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Everyday Fashions, Urban Modernities & Unpolished Photographs:
Claude Lévi-Strauss' Snapshots of São Paulo, 1935-7
It is 1937 and a dark-haired woman in a horizontally striped, simple modern dress cut below the knee strides purposefully across the bustling Avenida João in central São Paulo (Figure 1). Her streamlined ensemble is accessorized with black sandals and a neat felt hat. She gazes intently at the photographer whilst holding her young daughter tightly in her arms. Dressed all in white, the child looks beyond her mother’s shoulder, fixing, not by the noisy motorcars rushing past and the sensation of speed that they incite, but by another pedestrian, who is wearing a dark hat and is almost entirely obscured from the viewer by her mother’s figure. The child’s father, to her right, wears a single-breasted loose-fitting dark suit with a chequered tie over a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The image is a product of a given medium, be it photography, painting or video, and also as a product of ourselves, for we generate images of our own (dreams, imaginings, personal perceptions) that we play out against other images in the visible world.1 Hans Belting, An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body (Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 2.

This has led Martin Lister to make a distinction between the time ‘in’ and the time ‘of’ a photographic image. Whilst the former refers to the specific moment of exposure that is centred on the camera technology and the temporality which invests a photograph in the instance of its making, the latter refers to the time of photographs as physical objects in the world, how we put photographs to use and ascribe certain meanings to them. Martin Lister, ‘The Times of Photography’ in Time, Media and Modernity, ed. E. Keightley (London: Palgrave 2012), pp. 45-68.

1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques, 1955


5 Sarah Cheang worked upon this definition of fashion at a paper delivered at the Courtauld Institute of Art on 19th June 2017, entitled ‘Transnational Fashion History: Some Problems in Chineseness’.


new regime of then-President Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945; 1951-1954), who responded to those transformations by fashioning their identities in and for the city. This single photograph enables us to engage with new interpretations of what it might mean to ‘be modern’ in São Paulo and to consider how certain mindsets, which frequently advocated identities that were white and European, were repeatedly used for regarding phenomena or moving pictures. It entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image. If we are to watch this particular photograph then, what layers of meaning might we seek to unfold? Firstly, who are these anonymous yet stylish Paulistas, presumably a part of the new metropolitan bourgeoisie who had fashioned themselves from coffee wealth, and were keen to distinguish themselves in dress, behaviour and perspective from the rest of Brazil?10 How did the medium of photography, as a modern visual technology, capture the contemporary Paulista experience of urban modernity and new patterns of consumption centred on luxury goods imported from Britain and France, which were still understood to be the centre of ‘civilisation’? To what extent did the camera bear witness to a specifically Brazilian experience of modernity, which was coloured by the violence and enduring influence of colonialism, but also provided room for deviation from a European model, as consumer items from abroad were necessarily adapted to suit local tastes?11 What is the complex fabric of relations between those involved in the photographic act: the photographer subject, the photographer and the contemporary spectator? Finally, what additional meanings are encoded within this photograph when we are informed that the photographer was a 26-year-old Lévi-Strauss, who in 1934 was invited to teach Sociology at the University of São Paulo?12

This image forms part of a series of 44 original photographic negatives that were captured by Lévi-Strauss in São Paulo between 1935 and 1937.13 Lévi-Strauss’ enquiring documentation of urban, everyday life in São Paulo — the wealthiest and most industrialised state in all of Brazil — records a transitional phase in the history of the city, which he recalled in his celebrated travel narrative and memoir Tristes Tropiques (1955).14 A selection of these photographs were published for the first time sixty years later in the rare photobook edited by Lévi-Strauss entitled Saudades de São Paulo (1996).15 As has been well documented, Claude and Dina Lévi-Strauss travelled to Brazil in 1935 as part of a small cohort of young French academics invited to help establish the newly founded University of São Paulo.16 For Lévi-Strauss, as Thomas Skidmore articulates, ‘the job in Brazil meant that, with any luck, he would get to do his initial fieldwork among Indians. It would be his first ethnographic experience, his initiation into the discipline of anthropology.’17 A little-known photograph published in Saudades de São Paulo, captures an elegant Dina Lévi-Strauss sporting a knitted, button-up cardigan with puffed sleeves, a belted knee-length pencil skirt and a matching hat. The outfit seems somewhat at odds with the rural Brazilian setting, which sees the subject tentatively crossing a precarious-looking bridge comprised of a tree trunk, observed by the French historian Fernand Braudel, geographer


