

Miguel Rio Branco and the Curse of Cities (*Maldicidade* 2014)

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ABSTRACT

This essay will discuss the book *Maldicidade* (2014) by the Spanish-Brazilian photographer Miguel Rio Branco with a special attention to its organization as a narrative and poetic unity as a photobook. In focus is the book's composition as an implicit dialogue between text and image and the use of modernist avantgarde techniques of montage and collage aiming at the expression of a contemporary reality of misery and hardship in the big cities of the Americas. The overarching argument is that the unity of the book as a photobook surpasses the referential nature of photography through visual narrativity in the effort to reveal the common condition of its posthuman urbanity.

KEYWORDS

Miguel Rio Branco; photobook; poetic of composition.

RESUMO

Este ensaio discute o livro *Maldicidade* (2014), do fotógrafo hispano-brasileiro Miguel Rio Branco, frisando a organização da sua unidade narrativa e poética como fotolivro. Em foco está a composição como um diálogo implícito entre texto e imagem e o uso de técnicas de montagem e colagem da vanguarda modernista visando a expressão da condição contemporânea da miséria e do sofrimento nas grandes cidades das Américas. O argumento principal é que a unidade do livro como fotolivro ultrapassa a natureza referencial da fotografia em função da narratividade visual no esforço de revelar a condição comum da sua urbanidade pós-humana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Miguel Rio Branco; fotolivro; poética da composição.

I. AT FIRST GLANCE

On the first double-page spread, a black and white photograph frames a fragment of saloon doors, traditional Far West style, which is also common in popular bars for men in the cities of Latin America, for example, the Mexican ‘pulquerias’. In the little window of the door, a mirror reflects the movement on the street, a fragment of a car, street vendors selling fruits, and the legs of a person attempting to cross the street. On the two following pages, an elderly man enters the dark bar with a white bag over his shoulders, looking for rest, a drink, and furtive company.

Where are we? In a large city of the Americas, certainly, for some characteristics combine cities from the North to the South into a single city (Gomes, 2008). Sure visibility does not deceive, and urban density reveals the wear and tear, the human friction, the organicity of the dirt and misery that characterize cities on the continent.

The book is *Maldicidade* by the Brazilian photographer Miguel Rio Branco, released by Cosac & Naify in 2014. It is not a catalogue, though it includes many photos displayed in exhibitions and installations between 1980 and 2010. The book is a long and intentionally united sequence of photos that are mostly reproduced in a double-page spread format with full bleeds over the entire 198 pages, without any subdivision into chapters, any subtitles, or any page numbers. Upon handling the object, one is invited to flip through the pages and create small sequences of images in motion.

Whoever knows the work of Miguel Rio Branco (MRB) will recognize New York, Salvador da Bahia (the lower part), the suburbs of Lima, Peru, Mexico City, Havana and other settings explored over decades by the photographer. Here, in the book *Maldicidade*, they are recovered to form a large and varied environment of the margins and underworlds of American cities and its human misery by conveying their little mysteries. The geographical locations are mixed, decontextualized, just like their referential historicity. Such forms of suspension serve another type of documentarism that seeks a more profound belonging in the same dramas of the city culture of the Americas in the 20th century.

II. MIGUEL RIO BRANCO

Miguel Rio Branco is a nationally and internationally renowned artist, from the generation of Sebastião Salgado and Claudia Andujar. He began his artistic career in painting with an exhibition in 1964, and two years later he went to the U.S. to study at the New York Institute of Photography. Back in Brazil¹, he briefly studied at the Higher School of Industrial Design (ESDI) in 1968, and invited by Affonso Beato, he made stills for the film *Pindorama* (1970) by Arnaldo Jabor, and then abandoned painting as his main activity in order to dedicate himself to being a photographer in short experimental films² or feature films such as the documentary *Uma Avenida Chamada Brasil* (An Avenue Named Brazil) by Otavio Bezerra from 1988. His own photography in general was marked by a socially critical documentarism, which was already striking in works completed between 1970 and 1972, in New York, and which earned him international recognition. After Rio Branco's black and white phase, in which he explores graphism in expressive clippings, he then proceeds to the strong coloring present in works completed in slides that, especially as of the beginning of the 1980s, will identify his artistic lineage.

