Abstract

In the development of authoritarian speech in Brazil in the 20’s and 30’s, the conceptions about technology played an important role. Several conservative utopias at the time raised the issue of technology. In those conceptions, there was a very clear view of technology and, in spite of their varied nuances, the belief in an authoritarian and corporative state, with a technocratic base, as a substitute of collective action.

Menotti Del Picchia participates actively in this debate, dialoguing on several levels with the thought of these conservative intellectuals. His own conceptions about the relations between technology and social change would be presented in a systematic way in the books *Crise da Democracia* (1931) and *Soluções Nacionais* (1938), and they were strongly shown in his novels. The objective of this text is to discuss two perspectives of this dialogue, presented in the utopian novels, *A República 3000* (1930), *Kalum* (1936), *Cummunká* (1938): the technological sublime and technology as a myth.
This work intends to analyze the representations of technology as components of the Brazilian modernist writer Menotti del Picchia’s conservative authoritarian discourse in his utopian novels *A República 3000* (1930), *Kalum* (1936) e *Cammunká* (1938).

The period between 1930-1938, when he wrote his “adventure novels”2, was, for Picchia, a moment of profound disenchantment with reality, as the Revolution of 1930, which dismantled the Old Republic in which he was involved (Picchia, 1972)³, aborted his promising political perspective. This context will probably help to explain the atmosphere of his utopian novels/fantastic novels. In Picchia’s words, it was through them that “I tried to free my spirit from these tragic episodes indulging myself to the voluptuousness of imagining absurd things that made sense, at least as hypotheses about a wonderful world” (Picchia, 1992:4).

What is constant in his novels is the presence of the authoritarian nationalist thought of the Right in its multiple aspects, developed in the first decades of the 20th century. The concepts about technology played an important role in the structure of the authoritarian discourse. In the different conservative utopias of the period, such as the *Fourth Humanity* of Plínio Salgado, or the *New Age* of Tristão de Ataíde, technology played an important role. Beired demonstrates that, in the case of Plínio Salgado, the criticism on capitalism was the same as the criticism on technical civilization, the “machine empire” (Beired: 131). In contrast, he praised the *Telluric Brazil*, emphasizing the role of agriculture. On the other hand, Tristão de Ataíde proved the inevitability of technical progress, exempting it from philosophy or politics (Beired: 138).

For Azevedo do Amaral, an ideologist of the New State, modernizing would mean adopting the irresistible model of Ford production, “industrialization should make us go through a superior step of economic organization as well as social and cultural progress”. What these three concepts have in common is the concept of a deterministic view of technology; the certainty of the impossibility of resisting to this overwhelming phenomenon of technology and, despite the different tones, the belief in an authoritarian and corporative state, of technocratic characteristic, as the substitute for the collective action. Such discursive and political practices would help the construction of the ideological basis to the New State, in 1937.

Menotti participated in this debate actively, sharing the concepts of these conservative intellectuals, but to different degrees. These views are expressed in the books *Crise da Democracia* (1931) and *Soluções Nacionais* (1938) in a systematic way, and are clearly evident in his utopian novels. In our analysis, the roles played by the technological sublime and the transmutation of technology into a modern myth in the proposal of a new conservative order will be emphasized.

### 1. Technology as Myth

Utopias enable a process of reinterpretation of social experience, helping authors to “articulate their social visions with greater clarity than

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2 When Bakhtin approaches the menippean satire theme – where the adventure novel and the utopian novel originate –, he reminds us that one of the peculiarities of the proximity of adventure novels and utopian novels would be the incorporation of “elements of social utopia, which are introduced in the form of dreams or trips to mysterious countries; sometimes the menippean satire directly becomes an utopian novel”. (Bakhtin 2002:118)

3 Menotti del Picchia was the political editor for *Correio Paulistano*, a PRP newspaper, and spokesman of the PRP (Picchia:1972)
in the discursive writing" (Kasson: 190). Therefore, these novels might be seen as a way of expressing a view of the social possibilities, at a moment of intense and bewildering political and social transformations, functioning as speculative myths (Kasson: 191, Frye: 56), as a “social life drama”, transforming history into poetry (Chevalier & Gheerbrant: 611).

Menotti del Picchia considered utopia “a mystic dream, where man confines his ideal of perfectibility” (Picchia, 1931:24), the ideal structure to seduce the “imaginative and sentimental” spirits. In this way, his novels consisted of political narratives, trying to seduce his imaginative youth public into the perception of the necessity of a conservative and authoritarian social-political structure, following the “mystic constancy law”:

by which humanity transfers their myths indefinitely so as to find the transitory pacification of their aspirations, operating this transference because of their irreducible dream of perfectibility. This movement is directly conditioned to the economical and social effects of the new positive discoveries. This means that there is a continuous and reciprocal influence between the social being determined by historical materialism and spiritual consciousness. (Picchia, 1935: 35)

In this way, the myth is established and produced in Menotti del Picchia’s utopias, working as a safe bridge in the turbulent social transition.

