The Unfinished Art of Theater

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Introduction

The Uneven Stage of the Avant-Gardes

At a certain point in O banquete (The Banquet), a collection of pseudo-Platonic dialogues by the Brazilian writer and musicologist Mário de Andrade (1893–1945), the character most closely identified with the author turns to theater to exemplify the social role modern art should play. Janjão is a composer who integrates folkloric melodies into pieces with titles such as “Antifascist Scherzo” and “Symphony of Labor.” In a conversation with a young writer, however, he argues that theater is the art “most suited to the intentionality of struggle” because it is an “open” form that allows for “the stain, the sketch, allusion, debate, advice, an invitation.” Contrasting it with sculpture, which creates fixed objects of art (or at least this is how they appear), he hints at something that many an artist and theatergoer has experienced in the flesh: because it unfolds over time, and because its realization requires a material stage as well as the presence of a collective audience, the “art” of theater is more difficult to disentangle from the process of its production and its sociopolitical and economic stakes. To put it in the lingo of avant-garde and modernist studies, theatrical “autonomy” is especially precarious and fraught, but this is also what gives it a very particular power. For this reason, along with design, Janjão classifies theater as an arte do inacabado—an “art of the unfinished.”

Mário de Andrade had a little experience with theater: during the 1920s and 1930s he had drafted (or started to draft) a number of pieces, and as the director of São Paulo’s Department of Culture he oversaw programming at an opera house where he and other members of the modernista avant-garde had made their collective debut at the Week of Modern Art in 1922. Yet like the other works I discuss in this book, his own theater remains unfinished in a sense very different from the one his fictional character would later describe. One of his pieces, which he labeled a “profane oratorio,” is both a spoof on Brazil’s foundational act of independence and an allegorical rendition of the Week of Modern Art, though with a cast of 550,000 singers and five thousand musicians it seems deliberately impossible to perform. A few years later, he started to collaborate with novice composers on a project to create a truly “national” opera by drawing together musical traditions from all the races...
and regions of Brazil; but while the music was performed, Mário’s would-be libretti were archived in the form of outlines and preliminary drafts. Even the handful of plays by avant-garde writers that made it to publication during this era failed to find a stage: in 1933, Mário’s fellow modernista Oswald de Andrade (no relation) penned an audacious anti-imperialist pageant for a small theater in a club frequented by leftist artists, activists, and working-class immigrants, but the stage was forced to shut down during the performance of another experimental piece with a mostly black cast. Almost forty years later, during a commemoration of the Week of Modern Art, the critic Décio de Almeida Prado wistfully noted that while others were celebrating the birth of Brazil’s modern literature, music, and art, he and other theater folks could “hardly help but feel a little on the margins, as if excluded from the party.”

In certain respects the situation is very different in Mexico, the other geographical pole of The Unfinished Art of Theater. In the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), the founding director of the Secretariat of Public Education José Vasconcelos led an unprecedented expansion of the cultural apparatus, including mass literacy campaigns and the construction of schools, libraries, and his own pet project: a “theater-stadium” where some sixty thousand onlookers and auditors gathered to witness thousands of performers sing, dance the jarabe tapatio, and form gigantic human pyramids. But Vasconcelos first envisioned such spectacles in the context of a never-performed (and unperformable?) play, and in his speech at the stadium’s inauguration he stressed that what spectators were about to see and hear was only an ensayo—an “essay,” but also a “rehearsal,” or a performance still in development and incomplete. Ensayos were everywhere in Mexico during the 1920s: the term was also used to describe the short skits performed by the indigenous subjects of artist-ethnographers who joined with members of the estridentista avant-garde to form a theater group inspired by a Russian cabaret-style revue. The Murciélago (or Bat) made its much-hyped debut for an envoy of U.S. businessmen and then quickly folded its wings; a decade later, however, it was cited as an inspiration for the new National Dance School, which planned to premiere its style of “choreographic theater” with a pantomime ballet featuring Troka the Powerful, a figure who represented the medium of radio but was (most likely) meant to be embodied as a puppet. The pantomime (most likely) never happened, and now Troka is remembered as the host of a children’s radio program. Still, the specter of his puppet double occasionally returns, as do remnants of other fragmentary, “failed” experiments involved in the expansion and (re)creation of the cultural infrastructure in Mexico.

The years between the two world wars loom large in genealogies of modern culture. In both Mexico and Brazil avant-garde artists formed part of an expanding network of circulation, collaboration, and conflict with their counterparts in other parts of the world: Diego Rivera was commissioned to
paint murals in San Francisco and Flint, but he also drafted a manifesto with Leon Trotsky and André Breton right in Mexico City, and although Oswald de Andrade spent plenty of time in Paris, he also argued over futurism and fought fascists with the immigrants and itinerant intellectuals who were arriving in São Paulo from Italy, Germany, and elsewhere. But despite the internationalist outlook of the avant-garde, most of the figures who traverse the pages of this book also played a prominent role in shaping the new cultural institutions and repertoires of national identity that arose in the context of major geopolitical shifts and a rearticulation of the global economy. One of my claims is that the emergence of a “modern Mexican” and “Brazilian” culture is bound to both the legacy of particular avant-garde intellectuals and to the idea of the avant-garde—an idea that implies a performative break with the past. Yet Prado’s lament about being left out of the festivities, like Vasconcelos’s depiction of the stadium spectacle as a work in progress, suggests that avant-garde theater can also be a reminder of what remains tied to the past. If, as Victor Turner insisted, the verb “to perform” has its roots in the Old French *parfournir* (“to complete” or “to carry out thoroughly”), both the unstaged pieces of Brazilian modernismo and the would-have-been performances of Mexico in the era of the avant-gardes seem to be evidence of an unfinished or uneven historical transition.3

