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The Torn Halves of Mexican Modernism: Maples Arce, O'Gorman, and Modotti

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What role should art play in a post-revolutionary situation? In the wake of the Mexican Revolution, this question could not be avoided. Whereas artists prior to the uprisings of 1910 could potentially overlook their broader social context, by the 1920s it seemed that art could legitimate itself only in some relation to the demands of the historical moment. This charge was felt acutely by architects as the post-revolutionary governments began to construct public monuments and ministry buildings. Additionally, the scarcity of housing and educational facilities was becoming an urgent problem in Mexico City. In 1933, the Sociedad de Arquitectos Mexicanos organized the "Pláticas sobre arquitectura" to discuss the future of Mexican architecture and the various responses that had emerged since the Revolution to address architecture's role in the new society. The conference—most likely intended to shore up traditional architectural tendencies—turned into a veritable avant-garde event as functionalists aggressively confronted the then-dominant neo-colonial style promoted by José Vasconcelos[1] and embodied in the works of Carlos Obregón Santacilia. Neo-colonial

[1] Vasconcelos supported neo-colonial architecture for its affinities with his concept of the "cosmic race," a synthesis of all existing races that was destined to inaugurate a spiritual age of civilization. Moreover, by conveying a sense of continuity, neo-colonial architecture gained broad appeal to the extent that it "would prove a reassuring message to those conservatives who

architecture, which incorporated elements of Spanish colonial buildings, like tile roofs, decorative spires and arches, emerged in the early twentieth century to satisfy the need for a distinctly Mexican style in contrast to the French influences of the Porfiriato. But, according to Juan O'Gorman, the most prominent of the Mexican functionalists, the neo-colonial architects responded to an artificial need. Polemically endorsing the work of Le Corbusier, O'Gorman argued that "architecture will have to become international for the simple reason that man is becoming increasingly international" ("Conferencia" 74).[2] Although he would later become known for organic designs and for the monumental mural of Mexican history on the Central Library at UNAM, in the "Pláticas" O'Gorman committed himself to what had recently become known as the "International Style," thus opposing the need for a peculiarly Mexican style of architecture. Whereas neo-colonial architects used ornamental details to bring about a synthesis of indigenous motifs and classical European forms, thereby conveying historical continuity and a narrative about Mexican cultural identity, O'Gorman built non-ornamental, geometrical houses and efficient, functional schools, thus positing a radical rupture with the colonial past and a wager on the technological innovations of global modernity, like reinforced concrete.

The split between O'Gorman's functionalism and the neo-colonial style resonates with Ángel Rama influential account of Latin American modernism in "Las dos vanguardias latinoamericanas" (1973). In this essay, Rama argues that modernist artists and works in Latin America can be distinguished in terms of whether they adopt a national-popular attitude or a cosmopolitan orientation. Rama asserts that national-popular modernists attempt to calibrate universal literary forms to national situations, whereas cosmopolitan artists seek an "abrupt rupture with the past" (62). If the former aspires to communicate with "a social community" by drawing on what presumably unities that community—e.g., indigenous cultures, the language of popular sectors—the latter "intensifie[s] their link with the structure of the European avant-gardes" (62).[3]

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feared the Revolution and the full imposition of the Constitution, as well as to those progressives who believed that the key to Mexico's future was a recovery of its past" (Olsen 7).

[2] O'Gorman's comments evoke Manuel Maples Arce's imperative a decade earlier in "Actual No. 1" (1921) to "become cosmopolitan" [*Cosmopolitícémonos*] (45). To my knowledge, O'Gorman and the estridentistas never directly collaborated, most likely because O'Gorman became active as an architect in the late twenties and early thirties, a few years after the estridentistas moved to Xalapa and then disbanded.

[3] "un sector del vanguardismo, más allá del rechazo de la tradición realista en su aspecto formal, aspira a recoger de ella su vocación de adentramiento en una comunidad social, con lo cual se religa a las ideologías regionalistas; otro sector, para mantener su formulación vanguardista, que implica abrupta con el pasado y remisión a una inexistente realidad que les

Beyond the realm of architecture, Rama's distinction aptly describes the differences between the *estridentistas*, with their technological, cosmopolitan utopias, and the muralists, with their epic narratives of Mexican culture stretching from pre-conquest times to the revolutionary present. If the *estridentistas* rejected the past and national commitments by engaging in a dialogue with Futurism and Dadaism, the muralists embodied the attempt to communicate with a non-elite, national-popular audience. In short, Rama describes a situation in which Latin American modernists face a choice between mutually exclusive options: either technical, formal innovation or popular accessibility; either participate in the formal experiments of the artistic vanguard and ignore the traditions and issues relevant to Latin Americans; or address the Latin American public by subordinating artistic form to the demands of local reality.

Rama's essay clearly articulates not only the terms in which Latin American modernism continues to be discussed but also the positions that tend to define Latin American literary criticism as a whole. For instance, decolonial theory, with its emphasis on de-linking from Western epistemologies, follows the spirit of the national-popular orientation in Latin American modernism. Decolonial critics have deepened Rama's insights into how certain artists reject the formalist impulses of the European avant-gardes and engage in projects to vindicate indigenous cultures and marginalized worldviews. But the cosmopolitan impulse also remains alive and well in Latin American literary criticism. These critics have shown how Latin American modernists, inspired by what Mariano Siskind calls a "desire for the world," had their fingers on the pulse of contemporary developments in the global political and artistic scene.[4] Cosmopolitanism, these critics suggest, does not necessarily entail ignorance of specifically Latin American questions; rather, it establishes global connections and offers ways of understanding local issues in a broader context.[5] The fact that debates in Latin American modernist studies—and literary criticism more broadly—take the form of a split between cosmopolitan and national-popular (or decolonial) tendencies indicates how persuasive Rama's account has proven to be. Nevertheless, I will argue

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espera en el futuro, intensifica su vinculación con la estructura del vanguardismo europeo, esto lo forzará a crear un posible ámbito común para las creaciones artísticas de uno y otro lado del Atlántico, lo que obligadamente pasa por la postulación de un universalismo".

[4] See Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America.*

[5] In this way, the cosmopolitan direction in Latin American literary criticism dovetails with the expansionary impulse of "new modernist studies," which has not only reconceived modernism along broader spatial and temporal lines but has also challenged the "great divide" between high and low culture that previously seemed to be one of modernism's most distinctive features. For the programmatic statement on the trope of "expansion" in the "new modernist studies," see Mao and Walkowitz.

that it ultimately fails to make sense of modernism and the underlying forms of inequality in the periphery that give rise to the very opposition of cosmopolitan and national-popular tendencies. I offer an alternative framework by examining how Mexican modernists—the functionalist architect Juan O'Gorman, the *estridentista* poet Manuel Maples Arce and the photographer Tina Modotti—sought to contribute to the Mexican Revolution, but not by subordinating their works to an external end. Rather than reject the autonomy of art, O'Gorman, Maples Arce and Modotti insist on the antithesis of art and life in order to disclose the limits of the Mexican Revolution, its failure to overcome the forms of inequality that motivated the Revolution in the first place and are inseparable from peripheral capitalism. Before undertaking a close analysis of the works of O'Gorman, Maples Arce and Modotti, I will elaborate on the historical and structural reasons for these peripheral forms of inequality, their implications for the goals of the Mexican Revolution, and I will explain how the autonomy of the artwork involves a critique of capitalist forms of social life.

