

Book Review

Winterbottom, Tom. *A Cultural History of Rio de Janeiro after 1889: Glorious Decadence.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

All intellectual production on Brazil made outside Brazil must deal with a series of challenges inherent to this condition. One of these challenges is to read Brazil on its own terms, without using the author's place of origin as reference for comparison; another is having to introduce fundamental themes of Brazilian history and culture to an audience often unfamiliar with them, while at the same time discussing in depth these same themes with the familiarized reader. Analyzing Tom Winterbottom's monograph within this context, one sees its positive aspects as the book's own qualities, and its negative points as examples of the still unresolved difficulties inherent to the greater conjuncture in which it is inserted.

The introduction, titled "Landing in the Marvelous City," takes the form of a personal narrative, in which the author describes his emotional connection to that physical space. He invites the reader to follow in his footsteps as he approaches the city: from landing and going through customs, to the perception of the city's plan, its places of memory and affection. Simultaneously, some of the first thoughts and impressions that a first-time traveler may have upon arriving in Rio are shared with the reader: among others, the contrast between wealth and poverty, difficult urban locomotion, and the sense that many facilities, public and private, are perpetually undergoing renovation. The author then introduces the notion that he will use throughout the whole book to read the city, and which he will describe in more detail in the following chapter: that Rio's defining characteristic is a particular relationship with time, marked by an overlap between a constant expectation of future fulfillment and an ever-present nostalgia for past achievements. In his own words, "The never-quite-inaugurated present day of Rio de Janeiro and the deep nostalgia for something absent create its glorious decadence" (6).

The first chapter, "Space and Time of Rio de Janeiro," serves as a lexicon,

wherein the author defines the most recurring ideas and keywords he employs. He starts explaining why the year 1889 was chosen as temporal marker: it is the year in which Brazil became a republic and adopted as part of its motto the notion of “progress,” as inscribed in the national flag. Then he covers the transfer of the national capital from Rio to Brasilia in 1960, an episode of enormous consequences for the development of Rio de Janeiro in the five decades to follow. Ultimately, he assembles a vast array of theoretical references to define his use of the notions of “landscape” and “decadence,” as well as to grasp the tenuous difference between “absence” and “*saudade*.” Although the author relies coherently and consistently throughout the book on the concepts laid out in this chapter, one might question the excessive value attributed to the year 1889, which in many respects is far from having being a “Republican Revolution” (30), a moment of rupture from which the project of a “modern” Rio de Janeiro begins (29). Likewise, the section on the meaning of *saudade* fails to reference the Lusitanian origins of the term and the feeling.

In the second chapter, “Decadence in Architecture,” the author seeks to capture the dynamics between nostalgia and modernization in action in four iconic buildings in Rio’s landscape: the Hotel Glória (1922) and Copacabana Palace (1923), the former Ministry of Education and Health (1945) and the Maracanã stadium (1950). The discussion regarding Hotel Glória is particularly noteworthy, first because it links the beginning of its decay process with the transfer of the capital to Brasilia; secondly, because it peels off the many layers of mega-entrepreneur and media staple Eike Batista, responsible for the failed attempt at reviving the hotel in recent years. The section regarding the Maracanã stadium, however, leads to an overly extensive sidebar about soccer, which serves neither to enhance the discussion about the stadium’s architecture nor to explore in depth the complex relationship between Brazilians and soccer.

The third chapter, “Reading and Writing Rio de Janeiro,” turns its focus to four clusters of literary works gestated in Brazil: the fictional diary created by Machado de Assis in *Memorial de Aires* (1908); Lima Barreto’s novel *Triste fim de Policarpo Quaresma* (1911); Elizabeth Bishop’s poetic anthology *Questions of Travel* (1965) and the collection of letters Bishop exchanged with Robert Lowell during her stay in Brazil (*Words in Air*, 2008); and finally, the short stories “Antes da queda,” by João Paulo Cuenca, and “O Rio sua,” by Tatiana Salem Levy, both published in 2012. Winterbottom’s interpretation of Bishop’s

work produced in and about Brazil is particularly rich: he captures Bishop's immediate post-arrival bewilderment, her views on modernism and local politics, and the changes in her point of view during the sixteen years she lived in Brazil. Moreover, the dimension of body, affection, and sexuality, unavoidable in any discussion about the symbolic construction of Brazil, is also traversed in the reading of Levy's tale, albeit quickly.

A personal tone returns upon the conclusion of the book, as does the idea of Rio de Janeiro as a "decadent city" (198), one that is "always seemingly incomplete and perpetually 'in progress'" (197). Even though the author seeks to establish a strict sense in which these terms are used, they are fraught with meaning and judgment, as they are somewhat precarious, lacking specificity. Consequently, the book raises some questions it does not answer: compared to what other cities does Rio manifest this "incomplete and perpetually in progress" atmosphere? To what extent is the dynamic between nostalgia and progress, however much an undeniable feature of Rio's history and landscape, not also native to many other places? How valid is the tension between these two terms as a trace of identity of this specific place? Even if Winterbottom's book fails to provide an answer to these questions, its merit lies in its ability to make readers ask them and to offer an ample range of material upon which they might draw their own conclusions.

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