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On the Imaginaries of Crisis: A Book Review of Ticio Escobar, *Imagen e intemperie*

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A BOOK REVIEW by MICHELA RUSSO¹On the Imaginaries of Crisis²

Review of Ticio Escobar, *Imagen e intemperie: las tribulaciones del arte en los tiempos del mercado total*. Madrid: Capital Intelectual, 2015.

*Imagen e interperie: las tribulaciones del arte en los tiempos del mercado total*³ is a collection of five essays and an interview, written during the past ten years by Ticio Escobar, one of the most distinguished figures of the contemporary cultural, and political, panorama in Latin America on the question of art and representation.⁴ Perhaps the most influential art critic in Paraguay, as well as a philosopher, lawyer, and former Minister of Culture during Fernando Lugo's presidency (2008-2012), Ticio Escobar has been an attentive reader of different artistic practices at both the

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² This book review was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2016/6/21/book-review-ticio-escobar> on June 21st, 2016.

³ The Spanish title of this book can be translated into English as "Image and Exposure: Tribulations of Art in the Time of Total Market." The Spanish word "intemperie" has many nuances and does not have a direct equivalent in English, but it seems to me that the word "exposure" somehow embraces the spectrum of meanings evoked by the original Spanish. Although at first glance there seems to be little difference between the two, I choose the word "exposure" over "exposition" because the former is enriched by an additional meaning derived by the use made in photography, which refers to the action of exposing a surface to light. Moreover, "exposure," like "exposes" in French, and "expuesto" in Spanish, is a notion central in Georges Didi-Huberman's work – with which Ticio Escobar is in open conversation throughout this book –, especially in his *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants* (2012), where the notion of exposure gets complicated precisely by the reference to light. Didi-Huberman, in turn, moves from Walter Benjamin – another of Escobar's references – especially when, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the German philosopher writes on the cult value and the exhibition value of a given work of art (*Illuminations*, 2007). "Intemperie," thus, in a broad sense, means "outdoors," and the Spanish locution "a la intemperie" refers to the fact of being "exposed out in the open."

⁴ The first four essays contained in this collection, "El arte fuera de sí," "La irrepertible aparición de la distancia: Una defensa política del aura," "El marco incompleto," and "Nandí verá," appeared translated in English respectively as "Art Beside Itself," "The Unrepeatable Appearance of Distance," "The Incomplete Frame," and "Nandí Verá: The Brilliance of Nothingness" in *La invención de la distancia. The Invention of Distance. Cuatro Ensayos - Four Essays* (Asunción: AICA Press / Fausto Ediciones, 2013). This bilingual publication was realized after the conferral to Ticio Escobar of the *Premio AICA a la Contribución Distinguida a la Crítica del Arte* during the 44th AICA (International Association of Art Critics) Congress in 2011 in Asunción, Paraguay.

local and global levels for decades, confronting questions posed by indigenous and popular art, crossed with a form of critique of mercantile-capitalist discourse. Among Escobar's previous publications, we should mention *Una interpretación de las artes visuales en el Paraguay* (1982), where Escobar began delineating, in the light of the Enlightenment definition of art, the question posed by different forms of popular production, whose imageries have been so vividly present within the cultural texture of the region. *El mito del arte y el mito del Pueblo: cuestiones sobre arte popular* (1986), written during Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorship (1954–1989), pivots on the analysis of the concept of “popular,” and finally, *La belleza de los otros* (1993) engages with the notion of otherness.

The work of Ticio Escobar, however, cannot be said to openly thematize what has been called either the “progressive cycle,” the “pink tide” or “Socialism of the 21st century,” a phenomenon which transformed the Latin American political landscape in the past twenty years or so (Schavelzon 2016). Nor can Paraguay be said to have been among the countries whose government fully undertook such a “turn to the left.” Why, then, include in a dossier dedicated to this specific political and cultural phenomenon, and its inchoate crisis, a review of his latest publication?

