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AIMING AT THE NORTH FOR WHAT? REFLECTIONS BY MARTA TRABA AND ARACY AMARAL ON ART AND CULTURE IN LATIN AMERICA (1970S)

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to discuss Marta Traba's perspectives on art and culture in Latin America in the 1970s, based on her essays, especially the work entitled Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas (1950-1970). In addition, this work establishes some connections between the thought of the Argentinian intellectual and the Brazilian intellectual, Aracy Amaral, highlighting the issues of valorization of the Latin American identity and "cultural dependency" on the globe.

Keywords: Latin American art; Marta Traba; Aracy Amaral.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo principal analisar algumas perspectivas de Marta Traba sobre arte e cultura na América Latina, a partir de ensaios escritos durante a década de 1970, com destaque para a obra intitulada Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas (1950-1970). Além disso, este trabalho estabelece algumas conexões entre o pensamento da intelectual argentina e o da intelectual brasileira Aracy Amaral, destacando as questões da valorização identitária da América Latina e da "dependência cultural" no globo.

Palavras-chave: Arte latino-americana; Marta Traba; Aracy Amaral.

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Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García wrote the phrase "Our North is the South" in the 1930s when explaining his project Escuela del Sur:

I have said School of the South; because in reality, our North is the South. There should be no North for us, except in opposition to our South. That is why we now turn the map upside down, and now we know what our true of the world would like to have it. From now on , the elongated tip of South America will point insistently at the South, our North (TORRES GARCÍA, 1935)

At the same time, the work "Inverted Map of South America" was exhibited, which would later become one of his most impressive visual works. The work, contextualized by his total art project (constructive universalism) for America, questions the continent's cultural dependency on Europe. In addition, the physical inversion of the map also proposes us to inquire about the change in directions and references, which until then had been very much focused on the northern hemisphere. With a precise and powerful artistic action, Torres García's work raises hegemonic ways of looking at the world.

The Uruguayan artist's work reverberated widely in the artistic-cultural environment of Latin America, including in Latin American art criticism. Later, Marta Traba, as well as Damián Bayón, Aracy Amaral and other critics, considered Torres García an iconic artist and pioneer in thinking about an affirmative project of art and culture from Latin America.

In 1973, about thirty years after the inverted map, Marta Traba's book, *Dos Decades Vulnerables en las artes latinoamericanas* (1950-1970), was published, considered a landmark of art criticism in Latin America. The author reflects on the panorama of Latin American

art between the 1950s and 1970s in this broad essay. The work is considered relevant, as it contains a more comprehensive and comparative perspective of artists and works, and was translated in several countries, including Brazil, by Editora Paz e Terra², em 1977. More recently, in 2005, the book gained a new edition in Argentina, by Siglo XXI Editores Argentina, which indicates the circulation and maintenance of its importance, even in contemporary times.

Marta Traba's book is divided into five parts, which are: "Primera posición: Estados Unidos versus Latinoamérica (First position: United States versus Latin America)"; "Segunda posición: Latinoamérica versus Estados Unidos (Second position: Latin America versus the United States)"; "La resistencia; La década de la entrega: 1960-1970 (The resistance; Decade of delivery: 1960-1970)" and "La búsqueda del signo perdido (The search for the lost sign)". In this article, we will work, above all, the first two parts, which sought to analyze the relations between the two regions.

As the subtitles themselves indicate, the author chose to establish in her work an oppositional relationship between the two regions. On the one hand, the United States and its highly industrialized, consumerist and urbanized society; on the other hand, Latin America, characterized by a weak internal market, by the high marginalization of part of its population and by the strong presence of oligarchies in power. Furthermore, she placed Latin American and North American art in different perspectives, even though there were inaccuracies in these two terms. Thus, according to Marta Traba, cultural, artistic, social, political and economic differences would be striking between these Americas in the period of the so-called Cold War.

