

Orgies of Work: Peru's Hora Zero and a Global Network of Dissent

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Abstract: This article examines the aesthetic and political discourse of Peruvian poetic neo avant-garde Hora Zero, which emerged throughout the 1970s in Lima and other Peruvian regions and later expanded to different parts of the globe. It argues that not only was Hora Zero a literary or poetic generation, as it is often read, but more significantly a rhizomatic experience of dissent characterized by movement, nomadism and flows. In particular, it examines the concepts of “cultural guerrilla warfare” and “orgies of work”, through which the young poets of Hora Zero contested the cultural establishment of the time and the dehumanizing effects of global capitalism, proposing instead a living and embodied form of collective cultural work. Hora Zero's aesthetic and political militancy, evidenced by these notions, emerges in its members' constant travel throughout Latin America and Europe.

Key Words: Hora Zero, avant-garde, Peru, 1970s, cosmopolitanism

Resumen: Este artículo examina el discurso estético y político del movimiento poético neo-vanguardista Hora Zero, el cual emergió a lo largo de la década de los setenta en Lima y otras regiones del país, expandiéndose luego a otras partes del mundo. Se sostiene que Hora Zero deberá leerse no solo como una generación poética, como sugiere la crítica literaria, sino más significativamente como una experiencia disidente rizomática caracterizada por movimiento, nomadismo y flujos. En particular, se enfoca en los conceptos de “guerrilla cultural” y “orgías de trabajo” utilizadas por los jóvenes poetas del movimiento para rebatir a la institución cultural del momento y combatir los efectos deshumanizantes del capitalismo global, proponiendo en su lugar un trabajo cultural colectivo corpóreo y vivo. La militancia estética y política

de Hora Zero surge a través de los constantes viajes a distintas regiones de Latinoamérica y Europa que sus miembros llevan a cabo.

Palabras clave: Hora Zero, vanguardia, Perú, 1970s, cosmopolitismo

In 1970, a group of male students from the Federico Villarreal University in Lima, without any previous published work or enough money to cover the printing costs, borrowed a mimeograph from the nearby La Cantuta University and, after two months of arduous labor, put out five hundred copies of their poetic manifesto. Through their “Palabras urgentes”, they sought to take down the entirety of the Peruvian poetic establishment: these “escritores fracasados”, “históricos insustanciales”, and “masa de irresponsables” who comfortably benefitted from their positions in Lima’s cultural institutions and universities¹. In a sweeping move, the poetic neo-avant-garde Hora Zero announced total rupture with its literary predecessors, proposing instead poetry as revolutionary, collective and living creation. That same year, in the Amazonian region of Pucallpa, an affiliate branch, Hora Zero Oriente denounced the centralism, paternalism and colonialism of the Casas de la Cultura del Perú, describing them as “catacumbas que sólo se dedican a rescatar fósiles”. Throughout the 1970s, Hora Zero would travel, both within the country and outside of it, to places like Mexico City and Paris, becoming a regional as much as a cosmopolitan movement that ceased to be defined by national or identitarian frameworks, and functioned instead as a transnational network of dissent and revolutionary commitment.

I read Hora Zero neither as just a poetic generation, nor through its linguistic or literary innovations (as literary criticism often does), but rather as a neo-avant-garde defined by the notions of movement, nomadism and flow. Hora Zero is best understood, in my argument, as a series of emergences, both temporal and spatial: temporal because it was active intermittently during the seventies, disappearing sometimes for years and reemerging with a different cast of artists; and spatial, because, as I have mentioned, it was constantly and quite literally “on the move”: taking their art to the streets, renting homes (and getting kicked out of them), traveling to and from several provinces, and finally establishing links with similar groups in other countries. I conceive Hora Zero as a regional and cosmopolitan network of cultural militancy, a rhizomatic experience that proposed poetic creation as foil to official culture and to the excesses of capitalism in the seventies.

In this article, I want to briefly outline two of Hora Zero’s guiding theories that formed the base for its artistic labor: the notions of “cultural guerrilla warfare” and “orgies of work”. Both are fundamental in understanding how Hora Zero conceptualized its performative poetic militancy, which materialized as massive recitals, direct collaboration with left-wing social movements and irreverent poetic “duels”. In reading Hora Zero, cultural criticism has focused on the individual poets’ literary creations, their general poetic themes and forms, use of colloquial language and multiplicity

¹ PIMENTEL, Jorge and Juan Ramirez Ruiz, “Palabras urgentes”, *Hora Zero: materiales para una nueva época*, Lima, 1970, no.1, 7-10.

