

“Cut off his head!”: Commentary on Some Jorge de Lima’s Photomontages

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“A própria história do ser consiste talvez apenas numa série de acidentes que desfiguram perigosamente, a cada época e sem esperança de retorno, a significação da essência”

Catherine Malabou, *Ontologia do acidente*

“Aprendi com meu filho de dez anos / que a poesia é a descoberta / das coisas que nunca vi”

Oswald de Andrade, *Pau-Brasil*

Jorge de Lima, probably better known for his multifaceted poetry (full of glossolalic voices), was the first in Brazil to devote himself to photomontage. In the late 1930s, he gave a set of eleven

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images as a gift to Mário de Andrade. After receiving them, the writer of *Macunaíma* published a text—“Fantasies of a poet”—considering that “photomontages might seem a joke at first. They only involve us armed with photographs, cutting out the pictures and reorganizing them in a new composition” (ANDRADE, 2010, p. 131) giving rise to a “new means of expression” (Ibidem, p. 131). On the other hand, by taking some distance from the term “expression,” Murilo Mendes noticed that photomontage, besides enabling “a combination of logic and the unforeseen” (MENDES, 2010, p. 134), also “implies a retaliation, a revenge against restrictions of an order of knowledge. It anticipates the cycle of metamorphosis in which man, through an operation of synthesis of his intelligence, can perhaps destroy and construct at the same time” (Ibidem, p. 134).

In this sense, the importance of photomontages may not only derive from the comprehension that they could present a direct materialization of imaginary, but especially by their disruptive effort, which is directed, at first, to a desired immediacy of *logos*. Or better, it is valid to consider that the strange uniqueness of these photomontages is not only directed to question the order of *similarity*; at the same time, they open a space to configure *simultaneity*—which brings to the fore an uncanny dimension: the vacuous (and soon after repressed) present in the notion of *logos* as a closed essence. Ultimately, it implies that, for the living beings who have invested the consistency of their corporeality in symbolic influence, an existent can always be decomposed into many other coexistents (Cf. AGAMBEN, 1996, p. 79-80). This exercise of reading somehow promotes an attempt at making images speak. Thus, the exercise will not appeal exactly to the ekphrasis [*descriptio*] mooted by Philostratus, the Old. On the contrary, there is something here that seems more like a “conjunction of ghosts” [*phantasmata*]—especially because, if images do not speak by themselves, their voices shall come from other instances. At this point, it is worth remembering a sentence of Aristotelian origin whereby, if images cannot explain or even clarify everything, at least they can help to think. It also means, however, that this reading is not looking for the unique hidden signification in some photomontages but is an experience of making—of *inventing*—some sense.

Image 1—“No title,” Jorge de Lima, 193?
 Collection of “IEB—Fundo Mário de Andrade,” USP

It can be visualized through the following link:

<https://goo.gl/RFOZ7s>

This first photomontage [Image 1], as the other one that will be discussed in this text, is part of the gift that Jorge de Lima gave to Mário de Andrade in the late 1930s². This information is not fortuitous, since one can find a certain relation with some poems written by Jorge de Lima in the same period. At first sight, it could be possible to say that this image, dominated by the fluctuation of three heads without bodies, is the exact opposite of the *Acéphale*, “headless,” presented by André Masson, in 1936, to illustrate the cover of the homonymous journal directed by the group around Georges Bataille. The scenery is rich and carefully decorated for work; in this space, all natural matter—wood, vegetable or animal fibers, metals and stones—appear under the sign of technical transformation: oval table, chairs and doors with panels, fabrics and tapestries, ashtrays and locks, columns. This is the ambiance where beings... just heads, can appear, suddenly, as terrifying specters. Somehow, this photomontage could be understood as the reverse and barren face of the being creator of worlds. Everything seems to be organized; everything remains in suspension—as in a sepulchral silence. If someone could imagine any phrase produced by these heads, their mouths would not open, forever *infans*—from Latin, “which does not speak.” However, there is something in their fluctuation able to make us utter a shrill laugh.

