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MUSEUM REVIEW

The "Mangle" of Human Practice

Museu do Amanhã's Artistic Staging as a Socioscientific Narrative on Climate Change

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We are accustomed to museums full of heritage displays from bygone eras, helpfully "seriated" for the visitor to tell a story of linear human progress toward an "end": the great metanarrative of (Western) modernity. This is not so with the Museu do Amanhã (Museum of Tomorrow) in Rio de Janeiro. A joint public-private partner venture (by the City of Rio de Janeiro, the Roberto Marinho Foundation, Banco Santander, the British Gas Project, and the government of Brazil), the museum was conceptualized as a dark but open-ended narrative on climate change and the future of humanity.[1]

Designed by the renowned Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava to house artifactual and audiovisual displays produced by an international artistic contingent, including the American artist Daniel Wurzel and the Brazilian filmmaker Fernando Meirelles, the museum is meant as both Rio's 2016 Olympic Games touristic landmark and a narrativized innovation on cosmopolitan scientific practice.[2] As the museum's current Chief Curator Luiz Alberto Oliveira notes, the aim is to "offer a collection of possibilities to visitors" while also allowing space for the attraction and support of international researchers, and contributing to the formation, maintenance, and mobility of international scientific networks.[3] However, aspiring to add such

expert mobilities to the museum's projected international tourist flow tells only part of the story. As I proceed to explain, its innovation lies in its makers' effort to rearticulate scientific observation and social prognosis in an accessible popular cultural language through technological means. Such "schematization" involves the theatrical staging of whole epochal transitions for humanity in ways that criticize its propensity to inconsiderate environmental exploitation.

At first, it seems that this artistic-technological staging is narrativized linearly, because the museum's permanent exhibition is divided into five areas, each representing one epochal segment: Cosmos, Earth, Anthropocene, Now, and Tomorrow. Each segment adds to an ultrapessimistic "script" of left-wing undertones resembling a particular version of "dark tourism" as visitations to sites of disaster, death, and heritage,[4] but extends this to conceptions of a complete human-made death of nature, followed by the death of human societies. "Cosmos" and "Earth" involve narratives of both human and natural ecosystemic genesis, which nicely match the display of a Gaia-like globe at the museum's entrance. The ecofeminist aesthetic of these segments complements Calatrava's bright curvilinear design of the building, in which Christian ideas of Madonna with child are subtly embedded.[5] Mereilles's contributions are much darker and disparaging in scope, with film clips portraying all possible ways we kill our planet. The "Anthropocene," or era of immense human-imposed geological change resulting in global sociocultural and political transformations, is represented by audiovisual clips of ecological degradation, excessive consumption, and death, both locally and internationally. Further dystopian exhibits make their way toward interactive games that allow visitors to shape alternative futures, including calculating one's ecological footprint; how many planets are needed to support humankind if everyone on Earth had the same living standard; deciding on

energy sources, finance, and land usage to support or diminish humanity's survival prospects; and more (the "Now" for "Tomorrow"). But before visitors are placed in this role of future policy makers, they have to go through an area dominated by powerful images of human-nature interdependency: microbes, organisms, and flora. Their neovitalist undertones suggest that all energy flows through networks of life that transcend human life, admonishing visitors to stop placing themselves at the center of everything and join instead orchestrated movements stemming from nature.

Admittedly, moving through these areas is unsettling. However, nothing prepares visitors for the grand finale: a "Tomorrow" awaiting authoring. The final exhibit maintains the museum's ambivalent core attitude toward dystopian ecosystemic imaginaries by suggesting collective existential rebirth as the ultimate form of travel. So, holistic "rebirth" is achieved through a return to premodern values, symbolized in the wooden structure of an indigenous "house of knowledge," where communities share stories. In the center of the structure lies the Australian aboriginal tjurunga, a symbol of learning, fertility, ritual power, and the ability to cope with change, which befits Brazilian notions of resilience (gambiarra), coping, and well-being (buen vivir). This positive tonality is matched with light and sound adjustments in the hall every time visitors move as a reminder of how humans and their mobilities change the world around them. The aboriginal exhibit is intentionally open to interpretation, but its hermeneutics seem to gravitate toward the nonrational and the subliminal—hence, remain open to reworking—future imaginings. Its power to induce such ad hoc responsive action from visitors counters the conventional technoscientific hegemony we find in organizations. One may even argue that the exhibit is used as a form of decolonial allegory, because it turns its back on the Western scientific narrative, even though it employs it in its staging ("we are healed by ancient magic").

This ambivalence rests in the realization that we may want to improve things now, but our hopeful attitude is not equipped with the appropriate concepts and tools with which action can be taken to prevent the death of our common heritage: Earthly Nature. Indeed, despite its superficially retrospective linear tour, and in line with scientific controversies on practice, the overall artistic staging promotes an intersection of temporalities as they happen in our minds and hearts and not as dissected in laboratories. This "mangle" or perspectival platform on which science, technology, and society interact provides a "real-time understanding of [scientific] practice."[6] In other words, the museum's scientific simulation "for dummies" through the "tick of birth and the tock of death" we associate with apocalyptic genres, which provide a more accessible language by which to speak about scientific complexity.[7]

All in all, we may argue that the museum's designers attempt to mediate between mobile situations initiated by social behaviors and beliefs about climate change and their planning "from above" (technocracy and systems of consumption and automobility) by offering an opportunity to museum visitors to perform them, restage them "from below," thus potentially changing their course.[8] But it is worth noting that the building's inner structure blends nicely with the newly introduced mobilities of its outer surface and surroundings: the solar panels of its roofs to generate electricity where one previously found only piles of garbage; the long-stretching areas for walking and cycling around it by the port, where locals used to be confronted only with chronic flooding and sewage; and artistic education in place of crime and empty grounds abandoned to fortune. On this rare occasion, the joint forces of art, science, and technocracy suggest that death might be an essential precondition in utopian planning and imagining alternative pathways not just for the city of Rio de Janeiro, but the whole world.

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Notes

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