*The Unfinished Art of Theater* pulls back on the futuristic impulse endemic to the avant-garde by exploring how theater became a key site for reconfiguring the role of the aesthetic in two countries on the semi-periphery of capitalism from around 1917 to 1934. This book argues that precisely because of its historic weakness as a “representative” institution—because the bourgeois stage had not (yet) coalesced—theater was at the forefront of struggles to redefine the relationship between art and social change at a moment marked by the (re)consolidation of the modern state and the emergence of a class of intellectuals identified as belonging to an international avant-garde. Drawing on archives in Mexico City, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and locations across the United States, it reveals the significance of little-known genres and texts that belie the rhetoric of rupture typically associated with the avant-garde: ethnographic operas with ties to the recording industry, populist puppet plays, children’s radio programs about the wonders of technology, a philosophical drama, and a never-performed “spectacle” written for a theater shut down by the police. In doing so it also opens up the study of Mexican and Brazilian culture, remapping their geopolitical coordinates and bringing avant-garde intellectuals from these two countries into dialogue with other theorists of the peripheral and passé. To borrow a phrase from the Russian revolutionary (and critic of the avant-garde) Leon Trotsky, this book stakes a claim for the “privilege of historic backwardness” by showing how these “unfinished” works can illuminate the ways in which the very category of avant-garde art is bound up in the experience of dependency, delay, and the uneven development of capitalism.4
The unfinished aspects of these pieces and projects frequently register as a symptom of lack, a sign of weak sovereignty and the precarity of art. But they can also, and often simultaneously, signify an excess or potentiality that bleeds beyond the bounds of existing disciplines and trajectories of development. In the following six chapters I approach the unfinished as a site of social conflicts, ideological contradictions, material limitations, and affective obstacles. At the same time, I also foreground it as a means of unraveling the reification of art and ideas, of working against deterministic views of history and elaborating a relational understanding of art—not only in its intersections with politics and economics but also anthropology, musicology, philosophy, new and old media technologies, and other cultural practices that vanguard artists helped (re)define. Ideas about the avant-garde and its “agency” (to use a fraught word) are genealogically entangled with a certain paradigm of theater and performance that privileges presence, embodiment, and immediacy. What I seek to do instead is to think through the materiality of theater and to account for what Hal Foster calls the “deferred temporality of artistic signification,” or the way its effects play out in and over time, in the back and forth between present and past. This unfinished dimension is especially evident in Mexico and Brazil during the interwar era for reasons that ultimately have to do with these countries’ integral but subordinate role in the world system at a moment of crisis and change. Yet what is more obvious on the (semi)periphery can also illuminate dynamics that in the center are harder to see. After all, the annals of the European avant-garde are also littered with pieces that were never (or never successfully) staged and projects that fell short or simply fell through, whether for lack of money, the limitations of technology, political repression or fear, conflicting visions among collaborators, the tug of “outmoded” institutional structures on the senses, or because experimenting with certain kinds of bodies was easier on the page than onstage. This is all to say that even as I piece together six very specific stories grounded in archival evidence and a close attention to diverse types of texts (along with some theoretical speculation), I also seek to model a more general methodology of reading, watching, and listening for what is unfinished.

Avant-Garde Autonomy and Its Dependencies

In September 1922, Brazil hosted an international exposition in Rio de Janeiro to commemorate the centenary of its independence from Portugal. The Mexican government sent a military delegation in addition to musicians, painters, and writers and joined France, the United States, and dozens of other nations in constructing a pavilion to display its commercial, artistic, and anthropological wares. In an arresting account of Mexico’s showing, the historian Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo dwells on the role of José Vasconcelos,
the quixotic figure around whom the first chapter of this book revolves. Less than two years earlier Vasconcelos had taken on the task of creating the Secretariat of Public Education with the stated aim of making education available to all—no mean feat in a country where the already low literacy rates had fallen during the decade-long revolution, and where multiple indigenous groups spoke multiple languages other than Spanish. Much of the communication and transportation infrastructure had been damaged or destroyed, rebellions and assassinations were still daily news, and the U.S. government was withholding recognition of the new regime as the president wavered on whether to expropriate the properties of U.S. citizens and oil companies. Brazil, on the other hand, still had eight years to go before the Revolution of 1930, an expeditious, top-down affair that would bring the eventual dictator Getúlio Vargas to power. Yet already at this stage there were signs of instability: anarchist-led strikes and an uprising in 1918 had put the elite on edge, the coffee economy was ever more volatile, and two months earlier young army officers in Rio had taken up arms against the Republic and demanded democratic reforms. None of this, however, dampened the enthusiasm of Vasconcelos. In the travelogue he published three years later, he describes Brazil as a land of progress and potential—even as he speculates that the authorities took measures to keep black and poor people out of his sight. Prior to the exposition he had visited São Paulo, which he hails as the most significant industrial center in Latin America, an idyllic city where all of the workers are happy and everyone knows how to read. And even though the Amazon was not on his itinerary, the prologue to his book insists that one day all of the world’s peoples will converge there to form a “cosmic race” and found the techno-aesthetic utopia he dubs Universópolis.

Tenorio-Trillo reads this as evidence of a “south-south kind of fascination,” a case of mutual admiration and intrigue between the two giants of Latin America. Judging from the press, he suggests, some Brazilians were equally in awe of Vasconcelos’s ambitious educational program, and his speech at the dedication of a statue of the Aztec warrior Cuauhtémoc on the anniversary of Mexico’s own independence on September 16 was applauded for its eloquence. At the crux of Tenorio-Trillo’s ironic narrative, however, is an encounter that never occurred. Back in Mexico, Vasconcelos was fostering the emergence of what would become one of the world’s most iconic avant-gardes: though not exactly an avant-garde artist himself, he sparked much of its organizational momentum and some key ideas, as when he sent Diego Rivera and others to Italy to study fresco techniques and then commissioned them to cover the walls of government buildings with murals. Among the Latin American avant-gardes of this era, the only other movement that rivals the Mexican *vanguardias* in terms of its prominence within studies of “global modernisms” (to use a current term) was the one gaining momentum in Brazil at the time of his visit. Yet Vasconcelos says nothing in his travelogue
of having heard about the Week of Modern Art that had taken place in São Paulo only a few months earlier, and if any of the Brazilian modernistas attended one of his public lectures in Rio or São Paulo, it apparently failed to leave much of a mark.\textsuperscript{10}

Direct dialogues between the avant-gardes of Mexico and Brazil were not especially common, and although such connections occasionally turn up, they are not central to this book. The (relatively minor) differences between Spanish and Portuguese may have contributed to their lack of exchange, but a more compelling explanation is that the circuits of culture, commodities, and immigration (as well as structures such as the Communist Party) worked to orient writers and artists from both countries toward Europe and the United States. Counterintuitively, the fact that Mexico City and São Paulo were becoming cultural capitals in their own right probably also acted as a disincentive to more regular communication. Still, there are reasons for drawing these two vanguards into proximity.\textsuperscript{11} Although they share an Iberian heritage, Mexico and Brazil arose out of divergent histories of colonization and state formation: Mexico City, built on top of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, was the administrative center of New Spain prior to its hard-won independence in 1821, but Brazil took shape as a more loosely integrated colony of Portugal, and in an odd inversion Rio de Janeiro became the seat of the realm when the Portuguese court fled from Napoleon’s invading army and decamped there for thirteen years. For much of the nineteenth century Mexico was torn by civil wars, foreign invasions, and the loss of half of its territory to the United States, until in 1876 Porfirio Díaz established a de facto dictatorship that would claim credit for the “pacification” and “modernization” of Mexico. In contrast, Brazil became an empire after its easy break from the mother country, and only in 1889—the year after it became the last country in the hemisphere to abolish slavery—was a republic with a weak federal government formed. Throughout the twentieth century both countries would continue to play a “dependent” role in the world economy, yet they were also regional powers and could be said to belong to what Immanuel Wallerstein designates as the semi-periphery.\textsuperscript{12}