First of all, because Escobar's work clearly nests inside the fissures opened by a post-Cold War cultural and political epochality, which incidentally coincided, in Paraguay, with the end of Stroessner's dictatorship. This political landscape is the one that has seen, on a global scale, the rapid diffusion of a new world order characterized by a neoliberal definition of the political, the social, and, why not, the cultural, through the diffusion of open markets, new constitutionalism, and multicultural discourses. This is also the site of the emergence of the Latin American “progressive cycle.” The importance of reading both the progressive cycle and, therefore, Escobar's work in a larger geopolitical context appears more evident if we observe, as Patrick Iber does in his *Neither Peace nor Freedom* (2015) on cultural Cold War, that the signification of internal political conflicts and, thus, the meaning of the role played by intellectuals in Latin America at that time, was overdetermined by the inscription onto the superpower competition. In a similar order of ideas, Escobar's work is a *writing* in an epoch of transition but also a *writing of transition*. It is a writing during

the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Paraguay, but it is at once a writing overdetermined by the inscription into a global context, embracing questions central to the discursive construction of the “progressive cycle” in Latin America. His work, concerned with the intersection of the aesthetic and the political, may help us to think through the “crisis” of this progressive cycle, which necessarily implies a crisis of imagination: the manner in which we imagine is fundamentally a condition for the manner in which we do politics; politics cannot overlook the faculty of imagination, as Didi-Huberman argues, following Hannah Arendt.

In this respect, it is important to mention that Escobar is also the founder and director of the *Centro de Artes Visuales / Museo del Barro*⁵ in the capital city of Asunción. The museum, instituted in the 80s, has played a central role in carrying on such discourses on popular, indigenous, and urban art, and conveying, among others, imaginaries that evoke a pluricultural and multiethnic Ibero-America national frame. Here, the exhibition of indigenous and popular art pieces is not organized following ethnographic, folkloric or historical semantics, but exclusively according to “artistic” criteria (*El Mito del Arte* 8). The reflections on different artistic practices, the status and the role of image and the notion of art, together with the cultural initiatives promoted by the museum, have also been directed towards supporting and strengthening the fragile and tormented democratic process in the country.

The creation, in the year 2000, of a parallel space named *Espacio/Crítica*, is crucial in this respect as a supplement to the expositive capacity of the museum, articulating a variety of intellectual practices. This space promotes workshops and discussions, research and publications, while hosting a series of seminars concerned with themes like *Identidades en Tránsito* [Identities in Transition], *Estudios de Contingencia* [Studies of Contingency], and, most recently, *Imágenes Disruptivas* [Disruptive Images].⁶ Escobar reminds us that, as Walter Benjamin noted, capitalism seems to be taking more time to change the cultural superstructure than the economic base, and it is precisely this discrepancy that allows the identification of revolutionary practices

⁵ For details on the Museo del Barro, see: <http://www.museodelbarro.org>

⁶ See “Espacio Crítica”: <http://espaciocritica.org>

within the same superstructure (*Imagen e Intemperie* 51). Through his work and in his writings, Escobar seems to fully endorse Benjamin's assumption that both cultural and aesthetic practices cannot but play a decisive role within social and political processes of change.

It shall not be taken as an overstatement, then, if we consider the book *Imagen e Intemperie* both as a collection assembling different discourses displayed in Escobar's work over the years and, for this same reason, as a contribution which somehow complements, or it is complemented by, the work of the museum. The problematization of the disruptive potential of images bridges both dimensions, especially when confronted with the fetishism of the image produced by the alliance between market, politics, and culture.

The essays featured in the book can be grouped in two parts; first, Escobar enters into dialogue with thinkers "of the crisis," who lived the experience of thinking (at) the edge of the *crisis* of European modernity, both as a limit-experience or experience of the limit, such as Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes.⁷ Second, we see an ongoing conversation with many of those contemporary thinkers who are the heirs of the post-structuralist debates, like Jacques Rancière, Georges Didi-Huberman, or Slavoj Žižek, for whom the *maîtres* of the crisis had involuntarily opened the way for recommencement.

⁷ Here, I would like to stress, *en passant*, the proximity between the ideas of *crisis*, *limit*, and *critique*, as theorized by Willy Thayer in *Tecnologías de la Crítica: entre Walter Benjamin y Gilles Deleuze* (2010), which, in turn, takes as its point of departure Derrida's reflections in the context of deconstruction. Both terms, "crisis" and "critique" (including, for our context, *art critique*), share the Greek etymology "krinein," which conveys a constellation of senses that somehow imply a sort of "manual task": examining, separating, selecting, but also excluding (22–24; 31–35). Both terms would, then, recall each other, while indicating the possibility of engaging with limit-experiences or experiences of the limit of signification(s) or within a given system of signification. To both belongs a sort of "destructive" character in the senses provided by "krinein." The *critical* moment – understandable both as a moment pertaining to the *practice* of criticism, and as grave and severe *momentum* – would be intimately intersecting and intersected by an instance of crisis. Escobar dwells on the question of limit as a form of indecidability between inclusion and exclusion, referring to Derrida's reflection on the concept of *parergon*. This figure enables us to think the frame of any given representation as something which is simultaneously both inside and outside, and neither outside nor inside the work of art, making the work of art the liminal dispositive *par excellence*.