It is possible to notice that the author thought about the relationship between these two regions through

² The work was published in 1977, during the military regime, by Editora Paz e Terra, in a collection of "Latin American Studies", with an editorial board formed by names such as Antônio Candido and Celso Furtado.

the prism of alterity. As is well known, the problem of the relationship between the Self (Latin American) and the Other (North American), in the context of culture, has been more intensely discussed since the 19th century by writers, essayists and artists³. Here, it is worth highlighting the importance of alterity in the process of identity construction. As a Latin American identity project is affirmed, and, with that, approaches and similarities, differences are also highlighted in relation to those who do not make up the same identity group. Stella Maris S. Franco and Amilcar Torrão Filho point out that alterity "is established in general by comparison, as a process of defining the Other, but also by the Self, albeit by the simplifying resource of inversion" (FRANCO; TORRÃO FILHO, 2016). Marta Traba used this resource to explain the differences between Latin America and the USA, in a context of greater regional identification and strong diffusion of North American culture in the region.

In the first part of her essay, Marta Traba emphasized American artistic production in the period 1950-1970. According to the intellectual, after World War II, the US visual arts were inserted in a context marked by the consumerist society, high industrialization and individualism. In addition, a large part of artistic activities in the country would have been subjected to the so-called "dictatorship of technology", ending the European leadership in shaping new trends, as was common until then. In her opinion, all this placed "artistic freedom" in a trap.

Marta Traba also followed the analysis of the German Hebert Marcuse and the French Pierre Francastel⁴, who

discussed the sociocultural impacts and contradictions of technology in industrialized societies such as the US. For Traba, the technology present in North American society had totalitarian ideological contents and produced passive and mimetic individuals, that is, "technology, skillfully transformed into ideology by those who needed to handle it as an instrument of power, penetrated the cultural unity of society consumption and impoverished it" (TRABA, 1977, p.12). Marta Traba understood that contemporary American artistic production, although not as a whole, was marked by the emergence of "exasperatingly personal" languages, the "disappearance of norms" and "total freedom". In her opinion, this could be understood as a kind of alienation, or even an "aesthetics of destruction"5.

The trajectory of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg was taken as an example to explain the process of artistic "decay" that was then taking place in the USA, according to Marta Traba. For her, the artist created a series of vigorous collages in the 1950s, marked by the search for the poetic function in the work of art, the so-called action painting. Then, in the 1960s, he began to paint canvases with light effects, like Tracer (1964), to finally arrive at works with fragmentary spaces and empty of meaning, filled with erotic photographs.

Marta Traba also did not approve of Campbells and Marylins soups, by pop artist Andy Warhol, which, according to the author, were inserted in an emergency context of the American way of life. She also disapproved of happenings, optical art and

³ It should be noted that the text by Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó is considered one of the most influential essays on Latin American culture. As is known, the essay has as reference the work "The Tempest" by Shakespeare. See: RODÓ, José Enrique. Ariel. Campinas, SP: Editora da UNICAMP, 1991.

⁴ Marta Traba was a student of Pierre Francastel when she studied in Europe.

⁵ In the essay, Traba clarified that the aesthetics of destruction acted in opposition to the traditional aesthetics – linked to permanence, to the formation of styles and to the overcoming of fads. The idea, therefore, was "not to last" or "not to establish any model", resulting in a series of pre-proposals. This led her to conclude that "without the possibility of remaining, without pursuing a structure of permanence, art condemns itself to the same fate as the other products of the consumerist society: it only consumes itself, meets an expectation and episodically satisfies its customer, it disappears" (TRABA, 1977, p. 13).

⁶ Action painting is the pictorial technique that emerged in the USA, around the 1940s, in which it is possible to observe the artist's gestures in the composition of his/her painting.

