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Review/Reseña

Esther Gabara, *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

When Photography Errs

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The academic study of photography more generally, and the photography of Latin America in particular, took off in the last decades of the twentieth century, and is thriving in the twenty-first. From the early efforts to establish the field, such as Victor Burgin's *Thinking Photography* (1982) and John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation* (1988), through Liz Wells' student guide, *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (originally published in 1997 and now in its fourth edition), aided and abetted by the rise of visual culture studies, photography has overcome its Cinderella status to become a legitimate object of academic analysis. Similarly, work

that focuses on photography produced in Latin America, and by Latin Americans, has enjoyed a boom, with the publication of pan-continental titles such as Lois Parkinson Zamora's and Wendy Watriss's *Images and Memory: Latin American Photography, 1880-1992* (1998), Erika Billeter's *Canto a la realidad: Fotografía latinoamericana, 1860-1993* (1993), and Mary E. Schwartz's and Mary Beth Tiery Tello's edited collection *Photography and Writing in Latin America: Double Exposures* (2006); or the remarkable growth in studies of photography in Mexico, including Leonard Folgarait's *Seeing Mexico Photographed* (2008), Roberto Tejada's *National Camera: Photography and Mexico's Image Environment* (2009), and John Mraz's *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity* (2009). Photography is then, as these titles suggest, a key optic through which to approach issues of aesthetics, memory, and identity related to the region.

Esther Gabara's eloquent and innovative *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil* is a major contribution to this burgeoning field, at the same time as representing a timely and important intervention into the broader study of modernism and modernity. Focusing on the place of photography in the modernist movements of Brazil and Mexico of the 1920s and 1930s, Gabara engages with a wide range of critical writing on both "universal" modernism and the specificities of modernism in the two nations that are the subject of her study. Although her focus is on the early decades of the twentieth century, she is at pains throughout to stress the intellectual urgency of her project for the current moment, concluding with an epilogue in which she explores the ways in which contemporary practitioners Maris Bustamante, Gerardo Suter, and Tunga have taken up some of the early twentieth century topoi explored throughout the book. What though is meant by "errant" modernism? In what ways might photography be said to have an ethos? And why bring together Mexico and Brazil in a single study?

The book—replete with ample illustrations, including color plates—opens with a densely argued introduction to the key issues that will be examined in the chapters that follow and, in particular, sets out the valences associated with its suggestive title that are launched through a

deceptively simple set of questions posed by an anonymous Latin American modernist intellectual on grasping hold of the camera: “What now? How do I capture an accurate image of this modernity? Who is the subject and who is the object of this photographic encounter?” (1). As the book unfolds, this questioning figure of the modernist intellectual will be embodied in, amongst others, the Brazilians Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade, and the Mexicans Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurrutia, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Jaime Torres Bodet, and Arqueles Vela, all of whom are carefully located in relation to the cultural politics and practices that framed their work. And to bring Brazil and Mexico together is not only to examine “two widely influential and iconic sites of modernism in the region” (1), but—through the points of convergence *and* divergence that link the two areas born of the experience of Portuguese and Spanish colonization—to signal a broader Latin Americanism, with the conflicts and tensions that underpin the “idea” of Latin America very much at the forefront.

Although the two sites of modernism are dealt with in separate chapters—with chapters one and two given over to Brazil (“Landscape: Errant Modernist Aesthetics in Brazil” and “Portraiture: Facing Brazilian Primitivism”), and four and five devoted to Mexico (“Essay: *Las Bellas Artes Públicas*, Photography and Gender in Mexico” and “Fiction: Photographic Fictions, Fictional Photographs”)—they are skillfully bound together in the theoretical reflections, indebted to the work of Jesús Martín Barbero, in the bridging chapter three “Mediation: Mass Culture, Popular Culture, Modernism”, in addition to constant references backward and forward that tie the ideas together. Whilst attentive to the complex interweavings of photography and literary cultures of the period, the former medium is the connective thread that binds together the chapters of *Errant Modernism*, for, as signaled by the modernist intellectual’s inaugurating gesture of taking up the camera, photography was the privileged medium of modern representation and was, moreover, used to alter the very image of modernity.

