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The Latin American Origins of ‘Alternative Modernism’

David Craven

As we approach the end of a millennium, we seem to be suffering from an excess of negative historical verdicts that in turn signal a lack of critical rigour in assessing modern developments. Nowhere is this observation more pertinent than to the postmortems for modernism that now endlessly circulate throughout academe and the art world. A revealing example of this ill-advised rush to dismiss modernism as a whole can be found, for example, in the otherwise commendable writings of art critic Thomas McEvilley, who wrote the following:

*It can now be recognized that Modernist internationalism was a somewhat deceptive designation for Western claims of universal hegemony... Modernist internationalism was a form of imperial assertion by which non-Western cultures would assimilate to Western norms. But as Modernism fetishized sameness, post-Modernist fetishizes difference... this [post-Modernist] project requires art to question and critique the very culture that produces it... Modernist art, by presenting beautiful objects lacking in apparent content, implied that the society producing such objects was also beautiful.*

So, here we have it in quite manichean terms: modernism is bad; postmodernism is good. The former is a wing of cultural imperialism and the latter is simply a means of thwarting it. Yet, McEvilley’s statement above presupposes a number of untenable claims, such as the assumption that the phenomenon of modernism in the arts was monolithic and nondifferential, as well as essentially Eurocentric. Unfortunately, McEvilley here implicitly starts off his criticism of modernism with an utterly uncritical acceptance of the late Clement Greenberg’s implausibly reductive definition of modernism.

Contrary to what both Greenberg and many of his opponents would have us believe, however, modernist art from the late nineteenth century until the late

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RUBEN DARIO AND THE INVENTION OF EARLY MODERNISM

It comes as no surprise for many of us to discover that, far from being coined in the metropolitan centers of the West, the term ‘modernity’ (or ‘modernism’) was in fact invented in the 1880s on the periphery of the world economic order by Rubén Darío of Nicaragua. Latin America’s first internationally acclaimed modern author and still one of her most influential novelists, Darío, who lived from 1867 to 1916, inaugurated Latin America’s earliest genuine avant-garde movements under the banner of modernism. He evidently first used this term around 1885-86 to refer to novel attributes in the writings of Mexican writer Ricardo Costerera.

In formal terms, Darío’s own modernism in such poems as Azul (1888) constituted a hybrid fusion of various artistic modes featuring heterogeneous cultural citations that were both European and non-European, along with being at once pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial in origin. All of these diverse elements were in turn densely interwoven with references to experiences gleaned from the fives. Among the contemporary visual artists about whom Darío wrote were the French sculptor Rodin and the late Symbolist Latin American painter Angel Zárraga.

Revealingly, when in 1912 he wrote an essay for Mundial Magazine about the paintings of Zárraga, Darío selected Rivera’s portrait of Zárraga to accompany his essay. Furtheremore, in this same issue of Mundial there was a brief discussion of Diego Rivera’s modernist paintings by another Latin American author. To a considerable extent, Darío was to modernism what Apollinaire was to Cubism. Marinetti was to Futurism, and André Breton was to Surrealism. In all four of these cases, a literary figure, specifically a poet, played a key role in articulating an avant-garde movement many of whose most well-known practitioners turned out to be painters (And here I am using the term ‘avant-garde’ movements’ so as to draw on the key concepts as associated with them in the now classic studies by Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger).

The general dynamic of this article is, in fact, not a one hand, by a reaction against the outdated and ossified literary conventions of official Spanish letters and it was motivated, on the other hand, by an assimilation of certain new developments in some nineteenth-century French literature that were then combined with pre-Columbian cultural traditions of the remote past. The view motivating this unlikely synthesis was articulated by Darío as follows in Prosas profanas (1896): ‘Si hay poesía en nuestra América, es porque yo escribí y la di a los niños...’

