

The Baroque, the “Little Cripple”, and the National Imaginary in Brazil

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One of the more pervasive narratives in architectural discourse is the myth of the hero-architect. Notions of individual genius have localized the origins of movements, styles, and thoughts in specific historic personalities who operate in a discipline/profession (architecture) permeable to societal, technological, and cultural pressures, and collaborative in the nature of its own production. While not unusual in all forms of artistic and cultural production, the architect is often positioned, not in opposition to the status-quo (as in the myth of the struggling artist), but as savior and proponent of societal progress. The classic example of this narrative in the United States is Frank Lloyd Wright whose person-myth was imbued with the spatial aspirations of an anti-urban, anti-European, America. And while the hero-architect holds an often-unquestioned role in the development of architectural production, one rarely investigates the mechanisms and motivations that create this role.

In this short paper, I hope to contextualize one of these narratives within the formulation of the “Nation”. While one might argue that this particular narrative creates an anti-hero architect, it serves to produce a distinct fissure that removes a type of cultural production from a colonial lineage to distinguish it as precursively nationalizing.

The context of this specific narrative is Brazil, fifty years after its independence from Portugal, when the country began its quest towards industrialization under the populist dictator Getulio Vargas who came to power in a 1930 coup. While modern architecture in Brazil is primarily characterized by the construction of Brasilia in 1960, Vargas formed the initial alliance between nationalist politics and architectural culture twenty five years earlier with the design of the Ministry of Culture, Education, and Health (1936).¹ The building is considered one of the world’s most important modern monuments, as it was the first large scale project to incorporate Le Corbusier’s five points of architecture, and the team of architects who constructed it went on to dominate one of the century’s most vibrant architectural cultures.

The Ministry of Culture, Education, and Health was the most important new branch of the Vargas government. Through it, Vargas developed a nationalism, that overwhelmingly equated Brazil’s progress with rapid industrialization and modernity. Modeled after strategies of indoctrination that Brazilian government officials observed in Fascist Italy, its goal was to create new mechanisms to actively involve culture, education, and health in the definition and pursuit of a new state, “O Estado Novo”.

The Ministry became the guiding hand in the production and distribution of all nationalist cultural transactions - music, cinema, radio, and physical education. Led by Gustav Capanema

and the rallying cry “To Civilize from Above”, the office completely involved itself in “the work of the construction of the Brazilian people as the eugenic formation of the masses.”² Behind the implicit belief that without it, man would regress into a lazy, unproductive, irresponsible group, the Ministry positioned itself as the paternalistic guide of the population. The stated objective was to “centralize, coordinate, orient, and guide the national image, internal and external.”³ and a specific article of the 1937 declaration which established the “Estado Novo” government stipulated the creation of an “elite intellectual” to supply “points of view and constructive criticism.”⁴

This “constructed culture” was vigorously presented in the classroom, as the springboard to a consensus national future. Within the ministry, health and education were combined with an intense government involvement in physical education. This blurred boundaries between both mind and body, and between individual conditioning and national strength. The concept of the “Estado Novo” was complimented by “O Homem novo Brasileiro” - the new Brazilian Man - emphasizing that the machine is only as strong as its individual parts.

The establishment of Ministry directives was supported by historicizations of Brazil realized through the Patrimony of History. The example I would like to discuss is a 1949 Patrimony publication⁵, near the end of Vargas’ term, introduced by Lucio Costa, later the urban designer of Brasilia and recognized articulator of Brazilian architectural identity. It is a re-publishing of an historical narrative that describes the work of the 18th century architect/sculptor Antonio Francisco Lisboa, better known as “Aleijadinho”. In his introduction, Costa credits Aleijadinho in transforming the Portuguese Baroque into an architecture “truly Brazilian”. However, the most remarkable thing about this short document, written in the 1840’s by a local government official named Rodrigo Bretas, is its emphasis on establishing Aleijadinho’s iconic status, rather than discussing his sinuous architecture.

His mythology begins at birth as an illegitimate child of a slave and a Portuguese architect. The nickname “Aleijadinho” (tr. the “little cripple”) describes his condition, originally speculated to be an advanced form of syphilis.⁶ Bretas describes the resulting grotesque corporeal manifestations of his indulgences.