By the beginning of the twentieth century Mexico and Brazil had small but growing concentrations of light industry and were avid consumers (as well as early producers) of the new entertainment media of film and phonograph recordings. Yet partly for these reasons they were places where the unevenness and contradictions of capitalist development were especially apparent. Both were still predominantly rural and starkly divided by disparities of region, race, and class; access to schooling and literacy rates were notably low; and their economies hinged on the export of primary commodities such as minerals and henequen (Mexico) or rubber and coffee (Brazil), which in many cases was directly controlled by external investors and in almost every case relied on foreign financing and foreign-built infrastructure (i.e., railroads and telegraph lines). In Brazil, where the export boom inflated
the fortunes of the landowning oligarchy, Roberto Schwarz has noted that the dissonance between the liberal ideology of this era and the “backward” social relations it helped to sustain generated an uneasy and shameful sense among intellectuals that “modern” ideas were “out of place” in Brazil. Of course, he acknowledges, ideas such as individual autonomy, the universality of law, and “disinterested” culture failed to accord with reality in Europe too, but they were more obviously askew and felt embarrassingly “inauthentic” in a country where slavery had only recently ended and relations of patronage formed the basis of social bonds. Yet in an insight that informs my own interpretation of modernismo, Schwarz argues that this affective experience of incongruity itself gave rise to a “Brazilian” national identity.

This was Latin America’s “Export Age,” a period when the region became increasingly integrated into global market relations, primarily through the export of raw materials and the import of manufactured goods. Although this setup had already been shaken by World War I, the fallout from the stock market crash on Wall Street in October 1929 precipitated a more profound shift in which the state assumed a more central role in the economy and extended its reach into new dimensions of social life. In this book I situate the avant-gardes of Mexico and Brazil in this transition—a period of struggles over economic realignments, but also changes in the dynamics of sovereignty and a transformation of the fields of culture and knowledge. Giovanni Arrighi describes the entire interwar era as a time of “systemic chaos”: although Britain had long been losing ground, its hegemony finally came to an end as the disintegration of free-trade imperialism coincided with the Russian Revolution, the rise of Germany, and a worldwide wave of popular rebellion. Ultimately, this capitalist crisis became the occasion for a restructuring and expansion of the world economy in which the United States secured its supremacy; curiously, though, it was at this very time that artists in many parts of Europe and Latin America laid claim to the category of the cultural avant-garde, which only among later generations of artists would gain purchase in the United States.

Exactly how all of these moving pieces connect is far from straightforward, and even some “theories” of the avant-garde that foreground its relation to capital take a surprisingly narrow view. Take, for example, the oft-cited argument of Peter Bürger. Bürger, who privileges Dada as the most radical and paradigmatic movement, defines the avant-garde as the “self-criticism of art in bourgeois society”: rather than simply attacking outdated styles or forms, it sought to destroy art as an institution by undermining its so-called autonomy, or detachment from the “praxis of life.” Only with the late nineteenth-century doctrine of aestheticism, or “art for art’s sake,” did this impulse toward autonomy come to full fruition, and only after that was it possible for “art” to be grasped as a concept and social construct. According to Bürger, the avant-garde took aim at the apparatus involved in the production and distribution of art (including academies and museums),
and also at the ideas underpinning its sacred status (or what Walter Benjamin would dub its “aura”), as when Marcel Duchamp lampooned the notion of individual creativity by signing his name to a mass-produced urinal.

This might be a plausible explanation of what Duchamp and certain other individuals set out to do, but it is less than satisfying as a general “theory” of the avant-garde. As Hal Foster has noted, Bürger takes the avant-garde’s own rhetoric of rupture at face value—one symptom of which is his hostility toward the neo-avant-gardes, whom he accuses of institutionalizing the earlier, “historical” avant-garde and thus turning it into the “art” it despised. In Foster’s words, Bürger “projects the historical avant-garde as an absolute origin whose aesthetic transformations are fully significant and historically effective in the first instance.” In doing so, he overlooks the time lag involved in reception and debate, and the fact that Duchamp accrued some of his “subversive” effect as the result of retrospective interpretations. Foster goes on to point to the “residual evolutionism” in Bürger’s account of artistic autonomy and its cognition. But there are some additional issues that deserve mention. First, Bürger’s story of the avant-garde’s emergence ignores tensions, contradictions, and differences within and among the movements included in this category; and second, his evolutionary narrative of art presumes a certain kind and degree of institutional development that was far from universal, even within Europe. In other words, he ignores the multiplicity and unevenness of the avant-garde—in part because he fails to factor in its geographical spread.

In Mexico and Brazil, too, the art-for-art’s-sake injunction gained ground in the late nineteenth century, as did many of the stylistic trends associated with aestheticism in Europe. And how could it have been otherwise? Both Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro had an official art academy and national conservatory where students received a classical training, usually from European instructors, and up-and-coming artists and musicians often continued their studies in Paris, Madrid, and/or Italy. In literature, Spanish American modernismo (not to be confused with the avant-garde movement of the same name in Brazil) cultivated a genteel, urbane style with echoes of French symbolism and Parnassian poetics and was fond of evoking exotic, often orientalist locales. But in this context, the claim to aesthetic autonomy could only be fragile and vexed. Modernistas such as the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío upheld the spiritual, aesthetic value of their own work as a defense against the crass commercialism of the United States, yet as Ericka Beckman observes, the luxury imports that litter the opulent interiors they evoke betray the imbalances and dependent relations of the Export Age. In his work on the desencuentros, or “dis-encounters,” of modernity in Spanish America, Julio Ramos also points out that the small size of the reading public and book market led many modernista writers (who tended to come from an emerging middle class) to work as journalists and cultivate their refined
aesthetic in the mass-market venue of the daily newspaper. In Brazil, which had a roughly parallel movement known as *parnasianismo*, Roberto Schwarz puts his finger on the same basic problem when he describes “disinterested” culture as an idea out of place in a country where patronage was the name of the game. In short, the institution of autonomous art that Bürger imagines as the fully formed object of the avant-garde’s attack was anything but—and as a matter of consequence, the avant-garde itself is harder to define. By insisting on their own avant-garde status, the artists of Mexico and Brazil destabilized the so-called universality and autonomy of European art (at least in a certain sense), but this often went hand in hand with a push to create their own local “autonomous” institutions of art.