Escobar sets out, then, from the affirmation of the *crisis* of art provoked by the loss of its autonomy, that is to say, the loss of the *aura*, the *specificity* of the work of art. Nevertheless, Escobar argues, we remain within the frame offered by the Enlightenment's concept of art. In this respect he situates himself in a breach already opened by Walter Benjamin, particularly in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," whose concluding paragraphs point, as is well known, to the imbrication of aesthetics and politics, which is, in turn, a sort of subtext of Escobar's book, and of his work in general. In the first part of *Imagen e intemperie*, Escobar engages with a series of reflections on the question of representation, and in the second part on the relationship between art and ethics.

The essays echo each other through a writing which is almost aphoristic, intermittent and fragmentary, and, I would say, *necessarily incomplete*, whose *montage*, or *textual collage*, to quote Marek Bartelik, president of AICA-international (International Association of Art Critics) (Escobar 2013), is visible only at the surface. This writing somehow mirrors what Escobar himself calls the "paradox of the representation," which is also the tragedy of language itself, that is to say, the promise, impossible to fulfill, to re-present what is, in fact, irremediably absent. In other words, this is the tragedy of the impossibility of reducing the *distance* between the sign and the object, where the sign announces the object but shows the image, and, similarly, between the subject — and its *gaze* — and the object. It is a matter, then, of "administrating" this distance, of "administrating" this gaze. This is the theme, precisely, of the first essay of the collection, "El arte fuera de sí." But there is another way of understanding this "distance," which is the one epitomized by the Benjaminian *aura*, which, says Escobar, indicates nothing but the exclusivist nature of the work of art; its aristocratic origin, which considers the artist as a genius and sacralizes the work of art, drawing it apart from the masses; bourgeois individualism and authority over private property.

The loss of the *aura* could have had, then, an eminently political potential and the reduction, or even the cancellation, of the distance between the work of art and the "subject" of the *gaze* could have represented the "democratization" of the aesthetic experience. The sacrifice of the *autonomy* of the work of art, that is to say, *auratic distance* and its cult value, had, thus, a progressive sense and a democratizing effect

(*El mito del arte* 18): the possibility for the work of art (and culture in general) to get closer to the masses. Technology and technical reproducibility, in principle antithetical to and incompatible with the notion of aura, may have represented the ideal way to evacuate such a process. However, and this is also the subject of the second essay, “La irrepressible aparición de la distancia: Una defensa política del aura,” if the loss of the aura may have represented the possibility of substituting the cult value of art with an emancipatory politicization through modern technology, such a loss of autonomy actually meant the subjugation of art itself to objectives external to it.

The expansion of technology altered the aesthetic experience, fracturing the autonomy of aesthetics and declaring the crisis of art, but at the same time it inaugurated a process of *re-auratization* through an exacerbation of what Escobar calls the “aesthetic function” (that is to say, the “form,” the mediating instance which conveys artistic contents) in all the spheres of human life during the epoch of what Guy Debord had called *the society of the spectacle*. Benjamin’s utopia, the attempt to realize a “positive concept of barbarism” based on Marxism, was not fulfilled: “the new aestheticism appeared in a market format; capitalism anticipated the avant-gardes, took on infinite reproducibility, and removed distance and the autonomy of art in search of other objectives”: greater consumption, exacerbation of the object’s exhibition value, and the institution of a new concept of aura, that is to say, the “mythical phantasmagoria of the always-new” (*La invención de la distancia* 240). At stake is, of course, the divide between “high” and “low” culture, the dichotomy between the great art system and the circuit of “minor” arts, and the need to assume, as a political project, Benjamin’s task: taking responsibility, in the context of collective and social projects and the support of state politics, says Escobar, for any democratizing possibilities, awakening the emancipatory potential of any given situation, while looking for modalities of critical and creative appropriation of imaginaries (*Imagen e Intemperie* 62).

However, the question is not, says Escobar, about dismantling the distinction between the erudite [*culto*] and the popular, but to consider it as contingent and provisory (*El Mito del Arte* 16). Escobar assumes Benjamin’s gaze of Janus and his

ambivalence towards the question of the aura, calling, as a practice of dissidence and disagreement, against the consumerism of the image, for a recuperation of the aura and that minimum distance between the image and the object necessary to enable the play of the gaze and the economy of desire while offering and at once subtracting the presence of the object itself. But how does one accomplish such a task without falling into idealist traditions and authoritarian privileges? Escobar goes back to popular and indigenous art, whose ritual forms surround bodies and objects with absence and invest them with the power of imageries, able to perturb and disturb everyday life (*El Mito del arte* 20).