As Roger Bastide (1997) has noticed in a classical essay about Brazilian religious poetry, one of the most recurrent *topoi* in Jorge de Lima’s scriptural activity is, precisely, the dismemberment of bodies. Examples can be easily found in texts written since the late 1920s, as in the study of *Proust* [1929], in the novel *O anjo* [“The angel,” 1934], in the book *A túnica inconsútil* [“The seamless tunic,” 1938]. It is important to consider that, through a great part of these texts, the advancement promoted by technique is not understood just as a glorious sign of progress, but especially as a process of uprooting that risks the integrity of bodies and the existence of life. In other words,

² All photomontages presented here can be found at <http://www.apinturaempanico.com/fotomontagens.html>.

progress could not be thinkable without the consideration of a gradual deepening of Babelish dispersion. There is a stunning poem published in *A túnica inconsútil* that exposes some revenge against belief in the infallibility of technique—“O grande desastre aéreo de ontem” [“The great air disaster of yesterday”], dedicated to Cândido Portinari:

Vejo sangue no ar, vejo o piloto que levava uma flor para a noiva, abraçado com a hélice. E o violinista em que a morte acentuou a palidez, despenhar-se com sua cabeleira negra e seu stradivarius. Há mãos e pernas de dançarinas arremessadas na explosão. Corpos irreconhecíveis identificados pelo Grande Reconhecedor. Vejo sangue no ar, vejo chuva de sangue caindo nas nuvens batizadas pelo sangue dos poetas mártires. Vejo a nadadora belíssima, no seu último salto de banhista, mais rápida porque vem sem vida. Vejo três meninas caindo rápidas, enfunadas, como se dançassem ainda. E vejo a louca abraçada ao ramalhete de rosas que ela pensou ser o pára-quedas, e a prima-dona com a longa cauda de lantejoulas riscando o céu como um cometa. E o sino que ia para uma capela do oeste, vir dobrando finados pelos pobres mortos. Presumo que a moça adormecida na cabine ainda vem dormindo, tão tranqüila e cega! Ó amigos, o paralítico vem com extrema rapidez, vem como uma estrela cadente, vem com as pernas do vento. Chove sangue sobre as nuvens de Deus. E há poetas míopes que pensam que é o arrebol. (LIMA, 1958, p. 446)³

From east to west, from high to low, the destinations of humans do not encounter any glory but fall, disaster, catastrophic disintegration. In other words, and following a thought that does not obliterate the inescapable emergency of the history of the subdued on the story of the vanquisher: from the Polar Star to the Crux, voyage encounters dystopia,

³ “I see blood in the air; I see the aviator who was carrying a flower to his bride, embraced with the propeller. And the violinist in which death has accentuated his paleness, crashing with his black head of hair and his Stradivarius. There are hands and legs of dancers hurled in the explosion. Unrecognizable bodies identified by the Great Recognizer. I see blood in the air; I see bloody rain falling on the clouds baptized by the blood of martyr poets. I see the so-beautiful swimmer, in her last jump of bather, coming faster because she comes with no life. I see three girls falling fast, swelled as they were dancing. And I see the crazy woman embraced with a bouquet of roses that she thought to be a parachute, and the prima donna with her long tail of sequins scratching sky as a comet. And the bell that was going to a chapel on the west, tooling funeral notes for the poor deceased. I presume that the sleeping girl in the cabin still comes asleep, so quiet and blind! Friends, the paralytic comes with extreme rapidity, comes like a shooting star, comes with the legs of wind. It is raining blood on the clouds of God. And there are myopic poets thinking that it is the afterglow.” Jorge de LIMA. “O grande desastre aéreo de ontem.” *Obra completa. Vol. 1*. Rio de Janeiro: Aguilar, 1958, p. 446.

or better, produces it with iron, fire and... blood. But, furthermore, while pointing out the repeated coincidence of fall and failure, past time and verbs in the present tense, it could be interesting to consider, in Walter Benjamin's words, that "the concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. 'Things continue like this'—*this is the catastrophe*." (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 515). This excruciating relation between progress and catastrophe can also be perceived in the poem "Arranha-céu" ["Skyscraper"], published by Jorge de Lima in the book *Poemas escolhidos* ["Selected poems," 1932]:

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O campeão mundial de misticismo[...]
quis, naquela época avançada,
subir no elevador
para ver o céu.

O campeão foi pelos andares
parando...
parando...
sempre em linha vertical.

[...]

No derradeiro parou:
nem um anjo.
Então desceu,
desceu,
desceu
e atravessou o asfalto
com um medo danado
de morrer sem confissão
debaixo dos autos.

(LIMA, 1958, p. 326-327) 4

Well, if humans have sometimes wanted to transcend their existence by taking distance from the ground, they have not only faced a dimension of absolute absence, but they have also realized that the way chosen for elevation was capable of giving them death, taking them back with no mercy to the place from which they had escaped.

