

Crises of Representation, Representations of Crisis: Historical Consciousness in Contemporary Latin American Art and Literature

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Abstract | The late 1970s and the 1980s were crucial years for the emergence of a new form of historical consciousness in Latin American art and literature, especially concerned with questions of collective memory and identity. The aim of this article is twofold. The first aim is to map the main strands in the debate surrounding the relationships between history, art, and literature in this period, focusing on the current discussions on the epistemological crises that led to the rise of this new historical consciousness. The second aim is to address the question of Latin American specificity. I will take into consideration several theoretical contributions in order to outline a standpoint that not only considers Latin American specificity but also its contribution to think the articulation of art, history and politics.

Key-words | Latin America, Contemporary Art, Latin American Literature, Neobaroque, Theory of History, Historical consciousness, Democratic Transition

The last decades of the 20th Century were marked by a new rise of historical themes in literature and the visual arts. History, in its most different meanings, became a kind of *leitmotif* in novels, paintings, and movies.¹ In Latin America the late 1970s

¹ History is a term that can refer to both past events themselves and to the discourse that

and the 1980s were crucial years for the emergence of this new form of historical consciousness, especially concerned with questions of collective memory and identity.

Although this resilient “presence of the past” has been theorized as one of the main characteristics of the paradigmatic change vaguely labeled as “postmodernity”, it has undoubtedly assumed specific configurations in Latin America. The notion of historiographical meta-fiction, coined by Linda Hutcheon, refers to critical and parodic historical references in contemporary novels (Hutcheon, 1988) and finds parallels with terms such as “Latin America’s new historical novel” (Menton, 1993), or the revisited concept of Neobaroque (Carpentier, 1995; Kaup, 2006; Sarduy, 2010) which stress the particularities of the Latin American phenomenon.

In the field of visual arts, the 1980s were characterized by the influence of *Transvanguardia* which brought about the so-called “return of painting” (Canonglia, 2010). Received as a postmodernist influence, *Transvanguardia*, and its most important theorist – Achille Bonito Oliva (1982) – found both sympathy and hard criticism in the region. In Brazil, for instance, critics were divided between those who considered *Transvanguardia* and postmodernism as new conservative vogues, such as Ronaldo Brito (2001), and those that saw in it a different type of political debate (Canonglia, 2010). Naum Simão de Santana considered that the volubility of contemporary art and the overcoming of modernist concerns with style made postmodernist art present itself as an “event”, intervening not only in a formalistic manner but also ideologically, which pointed to a new way of political intervention (Santana, 2006). Concerns with the Eurocentric misconception that deems Latin American art as merely derivative of the main European trends have led critics such as Marcio Doctors (2001) to reaffirm the connections between the art of the 1980s and the project of Latin American modernists. He stresses the process of hybridization between multiple influences and particular characteristics, and highlights the efforts of local artists to create an alternative pathway through postmodernist tendencies. In this sense, the notion of Neobaroque and other variations, such as Ultrabarroque, have been applied to underline the specificity of the Latin American experience in literature, and also in the case of visual arts.²

describes and analyzes such events. It can also refer to the academic discipline dedicated to study and produce historical accounts.

² The term Neobaroque refers to a set of aesthetic characteristics present in Latin American

Given the predominance of novels and visual artworks which deal with historical themes from the late 1970s onwards, and especially through the 80s (Hutcheon, 1988; Menton, 1993), the aim of this article is twofold. The first is to map the main questions in the debate on the relationships between history, art, and literature in this period. I will focus on the discussions surrounding the epistemological crises that led to the rise of this new historical consciousness. The second is to tackle questions regarding Latin American specificity as to bring forward a perspective that can take into account not only Latin American specificity, but also its possible contribution to discuss the articulations between art, history, and politics at that time.

1) The Crises of Representation: Theory and its discontents

The 1990s were a bewildering period for many professional historians as they realized that a profound crisis was already installed at the heart of their discipline. The core of this disciplinary crisis emerged in the scope of what is called the *Linguistic Turn* of historiography, a process that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s.

The germ of this crisis could already be found in the important considerations raised by post-structuralist philosophers, particularly in Foucault's and Derrida's readings of Saussure (Kleinberg, 2007: 113-120). The discursive nature of our relation with knowledge had important implications for historians' work, as this conception not only points to the textual nature of historical documents but also affects the process through which historians produce meanings about the past. It highlights the discursive nature of history and stresses the political and ideological implications of historical accounts. Therefore, the idea that history is a discourse operating not over the past itself, but rather through other texts (documents, letters, maps), is crucial when considering the referentiality of accounts of the past, especially in light of the Foucauldian articulation between discourse, knowledge and power.³

art and literature and theorized by Sarduy (2010), Carpentier (1995) and other artists and theorists. I will discuss the idea of Neobaroque in depth in the second part of this article. The term Ultrabaroque was used in an exhibition that took place in 2001 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego: *Ultra-baroque, aspects of post-Latin American art*. Although the title of the exhibition uses the term with an hyphen (Ultra-Baroque), this article drops the hyphen (Ultrabaroque) as a way to stress the idea that the term is a variation of the expression "Neobaroque".

³ Michel Foucault wrote extensively about historical reconfigurations of knowledge in what would now be called Humanities and Social Sciences. He frequently argued that these reorganizations of knowledge also constituted new forms of power and domination. See,

Another important question that had great relevance to the crisis of history as a discipline was posed even before this debate about referentiality.⁴ I am referring to the crisis of representation of historical events, raised in the aftermath of the Second World War, which placed the question of how to deal historically with a tragedy of such proportions as the Holocaust. The Holocaust is often invoked as a limit case that challenges our ability of making history.⁵ Many different thinkers, from Theodor Adorno to François Lyotard, and more recently Dominik LaCapra, tackled the question of how to represent the Holocaust, sharing the claim that after such an event we cannot write history in the same way. According to these authors, the (positivist) idea that history is the story of humanity's upward progress was completely and irremediably destroyed by this event.

Adorno raised the moral and aesthetic question of how to *make art* after the failure of western culture in Auschwitz, considering the Shoah an event that installed a deep crisis of representation at the core of western cultural tradition (Adorno, 1973). George Steiner also made important contributions to the discussion of the Holocaust as a limit and radical case of representation, sharing with Adorno the dilemma of how to speak about the unspeakable, or to represent the unrepresentable (Steiner, 1970). For these intellectuals, language in itself is not capable of conveying the deeply tragic dimension of such an event, thus all efforts to represent it will be inevitably subjugated to reduce its power, diminishing its reach and mitigating its catastrophic aspect. Nevertheless, Adorno claims that “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream” (1973: 363), therefore putting the crisis of representation in terms of an *aporia*: an irresolvable impasse between the imperative to represent the egregious crimes and the impossibility of doing so.⁶

Lyotard addressed the question by asserting the importance of Auschwitz in the

for example, Foucault, M (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.

⁴ Here we consider **referentiality** as a term to designate the match between reality (event, person, thing, process) and its description (linguistic expression), as well as **representation** by any sign, word, sentence, discourse, picture, sound or action intended to depict or characterize an event, person or process.

