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Critical Intervention and Literary Criticism:
Reading Literature in the Twenty-First Century

The aim of this essay is to raise questions regarding recent changes in contemporary literature and art, and the challenges these transformations pose to contemporary art and literary criticism and scholarship. While a contested and diverse field, some contemporary art and literature engage in heterogeneous interventions by incorporating elements from different disciplines, geographical regions, and cultures. I have dwelled in another work on the way certain transformations in contemporary Latin American literature and arts are favoring modes of organization of the sensible that call into question notions of belonging, specificity, and autonomy.¹ The field of visual arts has extensively analyzed this horizon for several years, particularly in response to the profound impact of conceptual art and installations on the art world.² Similarly, contemporary literature has also expanded its boundaries and media during the last decades. There is an increasing number of literary explorations that establish connections between fiction and other forms such as photographs, images, memoirs, autobiographies, blogs, chats, emails, essays, and documentaries. The questioning of a medium's specificity and the complex and fluid field of artistic practices have posed new questions to critical judgment.³ Works by various authors, including Mario Bellatin, Bernardo Carvalho, João Gilberto Noll, Fernando Vallejo, Diamela Eltit, Tamara Kamenszain, and Nuno Ramos, demonstrate a growing exploration of sensibility that questions notions of belonging, individuality, and specificity. Writing has also reemerged in formats and media such as cinema, theater, and artistic

1 Florencia Garramuño, *Mundos en común. Ensayos sobre la inespecificidad en el arte* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura económica), 2015.

2 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

3 Osborne, *Anywhere*, 3.

installations, often blending with other art forms, highlighting the porous boundaries between different aesthetic fields.

Georges Didi-Huberman, in a discussion on Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar and his conceptual use of photography in installations, speaks of a documentary drive in contemporary art. According to Didi-Huberman, “Artists not only use documents, thereby remaining ‘in front of history’, but also produce them entirely, thereby not only contemplating the event, but intervening in it, in contact with it.”⁴

Sergio Chejfec’s *Modo linterna* (*Flashlight Mode*) employs stories that incorporate photographs and references to photographs, resulting in a writing style that interrupts the linear progression of the plot. It seems as if writing—literature—has been imbued with a strong documentary impulse that disregards the traditional narrative structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Instead of constructing a continuous narrative plot, Chejfec’s stories focus on capturing fragments of the world—in flashlight mode—, illuminating the life pulsating within those fragments. The most interesting thing about the photographs is precisely how the stories refer to photographs, and even seem to depend on these photographs, which in the text are not actually taken. In the absence of those photographs the story seems to take their place. In “Una visita al cementerio” the story is interrupted at the precise moment in which the photograph was to be taken, in the same way as in “Novelista documental” the writing is interrupted at the moment when the narrator walks to some racks that, throughout the story, he tried to photograph without being able to do so. The stories, as if they were photographs, seem to cut out of an experience only what the *flashlight mode* allows to expose: a fragment, a piece, a remainder.

Brazilian art historian Lorenzo Mammí describes the changes in contemporary art and the challenges they present to art criticism in the following terms:

What is more complex today is the fact that, although the formal aspect is important, the analysis is no longer able to rely solely on it. It is necessary to understand how the work fits into various image systems, whether scientific, media, or everyday life. So, it is a precarious situation for critics as well. It cannot find such a specific methodology of its own.⁵

4 Georges Didi-Huberman, “La emoción no dice yo,” in *Alfredo Jaar. La política de las imágenes*, ed. Adriana Valdés (Santiago de Chile: Metales pesados, 2014), 62.