4 "The world champion of mysticism, / [...] / wanted, in that advanced age, / to go up in the elevator / to see the sky. // The champion has gone through the air / stopping... / stopping... / always in a vertical line. // On the top floor, he stopped: / nor an angel. / Then, he came down, / down, / down / and crossed the asphalt / with a so darn fear / of dying with no confession / under the cars." Jorge de LIMA. "Arranha-céu." *Obra completa. Vol. 1*. Rio de Janeiro: Aguilar, 1958, pp. 326-327.

According to Georges Bataille, the assumption of a vertical position in the infancy of humans would have caused a strong repression on discharges produced in the lower region of their body. So, as they have not found the same way for the satisfaction of yore, a great part of its vital impulses has been transferred to heads, to faces—besides, the abundance of laughter and tears could even be understood as symptoms of postural change. (Cf. MORAES, 2002, p. 206) In terms adopted by Jean-Luc Nancy (2003), once the head has raised from the ground, disconnecting hands and feet in two dislocated dimensions, the same movement has given space to the formulation of an ontological prototype around which mankind historically remains struggling—*sovereignty*, which is the substance of a subject whose being consists in absolute elevation. Above all, this means that sovereignty carries separation of high and low to the most extreme point, carries it to the very highness [*Altissimus*] causing vertigo and, at the same time, operates through the obliteration of the very lowness of *humus* (Ibidem, p. 27). However, there is something very interesting in this historical and ontological movement that escapes from ascent and inscribes itself as a residue (as a *caput mortuum*) in a word. “Sovereign,” who is in the elevation itself, used to be named *superānus* in Latin, a term built by the matrimony between *super*, which indicates “over,” and *anus, i*, which indicates—as we know quite well—the posterior hole of the digestive tract. In the multifaceted aspects of sovereignty, the excess of *superānus* is not only directed to the high, but also to the low. So, when the sovereign is making a decision about the case of exception, he is, according to Carl Schmitt’s elaboration, not only personifying substance over *humus*; he is also acting out as a *super anus*, as an excessive duct from where all manner of perversion and bloodiness comes, indeed all manner of perversion that humans are capable of. By the way, maybe it would be unnecessary to point out that “duct” reminds us of another Latin word, *ductus*, whose signification indicates a primary power to conduct in just one way dispersive flows or fluid impulses. But, considering one of the most terrifying *arcana imperii* in contemporary politics, *ductus* remains as the fundamental meaning of two words in Italian and German: *duce* and *Führer*. So, through the photomontage presented by Jorge de Lima, these terms can especially expose the intimate relation between “superiority of values” (Cf. AGAMBEN, 2004) and repressed abjection, which returns, here, as an uncanny apparition.

Well, could it be possible to accept that Jorge de Lima's photomontage simply evocates an attempt to erase acephalia? The answer is, in my opinion, negative. To be more precise, the proliferation of heads contains certain affinities with the absence of a head. In a text about "The sacred conjuration," Bataille (2013a) has observed that since the logocentric devotion of humans is turned into necessity, into the unique reason of existence for the entirety of the universe, it is life itself that becomes slavery. So, "if it is not free, existence becomes empty or neutral, and, if it is free, existence is a play [...] The fascination of liberty became poor when the Earth produced a being that demands necessity as a law above the universe. However, men [...] are free to resemble anything different from what, in the universe, they are not" (BATAILLE, 2013a, p. 3). In a later text, "Propositions," Bataille (2013b) has reaffirmed the comprehension that a living-together, habilitated to exercise liberty, beyond the denial of the head, can be elaborated through *bicephalia* or even through *policephalia*. According to the French thinker, it can be considered as such because everything that remains at a distance from the undivided tends to promote an explosion of the *principle of reduction to unity* which has been engraved on the only one head. So, if these words can be accepted, it is now time to deal with two other photomontages [Images 2, 3].

