortune into which he has married. As a result of this business failure João Miramar gives up his calling as film producer and resigns himself to the writing of his memoirs. São Paulo is no match for Hollywood.¹

The historical postscript to this tragicomic vignette of economic and cultural dependency is, by contrast, entirely upbeat: where the primitive efforts of Miramar and company fail, the *Cinema Novo* experiments of the '50s and '60s have at last given birth to the modern, state-run production and distribution operation of *Embrafilme*.² The latter enterprise not only competes with Hollywood on the Brazilian market but draws both crowds and profits with the North American showings of such favorites as *Dona Flor and her Two Husbands* and *Bye Bye Brazil*.

No one, of course, would go so far as to suggest that *João Miramar* is merely the narrative of an absent process of film-making. But there may be a larger historical truth half-exposed in this trivial mimesis. Does not *João Miramar*, as the celebrated ur-text of orthodox *modernismo*, map out, despite its 'vanguard' remove from the later commercialisms of *cultura brasileira*, what are already the contours of the future cultural commodity typified in the modern *Embrafilme* export? Can not *modernismo*, which, by analogy to its European aesthetic namesake, would be read as the very negation of mass produced culture, be read, on the contrary, as the tentative ideological and "theoretical" edge of a future Brazilian "Culture Industry"—the "vanguard" of a discursive formation which, what, or however it may think of itself, anticipates the logic of a new kind of cultural production? After all, the failure of João's film venture is not technical, nor, in principle at least, is it commercial. Both the means of production and the market for the finished product already exist. The failure of São Paulo as a Brazilian Hollywood is the failure of "Brasil" itself to make its own filmic appearance, the absence of any

representationality or mediatory discourse capable of cementing the productive and consumptive moments of the cultural commodity.

The point to get across here—in what is, to be sure, purely an explanatory and working hypothesis—is not that *modernismo* “sold out” or was somehow lacking in genuine democratic sympathies, but that it traces the modern commodity form of *cultura brasileira* on the theory that it is simply forging a new “language” or “style.” This is, at any rate, the *topos* it “borrows”, mainly through Oswald, from Futurism (“*parole en libertà*”) and the Franco-Italian avant-garde generally. As *modernismo* becomes more and more the dominant aesthetic authority, especially after the revolution of 1930, the will to a new language itself undergoes an increasing and apparent socialization—merely stylistic objectives are amplified to include the need for a new, decolonialized model of culture. But whether as “language” or as “culture”, the need for a break with a colonial tradition appears as already immanent in the sheer “fact” of Modernity. What *modernismo*, operating as ideology, remains unable to perceive is that very space, not yet “cultural” but undifferentiated and hegemonic, in which this superordinating need shows itself to be already inscribed in the objective social and historical dictates of a particular dialectic of dependent capitalist modernization. The new linguistic or cultural subject, we are suggesting, is already mediated in a new hegemonic form of subject. Due, perhaps, to certain seeming “peculiarities” of the modern Brazilian political process—the “Bonapartism” of Vargas, a populism of oligarchical origins—peculiarities which themselves do not allow a stable, political representation of this subject to emerge—this hegemonic subject must “speak” the “language” of *culture*.

The eventual marketing of this subject form—its “commodification”—would mark, then, a kind of maturation or second stage of this hegemonic impersonation. The same culture of “otherness” which is able to provide the Brazilian bourgeoisie of the southern triangle with a universalized representation of its own highly abstract social power undergoes a second reification by becoming that set of signifieds which represents “Brazil” to the rest of the capitalist circuitry in which the power behind the representation is constituted. The modern hegemonic formation initially consolidated in 1930, having learned to recognize itself as the “Brazil” of *cultura brasileira*, at length instructs its trading partners in the same recognition. A final and circumspect self-identity is secured in the modern cultural commodity.

II. If asked to provide evidence for this industrial prefigurement in the early, artisan-like works of *modernismo*, the reply would seem practically automatic: what is *Pau Brasil* and its later refinements in *Antropofagia* if not the formula for this new discourse of cultural hegemony and self-identity? What is *Macunaíma* if not the experimental coupling of this formula with a kind of synthetic orality? But what, then, is to be done with *João Miramar*?

Following Antonio Cândido, the standard literary historiography, which,—if occasionally critical of a *ideologia da cultura brasileira*, has itself come to be premised on the self-identity of the supreme cultural object—typically assigns to *João Miramar* the role of stylistic demiurge.³ It is *João Miramar* as a work of narrative prose which first pierces the armor of the *cataquese* (to adopt the terminology of Mario Chamie), ultimately permitting the hidden wealth of *cultura brasileira* to pour itself out into a substantive prose. In Oswald's novel the signifier becomes a weapon with which to shatter the bonds of the signified. *João Miramar* is *negation*.⁴ Its claim to the authority of the vanguard would seem to arise from its essential being as a pure *agency*—an agency which disappears in retrospect, since it has no substance of its own. Indeed, this appears to be intuitively confirmed in the literary/novelistic reading of the text whereby some fullness of meaning is expected or sought. All that one is able to lay hands on is a ceaseless and skeletal word play which, after the long since completed conversion of Modernist tampering with the signifier into institutionalized orthodoxy, seems almost as staid and "Parnassian" as the Romantic orthodoxies which choked the *modernistas* in the heroic period of the *Semana da arte moderna*. And the effect is heightened if one takes into account the metropolitan readerly demand, instantaneously activated by the aura of "Brazil", for the sumptuousness of *cultura brasileira*. *João Miramar* does not even deliver the "magical realism" of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, much less that of Sonia Braga.