5 Lorenzo Mammí, *O que resta. Arte e crítica da arte* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012).

Josefina Ludmer, in *Aquí América Latina. Una especulación* (*Here Latin America, a Speculation*), describes contemporary Latin American literature as a producer of reality rather than a mere representation of it. I quote:

Let us suppose that the world has changed and that we are in another stage of the nation, another configuration of capitalism and another era in the history of empires. To understand this new world (and to write it as testimony, documentary, memory, and fiction), we need a different apparatus than the one we used before. Other words and notions, because not only has the world changed, but also the molds, genres, and species into which it was divided and differentiated. Those forms ordered reality for us: they defined identities and founded politics and wars. This book looks for words and forms to see and hear something of the new world. To speculate, because how else could Latin America be thought if not from here?⁶

Taking its cue from speculative fiction, Ludmer postulates speculation (and not analysis or criticism) as a new method “to see and hear something of the new world” from Latin America, and through literature as a lens or machine of vision, conceiving writing, in the words of Sandra Contreras, “as an experimentation with the present”, and the method of speculation as an instrument to think the new world and today’s writings from here, Latin America.⁷

If, as Lorenzo Mammí pointed out, contemporary art is no longer the realm where the world is organized but merely where things appear, it becomes evident that criticism of that art must also forge a path between those things and that realm. It must transform itself into a cartography capable of traversing the borders that separate the world, things, and art.⁸

A series of recent critical interventions, often resonating with the contemporary forms they analyze, finds in the assemblage of materials, and objects the defining characteristic of a unique type of critical intervention. Following Raúl Antelo, “the critical gesture takes place

6 Josefina Ludmer, *Aquí América Latina. Una especulación* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2010), 9.

7 Sandra Contreras, “‘El Diario Sabático’: estructura histórica y experiencia del presente en la especulación temporal de Josefina Ludmer,” in *Cuadernos LIRICO. Revista de la red interuniversitaria de estudios sobre las literaturas rioplatenses contemporáneas en Francia* 24 (2022): 2.

8 Florencia Garramuño, “Devires da crítica,” in *Ieda Magri et al. Literatura e artes na crítica contemporânea* (Rio de Janeiro: Eduerj, 2016), 81-89.

at the assembly table.”⁹ These investigations exemplify a new form of transdisciplinary research that defies categorization as purely literary criticism, visual criticism, cultural history, or even cultural studies.

It is possible to assert that a significant portion of the criticism accompanying this transformation of art’s status in contemporary times has managed to transcend disciplinary boundaries, fields, regions, and countries. These critical interventions are conceived more as interventions themselves rather than mere acts of hermeneutics or analysis. At a meeting held in Buenos Aires a few years ago, titled “Destinies of Criticism” and organized by Mario Cámara and Gonzalo Aguilar, we engaged in discussions about texts such as the latest interventions by Flora Süssekind. She examines textual and visual forms from her own object (the art and literature of Nuno Ramos), which intertwine multiple languages. We also discussed a text by film critic Ivana Bentes that analyzes homemade documentaries and delves into the lives and languages of the filmmakers, and a text by Eduardo Sterzi that navigates between poetry and films created by poet-filmmakers like Pasolini, uncovering philosophical dimensions along these paths. These, I thought at the time, are three unorthodox paths that possess a certain non-specific quality, much like the languages employed by the artists analyzed in these critiques.

However, I would like to pose a different type of question: does the very transformation of art and literature in contemporary times create a distinct distance between criticism and art? Does it not engender another mode of relationship, one that would post a different positioning and a different kind of complicity between criticism and art? The transformation of art and literature extends beyond the form of art itself and encompasses its function and societal position. In that case, it is insufficient for criticism to merely alter its form, strategies, and methods of interpretation. Criticism’s role and position about its perspective on art should also transform. Thus, it entails not only diverse ways of reading but alternative modes of complicity between criticism and art.

What is certain is that when examining certain contemporary texts, a new blurring of boundaries between criticism and artistic practices becomes evident. This instability is apparent not only in criticism itself but also in literature and other forms of artistic expression.