Image 2—"No title," Jorge de Lima, 193?
 Collection of "IEB—Fundo Mário de Andrade," USP
 It can be visualized through the following link:
<https://goo.gl/i59Y3W>

Right here, in this second photomontage [Image 2], an oval white shape, very similar to the shape viewed in the first photomontage, covers up the face of a female figure, which could be a movie star, and whose body is dressed in a heavy coat fur. With invisible feet, she is carried by an immense, white and frosty piece of hand. Here is the vacuousness and neutrality of a life which, having as destination the perspective of a foggy spot in the background, finds itself in solitude—a spectral shadow that is coming closer or moving away from a life that seems to be just death. With a gesture that can indicate at the same time servile humility and sovereign lordliness, this figure turns to us the emptiness of its face, the veiling of its head—maybe, this wobble is

observing us more than we are observing it. Somehow, the vertiginous circle overlying the hand refers to the panic felt by one who finds the presence of absence in the high sky, and the swift turning of automobile wheels on the ground. Then, here is the ambiance where clarity that comes from the highest portion makes the lowest one obscure; the subject is suspended as its own life is suspended: “I see blood in the air.”

Even so, it might be a mistake to imagine that Jorge de Lima was proposing a very simple denial of technique. Taking distance from that choice, it is possible to consider that he was formulating a way to reuse technique; a way to radically expose something that, with the aid of technique, has been thrown away as an exotic matter—according to its etymon, “matter taken away from the reach of eyes”. In other words, it is possible to understand that Jorge de Lima was helping to present and, simultaneously, to make thinkable the existence of lowness in the consistency of what used to be perceived only as highness. The fluxes of that impulse are quite clear in the third photomontage.

Image 3—“No title,” Jorge de Lima, 193?
Collection of “IEB—Fundo Mário de Andrade,” USP
It can be visualized through the following link:
<https://goo.gl/kZ5fwo>

This third photomontage [Image 3] maintains a certain similarity to the previous one—but, it probably appears as its counterface. Now, the illuminated portion is the lower one, where one can see a peculiar female body crowned by a tremendous simian head with the mouth open as offering a hint of a smile. There is a very strange balance in this figure: crossed legs, coat close to slipping off the shoulders, chair mixed with the seated body, hand holding a smoked cigarette, foot coming sneakily out on the left portion. By the way, in this reciprocal intercourse between high and low, it is not an absurd to remember that Georges Bataille (2003) has considered the big toe—and not hands or even the head—as the most human part of the human body. Fundamental for the maintenance of an erect posture, the big toe cannot detach itself from contact with lowness—and while it is dragging on the floor, it also incarnates one of the best-known sexual fetishes. In

this sense, maybe this photomontage could present a very emblematic and disruptive spark of humankind's own condition.

But, upon examination of the photomontage, it seems that there is a foot touching an illuminated floor—maybe it can be enough to promote a complete change in the understanding of the human figure, by its own head and face. The strange balance in that image, besides indicating simultaneity both acephalia and policephalia, also recalls, with humour, the taxonomic definition of human presented by Linnaeus in the 18th century. As Giorgio Agamben has noticed in his book *The open* [2002], next to the generic name *Homo* there was no specific mark or sign, but a version of the very old philosophic adage *nosce te ipsum*, “know thyself.” The name *Homo sapiens*, in this sense, before qualifying any property or essentiality, suggests an imperative (Cf. AGAMBEN, 2002, p. 32-33)—an unreliable suture for an insistent narcissist wound. Thus, as it has been the case with the disarticulation of the terms of sovereignty, also the disarticulation of the elements of the taxonomic definition of human points out to a fluctuation around lowness—or, better, around the world itself. “*Homo* is just an animal constitutively ‘anthropomorphic,’” as Agamben would have said (2003). In other words, for being recognized and denominated as a participant of the genus *Homo*, such an animal must appeal to the reflections that the world provides to it through any media—in the specific sense of *metaxu*, in Greek, or *medium*, in Latin—which can be the broken pieces of a mirror or even the Babelish chatter of quotidian language. However, the incessant flux between attempt at self-knowledge and alienation in the recognition of others is not unequivocal either—it leaves residues, it mobilizes fissures, because there is always something that escapes, at the same time, from knowledge and alienation. Therefore, if an image cannot be more than the appearance of something out of its original place, for the human, the reconsideration around the vision of the image of its own head or face will always have to deal with prosthetic contours easily capable of being disarticulated into simian, animal features. Nevertheless, crossing through the destruction of figures and their uncanny reconstruction, the photomontages formulated by Jorge de Lima during the late 1930s still expose the confluence of virtual worlds where thought can return, one more time, to bodies—and now not necessarily to obliterate them, but to reconstitute some possibility of



an existence not exclusively sovereign, or better, to remind of the ethic ability to invent some manner of living beyond any sovereignty.



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