2 By the mid-nineteenth century, the coffee boom in Brazil had dramatically shifted the political and cultural identity of the province of São Paulo. This intense economic and demographic change prompted a renewed regional identity and an emerging middle class in the city who identified as white, affluent and “European” — in direct opposition to Brazil’s northeast, São Paulo’s racial “Other”.


5 Vivian Schelling and James Dunkerley, eds., Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America, (New York: Verso, 2000). This edited collection of essays explores the different manifestations of what is understood to be a specifically Latin American experience of modernity.


7 A selection of these images can be viewed online at ‘Claude Lévi-Strauss,’ Instituto Moreira Salles, accessed August 15, 2020, https://ims.com.br/titular-colecao/claude-levi-strauss/.


10 Luciana Martins has shed light on Dina Lévi-Strauss’ contribution to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ visual archive of Brazil, exploring her role in the making and presentation of their ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil. There is no substantial evidence, however, to suggest that she played a key role in the production of these images taken in São Paulo.


12 Pierre Monbeig and philosopher Jean Mauguié. The men are equally dressed in what appears to be an array of modern, casual ensembles adapted for the “primitive” Brazilian wilderness, yet still maintaining some semblance of the “civilised” European city. These photographs reiterate the significance of fashion as a visual marker of modernity, which travelled from France to Brazil and enabled a sense of efficiency and discipline to be recreated on arrival. They are also a potent reminder of the Eurocentric perspective in dress, mindset and attitude that these young academics are likely to have fostered on their arrival in Latin America, which invariably coloured to some degree their perception of Brazil and Brazilians. Nevertheless, Mark Sealy reinforces the insightful point that whilst photography functions within a ‘slippery matrix of colonial power’ — one which necessitates that we acknowledge Lévi-Strauss’s power and privilege as a white European who had travelled from the ‘centre’ to the so-called “periphery” — we must not discount the potential for images to be read against the grain and to provide ‘other ways of seeing’.16

13 The Lévi-Strausses’ arrival in Brazil as part of a transnational programme of cultural exchange must be contextualised within the specific context of the French-Brazilian ‘special relationship’ which dates to the mid-sixteenth century.17 France’s failed attempt to colonise terrain in Latin America and create France Antarctique evolved into a pursuit of cultural hegemony in the region that found fertile breeding ground in Brazil, which imported French luxury fashion and consumer goods.18 The opening of the English department store, Mappin, in São Paulo in 1913 attested to urban modernisation and the emerging consumer desires of bourgeois middle-class Paulistas, who sought luxury goods from afar and which to fashion their metropolitan identities. São Paulo had benefited from a new bourgeoisie founded on coffee wealth, as well as a huge influx of immigrants from north-eastern Brazil, Italy, Spain, Germany and Japan: a body of labour who facilitated the reshaping of urban modern life. During a period of intense industrialisation and modernisation, the city rapidly transformed from a modest seat of coffee and agricultural production to Brazil’s industrial and financial centre.19 The resulting photographs taken by Lévi-Strauss nevertheless provide unique insight into the contradictions of a Brazilian modernity poised between the Old World and the New World, the past and the future, whilst illuminating how different representational modes reconfigure our understanding of fashion. While the young academic’s camera captured newly built neighbourhoods, avenues, skyscrapers, modern transportation networks such as the camaro (the urban trolleybus) and emerging patterns of consumption in the form of restaurants, cinemas, cafes and shops, he also documents cattle wandering through the streets, laundry drying on makeshift lines hung in dirt courtyards in the shadow of Modernist blocks, crumbling Belle Epoque façades and general urban detritus. Despite the clear influences of modernity and industrialisation, São Paulo in 1935 was clearly still, as Emmanuel Loyer emphasises in her biography of the anthropologist, “raucous, many-sided and seemed as if it were unfinished, as attested to by the photos he took with his Leica camera.”20


15 Skidmore, “Lévi-Strauss, Brandel and Brazil”.

16 As Edward A. Riedinger has acknowledged, France’s desire to become ‘the leader of the Latin cultural world’ was augmented by the opening of the port of Rio de Janeiro in 1808, which paved the way for the importation of French customs and manners [. . .] Architecture and interior design [. . .] Banking, luxury retailing, elite social and culinary manners, and leisure indulgences’. Riedinger, ‘The Development of Brazilian Studies in France’ in Historia, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos, 8, no. 2 (2001), pp. 439-453.