To illustrate this point, let us consider two examples that come to mind. This fluidity of boundaries takes on intriguing dimensions in Teixeira Coelho’s *Natural History of the Dictatorship* and Silviano Santiago’s *Machado*. These books intertwine fiction and reality, biogra-

9 Raúl Antelo, *Archifilologías latinoamericanas* (Villa María: Eduvim, 2015) 113.

phy, and essay, resulting in works that have garnered prestigious literary awards in the Portuguese-speaking world, such as the Océanos and the Camões awards.

In *Machado*,¹⁰ Silviano Santiago, who transitions from reader to author in the book, redefines the literary landscape of nineteenth-century writer Machado de Assis through a curation of documents, images, and accounts. The novel explores fictionalized acts of reading, placing the temporal relationship between the character-writer Machado and the present at the forefront of Silviano's work.¹¹

On the other hand, *Natural History of the Dictatorship* by Teixeira Coelho begins with the narrator's visit to Walter Benjamin's grave in Port Bou. From a distance, the narrator spots the memorial created by Dani Karavan in 1994 and observes:

I approached, stopped in front of the entrance: as if it were a rusty iron corridor descending through the land, towards the sea below: two walls of iron plates forming, with the ceiling, a box that extended along a few meters underground, then continuing its descent to the open sky in a narrow, rusty corridor, and the blue sea down there at the end of the funnel. [...] I looked back and now a strong sun, despite the wind, with the wind, was entering through the opening of the Passage: I felt like I was in a foundry, as if the material to be melted were me, with that yellow jet behind me. Ahead, down below, the sea. I did not know the monument, I had not seen pictures of the monument, I did not know what to expect [...] I commented on the power of experience: an anti-monument, a monument facing downwards, a buried monument, a monument that descends to the depths, a monument to the fall. A monument that was not an exaltation of the memory of those who died in the city below: a monument that seemed an extension of that death: no metaphor in that monument: metonymy, rather: the monument attached to the death of Walter Benjamin, a monument that was the death of Walter Benjamin, which was the direct, physical extension of his death.¹²

The narrative describes the visit to the memorial. The memories and the emotions they evoke envelop the description of the tomb with an

10 Silviano Santiago, *Machado: romance* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2016).

11 Helder Santos Rocha, "Leituras, tempos, convulsões: o romance Machado, de Silviano Santiago," *Acta Scientiarum. Language and Culture* 43,1 (2021).

12 Teixeira Coelho, *História Natural da Ditadura* (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2006), 20–21.

affectivity that only literature can convey. However, it is also evident that the text can be interpreted as a critique of Dani Karavan's work as the creator of the memorial. The inclusion of photographs of the tomb in Teixeira Coelho's text further reinforces the critical tone of the quoted passage, mixing narrative with a distinct art criticism intonation.

It is fascinating to observe the parallels between this fragment by Teixeira Coelho, who is not only a writer but also a curator and art critic, and another depiction of Benjamin's grave found in a text by anthropologist Michael Taussig. "Looking over these essays written over the past decade," writes Taussig, "I think what they share is a love of muted and defective storytelling as a form of analysis."¹³ The mixing of storytelling and critical analysis defines both the text by Taussig and that of Teixeira Coelho.

Hence, storytelling emerges as a form of analysis. Or analysis as a form of storytelling.

In a similar vein, contemporary studies on Latin American literature diverge noticeably from previous models of Latin American criticism. In his article "Liberian Signifiers and the Crisis of Latin America in Cosmopolitan Imaginaries" Mariano Siskind explores the intellectual paths that Latin Americanist humanities have embarked upon in recent years to reconceive the cultural traces of the region's global inscriptions beyond its conventional boundaries. According to Siskind, "These scholars posit the porosity, artificiality, and asphyxiating nature of conventional linguistic, cultural, and identitarian borders."¹⁴

Within these contemporary critical perspectives, we may discern a framework grounded in an ethics of solidarity that displaces narcissistic preoccupations with identity (national, Brazilian, Latin American, gay, homosexual, literary, etc.), in favor of a quest for the in-between, for relationality, for shared existence. Silviano Santiago in *The Space in Between*¹⁵ builds a theoretical reflection that transcends the study of national literatures in their specificities, where we can see the lucidity of a method that tries to understand the text in its play with other texts, with the world, with its history and not with its individuality or national identity. Santiago criticizes the study of sources and influences,

13 Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), chapter vii.