⁵ For contemporary discussions regarding the (un)representability of the Holocaust, see Friedländer, Saul (1992). *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. See also LaCapra, Dominick (1994). *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

⁶ About the *aporia* in Adorno see: Martin, Elaine. (2006) Re-reading Adorno: The “after-Auschwitz” Aporia. *Forum*, Spring (2): 1-13. See also: Steiner, G (1988). The long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the Shoah. In: Berel Lang (ed) *Writing and the Holocaust*. New York: Holmes & Meier.

decline of modern master narratives, and even in the project of modernity:

At “Auschwitz”, a modern sovereign, a whole people was physically destroyed. The attempt was made to destroy it. It is the crime opening postmodernity, a crime of violated sovereignty – not regicide this time, but populicide (as distinct from ethnocide). How could the grand narratives of legitimation still have credibility in these circumstances? This is not to suggest that there are no longer any credible narratives at all. By metanarratives or grand narratives, I mean precisely narrations with a legitimating function. Their decline does not stop countless other stories (minor or not so minor) from continuing to weave the fabric of everyday life (Lyotard, 1984: 19).

Following Lyotard's argument about the relation between the post-Auschwitz era and the postmodern condition, or Auschwitz as “the crime opening postmodernity”, Gabrielle Spiegel sees an intimate relation between post-structuralism and the Holocaust post-traumatic era, especially in the case of Derridian deconstructivism. In her words:

Both for those who survived and for those who came after, the Holocaust appears to exceed the representational capacity of language, and thus to cast suspicion on the ability of words to convey reality. And for the second generation, the question is not even how to speak but, more profoundly, if one has a right to speak, a delegitimization of the speaking self that, turned outward, interrogates the authority, the privilege, of all speech. Which, of course, is precisely what Derrida and deconstruction do in the attack on logocentrism (Spiegel, 2007: 11-12).

According to Spiegel, the development of post-structuralism by the generation that matured in the 1960s and 1970s is a “displaced, psychological response to the Holocaust and its aftermaths” marked by the awareness about the impossibility of sustaining the belief in the enlightenment and in the progressive character of Western European civilization, a development subsequently reinforced by the emergence of postcolonial theory, “which exposed the brutal and dehumanizing aspects of European imperial ventures” (Spiegel 2007: 17). Andreas Huyssen (2009) sees resonances of Holocaust memories circulate beyond the European context, emerging within the context of politically and historically different events and situations such as post-dictatorship Latin America or post-apartheid South Africa. He points to a “globalization of Holocaust memory” (2009: 6) while recognizing some disputes in the field of memory: “The most difficult and contested of such memory competitions is the one between Holocaust memory and the memory of colonialism which seem separated today by what W.E. Dubois in another context once called the color line” (Huyssen, 2009:12). This “color line” refers to the idea of the exceptionalism of the Holocaust, which neglects many centuries of massacres and

genocides against Black and Indian people throughout European history, claiming priority of one kind of traumatic memory over another, and creating a problematic hierarchy of suffering.¹

It is important to note that this crisis of representation and referentiality of language was posed by different traditions of what became known as the Linguistic Turn in Philosophy, as mapped by Martin Jay (1982). It emerged from Foucault's and Derrida's reading of Saussure in France; from Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle in the English tradition; and from the Frankfurt School in the case of German tradition. In this sense, the link established by Gabrielle Spiegel between the Holocaust and post-structuralism, or between the post-Auschwitz era and the unfolding of what Lyotard named "postmodern condition", points to the psychological background that allowed for the development and circulation of such radical ideas in an intellectual context of post-traumatic crisis.

These questions of representation and referentiality were also addressed by Latin American artists and thinkers in an intellectual context of post-traumatic crisis, the post-dictatorship period, and the responses to those questions emerged in the field of art and literature rather than in the field of philosophy. The main reason for this artistic response, I argue, is related to what Walter Mignolo (2002, 2011) has called the "geopolitics of knowledge", allowing Latin America responses to come in a different moment and from a different point of view, marked by its historical subaltern relation with European (and Euro-centered) epistemology.²

The work of Hayden White in the 1970s, and its reception throughout the 1980s (Vann, 1998), brought to the field of theory of history the same questions that had a

¹ Dominick LaCapra sees in this debate around the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust the same kind of *Aporia* present in Adorno's argument about the possibility of representing the Holocaust. He tends towards the aporetic argument that the Shoah was both unique and comparable. See: LaCapra, Dominick.(1998) *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.

² Walter Mignolo argues that colonial difference is the loci of enunciation of the subalterns, and states that a geopolitics of knowledge must be taken into account in the process of critique of the Eurocentric epistemology. Once he considers that coloniality is indissolubly linked with modernity, the knowledge produced from the 16th century onward is also deeply marked by a colonial aspect (the coloniality of power) which is deeply connected with the discourse of Western epistemology, produced from an Eurocentric point of departure that systematically obliterate the contribution of non-European/ non-Western thought. See Mignolo, Walter (2002). *The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference. The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101(1): 57-96; Mignolo, Walter (2011). *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke University Press. See also Grosfoguel, Ramón (2008). Transmodernity, Border Thinking and Global Coloniality: Decolonizing Political Economy and Postcolonial Studies. *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* 80 (1): 1-23.

relative fermentation in the field of philosophy, opening controversial debates about the relations between history and literature, and about the literary nature of historical writing, thus problematizing points that were taken for granted in the operation of historical discourse. Therefore, the crisis of referentiality, or the suspicions about the arbitrary relation between the significant and the signifier posed by Saussure (2001), is extended to the relationship between a historical narrative and the set of events it describes, or the relationship between the “real” past and the narrative that describes and analyzes it. In addition, the problem of representing the Holocaust is now extended to the representability of the past in more general terms, raising critical discussions on the strategies historians recur to in order to convey past events through narratives.

The arguments of Hayden White, first published in *Metahistory* (1973) and later elaborated and restated in the collection of articles *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), pointed to history as a verbal structure which shared the same problems of referentiality and representation. According to White, historical discourse can be separated into different components (White, 1978). At the core of any historical account is its basic chronicle, which organizes the events of the unprocessed historical field by placing them into simple chronological order. Nevertheless, a collection of events organized in a chronological manner has no meaning at all. Indeed, the meaning is endowed to the events being described by the historian's decision to “emplot” them within a structure which refers to a form that already exists in the general cultural context where the historian is immersed. Thus, the meaning of a historical event relates to the way a historian arranges it in a set of events that forms a historical narrative, which is the result of an emplotment. However, this emplotment is more than a mere connection between events, rather being configured by pre-existent literary forms. In other words, the attribution of meaning to historical processes works not only through imputation of causality, as argued by other philosophers of history such as Oakeshott (1983) for instance, but also in the process of setting the narrative within a pre-existent structure that confers meaning by conforming it to a specific story-form. In White's words:

Properly understood, histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that “liken” the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture... It functions as a symbol, rather than as a sign: which is to say that it does not give us either a description or an icon of the thing it represents, but tells us what images to look for in our culturally encoded experience in order to determine

how we should feel about the thing represented (White 1978: 84).