17 Andrade, “Mappin Stores”.


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As a distinct body of work, they stand out for their unfinished nature and the resulting surface variations that arise from technical deficiencies including blur, light leaks, badly exposed images. All of these 'problems' add to the patina of the resulting images and highlight the very material nature of the photographic medium that feels so fitting to the representation of fashion. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss spoke of his frustration with 'the physical and mechanical constraints of the camera', which provided the photographer with restricted options for omitting data from the outside world, especially when compared to the artist's ability to synthesise and edit unwanted elements, and when taking into account the sensitivity of film, the number of subjects possible, the lighting, and the angle of view. His photographs stand as a fascinating record of what can often be easily overlooked, thus acting as a conduit to the lived sartorial experiences of everyday Paulistas. They are especially interesting since they counter the popular view that modernity in Brazil was driven entirely by bourgeois, middle-class experiences that looked to Europe and sought to recreate this in the Tropics; rather, we see how immigrants and workers from a broad spectrum of society engaged with fashion, sometimes getting it a little bit wrong as they negotiated the old alongside the new, the local with the foreign. A tantalising example can be seen in two separate photographs of young men (Figures 2 + 3), both of whom are walking alone in busy São Paulo, their outfits clearly informed by fashionable 'lookes', yet their demeanours suggesting a slight awkwardness or discomfort in their new attire — possibly a tentativeness or hint of reserve in response to the newness of modernity and the prying gaze of Lévi-Strauss' camera.

The Lévi-Strauss photographs are distinguishable for their complexity and materiality amidst a much larger visual archive documenting fashion and urban modernity in São Paulo in the first half of the twentieth century. In the documentary film São Paulo, Sinfonia da Metropole (1929), for example, Hungarian filmmaker Adalberto Kemeny and Rudolf Lustig emphasised the dynamism of a thriving metropolis undergoing a period of accelerated growth and industrialisation. By experimenting with unconventional camera angles and unusual camera movements, and the use of anonymous individuals on the street as protagonists — as can be seen in a film still of two elegant women shopping in carefully coordinated sporty ensembles and neat cloche hats, who turn to directly meet the camera's gaze — the directors capture the excitement of modern urban life and its everyday flows of pedestrians and vehicles against a backdrop of factories and skyscrapers, all presented in the fictitious time span of a single day in the life of the city. Strikingly, as Christina Meneguello has argued, the film 'avoids any representation of the rusty outskirts of the city [and, in addition] refuses to represent nature, which appears only in its domesticated form, like in the pleasant gardens where a romantic couple takes a stroll.' São Paulo, Sinfonia da Metropole thus presents a polished, powerful and modern vision of the city and its inhabitants, employing the medium of film to emphasise the speed and intensity of modernity as a linear, temporal progression into the future. A similar vision of polished modernity is evident in the photographs produced by Swiss-born photographer Hildegard Rosenthal, for instance, in São Paulo in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In one of her photographs, a stylishly dressed woman at the head of a queue of people wears slingback sandals and a pleated dress, waiting to board the streamlined bus. The modernist lines of fashion and vehicle, smooth and simple, exemplify Rosental's rational approach to documenting a bustling city, seemingly devoid of dirt and rubbish. This approach, as well as the sense of potential and movement, is also exemplified by Thomaz Farkas' cinematic configurations of the São Paulo urban imaginary and its inhabitants.