As has been ably established by critics such as Vivian Schelling, the concept of modernity is no simple matter in the region; nor is the relationship between modernity and modernism as a set of artistic practices

straightforward. Recognizing that the term ethos has not been absent from the vocabularies of critics of Latin American modernity and modernism, Gabara nevertheless sets out to develop its meaning as the intersection between ethics and aesthetics in order to ground her analysis of modernist artistic practices in an understanding of the historical and social specificities of a region that is the product of the violence of colonization. On the one hand, her definition of ethos “frames ethics as the social location of the work and the artist”, where “concepts of locale and subjectivity have become mutually constitutive” (6). On the other, ethos designates modernity’s aesthetic sense. By contrast with European discourses of modernist formalism, which chart a historical progression toward abstraction, modernism in Latin America is “a philosophy of art situated in a real space between representation and action” (8), where popular culture—understood in terms of both the folkloric and ethnographic, and in terms of the mass media on the ascendant in the period in question—played a crucial role. Unlike their European counterparts who, through movements such as primitivism, would mine other, distant cultures in their search for renewal felt to be lacking at home, Latin American modernists enjoyed an altogether different relationship to the popular: “The ethos of (popular) modernism reveals a sense of ethical responsibility to sectors of society that were increasingly defining modernity in these countries, and an aesthetic that reflects its formulation through disciplines and discourses not proper to high art” (9).

In this development of the term ethos, we start to see what undoubtedly promises to be one of the lasting contributions of *Errant Modernism* to scholarship in the field: namely, its insistence that we rethink not only the history of Latin American modernism, but also its “universal” histories and theories. Eschewing the monolithic theories of Latin American modernism that either would measure it against its similarity with, or difference from, European practices, or else divorce it entirely from its metropolitan incarnation in a utopian, and ultimately futile, gesture, Gabara proposes the concept of *errancy*, which is, in part, indebted to Brazilian literary critic, Roberto Schwarz’s theory of “ideas out of place.” The development of the notion of errancy, however, is a key

example of one of the many strengths of Gabara's approach. That is to say, she is not content simply to import a critical idea into her own thinking; rather she "runs with" it and develops it both in the theoretical exposition that takes place in the introduction, and crucially, in relation to the images, texts, and contexts under discussion in the book's five main chapters, which are centrally engaged with the politics of gender, race and sexuality of the region.

Errancy is, then, not only a question of wandering, "the movement and disruption of these key ideas out of place," it is also a matter of error, often intentional, as when Mário de Andrade articulates his vision of national expression in texts full of unorthodox spelling and grammar—in short, mistakes—in order to produce "an incorrect Portuguese reinvented in Brazil" (46). This, argues, Gabara is not just stylistic convention, "but also an epistemological proposal for writing and speaking 'Brazilian:' a poetically self-conscious, abstract metalanguage that articulates an ethics and an aesthetics" (47). It is, moreover, a tactic that migrates into Mário de Andrade's landscape photography—itsself produced during the polymath's wanderings, or errings, through the interior. So, for example, in a series of images from 1930 that capture the bow of a boat in which he is travelling:

The sea's ruined mirror of difference (not sameness) is critical to errant modernism in Brazil, for it refuses a vision of modernist opticality untouched by the disturbing presence of the social, and asks the viewer to consider the photograph as a similarly unstable reflection of the world. The kind of abstraction produced as a result is errant, ruining both the purity of medium specificity and the stable, localizing function of the horizon. (52)

Errancy is also about circulation, "referring to the movement of bodies and goods in modernizing Mexico, to the distribution of journals, and to the order and design of ideas and images within the illustrated journals" (146), which, as demonstrated in chapter five, is also centrally concerned with questions of gender, and particularly femininity as a site of disruption.

Errant Modernism is a dense and complex meditation on the aesthetics and ethics of modernism, particularly as they relate to the photographic—in the form of landscape, portraiture, as displayed in galleries, museums, the press, or as fictionalized in the work of the Estridentistas and Contemporáneos—in Brazil and Mexico. It is very

noticeably the product of extensive archival research, bringing to light images that are familiar (Edward Weston's "Excusado" (1925) and Manuel Álvarez Bravo's "Niño orinando" (1927)), and the not so well known, such as the quotidian photo-collages illustrating "El arte de lucir las pantorrillas" that appeared in the illustrated press in Mexico in the 1920s, or indeed Mário de Andrade's photographic work. But the book does not just bring these images and texts to light; importantly, it brings them into dialogue with one another and with an impressive range of methodological reference points—from Freud and Lacan through Benjamin, to Rama and Martín Barbero—to produce a nuanced picture of the ethos of photography and its articulation of the modern in the early decades of the twentieth century.