Technology and Visual Literacy in ‘Underdeveloped’ Contexts
A Case from 1920s Latin America

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1. Introduction

The presence of Fordist modernity in early twentieth century Latin American culture has been largely associated to technology as a motif: some texts and images make explicit references to planes, gramophones and skyscrapers; others attempt to recreate the perception of a person seated in a car in fast motion or suspended high in the air; some try to imitate the structure of a machine. Yet, Fordism wasn’t just an organizational motif, but a vast economic, social, and cultural system, one of whose defining elements was a set of organizational patterns that, while famously associated to the unifying design of the production process as a merging of tributary chains into bigger lines, extended well beyond the factory.¹ Those patterns can be easily recognized in the way many artifacts and structures, ranging from mechanical devices, to works of art, to institutions, were designed and/or produced in 1920s Latin America.²

This paper will analyze a car advertisement published in 1926 in the second issue of the Peruvian magazine Amauta, as an example of how Fordist patterns were adopted and adapted by local designers. Visual patterns were just one aspect of the cultural transformations usually referred to as “modernization,” a process that can also be described as Latin America’s way of accommodating to an international system of production and consumption designed mostly in North America and Europe. That single aspect was highly significant however, and it provides a vantage point for the study of broader social and cultural phenomena.

¹ Among the vast literature on the social and cultural aspects of Fordism, the studies by Tichi and Banta and the chapter on Fordism in Harvey have been particularly useful here. Banta and Tichi show how patterns originated in the field of management translated into other languages and spaces. An understanding of those translations is usually missing in the cultural analysis of Fordism originated within entrepreneurial studies, such as the otherwise remarkable contributions by David Gartman. Gartman’s most recent survey of the relation between Fordism and architectural aesthetics, for instance, presents Fordist influence on Modernism and aesthetic design mostly as a direct consequence of the material conditions of industrial production; such a perspective mostly ignores the semiotic mediations at work in every phenomenon involving two or more fields of production, such as the making of cars and of buildings—or, as it is at issue here, of advertising.
² Irigoyen, “Modelos”.
2. Between Mariátegui and Ford

The visual dimension of early twentieth century design required from its viewers a new visual literacy, one that in European and North American contexts was directly related to the sensorium of the urban, highly technologized environment closely related to the “Fordist” system of production-consumption. In contexts such as Latin America, artists and designers developed similar projects for audiences who hadn’t yet been fully exposed to the new technological experiences. For poets, presenting texts that were both poems and visual artifacts was not only a way of shocking the public, but also a way of educating their audience by teaching them what was often perceived as the visual literacy of modernity. In his recent book on Modernism, Peter Gay discussed the influence of dealers, museum authorities, and other mediators of avant-garde culture in a section titled “Middlemen as Pedagogues,” and in a way, it seems that some Latin American producers acted—and seen themselves—as a sort of pedagogues, indeed. In a region where Fordist technology was a foreign import, parachuted into society in the shape of ready-made appliances and devices, (as opposed to its gradual and more localized development in Europe and the U.S.), Latin American avant-garde artists and intellectuals sometimes played the role of interpreters of modernity.

Some advertisers seem to have had a similar function. While artists were divided between those “for” and those “against” the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of Fordist modernity, advertisement was mostly a showcase for it. But many cultural leaders, whether they were champions or critics of the social and cultural changes that were occurring, recognized that “modernization” was bringing with it a new visual language of its own, one that the public would have to learn. Various examples of Latin American visual poetry from the 1920s appear to help the readers/viewers to follow the poem in a way that contrasts with the less “user friendly” attitude of their European counterparts. What from an external point of view may be seen as a mere lack of sophistication (either from the part of the poet or of the audience), in the context of Latin American cultural history can be understood as one more episode in the long tradition of the artist and intellectual as mediator and/or educator. This tradition extends from the literary works of the early days of Independence (such as Andrés Bello’s famous 1826 poem, “Agriculture in the torrid region”), to the figure of the intellectual as politician that was so significant in the XIXth century, to the influence of the “engaged” artists and intellectuals of the XXth century, of which few were as widely and lastingly respected as José Carlos Mariátegui.