Recalling Adorno and Horkheimer's thematization of the Culture Industry, and the corollary affirmation of the Modern Work of Art as the "nonfungible",⁵ one might be tempted to deploy the latter attribute as a constitutive feature of Oswald's text. Only here the historical directionality would be inverted: *João Miramar* would stand as the negation of a Brazilian Culture Industry, not through any reactive impulse to "resist" it, but merely as the first in a redoubling series of negations (a "negation of the negation") which is the cultural commodity itself. Unlike the work of orthodox High Modernism, the content of which is, purportedly, only to be grasped as the negation of the modern *empyrium* of "consumer society", the content of the Oswaldian text would be read as that which literally conditions and foregrounds the reified fullness and substance of *cultura brasileira*. Due to its simultaneous quality of "modernity" and "underdevelopment," Brazilian society would be understood as making possible a vanguard which no sooner posits itself in a dialectic of purely aesthetic transcendence than it is effaced by the surge of a "cultural" alterity released as an effect of the same agency. The sheerly formal negation exercised by "style" becomes immediately the locus for a "cultural revolution."

III. But to rewrite *João Miramar* as a pure agency of style is already to invert it as well—to ideologize what undoubtedly is its real, historical

dysfunction as a text of *cultura brasileira*. Such a rewriting discounts the clear possibility that *João Miramar* is *cultura brasileira*, not in its negatively pure state as anti- or pre-commodity, but culture as unsaleable commodity, still in the process of being worked or written up, but no less fetishized for being so.

João Miramar's opacity of style can, from this latter perspective, be re-read not as a writing "for itself" but as the effect of an undecidability with respect to the proper speaking register of the hegemonic subject. The empty space left by this vacillation is filled up with a "writing" which is unable to anchor itself in a "speech" and which therefore fails to produce what has been called the "subject effect." Between the intolerably false idiolect of Machado Penumbra and Dr. Pilatos and the purely *unspeakable memorias* of João Miramar as formal "subject," there is no locus for a rational, self-identical speech act. *João Miramar* is awash in the "artifice" and mediacy of writing only because orality too has been tainted with the same falsehood. João's private and reflexive discourse is "saved" from the degeneracy and unredeemed falsity of colonial pedants⁶ and backward *capatazes*⁷ only by rendering itself impossible as speech.

The important question here is not what, if any, truly negative agencies are bestowed by the Oswaldian text, but rather why this hegemonic "speaking" subject eludes representation, and, subsequently, how it gradually establishes its hegemonic presence in a narrative tradition which probably begins, in a positive sense, with *Macunaíma*. The answer, perhaps, is that this subject itself in its political and social representation as the *povo brasileiro* of populism has, in the precise moment of *João Miramar*, still not exerted the social agencies which will force its presence into the political unconscious of the sons of the *cafeezeiros*. Like *tenentismo* in the years leading up to 1930, *modernismo* before *Macunaíma* and *Pau Brasil* is *constitutionalist* rather than populist. We know from historians and critics such as Weffort and Quartim⁸ that the *tenentes* tended to rationalize everything, including armed violence against the state, as part of the struggle to enforce a literal interpretation and application of constitutional principles; they fought the state in the name of the state's own higher and ideal being as a constitutional democracy. In demanding such "popular" measures as the extension of suffrage, the *tenentes* (to paraphrase Quartim)⁹ appealed to a "people" which existed only in the abstract conceptual realm of 19th century European liberalism. The "people" here are not yet the utopianized "other" of *cultura brasileira* but rather the phantom of a legitimating, neo-oligarchical consensus which the *tenentes* themselves were never to enjoy until their virtual auto-negation in the triumph of *getulismo*. Analogously, a text such as *João Miramar* can find no ground upon which to erect its revolution against the old order of discourse except that discourse itself, "revolutionized" in accordance with its own rational immanence. The fact that this "revolution" proceeds through the "estranging" devices of parody, satire and neologism does not alter its essence as an institutional reform which does not question the authority of the institution as such.

The *modernistas* perhaps never intended to do anything more than to "modernize" the existing literary and artistic institution by taking over the reins themselves; theirs—initially at least—is not a cultural but a revolution of the salon and the editorial boards, a ritual assassination of the father, guided by the same generational pruritus which inspires the more dangerous and foolhardy futurisms of the *tenentes*.

