

RIO DE JANEIRO, YEAR ZERO: REFRAMING THE CITY IN THE CONTACT ZONE

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to introduce and problematize how a few selected travelers writing in English have reflected on the new realities of Rio de Janeiro during the First Republic, by relating a corpus of selected travelogues to the photographs taken by Augusto Malta of the changing urban landscape and the tramway lines. By focusing on the concepts of speed, acceleration, globalization, and modernity, I propose to unpack the underlying tensions that accompany the far-reaching changes occurred as a consequence of the urban reformation promoted by Mayor Francisco Pereira Passos. To do so, following a critical review of the historical context leading to the scenes of urban transformation, I reflect on the central leitmotifs of travel writing in the city, and foster a dialogue between text and photography, interweaving foreign gazes and the interpretation of the city (and the country) by the lens of Augusto Malta. I propose, therefore, to consider Malta's photographs against the backdrop of three foreign authors writing about the city: Arthur Ruhl (*The Other Americans*, 1910), Lilian Elwyn Elliott (*Brazil Today and Tomorrow*, 1917), and Frank George Carpenter (*South America*, 1918). I hope to be able to gesture towards a deep mutual implication between the foreign gazes and the development of the imaginary of a cosmopolitan city, suggesting a correlation between social change, literary representations, photographic documentation, and the creation of a corpus of travel writing centered on the city of Rio.

Keywords: Rio de Janeiro; Travel writing; Augusto Malta; Photography; Urban renewal.

Resumo: O objetivo deste ensaio é apresentar e problematizar como alguns viajantes, escrevendo em inglês, refletiram sobre as novas realidades do Rio de Janeiro durante a Primeira República,

relacionando um corpus composto por diários de viagem com registros fotográficos de Augusto Malta da paisagem urbana em transformação e das linhas de bonde. Ao focar nos conceitos de velocidade, aceleração, globalização e modernidade, proponho-me a analisar as tensões subjacentes às mudanças de longo alcance ocorridas como consequência da reforma urbana promovida pelo prefeito Francisco Pereira Passos. Para tal, após uma revisão crítica do contexto histórico que conduziu às cenas de transformação urbana, reflito sobre os *leitmotifs* centrais da escrita de viagens na cidade e promoverei um diálogo entre texto e fotografia, entrelaçando olhares estrangeiros e a interpretação da cidade (e do país) pela lente de Augusto Malta. Proponho-me, assim, considerar a fotografia de Malta tendo como pano de fundo três autores estrangeiros que escrevem sobre a cidade: Arthur Ruhl (*The Other Americans*, 1910), Lilian Elwyn Elliott (*Brazil Today and Tomorrow*, 1917), e Frank George Carpenter (*South America*, 1918). Espero poder apontar para uma profunda implicação mútua entre os olhares estrangeiros e o desenvolvimento do imaginário de uma cidade cosmopolita, sugerindo uma correlação entre as mudanças sociais, as representações literárias, a documentação fotográfica e a criação de um corpus de escrita de viagem centrado na cidade do Rio.

Palavras-chave: Rio de Janeiro; Escrita de viagens; Augusto Malta; Fotografia; Renovação urbana.

In how many ways can a photograph encapsulate a set of tensions, clashes, and frictions that define a given period? How far can we read into an image that represents a fixed point in time about historical processes that are immersed in long-lasting structures of time? What is the relationship between the transitory and the permanent, in a history composed of continuities and disruptions? Or, how far can we interpret Brazil when a shutter remains open exposing the plate to light for a fraction of a second? Let us think about the city of Rio de Janeiro at the dawn of the twentieth century. The First Republic can be described as a period of fast-paced transformations meant to bring the Brazilian elites and foreign capital closer together. Rio's urban landscape of the first decades of the 20th century tells a story of combined and highly unequal spaces, centers, and suburbs, with different circulation logics.

I would like to start by looking at a picture taken by Augusto Malta, the official photographer of Mayor Francisco Pereira Passos. Kiosks represented several of the things that the urban renewal of Rio de Janeiro targeted as undesirable and marked for demolition. The end of their operating contract was scheduled for November 7, 1911, at 10 pm. The

very next day they would be pulled down. Malta, on that same day, November 7, toured the north, downtown and south zones to photograph the kiosks on the eve of their end.