² MOVIMIENTO HORA ZERO, “De Hora Zero a la colectividad: otras palabras prácticas”, *Hora Zero Oriente: materiales para una nueva época*, Pucallpa, 1970, no. 1, n.p.

of voices. Instead, taking as my corpus manifestos, recently published pronouncements, and individual testimonies of the members of Hora Zero, I argue for a more nuanced reading of the movement in order to understand its place within the broader Latin American (and global) avant-gardes of the 1970s. I contend that “cultural guerrilla” and “orgies of work” represent forms of what Claudia Gilman has called the “anti-intellectualist” current of the sixties and seventies: that is, writers and artists’ rejection of their own traditional roles as elites to focus instead on revolutionary solidarity, and in this way “resolve” that perpetual tensions between theory and practice, or aesthetic and social commitment³. Furthermore – and here I want to go beyond Gilman who conceives Latin America as a kind of single territory brought together only through the networks of these prestigious literary figureheads (the Pazes, the Cortazars, the Vargas Llosas) – I propose that “cultural guerrilla” and “orgies of work”, as itinerant concepts, are deployed both at the local and global levels. Their use demonstrates, precisely, how Hora Zero traveled, creating links between rural provinces, the capital Lima, and major cultural centers around the world. In this way, we may understand Hora Zero as a node in a broad network of cultural dissent that functioned transnationally throughout the sixties and seventies.

Cultural guerrilla warfare

Jorge Pimentel was the most vocal and polemic leader of Hora Zero. A student in the Education department at the working-class Villarreal University, Pimentel would soon leave school to dedicate himself full-time to his poetic labor, becoming the protagonist of some of the movement’s most irreverent actions (such as staging his own “assassination” during a poetic debate). In a 1972 text, only been published recently, Pimentel defines his poetic labor in terms of “cultural guerrilla warfare”⁴. Before going into his own use of the term, we should remember that this had been in circulation for a few years. In 1968, the Argentine artist Julio Le Parc argued that the relationship between artist and society needed to be reevaluated: no longer could artists serve as unconscious accomplices of the establishment but should instead aim to be the driving force for the revolutionary transformation of society. Their attitude should be one of reflection and contestation, organizing as “una especie de guerrilla cultural contra el estado actual de las cosas, subrayar las contradicciones, crear situaciones donde la gente reencuentre su capacidad de producir cambios”⁵. In 1970, Brazilian art critic Frederico Morais was more explicit still: “Today, the artist is a kind of guerrilla fighter. Art is ambush. Acting unpredictably when and where he is least expected, the artist creates – in an unusual way, since today anything can be transformed into a weapon for war or an instrument for

3 GILMAN, Claudia, *Entre la pluma y el fusil: debates y dilemas del escritor revolucionario en América Latina*, Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno, 2012.

4 PIMENTEL, Jorge, “Frente a toda la vida”, in *Hora Zero: Los broches mayores del sonido*, Tulio Mora (ed.), Lima, Fondo Editorial Cultura Peruana, 2009, p. 437-449.

5 *Julio Le Parc: obras cinéticas*, Katrin Steffen and Hans-Michael Herzog (eds.), Zürich, Switzerland: Daros Latinoamérica, 2013, in “Proyecto IDIS – Investigación en Diseño de Imagen y Sonido”, March 15, 2018. < <http://proyectoidis.org/guerrilla-cultural-el-rol-del-intelectual-y-del-artista-en-la-sociedad> >

art – a permanent state of tension, a constant state of expectation⁶. Artistic production, therefore, is here viewed as a weapon in anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggle – it follows in line with the New Left movements that sought to bring revolutionary theory and praxis together (and earlier with Situationism) combining it with ideas on violence as necessary for liberation (these were also expressed in the writings of Mao and Fanon, for example).

Cultural guerrilla, therefore, was about altering both the role of the artist and the spaces in which art was to be produced. Pimentel argues that the role of the new Peruvian poet is to “atender o profundizar la guerrilla cultural⁷”. This constitutes an area of poetic practice related to, but not the same, as political and cultural commitment: that is, while in the political arena the poet must study Marxism and in the cultural arena study art and literature, to be a *guerrillero cultural* is an *action*, not a field of study. In other words, for Pimentel (and the others before him) it is a site where poesis and politics may come together: “El guerrillero cultural da caminos, orienta, da vías de comunicación, dinamita teorías, fusila libros, prepara emboscadas, reta, se bate a duelos y su vida está al servicio del pueblo⁸”. Like Morais, Pimentel’s own language refers back to guerrilla tactics and maneuvers to be used during combat: he presents himself as a scout who understands the territory well and can thus “ambush”, “dynamite” and “execute” according to the needs of the masses – a cultural guerrilla, therefore, acting necessarily in solidarity with the oppressed.

Pimentel wrote from Lima, but the notion of cultural guerrilla warfare traveled. In the Amazonian region of Pucallpa, a group of young writers came together to denounce the centralism of the Peruvian cultural establishment. Also in 1970, *Hora Zero Oriente* put out its *Materiales para una nueva época*, which in addition to poetry and manifestos, included a collective memorandum to Pablo Neruda. Employing a sardonic and accusatory tone, the poets of Pucallpa “invite” Neruda to bring his message of liberation and Latin Americanism to the Amazonian region warning him that “aquí no existe una Casa de la Cultura y las gentes no tienen cien soles para escucharte hablar⁹”. Once again, the *horazerianos* denounce official culture’s reliance on capitalism, as the marginalized peoples Neruda is supposed to speak for and to “save” through his poetry (“hay millones de campesinos...que no saben que has venido trayéndoles poemas para curar sus llagas”) cannot afford the entry fee to his conferences. Finally, if he were to take up their invitation, Neruda would not be able to relax and smoke his pipe “con tu gorro de cuasi guerrillero”, as Pucallpa is not his comfortable house in Isla Negra in Chile, but home to terrible rivers where he could drown, a dangerous region where he could be kidnapped “para cambiarte por pan, pan para los niños¹⁰”. The poets challenge the telluric pretensions of Neruda’s poetry, used as he is to the comforts of the Chilean beach where he composed his *Canto general*, the poet would not survive an encounter with a truly treacherous river such as the Amazon. In fact, Neruda would only be good if traded for bread to actually feed the poor Amazonian children.