Second, I shall highlight the theory of history, specifically the conception of uneven historical development, that is presupposed by this above-noted notion of multivocal voice within modernity and importance. This is a tendency that has in fact contributed notably to an emergent postcolonial discourse that has become significant at the end of the twentieth century. When all of this has been done, it will become even more clear that postmodernism at its most profound is often a dissembling way of understanding and absorbing the progressive moments within modernism and thus in turn of advancing beyond them.'
Greece are overlooked. Our Greece must take priority over the Greece that is not ours." Aside from colonial peonage, there were the grave impediments of racism and imperialism that blocked the path of reconstituting the Americas along more socially just lines. Multiculturalism — embodied precisely that multilateral trajectory that Dore Ashton perceptively identified when she spoke of how modernist art at its most profound "moved backward and forward at the same time." As such, Dario's modernism was inflected by an alienation from capitalist social values, pervaded by an opposition to western colonialism, imbued with a desire to revitalize, or at least reuse, the non-western and pre-colonial artistic traditions of Latin America without, however, repudiating that which was still of great value in western art — and, finally, it was marked by an ambivalent embrace of what Charles Baudelaire had earlier called modernité (or modernity) in a well-known essay of 1863. Here, I think, it would be worthwhile to correct a very common misconception in art historical literature of the West. For Baudelaire's essay, "Le peintre de la vie moderne" (The Painter of Modern Life), was neither a definition for nor a theorisation of modernism, however much it did contribute to Dario's more theoretically self-conscious formulation of modernism later on. When Baudelaire wrote: "By 'modernité' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal, the immutable," he was simply defining modernity as the social experience of economic modernisation, to which the cultural practices and artistic processes of modernism would subsequently come to constitute a more self-conscious, often disjointed, and increasingly self-critical rejoinder.

This latter point was unintentionally made clear by Baudelaire's choice of the minor late Romantic artist Constantin Guys, rather than his proto-modernist friend Edouard Manet, as the "painter of modern life." In fact, Dario's closest counterpart in French literature was Stéphane Mallarmé, who, according to Roland Barthes and Marcel Duchamp, was the true first French modernist, even though he himself generally employed the more restrictive but also early modernism term of Symbolist. This Symbolist movement of the late 1880s and 1900s is justifiably seen as marking the advance of modernism and avant-garde in France. The modern visual artists for whom Dario showed a preference were themselves late Symbolists. Here, of course, I am following Perry Anderson and Marshall Berman in defining these above-noted terms, so that modernism designates the early artistic tendencies in opposition to, yet also tied to, the official high culture in the West. Similarly, just as the various tendencies of modernism were ambivalent and varied responses to the social experience of modernity, so the latter — even though he himself generally employed the more restrictive but also early modernism term of Symbolist. This Symbolist movement of the late 1880s and 1900s is justifiably seen as marking the advance of modernism and avant-garde in France. The modern visual artists for whom Dario showed a preference were themselves late Symbolists.
painting was being executed. Similarly, it has also been shown that some of Picasso's collages, such as the Bottle of Vase of 1912, feature newspaper articles about the horrifying loss of life in Turkey during the First Balkan War of 1912 and about anti-war speeches by anarchists before huge crowds that were protesting the "menace of a general European war" (to quote from one of the articles composing the collage that was taken from Le Journal in November 1912). As for the use of the idea of the fragment to explain the historical import of Cubism, we need only recall how Diego Rivera incisively defined Cubism along these lines:

It was a revolutionary movement, questioning everything that had previously been said and done in art. It held nothing sacred. As the old world would soon blow itself apart, never to be the same again, so Cubism broke down forms as they had been seen for centuries, and was creating out of the fragments new forms, new objects, new patterns and — ultimately — new worlds.

It was the deftly understated, even camouflaged, quality of Cubist fragments that Thomas Crow had in mind when he observed the following of the internal dialogue between high art and mass culture, as well as between western art and non-western art, in many Cubist collages:

The mixing of class signifiers was central to the formation of the avant-garde sensibility… to accept modernism's oppositional claims, we need not assume that it somehow transcends the culture of the commodity; we can see it rather as expatiating to critical purpose contradictions within and between distinct sectors of that culture… This careless switching of codes is readable as an articulate protest against the double marginalization of art… so that Cubism is… a message (with critical intent) from the margins of society...

