

Canudos: notes on the invisibility of Sertões

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Without falling, no bridge, once spanned, can cease to be a bridge.

Franz Kafka

1.0 Is Everything Northeast?

After an interruption of 46 years, the Bahia Biennale of visual arts opened its third edition on May 29, 2014, by asking: *Is Everything Northeast?* At the most explicit level, the project addressed the limits of official norms and definitions, since Northeast was a term created in 1969 (just one year after the abortion of the second edition of Biennale by the Brazilian dictatorial government) by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), grouping nine states into one word. This aggregate definition results in a creation of a stereotype of the inhabitants of this region, homogenizing the multiple differences under the denomination *Nordestino*. Always referred as an object of study, this "type" of Brazilian is always deprived of voice, even in ethnographical researches, which focus on him as a "subject". What is it to be a *Nordestino*? This question too seems to be raised by the title of the Biennale. Thus, the title of the exhibition challenges not only the definition created by the IBGE, but also the possibility of any kind of definition. It thus opens up a gap between the facts and the concepts. Between the words and the things, there is a micropolitical field where various questions of memory, identity, history and art are implicated.

The issue of the viability of aggregate definitions is not limited to official standards. In fact, it is even more relevant in the context of the very dynamics of an event such as the Biennale. In this sense, instead of proposing an exhibition centered in one place where it would be possible to create a fiction of contemporaneity (Osborne) under the curatorial perspective, the 3rd Bahia Biennale was composed of actions and exhibitions scattered between Bahia's Museum of Modern Art and 30 locations in Salvador and other ten cities. The curators' aim was not a mere substitution of a privileged venue with another, Salvador instead of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In fact, they tried to value heterogeneity under decentralization, dealing with the political and epistemological challenges of definitions and delimitations.

As one of the action fields proposed by the 3rd Biennale of Bahia, a group of artists and researchers were invited by the Brazilian artist Ícaro Lira to reflect upon the conditions of the historical battle of Canudos. The result of this ethnographic expedition was a book published by the artist. My contribution consisted in two texts, one of which established links between Lira's work and the book *Os Sertões* (translated as *Rebellion in the Backlands*). Written by Euclides da Cunha in 1902, it is a crucial work in Brazilian literature, on the one hand because it describes the struggle between the republicans and the missionaries lead by Antonio Conselheiro; on the other hand because it is an attempt to define the identity of the Brazilian nation. For the expedition of the 3rd Biennale of Bahia, I brought back da Cunha's book to its original site, re-interpreting some images and metaphors used by

the author in the context of Lira's discussion on the links between art and politics. Thus, the writer evokes some metaphors that will be, below, poetically bolstered in a movement that engenders challenges for the contemporary artistic practice.

2.0 Euclides the bridge-maker, or “Historical bridges in a culture of memory”

"Cem, duzentos olhos, mil olhos perscrutadores, volvem-se, impacientes, em roda. Nada veem." (CUNHA, 2001, p. 357).

Among Euclides da Cunha's fields of expertise, there is a suggestive one: bridge-maker. Perhaps, the most famous bridge that he engineered is the one on the Rio Pardo, in the State of São Paulo, a reconstruction project of 1898, year of completion of *Os Sertões*. As an engineer and a writer, da Cunha didn't span only material bridges, but also discursive structures and historiographical framings – epistemological bridges –, which, in spite of not being physical, may stand the test of time just as much. The proceedings are akin to a positivist civilizational project dominated by a determinist approach. The author may well be able to build a historical bridge from one of the most momentous events in the construction of the Brazilian identity, yet this bridge – from savagery to civilization – is incapable of bearing the weight of the complexity of contemporary cultural transformations.

The failure of reason as praised by the Enlightenment became evident through the horrors of the Holocaust, neocolonialism, *apartheid* and other wars and more recent manifestations: all these events lead the positivist bridge to collapse. In da Cunha's book, the conflict could still imply the illusion of an ideal civilization, in constant progress, in *comtian* terms (let us not forget the words on Brazil's flag). Currently, this could only be witnessed at the expense of a total absence of sensibility and an (ana)chronic blindness. A history-literature as in Euclides da Cunha is impossible.

If the historical discourse ceased to serve a civilizational project, what is it linked to then? It is necessary to take into account the neo-baroque character of our times with its proliferation of copies without an original, signs of signs replicating *ad infinitum*. In this context, it is important to underline the inclination to memoir writing, translated in the emergency of a culture and a politics of memory, which are tightly leashed to the time acceleration resulting from programmed obsolescence and to the immediacy of the so-called new technologies. The contemporary condition is marked by the attempt to suppress those gaps resulting from the incessant acceleration of time through the production of memory, which is often reconstituted by one type of history as a will of telling and exposing everything, in every detail. Everything must be told, nothing can be left absent. To the anguish and the emptiness of these accelerated times, we respond with an abundance of memories.