We can begin to grasp the inadequacy of Rama's account and the outlines of a more compelling framework by noting that O'Gorman's polemic against the national-popular impulse of neo-colonial architecture derives from a more fundamental issue. The choice is not between Mexican or International style, according to O'Gorman, but rather between "technical architecture," which "serves the majority" and "man," and "academic architecture," which "serves the minority" and "money" ("Conferencia" 75). First, we should recognize that O'Gorman acknowledges the split between the "majority" and "minority," that is, the elite and the masses, but at the same time he avoids the temptation to interpret this split in terms of an opposition between a particular cultural identity in Latin American and putatively universal, European forms. In this way, O'Gorman stands apart from Rama, who suggests in "Las dos vanguardias," as elsewhere, that the value of a cultural good depends on the ability of Latin American subjects to recognize in it the expression of their identity.[6] For instance, the national-cultural orientation of the muralists would seem to be truer to Latin

[6] Charles Hatfield has developed this critique of Rama far more eloquently and extensively than I can here. For Hatfield, "It is as if, Rama seems to suggest, one must achieve what he calls a 'lofty perspective,' transcending one's particularity, to think that our beliefs and values are not just true, given who we are but rather true, regardless of who we are. However, the desire to maintain our social values in the first place is rooted not in their being ours but rather in our belief that they are the true values—hence the desire to preserve them" (Hatfield 6). For Hatfield, beliefs necessarily entail claims for universality, and politics is the domain in which disagreements about these claims are worked out. The logic of identity, however, implies that the truth of a statement depends on one's subject position, meaning that politics and disagreements are reduced to questions of preference.

American reality than the cosmopolitan *estridentistas* because, in Rama's account, artworks are evaluated in terms of their ability to articulate a Latin American identity. Rama thus assumes that the meaning of the artwork ultimately depends on its relationship to the public. In other words, the artwork is determined not by the ends it sets for itself; rather, it is subordinated to an external end, the struggle for cultural independence, which is a matter of the artwork's effects on the audience.[7] But, for O'Gorman, it is not that "technical architecture serves the majority" because the majority recognizes it as the expression of who they are. Instead, as we will see in more detail below, O'Gorman holds that architecture should refuse to subordinate itself to an external end by insisting on the autonomy of the work from the demands of money and thereby making normative claims in relation to inequalities based on the social power of money.

O'Gorman's attention to inequality also raises another problem with Rama's account. Rama presupposes a form of communication that is often at odds with modernism and the form of peripheral societies. He assumes that artists can directly communicate with the national-popular masses, but modernists frequently question the possibility of such direct communication. Relying on the notion of the autonomy of the artwork, he notes that modern life deforms the sort of shared commitments that make such communication possible in the first place. In the core of the capitalist world-system, this concern often assumes the form of a modernist anxiety about the dissolution of traditional values, but peripheral modernists often confronted the additional dilemma that not even past traditions could be invoked to speak on behalf of a putatively national community. As Roberto Schwarz has convincingly argued, peripheral social formations are characterized by "forms of inequality so brutal that they lack the minimal reciprocity … without which modern society can only appear artificial and 'imported'" (15). That is, because of its dependent position in global capitalism, the peripheral nation lacks the formal unity apparently characteristic of "modern,"

[7] I am drawing here on Nicholas Brown's argument in *Autonomy*. Brown makes a distinction between exchange-value, as an external purpose determined by consumer preferences, and the commitment to autonomy, which entails normative claims that are antithetical to the commodity form. For instance: "If a work of art is not only a commodity—if a moment of autonomy with regard to the commodity form is analytically available, if there is something in the work that can be said to suspend its commodity character—then it makes entirely good sense to approach it with interpretive tools. Since its form is a matter of intention it responds to—indeed, demands—interpretation…But if a work of art is only a commodity, interpretive tools suddenly make no sense at all. Since the only intention embodied in its form is the intention to exchange, the form the object takes is determined elsewhere from where it is made: that is, by (more or less informed guesses about) the market" (8).

metropolitan nations. Because of these "forms of inequality," an indigenous peasant in Oaxaca and a bourgeois intellectual in Mexico City could only in the most "artificial" sense be said to experience themselves as belonging to the same national community. The disconnect between elite and popular culture, Schwarz explains, is not the result of the cosmopolitan desire to imitate European cultural forms; rather, this desire is a necessary consequence of the absence of "minimal reciprocity," of the form of peripheral society, which systematically disarticulates the synthetic impulse of the modern nation form. By invoking a pre-existing national-popular community to whom the artist could address his or her works, Rama evades the peripheral forms of inequality that impede the achievement of a social synthesis, the mutuality of relations whereby society becomes a cohesive whole. This inequality undercuts the formation of a tradition or social context in which individuals can make sense of themselves and each other as sharing a normative framework of interpretations and expectations. Modernist works, I argue, disclose the forms of inequality that forestall the possibility of a cohesive collectivity and thus call into question the existence of the thing that Rama's account presupposes.

Historically, these "forms of inequality" derive from the development of the nation-state in Latin America. Bourgeois revolutions in Europe began by establishing cultural hegemony and then moved to conquer the state, but, as Neil Larsen explains, the opposite occurs in Latin American history (72). National independence in Latin America begins with the conquest of the formal unity of the state; as a result, the nation lacks the cultural content presupposed by European nation-states. The history of modern Latin America thus involves the attempt to synthesize a national subject as if it were the organic product of autochthonous culture, a project whose contradictions intensify with the modernization of the state in the twentieth century.[8] In the nineteenth century, the attempt to synthesize a national-cultural subject had to contend with the absence of a shared set of normative commitments, but this problem became critical in the 1920s and 1930s when intellectuals could no longer ignore the "forms of inequality" characteristic of peripheral social formations.

[8] For Larsen, the peculiar problem faced by Latin American modernism must be understood in terms of the contradiction between "on the one hand, the enhanced power and rationalization of the peripheral bourgeois state itself—typically as a result of populist revolutions or coups led by the middle class—and, on the other, the fact that this same rationalization only elevates to a higher plane the contradiction between itself and the prevailing political 'irrationality,' that is, the relative absence of political subjects able or willing to act as the 'molecular' units of peripheral capitalist rule" (xxxvii).

From a more structural perspective, these issues are intrinsically related to capitalist social forms, but they become exacerbated in situations of dependency. In contrast to traditional societies, capitalism necessarily separates production and consumption, leaving these two aspects of social reproduction to be mediated by forms of value, namely money. Moreover, if the elements of social reproduction have been torn asunder, then capitalism undermines the possibility of communication. The Mexican-Ecuadorian philosopher Bolívar Echeverría argues that communication cannot be understood as independent from practical life; rather, he makes the compelling proposition that communication constitutes an aspect of social reproduction—that is, the unity of production and consumption.[9] For Echeverría, "To produce and consume objects is to produce and consume significations" ("Use-Value" 32). To the extent that the circulation of capital occurs smoothly, the separation of production and consumption does not become a problem, but dependency names a condition in which they are systematically divorced. As dependent economies, Latin American nations are oriented toward the export of raw materials, and as such, the organization of productive activities is dictated by the demands of the metropolis, not by the needs of national subjects.[10] In the twenties and thirties, Latin American states, compelled by the interwar crisis of the export paradigm, took tentative steps to industrialize and thereby overcome this divorce of production and consumption. But, as the history of modernization projects in the twentieth century demonstrates all too vividly, the challenges of dependency could not be easily overcome. The peripheral forms of inequality persist, distorting the possibility of direct communication.

The peripheral experience of capitalism, in other words, intimates something that would reveal itself more forcefully by the end of the twentieth century: modernity—the development of society's productive capacities and the formation of democratic institutions—does not necessarily coincide with capitalist accumulation. If Latin America's incorporation into capitalist markets did not typically lead to industrialization, if it exacerbated forms of inequality rather than led to the achievement

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[9] "According to Marx, the process of social reproduction includes, as a characteristic function of concrete human existence, a particular organization of the ensemble of inter-individual relations of coexistence. That is to say, it implies a classification of social individuals according to their involvement as much in the activity of labor as in that of enjoyment" (Echeverría, "Use-Value" 25).

