

**HOME AWAY FROM HOME?
A LOOK AT THE HUMANITIES IN BRAZIL FROM HALF-DISTANCE
EM CASA LONGE DE CASA?
UM OLHAR SOBRE AS HUMANIDADES NO BRASIL À MEIA DISTÂNCIA**

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ABSTRACT: A personal recollection of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's experience in Brazil.

KEYWORDS: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Humanities in Brazil

RESUMO: Memórias pessoais da experiência de Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht no Brasil

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Humanidades no Brasil

Coming to the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro in 1977 and at age twenty-nine for the first Visiting Professorship of my life felt like an exciting return. Eleven years earlier, while still a High School student, I had toured Brazil for several weeks and sensed an immediate fascination that became one of the reasons to choose “Romance Philology” as the subject matter and academic discipline for my university studies. But I also remember a stain of disappointment in the midst of my enthusiasm and gratitude. When I approached the beautiful campus in the Carioca neighborhood of Gávea for the first time, a large and equally strange banner was welcoming me: “strange” because, in letters larger than those used for my own name, it featured the arriving visitor as the “former assistant” of his then internationally famous doctoral advisor. To be honest, I have never quite overcome the suspicion, during the past four decades, that this inscription was the symptom of an untold prehistory easy to imagine: the Brazilian colleagues, I thought, had probably first invited my advisor who then rejected the possibility of a visit to Brazil claiming that, as a left wing Social Democrat, he was not willing to come to a nation under military dictatorship – which hypothesis later on gained a different status and twist with the discovery of his status as a former member of the German SS and as a proven war-time criminal. But what dominated for the moment was my shallow impression of being second choice.

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Doubtlessly, this experience gave me the impression and added motivation of having to show, in my seminar on German Phenomenology between Edmund Husserl and the mid-twentieth century, that I had deserved the invitation. For an entire month and five days per week, I met with a group of about twenty-five colleagues, graduate and undergraduate students (most of whom were earning their tuition through part-time jobs) in long late afternoon sessions of enormous intellectual intensity, as it was typical within a tense political situation where only private universities were allowed to host foreign scholars for lectures and classes. Soon our philosophical discussions began to spread into the joint dinners at “A Diagonal,” a restaurant close to campus, and into our weekends on Leblon beach, and they did so largely due to the fact that there were hardly any competing academic events in Rio during those years.

Our exchange turned out to be so particularly productive and challenging for me because of a historical constellation in the Brazilian Humanities whose parameters appeared very different from my then familiar European environment. As a legacy of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ field work in the country’s North and of his teaching at the University of Sao Paulo from the mid-1930s on, Anthropology and not Philosophy, Anthropology in a version between the Anglo-American understanding of describing cultures different from one’s own and the German conception of trying to identify general structures of human culture, functioned as the shared horizon of reference for all of our conversations. As a consequence, Lévi-Strauss’ Structuralism was firmly established as a central method and frame of mind, and the proposal to concentrate on the German phenomenological tradition in my seminar belonged to the first movements of an opening towards alternative epistemological paradigms.

If this initiative to conquer an alternative legacy of thinking seemed typical of the situation in Rio de Janeiro, it triggered a competition with Literary Studies at the University of Sao Paulo where branches of Western Marxist thought were prevailing and had triggered, above all in the work of Antonio Candido, a new historical reflection about the specific conditions under which a national literary tradition had begun to emerge in Brazil since the nineteenth century. The intersections and tensions between so many different positions gave the debates in our class not only an uncanny energy but also the optimistic conviction that innovative ways of thinking and writing with a potentially international impact would shape up in Brazil within the years to come. And as I progressively learnt about the work done by my colleagues and students, I realized how some of them were indeed on the verge of developing intellectual profiles of their

own transcending the work from Europa and Northern America on which they had hitherto concentrated. Luiz Costa Lima, my official host, inaugurated a life-long reflection on the ontological status of Literature and Art based on the complex semantic potential of the “mimesis”-concept. Silviano Santiago who, years later, would be central for the shaping up of a specifically Brazilian version of “deconstructive” criticism, was beginning to find his own discursive place between high-level novels in the modernist tradition and a form of criticism particularly close the literary traditions of writing. Flora Sussekind, already in her research as a graduate student, became fascinated by the challenge to explore the historical basis and the aesthetic potential of specifically Brazilian genres of popular and folklore texts. And Roberto Ventura who, after a doctorate in Germany would then transition into the São Paulo intellectual scene before his premature death, tried to understand and to activate in the present a national legacy of mostly academic literary and cultural studies in his homeland.

As these colleagues and quite a number of younger scholars from my seminar went on to have successful university careers, I have ever since enjoyed the privilege of returning to Brazil for similar opportunities and formats. After 1982, there has not been a single year for me without lecturing and teaching there, and I thus pride myself to have invested a serious portion of my lifetime work into several generations of the Brazilian Humanities scene, enough indeed to claim that I have become part of it, at least from a position half-distance. If I try to summarize endless moments of positive individual experience, my strongest impression is that of a particularly intellectual energy which, today, is no longer isolated in the two metropolitan centers of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro but has established a presence all over the country. Even in Federal States and at universities without any remarkable intellectual traditions, I always find a number colleagues and students with a sophisticated command of the ongoing international debates and, above all, with a liveliness and excitement that continues to remind me of my very first encounters in 1977. I still feel the same unconditional thirst of learning; the epistemological frame and horizon has largely evolved but still looks different from that in the centers of the Northern hemisphere (and would deserve a philosophical mind capable of articulating the central zones of its productivity in a coherent fashion); specifically Brazilian genres and discourses of Literature that used to lie outside the range of the academic institution have long been integrated into the national canon and into the educational system; and the mutual inspiration between the literary and the academic scene may be stronger today than ever before.

