



BOOK REVIEW

Latin America at Fin-de-Siècle Universal Exhibitions: Modern Cultures of Visuality,

by Alejandra Uslenghi,
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“Every epoch dreams the one to follow” (qtd. in Uslenghi 7). Early in the book’s introduction, author Alejandra Uslenghi revisits this Jules Michelet quote –also borrowed by Walter Benjamin– in order to establish the premise of her work: elucidating any period’s means of self-perception must necessarily examine how it conceives its own future. Illusion and awareness of time, two main ideas suggested by this quote, are thus crosswise to the author’s analysis of Latin America’s role in late nineteenth century world exhibitions. Uslenghi chooses three case studies that, because of their own specificities, convey the impossibility of speaking about a uniform and single Latin America.

As Uslenghi points out, this quote is “a historiographical leitmotif for Benjamin’s entire later research” (7). In fact, not only does Benjamin constitute the author’s most visible theoretical framework, but the implications of the phrase also define the book’s form and content. This quote “encapsulates the utopian impulse in the capacity of the imagination to anticipate what is not yet actual but conceived as possible: those dream images in which the inadequacies of social organization are transfigured and the collective brings its historical experience into remembrance” (7). Thus Uslenghi’s acknowledgment of this premise can help readers understand one of the most striking elements of the book: its puzzling structure, one that, in fact, mirrors the complex intertwinement of the author’s case studies: Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. It is worth mentioning two books that also touch on Uslenghi’s same case studies: *The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil*, by Jens Andermann, which in fact is among the author’s main secondary sources; and *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil*, by Esther Gabara, which although is not part of her bibliography, also shares some of her thoughts on photography and its influence on Latin American modernism. Uslenghi goes beyond in that she analyzes these countries’ role within the limits of another trio: the world exhibitions of 1876 (Philadelphia), 1889, and 1900 (both in Paris), each represented by three inventions: photography, iron, and motion.

With an organization determined by a sequence of exhibitions instead of a juxtaposition of geographic neighbors, Uslenghi favors time over space. She blurs each country’s own uniformity and seems to be aware that, being fragile, physical borders cannot delimit the scope of her work. The author’s choice is also important because

while it challenges readers to reconcile the visual incongruity of how the content of her research is distributed, the book itself exemplifies the same problems it poses about the illusions of visuality.

The correspondence between form and content is consistent. The inscription of space within a timeframe mirrors one element shared by all three countries: their desire to inscribe the national territory within a notion of universal time. According to Uslenghi, "Latin American countries sought to historicize and exhibit their recent past and their own formation as part of the process of 'nationing' their people; universal exhibitions provided the stage on which the stories of nations could be told and related to the prospect of a universal history of civilization" (7). Therefore, Uslenghi acknowledges that time was explicitly represented in the exhibitions, and the periphery coveted an inclusion in the worldwide passage of history. In other words, the periphery was eager to prove it was also worthy of a national past, a present of modernity, and a future of dreamed progress. As the author points out, all three countries had to engage in contradicting self-depictions that diluted the possibility of a uniform discourse. While pleasing the foreign gaze with a staged exoticism, they emulated the standards of other countries, thus remaining halfway between belonging and exclusion.

Early on, the book dismisses the possibilities of obvious structures, such as a division of nine chapters (three time periods per country), or simply one section per country. Instead, the exhibitions make up the book's three main parts, none of which is broken down per country. Each chapter is subdivided into themes that are not necessarily overarching to the three case studies; hence readers will find that the book's alleged focus on three countries is not consistent throughout all of its sections. The first chapter's subdivisions, for instance, include topics as broad as the visual narratives of empires and republics, the display of wealth, photography as the conquest of images, and literary expressions against American money-driven progress, among others. Not all countries are analyzed in each topic: in the last subsection mentioned, for instance, Uslenghi only examines a Brazilian example (poet Sousândrade¹), without any mentions of authors from the two other countries. In no way does this mean that Uslenghi ignores literary expressions from Argentina or Mexico. In fact, the influence of exhibitions in literature is broadly discussed, yet never within a cross-national comparison. Strikingly enough, all three countries are not even equally present in the chapters: for instance, neither Brazil nor Argentina participated in the 1900 exhibition in Paris.