[10] In industrial nations, workers fundamentally play a dual role in the economy, producing goods but also consuming the majority of those goods whose value would otherwise not be realized. Since the value of the raw materials and agricultural goods produced in the periphery is realized in the metropolis, workers in dependent nations are largely irrelevant as a source of effective demand. On this topic, see Ruy Mauro Marini's *Dialéctica de la dependencia*.

a cohesive collectivity, then the inverse would also seem plausible in the periphery: modernization without capitalism. In effect, this is what the Mexican Revolution promised.[11] O'Gorman, Maples Arce and Modotti found inspiration in this utopian horizon, in the commitment to a democratic and technologically advanced form of society that was attentive to social needs, not based on exploitation.

In such a society, the antithesis of art and life would be overcome, but O'Gorman, Maples Arce and Modotti acknowledge the ongoing antithesis as the expression of the failure to accomplish the revolutionary project of modernization without capitalism. Art, for them, aspires to be part of the world, but it remains alienated from a society defined by brutal forms of inequality. Theodor Adorno's account of modernism speaks to these issues, even if its points of reference are far removed from the Latin American context. Drawing on Adorno's work, I will examine Mexican modernism "from the perspective of alienation: namely, as halves of a totality which to be sure could never be reconstructed through the addition of the two halves" (Adorno, "Social Situation" 132). The image of "torn halves" appears most famously in a letter to Walter Benjamin in which Adorno asserts that modern culture is characterized by a situation in which artists cannot seek a compromise between mechanically reproduced, utilitarian objects—like Hollywood film—and technically innovative artworks—like Schönberg or Picasso. Although mechanically reproduced works, in virtue of their increased distribution, can become vehicles for mass political communication, this is made possible by standardized production. As a result, these works forfeit their critical dimension. Autonomous artworks, by contrast, maintain critical negativity but in the process become increasingly inaccessible.[12] Although Hollywood film and Picasso represent mutually exclusive choices for Adorno, by calling them "torn halves of a whole" he implies that neither is fully intelligible without the other. What the torn halves, taken together, reveal is the condition in which the commodity form alienates the artwork from society. For Adorno, this alienation, "the separation from the simple immediacy of use," breaks apart the unity of production

[11] We might say that prior to the Revolution, Mexico experienced capitalism without modernization. Elizabeth Olsen makes a similar point about the pitfalls of the Mexican Revolution, although she uses different language. She argues that the revolution simultaneously challenged oligarchical control of the country and pursued modernization. These commitments overlap, but they were not always identical. Ultimately, she concludes, "it was impossible to conduct both [projects] at once" (xv).

[12] Adorno writes in "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" that light and serious music "do not hang together in such a way that the lower could serve as a sort of popular introduction to the higher, or that the higher could renew its lost collective strength by borrowing from the lower" (275).

and consumption characteristic of, for instance, traditional storytelling, but it also constitutes a gain insofar as it endows modern art with its autonomy. More than a mere craft, autonomous art acquires "the power of far-reaching sublimation of drives and the cogent and binding expression of humanity" ("Social Situation" 130). With the autonomy gained from the effects of the commodity form, art, according to Adorno, must either seek to overcome this alienation by orienting itself to the demands of the market—in other words, to consumption and the audience's preferences, as in Hollywood film—or refuse such demands by asserting the autonomy of its production.

The notion of autonomy here may invite skepticism or confusion. Adorno's account is premised on metropolitan modernism, a situation in which the autonomy of art has been secured through various institutions.[13] But, as Julio Ramos has argued, the uneven development of Latin America consistently undermines the autonomization of the literary field.[14] And yet, I argue that it is precisely because the autonomy of the work of art cannot be taken for granted in the periphery that the assertion of autonomy becomes all the more crucial for art's capacity to critique and make sense of our place in the world. The works I will interpret in this essay do not presuppose their autonomy; rather, the meaning of these works derives from the way they reflexively acknowledge and negate the conditions that oppose autonomy, namely capitalist forms of social life and brutal inequality. The work of art is, in Nicholas Brown's words, "the internal, unemphatic other to capitalist society" (Brown 9). The torn halves do not "add up" because, in Neil Larsen's words, the "space of integral freedom" has been overtaken by the commodity form, by the "'integral unfreedom' that, as the bearer to an ever-increasing degree of *all* social mediation, as society itself in its subjective moment, leaves behind no burrow or niche for an autonomy of human dimension" (90). According to Adorno's account, when the artwork seeks to overcome the alienation caused by commodity production by accommodating itself to the demands of a market, it succumbs to the logic of the commodity form because it orients itself to an external

[13] Neil Larsen makes a different claim about the inadequacy of Adorno's account of modernism for Latin America. In contrast to Adorno's metropolitan context, autonomy in Latin America cannot "seek its configuration as an anticommodity—as the dialectical negation of the commodity in its integral relation to the totality of economic relations—because the movement of commodities is not itself autonomous from the standpoint of the periphery" (Larsen 94). In Larsen's account of Brazilian modernism, "it is precisely the commodity that becomes the imaginary site of an autochthonous self-mediating cultural subjectivity" (93).

[14] See Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad*. Ramos addresses the question of autonomy from the perspective of the sociology of literature. This is not my primary concern here. While sociological questions are crucial, they cannot replace the interpretive questions that I address here.

end. Whether this market is national-popular or cosmopolitan, it is ultimately, as a market, an aggregate of private individual preferences. In asserting its autonomy from the market, the artwork preserves the "human dimension"; it makes compelling normative claims—"binding expressions of humanity"—by "portray[ing] within its own structure the social antinomies which are also responsible for its isolation" (Adorno, "Social Situation" 130). This does not mean that autonomy amounts to "a metaphysical independence from external circumstances"; rather, as Nicholas Brown puts it, autonomy "has to do with the fact that precisely those external circumstances are actively taken up by us in ways that are irreducibly normative" (30). For the artists I will address here, this normativity involves the claim that we should share a commitment to the possibility of a different form of communication, of a unity of production and consumption based not on capitalism's asocial form of sociality but on self-conscious social norms oriented toward human needs.

O'Gorman, Maples Arce and Modotti at times entertain the idea that art can become an instrument of revolutionary change, that art itself can overcome its alienation from social life. But I argue that their works are most compelling when they insist on the antithesis of art and life, acknowledging the social processes responsible for the alienation of art. In this way, the antithesis of art and life expresses the limits of the Mexican Revolution, its failure to fulfill the project of modernization without capitalism, which would require overcoming peripheral capitalism's forms of inequality. And rather than abandon the Revolution, O'Gorman, Maples Arce and Modotti sustain this normative commitment in projecting the possibility of a shared meaning based on overcoming the asocial sociality of capitalism. It is not that these artists simply renounce the attempt communicate with an audience. The forms of inequality of peripheral capitalism already put such communication in question. Rather, modernist forms enable these artists to preserve the outlines of the sort of social forms that would make genuine communication possible.