III. THE UNITY OF THE BOOK

It is a photobook, though it avoids the combination of images with texts and plastic arts with literature, as it is often characteristic of this genre. It is a book in which the composition of the images creates a kind of long visual poem that combines various arts and various technological media that are not always identifiable. There are paper photographs from the 1970s, others in slides from the following decades, and stills from videos and films, images frozen in motion, many previously exhibited images from other works by the author and here arranged in a new montage in which the sequence offers a cinematic illusion, a kind of Moviola-book or portable editing board of an artist of slides who seeks to create a work that essentially unleashes the images through the movement from one frame to another, and to the others. One perceives a classical use of diptych and triptych compositions, simple sequences in which situations are combined with other situations through a linking that does not depend on a narrative program of action, on

1 See the interview in the film by Pedro Urano *Inhotim Arte Presente* (Ep 07), Dir. Pedro Urano. Prod. Camisa Listrada e Quarteto Filmes, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/312912112> [18 January 2021]

2 According to the artist's website, MRB directed 14 short films and photographed 8 feature films. (<http://www.miguelriobranco.com.br/portu/biografia.asp> [21 January 2021])

cause and effect, and on a redemption of an exemplary plot within a universal space and time. They are small stories of everyday life in which suffering and pleasure inevitably coexist, thereby leaving sparks of survival captured by the gaze of MRB. They are apprehended moments, kidnapped from their owners, sometimes delivered voluntarily and other times stolen by a camera pointing casually downwards, to the ground, without any apparent intention, but capable of freezing legs in motion, part of a sleeping person's body, the bare skin of a prostitute, or the innocent gesture of a fleeting encounter on a random street.

IV. THE SEDUCTION OF THE FRAGMENT

On the next double-page spread, a couple of children are caught peeping through a hole in a construction fence. We do not know why they are looking, but the photo is important since at the end of the book there is another image of the same couple in another version of the same mysterious activity. It is an invitation to look, and it concerns, in the book, offering a 'hole in the wall' and facilitating the scopic drive in the face of something veiled and desired in prohibited moments. The next image is in color and frames an open hood of an old car on which a counter was improvised for the sale of pastries to passersby. Another car with a damaged hood follows in black and white, and a body of a well-dressed man is lying with a certain arrogance on the bodywork. On the next page, a man dreaming in anguish is found in a fetal position lying on the sidewalk curb holding his tormented head with his hands, and then a completely wrecked car including a montage of a lady in front of a homemade Catholic altar. It is easy to perceive the *metonymic* displacement between one motif and another that is superimposed on the unilinear narrative, from each image to the next. The metonymic chain includes a dense bundle of virtual stories around the indexical concreteness of metonymic proximity. On the following pages, a car with bullet holes, on the next a sports car driving down the road with two Latinos on the front seats with a tough guy appearance stressed by the driver's dark shades and his too small hat. Perhaps they are criminals? Then one sees another dark grey car with tinted windows, and in this manner narrative possibilities follow in associative chains. They are fragments of situations captured by the curious gaze of the camera that in each entry is open to narrative virtuality without ever closing the plot.

In the book *Maldicidade*, one immediately recognizes the thematic inclination to portray the underworld of the big cities, to capture their street characters and their dead-end alleys. A multitude of panhandlers, prostitutes, hustlers, transvestites intermingle with the physically disabled,

homeless kids, street vendors, mangy dogs, and everybody else from the miserable urban population immersed in the material condition of rejection and in the inert destiny of entropy. That is the *grand narrative*, and the initial background is the portrait of the big city as the setting of a modernity in which the underworld is the byproduct of development and the foundation of its crisis.

It is upon this thematic foundation that the singular images are highlighted, and the issue that this essay will discuss is precisely how the format of the photobook is developed by Miguel Rio Branco and how its particular composition plays with this premise. The first observation is that the book *Maldicidade* lacks text and captions. The exception is the significant title that presents us with the duplicity of the cursed city that is also its seduction, such as, for example, in the expression *mal d'amour*. It concerns a cursed seduction, but also a curse that seduces. In this manner, the book abandons the direct dialogue between text and image that is often the basis of the photobook concept, but at the same time one recognizes the implicit thematic narrativity that organizes the plot of the singular images either by composing syntactic or textual unities or by creating little possible stories. Miguel Rio Branco himself identifies, on this point, the influence of cinematic language in his compositions characterized by a dialectic between the fixed image and the moving image. At the same time, he recognizes the importance of the pictorial framing, of the affective visuality that painting singularly brings and contributes to the composition. The book safeguards the documentarism of urban photography, but it is now at the service of a poetics of editing that has become the focus of a visual artist that no longer photographs, no longer takes photos, but creates the book as one of the possible products based on the archive from half a century of activity among other contemporary products such as installations, videos, slide shows, exhibitions, and works for the visual art market. If editing in this manner is transformed into the main activity of a mature artist, the question that we will attempt to answer is: what are the identifiable elements of his visual poetics? How does he form the syntagms of his collages and montages, in which textuality is preserved always in discrete counterpoint to the materiality of each image in its pure expressivity?