⁷ The work entitled "Tracer" (1964), in the intellectual's view, would be an initial example of this transition that occurred in his work from the 1960s onwards.

performances. In her view, all of this represented a significant part of American art at that time and meant the "signal of direction", which, roughly speaking, was linked to consumption and production energy, common in "imperialist societies. Something different from an artistic language, linked to the structures, forms and energy of creation, very common in artistic avant-gardes, for example. Following this "signal", art would no longer be a form of knowledge to be a form of impact, similar to advertising, in which, according to Traba, "it is not necessary to understand, just 'see', it is not necessary to totalize, just to fragment, it is not necessary to think, just receive, it is not necessary to reflect, just accept" (TRABA, 1977, p. 16-20).

For Marta Traba, North American art offered Latin American art a sign of direction, not an artistic language. Traba warned that the mimetic reception of this signal or the lack of criticality and resistance to it, made the art and culture of the region susceptible to the trap of "cultural domination. Although Traba has taken a conservative stance in relation to new contemporary artistic languages, she provoked her reader to reflect on the importance of more resistant and critical artistic and cultural practices.

In her 1973/74 essay "La Cultura de la Resistencia", the Argentine intellectual indicated that, without a critical and resistant Latin American project, we could never "aspire to modern forms of freedom", thus remaining in "culturally dependent". In this sense, she understood that writers and artists had a fundamental role in this game. According to Traba:

Writers and artists have always been especially receptive to the problem of dependency, despite the tendency now to demonetize them and minimize their influences. It is clear that only considering that the written word, the emitted thought or the expressed work of art constitute a special form of power within the social group by incorporating the aspirations of this group, it is worth talking about their role in the problem of dependency (TRABA, 1973/2009, p. 49/137).

While she recognized the importance of artists and intellectuals in combating cultural dependency, Marta Traba understood that their roles were also very delicate. By handling cultural sources and language sources, they ran the risk of following a path filled with "nationalisms" and false "originating" elements. In her view, the regional identity project should be broad, diverse, able of dialoguing with particularities and critically evaluating languages, signs and international fads. Thus, to combat the issue of cultural dependency, thought of as a long-term element, it would be necessary to think of Latin America as a project.

For Mara Traba, historically, Latin America had occupied a position in which it received more than it issued artistic languages. However, she understood that when there was the transmission of languages, Latin American art was also capable of giving new meaning to the elements received and even altering codes or signs of these languages, which often reverberated in the place of origin. As an example, she cited the works of Aleijadinho, in Baroque, or the Venezuelan Armando Reverón and the Cuban Wifredo Lam, in modern art. However, she warned that this did not happen in the current scenario, as there was no resignification of North American production here, there was too much consumption and reproduction, thus criticizing the "submission" of Latin Americans themselves.

The intellectual took a critical look at these new artistic productions and supports, such as happenings and performances, in vogue in the second half of the 20th century. If, on the one hand, his warning against "fads", banalizations and lack of criticality in part of the artistic production of the time was valid, on the other hand, this perspective, in some cases, inhibited us from seeing new forms of resistance, resignification and potential questioning in these emerging productions. Not everything was consumption and reproduction here. What can we say, for example, about the Latin American artists who, at the time, used the most varied artistic supports to investigate more traditional forms of art, customs or even political regimes?

In Mexico, for example, from the 1960s onwards, female artists began to use their own bodies as artistic support, in a context of questioning customs, post-structuralism and existing feminisms. It is worth mentioning, for example, artists such as Ana Victoria Jimenez, Yolanda Andrade, Graciela Iturbide, Ximena Cuevas, etc. According to art historian Karen Cordero Reiman, "female artists in Mexico began to explore new discourses of the body that challenged not only the forms of bodily representation, but also the concept of political art that had characterized the dominant narratives of Mexican art up to that time". (CORDERO REIMAN, 2018, p.271). However, these productions have only recently been revisited.

It is noteworthy that in Latin America, the new forms of art were also very important as instruments of questioning existing authoritarianism. An example, in Brazil, was the artist Arthur Barrio, who in 1970 created bloody bundles made of flesh and bones, wrapped in a rope and distributed them in streams located in parks in Belo Horizonte, to denounce the disappearance of people during the military regime. Something that attracted a lot of attention at the time, attracting many curious people, who wanted to know if the bundles were corpses. The work, which could have been inserted in the spectrum called "art of destruction" by Marta Traba, was an example of confronting the existing repression in Brazil.