The increased commercial dynamism revealed the inadequacy of the old colonial city's urban model of narrow and winding streets to the new volume of traffic. It was necessary to change the image of Rio, so that the international economies could take part in the euphoria of growth. Thus, was born the new city, which Nicolau Sevcenko describes as “the capital of arrivism” (Sevcenko, 1983, p. 25). Everything was, in fact, about designing and building a city consistent with the ideals of the new urban bourgeoisie: industry, progress, and unlimited wealth. Mayor Pereira Passos will be the architect of this transformation. In 1904, *Avenida Central* was opened. In the same year, the law of mandatory vaccination against smallpox was enacted, at the initiative of Oswaldo Cruz (which will trigger a violent reaction from the population), and four years later the National Exhibition of Rio de Janeiro



Quiosque na Rua Frei Caneca, 1906
Augusto Malta
Matriz - negativo
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de
Janeiro. Gift of White Martins

was inaugurated. In the same year of 1908, the *Hotel-Avenida* opened its doors, “a piece of New York transplanted to Brazil,” in the words of the owners, offering suites equipped with telephones (long before these became widespread throughout the city), abundant electricity, a modern electric-powered elevator (a marvel of engineering arousing the curiosity of journalists and visitors), and a tram terminal, with *Light* railways running through the ground-floor halls between elegant boutiques, coffee-shops and restaurants (Williams, 2016, p. 163).

It was necessary, after all, to create modern spaces to receive the *others*.¹ In the streets, the relentless march of what would come to be known as the “*bota-abaixo*” [tear down] policy was clearly visible: all obstacles to modernization should be demolished for the sake of the triumph of a metropolis in the image of Paris, Vienna, New York. In 1921, in an unprecedented work of landscape engineering, Mayor Carlos Sampaio ordered the dismantling of *Morro do Castelo*, facing the island of Villegaignon, and the eviction of all its inhabitants, in the name of hygiene and circulation. For Sevchenko, this created the framework of an aggressive and frantic cosmopolitanism, generated in the euphoria of Regeneration: the city was transformed and sought to transform its inhabitants, driven by the “desire to be a foreigner” that marks Brazil's compulsory insertion in the *Belle Époque* (Sevchenko, 1983, p. 36).² These are the times of “*chiquismo e smartismo*” [chicness and smartness], of the “*Liga Contra o Feio*” [League Against the Ugliness] by Luís Edmundo (1908), and the “*Liga da Defesa Estética*” [League of Aesthetic Defense] by Coelho Netto (1915), of the tea rooms where only English or French were allowed, in short, the times of what the costume designer Figueiredo Pimentel summed up in his slogan: “*O Rio Civiliza-se*” [Rio Gets Civilized]. By this time, the magazine *Fon-Fon* speaks of the “super-civilized way” that *Cariocas* had adopted “since Mr. Passos had given them the Avenida” (Broca, 2004, p. 38).

¹ Beatriz Resende writes: “With the Abolition of Slavery and the Proclamation of the Republic, Brazil intends to become a modern Nation-State. The imperial city must change to enter this new world. (...) Rio de Janeiro must become a postcard city capable of attracting tourists and foreign capital.” (RESENDE, 1994, p. 128).

² Nicolau Sevchenko coins the expression “desire to be a foreigner” on the reverse of another, by Antônio Cândido — the “desire to be Brazilian” — underlying indigenism as a literary aesthetic orientation in the period of Independence.

The regenerating euphoria had thus become utopia — or rather dystopia: the purpose was “to expand the city, excluding from it what can no longer coexist with modernity” (Rodrigues, 2009, p. 91). As the urban center was transformed into a cosmopolitan and sanitized city, large numbers of the city dwellers were displaced to the periphery, which expanded beyond any official plan: in the expression of Renato Cordeiro Gomes, borrowing from Roberto Rossellini's 1948 film title, we had now entered the “Rio, Year-Zero” (Gomes, 1994, p. 95). The tensions between the city “designed for foreigners” and its inhabitants were accumulating by the day. Alongside the Rio “chic and smart” (or even because of it), there is a steep increase in the number of street vendors, Afro-Brazilian women selling on the streets (*quitandeiras*), turkey auctions, vegetable and milk traders on the public sidewalk, flower sellers in Largo de São Francisco, itinerant barbers, and barbers that apply “*bichas e ventosas*” [leeches] (Rodrigues, 2009, p. 92).