In general terms, the tiniest details and the exhaustively reported facts are intertwined in a synthetic and compact narrative, shaping an undisguised neo-historicism, above all through remakes, biographies and stories in which any resemblance is all but mere coincidence. An undeniable fact to the dissemination of the culture of memory is the presence of the operations of history in the symbolic market of late capitalism. These spread through TV channels, movie theaters and bookshelves, *disneyfying* the past. Memory – its main qualities being synthesis and intelligibility – is trendy. There is always a readily accessible moral lesson giving us the liberty to quickly buy instead of thinking.

Somehow, this approach to the historical discourse with an unequivocal and teleological sense resembles Euclides da Cunha's bridge. In his book, we have an abundance of fastidious descriptions of battles, flora and fauna. We have a dividing line being drawn between the republicans and their opponents, between the barbarians and the civilized. We have, once again, the issue of racial mixing. Would this progressive history be possible? Would this kind of bridge be even possible in the midst of the 21st century?

How to produce a thought-through history? The profusion of details develops into absence, which finally seems to respect the lengthy time of thinking and even the memory of the dead. This doesn't mean that Canudos is lacking adequate reporting: *Os Sertões* certainly initiated what we may call the historiographical discourse on facts, which has been replicated several times, for instance in fictional films (*Guerra de Canudos*, directed by Sérgio Rezende), in school subjects (in the schools of the sertão of Bahia there are classes specifically devoted to the history of Canudos), in schoolbooks and in theoretical writings (such as *Terra Ignota*, by Luis Costa Lima, one of Brazil's most distinguished intellectuals). Hence, Canudos is flooded with discourses and historical reconstitutions. The war is talked about, stories are written, here Antônio Conselheiro is acknowledged as a fool and there as a leader concerned by social justice. Why then conceive one more work about this subject? Precisely because of what is omitted in the discourse, what words will never be able to express.

The experience of an absent history as we are referring to here seems possible, for instance, by visiting the Parque Estadual de Canudos where in fact there is nothing to see aside from the opulent tyranny of the Brazilian shrubland (caatinga). This is why the impertinence of the huge picture panels installed in glass cases around the park must be underlined as this goes against the silent shriek, which they try to outline. The horrors of the war, the thousands of wounded and dead, the resistance of the *conselheirista* movement: all this remains invisible. It is however there, present, rooted in the scenery. Flooded, razed, vanished, Canudos hides itself in a landscape, which demands experience. The only way to understand it, is to walk under the scorching sun, wander around the bright wilderness in the noontide, feel the lack of air, gape to the limits of eyesight, resist to thirst and hunger in the open desert, let the thorns of the bushes scratch the skin, get disoriented by the bells of the cows and goats disguised in the shrubs. The beautiful landscape survives thanks to the horrors of those who fought there. The insignificance of the visible carries the weight and the absence of events, which are summoned with each and every step, and this is the only story that can offer an appropriate image to the situation as it spurs our imagination through the experience. There is no other way to hear the dead.

Even more telling is the call of an absent history considering the Brazilian Art History, which, according to our foremost critics – Ronaldo Brito and Paulo Venancio Vilho, for instance –, is delusive, modest and even inexistent. This doesn't mean that we should plaster the cracks in order to create a duly structured medium of art, but that we should think this absent History of Art in a positive – not positivistic – way. Which is to say: show – and not fill – the gaps.

3.0 Isolation

"Ora, toda essa população perdida num recanto dos sertões lá permaneceu até agora, reproduzindo-se livre de elementos estranhos, como que insulada, e realizando, por isso mesmo, a máxima intensidade de cruzamento uniforme capaz de justificar o aparecimento de um tipo mestiço bem definido, completo [...] Causas muito enérgicas determinaram o **insulamento** e conservação autóctone" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 195).

"**Insulado** deste modo no país que o não conhece, em luta aberta com o meio, que lhe parece haver estampado na organização e no temperamento a sua rudeza extraordinária, nômade ou mal fixo à terra, o sertanejo não tem, por bem dizer, ainda a capacidade orgânica para se afeiçoar à situação mais alta" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 237 - 238).

"**Insulado** no espaço e no tempo, o jagunço, um anacronismo étnico só podia fazer o que fez – bater, bater terrivelmente a nacionalidade que, depois de o enjeitar cerca de três séculos, procurava levá-lo para os deslumbramentos da nossa idade dentro de um quadrado de baionetas, mostrando-lhe o brilho da civilização através do clarão de descargas" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 502).

In *Os Sertões*, the image of isolation defines the *modus vivendi* of the Sertanejo. Geographically, the people of Canudos were isolated because of the incommunicability that ensues from the local climatic and ecological conditions. Historically, they were Brazilians living out of time as they represented a point outside the curve of progress. However, they couldn't even really be Brazilians, for their remoteness from the federal principles, which characterized urban centers, put the Sertanejos so much as out of Brazil.