"Hachazos del silencio" in Maples Arce's Urbe

In Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes*, Amadeo Salvatierra tells Cesárea Tinajero that *estridentismo* was a way "to get us where we really want to go… To modernity, Cesárea, I said, to goddamned modernity" (460/433). The crucial question,

however, is what this "goddamned modernity" would look like.[15] It would undoubtedly exhibit the speed and dynamism of the Futurist imaginary. Marinetti famously wrote in the manifesto of the Futurist movement that "a roaring automobile…is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" ("Founding and Manifesto" 51). The Mexican avant-garde group *estridentismo* enthusiastically echoed the message, calling for rapid modernization as Mexico rebuilt after a decade-long revolution. Manuel Maples Arce, the movement's founder, repeats Marinetti's words in his own manifesto, "Actual No. 1" (1921), and offers a complementary formulation: "with half a glass of gasoline, we literally gulped down Avenida Juárez, 80 horsepower" ("Actual No. 1" 44).[16] Across various media, including poetry, murals and woodcuts, the *estridentistas* expressed their passion for the technologies of the modern metropolis, largely ignoring indigenous cultures and the colonial past. *Estridentismo* would thus apparently exemplify the cosmopolitan orientation that posits a rupture with popular traditions in order to strengthen its ties with the international avant-gardes. Indeed, Maples Arce explicitly calls in "Actual No. 1" for Mexican intellectuals and artists to "become cosmopolitan" [*Cosmopoliticémonos*] (45). And yet, as an avant-garde project aspiring to fuse art and life,[17] *estridentismo* could not disavow the immediate context that it wanted to modernize: namely, Mexico City. Elissa Rashkin explains that the *estridentistas* called for, on the one hand, "a public art, rooted in the daily life of the metropolis with its factories and workers, cars and trolleys, cinemas, jazz bands and flappers, shop windows and electric signs, carnivals and demonstrations, telegraph wires, concrete and steel," and, on the

[15] As Bolaño's novel suggests, throughout the twentieth century critics were largely in agreement that *estridentismo*, in its obsession with technology, committed itself to an uncritical vision of modernity and that the avant-garde movement ignored Mexican identity in favor of industrialized culture. Critic Carlos Monsiváis clearly articulated this sentiment when he wrote that "At bottom, it was Edison, not Marinetti and Marx, who presided over this adolescent enthusiasm for the benefits of civilization" (173). In choosing Edison over Marx, the *estridentistas* forfeited critique precisely when it was most necessary—that is, in peripheral conditions where the material conditions of modernity were largely absent.

[16] "*En medio vaso de gasoline, nos hemos tragado literalmente la avenida Juárez, 80 caballos.*" In "Actual No. 1" Maples Arce also insists that estridentismo departs from futurism insofar as it privileges the present moment over the future: ""Nada de retrospección. Nada de futurismo. Todo el mundo, allí, quieto, iluminado maravillosamente en el vértice estupendo del minuto presente; atalayado en el prodigio de su emoción inconfundible y única y sensorialmente electrolizado en el 'yo' superatista, vertical sobre el instante meridiano, siempre el mismo y renovado siempre. Hagamos actualismo" (46).

[17] It is easy to misinterpret this idea. Marjorie Perloff provides a helpful clarification: "'Literature is a part of life!' meant in practice…(1) form should not call attention to itself; (2) the 'high' artwork should incorporate and come to terms with elements from 'low' culture—the newspaper headline, the popular song, the advertising poster; and (3) the making of art could become a collective enterprise, designed for what was perceived to be a newly collective audience" (37-38). All of these meanings could be said to describe the project of *estridentismo*.

other hand, "a linguistically complex, cosmopolitan intellectualism in dialogue with an international avant-garde, but unlikely to engage a mass audience" (Rashkin 22). In sustaining an orientation toward popular, urban life and the experimental techniques of the avant-gardes, the *estridentistas* attempt to suspend the tension between national-popular and cosmopolitan priorities, acknowledging first and foremost the alienation of art from social life. In the heady atmosphere of post-revolutionary Mexico, they imagined they could overcome this alienation through artistically-mediated technological advances that would extend the Revolution into the cultural domain. And yet, I will argue that Manuel Maples Arce's *Urbe: Super-poema bolchevique en 5 cantos* (1925), perhaps the movement's most important work, asserts its independence from external ends—e.g., the use of the work by a revolutionary audience—, thereby thematizing the disarticulation of modernization and social needs that indicated the failure of the Mexican Revolution.

Critics have argued that Maples Arce's *Urbe* marks a shift in the political valence of *estridentismo*. Tatiana Flores, for instance, holds that "*Urbe* represents Maples Arce's attempt to unite Estridentismo to socialist politics" since "he leaves behind his utopist vision of the city, describing the urban environment as a contested space, rife with social problems" (184). Indeed, *Urbe* articulates a commitment to the politics of class struggle, but the tone of the poem could hardly be described as celebratory. Rashkin, for instance, identifies a disjuncture in *Urbe* between, on the one hand, the way "the activism of workers and campesinos was a source of profound inspiration" and, on the other hand, "the continued violence and instability," which "created feelings of insecurity and distress" (116). Rashkin's comments echo Maples Arce's own recollections about the composition of the poem. In his memoirs, he writes that after walking home during the May 1st workers' marches in 1923, he sat down to write "un canto en que latía la esperanza y la desesperación" (*Soberana* 148). These comments would seem to confirm the suspicion held by many critics that *estridentismo*'s radical politics were tepid or insincere. According to this account, the movement's elitist, cosmopolitan aspect ends up overshadowing its commitment to popular culture. It ultimately prefers a pure, imaginary modernity over the messiness of the mass politics. But *Urbe*'s most compelling claim, I will show, concerns not its immediate attitude toward national-popular culture but a narrative of the Mexican Revolution in which such an attitude becomes irrelevant, in which the attempt to overcome art's alienation turns into an assertion of autonomy.

Maples Arce presents *Urbe* as a revolutionary work, evoking the Bolshevik Revolution in the title and carrying a dedication "A los obreros de México". To carry out the promise contained in these paratexts, the work effects a shift from privatized individual to revolutionary collectivity. According to Evodio Escalante's compelling account, the poem requires a "*libidinal sacrifice,*" in which "modernity can only be achieved by getting rid of the figure of the beloved" (51).[18] Canto I thus praises the revolution and the modern, industrial city, but when it addresses a female figure, a more pessimistic tone surfaces. At this point, the world seems to move away from the poetic speaker, a movement that intimates the eventual failure of the revolution. Canto II again alternates between the politicized masses and the absent beloved, turning to the port as both an industrial space and a metaphor for leaving. Canto III abounds in violent metaphors and images that suggest the decomposition of the revolution. This pessimistic tone resounds in Canto IV as Maples Arce evokes the aftermath of the Great War and "winds of tragedies" from Soviet Russia. The beloved at this point has been reduced to silent, fragmented memories. Once this figure has been eliminated and the privatized individual subsumed into the collectivity, the poem indicates that revolutionary modernization has destroyed its own emancipatory promise. *Urbe* ends with the image of a "cielo deshilachado", which is "la nueva / bandera / que flamea / sobre la ciudad" (23).

To attend more closely to *Urbe*'s treatment of the Mexican Revolution and its claims about art's relation to society, I will focus on the relation between noise and silence in the poem. The modern city, Maples Arce writes in Canto I, is "toda tensa / de cables y de esfuerzos, / sonora toda / de motores y de alas" (5). These lines evoke "The Art of Noise," Luigi Russolo's Futurist manifesto, in which he wrote, "In the nineteenth century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born" (133). For Russolo and Maples Arce, silence prevails in nature, but the city has a "musical" character that derives from its "ritmos mecánicos" (Maples Arce, *Urbe* 13). But noise in *Urbe* also reflects the entrance of the masses onto the historical stage. Indeed, the masses constitute in Maples Arce's poem a musical form that displaces bourgeois compositions. "La multitud desencajada / chapotea musicalmente en las calles" (9), and this collective noise stands in stark contrast to the images of silence that appear

[18] *Urbe*, Escalante continues, accordingly has four moments: the constitution of the modern poet through the experience of catastrophe; the modern poem as the coordination of multiple spatial and temporal planes; libidinal sacrifice; return of the sacrificed, "the weight of the dead continues to loom over the economy of the poem in the form of a resistance, a burden that sabotages the euphoric ideology of the text" (54-55).

whenever Maples Arce turns to the beloved, the private concern of the poet. Noise, in other words, becomes a figure for two aspects of communication: on the one hand, a dialogue between the poet and the masses in which art seeks to overcome its alienation by becoming part of the workers' struggle; on the other hand, a form of social reproduction in which the technologies of the industrial city are developed in accordance with the needs of the masses.

