BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Frequency, modulation and time in Amerindian art

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Comment on Fausto, Carlos. 2020. *Art effects: Image, agency, and ritual in Amazonia*. Translated by David Rodgers. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

The ethnographic depth and analytical richness of Fausto's *Art effects* are remarkable. The book takes the reader on a fascinating journey through processes of image- and artifact-making among a number of Lowland South American societies. The analytical framework is notably coherent in bringing together examples from different visual and material media and ritual contexts, including bodily trophies, wind instruments, masks, wooden effigies, and immaterial images. What I find particularly compelling is the extended reflection on Amerindian arts that the book provides, which through a wide array of case studies, examples, counterexamples, arguments, and counterarguments indulges the reader in an ethnographic and comparative analysis that enriches our understanding of Amerindian aesthetic epistemologies and ontologies.

In this comment, I focus on the main problem that the book wrestles with, which also constitutes one of its central contributions, and a long-standing preoccupation of mine. This is the relation between prototype and copy in image- and artifact-making, as well as in ritual behavior, a problem that has indeed occupied center stage in Western art history since its beginnings and which Fausto tackles from the perspective of Amerindian art—a no mean

feat. What the different case studies considered in the book show is in line with previous research conducted in Greater Amazonia (Barcelos Neto 2002; Lagrou 2007; Fortis 2012). Amerindian arts are not about representation and lifelikeness but about figuring transformations (p. 21). This is the point of articulation of the most profound difference between Amerindian and Western art, which the author exploits using the latter category explicitly as a straw man. If mimesis is the art of societies for the state, transformation and relational ontologies are the arts of societies against the state (Lagrou 2011). Fausto is aware of the limits of this grand opposition, which nonetheless lingers through the analytic fabric of the book, becoming manifest in the use of the dichotomy between prototype and replica. In what follows, I argue that one particular problem of operating within the frame of this opposition is that the very categories needed to establish it risk stifling the analytical process.

With regard to the problem of the relation between prototype and copy in Amerindian ritual images, the author defines the relation as "asymptotic," "in order to emphasize the fact that although ritual condensations tend towards identity between the related terms, an infinitesimal distance is always preserved between them" (p. 264). Asymptotic forms of identifications are therefore those that tend to similarity ad infinitum but never quite get there, positing a constitutive difference at the core of art-making, a difference that is at the core of notions of similarity in Amerindian ontologies and epistemologies, as Lévi-Strauss has showed in *The story of lynx* (1995). What is best described as a chromatic approximation between prototype and copy mirrors the internal multiplicity of Amerindian subjects, who, following indigenous exegeses, defy the dualistic opposition between soul and body and provide an image of proliferation "without ever revealing a fundamental interiority" (p. 261). The original, Fausto concludes, "is nothing other than the very capacity to be replicated," and—he adds—"a dead person ceases to be replicated (except as an effigy)" (p. 262).

I find Fausto's point mostly convincing and wish to take it up in order to suggest some further reflections that could take us in a slightly, but importantly, different direction, moving away from "replication" towards "repetition." I suggest that, if paid closer attention to, the principle of "repetition" (in the sense of Deleuze 1994) at work in Amerindian arts could shed light on the time-reckoning nature of image and artifact systems in this macro-region (see Fortis and Küchler 2021), avoiding the rather fixed opposition between prototype and replica. One of the implications of the book's argument, emerging from the ethnography of the Xinguano mortuary ritual, is that the *Quarup* effigy is the figuration of the impossible relation between the living and the dead, or better said, a relation that is impossible because of the spatiotemporal incommensurability between the lived experience of the former and the afterlife. The slippage between the effigy and the deceased at the core of the object affords the contemplation of the incommensurability of life and death, or the figuration of absence for Xinguano peoples (see Fortis 2012: 202–204 for a similar conclusion regarding Guna artifacts). This, from a human perspective, is chiefly a temporal relation.

