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Exile and the Reinvention of Modernism in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, 1937–1964

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The cultural scene in Brazil shifted so radically between the 1930s and 1960s that it is difficult to reconcile views of the nation before and afterwards. That is a sweeping statement, but one borne out by reflecting on how Brazilians thought of themselves and their place in the world. In the early 1930s, the country was perceived as politically fragmented, economically deprived and culturally backward. The vast majority of the population was rural and poor. The sense of nationhood was weak. Elites, largely concentrated along the coastal strip, looked to the vast hinterland as a place from which they felt divorced. Most intellectuals possessed closer bonds to Europe than to the popular culture of the regions they inhabited, much less to remote geographical reaches like the Amazon. The major questions they asked themselves revolved around ethnicity, race and the legacy of colonialism and slavery: essentially, who are we and what are we to make of ourselves? Two landmark works of the time – Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves*, of 1933, and Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda's *Roots of Brazil*, of 1936 – redefined how Brazilians thought about their own culture and society (Botelho 2010, 47–66; Benzaquen de Araújo 2005). Both looked inwards and to the remote past to consider how nation and people had been formed. Similar issues were being addressed in artworks like Portinari's *Mestizo* of 1934, with its peculiar tension between portrait and stereotype, empathy and confrontation with the native other.

Jump to the early 1960s. The new capital city of Brasília had just been inaugurated, possibly the most ambitious experiment in utopian urban planning in the brief history of modernism (Saboia/Derntl 2014). Brazil was riding the crest of an international wave of optimism: an emerging economic power, the first non-European nation to win the football World Cup in 1958, cradle of the Bossa Nova musical style that was then sweeping the world. Brazilianness became a source of pride. The cultural scene within the country was vibrant, with Museums of Modern Art emerging in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, plus the São Paulo Art Museum and the São Paulo Biennial, inaugurated in 1951 as only the second Biennial in the world after Venice (Alambert/Canhête 2004). In the field of architecture, Brazil
was widely recognised as a hotbed of modernism (Cavalcanti 2003). Literature and cinema were thriving too. The budding Cinema Novo movement gained traction, particularly after a Brazilian film, *The Given Word*, won the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 1962. Debates among intellectuals no longer focused on what had gone wrong in the past but on an exciting present and the inevitability of greatness in the future (Marques dos Santos 1997, 59–70). Thanks to improved communication and new media, these changing attitudes not only made themselves felt among elites but were embraced throughout Brazilian society.

What happened in the brief interlude of three decades that separates the comparatively provincial Brazil of 1930 from the cool cosmopolitan version of 1960? Well, quite a lot happened. This was a period of tremendous technological, political, economic and social transformation – it would be fair to say, upheaval – encompassing not only World War II, but also major demographic shifts and rapid strides in industry and agriculture. In Brazilian political history, most of this period belongs to the Vargas Era, an umbrella term for the successive governments of Getúlio Vargas from 1930 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1954 (Pandolfi 1999). A polarising figure, loved by many, hated by some, Vargas looms large as the leader under whom Brazilian politics and identity were reshaped over the mid-20th century. He was a driving force in consolidating a strong centralised state, dismantling competing power structures, suppressing regional differences and, on the cultural level, pushing for a unified collective identity based on fierce nationalism and not a few invented traditions. Especially under the dictatorship of the Estado Novo, from 1937 to 1945, Brazil was fashioned into a nationalist corporative state reminiscent of fascist or quasi-fascist regimes in Italy, Spain and Portugal.

Despite the abundance of factors at play in the transformation of Brazilian culture over the mid-20th century, this paper aims to draw attention to one aspect that is usually overlooked. The 1937 to 1964 period witnessed an unprecedented flow of artists and intellectuals into Brazil, many as exiles or refugees from World War II, as well as its immediate prelude and ongoing repercussions in Italy, Japan, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Portugal and other countries in which cultural freedom and/or ethnic minorities were targeted by authoritarian regimes. Like in the United States and Mexico – the two other nations in the Americas that most welcomed exiled artists and intellectuals – the cultural landscape in Brazil was powerfully influenced by the influx of refugees. Unlike in the US and Mexico, however, the wider repercussions of their influence have yet to be fully digested. Most people who study exile are likely to know a lot about Weimar on the Pacific, as it has been called (Bahr 2008); at least a little about the German exile community in Mexico; and probably next to nothing about exile in Brazil. Despite the fact that
the topic has been studied for over three decades, no broad overview has been produced since Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro’s seminal exhibition *Brazil, a refuge in the tropics* (Tucci Carneiro 1996), which dates from around the same time as LACMA’s *Exiles and Emigrés*. The contribution of exile to the modernisation of Brazilian culture during the mid-20th century is still poorly understood, in particular with regard to the interrelationship between immigration and the refashioning of urban identities. That contribution was enormous and transformative – especially in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the arrival cities where the immediate impact of refugee artists and intellectuals was most powerfully felt.