Once considering history as a verbal structure it is impossible to grasp the past outside of a linguistically-structured configuration. The historical discourse is then “intended to constitute ground whereon to decide what shall count as a fact in the matters under consideration and to determine what matter of comprehension is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted” (White 1978: 4). It underlines the fundamental literary strategies present in historical writing insofar as it emphasizes the emplotment process alongside the claim on the existence of several modalities of emplotment, all of which are equally plausible because of their aesthetic foundation.

Thus, White puts the literary procedure at the very heart of historical accounts, claiming that writing history requires the same type of linguistic operation that is applied to writing fiction. In making this point, White is not arguing that history and fiction are the “same” thing, but rather that historical accounts do not operate over the past but instead over language. Therefore, he finds it crucial that historians be aware of their *modus operandi* because the recognition of the constructed nature of historical narratives could serve as a potent antidote to the historian's tendency to become captive in ideological preconceptions. This theoretical awareness may enable historians to recognize their *tropic* position, thereby allowing them to choose an emplotment based on a clear-sighted understanding of their cultural and disciplinary context (White, 1978).

Although White's arguments had different receptions among historians, from astonishment to hostility (Vann, 1998), a very interesting implication emerged about the place occupied by the historian himself as the subject of enunciation. Thereby, it becomes impossible to write history without taking an active stance on institutional and personal value systems.

The arguments proposed by Hayden White had a broad reach in the field of history during the 1980s, and as a result the 1990s were characterized by a crisis of history that can be understood as a crisis of representation. As Peter Burke questioned:

Is it possible to know the past? Is it possible to tell the truth about “what actually happened”, or are historians, like novelists, the creators of fiction? These are topical questions in the 1990s, both inside and outside the historical profession, though they are questions to which different people offer extremely diverse answers (Burke, 1998: 6).

It is important to keep in mind that Hayden White played a determinant role in the emergence and unfolding of this epistemological crisis. Peter Burke goes further, stating that this crisis led to a “transgression” of the boundaries between history and fiction, also identifiable in the way contemporary literature began dealing with historical events, in novels such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982), Vargas Llosa's *Historia de Mayta* (1984) and Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985). According to Burke (1998), these boundary “transgressions” were an indicator of what he calls a “crisis of historical consciousness”, as the title of his article, “Two Crises of Historical Consciousness” (1998), suggests. The article argues that this crisis is articulated with postmodernity and with the critique of Cartesian assumptions, and tries to describe a far older “crisis of historical consciousness” that took place during the seventeenth century, at the time when the development of the modern epistemological paradigm, that “postmodern” theory contests and deconstructs, emerged.

Burke claims that the emergence of skepticism towards historical knowledge in the seventeenth century, which he refers to as pyrrhonism, was part of a quarrel about the limits and foundations of historical discourse.³ According to Burke, pyrrhonists addressed two chief criticisms against the activity of historians: that of bias, and that of forgery. The first accused historians of never representing things as they are, but instead of masking them “according to the image they wish to project” (Burke, 1998:3).⁴ The second argument, which was even a stronger blow to historians, charged them for basing their accounts of the past on forged documents, and of accepting characters and events that were pure inventions. This skepticism was part of a complex web of cultural and intellectual changes: “Historical pyrrhonism clearly depended on the systematic doubt of Descartes and his followers” (Burke, 1998: 11). Moreover, this “paradigmatic shift” - to use Thomas Kuhn's notion (2012) even though Burke does not mention it - is connected to progresses made in philological techniques, which were helpful in the process of detecting forgeries, and to the emergence of newspapers in the late seventeenth century, giving readers access to diverse accounts of the same events. Burke states that even the religious conflicts of that time played an important role, stimulating the awareness of bias among different contenders.

³ The term “pyrrhonism” is a reference to the epistemological skepticism of the ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis.

⁴ “*Les inclinent et masquent selon le visage qu'ils leur veulent prendre*”, this phrase of the seventeenth-century French scholar Gabriel Naudé is quoted by Peter Burke (1998: 3).

At this point, it is interesting to articulate the argument of Peter Burke on the epistemological crises of the seventeenth century with the ideas of Gabrielle Spiegel about the second half of twentieth century. First, however, it is important to make some remarks about Burke's approach. The author often refers to the two paradigmatic crises (that of the seventeenth century and that of the postmodern philosophers) as crises of "historical consciousness", which I do not consider completely appropriate. On doing so, Burke seems to argue that skepticism towards the historian's capacity of representing the past might be taken as a general crisis of historical consciousness, while in fact it seems more like the emergence of a more accurate consciousness about the nature of historical discourse. Thus, the core of his argument, when comparing the skepticism of the pyrrhonists with post-structuralist linguistic awareness and naming them as "two crises of historical consciousness", carries a very subtle trick between the lines. It suggests that contemporary criticism represents a risk to historical consciousness or that it threatens our relationship with the past and with tradition. Indeed, it looks more like a crisis of the legitimacy of the historian's discourse than a general crisis of historical consciousness.

The emergence of a new historical consciousness is in fact the result of an epistemological crisis; therefore, because professional historians are not the only source of discourse about history neither about the past, it is not accurate to interpret a crisis of one type of historical discourse as a general crisis of historical consciousness. Instead, other cultural manifestations must be considered as sources of historical consciousness. Literature, visual artworks, music, fashion, and a vast amount of other cultural expressions also refer to the past through a vast repertoire of strategies. All these cultural manifestations can re-present the past, produce meanings about past events, and thus they may be considered instances of historical consciousness, even though none of them aims at explaining the past through causal imputation, neither claim to be the result of a scientific procedure. For these reasons I prefer the term "epistemological crisis" instead of Burke's "crises of historical consciousness".

It is very interesting to consider that the very foundation of history as a discipline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was part of the response to an epistemological crisis that put at risk the legitimacy of a type of discourse about the past. This also helps us to understand the commitment of historians of the nineteenth century, such as Leopold van Ranke (1795-1886), to build a scientific status of objectivity for the discipline of history. It is exactly this discursive configuration that

was targeted by the criticism of the second half of the twentieth century.

Following the argument of Michel de Certeau, who considers revision as a formal prerequisite for writing history, Gabrielle Spiegel also employs the term “revision”, in place of the blunter notion of crisis (Spiegel, 2007). Spiegel is especially focused on understanding the rise of the linguistic turn in historiography as an example of this process of historical revision while seeking possible “causes” for that turn. Whilst searching for the “psychological roots” of post-structuralism, which she considers a response to the Holocaust and its aftermath, Spiegel explores the possible economic and social transformations in the post-war world that might account for its reception, suggesting that this process of “revision” is the result of the combined effects of psychological, social, and professional determinations. I would add to these determinations an epistemological demand, a necessity to rethink the foundations of historical discourse as to deal with the paradigmatic crisis raised by the post-structuralist critique.

I consider Spiegel's arguments on the psychological role of the Holocaust and its aftermaths to be very adequate, insofar as they point to the broader aspect of this crisis of representation, recognizable in the field of history but also in many other cultural expressions, including movies, paintings and literature. The debates around epistemological questions regarding referentiality, representation, and the role of the subject in the production of knowledge were crucial to the rise of a new kind of historical consciousness in the last decades of the twentieth century, especially from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

The emergence of this new historical consciousness explains the constant reference to history and history-writing in the art and literature of the last decades of the twentieth century. Linda Hutcheon refers to the contemporary inclination to discuss history as typical of postmodern phenomena:

Today, the new skepticism or suspicion about the writing of history found in the work of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra is mirrored in the internalized challenges to historiography in novels like *Shame* (1985), *The public Burning* (1977), or *Maggot* (1985): they share the same questioning stance towards their common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even their implications of ideology (Hutcheon 1988:106).