In recent years, Bürger’s paradigm has fallen out of favor, as have other such “totalizing” theories of the avant-garde. In fact, the very category of the avant-garde has acquired a dated air. In leftist politics and debate, the tide has turned away from vanguard party politics and toward anarchism and more horizontal forms of organization. At the same time, in the academic world, there is a growing move to integrate “avant-garde” movements into “global,” “comparative,” or even “planetary modernisms”—ever more expansive, flexible frameworks that purport to unsettle borders, allow for diversity of definitions, and diffuse the teleological thrust behind the idea of a singular avant-garde. But there are also some imposing desires, assumptions, and institutional pressures at play in this effort to decenter the study of modernism and the avant-gardes. Much of its momentum comes from scholars whose primary background is in Europe or the United States, and although this can make for new insights into old problems, limited linguistic skills and knowledge about local conditions and critical traditions tend to favor the interpretation of texts and works of art as (!) autonomous objects. Of course, so-called specialists are hardly immune to this problem, and regardless of who the critic is, the salutary push to burst the field’s Eurocentric bubble often fuels exceptionalist claims and a desire to champion “marginalized” works from other regions of the world, where in fact said works are often quite canonical. In other words, in the process of going “global,” the problem of art as an institution is all too often shoved to the side.

As an example, take Fernando J. Rosenberg’s *The Avant-Garde and Geopolitics in Latin America* (2006), a book that shares some of my own concerns and has more than a few merits. The author’s argument, illustrated with close readings of novels and travel narratives from Argentina and Brazil, is that whereas the European avant-gardes simply refigured imperialist assumptions, their Latin American counterparts “explored the limits of a national, culturalist response to crisis of the universality of civilization” by creating “narratives of space” that undermined the linear narrative of progress. He describes this as a practice of “embodied universality” and endorses it as a model for approaching the cultural politics of our own age—yet for all his talk of geopolitics, he avoids any discussion of Latin American avant-gardists.
who espoused fascism, dismisses all examples of polemical (i.e., leftist) work as a “repression of critical consciousness,” and devotes two chapters to Mário de Andrade without noting the writer’s own ambivalent experiences in creating new cultural institutions under the auspices of the state. In effect, Rosenberg’s readings redefine “politics” as an ethical-aesthetic category and privilege a specifically *literary* form of “cosmopolitanism.” But is cultural nationalism (his main bugbear) just a bad style that can be (un)written on the page? Is it accurate to attribute a progressive function to works of literature on the sole basis of form or their *representation* of social relations? What about the materiality of art and the apparatuses on which it depends? Rosenberg’s focus on space as a critical category in the study of the avant-gardes is on point. And yet solutions crafted within the closed confines of poetic or narrative space often fail to hold up when space becomes something more than metaphorical and actual bodies are involved.

In the next section I turn to the question of why theatrical works—even when they never make it onto a physical stage—tend to prove more resistant to the mode of interpretation Rosenberg and others practice. First, however, it is important to recognize that the “geopolitics” of the avant-garde were connected to the very problem of artistic autonomy that such readings ignore. In 1923, in a polemical essay published the following year in his collection *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky observed that the most vibrant futurist movements had emerged not in “advanced” capitalist countries such as the United States or Germany but in Italy and Russia, two comparatively “backward” countries on the periphery of Europe. In other words, was not a direct reflection of economic and political modernization but a response to the experience of what he refers to on other occasions as combined and uneven development. In his account of the Russian Revolution, the founder of the Red Army points out that the expansion of capitalism draws all regions of the world into a complex, self-contradictory totality, such that while the more “primitive” countries are “compelled to follow after” those regarded as more advanced, it is impossible for them to replicate the same series of cultural stages observed in places where capitalist relations of production first emerged. Competition and constraints imposed by the dominant countries can foster certain aspects of their growth while hindering others, as can aspects of their own culture, and they can adapt ideas and technologies from elsewhere without having to reinvent the wheel. “The privilege of historic backwardness—and such a privilege exists—permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages” (31). As a result, development in such countries looks less like a steady progression than like a “drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (32). Yet this seeming peculiarity is not actually a deviation from the norm: unevenness, Trotsky insists, is “the most general law of the historic process,” the logic of which
“reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries” (32).

Trotsky’s recognition of heterogeneity and asymmetry as constitutive elements of the historical process offers an implicit critique of economic determinism, which condemns weaker countries to mimetically reproducing the imperial powers’ past, yet his emphasis on the interdependence of all nations is also aimed against Stalin’s claims about the viability of building socialism in one state. Both principles also underlie Trotsky’s insistence on the relative autonomy of art. While he zealously defends Russian futurism against “petty realists” and sees it as a “necessary link” in the creation of a new art still to come, his understanding of revolution as a single if internally contradictory and discontinuous process also undercuts the sense of temporality and agency associated with the avant-garde.

The “Bohemian nihilism” of the futurists, their hyperbolic disavowal of the past and call for the immediate fusion of art with “life,” too hastily relinquishes the weapons afforded by (bourgeois) art, which is “always a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli that originate outside of art.” Writing in the context of Lenin’s declining health and his own struggle with Stalin for leadership, Trotsky too seems to hold out hope for a time when art will be more integrated into everyday praxis, but he warns against instrumentalization and argues that such a “synthesis” can’t be fully realized in the here and now. Political revolutionaries, he says, know the future can’t be built from scratch, and the only way to move forward is by working through the contradictions and unevenness out of which the revolution, like futurism, arose.

Little did Trotsky know that some thirteen years later he would find himself in a different semi-peripheral, (post)revolutionary country after a Mexican avant-garde artist named Diego Rivera negotiated an offer of asylum on his behalf. In exile from his own country, Trotsky would live in the house of Rivera and Frida Kahlo and survive an assassination attempt led by another avant-garde muralist—David Alfaro Siquieros—before dying a few months later in a second attack. Today, of course, the language of backwardness both he and Schwarz employ has the same outdated air that clings to the idea of the avant-garde. Although the concept of unevenness has long played a part in modernist studies and is currently enjoying a resurgence in discussions of world literature, much of this work is marked by a strange silence surrounding the history of debates about uneven development and all the political and economic issues that were (and are) at stake; often the idea of development is deemed irrelevant when the avant-garde is subsumed into global or comparative modernisms, and unevenness is redefined as a principle at work within the literary or aesthetic field. My own wager, however, is that rather than skirting the issue of temporality, our critical discourse needs to reckon with the contradictions and teleological trajectories that capitalism creates, which can’t be unthought or undone simply by coming up with a new paradigm or loosening the definition of a word.
The Banal Equipment of the Theater

What, then, of theater?