There is, for example, a dominating colossal golden statue of the Minotaur in the geometric city in República 3000. There is a glimpse of hell inside it, a horrendous view of the archaic “machines of the electricity civilization”. The factory spectacle is complete, in the frantic rhythm of the wheels, brutalizing, automatizing the “monsters” Capac and Maneco. The alienating work lives inside the mythical statue. The archaic and modern myths are joined in the same “race fetish”.

Ironically, the ritual time, typical of utopia, according to Frye, is recovered there, in the pure energy and science civilization, where religion consists of meditation and study, in the idolatry of the initial incognita, whose rituals are the scientific researches carried out in the laboratory altars. The Capac and Raymi sacrifices should be made at the feet of the Cretan idol, the perfect simulacrum of the Incan rituals, in a quasi-out-of-humanity civilization. The mythical violence is installed in the core of technology. In the civilized labyrinths, those uprooted by the historical evolution of technology feed the system.

In the novel Kalum, Elinor’s distopian city is encrusted in the mythical platonic cave, due to the fear of the other and nature denial, with its political and social organization leading to alienation. This is evident in the work and gender relationships. All the work is assigned to the men, who are kept extremely busy, making their bodies deformed and their spirits disenchanted, stimulating suicide and making it banal. A population of 200 men are opposed to a population of 2500 women. The women are exempted from any work, an activity that they hate, living frivolously and becoming extremely childish. They spend their time swimming, dancing,
doing gymnastics and boating in individual boats in the small internal lake of Elinor’s reign. The neglect of work changes into sexual repugnance for men.

Geographic abysses, spacial demarcations, mark the gender relationships: the men live in the labour city, with “different and asymmetric buildings”, where “dynamos whir”, and “engines gasp” and exhale gases and oils, “volatised by combustion”. This region is considered ‘infected and condemned’. On the other hand, the women live in the geometric city, in identical houses, “made of opaque metal, with sober lines”, and the streets are made of “asphalt of elastic consistency and without any cars”, a “dead city”, phantasmagoric, without any “monuments or circulation”.

Picchia gives an apocalyptic end to Elinor’s city, blamed of leaving history, dehumanizing when adopting an asymmetric form of work division and, specially, of losing scientific knowledge: the violent invasion of the Kurongangs, who, after destroying the underground population, die as a consequence of the destruction of the oxygen machines.

The simulacrum cannot be sustained without the vitality of the ideal model. Immersed in the utopian tradition again, Picchia opposes the resurrection of the Adam myth of primeval love, to the failure of the social and power structures, and the failure of the discourse with the evidence of impossibility of communication. Karl and Elinor, the only survivors of Elinor’s City tragedy, leave the platonic cave to see the light (Picchia, 1946:198). As a way to ease the pain caused by their sad memories, they drink the forgetfulness elixir, eliminating the “memory phantoms”, symbolically restoring the “psychic virginity”, becoming a “photographic plate ready to register the slightest impression”, in a new communion with nature. To invert the alienation, a passion perversion, the oblivious ingestion is suggested to restore the sublime love. The possible utopia is to plunge into the future in the archaeological quest for the ‘regression to the Divine Law’ in the reconstitution of full knowledge. (Ricouer: 493).

In the novel *Cummunka*, the Edenic myth is taken as a rearticulating instrument of order, when Picchia, in a romantic and conservative way, defends the harmony with nature, establishing a strong cleavage between the artificial and the natural. In his imaginary Xavante tribe, the wishes are connected with the simple satisfaction of material and spiritual necessities. In the consecration of nature, Menha is redeemed in the Eden Garden when he meets his Eva, Maria Rosa/Cendi, which refers us to the founding myth of the ‘Brazil-garden of Brazil-paradise’ (Chauí: 62) where technological development is not of vital importance, having to submit itself to the spiritual quietude.