It is important to highlight the fact that novels of this period (Latin America provides good examples of this) do not discuss these questions as a consequence of a previous debate installed in the field of theory of history. Instead the considerations raised in these novels, as well as in other art works, aimed at contesting a large set of

traditional historical procedures at the same time (late 70s and 80s) as they were being discussed by theorists of history. This points to a broader process that occurred through different cultural expressions.

Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” to refer to postmodernist novels that incorporate self-awareness, as well as an awareness of history as a human construct, rethinking and reworking the traditional ways of representing past events (Hutcheon, 1988). Parody is the most common procedure in these novels, paradoxically incorporating and challenging the boundaries between fiction and history. They are especially parodical in their intertextual relation to traditions and conventions, as “historiographical metafiction always work within conventions in order to subvert them” (Hutcheon, 1988: 5).

This is similar to the position defended by the Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva when defining the historical references present in postmodern art, which he refers to as *Transanguardia* (Trans-avant-garde). The “presence of the past” in the “return of painting” of the late 1970s and 1980s accounts for how art history can be used in a transverse and eclectic way. For Oliva, instead of the evolutionist conception of successive vanguard movements that characterized the art history of the twentieth-century, contemporary artists were meant to free flow as nomads through different techniques and themes, conciliating contradictory languages and building a intertwined web of methods and expressions. These procedures of “free flow”, this crossing of boundaries and the use of irony and parody do not aim at turning history into something obsolete, or to destroy historical consciousness, but seek instead to address the textual nature of the past, so crucial in the thought of Foucault and Derrida.

Linda Hutcheon analyzes historiographical metafiction in relation to the literary tradition, and states that part of this problematization of history is a response to the “hermetic ahistoric formalism and aestheticism” that underpinned much of the art and theory of the so-called modernist period (Hutcheon 1988: 88). In this sense, postmodernist historiographic metafiction repositions historical context as significant (or even deterministic), while problematizing the entire notion of historical knowledge: “the postmodern enterprise is one that traverses the boundaries of theory and practice, often implicating one in and by the other, and history is often the site of this problematization” (Hutcheon 1988: 90). The most interesting implication of Hutcheon's position is deeply anchored in the notion that, while postmodernist art “transverses the boundaries of theory and practice” it also

crosses the boundaries between art and life, thus bringing to the present compelling questions that would otherwise be kept in the past and far from our reach. This suggests that to rewrite, or to re-present, the past (in fiction and in history) is to open it to the present, preventing it from being conclusive or teleological.

According to Hutcheon, the difference between nineteenth-century historical novels and postmodern historiographic metafiction is that the latter plays upon the possibilities and limits of reaching historical truth, instead of using history to produce an effect of verisimilitude as the former did. In many contemporary novels, historical details are deliberately falsified to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history, and also the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent errors in historical accounts. Traditional historical novels, as theorized by Lukács (1976), usually assimilate historical data in order to lend an air of verifiability and dense specificity to their fiction, whereas historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the “reality of the past but its textualized accessibility to us today” (Hutcheon, 1988: 114).

Another relevant point, as put forward by Richard Humphrey and Seymour Menton, is the importance of the historical character in these two different types of historical novels (Humphrey, 1986; Menton, 1993). While in traditional historical novels historical characters usually appear in a secondary position, taking part in the plot just as a strategic effort to sustain the historical contextualization of the story, in contemporary novels they are often protagonists, at times part of a strategy to demystify the importance of historical events, and even to raise suspicion on the processes of construction of heroes and national myths.

The historical consciousness present in the novels of the late 1970s and 1980s raises a considerable number of specific issues regarding the interaction of historiography and fiction: issues surrounding the nature of identity and subjectivity, questions of reference and representation, the intertextual nature of the past, and the ideological implications of writing about history. According to Hutcheon:

[H]istoriographic metafiction appears to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view or an overtly controlling narrator. In neither, however, do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty (Hutcheon, 1988: 117).

These novels seem to stress the fact that fiction is historically conditioned and that history is discursively structured. In doing so, they also broaden the debate on the

ideological implications of producing meanings about the past.

2) The Representation of Crises: New historical novel, Neobaroque and the Latin American specificity

Having considered the emergence of a new historical consciousness in postmodern art and literature, especially through the notions of historiographic metafiction and the idea of *Transvanguardia*, I will now analyze how this historical consciousness emerges in Latin America. In the field of literature, the work of Seymour Menton is of crucial relevance when considering the phenomena he calls Latin America's new historical novel. In this context, many theorists have made contributions to discuss Latin America's specificity through the notion of Neobaroque - although this term does not point to a new tendency in Latin American production, but rather to a line of continuity of some formal aspects already present during the modernist period in the region. In this sense, the presence of Neobaroque forms in the novels and artworks of the 1980s, or the presence of a baroque "spirit" as Carpentier put it (1995:100), can be understood as an affiliation with some objectives and specific configurations of Latin American modernism. However, in other aspects, these novels and art works are also marked by important differences and discontinuities when compared with previous works from the 50s and 60s. As I will argue, one of the main characteristics of Latin American literature and art committed to this new historical consciousness is this capability of playing in-between by using what is considered typically postmodernist strategies while attending to problems and concerns which are usually present in modernist productions.

The term Neobaroque has been recurrently used in the last decades to highlight a set of modern and contemporary aesthetic trends, in particular, though not exclusively, in Latin America. In the literary field, a broad set of novels produced during the 1950s and 1960s have been categorized under this rubric. Authors such as Alejo Carpentier, Haroldo de Campos, Severo Sarduy, Jose Lezama Lima, Bolivar Echeverria, and Irleamar Chiampi are the most important references in the debate on the uses of the term Neobaroque as a category of explanation about the specificity of modernism and postmodernism in Latin American literature and art (Kaup, 2006; Malczynsky, 2009).

Despite some exceptions, such as the case of Omar Calabrese (1992), many authors tend to consider Neobaroque as a specific characteristic of artistic productions developed in the "global peripheries" (Carpentier, 1995; Kaup, 2006;

Sarduy, 2010). Calabrese considers Neobaroque as a formal characteristic of contemporary production in a broader sense, as a kind of formal configuration of postmodern art and mass media. According to this author, the Neobaroque consists of: “a search for, and a valorization of forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality, and change” (1992: 11). He tries to identify aesthetic trends that permeate different cultural objects, many of them previously considered within the vague umbrella-term postmodern: “To be perfectly honest, our expressive field already possesses a catchall term that has been widely used to define a contemporary trend: the much abused postmodern” (1992: 12).