“Antonio Francisco came to lose all of his toes, with the consequence that he atrophied and curved, and some even fell off leaving him with only the thumbs and forefingers, and even so practically devoid of movement. The excruciating pains he frequently felt in his fingers, and the sourness of his choleric temper, often led him to the paroxysm of cutting them off himself, using the chisel he worked with.”⁷

This publication's edification of Aleijadinho is seemingly oppositional to the heroically classical "homen novo Brasileiro". In fact he is defined within a Bakhtinian formulation of the grotesque which - "ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices."⁸

However, Aleijadino attains his iconic value by transcending his physical state and recreating a classical image of himself through his work. His masterwork is Congonhas do Campo, consisting of the stations of the cross and a chapel. One reaches the pilgrimage church only after wading through twelve figurative statues of the prophets, that, after the stations, complete the corporeal representations which give meaning to the ascent of the devoted. These figures truly overwhelm the architecture, as Bretas recounts - "It is said that some women, having gone to Congonhas do Campo, on passing by the Last Supper Station, greeted the figures depicting Christ and his Apostles, which was due solely to the perfection of the work."⁹ The sculpted bodies contrast their creator who Bretas describes as "a priceless treasure laying in a disease-ridden body, that must be carried everywhere and have his tools fastened to him, though having unquestionable talent, although one cannot fail to acknowledge also that he was better inspired than taught."¹⁰

While Aleijadinho was chronologically far removed from the "Estado Novo", the example of the grotesque recreating itself into a classical ideal through religion allied itself with the devotional nationalist rhetoric of the "homen novo Brasileiro". In a very direct way, the myth of Aleijadinho served as a target of transference, where paradigms constructed by the post-colonial state, could be consolidated in the grotesquely exaggerated characterization of a singular figure. Like the majority of the population, Aleijadinho was mulatto and poor, but he had the ability, or rather, the inspiration to transcend his own existence and create for a higher cause. In the context of a new republic striving for economic independence and national identity through the secular religion of modernity, this allegory promoted a role model for the collective mobilization of a new, multi-racial industrial working class.

Furthermore, the narrative infused value into the architecture that was inextricably tied to it. While Aleijadinho's work can be placed under the heading of the Baroque, Costa claimed he was able to transform the Portuguese style into something identifiably Brazilian. Indeed, if one examines Aleijadinho's work in relation to its immediate Portuguese predecessors, there are discernible differences. Typically, the smaller 18th century churches of the Portuguese Baroque, presented a flat facade, tri-partheid in organization, which held articulations of pilasters and beams in stone to contain an infill facade.¹¹ Aleijadinho, in his Igreja de Sao Francisco in Ouro Preto, began to slightly curve the front facade of the building to complexify its directionality and orientation. Also, while the stations of the cross by Andres Soares 40 years prior in Braga, Portugal were more elaborated in detail in comparison to its Brazilian counterpart, it lacked the continual complexity of oblique axial crossing one undertakes in

ascending Congonhas. On the other hand, when one arrives at the church at Congonhas, one is met with a facade done by Aleijadinho twenty years after Sao Francisco, that is actually much closer to the Portuguese. The facade is again flattened and its axial relationship becomes directional rather than encompassing.¹²

Furthermore, one might question if these changes to an imported architectural style are enough to constitute something that is "truly" Brazilian. In his 1888 essay, *The Cause of the Change in Style*, Heinrich Wölfflin, in looking at why the Italian Renaissance ended and consequently gave birth to the Baroque, argues that architectural style is expressive of a fundamental temper of the age, and this temper manifests itself corporeally in how we judge objects and bodies in relation to our own bodies.¹³ Consequently, the integrity of a centralized body gradually began to erode and, with a different conception of the kinetic forces bodies exert on space, gave way to a Baroque sensibility of heaviness and movement. While Wölfflin's relational foundations of style have been thoroughly contested, his characterization of stylistic change as being gradual and continuous- without obvious origin or end, has been more pervasive. Wölfflin's model obfuscates the moment when one crosses from Renaissance to Baroque, or, by extension, from colonial to "Brazilian".

Nevertheless, Wölfflin does search for an origin of the new style, and finds it, not in an architectural example, but in the personality of Michelangelo, who "could force his moods into his work".¹⁴ In Aleijadinho, we have seen how Bretas focuses on the corporeal over the architectural. As Bretas' description was the originary narrative of the work, and as it was disseminated through Costa under the Ministry of Culture, the biographical narrative became imbedded in the architecture. Once the architecture becomes imbedded with biography, its position can be defined outside the model of linear stylistic development and can assume a specificity in its identification. In other words, in assuming the narrative, Aleijadinho's work distinguishes itself from a string of cultural commodities that are defined within the incremental development of the Iberian Baroque. The individuation that accompanies the biography separates the architecture from the realm of exchangeable cultural commodity, and gives it value and meaning beyond its immediate objective presence. This forms a distinct break in the genealogy of stylistic development, and, like Wölfflin's search for origin, provides an identifiable point of cultural production, which, though legitimized by stylistic development, asserts singularity. Consequently, its identification can be re-framed, and re-evaluated under a new set of criteria.¹⁵