Similarly, the origins of the visual language associated with Cubism in general and with collage in particular both presupposed and concretely enacted a profound critique (or deconstruction) of the nature of painting in the West. At issue was something more than the reductive exercise of working with the essence of the medium, as proponents of formalism maintain. (In fact, in a recent series of lectures at the Whitney, Richard Shiff largely disowned this Greenbergian reading of modernism by defining the medium as contingent on "the way the artist shapes the materials", and not as an a priori given with which an artist must be resigned to work.) As such, the inception of Cubism would have both an expansion of the communicative resources of the medium and a necessary contraction of the pictorial claims of European Renaissance art — that is, its illusions and illusionism.

Simultaneously, a Cubist painting both evokes and then undermines the high art conventions in the West for constructing perspective space as in the abbreviated use of chiarosuro, in the coy and inconsistent deployment of overlapping, and in the original suggestion but subsequent dissolution of figurative references. In addition, there is an artful decanting of the images, so as to disallow through an almost 'anarchistic' annulment, the hierarchical structure along with the sense of formal resolution that were almost always salient traits of the classical tradition. As such, a Cubist painting, with its all-over tension between the actual two dimensions of the picture plane and the fictive three dimensions of Renaissance vintage, is not just about an interrogation of the medium (as Greenberg contended). More importantly, modernist space in Cubist work resulted, whether intentionally or not, in a critique of the official pictorial language in mainstream western art, of which the medium itself was one, but only one, component. Indeed, it is precisely because modernist art at its most profound was a de-hierarchical and demotic critique of the overarching conventions of official western art that the collaboration aesthetic could become so effective at accommodating a multicultural interplay of western and non-western elements on equal terms.

In one of the most incisive post-formalist discussions of modernism (and I would like to insist here along with Mikhail Bakhtin that we not confuse the necessity of formal analysis with the fetish of formalism) Rosalind Krauss has deftly illuminated further how a Cubist collage, with its distinctive use of modernist space, addresses the mechanics of pictorial logic in art as the West. As Krauss has rightly observed, two of the formal strategies that develop out of collage space are those of figure/ground reversal and of the continual transposition between negative space and positive form, so that there is no visual sign without the attendant eclipse or negation of its material referent.

Thus, Cubist collage and modernist space end up critically exploring the cultural preconditions of western representation itself, that is, how images have been produced in pictorial terms and how these images have traditionally come to assume the status of signs. Such a self-critical investigation of how and why western painting has traditionally worked, specifically of how its system of representation has been culturally mediated, strongly disallows the assertion above by Thomas McEvilley that modernism in all its forms hegemonically privileges — that is, naturalizes — western art at the expense of non-western art. (This latter point about avant-garde modernism as a critical engagement with western hegemony, instead of being an uncritical presentation of it, was made by Meyer Schapiro in a series of classic essays from the 1930s up through the 1970s.39)

In fact, the Cubist contestation of western cultural hegemony is precisely what allowed Diego Rivera (one of the greatest of the Cubist painters) to recruit Cubist collage and modernist space on behalf of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, with its anti-imperialist mission to construct a non-Eurocentric national identity. There are two key works in this regard by Rivera that fuse the shifting planes of Cubism with the forces of revolutionary upheaval. These are his Portrait of Doctor Martín Luis Guzmán (1915) and his Zapata: The Motivos Landscape: The Guerrilla, which was painted in 1915 after Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa had taken and briefly occupied the capital of Mexico City. (In fact, Guzmán, a Mexican novelist, did serve at one point with Villa…)

A rival and generally unrelated movement that used modernist collage to quite different ends but for very critical reasons nonetheless was Surrealism, which numbered among its ranks at various points such major Latin American artists as Wifredo Lam, Frida Kahlo and Roberto Matta.40 And, of course, no other avant-garde movement contributed more to the emergence of anti-colonialist discourse or to the course of multi-ethnic identity in the arts than did the Surrealists. In 1943, André Breton called Aimé Césaire's damning indictment of European colonialism and western racism, in Cahier d'un retour juré natal, (Return to My Native Land), as "nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of our times."41 Picasso, who was also deeply moved by this Martinique poet's work, illustrated Césaire's fourth book, Corps étranger, in 1950.