Urbe aspires to effect "una tumultuosa conversión hacia la izquierda" (19), to construct a "pobre ciudad sindicalista / andamiada / de hurras y de gritos" (15), but the relation between silence and noise undergoes a fundamental shift in Canto V. The streets, which were initially teeming with musical crowds and mechanical rhythms, remain "sonoras" but are now "desiertas" (23). Whereas the noise previously expressed the unity of humanity and technology—that is, of production and consumption—this unity has now been torn asunder, leaving machines operating in the absence of workers. In the image of "calles / sonoras y desiertas," the development of humanity's productive capacities seems to take on a life of its own. In the reconfiguration of Canto V, silence also undergoes a shift, indicating not the ineffectual existence of the bourgeois individual but the destructive fate of the modernization project: "Bajo los hachazos del silencio / las arquitecturas de hierro se devastan" (21). This silence symbolizes a force that smashes modern architecture's revolutionary promise to construct a technological social space attentive to social needs. The Mexican Revolution itself, *Urbe* implies, did not betray its emancipatory potential because it abandoned modernization. After all, the streets still resound with the noise of machines. Rather, modernization here assumes a destructive, alienated form in which the development of the productive forces no longer obeys the qualitative logic of social norms determining the unity of production and consumption.

That is, by the end of the poem, the problem of the alienation of art from society turns into the alienation of capitalist modernization from human subjects. Rather than a celebration of the industrial metropolis as the expression of revolutionary workers, the city ends up more closely resembling what Arqueles Vela, *estridentismo*'s resident prose writer, called "el esquema de la civilización": "El mecanismo de las urbes modernas tiende a sintetizarlo todo. A comprimirlo" (qtd. in Schneider 85). As an outline, civilization becomes a form devoid of content. The city, in other words, is ruled by the abstract imperative of capitalist modernity to systematize everything, destroying particularity and qualitative needs. In such a situation, communication, in Bolívar Echeverría's sense as a form of social reproduction, all but disappears. The poet in *Urbe*

may have overcome his alienation from the masses, but to the extent that production and consumption remain divorced, mediated by capital instead of social needs, the poet and the masses become alienated from modernization. Arqueles Vela captured this paradox well when he wrote that in Maples Arce's poetry "excessive individuality finds its social resonance. The poet's anguish sings not its solitude alone, like the romantic or the surrealist, but the *solitude refined in the crowds*" (qtd. in Escalante 45, my emphasis). The poetic voice in *Urbe* is thus neither a *flaneur*, a detached observer who takes satisfaction in his aesthetic rendering of the crowd, nor a member of an organic community. Within the space of the poem, the opposition of poet and crowd is suspended, and yet solitude remains. *Urbe* promises a revolutionary politics in which it would overcome its alienation by adjusting to the demands of a mass audience, but it delivers a far more modest politics: "not the overcoming of our isolation, but the sharing of that isolation" (Cavell 229). By abruptly shifting from noise, as a figure of communication, to silence and mechanical noise in the absence of human subjects, the poem acknowledges its own solitude and silence in the sense that, as a work of art, it insists on its independence from external ends. In this way, *Urbe* opens up the space for a self-conscious subject mediated by an alienating socio-historical process: not the alienation of the artist from the crowd, but of the masses from the post-revolutionary world they have produced. Maples Arce ends *Urbe* with silence because this assertion of autonomy also represents the transformation of modernization into "el esquema de la civilización", the self-perpetuating institutionalization of the Mexican Revolution. And in sharing that isolation, *Urbe* projects the possibility of a form of communication that acknowledges, in order to ultimately overcome, the inequalities of peripheral capitalism.

O'Gorman's Functionalism: Does (Aesthetic) Form Follow (Capitalist) Function?

Although the *estridentistas*' plans to transform the modern city never materialized, the architect Juan O'Gorman contributed to the Mexican Revolution in a much more tangible way. He is perhaps best known for designing the central library in the *Ciudad Universitaria* of UNAM. Following in the footsteps of the muralist movement, the library is a public monument that uses architecture to construct a narrative of Mexican cultural history. The façade of each side of the building consists of an intricate mural of symbols relating to three stages in the nation's history: pre-conquest, colonial and modern. The library is remarkable when one considers that O'Gorman began his career as a devout functionalist who opposed all ornamentation.

Against the neo-colonial architecture of someone like Carlos Obregón Santacilia, whose Centro Escolar Benito Juárez (1924-25) included decorative spires and a colonial tile roof, O'Gorman, as we have already seen, endorsed the ideas of Le Corbusier.[19] While neo-colonial architecture projected a historical continuity, communicating an image of Mexican history and culture to the nation,[20] O'Gorman concluded that functionalism initiated the sort of rupture with the past that would be necessary to achieve the goals of the Mexican Revolution. For O'Gorman, functionalism entailed a commitment to the autonomy of the medium of architecture, which also explains why he abandoned functionalism once it became the preferred architectural style for the accumulation of capital.

O'Gorman's early commitment to functionalist architecture is perhaps most evident in the dual studios he designed for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. With their zig-zag roofs and exterior concrete staircases, the studios closely resemble the designs included in Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*. Adhering strictly to the principle "form follows function," O'Gorman did not hide functional elements—like electrical wires—behind walls, and he left water tanks exposed on the roof. The design and construction of the house was guided by a simple principle that O'Gorman reiterated time and again in those years: "maximum efficiency for minimum effort/cost." Indeed, the cost of the studios for Rivera and Kahlo was equivalent to the cost of workers' housing (Fraser 44). Because of this combination of modern design and efficiency, Rivera recommended O'Gorman to Narcisso Bassols, the newly appointed Secretary of Public Education in 1932.[21] Acting on the state's commitment in the 1917 Constitution to universal, rational, non-clerical education, and on his on socialist politics, Bassols

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[19] He claimed to have read the Swiss architect's *Vers une architecture* (1923) multiple times during his formative years in the twenties. In Nicolás Cabral's *Catálogo de formas*, a contemporary novel about O'Gorman, Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* has biblical connotations, referred to as "the Book."

[20] According to the neo-colonialists, the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz—with its oligarchical modernization, imitation of French styles and Haussmannian urbanization—represented a departure from Mexican culture and national history. The revolution opened up the possibility of restoring an authentic Mexican culture by appropriating the colonial architecture of the *centro histórico*. That is, the neo-colonial style—with its intricate ornamentation—was premised on conceiving "the revolution in opposition to the dangers of capitalist modernization" (Legrás 78).

[21] Bassols is a fascinating figure. He attempted to move the Ministry of Education in a decidedly socialist direction. Bassols's tenure, however, was short-lived. On Bassols and his relationship to architecture, see Olsen 84-86. As Nicolás Cabral recounts the meeting in his novel *Catálogo de formas*, Bassols asked O'Gorman how he would build a school, to which he replied, "Desterrando el arte, atendiendo estrictamente la función, impidiendo los sobornos. Hagamos algunas entonces, le dije, preséntese mañana en mi oficina" (36).

sought an architect to design buildings for the nearly 30,000 children without schools in Mexico City (Rodríguez Prampolini 29-30).[22] O'Gorman took on the project and achieved the remarkable feat of building 24 primary schools for a million pesos. At every step of the way, the designs were informed by his dictum "maximum efficiency for minimum effort/cost." O'Gorman eschewed all ornamental, superfluous elements, building austere, geometrical and functional forms that could be reproduced, with slight modifications, in multiple locations:

Figures 1-2. Schools designed by O'Gorman.

As the studios and schools demonstrate, O'Gorman turned to functionalism for social and political reasons. Because of its "maximum efficiency," functionalism promised to modernize Mexico and fulfill the Revolution's commitment to addressing social needs for housing and education. It constituted, in other words, an attempt to extend the revolution into architecture. In his commitment to revolution, however,

[22] José Vasconcelos, Bassols' predecessor, emphasized the importance of education, but he preferred the prohibitively expensive neo-colonial style. As a result, few schools were built during his tenure.