14 Mariano Siskind, "Liberian Signifiers and the Crisis of Latin America in Cosmopolitan Imaginaries," in *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Latin American Literary and Cultural Forms*, ed. Guillermina De Ferrari and Mariano Siskind (London: Routledge, 2022), 192.

15 Silviano Santiago, *The Space in Between. Essays on Latin American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

pointing to what Emily Apter would designate, many years later, “the racist unconscious within humanist philology”.¹⁶

Rachel Price’s *The Object of the Atlantic* serves as an exemplar in this regard. The book explores how concrete aesthetics from Cuba, Brazil, and Spain draw inspiration from global forms of constructivism and intersect with the histories of empire, slavery, and media technologies within the Atlantic world. Price’s work makes a notable contribution to multiple disciplines, including trans-Atlantic studies, Latin American studies, art history, and African diaspora studies. Through its examination of Jose Martí’s notebooks, Joaquim de Sousa-Brandrade’s poetry, Ramiro de Maeztu’s essays on things and slavery, 1920s Cuban literature on economic restructuring, Ferreira Gullar’s theory of the “non-object,” and neo-concrete art, the book weaves together diverse threads and could be simultaneously embraced by numerous fields.¹⁷

Like Price’s book, many recent works of Latin American literary criticism challenge the dominant hermeneutical paradigm, reframing the scholar’s task as an act of complicity. Instead of seeking to diagnose, deflate, or analyze, these critics aim not to expose hidden truths but to follow the paths suggested by the texts. Rather than offering philological or historical explanations, they closely scrutinize ideas, posing affective and intellectual questions to the text. Sandra Contreras highlights Ludmer’s book as an example, emphasizing that it entails a practice of theory as an exercise in community, interwoven with narratives of friendship and literary “families”.¹⁸

I would like to draw attention to one final phenomenon in this discussion. In certain contemporary Latin American practices, there is a notable incorporation of Amerindian inspiration and knowledge, which serve as potent materials that expand the possibilities of contemporary art and writing. By repositioning alternative genealogies and drawing upon ancestral knowledge and practices, these artists and writers diversify the historical narratives of Latin American culture, its legacies, and, I would argue, the very forms, materials, and repertoires that define contemporary art and writing in the region today.

16 Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 30.

17 Rachel Price, *The Object of the Atlantic. Concrete Aesthetics in Cuba, Brazil, and Spain, 1868-1968*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

18 Sandra Contreras, “El Diario Sabático”: estructura histórica y experiencia del presente en la especulación temporal de Josefina Ludmer,” in *Cuadernos LIRICO. Revista de la red interuniversitaria de estudios sobre las literaturas rioplatenses contemporáneas en Francia* 24 (2022): 9.

They restore aesthetic value to practices that were once solely attributed to ritual, rescuing the ambivalence between the ritual and aesthetic function of objects and practices that were stripped of their significance by colonial plundering to turn them into spoils of war. The act of returning these practices to museums or incorporating them into writing represents an empowering gesture, disentangling them from their exclusively ethnographic value. In doing so, it demands recognition of the profound impact that indigenous practices and knowledge have on the rhythms and expressions of Latin American art and writing.

Reimagining Latin American literary criticism considering these previously silenced and suppressed paths not only entails a revision of their histories and genealogies, but also invites us to envision alternative futures. This approach encourages a more affirmative and engaged relationship with literary works, prompting critical reflection on the world, the text, and the critic, to use Edward Said's words. It beckons us to considering reading literature and art as an act of speculation, maybe for a different world.