While in Haiti during 1945, Breton declared the following to the poets of this Caribbean country:
modernism. One such work is Santos Medina’s painting of 1982 entitled La unidad revolucionaria de los Indiamericanos, which is located quite justifiably within the tradition of Rubén Darío’s modernismo. This painting combines intentional references to pre-Columbian ceramics, such as Nicoya ware, with allusions to European Cubism and an oblique recollection of Diego Rivera’s contribution to modernism via ‘Anahuac Cubism’. In this situation as in others, modernism is not simply a regressive remnant of the colonial past, but a still viable modus operandi as well as raw material for reconstructing a postcolonial present in keeping with a more egalitarian future.

In closing, I should probably note that one of the very few uses of the term ‘post-modern’ was by the historian Arnold Toynbee in a book entitled A Study of History, which was written in 1938 and published in 1947. Significantly, for Toynbee the term ‘post-modern’ was a chronological one rather than a stylistic one and it denoted basically ‘post-Eurocentric’ and ‘post-modernisation’ along western lines, or perhaps more accurately, ‘post-colonial’. Such a usage of ‘post-modern’ is definitely not at odds with the ongoing legacy of progressive, non-Eurocentric tendencies within modernism proper that I have outlined here. So, while there is indeed a sense in which we have entered a postmodern, postcolonial, and post-western-centred period of history, there is another sense in which we still have yet to catch up with modernism.

This is a slightly revised version of a paper that was presented in Spanish at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas in Managua, Nicaragua (July 3, 1995) and at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City (May 23, 1995). I would like to thank Alicia Azuela, Rita Eder, Kaul Quintanilla and Pedro Vergas for arranging these public presentations and for giving me helpful comments. I also presented earlier versions of this talk at Oberlin College and at the University of New Mexico.

A version of this paper was also presented in English at Oberlin College in the Fall of 1994 and at the University of New Mexico in the Philosophy Department’s Spring 1996 Colloquium. For their efforts in this regard, I would like to thank Patricia Mathews, Richard Spier, Amy Schmitter and Russell Goodman. For their support of my research on this paper, I would like to express gratitude to Marcos Sánchez, Holly Barnett-Sánchez, Stephen Eisenman and Marjory Amdur.

1 Ponary, also known as Ponari, is the Polish name for Paniatów Forest, eight miles from Vilnius. Before the war, large pits dug in the forest had been used by the Soviets for storing diesel fuel. After the German invasion of Lithuania, these pits were used as sites of mass execution and burial of up to 100,000 people, largely Jewish civilians from the Vilna Ghetto as well as Soviet and Polish prisoners.

2 The captured were shot and five days later the remaining prisoners in the pit were shot.


Dangerous Places: Ponar
An Installation by Pam Skelton
Griselda Pollock

One use of slave labour was to obliterate the trace of earlier mass murders. At Himmler’s special instigation, a series of special units, known collectively as ‘Unit 1005’, were being forced to dig up the corpses of those slain, to burn them, and to scatter the ashes. The work took nearly two years and involved exhuming more than two million corpses.

At Ponary more than 50,000 bodies were exhumed and cremated between September 1943 and April 1944. The Ponary unit, made up of 70 Jews and 30 Soviet prisoners of war suspected of being Jewish, was chained while working, and kept at night in a deep pit, with access to which was by a wooden ladder which was withdrawn each evening. After digging an escape tunnel with hands and spoons, 40 escaped on the night of 15 April. Twenty-five were caught and killed; 15 eluded their pursuers.

Martin Gilbert

I have borrowed this way of beginning from Janina Bauman, who prefaces the chapters of her memoirs of her experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto and survival in hiding outside its walls with extracts from the Encyclopaedia Judaica. Cold hard facts form one kind of necessary record; impassionate words draw the simple outlines of a black and white picture of ‘the historical event’. What happened was this. Yet History — our understanding of what happened like that — falls between and has to combine the cool statement of events, statistics, dates and places, and the intense, affecting and painfully extracted testimony of those who testify to ‘events without witnesses’. On the basis of the many Holocaust testimonies I have listened to, I would like to suggest a certain way of looking at the Holocaust that would reside in the following theoretical