While in some areas of Amerindian artistic production innovation and change are clearly privileged, such as in the graphic designs adorning bodies and woven artifacts, three-dimensional figurations of the type Fausto deals with, especially with regards to the *Javari* and Quarup rituals, tend to be rather standardized and resistant to change. Probably, as it emerges in the book, this has to do with the fact that these artifacts sit at the point of articulation between the world of human beings—with their mortal bodies—and that of spirits—with their transformational image-bodies. Ritual artifacts act as stoppages in the network of transformations that traverses the different domains of the cosmos, enabling human beings to extend their agency beyond the realm of the visual and the material, and by the same token have rhetorical efficacy vis-à-vis their kinspeople, affines and enemies. These effigies, behind their generic and sometimes rudimentary appearance, are a distillate of

deception and strategic action. While the author focuses on the former quality, it is to the latter that I wish to pay attention here.

Beyond the external temporality through which Fausto looks at these Amazonian artifacts—a view that takes into account their historical transformations through encounters with colonizers, missionaries, and other indigenous peoples—there are other images of time that emerge from within the artifacts themselves. These are the images of time that are generated by the artifacts and used by indigenous peoples to figure biographical relations and envisage and plan collective action. This is particularly evident in, but not limited to, the case of the intertribal rituals of the Upper Xingu, where the death of individual persons offers the occasion to contemplate intergenerational time and where intertribal relations are played out. In figuring death, these effigies point to the limits of the relation between individual living experience and the collective temporality of social life. By figuring the death of a single person, the Quarup effigy provides a means to contemplate genealogical relations extending back in time to the origin of humanity and, crucially, toward the future. The collective action surrounding the organization, preparation, carrying out, and conclusion of the festival—which peaks in the cutting, decoration, contemplation, and discarding of the effigies—revolves around what to me seems the problem of articulating different orders of temporality.

As Fausto hints at, the Quarup effigy is the future condition of every chief. After becoming a magnified person in life, the biography of a chief is celebrated by evoking both his predatory/jaguar-like and his caring/ancestor-like qualities. This life trajectory is condensed into the ritual effigy and only briefly offered to people to look at and to cry on. The nonidentity between the image of the deceased and its effigy is thus not knowable through a static interpretation that postulates an aesthetic incommensurability, but requires a view that takes the incommensurability of different orders of temporality into account. The life trajectory of an individual chief is by the same token flattened and expanded in time,

reaching back to ancestral time and affording social time to extend in the future. For however much Amazonian societies have been characterized as averse to genealogical thinking, Xinguano societies show a different picture, one where genealogical depth is clearly engaged with, reflected on and visually and materially figured. Its figuration presents us, however, with a nontrivial problem, which the author has grappled with through the image of the "asymptote," a curve that approximates but never touches a straight line. I am particularly intrigued by the view of time that this image mobilizes and would like to try a brief speculation. If we consider the straight line as the B-series, "real time," that Alfred Gell discusses in his book on time (1992), drawing on MacTaggart's definition, and the curve as the A-series, "subjective time," we could imagine another possible way to explore the problem. If the prototype is an original condition, which dead chiefs—and by extension everybody—returns to after death, an ancestral time that is both origin and destiny, the curve could represent the human collective condition, bound to individual mortal experiences but ever tending to the continuation of the social body. The Quarup, and the other ritual effigies studied by Fausto, not only articulate these different views of time, or time-beliefs as Gell would have it, but render their contemplation possible for people. It is the whole ritual process, culminating in mourning the dead and in discarding the effigies, that envisages the future through collective action, a future seen from a present that follows in a line of previous Quarup rituals, extending in the future through more Quarup rituals to come. Not much unlike the Maori meeting houses, described by Gell (1998: 251–58) as stoppages in the network of stylistic retentions and protensions, Quarup effigies provide maps to navigate time by generating images that match the perceptual experiences of biographical time, feeding forward collective experience, and affording a view of ancestral time, otherwise inaccessible per se to human experience.