This is also the Rio de Janeiro of the kiosks photographed by Augusto Malta's lens on the eve of their demolition by executive order of Pereira Passos, as they did not conform to the image of progress and urbanity to which the bourgeoisie aspired. Kiosks from which the smell of grease and urine exuded, and where the construction workers who during the day spent their energies in public works, at sunset went to buy cigarettes, newspapers, and fried shrimp (Williams, 2016, p. 167). The historian of urban geography Antonio Edmilson Martins Rodrigues analyzes the contrasts of a Rio in search of “strengthening the integrative functions of the city with international capital,”³ by seeking to appeal to the wealthy investors, and the real Rio, in which the women and men living around the city would come down during the day to the boulevards to sell their labor to endowed citizens and foreigners, returning at night to the “social hell” which the government tried to hide from the tourist. For all this, as Rodrigues points out, the transformation of the city during the First Republic is not just a moment of change in Brazilian urban culture: it is also — or above all — composed of “several clashes that do not show up in the process”

³ Including the real estate expansion, the consolidation of finances, the implantation of European and North American banking houses, and the demarcation of the city's noble spaces, destined for “civilized men” (RODRIGUES, 2009, p. 100), translating into the “regeneration in the framework of an export economy that is linked to the international economy through the port, without necessarily all structural dimensions of the bourgeois model being contained in modernization” (104).

(Rodrigues, 2009, p. 112), and that make it, in Bruno Carvalho's formulation, a “porous city” (Carvalho, 2013, p. 13), where the gazes of *others* and of the inhabitants intersect each other all the time, building the reality of a city of contrasts around them.

Frank George Carpenter, the author of a vast collection of travel books, spent extended periods of time in the city between 1899 and 1915. His travel guide, *South America*, originally written for a teenage audience, incorporates his observations collected throughout multiple trips to Rio in the second decade of the 20th century. His writing celebrates the streets of the city renewed by Mayor Pereira Passos. In his account everything resembles a motion pictures studio, ready to host in the brand-new settings the impeccable cast and shooting crew:

We first drive rapidly through the city to get a general idea of its various features. The main street is the Avenida Central, which is more than a mile long and one hundred feet wide. It is paved with asphalt, and beds of flowers and trees run through its center. Its wide sidewalks are made of black and white flint, laid in patterns, and back of them are magnificent stores and office buildings lining the street from one end to the other. From this avenue we pass into other magnificent boulevards, upon which are beautiful buildings, and we are told that the greater part of Rio de Janeiro has been torn down and rebuilt within the past few years. The city is now one of the finest of the world, and it has many miles of drives lined with narrow parks filled with tropical trees and flowers. It was once a pest hole where nearly every stranger was in danger of yellow fever; but it is now kept very clean and is one of the most healthful cities of all those which lie in the tropics. (Carpenter, 1918, p. 274)

The author describes how, from all corners, well-dressed men pop up, buying and selling all sorts of merchandise: “the crowd is a strange one and it contains people of all the nations about us” (275). This is, in every sense, the postcard image of Rio, the one that the Republic tried so hard to convey. The multiple and diverse presences on these streets, however, tell us a story that does not fit the official narrative.

[t]here are natty politicians dressed in black with tall hats, and there are merchants in business suits. There are Italian vegetable peddlers with baskets fastened to poles on their shoulders, and half-naked negro porters moving along with loads on their heads. There are bare headed women and smartly dressed boys moving to and fro, forming all together such a human mixture as you will see nowhere else upon earth. (Carpenter, 1918, p. 275)

The city comes out on the streets, as a space where wealth, power, and distinction are disputed. According to Frank Carpenter, citizens no longer invite their acquaintances

to their place, but rather set up rendezvous on the street or the boulevard, where practices of socialization become an open-air performance.

If it is safe to say that the city gets converted into a movie set, the genre to which the production belongs is not so easy to classify. In fact, the editing process of this movie seems to give origin to multiple and diverse narratives, each one conforming to a specific way of understanding the city. Artur Ruhl, a writer for *Harper's Magazine*, professional travel writer, and a leading member of the G.O.P. in the United States visits the city in the first decade of the century, and publishes in New York *The Other Americans*, in 1910. Despite all the efforts of the Republic, hotels are deemed unsatisfactory, and everything about the city seems to him vaguely disconcerting:

There is no really good hotel, lovely as is the view from some of them. The streetcar conductor doesn't know where the post-office is, the postal clerk can't find one's letters, although they're lying in the poste restante, and the languid policeman, unable to understand pigeon-Spanish, merely grunts and walks gloomily away. In short, until somebody invites you to spend a cool mountain night at Petropolis, you are in imminent danger of concluding, during those first few hours, that this city of six hundred thousand people is a huge, hot, overgrown village, inefficient and half-alive. (Ruhl, 1910, p. 266)