O'Gorman's departs from the principles of his teacher, Le Corbusier. At the very end of the first section of *Vers une architecture*, Le Corbusier states emphatically, "It is a question of building which is at the root of the social unrest of to-day: architecture or revolution" (8).[23] For Le Corbusier, the question of architecture and revolution revolves around the issue of housing, specifically the increasing gap between modern technologies (steel and concrete) and the inadequacy of traditional housing. "The machinery of Society," Le Corbusier writes, is "profoundly *out of gear*" (8). In effect, Le Corbusier suggests that technology has advanced beyond its social conditions, and he conceives functionalism as the means of restoring harmony by overcoming this imbalance. The situation in post-revolution Mexico seems to be precisely the opposite. As Luis Carranza writes with regard to O'Gorman, "the Revolution had already taken place. The country now needed architecture" (135). That is, post-Revolution Mexico appeared to O'Gorman to have brought about a transformation in social relations, but technical conditions remained relatively unchanged. If Le Corbusier saw the need to bring housing in line with modern technologies, O'Gorman strove to advance the technical forces to meet the social conditions of post-revolutionary Mexico, to achieve, in other words, modernization without capitalism.

By seemingly subordinating architecture to external ends, to the needs of urban populations, O'Gorman's functionalism appears to eschew aesthetic autonomy. Although he was profoundly influenced by Le Corbusier, O'Gorman never shared his insistence on the aesthetic beauty of modern engineering and pure geometrical forms. In his polemical contribution to the 1933 "Pláticas sobre arquitectura", O'Gorman makes a categorical distinction between functionalism or "technical architecture," which "serves the majority" and "man," and "academic architecture," which "serves the minority" and "money" ("Conferencia" 75). The academic distortion of architecture's function, according to O'Gorman, occurs when "spiritual needs…intervene in the composition of architecture" (69). That is, even if academic architecture purports to respond to needs, it confuses subjective and objective needs. Spiritual necessities, for O'Gorman, amount to little more than advertising, vanity or aestheticism. Since functionalist architecture addresses the objective needs of the majority, it has little concern with ornamentation. "The form of the building," he writes,

[23] Fredric Jameson argues this formula is not, as critics often assume, a straightforwardly reactionary statement. Le Corbusier, of course, was not "committed to 'revolution'…because he saw the construction and the constitution of new space as the most revolutionary act, one that could 'replace' the narrowly political revolution of the mere seizure of power" (50-51).

"would be the simple result of technical application" (74).[24] In this way, the influence of Adolph Loos stands alongside that Le Corbusier, since O'Gorman regards ornamentation as a "criminal" waste of materials and labor, a grave violation of his principle "maximum efficiency, minimum effort/cost."

Given his orthodox functionalism, it is striking that O'Gorman abruptly abandoned these ideas in the second half of the 1930s. The first glimpses of O'Gorman's hesitations appear in his essay "Arquitectura capitalista y arquitectura socialista" (1936). Under the conditions of capitalism, O'Gorman argues, "maximum efficiency for minimum effort/cost" ceases to be a way to efficiently satisfy social needs and becomes, instead, "maximum efficiency for maximum profit."[25] Although O'Gorman promoted this formula as an attempt to use scarce resources in post-revolutionary Mexico to address the scarcity of housing, the increased productivity implied by "maximum efficiency for minimum effort/cost" also constitutes the lever by which capital increases surplus-value. The compatibility of functionalism and capitalism ultimately demonstrated to O'Gorman that "there could be no 'socialist' architecture, given the structural relations that determine the nature and meaning of any particular work: only when all private property and the means of production were in the hands of the people could there be an architecture under socialism" (Carranza 160).[26] That is, a cultural revolution—in architecture, among other artistic forms—cannot replace social revolution. In effect, O'Gorman premised his project on the idea that functionalist architecture could constitute a unity of production and consumption, constructing buildings to satisfy the social needs of a concrete community, but he failed to register the extent to which this form of social reproduction had been subordinated

[24] On this basis, O'Gorman also responds to complaints that functionalist architecture is a foreign form: not "Mexican," but Swiss, German or international. O'Gorman writes that just as "The size of the door of a worker's house will be the same as the door of the philosopher's house" (69), certain needs are universal and will be mystified if they are made to have a specifically national character. The point of functionalist architecture, for O'Gorman, is not to construct abstract forms in the style of European architecture, but to address human needs in the most efficient manner possible. And in this sense functionalism may be more "Mexican" than neo-colonial architecture: in terms not of identity but of local needs. Moreover, O'Gorman argues, sounding very much like Maples Arce, that "architecture will have to become international for the simple reason that man is becoming increasingly international" (74).

[25] O'Gorman saw this play out firsthand when the Tolteca Cement Company embraced functionalist ideas and aggressively advertised for their application.

[26] For a more detailed discussion of this article, see Carranza 158-167. Most accounts of O'Gorman's "dissatisfaction" with functionalism jump rather quickly from the early thirties to his reflections on organic architecture in the fifties. This approach bypasses the question of architecture's relationship to capitalism and gives the impression that he initially abandoned functionalism because it was insufficiently "Mexican" or because it was not attuned to the natural environment.

to the quantitative logic of capital accumulation. Functionalism represented an architectural advance in humanity's productive capacities, but, as Theodor Adorno remarked, modern architects only produced "a small portion of their work," since "the same society which developed human productive energies to unimaginable proportions has chained them to conditions of production imposed upon them" ("Functionalism" 14). In this way, O'Gorman's functionalism highlights the limits of the modernization without capitalism promised by the Mexican Revolution. In the absence of a genuine socialist revolution, the attempt to expand Mexico's productive capacities and satisfy social needs could not be extricated from the imperatives of capitalism.

All of this suggest that O'Gorman would be deeply hostile to any claims about the autonomy of architecture. Technical architecture, it seems, is determined by an external end—namely, the needs of those who would live in the building—not by any formal standards. In his critique of academic architecture, O'Gorman acknowledges and seeks to overcome the alienation of architectural design from the masses and their needs, but his frustration over the transformation of functionalism into a capitalist style indicates that he also opposed the idea of subordinating design to the preferences of dwellers. Indeed, after O'Gorman finished the studios for Rivera and Kahlo, he was surprised to learn that Rivera found his house aesthetically pleasing: "he had designed the house to be useful and functional, not beautiful" (Fraser 42). Rivera's preference was irrelevant because for O'Gorman preference is only contingently related to what mattered, namely, the inherently purposeful character of the medium. O'Gorman's functionalism entails not simply an economic calculation concerning efficiency and scarce resources but also a normative claim about what architecture should be in a modern society. It is not a claim that instrumentalizes architecture for an external purpose, which is precisely what academic architecture and capitalism do by orienting production towards market preferences and "spiritual necessities." The normativity of O'Gorman's claim about architecture's purpose—that purpose is its medium—is inseparable from the assertion of functionalism's independence from immediate responses, be it aesthetic pleasure, use or the self-satisfaction of owning a modern home. In effect, O'Gorman turns the economic principle "maximum efficiency, minimum effort/cost" into a formal principle for autonomous architecture, pointing both toward and beyond the dwellers of the buildings. Along these lines, Adorno wrote, "architecture is in fact both autonomous and purpose-oriented," meaning "it cannot simply negate men as they are. And yet it must do precisely that if it is to remain autonomous" (14). Functionalist architecture, for O'Gorman as for Adorno, is "worthy

of human beings [if it] thinks better of men than they actually are. It views them in the way they could be according to the status of their own productive energies as embodied in technology" (14). By insisting on need over beauty, O'Gorman does not subordinate his work to an external end, namely, the preferences of a market; rather, he designs buildings that project a possible community, the possibility of a form of social reproduction freed from the valorization of capital. His architectural works imagine the realization of modernity's possibility—the expansion of productive capacities to eliminate absolute scarcity—not on the basis of the existing forms of inequality in capitalism but on a rupture with its prevailing logic.