Trotsky never singles out theater for special attention in his discussion of futurism, and it is far from certain that his approach to the art would resemble the one I develop in this book. Yet in 1925, just a year after that essay appeared, Walter Benjamin submitted his postdoctoral thesis about a set of strange, seldom-read plays—works which, in the opinion of most previous critics, had probably never been performed.

As the author himself acknowledges, the German Trauerspiel of the seventeenth century was an “eccentric” form with a penchant for ostentation and exaggeration, prone to the use of archaisms, neologisms, and morbid scenes of royal martyrdom and violence—all evidence, Benjamin said, that the Trauerspiel was an attempt to transform the medieval passion play for an era in which the law of the Church was giving way to the rule of absolute kings and queens. The neoclassicists of the following century dismissed the Trauerspiel as a bungled attempt to revive Greek tragedy, and even the Romantics reserved their admiration for Shakespeare and Calderón de la Barca, whose works achieved a “suppleness of form” absent from the works of their German contemporaries (49). In Protestant England and Catholic Spain it proved possible to make masterpieces to mark the times; but in the fragmented states of Germany, still wracked by the religious wars, the authors of the Trauerspiel were unable to marshal the power of illusion to redeem the fallen kingdom of this world.

For Benjamin, however, this inability (or refusal?) to overcome their own creaturely condition is what granted these works their strange virtue. True, the German Trauerspiel was awkward and extreme; its plot was fragmented into “crudely illuminated” figures and scenes, and its puppet-like characters seemed to lack even the slightest psychological motivation. Yet to a certain degree the same could also be said of Hamlet or Life Is a Dream, as of the Baroque as a whole. The baroque style was one of ornate involutions and circumlocutions, spectacular contrasts and contradictions, and dizzying “antinomies of the allegorical,” all of which were driven by the desire to escape the fate of transience and arrive at “that one about-turn”—the moment of salvation when the fragments form an aesthetic whole and allegory suddenly “loses everything that [is] most peculiar to it” (232). The more successful examples of baroque drama achieved this: in the lush pageants of Calderón de la Barca, a virtuosic illusion delivers the secular equivalent of a divine miracle, and all conflicts come to a close in an awe-inspiring apotheosis. The German Trauerspiel, on the other hand, refuses redemption and remains faithful to its earthly condition of immanence; it retains its peculiar- ity to the end, because “in the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment.” Unable to overwhelm its spectators with the magic of stage machinery, it allows them to see the “banal equipment of the theater,”
and in doing so it not only illuminates its own mechanisms of representation but also emblematizes the conflicts and contradictions of its era (235).

Benjamin was just beginning to engage with Marxism at the time he wrote this text, and it would be a few more years before he met Bertolt Brecht, who would have a profound impact on his ideas about theater and politics. Even so, this text is notable for the way it approaches the materiality of the stage as a place from which to think through world events. Historians often refer to the seventeenth century as a “general crisis” involving not only the decline of papal authority and destructive wars but also economic volatility linked to the intensification of maritime competition and inflation caused by the influx of silver from the New World mines. Benjamin only vaguely alludes to this turmoil, and he shows no sign of recognizing this as a key moment in the global expansion of capitalism. Nor does he seem to know that the baroque found some of its most spectacular expressions in the colonial pagentry of those regions of the Americas under Iberian rule. Still, hovering in the historical backdrop of his interpretation is the emergence of the European nation-state system and a new order of international law in the wake of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Germany remained on the margins of all this: still just a group of principalities within the Holy Roman Empire, it would not gain the status of a sovereign nation for another 231 years. For Benjamin, however, the truth of a phenomenon was found not in the “average,” but in the “remotest extremes and the apparent excesses of the process of development” (47). In its fragmentary form, the German Trauerspiel reveals the uneven temporality of secularization and state formation; it enacts the splintering of power into the realms of religion, politics, and art; and in its failure to match the feats of Calderón and Shakespeare, it registers the asymmetries and asynchronicities that arise when God’s earth is divided into semi-autonomous but ultimately interdependent domains.

At one point Benjamin hints at an analogy between the Trauerspiel and expressionist theater, suggesting that his remarks on these arcane plays are also an argument about the art of his own times, which reacted against but in some respects perpetuated a discourse on theater that also shaped some of the early attempts to create a “national” theater in Mexico and Brazil. Within the German aesthetic tradition, theater was the arena where progressive intellectuals could reach beyond the small coteries of the literary elite and elevate the masses by bringing their senses and rational faculties into play. Friedrich Schiller, for example, argued for the importance of a standing national theater by evoking its capacity to create consensus, to unite spectators of different classes and regions just as it creates a bridge between each individual’s reason and emotions, “uniting the noblest education of the head and heart.” The theater is where effeminate natures are steeled, savages made man, and, as the supreme triumph of nature, men of all ranks, zones, and conditions, emancipated
from the chains of conventionality and fashion, fraternize here in a universal sympathy, forget the world, and come nearer to their heavenly destination. The individual shares in the general ecstasy, and his breast has now only space for an emotion: he is a man. (345)

Indeed! Audience members are joined in their common condition as spectators through a process of abstraction in which contingencies of class, geography, and gender melt away—a process mapped onto a developmental narrative that uses “culture” as a yardstick for distinguishing “savages” from “men.” How does an image achieve this edifying effect? What does the ideal spectator see? Schiller cites a few exemplary plays, but plotlines and stylistic niceties are hardly his main concern. As David Lloyd and Paul Thomas point out in their genealogy of the convergence of theories of the state with theories of culture in Germany and Britain, the medium is the message of cultural pedagogy. The stage functions as a “moral institution” not because of the particular objects it places before the public’s eye but by virtue of its social form—the spatial relations, normative narratives, and logics of identification it rehearses in a re-creational space. Theater is where individuals learn to be represented, which becomes the precondition for political participation, just as the stage serves as a paradigm for all those other “representative” bodies that emerged to interpellate individuals as subjects of the democratic state, among them the parliament, the classroom, and the political rally.