V. BEYOND DOCUMENTATION

The first important observation is that MRB's work, even if it began inspired by thematic documentarism, quickly detached itself from the prevalence of

the theme and the role of representation and evidence³. His photography was then no longer an illustration of a theme but aimed to transform itself into poetic creation even if it continued on the grounds of this same thematic perspective. One of the pillars of the representative regime in the view of Jacques Rancière is the hierarchical relation that submits the image to the text and thus establishes a stable relation between what can be said and what can be seen. The textual priority organizes the causal comprehension of representative reality and reduces the imagetic illustration in books to a pedagogical supplement for reading. The arrival of the aesthetic regime, which was in progress in the modern art and literature of the 19th century, will announce itself precisely through the destabilization of this hierarchy as part of the suspension of the textual functions of the image, of illustration, of narrative, and of figurativeness in favor of the actual sensible materiality of art. Photography being a technology that is born with this aesthetic moment, its definition since the beginning has included the paradoxical ambiguity between the documentary role of its ontology as an index of light and time and the iconic and figurative recognition of a certain copy of the object or of the visible setting.⁴

In photobooks, the genre is often understood as a balance between the work of the writer who encounters the work of a photographer on the same level of importance, such as, for example, in the books by Maureen Bissiliat, always in creative dialogue with great authors such as Euclides da Cunha, João Guimarães Rosa, and João Cabral de Melo Neto, or occasionally in books by a multi-artist who expresses himself or herself with the same ability and excellence as a poet and visual artist, such as, for example, the book *Ensaio Geral* (Dress Rehearsal) by Nuno Ramos, in which images and texts of different genres appear on the same level as if they were part of a bibliographical installation curated in form of an artist book. The elimination of material writing in the books⁵ by MRB only erases the concreteness of letters, but not the implicit discourse that binds together the book as autonomous unity. Narrativity and plot continue to guide the interpretation of the action embedded in the frozen images. Without explicit text, another relation between the seeable and the sayable appears that subverts the hierarchy behind representation and grants privilege to each image, each fragment of the narrative sequence, and to the chain that binds the sequence into a plot.

3 The obvious counter-example is Claudia Andujar, who dedicated a life of photography in defense of the Yanomami of the Xingu.

4 Roland Barthes (1964) initially defines the photographic image as a sign that is simultaneously iconic and indexical.

5 Without considering the book titles, which are without a doubt very significant, for example: *Dulce Sudor Amargo* (Bittersweet Sweat; 1985), *Silent Book* (1997), *Pele do Tempo* (Skin of Time; 1999), *Entre os Olhos, o Deserto* (Between the Eyes, the Desert; 2002), *Gritos Surdos* (Deaf Screams; 2002), *Plaisir la Douleur* (2005), *Out Of Nowhere* (2009), *Você Está Feliz* (You Are Happy; 2012).