The Form of Social Production, or Modotti's Modernist Photography

Like O'Gorman, the Italian-American Tina Modotti insists on the autonomy of photography at the same time that she seemingly disavows art. In one of her few essays, she expresses her discomfort with the label "artistic" when attached to her work. "Photography," she writes, "because of the single fact that it can only be produced in the present and based on what objectively exists in front of the camera, is clearly the most satisfactory medium for registering objective life in all its manifestations" (qtd. in Tejada 87). The medium "has documentary value," and, as a result, it "deserves *a place in social production*, something to which all of us should contribute" (87). For Rubén Gallo, these comments indicate an unambiguous position on the debate over the camera as a machine or an artistic tool. According to Gallo, Modotti thus distanced herself from Edward Weston, with whom she lived and collaborated in Mexico during the mid-1920s. As a formalist, Weston apparently ignores Mexico's modern architecture and industrializing cityscape, preferring instead the beautiful forms of traditional subject-matter, but Modotti "uses a modern medium to document modern technologies" (Gallo 35). Rather than use the camera for aesthetic purposes, Modotti strips this machine of its aura and "partakes of the automatism that characterizes the modern era" (37). To say that photography has a place in social production would thus mean, in Gallo's account, to insist on the medium's indexical character over its artistic pretensions, on the camera as a machine embedded in an industrial production process in which decisions are subordinated to the preferences of an anonymous market.

Figure 3. *Workers' Parade* (1926)

Figure 4. *Mella's Typewriter* (1928)

Modotti's "Workers' Parade," however, illustrates the limits of this sort of interpretation. As a photograph of protesting peasants, it certainly has documentary value. Its meaning, it could be said, depends on the audience's response, on the peasants who recognize themselves in the struggle or on the urban reading public who would learn about the protest through this image and the newspaper in which it appeared.[27] In this case, the photograph matters as an index of a specific protest, as a document

[27] "Workers' Parade" was published in *El Machete*, the newspaper for the Mexican Communist Party.

that can inform and motivate others to political action. Our interest in the photograph would, accordingly, "drop through"[28] to its subject-matter, ignoring interpretive questions about Modotti's formal decisions in taking this photograph. But what is most distinctive about the photograph is the pattern of *sombreros*. By foregrounding this formal arrangement, Modotti expresses a meaning that cannot be reduced to subject matter or its social, documentary character. John Mraz thus argues that Modotti "filled Westonian form with social content" (85), utilizing formal composition like Weston, but replacing his peppers, toilets and nautilus shells with objects invested with social meaning—e.g., sombreros, a sickle and the *mazorca*.[29] While Mraz rightly reinstates the importance of the formal dimension to Modotti's photographs against the tendency to reduce them to documents, he assumes that the social and political character of her works derives from their subject-matter or content. I argue, instead, that the commitment to autonomous form in these photographs has a crucial political valence. For instance, the workers represented in "Workers' Parade" would have no use for this photograph. With their backs turned toward the camera, the photograph could not even serve as a portrait for individual peasants. They seem to insist on the fiction that they are not being viewed.[30] They are absorbed in their political struggle, independently of the fact of their representation. The content of the photograph, in other words, does not fuse with, or fill in, the form; rather, the two are at odds with one another. To see the beauty of the formal arrangement of sombreros necessarily separates one from the immediate political struggle of the peasants. The politics of form here consist in highlighting the social division between those who can make a protest into formal composition and those who are absorbed in the protest to overcome their poverty. The disarticulation within "Workers' Parade," in other words, points to continuing forms of inequality and the alienation of art from immediate social purposes and preferences.[31]

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[28] On "dropping through" and its opposite, revelatory photographs, see McIver Lopes 36-47.

[29] See also Sarah Lowe's argument about Modotti's use of still-life, her ambition, in Lowe's words, "to transform the tangible into the intangible, to transmute matter into ideology" (205).

[30] I am alluding here to Michael Fried's notion of "absorption." The peasants, in other words, are emphatically anti-theatrical.

[31] In this interpretation of "Workers' Parade," I owe a debt to Walter Benn Michaels's reading of the photographs of Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. These photographs of poor tenant farmers, according to Michaels, stage a social difference relating to the ability to see beauty in poverty. The condescending idea that "they can't see the beauty in these pictures…is just the flip side of" the idea that "only the rich see the beauty of poverty" (126). Michaels adds that "it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the beauty of these pictures therefore compromises their political meaning. On the contrary, it's what *gives* them their political meaning. It is only if you can see the photographs as art that you can see the

Modotti's claims about photography are most powerfully articulated in "Mella's Typewriter" (1928). The typewriter belonged to the Cuban Communist Julio Antonio Mella, Modotti's lover at the time. With its peculiar angle and cropping, its attention to the details of a machine, the image calls to mind the precisionist photographs of Alfred Stieglitz and Charles Sheeler. Like the Futurists, the precisionists celebrated the new technological age and, adhering to the principle "form follows function," found beauty in the pure, geometrical forms of modern engineering.[32] Indeed, the photograph also contains a textual fragment that explicitly articulates the motivations of precisionist art, namely a quote from Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* (1924): "Technique will become a more powerful inspiration for artistic work" (205). In the original passage, Trotsky insists that socialism must draw on, not turn away from, the unprecedented development of productive forces in capitalism.[33] Accordingly, if art is to contribute to the goals of socialism, it must likewise find its inspiration in technology.

In the rest of the passage included in "Mella's Typewriter," Trotsky asserts that in socialism "the contradiction itself between technique and nature will be solved in a higher synthesis" (205).[34] Trotsky begins the section by speculating on the "monumental tasks" that the Bolsheviks will carry out: "the planning of city gardens, of model houses, of railroads" (202). Beyond feats of engineering, these projects would entail that the "wall between art and industry will come down" (203). In tearing down this barrier, Trotsky does not mean to suggest that art will be subsumed under technique in a socialist society. The "artistic imagination," he writes, "will be directed toward working out the ideal form of a thing," not toward the ornamental "embellishment of the thing as an aesthetic premium to itself" (203). The artist, in other words, imagines the thing as it could be; he or she does not simply decorate it, giving the illusion that

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'superiority' of the person who made them and of the people who admire them to the people who are in them. It's only as works of art—their beauty invisible to their subjects—that they can inscribe on themselves the inequality that is the condition of their production" (126-7).

[32] Weston references "form follows function" in his notebooks when he decides to explore the aesthetic possibilities of photographing a toilet. Taken in 1925, Weston's "Excusado" was, at least in part, the result of his collaboration with Modotti in Mexico and likely his contact with the Mexican avant-gardes.

[33] It would have come as no surprise to Trotsky that precisionist art was primarily an American phenomenon. "The passion for mechanical improvements, as in America, will accompany the first stage of every new socialist society" (Trotsky 205).

[34] Modotti also used the quote as an epigraph for the text that accompanied her solo exhibition in Mexico City. When the text was later published, she deleted the quote for political reasons. She was a member of the Mexican Communist Party at the time, and she tended to support Stalin against Trotsky.

the thing is already more than itself. Trotsky then adds that another wall will fall, that between art and nature. It is not that in a socialist society art will return to a pre-modern imitation of nature. Rather, Trotsky insists here on the development of humanity's productive capacities, the ways humanity has transformed nature to satisfy its needs and reproduce itself. Therefore, when Trotsky writes at the end of the passage that the "contradiction between technique and nature will be solved on a higher synthesis," he envisions what Bolívar Echeverría calls the transition from absolute to relative scarcity, a relation between humanity and nature dictated not by the domination of the other but by their mutual enrichment and collaboration.[35] Art has a role to play in this synthesis precisely because of its assertion of autonomy, the refusal to be subordinated to external purposes and thus its ability to make normative claims.