A prominent communist and defender of native American rights, Mariátegui was one of the leading Latin American intellectuals of his time. In 1926 he founded the magazine Amauta in Lima, which soon became one of the region’s most influential publications both within leftist and indigenous movements, and within the avant-garde cultural milieu. Mariátegui advanced plurivocal, non-uniform models of social organization, which he described in his texts, applied in his editorial decisions in Amauta, and supported in his political activism. In all these areas he aimed to integrate diversity in forms that were explicitly opposed to the Taylorist-Fordist “one best way” and sympathetic to the aesthetic avant-gardes. He pointed out, for instance, that ‘the best method for explaining and translating our times [into writing] is, perhaps, a method part journalistic and part cinematographic,’ an observation that refers to the distinction between words and images and between reporting facts and (re)creating stories, but also between the paradigmatic axis that links the different texts in a newspaper and the syntagmatic axis of a running movie. He proposed a way of “translating” things (rather than communicating them), that involved simultaneously a bit of journalism and a bit of filmmaking, and he put it to practice by writing texts as well as by editing magazines (that is, organizing sets of texts and images).

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3 Gay, 87-100.
4 Within the literary avant-garde, this seems to be a distinctive feature of the Latin American production; one similar case from the U.S.-European environment is Ezra Pound (Golding, 86-106).
5 For a discussion of Mariátegui’s relationship with, and opposition to, Fordism, see Irigoyen, ‘Modelos’, ch. 5.
6 Mariátegui, La Escena Contemporánea, 11.
A reader of Gramsci and one of the first Latin American intellectuals to have discussed “The case and theory of Ford,” Mariátegui was highly aware of what Fordism meant within international capitalism. He was also fully aware that patterns of organization affect not only material technology but are cultural models that have wide and deep influence in society; this was a major reason why he paid a close attention to the visual dimension of Amauta, which in turn made of the magazine one of the most significant showcases of avant-garde visual arts in the region. In this light, the publication of a prominent and costly full-page advertisement from Ford that appeared in the second issue of the magazine, seems to have important implications. In this paper, I will focus on some of the formal aspects of the advertisement, in order to understand the ways and models involved in the production and the “reading” of this image.

Since Fordist patterns (a dimension of Fordism at large), were to a certain extent an “imported” phenomenon in Latin America, scholars tend to assume there is nothing new or particular about them, just as Mariátegui could be seen at first glance as merely an “importer” of Communism and other “foreign” ways of thinking to the Andes. It is true that “technology” often times was merely a motif or, as Mirko Lauer has described in the context of Peruvian avant-garde literature, a “mechanical muse” that mostly inspired naive imitations. However, these recreations often produced results that were significantly different from what was (supposedly) being copied. As Beatriz Sarlo has pointed out, in 1920s Latin America bricolage and “garage inventions” were not just hobbies: machines and procedures were being used in contexts and for needs that frequently were not foreseen by the original inventors, making it crucial even for common users to creatively diverge from what the users manual established.

This is true of the ubiquitous cars, machines, and appliances, but also of the cultural dimension of Fordism. While studies in visual arts have discussed extensively the regional and local peculiarities of Latin America’s take on modernity, the development of new visual patterns in places such as advertising has been much less studied. However, their impact may have been considerable in a region where, as Mirta Varela has pointed out, media seem to have filled “the void left by political institutions,” serving, among other things, “to standardize national language, to introduce urban habits in rural areas, to spread social models and different ways of marking social distinctions.”

3. National allegories and advertisement design

By the third decade of the century an “alternative ‘leftist’ circuit” had developed in Peru, as part of the first wave of globalization in the country. Advertisements, announcements, letters, and logos had a significant place in those publications, but accounts of Peruvian and Latin American culture and society have paid little attention to them. They are, however, a useful tool for understanding how some Latin Americans were reacting to Modernity, or rather, producing its own version of it. In the following paragraphs I will study a full-page advertisement of Ford that includes two different cars: the emblematic Model T and a luxury Lincoln (a brand Ford had acquired in 1922).