The approaching hegemonic rupture and transformation which is to thrust the Brazilian masses into a state of social and political activism, which only subsides under the mass-terror-state inaugurated in 1964, catches the *modernistas* unprepared. It is the particular adaptational genius of this aesthetic current to have rapidly understood the real geological shift underfoot and to have met its challenge to traditional discursive authority more or less directly with a workable populist cultural program. ("Populist" not in the sense of producing immediately "popular" works, but of reorienting the cultural intelligentsia as a whole towards the task of forging a cultural hegemony based on the "people" as representational presence.) Nowhere is this witnessed more acutely than in the literary trajectory of Oswald himself: from *João Miramar* to *Pau Brasil* there runs a course of political and social education whose tests few intellectuals have passed so well and convincingly. Once the essential components of the hegemonic speaking subject of *cultura brasileira* are within grasp, *modernismo* wastes little time in hitting upon a hugely successful model of cultural manufacture. Oswald's verse manifestoes seem largely design-oriented in this respect. It is *Macunaíma* which probably first erects the structure which is to be maintained more or less intact well into the current phase of full-grown Culture Industry.

By attempting through the mouthpieces of criticism to reappropriate a modern relic like *João Miramar* as purely negative and stylistic agency, *modernismo*, reincarnated as the critical self-consciousness of the new Brazilian cultural elite, tends to suppress its own elitist and neo-colonialized vacillations before the aesthetic discordancies of a modern, massified social formation. It effectively obscures what were, at first, its strongly felt misgivings at giving up an essentially luxury-import model of cultural "production." If *João Miramar* has an identifiable historical subtext, it is this temporizing of an up-to-date cultural *comprador*, his senses turned seaward, but with the heavy breathing of the Brazilian masses whipping up a gale behind his neck.

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NOTES

1. The factual history of Brazilian film enterprise and production is accurately reflected in this narrative sub-plot. In their invaluable *Brazilian Cinema*, Randal Johnson and Robert Stam describe how in 1911, what had been a veritable *bela época* of local independent filmmaking, beginning as early as 1900 in Rio and São Paulo, ended with the sudden influx of North American films and film capital. "The foreign film," they write,

became the standard by which all films were to be judged, thus rendering problematic the exhibition of the less technically polished Brazilian product. Since local distributors lacked the infrastructural organization possessed by foreign distributors, the internal market began to function for the benefit of the industrial products from abroad. From that point on, when forced to choose between the guaranteed profit of inexpensive foreign films that covered costs easily in their home market, and the risks involved in dealing with the national product, exhibitors tended to opt for the foreign film. The Brazilian market became a tropical appendage of the North American market.

Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, *Brazilian Cinema* (London & Toronto: Associated University Press, 1982), p. 22.

2. *Embrafilme*, created in the late '60s and later strengthened by Geisel appointee Roberto Farias, both co-produces and distributes Brazilian films. Many of the original *Cinema Novo* directors now work to varying degrees under the *Embrafilme* umbrella. For more on *Embrafilme* see *Brazilian Cinema*, pp. 43-44 and 104-108.

3. Antonio Cândido describes *João Miramar* as "uma linguagem sintética e fulgurante, cheia de soldas arrojadas, de uma concisão lapidar." And again: "Tal vez as próprias *Memórias* e o *Serafim* estivessem demasiado presos as condições momentâneas e so adquiressem pleno valor com o aparecimento de tudo o que, nelas, obras de combate e de ensino, não passava de inovação e ataque." Antonio Cândido, *Brigada Ligeira* (São Paulo: Martins, 1945), pp. 21 & 24.

Mario da Silva Brito, meanwhile, asks rhetorically: "Miramar, como experiência estilística, não antecipeou os rumos seguidos por Mario de Andrade em *Macunaíma*, por Jorge de Lima em *O Anjo*, por Clarice Lispector em *Perto do Coração Selvagem*, por Geraldo Ferraz, com Pagu, em *A Famosa Revista* e sózinho em *Doramundo*, por Guimarães Rosa em *Grande Sertão: Veredas?*" Mario da Silva Brito, *Revista Brasiliense*, 16 (March/April 1958), pp. 135-6.

And Haroldo de Campos: "As *Memórias sentimentais de João Miramar* foram realmente o verdadeiro 'marco zero' da prosa brasileira contemporânea no que ela tem de inventivo e criativo. . . . Romperam escandalosamente com todos os padrões então vigentes, fazendo a autocrítica inclusive . . . da própria tentativa romanesca anterior e paralela de Oswald." Haroldo de Campos, "Miramar na Mira," intro. to *Memórias sentimentais de João Miramar*, (São Paulo: Difusão Europeia do Livro, 1964), pp. 20-21.

4. "Antítese da atitude parnasiana, o *Serafim* se junta as *Memórias Sentimentais*, formando com elas a fase de negação." Antonio Cândido, p. 23.

5. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans., Herder and Herder Inc., (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 120-167.

6. See "'76. Carta Administradora", pp. 105-6.

7. See, for example, "81. Noite institutual," p. 110.

8. Francisco Weffort, *O populismo na política brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Paz e Terra, 1980), pp. 105-122.

João Quartim, *Dictatorship and Armed Struggle in Brazil* (London: NLB, 1971).

9. Quartim, pp. 22 & 24.