Without any doubt, my quite regular (but never officially institutionalized) visits to Brazil have been decisive for my own work back in Germany and, since 1989, at Stanford University. But how can I then explain that the best of this singularly productive machine of innovative thought and cultural enthusiasm has had so little impact on the international debates? The question is of course less relevant for Brazilian scholars than for their colleagues all over the world, especially in countries whose academic history has developed under structurally similar conditions – as I believe it is the case with the People’s Republic of China. My main intuition towards an answer, beside a quite visible practical arrogance and condescendence in the centers of the Northern Hemisphere, points to the difficulty that many individual colleagues in Brazil, but above all their institutional discourses, have had to overcome a primarily receptive frame of mind. Even in a present where the production of those Northern centers may have become largely stagnant, the Brazilian gaze is still fixated on them, instead of taking more seriously and developing more actively what has been produced inland during the past half century.

There are, however, a few thoroughly encouraging exceptions of scholars in the Brazilian Humanities whose work is available in languages other than Portuguese and who have thus begun to unfold an international impact that may well turn into the beginning of a new status for the work done in their national context. I will barely mention two examples, and of course they both belong to the Rio de Janeiro scene.

The first of them is Luiz Costa Lima to whose initiative, more than four decades ago, I owe the intellectual contact with Brazil that ended up becoming so singularly important to me. From the early 1980s on and until the present, Costa Lima has been involved in a successive unfolding of the different philosophical problems having to do with the relationship between texts and their non-textual environments, under concepts such a “mimesis,” “representation,” “fiction,” and “imagination.” In its earlier stages and due to versions above all in English and in German, this work did find the recognition of specialists in Europe and North America, especially the appreciation of Wolfgang Iser, one of the central authorities during the great age of Literary Theory towards the end of the twentieth century – who saw in Costa Lima one of the productive competitors in some central fields of his own research. If such reactions have stalled during more recent times and despite the continuation of Costa Lima’s work on a remarkable level, this may have been for two reasons. In the first place, it has become increasingly difficult to

pursue his reflections, as a complex but straight line of thought, without having taken into account each of its earlier steps of development. Secondly and above all, Costa Lima's books have profited so much from their confrontation with the discussions going on in the traditional academic centers, that it was no longer obvious for readers outside Brazil what their specific potential and productive provocation for their own thought might be.

In this sense, the work of Joao Cezar de Castro Rocha, a former student of Costa Lima at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), marks a decisive difference – and it may as well be partly due to this difference that the two scholars are no longer in a dialogue today. Castro Rocha acquired a second doctorate at Stanford University in California and, as we can say in today's retrospective, was using his time abroad to develop, as an insider, an peculiar outsider's view on the Brazilian literary and cultural legacy, a view as it had never emerged within the national tradition before. Above all, he constituted a new sensibility for the potential inherent to Brazilian texts and authors capable of opening up new perspectives within the debates of classic philosophical problems of the Humanities and, above all, he experimented with fresh ways of reading the European and Northern American classics from different angles belonging to the former “periphery.” It is thus no exaggeration to say that the work of Castro Rocha and his students has the potential of operating a decisive hermeneutic inversion in the global context.

If the question had been, for several generations, what place texts and artifacts from the so-called “periphery” (in South America, Asian, or Africa) would be able to occupy within the established views of the so-called Western tradition, we are now invited – and indeed beginning – to reread Shakespeare from the viewpoints of Machado de Assis, or Joyce from that of Guimaraes Rosa. And if, until recently, we interpreted the closeness of Literary Studies in Brazil to the contemporary scene of literary production as a leftover from an institutional and intellectual stage that needed to be overcome, we are now learning how such a proximity can inject a new energy into our own intellectual and also academic work.

In other words – and despite much regular work done at Brazilian universities today under the old-fashioned “Leftist” assignment of documenting the aesthetic quality and political relevance of texts and artifacts from “popular culture” (under premises that copy the “political correctness” of the classical centers): the Humanities in Brazil have finally begun to transcend their

“marginal” status as a place of high energy in eternal reaction to the intellectual production of the traditional centers; they have started to fulfill a promise that felt strong but vague half a century ago but then remained congested in a unilaterally receptive vision and attitude. Not only for South America, Asia, and Africa, but also for us from the traditional centers, the Humanities in Brazil have become a scene to concentrate upon and to learn from because they seem to anticipate a cultural and intellectual dynamic that could become, for the first time, truly global. “Global” in the sense of abandoning hierarchies of influence and authority and of replacing them through a centrifugal plethora of mutual readings and approaches of understanding; “global” also in a fresh way of exploring what “world literature” and “world culture” might end up becoming. And all of this is happening while Humanists in Europe and in North America are asking themselves, seriously and for a number of good reasons, whether their version of the Humanities may have reached the final stretch of a historical ending.

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