**Rio de Janeiro as wartime haven**

Even before the outbreak of war, the rise of fascism in Europe led major intellectual figures in Europe to seek out Brazil as a place of refuge (Asmus/Eckl 2013; Furtado Kestler 1992). The most famous of these was, of course, Stefan Zweig. Zweig first visited Brazil in 1936 for only ten days, and moved there definitively in August 1941, shortly after publishing *Brasilien, ein Land der Zukunft*, which came out almost simultaneously in six languages and eight separate editions. Six months later, in February 1942, he committed suicide in Petrópolis, at the age of 60, casting a long shadow over the idea – of which he was the major proponent – that the better part of European civilisation could be successfully transplanted to South America (Dines 2006). Even before Zweig, key players in German-speaking artistic circles were already seeking out Brazil as a haven in which to weather the storm of National Socialism. The well-known sculptor Ernesto de Fiori left Berlin in 1936 and moved to São Paulo where he remained until his death in 1945 (Laudanna 2003). The young German musician and musicologist Hans-Joachim Koellreutter arrived in 1937, bringing to Brazil the principles of the 12-tone system. He played the flute in the Brazilian Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1940, whose first conductor, the Hungarian Eugen Szenkar, was also a refugee from National Socialism. Over his long life, Koellreutter was to prove hugely influential as a teacher. Among his pupils were not only some of the most important classically-trained conductors and composers in post-War Brazil, but also popular musicians like Antônio Carlos Jobim, Caetano Veloso and Tom Zé (Alencar de Brito 2015).

From the late 1930s, the trickle of notable exiles to Brazil began to swell. The renowned French writer, Georges Bernanos, arrived in 1938 and eventually settled in the town of Barbacena, in the mountains of Minas Gerais. From this unlikely location he became a leading spokesman for the Free French movement, and his book *Lettre aux anglais*, one of the rallying cries of anti-Vichy forces, was
written and first published in Brazil, in French. He wrote regularly for the Diários Associados newspaper chain, and his articles were syndicated all over the world and even broadcast by the BBC. Bernanos’s unusual profile for a refugee from 1930s Europe – French, Catholic, monarchist – afforded him exceptional inroads into the conservative political establishment (Lapaque 2003). After Brazil entered the war, under intense US pressure, in August 1942, his presence became a convenient symbol that the heart of the nation had always been on the side of the Allies. That was true for a large segment of the francophile elites, but certainly not for society as a whole. Brazil was home to one of the largest NSDAP branches outside the German-speaking world. Between 1936 and 1941, parts of the Vargas government engaged openly with the regime in Berlin, turning away leftist and Jewish refugees and even deporting a few back (Souza Moraes 2005; Perazzo 1999; Lesser 1995).

The situation was perhaps most dramatic for the numerous German-language writers and intellectuals, mostly of Jewish origin, who arrived in Brazil during the years of the Estado Novo (Eckl 2010). Some were able to pick up the language, and indeed Ernst Feder and Otto Maria Carpeaux were writing and publishing in Portuguese within a few years. Not everyone was so gifted or sociable enough to make friends in the Brazilian press and literary world. Despite having spent 15 and 16 years in Brazil respectively, Richard Katz and Frank Arnau are mostly unknown to Portuguese-language readers. Their ties to Brazil are remembered only in the German-speaking world, if at all. On the other hand, Carpeaux and Anatol Rosenfeld are known in Brazil and largely forgotten in their countries of origin. Emigration affects different people in different ways, and this has a lot to do with the age at which someone becomes a refugee and what status they may or may not have had beforehand. For the younger and unknown, exile may even prove to be an opportunity to reinvent oneself completely in another language and context. Vilém Flusser is a remarkable example, fashioning an intellectual identity in the margins between his shifting allegiances in Brazil and Europe (Guldin/Bernardo 2017). Within the German-speaking exile community, political divides remained fierce during and after the war. Suspicions and intrigue ran high. Austrian exile Paul Frischauer was ostracised for writing an official biography of Vargas at the behest of the regime’s Department of Press and Propaganda (DIP). Others, like Wolfgang Hoffmann-Harnisch, were viewed with mistrust, leaving them in a limbo situation in which they fitted into neither the exile community nor mainstream Brazilian society.