This would not happen to the western civilization. This Faustian civilization is slaved to its own technical scientific creation. Thus, according to wise Indian Ambará, the rupture with the classical rhythm of life in that civilization would have happened because “the machine, created to be a passive slave to man, providing more comfort to him and saving him effort, was transformed into a mass executioner, as it was taken over by capitalism…” (Picchia, 1938: 173)
Ambará refers to Spengler – which is ironically heralded in the text by the philosopher Carrão, “The Old Wizard will quote Spengler” (Picchia, 1938:174) -, almost literally, “creation revolts against the creator. As before, the microcosm-man revolts against nature, as now the microcosm-machine revolts against the Nordic man” (Spengler: 160). If Spengler, in his reactionary modernism, tried to transplant the technology of the world of Civilization to the world of Culture, emphasizing the necessity of reconnecting technology and cosmic soul organically in the Kultur, Picchia, in his conservative modernism⁴, emphasizes the pessimism about technology, not holding out much hope for the classical order/political order rupture.

2. The technological sublime

The various dimensions of the sublime, especially the technological sublime present in Menotti del Picchia’s utopian novels, will allow a romantic dismantle of the socio-cultural convictions of their heroes through the creative rhetoric resource of terror, aiming at a re-dimensioning of their imaginary, in order to conform them, as well as their readers, to the modern conservative order.

In the novel A República 3000, the Brazilian forest and the city of República 3000 are the territories of history to be disclosed and conquered. When offering resistance and fascination simultaneously, the “inexplicable universe” of the forest arouses a feeling of sublime. Menotti del Picchia goes back to a certain Brazilian romantic tradition of the sublime landscapes, the inspirers of the utopias (Hardman, 1998; Bresciani, 2005).

The out-of-time jungle, in the lavish and powerful nature, imposes the sense of sublime to the sensitive conquering aesthete: “Fragoso stood in awe of the majesty of the Brazilian forest. He felt like a useless and humble thing, shoved aside as a dead branch on a leaved ground where, invisible to his eyes, the organic microcosm of millions of embrionarian lives agitated formidably and incomprehensibly”. The absence of parameters of the green immensity leads to the violent anthropomorphism,

(…) the massif of the Cyclopian clinch of trunks, in the sense of tragedy and battle of arms gripping arms, the impetuous treachery of urupéás clung to the mortal and pusillanimous parasitic surprises; the violence of attitudes; the victorious arrogance of the tallest stalks, frightened man. The acapu, the macaubá, the heroic cedar, the sapucaí, the copaiba, these Herculean warriors entangled with the bacuris, the peroba trees and the canaranas in the perpetual, always courageous fight. It was such violent strength that seemed to irradiate from their fibre muscles that the battle ended in a draw, balanced in the deaf statics of their posture, as if they had been galvanized by the own prodigies of violence. (Picchia, 1930: 47)

Time in the forest is incommensurable, the eternal repetition expressed in the anthropophagic ritual of the “savages”. Time is only demarcated in the acts of the ‘civilized’, in the slow pace of the expedition

⁴ For a discussion on the German reactionary modernism and Oswald Spengler see: Jeffrey Jerf. Reactionary Modernism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
in confrontation to the inhospitable environment, in Fragoso and Maneco's wild escape after interrupting the Indian ritual. The hero Fragoso faces a big *sambaqui*, which spreads over an immense valley, made of intriguing material remains: human skeletons from pre-history, brontosaurs, pumas, wild boars, eagles, condors, objects from different civilizations such as the Incas and the Cretans. In this case, the imaginary *sambaqui*, very similar to an upside-down archaeological museum, establishes a new feeling of stupor and sublime in the poetry of the ruins, which dismantles knowledge, relatives the historical evolution, demonstrates the building process of historical knowledge and exposes the absurd of time.

Only the penetration into the magical circle of the utopian city, when crossing the electric frontier, can re-establish certain logic in the turbulent time. The spectacle of the conquered civilizations that contemplate the insurmountable frontiers of technological utopia can only be understood in the imaginary place of utopia, where "the almost hallucinogenic sensation of being within the mystery, without being able to register and define the reality of the exterior world for lack of rumors to spot and attest its constant presence" predominates (Picchia, 1930: 72).

The feeling of illusion and imprisonment in the invisible, does not leave room to the feeling of the technological sublime immediately, despite the exhibition of the admirable technological and scientific advances of the República 3000. The feeling of the sublime is blocked in Fragoso by the expectations of what a future city would be like. The astonishment is caused by the lack of skyscrapers, cars and crowds in the anarchic confusion of the streets, the lack of airplanes and balloons across the skies, that is, “the mechanical complexity, which Fragoso considered to be progress, was nothing but an uncertain search of ways.” (Picchia, 1930: 86). The materialized artefacts are not those that “provide the feeling of the sublime beyond the symbolic, which leads beyond the anthropocentric measures” (Costa: 20). In this case therefore, the “temporary displacement of sensibility that forces the observer into a mental action” (NYE: 6), which provides the technological sublime, is only established in the feeling of terror, before the unexpected emptiness, the necropolis silence of the metallic city.