In the context of Brazil, a country in the process of building and legitimizing its "Nation-ness", Aleijadinho's architecture is more highly valued, not as an important point in the development of the Baroque, but as an originary point in the cultural development of Brazil. As a genealogical rupture, the narrative creates a distinct break from a colonial past, while the architecture maintains a legitimizing stylistic linkage. This was impor-

tant in building a post-colonial nationalism, while maintaining linkages to the colonizer, against whom the new nation would position itself in the internationalism of modernity. The rupture in the line locates a point to which subsequent culture production, in this case Brazilian national cultural production, can relate. The fissure provided by narrative also engraves a new empathy into the architecture, and it is through empathy that the architecture is experienced and given value. While Aleijadinho's work is most original at times, there is an ambiguity in finding origin and invention within the continuum of style, even for the most informed scholar. However, a poor, uneducated, and heterogeneous Brazilian population can empathize with this identifiable but heroic figure. This gives Aleijadinho's architecture both a specificity and a communicative value, that contributes to the collective national imaginary.

Though the emphasis was placed on the claiming the character of Aleijadinho as Brazilian, doing the same with the Baroque became important in distinguishing the consequent production of Modern Architecture from its European counterparts. While acting as director of the Patrimony of History, Lucio Costa was also at the center of the vibrant modern movement in Brazilian Architecture, having organized the design and realization of the Ministry of Culture building and later being the Urban Designer of Brasilia. In his short Ministry of Culture book *Brazilian Architecture*, Costa connects Brazil's most famous, prolific, and political modern architect Oscar Niemeyer to a Brazilian lineage. He wrote "Aleijadinho is both the key and enigma that intrigues and wins the utmost admiration of our modern architects, especially the personality of Oscar Niemeyer, an architect who's background and mentality is genuinely Carioca".¹⁶

Consequently, the narrative of Aleijadinho served as an originary point of reference for Brazilian Modern Architecture. This connection was consciously constructed, both to distinguish it from a hegemonic genealogical narrative of modernism and to take advantage of some of the narrative potentials of the already established Brazilian Baroque.

On the first point, it is important to understand that the Baroque was not the only stylistic precedent existing in Brazil as Modernism was formulating itself. Rio itself had been planned by a French planner from the Beaux Arts and there were numerous important buildings done in the French Academic Tradition though realized in rather eclectic variations.¹⁷ European modernism, in historic narratives that include Pevsner and Banham, is inextricably tied to the 19th century tectonic, programmatic, and formal investigations of the Beaux Arts.¹⁸ In Brazil, the majority of these buildings were done by immigrant French architects, and, unlike the Baroque, the Beaux-Arts tradition was characterized as "imported". Furthermore, Le Corbusier, to whom both Pevsner and Banham connect Pugin and Choisy of the Beaux Arts, came to Brazil to jump-start the modernist project with a series of lectures in 1929 and in assisting the design of the Ministry of Education Building in 1936. While effusively acknowledging the overwhelming Corbusian influence on Brazilian modernism, Costa, in his work, finds origin, in Aleijadinho,

not in Le Corbusier or the Academic tradition in which Le Corbusier was educated. From the outside, Brazilian architecture has been seen as derivative, an offshoot of the hegemonic lineage of European modernism which draws from 19th century academicism and extends into what was later characterized as the "international style". For the Estado Novo, it was important to establish a oppositional national narrative to assert that modernism was neither imported nor regionalized in Brazil, but endemic.

Secondly, connecting Modernism to the Baroque brings multiple associative meanings to its abstract formal expression. In the theoretical debates surrounding the Baroque, and most clearly stated by Erwin Panofsky's in "What is Baroque", there is a real ambiguity in distinguishing an identifiable style from mannerist forays.¹⁹ This inherent ambiguity allows the expressionistic tendencies of the author to exist within the context of a larger framework, or style. As with Aleijadinho, Niemeyer's work can therefore be legitimized within a movement, while it is imbued with a cultural biography that gives it specificity in a national context. While Academicism denies individuation in its organizational preoccupation, the Baroque model accommodates it and to consequently frame Niemeyer's modernist production within the latter paradigm empowers it.