Monika Kaup assumes a different position from Calabrese’s and associates the notion of Neobaroque with an attitude of rebellion against the Eurocentric definition of modern and postmodern experiences, stating that modernity and postmodernity should be understood as having “multiple forms”:

The “postmodern” marks a bifurcation between parallel critiques of modernity in Europe, on the one hand, and in Latin America and other non-Western regions (such as India), on the other. Indeed, third world critics such as Dussel, Chakrabarty, and García-Cancelini have charged that the postmodern critique of the violence of modernity and its totalizing grand narratives of rational knowledge is nothing but a “provincial” European analysis that has only limited validity in the global periphery. That is, when the center delegitimizes the modern grand narratives it imposed around the world through colonialism, the periphery seizes this moment as another kind of opportunity unthought of in Europe. Rather than once again mimic Europe as it undergoes yet another (now postmodern) cycle of modernity’s development. New World and Indian intellectuals seize the postmodern crisis of the modern as the occasion to challenge the Eurocentric historical consciousness (...) (Kaup, 2006: 129).

This position and argument are also claimed by other theorists, such as Susan Friedman (2010), who argues that there is an indissoluble link between modernism and modernity: once modernity is understood as a global phenomenon profoundly associated with colonial enterprises (Dussel, 2000), the idea of multiple forms of modernism comes to the fore. As Friedman contends: “every modernity has its distinctive modernism” (Friedman, 2010: 475). The idea of “transmodernity”, proposed by Dussel (2000) and developed by Walter D Mignolo (2002, 2011) and Ramón Grosfoguel (2008), also implies a decolonial critique of modernity. Mignolo writes that: “modernity is not a strictly European but a planetary phenomenon, to which the “excluded barbarians” have contributed, although their contribution has not been acknowledged” (2002: 57). Against this background, the notion of transmodernity offers a liberating reason (*razón libertadora*) and challenges the

Eurocentric notion of one modernity (and postmodernity), thus opening spaces for those once neglected points of view in an effort to decolonize the construction and dissemination of knowledge (Mignolo, 2002).

Therefore, Latin American Neobaroque holds a potential for aesthetic counter-conquest that derives its strength from the restating of the hybridization and the polydimensionality of Baroque aesthetics. According to Marie-Pierrette Malcuzytsky (2009), baroque is present in the theorization of Carpentier (1995), Campos (1980) and Sarduy (2010) not as a seventeenth-century invention or a historical style, but rather as a type of ontological conception. In this sense, Baroque seems to be an almost transcendent aesthetic form that manifests itself throughout Latin American art. In Carpentier's words:

(...) all symbiosis, all *mestizaje*, engenders the baroque. The American baroque develops along with *criollo* culture, with the meaning of *criollo*, with the self-awareness of the American man, be he the son of a white European, the son of a black African or an Indian born on continent... the awareness of being the Other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being a *criollo*; and the *criollo* spirit is itself a baroque spirit (Carpentier, 1995: 100).

In a similar way, the ideas of Sarduy are derived from the thesis which defends that today there is a kind of Baroque experience, as he states:

To be Baroque today means to threaten, to judge, and parody the bourgeois economy, which is fundamentally and centrally based on the miserly management of wealth: the space of signs, of language, the symbolic foundation of society, the guarantee of its functioning, of its means of communication. (...) The Baroque subvert the supposedly normal order, like an ellipse - an added value - subverts and distorts the shape of a circle, which idealist tradition thought to be the most perfect shape of all (Sarduy, 2010: 99-100).

By presenting the Baroque as an aesthetic experience Sarduy also invokes Baroque as an ontological idea that can reappear in different historical periods. This contemporary form of Baroque (Neobaroque) arises at once as a space of dialog, polyphony, carnavalization, parody, and intertextuality which presents itself as a network of connections marked by an overabundance of forms: "superabundance, brimming cornucopia, prodigality, (...) a mockery of all functionality, of all sobriety" (Sarduy 2010: 100).

Haroldo de Campos (1980) sees the Neobaroque in the work of Guimarães Rosa, an author of the 1950s deeply committed towards the formal experimentation of the Brazilian modernism. Sarduy (2010) sees Neobaroque in works of a wide range

of authors, from Miguel Angel Asturias to the “Boom” writers of the 60s. Nevertheless, some characteristics of the novels of the 70s and 80s, considered as “post-Boom” novels by critics such as Gustavo Pellón (2008), do not entirely disrupt modernist concerns with formal principles. In fact, the emergence of a new historical consciousness in the novels of the 1980s does not exclude Neobaroque characteristics, but instead uses the Neobaroque attitude of “mockery of all functionality, of all sobriety” to better de-commemorate the brutality of the Latin American past of colonization, slavery and authoritarianism. It seems part of an effort to deconstruct a history which had traditionally been written as a way to justify corrupted elites and to mystify military “heroic” *bravados*. In this sense, the novels and the visual artworks of the 1980s seem to be deeply connected to the processes of democratic transition in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, alongside the struggles against right-wing authoritarian conservatism which were taking place in practically every country in the region during this period.

Seymour Menton corroborates this presence of Neobaroque characteristics in what he calls the “Latin America’s new historical novel”:

The empirical evidence suggests that since 1979 the dominant trend in Latin American fiction has been the proliferation of New Historical novels, the most canonical of which share with the Boom novels of the 1960s moralistic scope, exuberant eroticism, and complex, **neobaroque** (albeit less hermetic) structural and linguistic experimentation (Menton 1993: 14).

The use of the term “Ultrabaroque” to refer to the work of Latin American artists is another expression of a contemporary presence of Baroque aesthetics. In 2001, the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego opened an exhibition on Latin American contemporary art with a very suggestive name: *Ultra-baroque, aspects of post-Latin American art*. The catalog of the exhibition takes up several articulations between Baroque and contemporary trends in Latin American art:

Curatorially speaking, we suggest that the baroque is a model by which to understand and analyze the processes of transculturation and hybridity that globalization has highlighted and set into motion. Given this approach, we propose that the baroque, in all its conflictive reception and reinterpretation, is pertinent today more as an attitude than a style and is interdisciplinary in nature and not restricted to architecture, music and visual arts, the fields to which it has traditionally been confined (Ultrabaroque, catalog of the exhibition, 2001).

Adriana Varejão, a Brazilian who began her career in the 80's, was one of the artists included in the exhibition, celebrated as important and representative of the

characteristics of recent Latin American contemporary art that curators wished to highlight. In the catalog of the exhibition, there are also important references to novels of Latin American writers, such as José Lezama Lima and Alejo Carpentier, which indicates an effort to reveal aspects of the shared sensibility connecting a range of cultural artifacts.

Gustavo Pellón, when addressing the recent developments of Latin American novels, sees a clear change of strategy among writers by the mid-1970s: “Their novels drew away from myth towards history” (Pellón 2008: 280). Moreover, Seymour Menton considers this notorious concern of Latin American writers with history and frames the emergence of this new trend especially from the late '70s onward. His purpose with this chronological contextualization is “to demonstrate the predominance since 1979 of the New Historical Novel rather than the telluric, psychological, magic realist, or non-fiction novel (...)” (Menton 1993: 16). Although Alejo Carpentier is considered to be a precursor of the genre in the twentieth century, with *El reino de este mundo* (1949), Menton highlights that it was only after 1979 that the presence of what he terms the new historical novel became a predominant trend, even counting around 194 publications between 1978 and 1992.