7 That’s the title of an article Mariátegui published in 1927 in the Lima magazine Variedades (Mariátegui, Defensa, 151-154).
8 Lauer, 45.
9 Sarlo, 87-108.
10 Varela, 88.
11 Zevallos-Aguilar, 275. Between 1923 and 1928 Peruvian newspaper and magazines doubled (Beigel, 21; see also López Lenci, 27-38).
12 Zevallos-Aguilar, 276.
13 Amauta, I:2, 3. (fig. 1)
According to a first hand account, Latin American car ads in the 1920s could either be reprinted from originals sent from the U.S. (fig. 1) or be created locally (fig. 2), “typographically in the newspaper workshop.” While the origin of the ad analyzed here is yet to be established, it seems to have been designed in Lima. Its most significant feature is the inclusion of two cars that were aimed at very different target markets and, accordingly, usually advertised separately and in very different ways. Car ads used to stress either the status and comfort of luxury vehicles or the convenience and reliability of the less expensive models. The merging of two products that ‘should’ stay strictly separated is a good example of how both the material structure and the symbolic status of “imported” stuff could be adapted for local uses. This decision, probably taken in order to lower advertising costs, leads to the reuse of images and probably texts from previous ads. As Sarlo and others have said of the “garage inventors” and bricoleurs, the designers built a new structure using materials they had on hand.

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14 Duarte, n/p. Whether ads should or should not be individually crafted for separate countries was a matter of constant debate in the U.S. trade press during the 1920s. By the end of the decade and especially after the 1929 crisis, the prevalent choice was “pattern advertising”: ads were produced in the U.S. and, with slight adaptations, would serve for any country (Merron, 496-498). However, “the standardization-adaptation controversy” has dominated discussions on international advertising ever since (Hill; Hanni, 83).

15 Unfortunately, there seems to be little data and very few studies of U.S. automobile advertising in Latin America, or anywhere outside the U.S. and Europe, during the 1920s (Merron, 466 n1). The following people provided me with information on Peruvian advertisement from the 1920s: Desiree Taboada (Dimension Media Corp.), Vanessa Diaz Llontop (Quórum Nazca Saatchi & Saatchi), Miriam Sattler (Feedback Publicidad & Marketing), Daniel Robles (APAP), and Alfredo Goitre.

16 In Perú, as elsewhere, Ford was “the people’s car.” The previous issue of Amauta (September 1926), included “Situation of Lenin (Poem with several sides),” a work by avant-garde writer Alberto Hidalgo that depicts humanized (proletarian) Fords laughing at Rolls Royces, (as they could had made at Lincoln’s [Hidalgo, 3]).
En las aristocráticas avenidas, en los malos caminos, los productos de la FORD MOTOR COMPANY Rinden el máximo de eficiencia

LINCOLN

PUREZA DE LINEAS
PERFECCION MECANICA
CARACTER
ELEGANCIA
LUJO, CONFORT
INIMITABLES

BAJO COSTO
FUERTE
PODEROSO
PASA POR TODOS LOS
OBSTACULOS
EL AMO DE LAS CARRETERAS NACIONALES

A. C. SHUMWAY & CO. S en C.
EDIFICIO MINERIA -- TELEFONO 2440
Agentes en las principales ciudades del Perú

Fig. 1. Advertisement. Amauta, I:2 (Lima, October 1926), 3, full page.
Traditional graphic advertisements usually included a heading, a body of text, the signature line (i.e. the brand or company name), the practical information, and one or more illustrations that may have different roles and establish different relationships with the text. In our example, the heading reads:

On the aristocratic avenues, on the bad roads,
the products of the

FORD MOTOR COMPANY
Deliver maximum efficiency

Below the heading, on the left, are two illustrations, each accompanied by text on the right side. In the lower part of the ad is the signature (the name of the Peruvian importer), and the practical information.