The teacher's smirk that Fausto uses as an opening line for his argument—the response to the author's question about whether the object will turn into a spirit—conveys plainly that the Kuikuro know all too well that the image is and is not what it is an image of. This is much as the Bororo knew that they are and are not macaws—as Von den Steinen heard them saying—since "the Bororo-macaw identity is a destiny, not a present condition" (p. 266). However, I suggest the image of a collective destiny—like the one evoked by the Bororo in the late nineteenth century—and the image of an "objectified' spirit—evoked by the Kuikuro teacher—could be better represented by a series of undulations rather than by an asymptotic curve. This is where we might get rid of the rigid dualism of prototype and copy, and of the idiom of replication, and adopt instead one of frequency and repetition.

What we learn from the journey Fausto takes us through, from bodily trophies, through wind instruments and masks, to mortuary effigies, is that the human body is a constant point of reference of which images and artifacts can be an attenuation. How can the relations between artifacts, bodies, and images be envisaged outside the frame of prototype and replica? I will use here an analogy used by Lévi-Strauss in the 1950s (in Tax et al. 1953: 202), whereby he suggested that experiments in analogic image production then taking place in the television business may throw some light on the basic constituents of artistic production—i.e., on the opposition between drawing and painting. By modulating frequency bands, different types of images could be obtained. Namely, images generated by low-frequency bands only—cutting off high-frequency bands—would correspond to drawing. And vice versa, those generated by high-frequency bands only would correspond to painting. The former are the outline of images, the latter suggest their three-dimensional constituent, similar to chiaroscuro painting. Pushing further Lévi Strauss's thought experiment, I suggest that low-frequency band designs would correspond to the widespread graphic design styles, used as body decorations and applied to and woven in a variety of artifacts in Amerindian

lived worlds. Whereas high-frequency band images would correspond to the figurative, sculptural, or three-dimensional artifacts, of the type to which the Xinguano mortuary effigies correspond.

Frequency modulation seems an apt image to represent how the relations between objects, bodies and images are never static. The apparent motionless outer shell of ritual artifacts is in fact rather a stoppage on the scale of frequency modulations. Purposefully modulating towards high or low frequencies, Amerindian image and artifact systems generate different spacetimes. The kind of spacetime discussed in Fausto's book has arguably to do mostly with the high-frequency spacetime of spirits and the image doubles of the deceased, an other-than-human spacetime that vibrates in the background of human life, unperceived, unless during particular ritually controlled occasions. What the book speaks less about is the low-frequency spacetime of graphic designs, painted on the bodies of kinspeople to endow them with the capacity to master predatory forces, to make them human. This is a frequency that human beings can perceive—unlike that of spirits (see Viveiros de Castro 2007)—and it characterizes the spacetime that human beings aim to collectively re-create through everyday acts of bodily decoration and nurturance.

So, having substituted the asymptote for frequency modulation, we could finally suggest that the high-frequency spacetime that the ritual images in Fausto's book help navigate is in fact "the 'real' four-dimensional space-time manifold" inaccessible to human subjective experience that Gell talks about (1992: 239). This time can only be mapped, or represented, through the active role of objects and images, through which modulations in human experience are rendered meaningful. Instead of a never-ending trajectory on a line, the spacetime that Amerindian image and object systems help navigate, is one undulating between the biographical and the ancestral and able to incorporate the eventualities of

history, whereby, for example, the passage from bodily trophies to wooden effigies allows for a continuity of value creation processes (Munn 1992).

While fully onboard with Fausto's project, I therefore propose a more dynamic temporal dimension to tackle the obstinate yet fascinating problem of Amerindian aesthetic ontologies. Finally, I wish to conclude with one image from the book which beautifully encapsulates the inadequacy of categories such as prototype and replica. This is the Kuikuro term *akuãpe*, which the author translates as "replica that no longer possesses its prototype." This is indeed anathema to Western art regimes, so much based on the primacy of mimesis. But is it?! As Didi-Huberman (2005) has argued in respect of the white space at the center of Fra Angelico's *Annunciazione* in cell 3 of San Marco's Monastery in Florence, there is indeed space for the figuration of the unknown in art, if only we were able to withstand the anxiety its contemplation generates.

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