Of course, theaters were also hotbeds of factious fervor in the lead-up to the French Revolution, an event Schiller of all people had no desire to see repeated. History’s many tales of theater riots might be exaggerated and overplayed, and they are certainly symptomatic of a common fantasy (and fear) about the convergence of politics and art. Still, it remains true that improvisation and onstage accidents heighten the element of contingency, as does the possibility that spectators will fail to feel their hearts flutter with fraternal love and might even interrupt the action or debate its significance in a more physical manner than the mediations of print would allow. Instead of making people forget the world, theater can make them more acutely aware of it. Social distinctions often become more apparent when the “public” materializes in the form of actual individuals occupying the same space (with others left standing outside the door), and if readers of novels usually manage to overlook the labor of the printer, theater is more apt to unsettle assumptions about what Nicholas Ridout refers to as the “work of time and the time of work” because it involves actors performing something uncannily like labor in the presence of audience members during their leisure time. In her study of national theater movements, Loren Kruger contends that the more manifest “impurity” of theater’s autonomy from the sociopolitical realm makes it a powerful yet precarious vehicle for establishing cultural legitimation: “At once more and less than art, theatre straddles the disputed border country between the aesthetic state and the political. . . . This constitutive
contradiction in theatrical autonomy enables the construction of theatrical nationhood as at once a cultural monument to legitimate hegemony and the site on which the excavation and perhaps the toppling of that monument might be performed.”  

This—the toppling part—is one way of understanding what many of the European avant-gardes claimed to do. As liberal democracy strained at the seams and the abstraction of social relations was driven to new levels by imperial expansion, the intensification of finance capitalism, and the growth of new technologies of communication, the very principle of representation came under fire, and nowhere was this so evident as on the bourgeois stage. At a time when new media were blurring old boundaries and promising the possibility of reaching new audiences, theater seemed to some to be irredeemably retrograde, hindered not just by hundreds (thousands!) of years of tradition but also by two fundamental limitations: the human body and the material stage. In a text written during his time among the Tarahumara indigenous people of northern Mexico, Antonin Artaud called for a “total spectacle” that would abolish the text and physically engulf the spectator with the aim of throwing him into “magical trances.” Artaud’s plan to resacralize theater, though equally enamored of “danger” and hostile to the dramatic text, was in other ways quite different from the brief sintesi of the Italian Futurists; and although the “theater of totality” envisioned by the Bauhaus school in Weimar Germany employed some of the same circus-inspired techniques as Vsevolod Meyerhold’s Soviet theater and drew on a similar vocabulary, there was an immense gap between the offstage realities in which the two projects sought to intervene. Yet despite these differences, all of these artists are commonly associated with the trend toward “total theater”—an all-encompassing, synesthetic spectacle in which every genre and medium mixes and the stage disappears as art and action coincide.

This specter of total theater is one of the foils for my own approach to theater as an unfinished art. Genealogies of total theater typically trace it back to Richard Wagner’s notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art), which promised to supersede the decadent art of opera and abolish the distinction between social classes by recovering the vitality of the folk. Like a number of other critics, Martin Puchner stresses the importance of the Wagnerian legacy for European and Euro-American modernism and the avant-garde, but he also sees it as a pivot on which the distinction between these two categories turns. Whereas avant-garde artists embraced the growing theatricalism of the era, modernists such as Mallarmé, Joyce, and Stein—and even playwrights such as Beckett and Brecht—redoubled their emphasis on “literariness” and textual mediation as a defense against the seemingly unmediated mimesis of theater. Puchner teases out the disavowal and dependence at the heart of this “stage fright” by focusing on the neglected genre of the closet drama, a play seemingly meant to be read rather than performed. In some cases the text revolves around long intellectual dialogues with little action, though
in others the actions are too grandiose or impossible to enact mimetically onstage (as when a character instantaneously changes sex). Although Puchner acknowledges that the antitheatricalism of some modernists was an elitist defense against the masses, he also recognizes it as a form of resistance to the codification and commodification of the physical theater, as well as to the spectacular pageantry of fascism in which avant-garde theatricalism could become caught up.36

But if a certain understanding of performativity grounded in immediacy is considered characteristic—even constitutive—of the avant-garde, where does this leave the “unfinished” theater of the avant-garde in Mexico and Brazil? How can it be integrated into broader narratives of avant-garde theater? Among U.S.-based scholars, one significant exception to the usual omission of theater in discussions of the vanguardias and Brazilian modernismo is Vicky Unruh’s influential Latin American Vanguards (1994), which managed to put several long-ignored works on the critical radar and sparked my own interest in this area. Published at a moment when performance studies was beginning to gain greater visibility, the book draws heavily on the ideas of Richard Schechner in depicting Latin American vanguardism as a mode of “aesthetic activism.”37 Yet in her desire to validate the work of these artists according to a very particular notion of performativity and avant-garde agency—Peter Bürger is another of her main models—Unruh neglects the fact that many of the pieces she discusses weren’t actually performed. Much like Fernando Rosenberg, she endows the text with an enormous degree of autonomy and agency, though in this case the move is even more paradoxical because what is at stake is theater. The materiality of theater, its dependence on an apparatus, and the “banal equipment of the theater” about which Benjamin wrote recede into the background as performance becomes a phenomenon that can be realized on the page.

The materiality of theater—even or especially when the apparatus isn’t there—is precisely the place from which I try to rethink the avant-garde. Artists and intellectuals in Mexico and Brazil drew on many of the same ideas about theater as artists and intellectuals in Europe and the United States—hardly a surprise in light of the transoceanic and hemispheric circulation of ideas, artists, techniques, and texts. But the experimental projects of Artaud and even Marinetti (in “backward” Italy) were predicated on the existence of the stage they set out to destroy; in Mexico and Brazil, there was less pretense that theater was or had ever been a “symbolic,” “representative” institution.38 The nation-building novels of the nineteenth century could make lily-white maidens swoon over noble savages (even if only a small percentage of the country’s inhabitants could read these foundational fictions), but the very prospect of enacting a similar scenario onstage inevitably brought uncomfortable realities to light: social prohibitions stood in the way of an actual indigenous man and an actual white woman kissing before an audience of respectable citizens, and even if it were allowed, bringing a noble savage
from the Amazon or Chiapas (where few people from the principal cities had ever set foot) and giving him acting lessons (while also teaching him Spanish or Portuguese) was not on the table. In Mexico, efforts to create a national theater in the postindependence period were stalled by ongoing political instability, and although Brazil had more stable institutions and local companies, its elite was even more preoccupied with opera. The Gran Teatro Nacional in Mexico City and the Teatro Lírico in Rio de Janeiro did occasionally offer operas by “national” composers, but as the consummate art of the Export Age, opera acquired much of its prestige from its status as an import, and most performances were given by touring companies from Europe. In Brazil, some canonical authors from this period wrote plays, though they are seldom read or staged today, and the plethora of revistas (musical revues) and comédias de costumes (similar to a comedy of manners) were not quite regarded as “art.” Both Brazil and Mexico saw turn-of-the-century attempts at theatrical realism (also rarely read today), and Spanish American modernistas often wrote about theater in their newspaper crónicas (chronicles), but if anything their antitheatricalism was even more marked than it was among European modernists due to the very fragility of literary autonomy.