Headings may serve as a presentation and/or a synthesis of the ad. The ad starts by locating the Ford vehicles, as well as the readers and itself, in the territory (“On the aristocratic avenues, On the bad roads.”) Here, ‘Ford’ is not a car brand but a company name. The piece does not utilize the customary Ford logo. Instead, the solid letters ‘FORD MOTOR COMPANY’ appear, dominating the heading. The ad occupies one of the most valuable spaces within the magazine, and possibly most expensive one, (the first right page), a place usually reserved to publicize expensive and/or sumptuous products. The unlikely meeting of the Lincoln and the Model T on the surface of the page may be understood, then, in at least three different but related ways: as an unusual strategy to bring down costs, (a sort of “2 for the price of 1” ad), as an example of the 1920s inclination for juxtaposition and collage, and as the material and symbolic construction of a space under the aegis of the Ford Motor Company. This space refers not only to the ad itself, but also to the page, and to the Peruvian territorians as a whole, from “aristocratic avenues” to “bad roads.”

The name of the Peruvian distributor, at the bottom, occupies the place usually reserved for the Ford logo. Symmetric to the company name on top, it anchors the ad in Peru, referring first to its Lima headquarters and then, in the last line, to their ‘Agents in the main cities of Peru.’ In non-U.S. and non-European ads, bottom or near-bottom lines were usually the place where the link between the “foreign” and the “local” was established. In this case, this is done through one of the most common images of Latin America’s relationship to modernity: modernity as a (foreign) force spreading over the nation (first arriving to the capital and then extending throughout the whole country). In other places, technology was grounded to (local) soil in a different way; in Australia and New Zealand, for instance, it seems to have functioned by identifying the local space as (part of) the space of production: the bottom or near-bottom line usually stated that the cars were “British” or that they were produced in the British Empire.

Between the heading and the signature, two images and their corresponding texts are displayed. While visually the four elements form two parallel columns, semantically they organize themselves in rows, each text relating to the contiguous image. A similar ambiguity can be seen in

17 Gieszinger, 10 (similar descriptions can be found in other sources). If we analyze the whole ad as an image, these aspects correspond to what social semioticians call the image’s organization or composition; or the compositional “metafunction” (Aiello, 91-92; Kress).
18 Gieszinger, 53.
19 Whose most famous verbal statement is probably in the Surrealists’s appropriation of Isidore Ducasse’s 1869 image: “the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella” (Ducasse, 217).
20 Understanding—and working with—the page as a space or surface where content was to be displayed was a central feature of both avant-garde poetry and advertisement in the 1920s.
21 The same is the case for the only South African ad examined for this paper, a 1932 announcement of General Motor’s Chevrolet (Merron, 488, see also 490). The difference does not seem to be due to a lack of assembly plants in Latin America: Ford (as well as GM) had factories in several countries of the region.
one of the most famous manifestos of 1920’s design: Le Corbusier’s comparison of contemporary cars and ancient Greek temples (fig. 4). Reading the manifesto as a text (line by line, page by page), the pages follow a chronological order: the left page contains earlier examples of a temple and a car, while the next one contains later examples of the same design standards. But what dominates is the visual setting, which leads us to see the double page as a set of two Greek temples on top and two cars at the bottom (which is actually Le Corbusier’s main point here: the parallel between ancient temples and modern cars), the text seemingly filling the spaces in between. In both cases, then, the visual organization seems to create an order (buildings and vehicles appearing as two parallel rows in the European example, images and texts appearing like two parallel columns in the American one), which establishes a tension with the actual reading, that proceeds line by line and from left to right.

Although the tension, (or the ambiguity) is similar, the results are not. Le Corbusier’s piece keeps a strong symmetry, both horizontally and vertically, producing a solid square effect. In the ad, the attempt to make the most of the page leads to an accumulation of elements: words, phrases, and images seem to compete for space, and the texts describing each car seem compressed between the dominant images and the border line. On the whole, however, what dominates is verticality: the central section works like a column that links the heading and the signature, as if they were a pediment and a base.