In Argentina, the *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán Burns) group was also an emblematic case of artistic opposition to the political regime at that time. In 1968, a group of artists organized exhibition events in the cities of Rosario and Buenos Aires, containing documents and images from the province of Tucumán, denouncing the situation of poverty, unemployment and neglect of the government, and furthermore, contesting the political and economic regime. Among the artistic manifestations were posters, graffiti on walls with the slogan "Tucumán Arde", happenings (serving coffee to

awaken the public to the oppressive reality), expeditions to Tucumán and collectives. The event gained great notoriety for fleeing traditional artistic methods, uniting art and political engagement. Thus, artistic support became as important as political and engaged content.

Still in relation to Marta Traba's essay, it is noted that the issue of authoritarianism existing in Latin America during the Cold War was also addressed in her analysis. On this point, Marta Traba reflected that:

> The forms of authoritarianism in Latin America are not related to technological tyranny: it covers the most radical aspects of progress, is equitable and presupposes a fair redistribution goods. consumer Latin American authoritarianism, on the contrary, stands outside of progress. It establishes immovable hierarchical layers that tend to completely paralyze possible progress, or to favor it slowly, under unbeatable developmental conditions. Generating forms of repression or containment, it remains petrified in an eminently political framework and does not consider, as happens in a highly industrialized society, that culture can be a consumer good, which can be manipulated for its own service (TRABA, 1977, p. 24).

As can be seen, Marta Traba placed in different positions the authoritarianism existing in Latin America and the technological "tyranny" that marked the United States. The first would be located within a political framework and, despite seeking some social progress, would be outside of it. Furthermore, in her view, these authoritarian regimes ended up promoting repression and cultural disinterest. On the contrary, in the United States, technological tyranny reigned, which understood culture as a "consumer good", which could be "manipulated" for its interests; however, it would be within an idea of progress and greater social equity.

⁸ In 2018, the exhibition entitled "Radical women: Latin American art, 1960-1985" was exhibited at the São Paulo State Pinacoteca, with the curatorship of Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta, in which some of the works of these artists were present.

Thus, Marta Traba critically perceived the differences between the two regions of the continent. For the intellectual, in these places, art and culture were undoubtedly also attacked by social and political milestones, whether by the technological and consumerist dictatorship, or by authoritarianism and neglect. In the case of Latin America, the existing cultural disinterest on the part of authoritarian political regimes resulted in the denial of new artistic languages, making Latin American artists more vulnerable and easily attracted to foreign movements. As if the situation of underdevelopment and political authoritarianism that marked Latin America directly affected the visual arts. On the opposite side, the Americans had more favorable political, economic and social conditions at that time, despite transforming culture and art into consumable goods.

Thus, in general, Marta Traba established in her imaginary game the main differences between the actors in this scenario There was Europe and "European art" (in a decadent position), which had lost its position as the main cultural hub after World War II. There was also the United States and "American art" (technological, individualistic and consumerist), which was the Western protagonist at that time and dictated the trends of art. Finally, there was Latin America and "Latin American art" made up in part by engaged/resistant artists and in part by submissive adherents to the sign of the North.

Thinking about this relationship between Latin America and the USA, in 1978, Aracy Amaral wrote the essay "Cultural Politics: why would the United States be interested in Latin American art?" In this essay, the Brazilian intellectual reflected on the interest in the US for Latin American art. From a summary survey of the exhibitions held at the Museum of Art in

New York (MoMA) so far, she found that after World War II, the institution's disinterest in Latin American art increased. Furthermore, she also realized that in the same period, local American critics had paid little attention to the production of Latin Americans¹⁰.