VI. THE PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION

In the book *Maldicidade*, one perceives the simultaneous maintenance of the narrative in montage, the importance of the sensible presence of each frame and of the materiality of each slide. At the same time that there is a relatively obvious sequential flow between one photo and the next within a linearity of metonymic association creating links between significant details in the photos. We observe in some images a kind of densification in montages of 2, 4, 6 or more photographs in a single image, for example, 4 photos of people lying on the street, a montage of 7 photos showing packed buses with passengers appearing in doors and windows, 4 photos of a night club or whorehouse, multiple clippings of hanging images of naked women, and afterwards a double-page spread with bird meat from a fair in suggestive erotic positions, and on the next page a bunch of stills from a TV screen with low resolution clippings showing parts of naked bodies, probably from a porn movie. In the work of MRB, the simultaneous use of *montage* and *collage* are thus significant, and these two dimensions are evident in the syntagmatic linearity as the horizontal composition of the book, on one side, using Roman Jakobson's traditional concept, and in the vertical superimposition of photos in collage, on the other, introducing the idea of a dynamic paradigmatic archive at the moment in which the superimposed collage reaches a density capable of inducing other metaphorical levels and typically serves as a connection to something metaphysical, to the sacred, expiation, or sacrifice. In Jakobson's discussion, the balance between these two aforementioned dimensions is fundamental for an understanding of human language and their imbalance can be noted in various forms of aphasia (Jakobson, 1954). However, the Czech semiotician also seeks in certain disturbances of this balance the key to poetry and to understanding the poetic effect in language, which he defines as a projection of the paradigmatic axis, ruled by similarity, over the syntagmatic axis, ruled by linear positioning in the completion of each class of words in the clause. The example of alliteration in the electoral slogan of Eisenhower ("I Like Ike") is well-known and illustrates the consequence of the projection of the principle of similarity on the composition of the syntagm. It is not difficult to recognize in these two dimensions an equivalence to the conceptual duo of Roland Barthes (1981) in his definition of the artistic or aesthetic power of photography between the *Studium* and the *Punctum*, in which the former describes its referential capacity to illustrate the discourse, on the one hand, and the latter describes the aesthetic detail that affectively captures the attention of the gaze, on the other. In Barthes' interpretation, affect interrupts discursive representability since it is indexically connected to the body behind the image. On this point, however, Jacques Rancière, observes in *The Future of The Image*:

Photography did not become an art because it employed a device opposing the imprints of bodies to their copy. It became one by exploiting a double poetics of the image, by making its images simultaneously or separately, two things: the legible testimony of a history written on faces or objects and pure blocs of visibility, impervious to any narrativization, any intersection of meaning. (Rancière, 2007:11)

It is this conceptual duo that Rancière develops to define what he calls the aesthetic image and that can help to explain the singularity of the viscosity regime in the photographs of MRB. It concerns a concept that seeks to articulate the specific relation between the sayable and the seeable, and that, in the aesthetic regime, what art history normally would call 'modernity', opportunely introduces a double perspective by pointing to the fact that the image in MRB is characterized, from the point of view of its sequence, by the evident inscription of the signs of a story and, from the point of view of its singularity, by the apparent introduction of "the affective power of sheer presence that is no longer exchanged for anything" (Rancière, 2007:17). In photographic documentarism, the commitment of testimony is on the one hand to history itself as a causal narrative and, on the other, to the privilege of the 'decisive moment' that according to Cartier Bresson reveals the connection between a situation captured at the present time and a more encompassing comprehension. At the moment when MRB abandons this commitment to documentary testimony, he can be read as someone who disconnects from the historical narrative in favor of the aesthetic power in the abstract composition of the motif in photography and of the affect triggered by the sensible materiality of colors and light. Another way to read his recent work, however, is to understand this operation as a search for a narrativity on a deeper level of history. It is on this profound and emergent level of his composition that the universal themes of humanity are recognized throughout chronological history and gain symbolic, religious, and mythical resonance in the staging that they receive from the artist.

VII. CURATING THE ARCHIVE

For more than a decade, MRB has no longer photographed, according to his own statement. He works with material from his personal archive and it is in the editing and the repeated reediting of the same material, in which he detaches the photo from its documentary context, both in time and in space, that he is seen as a visual poet in activity, but also as an artist in search of a level of spirituality in which the captured poverty, violence, and sex gains

values of compassion suffering, pain, and enjoyment. It is important to keep the tension between these two dimensions in the work of MRB, for if the accentuated narrativity is a clear characteristic, the pictorial power of the moments of descriptive density also creates settings with an affective impact in which not only the materiality of the singular image appears, but also its potential for symbolic reach is activated. MRB employs often a dark material coloring with a strong melancholic connotation, which at times leads the viewer to feel that he or she is in front of an abstract expressionist painting. The high resolution of the slides, the inclination of his gaze seeking the ground, the legs, the sidewalks, the trash, the dirt, the roots, etc. tend to increase the corporal and haptic perception of the image. At the same time, it is in these moments of dense precipitation of vision that MRB provokes a leap beyond the prosaic of his narratives. It is in these moments that a sensible relation occurs between the most prosaic of settings sought by the photographer and the apparently symbolic level of a certain religious metaphysics or sensibility of the sacred in human expiation and pain.