For it to "work out the ideal form of a thing," the artwork must oppose the existing world. But Trotsky's statement about art may seem to contradict Modotti's own remark about art and photography "deserving a place in social production." With regards to "Mella's Typewriter" specifically, Mella himself wrote in a letter to Modotti that her photograph has "socialized" the typewriter "with [her] art" (qtd. in Noble 97). If socialized production seems incompatible with the autonomy of art, this is largely because capital has determined what counts as "social." We might remember Theodor Adorno's enigmatic claim that artworks are "products of social labor" (*Aesthetic Theory* 225). In capitalism, the social character of labor lies in its commodity-producing character, but Adorno, as the preeminent theorist of aesthetic autonomy, also has in mind a different sense of sociality. As Josh Robinson explains, the "concept of social labor thus contains a tension between two different kinds of sociality," the capitalist meaning, on the one hand, of "the organization of society on the basis of production of commodities for sale to anonymous others," and, on the other hand, "the cooperation inherent in … 'genuinely human activity'" (168). When Adorno insists that artworks are the products of social labor, he rejects the idea that artistic activity is a private activity and makes explicit the artwork's implicit claim that "Exchangeability is not the only possible basis for the sociality of labor" (Robinson 170). And when Modotti insists that photography "deserves a place in social production," she suggests that artworks call for a social character that cannot be achieved on the basis of existing commodity relations.

[35] Capitalism paradoxically promotes and stifles this potential, exponentially expanding society's productive forces and "artificially reproducing absolute scarcity" (Echeverría, *Crítica* 131).

"Mella's Typewriter" makes these claims about art, technology and capitalism through formal decisions. Perhaps the most striking thing about the photograph is the framing. Rather than present the typewriter directly, as if one were sitting in front of it and ready to write,[36] Modotti chooses an unfamiliar angle. Moreover, she crops the object so that only a corner remains within the frame. Through these formal decisions, Modotti decontextualizes the typewriter, removing it from the role it would play for a secretary in an office, for instance.[37] The photograph is a document because Modotti has not manipulated the image, but the interest of "Mella's Typewriter" cannot be reduced to seeing Mella's typewriter. The framing ensures that the photograph becomes more than an index because it reveals the typewriter in a way that we would not normally experience it as a useful machine.[38] At the same time, the object is less than itself. The framing leaves out a significant portion of the machine and Trotsky's quote; all that remains of the passage is: "inspiration"; "artistic"; "in a synthesis"; and "between the."[39] Although the quote is only partially communicated, this partiality is crucial to the photograph's meaning. By not presenting the entire machine or a complete message, Modotti asserts a meaning that suspends the photograph's indexical character and points toward the "higher synthesis" that does not yet exist.[40] Art itself cannot overcome the contradiction between technique and nature, which is also the contradiction between the natural form of social reproduction and the accumulation of capital, but it can assert this possibility by decontextualizing its objects and working out their "ideal form."

"Mella's Typewriter" thus indicates that it would be inaccurate to say that Modotti either strives to adapt photographic modernism to Mexican reality in order to

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[36] Weston, one imagines, would have photographed the typewriter in this way. He does not, for instance, present his peppers and nautilus shells from unfamiliar angles. And yet, we might say that Modotti and Weston achieve the same effect through different means: defamiliarization.

[37] In the "Frame" section of *The Photographer's Eye*, John Szarkowski writes: "To quote out of context is the essence of the photographer's craft. His central problem is a simple one: what shall he include, what shall he reject? The line of decision between in and out is the picture's edge. While the draughtsman starts with the middle of the sheet, the photographer starts with the frame…The edge of the photograph dissects familiar forms, and shows their unfamiliar fragment…The photographer edits the meanings and patterns of the world through an imaginary frame. This frame is the beginning of his picture's geometry. It is to the photograph as the cushion is to the billiard table" (70).

[38] Dominic McIver Lopes calls this the "first art" of photography. See McIver Lopes, pp. 36-47.

[39] These translations from the Spanish do not exactly correspond to the English translation of Trotsky's Russian.

[40] As Roberto Tejada writes, the "synthesis is deferred into the future" (92).

subordinate the meaning of her works to the responses of a national-popular audience, or that she seeks a tighter link with the European avant-gardes through the rupture with the past. Modotti was undoubtedly committed to photographic modernism but not for national-popular or cosmopolitan reasons. A "good photograph," she writes, "is that which accepts the limitations inherent in photographic technique, and which takes advantage of all the possibilities and characteristics offered by the medium" (qtd. in Tejada 87). In light of this comment, Modotti's rejection of "artistic" photography can be clearly recognized not as a categorical denial of the possibility of artistic photography but as the modernist critique of pictorial photographers who, in the attempt to imitate painting, ignored the specific qualities of the medium.[41] It is only by working through these limitations, which are also conditions of possibility, that the modernist photographer can both produce "good photographs" and imagine the sort of unity of production and consumption that does not currently exist. The value of photography, in other words, lies not in partaking in the "automatism that characterizes the modern age," as Gallo would have it, but in what Paul Strand refers to as the "immense possibilities in the creative control of one form of the machine, the camera" (146). These are the immense stakes of modernist photography in Strand's "Photography and the New God." In using this machine for artistic ends, the photographer, Strand argues, represents the necessity that the machine "must be humanized lest it in turn dehumanize us" (151). "Mella's Typewriter" suggests that Modotti would have agreed not only with Strand's argument about the photographic medium but also with his claim about its ability to insinuate the possibility of humanizing social production.[42]

Conclusion

The history of peripheral capitalism has frequently involved the bad without the good: intensive exploitation but meager democratization. The Mexican Revolution

[41] At the time "artistic" photography was effectively synonymous with "pictorial" photography, a style that imitated painterly effects by manipulating the negative, through soft-focus and natural landscapes.

[42] This is, in effect, about the question of intention in photography. Critics tend to assume that the camera, because it mechanically reproduces what is in front it, undermines the photographer's intentions. These critics, however, work with an inflated, misguided sense of intention. One might respond that the camera poses no problems for intention, that it is simply a tool like a paintbrush, but this also seems inadequate because we often have to ask different interpretive questions of a photograph than of a painting. I would argue, however, that photography raises interesting questions about intention, and particularly in the context of Mexican modernism, it becomes a question of the work of art's ability to negate a social horizon in which productive forces seem to outstrip human control.

was fueled in part by a desire to reverse that equation, to achieve a good modernization without bad capitalism. But, as would become increasingly apparent throughout the twentieth century, the commitment to developing society's productive capacities to satisfy human needs negated itself because it could not be extricated from the accumulation of capital and commodity production, the very things that generate the brutal forms of inequality characteristic of the peripheral situation. In other words, it failed to humanize the machine when facing the threat of dehumanization. In this context, art cannot fulfill its critical role by either giving voice to a putative national community, a community whose absence of mutuality undermines its formation as a coherent whole, or by identifying with the most advanced artistic and technological developments of global modernity. Instead, O'Gorman, Maples Arce and Modotti, among other modernists, insist on the ongoing antithesis of art and life, hence art's critical opposition to social reality, to express art's alienation, the loss of its relation to the audience since traditional social contexts have been reshaped by the commodity-form. Furthermore, as peripheral modernists, they also insist on the antithesis of art and life to expresses the forms of inequality that should no longer exist but are systematically reproduced in dependent capitalism. By maintaining this critical distance, rather than subordinating their works to an external end, O'Gorman, Maples Arce and Modotti hold onto the possibility that this "higher synthesis" could still be achieved.

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