After all, Benjamin had said that the origin of aura resided in “primitive” rituals. Escobar paganizes the aura and depicts a scene constituted now by a proliferation of “other” *auras*, which are alternative auratic models, represented by certain indigenous forms of art, whose artistic practices had always occurred at the margins of modern Western art. According to the modern gaze, these practices were nothing but craftsmanship and folklore, committed to archaic rites and superstitions, and realized through rudimentary techniques: they did not comply with formal requisites of modern aesthetics, they are not “autonomous,” they are not “useless,” in the Kantian sense of the term (*Imagen e Intemperie* 65–67). Nevertheless, there is something in the scene of the ritual representations that confers to bodies and things the auratic cult value, the unrepeatable manifestation of distance, the luminescent appearance of the aura. Whether it is the *inscription* in another order of signification or the execution of an aesthetic function, at stake is the production of a distance through the distortion of an ordinary setting, “the manipulation of sensibility, and the management of forms” (*La invención de la distancia* 272), in a word, a secularization of the concept of aura. It is in “El marco incompleto,” the third essay of the collection, then, that Escobar wonders about the *critical* possibilities of artistic practice in a global context more and more marked by blends of pluricultural registers.

Reviving the question of the transgressive vocation of art, the role of the *avant-garde* and, implicitly, its relationship with the political, Escobar maintains the need for a de-essentialization of figures like avant-gardism, emancipation and utopia, in order to consider them as hazardous historical products, and finally take responsibility for

the challenges posed by any *minoritarian* forms (“becoming-minoritarian” was the strategy proposed by Deleuze and Guattari at the end of the 70s). This refers to what we will see later as the “ethic of the image.” “Nandi Verá” is the last essay of the first part of the book, dedicated to the question of representation. The title of this essay, which in the Guaraní language means “the brilliance of nothingness,” recalls that of an art installation by Osvaldo Salerno at the *Museo de Artes Visuales* in Santiago de Chile in 2005. In this work, the opening sides of a quadrangular window had been draped with tulle where the words *Nandi Verá* had been written with beeswax. Due to the porosity of the tulle, the wax, during the writing process, has passed into the other side. This image points to the *porosity* of the work of art, which, through the play of the gaze, and its constant displacement, opens to the possibility of the event, maintaining the space *as* available space, “making a space for the space” (*Imagen e Intemperie* 136). Here the question of *otherness* also emerges, and the *Unheimlich* inquietude it provokes, a preoccupation that has been at the center of Escobar’s work. This essay is followed by the second part of the book which, with “Prácticas de frontera: Consideraciones sobre la ética de la imagen contemporánea,” finally deals with the relationship between ethics and art. According to Escobar, the ethical dimension of art derives from its concern with the human condition. The “ethics of image,” the dissident gesture of critical art, which presupposes a “politics of the gaze,” consists in being able to disturb the hegemonic imaginary order. Art will not solve historical conflicts, whether political, social, economic, but can offer a variety possible images, imaginaries and scenarios; it can provoke demands, activate desires (*Imagen e Intemperie* 160–161). An interview in two parts conducted by Kevin Power, who was a poet, essayist, and art critic working with Spanish and Latin American contemporary art, and who also served as vice-president of Madrid’s Museo Nacional and Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, closes the collection. Here, the two converse on Escobar’s work over the years and the entire conceptuality he mobilized in light of the political situation of Paraguay from the dictatorship to the transition to democracy, the collapse of a geopolitical order shaped by the Cold War and its bipolar imaginary, and the role art played in this context.

As I have already mentioned, Escobar works at the edge of that liminal zone where the political and the aesthetic enter a threshold of indecidability. I am convinced that his reflections on the question of art and image are absolutely crucial in order to think what I believe is one of the central features of the “progressive cycle” in Latin America, a newborn, although already tremendously ailing, geopolitical conjuncture, that is to say, the “return of the popular” and, thus, the question of representation. Escobar’s book ultimately disjoints the notion of “progressive cycle” or “pink tide” from its exclusively national or state-driven discourse in order to see a ‘scattered panorama,’ which nonetheless may open more punctual, interstitial or intermittent, even nomadic spaces disconnected from the ones limited or restricted to a party organization. That is to say, spaces which are possibilities *in spite of all* (Didi-Huberman 2012), against the totality of the machine, its system and networks of significance; in other words, the ground of the hegemonic system that upholds all hegemony.

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