Between the aerial frontispiece and the base, a space is constructed. And within it, a vision is displayed. As was often the case in Latin American discourses on modernity, technology is presented as a creation, something produced by a paramythical figure, (be it a legendary inventor, a distant country or an imposing company) that descends from the air and spreads over the territory. Images such as this dominated the Latin American political imagination for centuries. Under the Spanish rule, the king’s power was celebrated in official ceremonies as the sunlight that arrives and gradually covers the four cardinal points of his territories. The figure was reproduced by different

22 First published in the magazine *L’Esprit Nouveau* (10 [Paris, 1923], 1140-41), the article became widely known after its inclusion in Le Corbusier’s 1923 book *Towards an Architecture.*
means, from visual images to acts where the king’s portrait or flag was displayed in a procession or even taken on a horse ride, as a way of materialize what was seen as the king’s “presence” (and domain) over the territory. Newly independent states often substituted the king’s figure with some of their own, such as the “sun of May,” still an official image of sovereignty in some Spanish American countries. A similar imaginary can be recognized in the presentation of technology, and modernity at large, as descending and then spreading over the surface as an unstoppable force—one that swallows or makes vanish under its flow everything that was previously there.

The two cars presented in succession, as well as the ad itself, can be read in terms of a movement that encompasses the whole space—both that of the ad and that of Peru: from “the aristocratic avenues” to “the bad roads,” from the first attribute of the upper Lincoln (its universal and classic “Purity of lines” (“Pureza de líneas”)), to the territorialized dominance of the Model T (“The master of national highways”). The territory appears as dominated and transformed by the ubiquitous “products of the Ford Motor Company.” The surface of the ad seems to work as a correlate of the national territory, according to an “allegoric” association which was one of the dominant narratives of Latin American national discourses during the XIXth century and well into the next one. Several geographers have pointed out that “space [is] embedded with politics and ideology, both real and imagined, which afford space with a conceptualization of power” and “produced and reproduced by human agency, in line with ‘local’ situations and responses to apparently more general (structural) conditions.” In Latin America, in particular, the “contestation for space,” (the discussions on the right to occupy it, the struggle to control it) has been a stage where competing social forces have constantly met.

4. Subalterns and alternatives

Towards the early 1920s, the “[North] American school” of advertisement, following Taylorist and Fordist models of organization and management, started to organize ads according to the different steps that could lead the consumer to buy the product. In Latin America, however, advertisement seems to have been dominated by earlier French models, and could be viewed as backward. From a merely technical point of view, the Amauta ad is poorly designed: its visual organization is schematic and yet rather confusing, attention lines and reading paths cross and interrupt each other, dispersing the attention rather than focusing it in a single idea or stimulating a psychological process. From a cultural point of view, however, the ad may be described differently. By juxtaposing attributes usually displayed in separate ads, such as the athletic or the sublime, on the one hand, and the powerful or utilitarian, on the other, the piece operates a sort of Eisensteinian “collision” where the montage of elements from two separate environments or narratives produces a third, new meaning, which arises from the conflict itself. In Latin American advertisement of that time, non-unified and discontinuous (pre-Fordist) organizing principles dominated, serial and parallel (Fordist) structures being still rare (figs. 5 & 6). The case considered here may be seen as a rudimentary application of modern design patterns, but also as a local, hybrid development. In short, the difference can be read, as is so often the case, both as “subaltern” and as “alternative.” Patterns and models applied in different contexts and for different uses than those they were originally designed for may lead to results that can be both deficient and creative, less

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23 This is the thesis of one of the most influential studies of XIXth century Latin American novel (Sommer). Similar allegoric readings have been also made of spatial symbols such as paintings, public spaces, stage and street performances, etc. (Irigoyen, La patria).

24 Jones, 1-2.

25 Jones, passim.

26 Eguizábal, 294-295. See also Gieszinger, 12-13.

27 Variedades, XXII:956 (Lima, 6/26/26), 2.

28 La Pluma, I:1 (Montevideo, 1927), n/p.

29 Variedades, XXII:952 (Lima, 5/29/26), n/p.

30 El Hogar, XXIII:899 (Buenos Aires, 1/7/27), 52.
succesful in the sense the were originally imagined, and more succesful in other, unforeseen ways. In this light, local bricoleurs may remind us of what literary theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari have called ‘minor literature’.\textsuperscript{31} they use a “major” (usually imperial) languages in “minor” (sometimes original) ways.


**Works Cited**


\textsuperscript{31} Deleuze and Guattari, *passim*. 