During World War II, Rio de Janeiro, then the capital and main port city of Brazil, became a haven for refugee artists and intellectuals. Among the most prominent exiles arriving during wartime was the artist couple Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, Portuguese by birth, and Árpád Szenes, Hungarian and Jewish.
Resident in Paris during the 1930s, they moved briefly to Lisbon at the outbreak of war and again in 1940 to Brazil, where they settled in Rio. They were to remain until 1947, residing in the district of Santa Teresa where a small community of exiled artists soon formed around two addresses: the once grand but decaying Hotel Internacional, near the world-famous statue of Christ the Redeemer, and the more modest Pensão Mauá, closer to the city centre but still fairly remote due to the hillside location of the area. This is the best-known facet of wartime exile in Brazil and was the subject of a groundbreaking exhibition in the 1980s curated by Frederico Morais (Vieira da Silva no Brasil 2007; Tempos de guerra 1986). Due to their Parisian reputation and also to the fact that Vieira da Silva’s native language was Portuguese, the couple soon became well connected in the Brazilian cultural world and cultivated acquaintances with influential figures like the poets Cecília Meireles, Murilo Mendes and Carlos Drummond de Andrade. They were also surrounded by a circle of younger artists, both Brazilian and exiled.

Vieira da Silva was among the first to exhibit at the gallery opened in 1944 in Rio de Janeiro by Miecio Askanasy, also a refugee from Europe, which became a meeting place for connecting exiled artists and their Brazilian counterparts. German painter Wilhelm Wöller and Belgian Roger van Rogger both had solo exhibitions there, as did Brazilian artists with personal links to the émigré community, like Bellá Paes Leme and Lucy Citti Ferreira. In April 1945, Askanasy’s gallery opened an exhibition of 150 works by major German artists entitled Art condemned by the Third Reich (Kern 2016, 813–826). The catalogue essay was written by exiled art historian Hanna Levy; and Ernst Feder gave a lecture at the opening. The exhibition received extensive press coverage. A few weeks after the opening it was targeted by three fascist thugs who slashed one of Wöller’s works with a razor, generating further attention. Few of the more prominent names in Brazilian modernism seem to have lent support to Askanasy or to the exhibition, except for Lasar Segall who lent one work and Tomás Santa Rosa who gave a closing speech. Segall was himself Jewish and had personal ties to German expressionism. Santa Rosa was a painter and stage designer involved in communist circles. The absence of other notable figures of the art world raises interesting questions, such as whether or not the mainstream of Brazilian modernism kept itself apart from the refugee community, and if so, why.

Artists of various nationalities lived and worked in Rio de Janeiro around this time, including Polish sculptor August Zamoyski, Austrian printmaker Axl Leskoschek, Japanese painter Tadashi Kaminagai and Romanian painter Emeric Marcier, all of whom were established in their careers by the time they moved to Brazil. Polish director Zbigniew Ziembiński arrived in 1941 and is remembered today as one of the founders of modern Brazilian theatre. The artistic networks
that developed in Rio around these figures had lasting repercussions, particularly for those artists who were also active as teachers, like Zamoyski, Leskoschek, Kaminagai and Szenes. A substantial number of younger artists congregated around the courses they taught and the ateliers where they worked. They exercised a direct influence on a generation that included Almir Mavignier, Athos Bulcão, Carlos Sciliar, Djanira, Flávio-Shiró, Franz Weissmann, Inimá de Paula, Ione Saldanha, Lygia Clark, Milton Dacosta and Tikashi Fukushima, some of whom would, in turn, become influential in the second wave of Brazilian modernism over the 1950s and 1960s.

The circle around Vieira da Silva and Árpád Szenes shares certain characteristics typical of wartime exile in the Americas. The part of Santa Teresa where they lived, high on a hill, is somewhat isolated from the rest of Rio. It is greener and slightly cooler and has long attracted foreign residents. Spatially and socially, it could be compared to Pacific Palisades in Los Angeles or Coyoacan in Mexico City. It is something of an enclave, contained within the wider and more turbulent fabric of the city. The Hotel Internacional/Pensão Mauá circle is also reminiscent of other exile communities because it did not endure very long beyond the end of the war. After 1947, when Vieira da Silva and Szenes returned to Europe, their influence was gradually forgotten, and they are rarely taken into account in surveys of the history of art in Brazil. Rio, with its long history of glossing over conflict, swallowed up the stories of the exiles who inhabited the city in the 1940s and 1950s. Most of them left, and those who remained remade themselves in a more domesticated image, like the Catholic converts Carpeaux and Marcier.