Finally, there is the possibility of the Baroque heritage, in which Aleijadinho's narrative is imbedded, to not just heroicize its producer, but to recharacterize the modern spatially, formally, and theoretically. In looking at three diverse theorists of the Baroque - Wolfflin, Panofsky, and now Deleuze - one finds consensus regarding the Baroque's resistance to containment. While Wolfflin looks at the architecture's continual movement from a corporeal perspective,²⁰ Panofsky, examines psychological projections of the subject that question both the subject's stasis in relation to time and space and the frame's role as boundary.²¹ Finally, Deleuze completely disintegrates the boundary by acknowledging a multiplicity of systems that exist in a dynamic and heterogeneous field.²² The implied fluidity and heterogeneity in all these analyses, which question the centrality of organized body vis-à-vis the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, congeal with the association of the Baroque and the grotesque narrative of Aleijadinho. To then frame modern architecture in such terms is to deny its whiteness, its austerity, its abstractness, and its monumentality. It hopes to imply a heterogeneity and fluidity that is the narrative, not just of Brazilian architecture, but of the Brazilian.

We finally arrive at this contradictory point of a nation making itself under the auspices of modernization that tries to reconcile its teleological aspirations, within a national body that is heterogeneous and fluid. Consequently, the narrative, as a break from the colonial, a point of empathy for the "Brazilian", and a point of origin for subsequent cultural production, enters into a series of continual negotiations with other nationally constructed and imported hegemonic narratives, that lend justification to the imposition of the super-narrative that is the Nation.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Concurrent with Vargas' rise to power in a 1930 coup, was the appointment of Lucio Costa to direct the state supported Escola das Belas Artes in Rio. Previously run following the Beaux-Arts curriculum. Costa brought in recent immigrant Gregori Warchavchik from Sao Paulo, and Affonso Reidy, both of whom had recently completed unabashedly modern projects. When the competition for the Ministry Building was held, a Beaux Arts scheme was selected. However, the minister, Gustav Capanema, with Vargas' blessing, paid off the winner, and hired Costa to organize a team. This association was a result of Costa's academic post and changes he made seen favorably by Capanema.
- ² 1942 Quote of Pegrino Junior, Ministry of Education official, "O Papel da Educacao Fisica na Formacao do Homem Moderno", *Educacao Fisica* (Rio de Janeiro), no. 62-3, 32.
- ³ Lippi et al; *O Estado Novo* (Zahar: Rio, 1982) 72.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, 73.
- ⁵ The publication *O Aleijadinho* (Rio de Janeiro: Ministry of Education, 1949) includes Costa's introduction "A Arquitetura de Antonio Francisco Lisboa" which is a precise formal and historical outline of the Igreja de Sao Francisco in Sao Joao del Rey. The main text, by Rodrigo Bretas, has recently been republished in Rodrigo Bretas, *Passos da Paixo* (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Alumbamento, 1989). Costa's introduction can now be found in Lucio Costa, *Registro de uma Vivencia* (Sao Paulo: Empresa da Artes) 539-548.
- ⁶ There are a number of Brazilian texts that try to decipher the mystery of Aleijadinho's affliction. It is now thought to be a variant of leprosy.
- ⁷ Bretas, 53
- ⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: U. of Indiana, 1968) 310.
- ⁹ Bretas, *ibid.*, 58.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, 57.
- ¹¹ The Portuguese Baroque examples that most relate to Brasil are somewhat restrained compositionally while effusive on the interiors. This is of the highest period of colonization from the late 17th century into the 18th as Portugal was re-discovering Classicism. A good example is the Church of Sao Fransisco in Braga. See Carlos de Azevedo, *Churches of Portugal* (New York: Scala, 1985)34-40.
- ¹² For an excellent comparison between these two Stations of the Cross, see Germain Bazin, *Aleijadinho et la Sculpture Baroque au Bresil* (Paris: Panoramique,1963)200-219.
- ¹³ Heinrich Wolfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1966)71-89.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.* 82.
- ¹⁵ For a clarification of this use of "biography", see
- ¹⁶ Lucio Costa, *Arquitetura Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Ministry of Culture, 1952) 34
- ¹⁷ See Norma Evenson, *Two Brazilian Capitals* (New Haven: Yale, 1973)
- ¹⁸ See Nikolaus Pevsner, *Sources of Modern Architecture and Design* (London: Thames & Hudson 1968) and Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (New York: Praeger 1960)
- ¹⁹ Erwin Panofsky, "What is Baroque", in *Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge: MIT 1995)
- ²⁰ Wolfflin, *ibid.*
- ²¹ Panofsky, *ibid.*
- ²² Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota 1993)