Avant-garde artists in these two countries railed against el teatro burgués or o teatro burguês, but for some it was both the symbol of an imported, imperial order and a spectral sign of the sovereignty their own nations had never achieved. The engagement with mass culture, so central to definitions of the avant-garde, also had a distinct inflection: although it raised the profile of more “popular” cultures and helped generate a shared sense of national identity, the very media through which images and sounds of the popular circulated were dominated by economic interests in Europe and (increasingly) the United States. To put it succinctly, there were more obvious obstacles to the effect of immediacy on which the transformative potential of total theater was imagined to hinge.

Theater and performance studies have undergone some shifts in recent years, a development I would suggest is related not only to the rise of media studies but also to changing ideas about the avant-garde. In her work on the “archive” and the “repertoire,” Diana Taylor stresses that performance is a mode of knowledge transmission no less mediated than written or digital documentation. There is also growing interest in what Fred Moten and Rebecca Schneider refer to as the “inter(in)animation” of the past and present, which troubles the sense of presence, immediacy, and futurity common to certain shared understandings of both performance and avant-garde action. In this book I try to resist the compulsion to prove that theater in Mexico and Brazil was just as “avant-garde” or just as “performative” as in Europe. At the same time, I push back against the discourse of national or regional exceptionalism typical of so much scholarship on the avant-gardes in Mexico and Brazil. The works I consider have their own peculiarities, but even in their strangeness they share key characteristics with their metropolitan counterparts, and for a
number of them, proving their own alterity isn’t exactly the objective. Several are guilty of the same “sins” as the old modernism (e.g., primitivism), none manage to entirely evade the “trap” of teleology (though some give it a twist), and all fail to meet the expectations of uplifting otherness that often drive the redemptive narratives of an expanded modernist and avant-garde studies. Yet in keeping with some of the critics I cite, I insist that these examples of an unfinished art can draw out certain truths about the avant-garde as a whole.

Unfinished Business

*The Unfinished Art of Theater* is not meant to offer a comprehensive overview of avant-garde theater in Mexico and Brazil. Particularly in the case of Mexico, there is a dizzying array of pieces and projects that receive barely or nary a mention in this book. In general I chose to sideline the slightly better-known plays and groups, which also tend to be those that correspond more closely to conventional definitions of “theater.” More intriguing to me were the things I came to glean only little by little through sneaking suspicions, fortuitous finds, and a lot of legwork. This book draws on my research in a number of different archives, though the majority of my time was spent at three sites: the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública in Mexico City, which held a rather random (and sketchily catalogued) collection of materials that has since been incorporated into the Archivo General de la Nación; the meticulously organized personal archive of Mário de Andrade at the Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros in São Paulo; and the Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo, where I immersed myself for weeks in the records of the DEOPS, Brazil’s former political police force. The process of learning how to navigate each of these archives, of trying to discern under what label or branch of the bureaucracy a specific kind of information or material might be—and whether it was even likely to exist—gave me invaluable insight into the messy reclassifications and realignments that were taking place during this period. If you go looking for a category called “theater” in the archives of these years, you are likely to find either that it isn’t there, or that very little is stored in the boxes with that label. Yet theater—the word, the idea, the material traces of theater practices and projects—is everywhere else. More than any concrete document I read or saw, this shaped my sense of how an unfinished art became a site around which so many other categories and concepts were drawn.

The book is divided into two sections: the first on Mexico, the second on Brazil. Each of the two sections has three chapters that follow a roughly chronological order, though within each chapter I frequently loop back to earlier moments and look ahead to future developments that retrospectively reshaped the period on which I focus. In my view, it makes sense to read the
book from start to finish, if only because the seemingly straightforward arc of the narrative serves to cast the temporal complexities of the avant-gardes into relief. That said, there are certain similarities between the analogous chapters in each section, and taking note of them can illuminate some of the oblique ways in which the two countries were linked by their mutual involvement in the global circulation of capital and culture. Rather than giving a rundown of the chapters in consecutive order, then, I prefer to take this opportunity to draw connections across the Mexico/Brazil divide while also highlighting some of the secondary motifs that recur throughout the book.

The first chapter in each section circles around the issue of origins and definitions: the prehistories and (anti)foundational acts of the avant-gardes, their debates over nomenclature, and the dynamics of disavowal on which they depend. In each case I dwell on the early 1920s, and I foreground a figure who played a pivotal role in the formation of the vanguard but was (or is) regarded in some sense as marginal—even antithetical—to its ideals. The protagonist of chapter 1 (“Rehearsals of the Tragi-Co[s]mic Race”) is the aforementioned José Vasconcelos, a hard-to-classify character whose institutional innovations as founding director of the Secretariat of Public Education were arguably among the most significant factors in the early development of the Mexican avant-garde. If this connection occasionally posed problems for the artists, it has caused even more consternation among critics—particularly given that Vasconcelos’s vision of *la raza cósmica* eventually became an ideology closely associated with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (often referred to by its Spanish acronym, PRI), which monopolized the presidency for seven decades starting in 1929. This chapter grapples with the tenuous distinction between “art” and “ideology” in a (post)revolutionary context, and it restores a sense of contingency to the cosmic race by shifting attention away from Vasconcelos’s so-called ensayo (essay) *La raza cósmica* to alternative meanings of *ensayo*, which can also refer to a rehearsal or a preliminary experiment. When read through the lens of his bizarre essay-cum–closet drama *Prometeo vencedor* (Prometheus Triumphant) and the rehearsals for the inaugural mass spectacle of his giant “theater-stadium,” the cosmic race appears as a more fragmentary figure for a shift in ideas and practices of sovereignty that entailed a remaking of the body and its senses.