The modernizing efforts seem to him even more misplaced. The new boulevards are “depressingly new and perfect”, and the “banality” of public lighting, telephones and tramcars is plainly uninteresting and anachronistic when compared to neighboring countries:

Rio is, first of all, a city of the tropics. And it is as such, and not for what it has accomplished in twentieth century utilitarianism, that it—and Brazil also—is most interesting. Much may be said of these accomplishments—the growth of trade, the new docks, sanitation, the new Avenida, for which six hundred houses were torn down and which now stretches for nearly two miles as depressingly new and perfect as the newest plaisance of our newest world's fair. There's the famous old Rua Ouvidor, narrow, dark, and vivacious, where you may see, as the saying goes, everybody who is anybody in Brazil. It was not built, but just grew, and is very interesting, but an antique compared with the Calle Florida. The usual banality of “electric lights, telephones and trolley-cars” can be tacked to Rio as vociferously as may be, the “Jornal do Commercio” and “Jornal do Brazil” print as much cable and home news as the best papers of Buenos Aires, but their huge blanket sheets and small type seem odd and old-fashioned compared with the crisp modernity of “La Prensa,” “El Diario” or “La Nacion.” (Ruhl, 1910, p. 267)

Through Ruhl's lens, Rio de Janeiro appears to have fallen victim to some sort of casting error, and the attempts at westernization of the metropolis are nothing but a miscalculation. In other words, the wrong setting, in the wrong place.

Visiting the city in 1917, Lilian Elwyn Elliott, the editor of the New York-based *Pan-American Magazine* will also write extensively about the changing urban landscapes of Rio. In her book *Brazil Today and Tomorrow* she mentions that Brazil is the largest country in Latin America and argues that it was also until recently the least developed. Elliott justifies that with the long period in which the Brazilian ports were closed to international commerce. According to her, the injection of "foreign capital and technical skill" over the three previous decades had allowed for a rapid expansion of civic buildings, public utilities, and transportations.

In her perspective, the need to rely on foreign investors and stakeholders could be explained through the fact that the Brazilians were "artistic and mentally brilliant, but not usually born *commerciante* [sic]." (Elliott, 1917, p. 8). She illustrates this alleged lack of practical skills in a passage depicting social interactions on board of tramcars in Rio:

one afternoon I sat in a streetcar of the Copacabana line running to and from the heart of Rio de Janeiro city. As we approach the Avenida and paused at a sharp turn at the regulator's signal, a small boy poorly clad in cotton clothes got on to the front platform with a dinner pail in his hand. He set it down, removed his cap, and bent his knee, as the motorman, with a swift smile at the child, extended his right hand. The boy respectfully kissed it, replaced his cap, and jumped down. the little incident was typical of the wide spread of gentle manners here in Brazil. (Elliott, 1917, p. 76)

The introduction of speed on the streets does not erase the traditional practices of deference in the urban space, and this is what strikes this traveler: the tramcar stops on the tracks so a young boy could kiss the driver's hand. In a sense, we have here access to different worlds colliding, but we can also argue that it is a dispute over the interpretation of everyday life that is taking place in this vignette. Elliott's perspective as a foreign visitor romanticizes the episode as an instance of old-fashioned sociability. The driver, in turn, serves as a mediator between a new technological reality, the highly specialized job as an operator of new transportation machinery, and the traditional hierarchies in a densely stratified society. And finally, the children, that enters the narrative without the reader being aware of any details of their life, their past, or their history, but that somehow clings

to the memory of the reader as a concrete, real, human presence on the streets of a changing city.

The bustling movement on the streets converts the city dwellers into performers in a spectacle in which they take part, but do so *involuntarily*. A performance of the city unfolding for the eyes of a ruling elite and foreign visitors. In a certain sense, the city seems to acquire a new life. Reading these travelogues against the archival grain, however, or engaging with the photographs of kiosks by Augusto Malta, we may relaunch new questions about the concept of the "year zero" of the city. Similarly to what takes place in Rossellini's historical feature, and whose resemblance with the transformation of Rio de Janeiro Renato Cordeiro Gomes insightfully proposed, maybe we can understand the *anno zero* as rather a continuation of the clashes, tensions, and extinctions structuring and saturating the space of the city and, perhaps, the very contradictions that will extend throughout the dawning 20th century in Brazil.

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