**São Paulo as city of migrants**

The situation in São Paulo was different. Until the end of the 19th century, São Paulo had been a dusty provincial town. A huge influx of immigrants – mostly Italian, but also Spanish and Portuguese, Japanese, Lebanese and Syrian, Jews from Eastern Europe, among other groups – changed the face of the city over the first decades of the 20th century. From a population of just under 65,000 in 1890, São Paulo blew up into a metropolis of over 1,000,000 inhabitants by the mid-1930s. This explosive growth – more than 15 times in less than 50 years – was driven by the prosperity of the coffee export trade centred around the city and state of São Paulo and, after World War II, by an upsurge of industrial activity. For younger refugee artists and intellectuals who did not possess established careers and reputations, this booming hub of new wealth and social mobility often proved more attractive than the comparatively stratified society of the capital, Rio de Janeiro.
Austrian architect Bernard Rudofksy followed a common route, arriving in Buenos Aires in 1938, moving to Rio after six weeks, then again to São Paulo, where he remained for a few very productive years before going on to New York in late 1941 (Rossi 2016). The lure of São Paulo came to be particularly intense after the war, when a new wave of immigration brought artists like Samson Flexor, Mira Schendel and Maria Bonomi, architect Lina Bo Bardi and her curator husband Pietro Maria Bardi and theatre director Gianni Ratto, the last four from Italy. In São Paulo, they encountered fledgling institutions and a class of eager patrons, among them: press magnate Assis Chateaubriand, who founded the São Paulo Museum of Art in 1947, or his arch-rival, industrialist Ciccillo Matarazzo, himself of Italian descent, who was the prime mover in establishing São Paulo's Museum of Modern Art in 1948, the São Paulo Biennial in 1951 and the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1963 (Amaral 2006; Mendes de Almeida 2014).

Historians have generally shied away from thinking about these multiple experiences of migration collectively. The motives for moving to Brazil were very different for Japanese immigrants in the 1930s, German refugees in the 1940s and Italian economic migrants in the 1950s. Without a doubt, it is essential to bear such distinctions in mind when writing these histories. However, from the vantage point of the contexts they entered, where they came from and why is less interesting than the fact of their simultaneous presence. Much more urgent questions for the ‘arrival cities’ are the impact of newcomers on the existing culture or how they interacted with the local mainstream and helped to transform it. There is no doubt, for instance, that foreign and immigrant artists of various origins played a prominent role in the move towards abstract painting – both geometric and informal abstraction – that shook the foundations of Brazilian modernism in the 1950s.

The 1952 exhibition entitled Ruptura – rupture – held at São Paulo’s Museum of Modern Art marks the beginning of the Concrete Art movement in Brazil (Concreta ’56: A raiz da forma 2006). Of the seven founding members of the Ruptura group, no fewer than four were immigrants: Swiss artist Lothar Charoux arrived in 1928; Polish artists Anatol Wladyslaw, who arrived in 1930, and Leopold Haar, who arrived in 1946; and Hungarian artist Kazmer Féjer, who arrived in 1939. A fifth member, Waldemar Cordeiro, was born and raised in Italy, though his father was Brazilian and he possessed Brazilian citizenship from birth. Revealingly, it is the Brazilian members – Cordeiro, Geraldo de Barros and Luiz Sacilotto – who went on to achieve notoriety and are usually remembered as members of the group, alongside Hermelindo Fiaminghi, Judith Lauand and Maurício Nogueira Lima, all three Brazilian, who joined later. Irrespective of the quality of their work, it is at least intriguing that the foreign artists have been consigned to the footnotes, especially
considering the importance of like-minded movements in Europe to the group’s ideas. There is undoubtedly a tension between nationalism and internationalism that bubbled under the surface of Brazilian modernism for many decades and came to a head after World War II. To understand this better, we need to go back to two figures who have already made a brief appearance at the beginning of this paper: sculptor Ernesto de Fiori and musicologist Hans-Joachim Koellreutter.