Pugnacious and polarizing, Vasconcelos cuts a striking contrast with Mário de Andrade, the conspicuously coy poet and music teacher who makes a star turn in my account of the Week of Modern Art in chapter 4 (“Parsifal on the Periphery of Capitalism”). Like Vasconcelos, however, Mário formed part of a symbolic chain linking an emphasis on racial mixture as the basis of nationhood to a genre similarly coded as “mixed”: the aura surrounding the “pope” of Brazilian modernismo (I argue) was bound up in the open secret of his not-quite-white origins and queer (a)sexuality, as was his characterization as the Brazilian Parsifal—a counterpart to the chaste, self-sacrificing knight in Wagner’s opera of the same name. This chapter complicates the
common depiction of the Week of Modern Art as a rupture from the past by foregrounding its setting in an opera house and showing how the participants formulated their call for the “new” in and against the “anachronistic” language of opera. I tease out the tense exchanges and veiled disputes among the proto-modernistas in a series of articles leading up to the event and speeches given on (and off) its operatic stage; then, in the last section, I reflect on the retrospective work of memorialization, focusing on Mário’s own parody of the Week of Modern Art in the form of a “profane oratorio” for 550,000 singers. My discussion of the modernistas’ operatic attachments and the sense of shame surrounding Mário’s persona offers a queer angle on Roberto Schwarz’s notion of Brazilian liberalism as an idea “out of place,” giving a new inflection to his argument that modernism in Brazil arose out of (and not simply despite) the experience of backwardness and dependency.

Some of these threads carry over into the second chapters of each section, both of which explore the intersections of ethnography and art while also tracing the shared circuits of emotions and economics. Chapter 2 (“Primitivist Accumulation and Teatro sintético”) constructs a critical genealogy of “synthetic theater,” a term used by the Italian Futurists but also associated with the Chauve-Souris, a touring revue troupe founded by Soviet émigrés in Paris that gained fame for its skits about the diverse social classes of prerevolutionary Russia and its imperial peripheries. In Mexico, the idea spawned several projects, the most notable of which grew out of a collaboration between affiliates of the *estridentista* avant-garde and artist-ethnographers who started out working with indigenous communities under the direction of Manuel Gamio, the so-called father of modern anthropology in Mexico. Directly modeled on the Chauve-Souris, the Teatro del Murciélago juxtaposed short, archetypal scenes of urban and rural, indigenous life. Its objective? To create a “synthesis” of the primitive and the modern in the form of an amalgamation of music, dance, painting, and pantomime that was billed as a “toy store for the soul.” My narrative reaches its climax with the group’s debut in 1924—a special function for a delegation of U.S. business representatives who were in Mexico to reestablish economic ties disrupted by the revolution. Throughout the chapter I show how the push for cultural and economic integration was imagined as entailing the production of particular emotions, and I ask how the primitivist desires of the avant-garde relate to the future-oriented impulse of capitalist development and its contradictory reliance on modes of accumulation regarded as precapitalist or “primitive.”

Similar issues are at stake in chapter 5 (“Phonography, Operatic Ethnography, and Other Bad Arts”), which revolves around the operatic libretti and scene summaries that Mário de Andrade drafted during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Based in part on his observations and notations of songs and dance-dramas from a trip through the Amazon and another to the Northeast, these short, comic *opera buffa* were intended to “deregionalize” the diverse performance traditions of Brazil in order to create a truly national
The Uneven Stage of the Avant-Gardes

opera—just as teatro sintético was meant to accumulate and synthesize the traditions of Mexico. Unlike the estridentistas, however, Mário was resistant to staging these pieces, even though the music composed by his collaborators was performed. The chapter examines his ethnographic operas in relation to his embrace of the phonograph as a means of preserving the “dying” sounds of black and indigenous Brazil, and it investigates his personal ties to the Victor Talking Machine Company, which had begun to supplement its operatic offerings with recordings of Brazilian “popular” music. Here, affects and emotions take a negative turn as I also ask how Mário’s own disinterest in seeing these works staged might be connected to the refusal of work and (re)productivity exemplified by the main character of the one libretto he finished—a folktale trickster named Pedro Malazarte, whose last name translates as “bad arts”—and Macunaíma (Evil Spirit), the protagonist of his famous novel and its never-written operatic adaptation. In addition to addressing questions of labor and value, this chapter intervenes in the growing field of sound studies by adding an international dimension to the largely U.S.-based accounts of the early recording industry and the intertwined histories of sound media and race.

In fact, at several moments along the way I almost decided I was writing a book about theater and sound: from the first chapter, where I touch on Vasconcelos’s notion of “auditory mysticism,” readers will note that in nearly all of the projects I discuss, the “unfinished” aspect of theater has an intimate connection to the aural realm. Another place where audio technologies come to the fore is in the final chapter on Mexico, or chapter 3 (“Radio/Puppets, or The Institutionalization of a [Media] Revolution”). Here I hunt for and reassemble the archival remains of a radio/puppet who (probably) failed to make his stage debut in 1933—the same key year as the nonperformance of the play around which the final chapter on Brazil revolves. In Mexico, as in Brazil and elsewhere, politics became more polarized following the stock market crash of 1929, an event that coincided with the formation of what eventually became the PRI. This chapter considers the little-known afterlife of the estridentista avant-garde and shows how artists were at the vanguard of the Left’s eventual alliance with the state under the progressive presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. At its center is the story of Troka the Powerful, an aural automaton who hosted a radio show designed to teach children about the wonders of technology. Troka’s eyes were streetlights; his nerves were telegraph wires; his muscles were cranes; his arms were radio towers. And his voice? It was the medium of radio itself. Yet the power of this aural automaton was more complex than it first appears, because it turns out he was first conceived as a marionette. In showing how Troka was born from the mutual remediations of radio and a puppet movement inspired by experiments in the Soviet Union, I make the case that an attention to the dynamics of uneven development can contribute to efforts by scholars to counter the rhetoric of media revolution and rethink the temporality of media change.
A similar rhetoric also fuels the dream of total theater, a specter I finally tackle head-on in chapter 6 (“Total Theater and Missing Pieces”). During the Tropicália counterculture movement of the 1960s, artists who claimed the legacy of modernismo drew on the discourse of total theater in conscripting Oswald de Andrade’s unperformed plays from the 1930s as the missing pieces of a national avant-garde. Here, in this closing chapter, I make one last metacritical move by reading Oswald’s strange and unwieldy “spectacle” *O homem e o cavalo* (Man and the Horse) against the total theater paradigm and in dialogue with Benjamin’s analysis of the German Trauerspiel. Drawing on records from the archives of the political police, I reconstruct the story of the “modern artists’ club” where Oswald’s play might have been performed if the theater had not been shut down by the police at a moment of tension over the status of the provisional president (and future dictator) Getúlio Vargas and the rise of the fascist Integralist movement. The records of police informants and other ephemera shed light on how the club became a site where artists, anarchists, Trotskyists, Communist Party loyalists, intellectuals, working-class immigrants, and black performers all intermingled for a brief time. Its connection to this forgotten social milieu illuminates the stakes of Oswald’s seemingly unstageable play—an allegorical tableau of world history starring Cleopatra, talking horses, Fu Manchu, a black man “disembodied” by a Fascist, and a Poet-Soldier who predicts Hitler’s genocide of the Jews.