In her view, the US interest in the other, that is, in foreign art, including Latin American art, occurred at opportune moments, and besides, "it always represented a political gesture" (AMARAL, 1983, p.268). This finding can also be seen in a recent study that verifies the formation of the first Latin American art collection of MoMA. In addition to exhibitions, some effective actions in relation to Latin American art were carried out during the so-called Good Neighbor Policy and, later, in a political context called the Alliance for Progress (COTA JR., 2019).

In her essay, the Brazilian intellectual still questioned why the USA or North American art should be interested in Paraguayan art, if not even the Paraguayans themselves were interested in it at that time? This inquiry warned the Latin Americans themselves that it would be a mistake to wait for the constant interest of North Americans in the art produced in Latin America, considering that this should come from the Latin Americans themselves. Furthermore, she highlighted the element of "exoticism" in the "globalizing" and "undifferentiated" approach that North Americans usually give to Latin American art (AMARAL, 1983, p. 270). This type of undifferentiated approach that Aracy Amaral highlighted indicates the difficulty of foreigners in understanding the complexity of Latin American artistic production, as well as the problem of "adaptation" of this production to the universal models established by the central circuits of art, situated on the United States-Europe axis.

⁹ The text is part of a collection entitled "Arte e meio artístico: entre a feijoada e o x-burguer (1961-1981), (Art and artistic milieu: between feijoada and x-burguer (1961-1981))", published in 1983 by Nobel publisher, which brings together around 60 essays on art and culture written in the period. The essays included in the work deal with Brazilian and Latin American art, making them important references for scholars in the field. Due to its relevance, the work was republished by Editora 34 in 2013.

¹⁰ It can be seen that right after World War II, Latin America gained some prominence in the museum, especially in the field of architecture. As Fabiana Paiva dos Santos demonstrated in her recent study, some events were held on Latin American architectural production at MoMA during the period, with emphasis on the exhibition "Latin American Architecture since 1945", held in 1955, . See: SANTOS, 2019.

Aracy Amaral also reinforced that the US, as well as Brazil and other countries that had been colonized, always maintained a stronger cultural dialogue with Europe. Para For her, the North Americans, above all, appreciated what was happening in the Old World, keeping the European taste for the "exotic". In this sense, they considered it worthy of museums and collections of an anthropological nature, which happened in Africa, the Pacific and Latin America (AMARAL, 1983, p. 271).

It is interesting to note that, in Aracy Amaral's view, the coexistence of these cultural identities (European, North American and Latin American) does not necessarily place them in a position of competition or clash, as Traba put it in her essay. Although she thought about their respective differences and tensions, the Brazilian intellectual sought to highlight some points of similarity. She warned, for example, that the mutual lack of knowledge would happen either between the US and Latin America, or between Brazil and Paraguay, even if the North Americans were interested in the exotic, as mentioned above. Although Aracy Amaral pointed out some North American institutions that became interested in Latin American art, such as museums and universities, she did not clearly indicate the names of Latin American artists and institutions that not only legitimized the USA as a cultural center, but also started to seek their recognition¹¹.

However, it should be noted that both, each in her own way, contributed to Latin American critical thinking on the relations established between the region and the rest of the world in the artistic-cultural sphere. Marta Traba, for example, was emphatic when she pointed out the problem existing in the relationship between Latin America and the United States-Europe axis. In her essay, the author identified art produced in Latin America as something strongly linked to European "cultural domination" in the past

and, in contemporary moments, susceptible to North American cultural supremacy. Furthermore, she indicated a regional cultural scenario that is still not very autonomous (TRABA, 1977, p.10). In the same text, she pointed out this issue several times, as in the following excerpt:

It seems commonplace to assert that our continent has not surpassed the colonial state; the Spanish cultural domination during the 17th and 18th centuries, and the French and European in the 19th and early 20th centuries was, precisely, a cultural domination. The transmission of direction signals, unique to American civilization, has its originality within our "semi-everything" history: semi-independent, semi-dependent, semi-developed, semi-underdeveloped, semi-cultured (TRABA, 1977, p.16).

