

Reseña / Review

Sarah Ann Wells, *Media Laboratories: Late Modernist Authorship in South America*.
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The Poetics of Media Consolidation

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“Sounds of unknown or muddled origins run stealthily through many of the texts I analyze in this book...” (53): this moment of critical self-reflection provides a useful point of departure for a reading of *Media Laboratories*, Sarah Ann Wells’s recent study of authorship and media during the late modernist period (1929-46) in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Her observation in this passage links together the work of various of the authors analyzed in this excellent volume of criticism—Felisberto Hernández, most centrally, but also Patrícia Galvão, Clarice Lispector, and Adolfo Bioy Casares. But it is the adverb “stealthily” that stands out most to me, for it appears to indicate that these sounds—representations of sound in writing, depictions of characters hearing or not hearing—make up a sonic background that is by turns banal and incomprehensible, though also important enough to merit comment.

By and large, these are the sounds of light industry. They are the buzzing, humming and clicking of electric lights and mechanical devices powered by small motors, objects that towards the middle of the twentieth century increasingly populated

interior spaces in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. They are also technologies of communication in which, frustratingly, language itself is often obscured—think of a record playing in another room that you can hear through the walls without making out the words, a character in a *radionovela* whose pleadings are interrupted by the static of transmission, or of an office full of typing, each individual phoneme reduced to the same uniform, infernal click-clack. They are also, as Wells points out, the sounds of mass society. Against the backdrop of both circumstances—a media landscape populated by mechanical devices and a social world in which the masses are becoming political protagonists—the authors of late modernism will articulate new terms of authorship.

“New,” however, is a relative term, a fact that Wells emphasizes to important effect. “Late modernism,” she writes in her book’s introduction,

is indeed a reaction to economic or political crises, from the dictatorships that sprung up across the continent during this period to the global economic depression that affected the material experiences of writers, including Jorge Luis Borges’s new relationship to the rapid-fire production of mass journalism, Felisberto Hernández’s struggle to make a living in a Paris evacuated of surrealist promise, and the alliances with the proletariat and precariat found in the novels of Graciliano Ramos and Patrícia Galvão. More immediately, late modernism is a reaction to its artistic predecessors: rupture, the avant-garde’s mobilizing condition, had become a “sales pitch,” as the autobiographical narrator of “Around the Time of Clemente Colling,” a short story by Felisberto Hernández, puts it. In this description, the new (*lo nuevo*) parades in front of the narrator’s gaze, evacuated of content. (6)

Late modernist writers thus respond to the conditions of production that circumscribe their lives and labors, while also critiquing the aesthetic of rupture characteristic of their immediate predecessors in the arts, something that Wells makes clear by analyzing the waning of the genre of the manifesto from the late twenties onward (13). While I question the notion that the aesthetic position is more “immediate” than the writers’ economic circumstances, Wells here identifies something fascinating: a shift in both material life and aesthetic style that demonstrates a rejection of an attitude that heralds “lo nuevo” as something both desirable and meaningful.

Dates are important in this analysis, and Wells is attentive to the fine grain of change. She takes 1922—the year of São Paulo’s Modern Art Week, and elsewhere of the publication of *Ulysses*—as an index for avant-garde optimism, while 1930 marks, in many contexts around the world, a shift away from this disposition (16). I’ll quote her succinct summary of the new circumstances inaugurated by, among other things, economic depression:

Beginning in 1930, in Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina, the promises of what had been up to this point a most experimental and hopeful moment of progressive modernity—political, economic, technological, and aesthetic—seemed to be radically foreclosed. Liberal democracy, the sense of freedom the avant-gardes espoused, and a presumed link between technological and political modernization all seemed precarious, if not impossible. (18)

In barely the space of a decade, then, we find an important shift in the material conditions of aesthetic production, and the consequences will be amply reflected in the notions of authorship that emerge in response.

To summarize these notions briefly, the authors analyzed in Wells's study tend toward a model of authorship that is receptive, rather than assertive. "Rather than prescient seers and producers of new worlds, they became conduits of a dense, embodied reception of the troubled present, recasting themselves as spectators, listeners, and users" (4). Hence the coolness of the affective dispositions of these writers, as well as their disenchantment and, I would add, a certain reticence characteristic of many of their works.

This shift is important, though often unremarked. Perhaps we can appreciate its impact by returning briefly to the sonic situation quoted at the beginning of this review and contrasting it with how sound appears elsewhere—concretely, among two Chilean poets: Vicente Huidobro and Pablo Neruda.

Huidobro's anti-mimetic manifesto "Non serviam" (from 1914) and his short poem "Arte poética" (from 1916) aptly spell out the luciferian aesthetics best summed up in the final line of the latter: "El Poeta es un pequeño Dios." He would most famously explore the consequences of this brash position in the seven cantos of *Allazor*, which was published in 1931 but composed from 1919 onward. Notably, the long parachute voyage of his protagonist is not only a fall from grace, but also a fall from articulated meaning and into sonic chaos. The final two cantos, and especially the last one, comprise a liberation of linguistic sound from the tasks of expression.