The characteristics of the new historical novel, as outlined by Menton, can be summed up in six points: (1) an attitude of suspicion towards the possibility of ascertaining the “true nature of reality or history”; (2) the “conscious distortions of history through omissions, exaggerations, and anachronisms”; (3) the presence of famous historical characters as protagonists; (4) the use of metafiction (or the “narrator’s referring to the creative process of his own text); (5) Intertextuality (or explicit allusions to other books and characters); and (6) characteristics present in the Bakhtinian concepts of the *dialogic*, *carnavalesque* and *heteroglossia*, meaning that most of the novels of the period often contain in the same text conflicting presentations of events and characters (dialogism), resource to parody and humor (carnavalesque) and different types of speech (heteroglossia) (Menton, 1993: 22-25).

It is worth noting that these features categorized by Menton and applied to Latin American literary production present similarities with those outlined by Linda Hutcheon when referring to postmodern novels in a broader sense. However, it is important to bear in mind that even though Latin American production has parallels with artists and authors around the world, it presents important particularities which can be seen in light of the specific locus of enunciation of these writers and artists. According to Grosfoguel, “peripheral nation-states and non-European people still live

today under the regime of global coloniality” (2008: 8), due to what he calls “coloniality of power”, a “crucial structuring process in the modern/colonial world-system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labor with the global racial/ethnic hierarchy” (2008:8). The coloniality of power has important implications in what Walter Mignolo calls “colonial difference”, which he considers to be: “the connector that, in short, refers to the changing face of coloniality throughout the history of the modern/colonial world-system and brings to the foreground the planetary dimension of human history silenced by discourses centering on Western civilization” (2002: 61-62). Ultimately, the colonial difference underpins the locus of enunciation, “the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks” (Grosfoguel, 2008: 3). Considering the arguments of Mignolo and Grosfoguel, it is possible to argue that colonial difference is not only crucial to the process of knowledge production but also lies at the center of aesthetic production and distribution.⁵

Therefore, when considering the process of democratic transition that took place in Latin America during the 1980s it is crucial to reflect on the rise of a new historical consciousness, characterized by the emergence and affirmation of writers and visual artists who were dealing not only with the particularities of the Latin American historical and social processes, but also with the position of the region in relation to Western Culture, as Gustavo Pellón argues: “recent writers have grown to distrust a stance that makes Latin American authors into either purveyors of exoticism to readers in developed countries or warrantors of long-held stereotypes about Latin America” (Pellón 2008: 281). The discourse that presented Latin America as an “Other”, full of exoticism and sensualism, was part of an Eurocentric trap that was fully embraced by Latin American modernists, such as Brazilian writer Mario and Oswald de Andrade. However, this perspective was deconstructed in the novels and visual artworks of the 1980s, in a critical effort to reject a type of discourse that fostered exoticism as the only way to stress Latin America's originality.

In fact, novels and visual artworks of the 1980s are less naive than their predecessors insofar as the artists of this period avoid stereotypes and seem more theoretically and historically aware of the implications regarding the relationship between power and knowledge. As a result, visual artworks and literature produced during the period of democratic transition went through several formal and

⁵ About the articulation between “colonial difference” and aesthetics see: Mignolo, Walter (2010). *Aithesis Decolonial*. In: *Calle14* 4 (4): 13-25.

conceptual transformations, a sort of post-traumatic aesthetic transition that pointed to a new perception of historical time, a new sense of social transformation, and a demand to deconstruct the “official history”. This “official history” was influenced by the regimes' propaganda that celebrated myths, heroes and moral norms that were taught in schools. This discourse was not capable of representing Latin American countries which were emerging from a past marked by authoritarianism and social inequality, and which were looking to redefine their self-image in order to construct an alternative future with different perspectives. The visual art and literature of the period seem to be more concerned with criticizing the production of a canonical history than with recreating a specific historical setting. In this sense, the authors and artists are not looking for mimetic strategies, but rather focusing on carrying out a (de)commemoration of the past, a deconstruction of tradition, by using strategies that combine elements of different periods and artistic movements in a non-chronological way, as to make clear the aspects of the past that were still operating at the time they were writing their books or painting their canvas.

The category coined by Linda Hutcheon (historiographic metafiction) is very pertinent in her project of a poetics of postmodernism. However, her analysis does not take into account the possibility of different forms of postmodernism. In this sense, the argument of multiple forms of modern and postmodern experience (Kaup 2006; Friedman, 2010), or the perspective of a transmodernity (Dussel, 2000; Mignolo, 2002; Grosfoguel, 2008) is very relevant. Due to the specificity of Latin American modernism, which is marked by the position of Latin America as a subaltern culture in the periphery of “Western Civilization”, it is evident that the new historical consciousness that emerged in novels and pieces of art of the 80s would take a specific configuration. This configuration is not only historically aware but is politically committed to a cultural and symbolic decolonization of the past.

Menton's effort to define what he terms new historical novels offers a narrow perspective on the historical references present in the novels that he takes into consideration. In fact, in his theory Menton casts aside a significant group of novels that discuss history and historical consciousness merely because they are set in the present. When defining what a historical novel is, Menton adheres to the following definition: “We call historical novels those whose action occurs in a period previous to the author's” (Menton 1993: 16). Such a narrow definition does not allow the consideration of novels such as Vargas Llosa's *Historia de Mayta*, a book that is clearly a parody of the work of historians, although it takes place in a contemporary

moment. Even Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración Artificial* is regarded by Menton as a kind of exception because there are many passages in the plot which take place in the present time.

When analyzing visual artworks and novels produced in the 1980s many critics tend to label these productions as postmodern, as new historical novels, or using very schematic (and frequently Eurocentric) denominations in order to fit these artistic expressions in a previously elaborated pattern. Instead of these schematic denominations, we are seeking in these artistic expressions a common aesthetic trend that is in fact a set of tendencies which dramatize the challenges of that specific historical moment, through plots or themes that aim for a kind of historical deconstructionism. Although these artists were exposed to new strategies brought up by postmodern perspectives, their productions do not seek a formal rupture with tradition. These artists were in fact trying to find their place at a very complex crossroads of trends and perspectives. This fact may contribute to understand why some artists of the 1980s, including some who had debuted before this decade, did not align with any clear art history tradition, but instead played between modern and postmodern boundaries. This "playing in-between" is in accordance with the idea of "critical border thinking" (Mignolo, 2002, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2008) and points to a particular manner of articulating different aesthetic trends and concerns related to the type of modernity achieved in Latin America under very specific conditions. According to Ramón Grosfoguel:

Critical border thinking is the epistemic response of the subaltern to the Eurocentric project of modernity. Instead of rejecting modernity to retreat into a fundamentalist absolutism, border epistemologies subsume/redefine the emancipatory rhetoric of modernity from the cosmologies and epistemologies of the subaltern, located in the oppressed and exploited side of the colonial difference, towards a decolonial liberation struggle for a world beyond eurocentered modernity (Grosfoguel, 2008: 16).

The best example of this attitude is the case of João Ubaldo Ribeiro's *Viva o Povo Brasileiro* (1984) whose action develops within different historical periods, thus narrating a wide range of questions and themes, from the 16th Century Portuguese colonization to 20th Century social inequality and corruption among Brazilian elites. The text is constructed in a non-chronological way and uses elements of parody to address historical events, such as Brazil's independence from Portugal in the 19th century, or the Paraguayan War, which are events deeply rooted in canonical history and in collective memory.