In contrast, a slightly overexposed photograph (Figure 4) taken by Lévi-Strauss on the Largo do Paipandu, in the historical centre of São Paulo, where the Nossa Senhora do Rosario church can be spotted on the left-hand side, enables us to see clearly his more nuanced vision of modernity. In the centre of the frame, a little blonde-haired girl with her back to us stands on the chequered pavement wearing white sandals, a dress with a ruffled collar and pom-poms, and a tall pointy hat. It is clearly carnival and assorted crowds in summer dresses, white linen suits and darker suits cross the road junction in various directions, injecting a sense of dynamism into the scene. A woman in the foreground wears black heeled shoes, sheer tights, a black suit with an elaborate brooch, a white lace blouse and a string of pearls. In her right hand she carries her handbag and a pair of gloves. We can't see her face, which is obscured by her hat. A man behind her is stationary, dressed in a tie, fedora. A family of African descent with the mother in a dark robe, accompanied by her children in matching floral summer dresses, and a toddler in a striped playsuit, grasp the viewer's attention. Most enigmatic of the group is the young boy dressed in tailored shorts, a pale shirt and white socks with flip-flops, who turns to confront the camera. The architecture of the scene combines modernist blocks clad with scaffolding in a state of construction and Belle Époque buildings, palm trees and a tangle of electricity wires working their way across the top of the image. Rubbish is scattered on the clean, rational lines of the chequered pavement, whilst a stall selling pineapples occupies the centre of the frame. The sign for the municipal hotel, at the time one of the most elegant hotels in São Paulo, is clearly visible on the corner of Avenida São João where it joins Conselheiro Crispiniano. Lévi-Strauss' Leica camera, once again, has captured every indiscrimate detail, acting not so much as an agent of modernisation as an eyewitness to its contradictions and problematising the story of modernity by underlining how acceleration and modernisation were inevitably cross-processed into identity and sartorial invention. As a result, the film and negotiate the very material nature of the photographic medium — specifically that its indexicality, as Roland Barthes emphasised in Camera Lucida, fixes a singular and repeatable moment in time — by reminding us instead of the complex fabric of relations, meanings and temporalities that are woven into any image. By presenting an uncanny synchronously
of past, present and future, his photographs of the urban imaginary constitute a rich resource for the fashion historian since they inhabit, in much the same way that fashion does, ‘a curious affinity with unorthodox models of time’, as Caroline Evans and Alessandra Vaccari have pointed out. We are presented with an alternative perspective beyond that of Europe, and a means to recognise the cultural and historical significance of fashion as an embodied form of identity construction through which individuals and groups throughout the world present themselves in that world. This is especially pertinent given how accustomed we have become, particularly in histories of Latin American fashion, to discussing Brazilian reliance on a European (predominantly French) fashion system. In Lévi-Strauss’ photographs, we gain a different perspective, which enables us to see how foreign consumer goods were adapted to suit local tastes, and how crucial fashionable ways of dressing were for all sectors of society in articulating their own urban imaginary in relation to the rapid changes taking place in São Paulo.

From his photographs it seems clear that the young Lévi-Strauss was astonished in the rapidly transforming and diverse cityscape of São Paulo, poised so pertinently between an agricultural past and a modern vision of an international future, not by its ‘newness, but the rapidity with which time’s ravages had set in’. His photographs, with their capturing of the contingent, the unobserved, the unstaged, all those elements usually removed from the formal world of the fashion shoot, are a tangible reminder that there are many different kinds of fashion systems operating throughout the world and multiple experiences of modernity possible. These modernities may take place at different speeds and thus be used to problematize our understanding of fashion time from a more holistic, global perspective. Lévi-Strauss’ photographs offer new insights into the relationship between photography, dress innovations, temporality, modernities, and national and international identities, offering alternative fashion histories and speculative biographies of the anonymous wearers that he captures so candidly on film. By rewriting the sartorial past in a way that draws attention to an underrepresented fashion-producing region, Lévi-Strauss forces us to question what we know of the established Western European and North American canon of fashion that is so often privileged in academic scholarship and popular histories to date. Whether intentional or not, his images of São Paulo facilitate our reimagining of fashion history in a new direction that is overlapping and multi-layered, much like the photographs themselves.
References


Illustrations

All of the accompanying photographs are taken from reproductions produced in *Saudades de São Paulo* (1996). The originals were all taken by Lévi-Strauss in São Paulo between 1935 and 1937.