For his part, Neruda first published his poem "Galope muerto" in 1925, in Chile, and then more prominently in 1930 in Madrid's *Revista de Occidente*; it would eventually open the book *Residencia en la tierra* upon its appearance in 1933. In the third of the chain of similes that opens this poem, Neruda depicts the ringing of bells, which generates a sound that resonates outward, crisscrossing space, liberated from its metallic beginnings: "teniendo ese sonido ya aparte del metal," he writes. That separation obscures the origin, severs sound from source, which makes the experience of the bells an experience of forgetting, perhaps also of lamenting our loss.

I bring up these two other South American writers, and particularly these works by them that were written very shortly before the late modernist period, because the way they represent sound is so distinct from what we find in Felisberto Hernández or Patrícia Galvão, for example. The sounds of the environment in Huidobro and Neruda are natural, primal, or in any case ancestral. They are the infinite reservoir on which the poet-as-prophet will draw in order to project strength and clarity: a linguistic will to make the world anew.

Such is, of course, the aesthetics of rupture characteristic of the avant-garde. Wells's late modernists will seek another path. If the voice in Neruda's "Galope muerto" enters, singing, "like a sword among the defenseless," the protagonists of, for example, Felisberto Hernández's minor stories will grope and listen and squint in search of clues—not entirely without defenses, perhaps, but certainly not wielding a sword.

Hence the importance of the varied sense experiences explored in *Media Laboratories*. Chapter One focuses on cinema spectatorship in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, particularly the place of Hollywood in *A Universal History of Infamy*, and in *Industrial Park* by Patrícia Galvão, especially her remediations of Soviet cinema. Chapter Two centers on the listener of both radio broadcasts and sound-enhanced film in the work of, among others, Felisberto Hernández. Chapter Three explores the figure of the proprioceptive typist in Graciliano Ramos and Clarice Lispector, while Chapter Four will return to Hernández and the haptic world of his protagonists. Finally, Chapter Five reads Adolfo Bioy Casares's *The Invention of Morel* alongside Borges's "Funes, the Memorious" and "The Aleph" as experiments in imagined media. Whether through sight or sound, self-perception or touch, these are experiences in which the receptive aspect of sensation is emphasized.

These chapters are wide-ranging and engagingly written. Wells situates the authors of late modernism in a historical narrative that is enriched by her archival study of little magazines and a constant attention to the human encounter with media machines. The resultant breadth of her vision of history allows very detailed, very close readings to shine brightly. One noteworthy example comes in Chapter Three, during a discussion of the figure of Macabéa, the young typist in Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*, who misspells the verb *designar* because she finds the appearance of two consonants side by side disagreeable and, more importantly, unnatural in her own way of speaking. Wells's comments on this passage are worth quoting, as an example of her style of analysis:

Macabéa's love for the sounds of words, especially mispronounced ones, becomes a motif in the novella. On the one hand, her errors underscore the quintessential problem of Brazilian modernism: the abyss between written and spoken language and the writer's capacity to traverse this divide, as epitomized by the work of Mário [de Andrade].... But there is more, because Macabéa also disturbs her boss's designation with her mistaken supplement. With that extra "ui" by which *designate* becomes *desiguinar*, she quite literally interrupts the word "sign"—and by extension a mark, design, or signature that bestows authority. (106)

The coupling of minutely close attention to detail to an awareness of history both literary and general, exemplified by this reading of Lispector, is an important strength of Wells's study.

This labor of such close reading is also what allows for the theorization of the notion of "media laboratories." These are precarious sites "where authors test out the implications of changes in the production, circulation, and reception of media," and they "become prominent," Wells posits, "during moments of perceived consolidation, as opposed to emergence, of extant media" (xii-xiii). These laboratories, fictions where the affective and social consequences of media consolidation are probed and explored, allow for an engagement with media in the moment of their bureaucratization—when, to use Bruno Latour's term that Wells also deploys, they inhabit a "black box"—rather than when they are first being created.

Because of this temporality, *Media Laboratories* has much to say about the possibilities attendant to the present moment. After all, in recent decades, we have moved from the fevered reception of new media and the new worlds they promised, into a scenario characterized by the sobering consolidation of these technologies under the control of a few billionaires—men whose material interests hinge on the continuing hype of novelty, even as the products of their innovations are, on a good day, trivial and, most other days, actively harmful to human wellbeing. In this context, we would do well to attend to the written experiments of late modernist writers, learning from the irony of their comprehension of a world that must have seemed to them suddenly full of noise and full of stuff. Sarah Ann Wells's *Media Laboratories*, besides casting new light on an important period in the literary history of Argentine, Brazilian, and Uruguayan literature, thus gives us new conceptual tools for the work that remains to be done.