De Fiori arrived in Brazil in August 1936 to visit his mother and brother, who were resident in São Paulo. He was an established artist in Berlin at the time, and was under no pressure to emigrate, being neither Jewish nor particularly political. As the situation in Germany deteriorated, however, there was less and less reason to return. When war broke out he found himself stranded in São Paulo, where he led a reduced existence as an artist until his death in April 1945. In 1938, he submitted proposals for a monumental sculpture of ‘Brazilian man’ that was meant to be erected at the entrance of the Ministry of Education and Health building, in Rio de Janeiro, a landmark in the history of modernist architecture, designed by Le Corbusier and executed by a team that included Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer and Roberto Burle Marx. The sculpture was an integral component of the building programme and can be seen in the original sketches. The idea for the monument was conceived by the Minister of Education himself, Gustavo Capanema, and closely overseen by a committee of scientific advisors. It was supposed to represent ‘the Brazilian racial type’. De Fiori’s submissions were rejected, as were those of two other sculptors; and, in the end, the project was shelved (Alves Pinto Júnior 2014; Knauss 1999). It is fascinating to consider the conflicts that this task must have posed for de Fiori – a sculptor accustomed to working on a small scale attempting to design a 12-metre high figure; a born cosmopolitan and circumstantial refugee from National Socialism charged with devising a monument to race and nation under a dictatorial regime. It is no wonder his half-hearted proposals fell short of the Minister’s expectations.

The other episode fleshing out the tension between nationalism and internationalism took place after the end of the war and revolves around Koellreutter, who was the pivotal figure in a notorious controversy in 1950 that epitomises the conflict between ideas of native and imported in Brazilian modernism (Egg 2005, 60–70). In 1939, soon after his arrival in Brazil, Koellreutter formed a group called Música Viva, dedicated to promoting contemporary music. They staged concerts and published a monthly bulletin. He managed to attract a number of students, including some who became important names in the Brazilian musical world such as Cláudio Santoro and César Guerra-Peixe. He also went on to host programmes for the Ministry of Education’s radio broadcaster. Cautious at first, Koellreutter became more militant in his promotion of avant-garde music by the
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In the twelfth issue of the Música Viva bulletin, he published a text called "Manifesto 1946" which adopted a more radical position in favor of serial and atonal music. Debates ensued within the musical world, with Koellreutter's followers increasingly emboldened to attack the nationalism and folklorism that had dominated modernist discussions of music in Brazil since the 1920s. The backlash came in 1950 with the publication of an "Open Letter to the Musicians and Critics of Brazil" by Mozart Camargo Guarnieri, one of the country's leading composers and, up to then, a colleague on good terms with Koellreutter. In this text sent out to various leading musicians and soon made public in the press, Camargo Guarnieri violently denounced the 12-tone system as false, formalist, pernicious anti-Brazilian and destructive of the national character. He compared it to abstraction in painting and existentialism in philosophy and linked it to a "policy of cultural degeneracy" and a "cosmopolitanism that threatens us with its deforming shadows", rhetorical tropes eerily reminiscent of the discourses around entartete Kunst (Egg 2006). The letter sparked a minor culture war that rocked the Brazilian musical world for three years, with repercussions in Portugal, and eventually consolidated Koellreutter's mythical status as a champion of artistic freedom.

There is not enough room here to delve more deeply into the issue of cosmopolitanism and its implications for the reinvention of modernism in Brazil. Or, for that matter, on the dialectical relationship between immigration and the development of the respective urban cultures of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In lieu of a conclusion, it may be useful to cast the net even wider and underscore the inordinate influence that foreign photographers, some refugees, had on the way Brazilians viewed themselves, their nation and culture over the 1940s and 1950s. The photographic works of Alice Brill, Thomaz Farkas, Werner Haberkorn and Hildegard Rosenthal were essential in constituting the visual identity of Brazil's new metropolises, particularly São Paulo. The photographs of Marcel Gautherot and Pierre Verger helped to flesh out how urbanites in Rio or São Paulo imagined rural Brazil, its folklore and traditions. What little consensus there is about what it means to be Brazilian has been shaped arguably more by the gaze of newcomers than by the programmatic intentions of those who set out to define the native in written terms. To look at the images produced by those who set out to define the native in order to confuse any stable or predetermined notion of national identity is to miss the point. Brazil remains a multicultural country despite its newly elected wish to deny the fact; and its most important arrival cities, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, are still shaped by the ghosts of those who once sought refuge there.
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