Readers may feel perplexed by the author's decision to follow a chronological division in which necessarily two thirds of the work's scope are virtually absent from one third of the book and perhaps even more so when they realize that each exhibition is analyzed through the innovation it symbolizes: photography, iron, and motion,

1 Pseudonym of poet Joaquim de Sousa Andrade (1833-1902), considered one of Brazil's forefathers of Symbolism and Modernism.

accordingly. Although Uslenghi never admits the extent to which she is aware of this odd structure, she manages to prove its coherency.

Overall, Uslenghi's approach admits the "shortcomings" of her own research, that is, the difficulty of establishing common threads across the case studies. The book is never shy of conceding that although chronology facilitates a sequential narrative, in no way does it reconcile the asynchrony among all three countries. Based on this approach, Uslenghi successfully argues how anachronism became a trope of South America's involvement in foreign exhibitions. In fact, Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil are usually differentiated in terms of time, especially in their inability to be at the same stage of national development.

The 1876 Philadelphia exhibition, for instance, saw the three countries claiming a shared discourse of modernity but actually embodying different (and in Brazil's case, anachronistic) moments of world history. On the one hand, Brazil intended to harmonize the contradiction of a pro-slavery monarchy that promoted republican liberalism, while intending to depict progress through photographs of its virgin landscapes. On the other hand, Argentina and Mexico portrayed conflicting national projects, the former discreet and coherent, while the latter was rather fragmented (as was the country's weak federalism). Similarly, amidst the fascination for iron at the 1889 exhibition, Brazil and Argentina opted for a pavilion that emulated their European counterparts—Argentina even hired French designers. In contrast, Mexico conveyed a confusing vindication of its national identity by building a pavilion in iron and other European associated materials, despite the fact that it replicated an Aztec temple.

As a result, readers may interpret Uslenghi's inclusion of the 1900 exhibition (despite the absence of two out of three countries) as the ultimate proof of a failed anachronism. Indeed, this last chapter unfolds under a new lens: the author's most evident interdisciplinary approach, which identifies absence as a metaphorical tool of analysis. Uslenghi interprets the sequence of exhibitions—i.e. the progress of her chapters—as a chain of accumulated visualities in which each innovation contained those that came before. Consequently, South America's pervasive desire to emulate iron constructions was possible thanks to the ubiquity provided by photography, that one medium able to portray reality and utopia. Similarly, the 1900 exhibition's moving sidewalk (a platform that was meant to transport passengers in cities, similar to modern moving walkways) was possible only after the merge between photography and iron, or in Uslenghi's words, the "mechanization of perception" (143). Ultimately, this metaphor of accumulation and fragile borders allows the reader to understand why Argentina and Brazil's absence was not a deterrent against their inclusion in this chapter. In fact, the author manages to taunt the fragility of physicality by linking the experience of accumulation to the literatures from the same countries that were never present. Her revisited analysis of South American *modernismo* proposes that the same technology exposed in Paris offered a "visual urban experience" that would allow these

movements to have a “possibility for their literary innovations” (144). In other words, the author suggests that this exhibition had an impact on the literature of at least these three countries.

What we encounter in Alejandra Uslenghi’s work is a well-forged representation of an irony: a chronology of exhibitions with no real succession of events but rather of accumulated symbols, which by virtue of their ceaselessness escape one specific moment in time. We also see an ironical approach to the nature of comparative studies, which seems to claim that, at times, the only viable common thread is acknowledging that there is none. And this should not come as a surprise, especially when Uslenghi insists that these “unpredicted linkages” (31) are the essence of the “inherently contradictory” turn of the century: “a scenario of dizzying transformation and frantic motion: the contradictory energy of modernity” (186).

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