The strategic method of composition, as analyzed in MRB's recent work, is based on *montage* and *collage*, old and hereby updated techniques from high modernism. This legacy can also be clarified by the systematization, proposed by Rancière, that differentiates two modalities of montage which he calls *dialectical* and *symbolic* (Rancière, 2007:55). Dialectical montage operates in art forms that choreograph confrontations among incompatible elements in order to establish conflicting views of reality — in particular, to present realities that are alternative to those supplied by hegemonic constructions of everyday common life. In modernist avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, these techniques of juxtaposition aim to provoke a shock among heterogeneous elements with the purpose of provoking a break in perception and thus revealing some secret connection behind or beyond everyday life. The other category of montage, which is *symbolic*, assembles disparate elements from the fields of art and non-art in order to produce a different perception of history. In the case of the symbolic montage of unrelated elements, montage establishes a familiarity, an occasional analogy that alludes to the more fundamental relation of belonging to a shared world in which heterogeneous elements are gathered from the same essential fabric, and are therefore always open to being assembled in accordance with the fraternity of a new metaphor. In a double image, a photograph of a sweaty man's face, perhaps originating from MRB's work at the Santa Rosa boxing academy, encounters a photograph of a pizza displayed in a display window and a fragment, in a larger size, of the torso of a church angel. The inclusion of Catholic motifs is frequent and form a coun-

terpoint to sinful situations in the human underground. Despite the aforementioned variations on the motifs of pity or compassion, it is clear that the churches and their decorations do not promise redemption. On the contrary, they seem aged and off the track, degenerated along with this miserable modernity. Even so, these are the ruins that offer a last hope. There are frequent allusions by critics to this relation between the profane and the sacred, right in line with an anthropological interpretation that is familiar in the French theoretical context of the interwar period, in which this relation is established by names such as George Bataille and Michel Leiris in the context of a Surrealist aesthetic. In these works by MRB, however, there is no promise of transgression and redemption to be found. The symbolic level remains in the critical scope of a common world determined by the 'globalization of the poor' and the miserable in which the testimony denounces the reduction in the quality of life and the loss of hope in a process of degradation that erases geographical boundaries among nations in the name of a common minimum coefficient of survival.

VIII. THE ENTROPY OF INTERPRETATION

There is a fascination in MRB's photos for the decadence of poverty-stricken places and of the absolute abandon in the ruins of the big cities.⁶ The process of entropy that devours the ruins, the sewage, the dirt, and the decadent bodies in the same slimy materiality appears in certain slides with the force of an illuminated pictorial in which a public bathroom floor or an open-air cesspool gains material expressivity, always by maintaining the strong and beautiful contrasts of a heavy and dark coloring that gains vigor in the chiaroscuro of the scorching sun or in the sparks of electric light at night that is enough to draw the outlines of this nocturnal population in search of the pleasures of the flesh. MRB's piercing gaze empathizes with human destinies, and he has the capacity to capture the complex from situations of people in simple gestures and postures. A panhandler sitting in a corner looking at the walls and faced by shadows. A man without legs on a chair seat moving on two hand supports, a drunkard without shoes rolling on the street sidewalk, and two strong men conversing on the narrow street, in a position of aggressive virility, and a girl motionless at a street exit door waiting for

6 "Photography has taken the place of descriptive painting, those box cameras that take pictures of things everyone knows. The so-called photography boom imbeds a reactionary aesthetic view." Miguel Rio Branco (2014). "A Sedução do Abismo [The Seduction of the Abyss] – Entrevista com Miguel Rio Branco." [Interview conducted by] Christian Carvalho Cruz. *Estado de São Paulo*. 18 October 2014. [05-10-2021] [The original quote in Portuguese reads: "A fotografia tomou o lugar da pintura descritiva, aquela coisa lambidinha que todo mundo sabe o que é. O tal boom da fotografia embute uma visão estética reacionária."]

someone or just observing the movement on the street. Objects for sale, broken things, meat exposed for sale at the fair, a bunch of padlocks being displayed, discarded trash, three bodies of dead birds on the street, a montage of photographs of car parts, a piece of paper hanging on a barbed wire. In each image, there is an invitation to lose one's gaze in the beauty of the composition and in the sensibility of the colors, but things are also offered in a varied *tableau* of little situations in which human stories are apprehended in an enigmatic interaction and now captured for deciphering.

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