In *Viva o Povo Brasileiro* the reader can find characters and confrontations which depict five centuries of Brazilian history and account for popular struggles for better life conditions, efforts of middle-income groups to improve their sphere of influence and upper class strategies to maintain privileges. The author links the fate of characters with different social backgrounds, stressing the violence of social relations in Brazil, the brutality of colonization and the formation of a National State after independence. Furthermore, he scrutinizes the spurious relationship between politics and economic power in contemporary Brazilian society.

One of the most striking aspects of the narrative is the effort to deconstruct the way Brazilian history was usually presented during the previous years of dictatorship, as a canonical history full of myths and national heroes meant to support a “virtuous” version of historical events. Ubaldo Ribeiro discusses the violence of colonization and the continuous brutality of Brazilian elites who at many important historical junctures have preferred to abdicate the freedom of self government in favor of an authoritarian and military regime which would be able to control potential popular uprisings and to perpetuate upper class privileges. His references to historical accounts are always marked by a satirical suspicion, as is the case in this excerpt:

Desde esse dia que se sabe que toda a História é falsa ou meio falsa e cada geração que chega resolve o que aconteceu antes dela e assim a História dos livros é tão inventada quanto a dos jornais, onde se lê cada pedaço de arrepiar os cabelos. Poucos livros devem ser confiados, assim como poucas pessoas, é a mesma coisa. [Since this day we know that all history is false or only partially true and each generation re-writes what happened before and thus the history from the books is so forged as the news in the papers. Few books are reliable, as well as few people; it's the same thing] (Ribeiro, 1982: 515).

When claiming that each generation decides what is important about what has happened before, Ribeiro highlights the discursive nature of past accounts. In fact, even before the beginning of the narrative the epigraph of the book already postulates its theoretical awareness: “O segredo da Verdade é o seguinte: não existem fatos, só existem histórias” [The secret about the Truth is the following: there are no facts, only histories] (Ribeiro, 1982).

Ribeiro resorts to typically Neobaroque aesthetic trends and reveals a hint of postmodern (and post-structuralist) theoretical awareness as he depicts a deeply suspicious attitude towards the possibility of historical truth while stressing the idea of history as a discursive *construct*. He is also clearly influenced by typically

modernist topics regarding nationality and national identity, thus invoking many references to cultural “cannibalization”, or “*antropofagia*” which were *leitmotives* in the work of Brazilian modernists: one of the characters of the book is a cannibal Indian who feasts on the flesh of the Dutch invaders of the 17th Century: “O caboclo Capiroba apreciava comer holandeses” (Ribeiro, 1982: 37).

The narrative simultaneously contains modernist references, Neobaroque features and postmodern strategies, for this hybridization is one of the main particularities of Latin American literary and artistic productions of that period. Although many literary critics insist on it (Cunha, 2007; Domingos, 2011), Ubaldo Ribeiro has rejected the label of “historical novel” for his book. Ribeiro’s rejection may be due to the fact that the novel does not focus on any specific historical recreation but rather takes part in a vast amount of historical-sociological discussions about Brazilian national identity. In this sense, *Viva o povo Brasileiro* is much more in line with the long tradition of historical and sociological Brazilian essay writers, such as Paulo Prado, Gilberto Freyre and Sergio Buarque de Holanda, than with any other tradition of historical fiction.

Richard Moses pointed to the deeply rooted tradition of *essayism* among Latin American intellectuals. As the professionalization of social sciences in Latin America did not take place before the 1950s, intellectuals of the region built up a very prolific tradition of essays, characterized by reflections that were historical and sociological in essence, but that frequently made use of literary style (Moses, 1995). Although a commitment to depict social inequality and represent national issues has been a constant concern in Latin American literature (Candido, 2007; Menton, 1993) some novels of the 1980s, especially those frequently considered as new historical novels (Menton, 1993; Cunha, 2007; Domingos, 2011), reveal an effort to carry on this tradition of great Latin American essay writers, such as José Carlos Mariátegui, José Enrique Rodó, José Vasconcelos, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Paulo Prado, Gilberto Freyre and Sergio Buarque de Holanda.

The case of Silviano Santiago’s *Em Liberdade* (1981), a novel labeled by Menton as a sample of the “new historical novel”, was considered by Karl Erik Schollhammer as an example of a “novel-essay” (Schollhammer, 2009), insofar as it presents a blend of fiction, critical analysis and historical essay. Both Ribeiro’s and Santiago’s novels express a special concern with the brutality of the historical process and the authoritarian tradition in Brazilian politics and society. They are both interesting samples of narratives which combine modernist themes, postmodernist approaches

and a decolonial effort. Thus, I consider that the term “novel-essay” is more suitable to understand the deconstructive effort of these authors when compared to the generic term “historical novel”.

Moreover, in the case of visual arts, some artists such as Adriana Varejão have also tried to carve an alternative pathway, or at least an approach between tendencies, by appropriating techniques and strategies which had been taken up by postmodernist trends while still working on themes from modernist vanguards of the twentieth century. Varejão resorts to historical images which are usually laden with references to the violence of the colonization process. In some sense, Varejão’s visual artworks also seem to point to the fragility of myths that are rooted in Brazilian social imaginary, as the idea of a society built as a “racial democracy”, as suggested by Gilberto Freyre in his writings about slavery in Brazil; or the idea of Brazil as an idyllic and peaceful society. In doing so, Varejão takes part in the referred tradition of essayism, attempting to remind the viewer that Brazilian society was built through historical processes marked by brutality and authoritarianism, and that social inequality is still an ongoing problem.

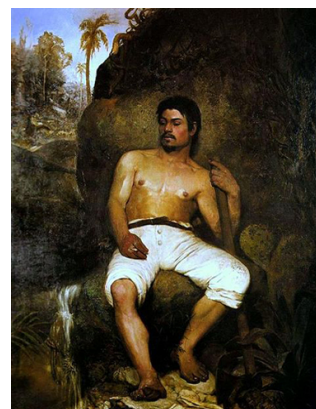
Adriana Varejão has a subjective way of tackling the complexity of tendencies that boomed in the 1980s. Her interest in the Baroque, often noted by critics, synthetically incorporates topics related to historical themes as she explores implicit or untold stories, thus creating a type of critical historiography. For instance, in her work *Acadêmico-Heróis* (Figure 1), Varejão appropriates small pieces of 19th century’s academic paintings, such as Rodolfo Amoedo’s *O Último Tamoio* and Almeida Junior’s *O derrubador brasileiro* (Figures 2 and 3). She articulates different dramatic narratives by mixing up canonical paintings and by confronting their theatrical principles of figurative composition. This relationship between history, violence and representation permeates her entire body of works.



(Figure 1) Adriana Varejão. *Acadêmico – Heróis*. Oil on canvas, 140x160cm.



(Figure 2) Rodolfo Amoedo. *O último Tamoio*, 1883.
Derrubador Brasileiro, 1879.