Let's recover the image of isolation by seeing in it a powerful poetic procedure. Thus, the scientific-literary image of Euclides da Cunha becomes linked to the concept of "defamiliarization" coined by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky. This implies a distinction between practical and poetic language, the first pointing at the recognition of the object while the second aims at its perception. Practical speech, being above all used in day-to-day communication, is marked by a process of perceptive automation. In this practical context, the singularization of objects is only possible through poetic procedures, which can restore the originality of life experience in things. Now, singularization really is tantamount to the strategy of isolation. Isolating an object thus means removing it from the sphere of the ordinary, place it beyond the usual time and space so as to renew perceptions, maintain differences and beget enigmas.

The image of isolation in this sense of "defamiliarization" seems to work in a way that keeps in check the very prevalence of the concept. If it is undeniable that we do need concepts, it is also true that these may engender prejudices by narrowing the inexhaustible range of real possibilities. As we resolve to defend the vim of things, we must insulate them, underline the rebelliousness of the singular against the universal (of course, by isolation we should not understand the dislocation to the aseptic environment of the white cube).

4.0 Index

"O sertão de Canudos é um **índice** sumariando a fisiografia dos sertões do Nordeste" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 109).

"A sua religião é, como ele – mestiça. Resumo dos caracteres físicos e fisiológicos das raças de que surge, sumaria-lhes identicamente as qualidades morais. É um **índice** da vida de três povos. [...] Não seria difícil caracterizá-las como uma mestiçagem de crenças. Ali estão, francos, o antropismo do selvagem, o animismo do africano e, o que é mais, o próprio aspecto emocional da raça superior, na época do descobrimento e da colonização" (CUNHA, 2001, p. 238 - 239).

Isolated mestizo: a paradoxical image that Euclides da Cunha proposes in order to designate the *jagunços* (militias) of the Northeast. The incongruity comes from the juxtaposition of mixture and isolation, for how would it be possible to intermingle when living in retreat? The solution might lay in the semiotic concept of indexicality.

The index is a trace. As such it works as presence of the absence. The smoke indicating a fire, a footprint suggesting a step, a projected shadow, the photographic testimony of a past event. If this is the case, the index contains a direct relation of physical derivation, as theorized by Charles S. Peirce.

In the context of the sertão, the index appears in the earth, in the religion and in the race, that is everywhere. Without going as far as suggesting a flow of synthesis between elements, the image of the index cannot be ignored when dealing with *Canudos*. In order to respect its semiotic specificity it is necessary to turn to the logic of symptoms, which, despite relying on contiguity, goes against the claim of totality of a complete work, of a compact history. It might thus be that a work on *Canudos* must take into account the indicial nature of the examined object.

5.0 Faith: religion and civilization

Da Cunha's epic abounds with images of Antônio Conselheiro as the crazy messiah with the power of provoking the pandemonium in the sertão. Held as a living document of atavism, the religious leader is portrayed as false apostle reigning in an environment ailing under the obfuscation of reason.

Of course, the author can be excused for his positivistic faith if we take into account that his views predated the historical context of the great catastrophes of the XX century. Moreover, Euclides da Cunha seems to even out the republican creed and the religious faith in the last part of his account, establishing a parallel between the religious and the republican messiahs:

"A luta pela República, e contra os seus imaginários inimigos, era uma cruzada. Os modernos templários, se não envergavam a armadura debaixo do hábito e não levavam a cruz aberta nos copos da espada, combatiam com a mesma fé inamalgável. Os que daquele modo se abatiam à entrada de *Canudos* tinham todos, sem excetuar um único, colgada ao peito esquerdo, em medalhas de bronze, a efigie do marechal Floriano Peixoto e, morrendo, saudavam a sua memória – com o mesmo entusiasmo delirante, com a mesma dedicação incoercível e com a mesma aberração fanática com que os *jagunços* bradavam pelo Bom Jesus misericordioso e milagreiro..." (CUNHA, 2001, p. 617).

It may thus be inferred that the mystic character of the republican endeavor can be compared to the religious fervor of the *conselheiristas*. This parallel leads to the confirmation of a shift in emphasis by the author, who, by stressing the similarity between religion and civilization, suggests himself a more contingent view of the progressive perspective.

Furthermore, as Walter Benjamin put it, it must be understood that "the history of art is a history of prophecies". The artist would then in turn be an individual beset by visions of other possible worlds. The work of art would thus be a prophecy, religious as much as civilizational. Such a

perspective leads to the question of the relevance of images coming, not from the great advertising vehicles (which condition us to the Civilization of Images), but rather from personal cosmologies. What sort of validity would these constructions based on fictions, dreams, visions and even hallucinations hold?

Bibliography

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