In confluence with this view, Aracy Amaral indicated in her essay that:

Self-assertion, coming from the Latin Americans themselves, would express much more an awareness of their own values and not their acceptance through the 'consecration of the metropolis', a situation experienced since nineteenth-century academicism (AMARAL, 1983, p. 268).

Marta Traba and Aracy Amaral saw the existence of a Latin American/South "self" in the process of construction, and that the relevance of the construction of this "self" consisted mainly in fighting uncritical alignments or hierarchies in the cultural environment. It is also possible to state that both sought to question the devaluation of artistic production from the southern hemisphere in the western world and that this also meant political

¹¹ The Bolivian artist Marina Núñez del Prado, for example, tried to enter the North American art scene during the first half of the 20th century, as the historian Giovana Mazza demonstrated in her study. See: Mazza, 2018.

actions against forms of "colonialism", which took place in that context. Edward Said, an author who theorized about the so-called "colonialism", stated that "the universalizing discourses of modern Europe and the United States, without any significant exception, presuppose the silence, voluntary or not, of the non-European world" (SAID, 1995, p. 86).

Aníbal Quijano, one of the exponents of the decolonial theoretical current, alluded to the projected image of Latin America in a mirror, to explain the distortions generated by the Eurocentric vision (QUIJANO, 2005, p. 118). The metaphor indicated by the Peruvian intellectual reflects on the distortions generated in the consecration of standards considered "universal". As these models of the North axis seen as "universal" are mirrored, often unattainable for Latin American societies, the feeling of backwardness is highlighted. Therefore, it would be essential to break with these paradigms and universalities that would be ways of perpetuating the so-called coloniality¹², a central notion of the so-called decolonial perspective.

In several essays by Marta Traba and Aracy Amaral, it was possible to perceive poignant criticisms, in which they used terms such as "import", "invasion", "cultural dependence" or "cultural colonization". In the case of Marta Traba, the criticism directed at Latin Americans on artistic-cultural submission in relation to the North axis stands out. Reflecting on the visual arts, Aracy Amaral stated, in her 1998 essay on identity and otherness: "this character of importing external models of the visual arts bothers us because we always feel like tailings of other centers" (AMARAL, 2006, p. 150).

More recently, Cristina Freire, professor and curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo, indicated that although we live in a time of strong digital connection, we know more information about what is happening in Berlin, London or New York than in Bogotá, Lima or Buenos Aires. She found that "the discrepancy in the distribution and dispersion of artistic information, despite the integrated circuits of globalization, refers to a colonial matrix of values and representations. This colonization of thought is still active in the academy and in art criticism" (FREIRE, 2015, p.19).

Decolonial criticism, in turn, can also be thought of beyond the visual arts, from other fields of knowledge, as Nilce Aravecchia Botas pointed out. For the architect and historian, this same criticism "makes us aware of the Eurocentric dimension of our intellectual heritage" or even the "North-Atlantic Centric" dimension, as Jorge Francisco Liernur also indicated in the case of architecture (ARAVECCHIA BOTAS, 2018, p.79).

Finally, it is once again highlighted that in the 1970s, as can be seen, intellectuals linked to the arts also questioned the place of Latin America in the world. In this sense, the idea of Latin American art was taken as an important cultural identity strategy. For Marta Traba, this strategy, or rather this Latin American project, was relevant to combat the so-called "cultural dependencies" and to seek greater autonomy and resistance in relation to the world scenario designed at that time. For Aracy Amaral, this strategy served to bring the Latin American countries closer together, valuing initiatives that sought greater contact and knowledge of our own reality. With that, they pointed to the path of critical and non-submissive actions, in which Latin Americans could question the meaning of "guiding" or constantly directing our artistic and cultural practices towards the United States-Europe axis, because, how Torres Garcia said, our north is the south.

¹² On the concept of coloniality and the decolonial perspective, see: RESTREPO, E.; ROJAS, A. Inflexión decolonial: fuentes, conceptos y cuestionamientos. Popayán: Samava, 2010.

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