(Figure 3) Almeida Junior. *O*

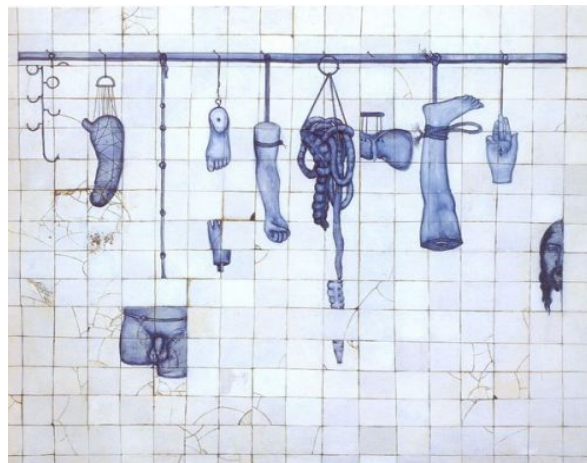
In Varejão's flesh paintings, flesh seems to emerge from within the canvas made out of concentrated amounts of paint, as if the interior of the canvas was itself

in a rough state (Figure 4). Beyond the presence of flesh-painting, a symbolic meaning is enhanced to appropriate a visual memory at once strange and familiar. The artist's intervention strategies play with the symbolic construction of visibility, building layers of signification permeated by tension and struggle. According to Luiz Camilo Osório (Osorio, 2009) the creation of illusion and enchantment implies giving up a certain modernist tendency that legitimized itself through an alleged self-referentiality of expressive media. Varejão overcomes it in a way that the contamination of form by image did not bring back the illustrative nature of



figuration.

(Figure 4) Azulejaria em carne viva. Oil on canvas and polyurethane on aluminum and wood support, 220x160x50cm.



(Figure 5) Varal. Oil on canvas, 165x195cm.

Many critics refer to the paintings of Adriana Varejão as driven by a desire for theatricality (Osório, Santiago, Schuarts, Shoolhammer, 2009). Bringing back Baroque references to contemporary representation, through the themes of Lusitanian *azulejarias* that pervade her works, Varejão revives a painting style that is unafraid of artifice, illusion, or a delirious and sensual game of appearances. Opposed to the idea that art has definitely divorced from politics, as many critics have argued, this form of art seems to point to a redefinition of the terms of this relationship, or as put by Osório: “Once the revolutionary dream and the hangover of disenchantment had ended, it was up to artists and to art to review the forms of interaction with history and society” (Osório, 2009:234).

The paintings of Adriana Varejão assume the uneasiness of a simultaneous de-referentialized and re-enhanced figuration (Figure 5), destabilizing conventional iconographic regimes through the approximation of heterogeneous elements. In her work both figuration and history return as a parody, suspending a predetermined narrative order. One important aspect of her work is the way she mixes layers of memory, redefining unfinished historicities according to a contemporary gaze. It is a strategy of exposing a temporality disturbed by combinations and juxtapositions of materialities and imaginations, creating an “Other temporality” drawn from its place in the past in response to its relation with the present. In Adriana Varejão there is a type of coexistence of modern and postmodern perspectives. According to Luiz Camilo Osório:

It is a matter of affirming the modern aesthetics regime without modernist teleology and its succession of ruptures. The tradition of rupture was important in establishing new horizons of possibility for making and thinking about art, thus fully deploying them for an utopian colonization of the future. (...) Just as there is no longer a historicity based on revolutionary logic that points to an ideologically defined horizon of expectations, there is no reason why all of art's possibilities should be reduced to a hegemonic formal or iconographic model (Osório, 2009: 235).

The work of Adriana Varejão problematizes many aspects of the Baroque, sometimes appropriating and inverting its stylistic and rhetorical elements. The semantic density of her images confers a critical sense to history. Although Varejão was among the artists who were received as postmodernists in the 1980s, her work seems to stress an undoubted link with modernism. As the author herself has claimed:

I am interested in verifying in my work dialectical processes of power and persuasion. I subvert those processes and try to gain control over them in order to become an agent of history rather than remaining an anonymous, passive spectator. I not only appropriate historic images, I also attempt to bring back to life processes which created them and use them to construct new versions.⁶

These “new versions” of historic images are usually full of references to the violence of colonization and of the post-colonial historical process. She appropriates references from different periods of time without being ahistoric. Instead, she seeks to uncover the most painful and bloody aspects of the images, aspects that rest beneath the thin layer of surface, as the flesh that emerges from the inner part of her canvas.

Observed both in literature and in visual arts, this decolonial tendency points exactly to the specificity of Latin America's new historical consciousness, which is part of a broader cultural, social and political process of transition. It is important to reiterate that these novels and visual art works also have an important epistemological dimension, in the sense that they criticize historical knowledge through an aesthetic approach and as such confer an even more powerful decolonial potential to these artistic manifestations.

Seymour Menton argues that the tendency towards history in Latin American literature can be associated with certain factors. First, he refers to the forthcoming of quincentennial celebrations of “discoveries” as an event that has triggered an evaluative effort regarding the course of Latin American culture. However, according to Menton, the renewed interest towards history is linked to an escapist impulse, when faced with the political and economic crisis that marked the 1980s: “the increasingly grim situation throughout Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s is responsible for the popularity of what is essentially an escapist subgenre” (Menton 1993: 29).

In the opposite direction to that pointed out by Menton, I understand that the new historical consciousness in Latin American novels like *Respiración Artificial* (1980) by Ricardo Piglia, *La Guerra del fin del mundo* (1981) and *Historia de Mayta* (1984) by Vargas Llosa, *Em Liberdade* (1981) by Silviano Santiago, *Viva o Povo Brasileiro* (1984) by João Ubaldo Ribeiro, as well as in a series of paintings like

⁶ Quoted in Carvajal, Rina (1996). Travel Chronicles: the work of Adriana Varejão. In: Gangitano L and Nelson S (eds). *New Histories*. Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, p. 16.

Barroco or *Acadêmicos* by Adriana Varejão, is part of an effort to vent a deeply-rooted identity crisis, related to the Latin American colonial heritage and in the context of the traumatic and post-traumatic years of dictatorship, followed by the subsequent democratic transition. The flourishing of this new historical consciousness and its popularity among writers and readers is not part of an escapist pursuit but rather the opposite: a radical effort to deconstruct and decolonize the discourse about the past, a symbolic guerrilla war fought in the field of memory.

The quest, amongst artists and writers, to cope with the very complex crossroads of tendencies and possibilities of the 1980s was articulated through the necessity to re-signify history and self-image, at a time marked by deep political and social transformations. The dilemmas of the collective construction of democracy after the grisly years of dictatorship in the region added a potent fuel to the uncertainties of a period when modernism was declared moribund although the issues queried by Latin American modernists were still, in many senses, pertinent and relevant. Therefore, the tendency towards historical themes in Latin American art and literature bloomed in response to a difficult task, which was to find a particular way of tackling the new challenges whilst dealing with long-term rooted problems. The specificity of Latin America emerges exactly from this dilemma, and through the strategies these artists and writers have applied to walk between old and new, past and future, coloniality and liberation, tradition and transition. Therefore, the process of democratic transition occurred parallel to a profound re-thinking of self-representation in the region; an aesthetic transition aimed at redefining the way the past had been rendered in order to reformulate the way a desirable future could be envisioned and achieved.

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