The sublime is also established in Fragoso's feeling of impotence through the control of his body and his willingness for the *telegenic* of the inhabitants of República 3000, a typical spectacle of the dynamic sublime pointed by Kant, the one "generated by the spectacle of a strength that does not fit the conventional measure standards" (Costa: 10). The sense of “annihilation of space and time’ before the “sublimity of technological progress” is only established in dematerialized technologies (Marx: 194). Here, the technology appears as ‘a new type of lethal menace, able to expropriate and oppress man, not only in the plan of sensibility, as it is for nature, but also in the mind. Therefore, technology seems harmful not only to what it concerns to feelings, but also to reason.’ (Costa: 22). Technology is terrifying to Picchia's romantic criticism.

This “sensibility collapse” causes an ephemeral “concentration of imagination”, however, at a second moment, with the re-establishment of

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1 For Burke, the feeling of astonishment is a component of the sublime, as for him the sublime does not cause “true pleasure, but a kind of pleasant astonishment, in a kind of quietude mixed with astonishment” (Burke, apud Costa: 21). Burke also remarks, “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible... is a source of the sublime... the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke apud Kasson: 166). In Kant, the sublime provokes a simultaneous feeling of attraction and repulsion, “it generates a negative feeling of terror or impotence, but, at the same time, a feeling of wonder, admiration and esteem: the sublime consists of living these two feelings simultaneously; the pleasure for the sublime is not possible but through some displeasure.” (Costa: 22)
the hero’s intellectual capacity, it leads to the questioning and perception of the social and political values relativity: “If these bizarre people’s material life was different, these differences would certainly have corresponded to other juridical and moral concepts. The ideas of liberty, tyranny, law and ethics are related to certain processes of life.” (Picchia, 1930: 100). The technological sublime provides Menotti del Picchia’s hero, in his impotence, with the perception of another possibility of political and social organization, which would be described to him as being anarchist and individualist. This perception is coherent with Picchia’s political conviction, presented in the Crisis of Democracy: “for the adjusting action of their elites, humanity ought always try to do a vigorous revision of the social values, making reforms in order to adapt their mentality for the utilitarian reality of their technical-scientific conquests.” (Picchia, 1931: 15-16)

In the novel Kalum, Picchia often refers to the images of phantoms, connecting them with the feeling of terror pertinent to the technological sublime. In this way, Karl Sopor, when captured by the Kurongangs, threatens to capture chief Kalum’s soul with the film camera if he does not want to release his fellows: “It is the machine that takes the spirits out of the body. I am able to take the spirits out of the body” (Picchia, 1946: 179). The threat of the human beings by technics, a characteristic of a certain type of the technological sublime, is used by Karl Sopor as a form of social control, as the Indian chief, taken by terror, becomes incapable of action. Contrary to Kant’s concept, the sublime does not prepare him to overcome his suspended feelings through his mental faculties for moral reaffirmation. In this case, the overcome only happens through violence.

The process of technical reproduction is totally clear in the constant threat of losing the aura, in the ‘reality shattered into phantoms that come back to torment the alive’ (Machado, 1997: 22), in the instantaneous process of life, which is already death, the double that emerges from the world of shadows. Picchia seems to urge the permanent dialog between technology and myth, already present in the origin of the cinema, in spectacles of shadows, phantasmagorias and magical languages. If this fantastic and mythical dimension seems to be referred by the author, on the other hand, he reaffirms the creative possibility of the human imaginary re-dimensioning through technologies, in the limits of fear and fascination. According to Arlindo Machado, in ‘all technical inventions, - mainly when they are inventions of ‘semiotic’ machines – there is always the emergency of an imaginary dimension, something like the obscure, passionate and anarchic side.’ (Machado, 1996: 35).

3. Conclusion

By articulating myth and technology, Menotti del Picchia is involved in a political debate essential to the authoritarian nationalist thought. In this struggling combat against decadent “democratic myths”, he raises, in his utopian novels, technology and science as important elements of a...
new mythological narrative, which proposes keys to the comprehension of the present while giving new meanings to the primeval myths, enabling a conservative order in the “perplexing chaos of facts and events”.

The innovating technologies of biopower in his utopias, such as the technical malthusianism or the aesthetic eugenics, the production technologies such as the machines for the earth volatilisation and the control technologies such as telenergy, converge to the construction of an imaginary inhabited by renovated technologies of self, adequate to the new civilizing stage. In this process, the resource to aesthetic elements like the sublime, consists in a technology of power, which intensifies the role of social mobilization of the myth (Girardet: 12-13).

Works Cited