6 MORAIS, Frederico, “The body is what drives the work of art”, in *Juan Acha: Despertar revolucionario/ Revolutionary Awakening*, MUAC-Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, 2017, p. 228-229.

7 PIMENTEL, Jorge, “Frente a toda la vida”, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

8 *Ibid.*

9 NAJAR, Jorge, Javier Davila and Juan Sanchez, “Memorándum Colectivo”, in *Hora Zero Oriente*, *op. cit.*, 27-28.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

In this way, the notion of cultural guerrilla emerges in opposition to Neruda's (and the larger cultural establishment's) supposed revolutionary solidarity. Ultimately, Neruda can only be a "cuasi guerrillero", who can never understand the plight of the marginalized, and whose grandiloquent, telluric poetry bears no connection to the reality of Latin American social conditions. While the members of Hora Zero Oriente do not directly employ the term of cultural guerrilla warfare, they do argue that poetry must not be confined to the poet's comfortable room; instead it should be taken to the streets to be in direct contact with the masses (as Pimentel, Le Parc and Morais did). This is also why cultural guerrilla warfare, as I mentioned above, exceeds study and preparation in political and cultural matters; it is no longer related to texts, or only to written poetry: instead, it is conceived as a physical act, even a violent one, that prowls into the streets – akin to the jungle – to ambush, eliminate, and create anew.

Orgies of work

Unlike the notion of cultural guerrilla warfare (in all its political and artistic avant-garde connotations) it is difficult to find any theoretical or historical precedent for Hora Zero's use of the concept of "orgies of work". In any case, and related to that of cultural militancy, "orgies of work" seems to point to poetry, and more generally to art, as being more than a cognitive or linguistic process. Orgies of work is the methodology, or strategy, that revolutionary poets must undertake in order to replace bourgeois, intellectual and sterile poetry:

Frente a esto nosotros proponemos una poesía viviente... No queremos que se pierda nada de lo vivo. Proponemos una poesía 'fresca' que se enfrente con nosotros. Y además para la labor poética proponemos orgías de trabajo. Creemos también que el acto creador exige una inmolación de todos los días, porque definitivamente ha terminado la poesía como ocupación o jobi de días domingos y feriados, o el libro para completar el currículo. Definitivamente terminaron también los poetas místicos, bohemios, inocentones, engréidos, locos o cojudos. A todos ellos les decimos que el poeta defeca y tiene que comer para escribir¹¹.

To unpack this, we need to first remember that the very idea of art as work (or artistic creation as a productive facet of life, akin to any other kind of physical work) is central to Marxist thought, and that since the twenties (though particularly in the sixties and seventies) radical artists had often organized as syndicates or other kinds of labor organizations. In the case of Peru, for example, we may look at the Frente Unico de Trabajadores del Arte, or the Frente Antiimperialista de Trabajadores de la Cultura in Argentina, both in the seventies. To define art as physical work or to perform physical work as art was also a form for artists (often middle class) to conceive their own anti-intellectualism and revolutionary solidarity towards the working classes – though in the process

11 PIMENTEL, Jorge and Juan Ramirez Ruiz, "Palabras urgentes", *op.cit.*, p. 9.

they also called attention to the unbridgeable gap between them¹². Hora Zero's own understanding of poetic and artistic work is different because, although it is necessarily linked to class consciousness and revolutionary solidarity, it is never put forward in strictly class terms. Nor do the *horazerianos* frame themselves as precarious art workers – they cannot *perform* precariousness, that is, because most of them are actually poor, with extremely limited incomes and relying on all kinds of bureaucratic or official jobs to survive.

Through the notion of “orgies of work”, poetic labor becomes a vital and physical activity, an extension of the body: producing poetry becomes another bodily function, just as eating or defecating. More importantly, it carries a fundamentally sexual connotation: poetic creation as the release of libidinal energy. To employ the term “orgies” implies that poetry becomes a collective site of pleasure for the sake of pleasure itself, no longer tied to a (re)productive function. Just as procreation is not the end goal of an orgy, it is not that a poem will “be born” out of this activity. Instead, to speak of “orgies of work” emphasizes the process of creation itself instead of the final product. In my reading, therefore, poetic creation as orgiastic experience challenges the idea that art should have a fixed value to it, and the very notion of the professional writer who obtains monetary and social benefits through his work. In traditional Marxist theory, this could be seen as the difference between “dead” and “living” labor, where the creative process of the latter emerges as foil to the object subsumed by the logic of capital. However, the concept of the orgy expresses a sense of excess that undoes this division of labor, presenting poetry as a pleasurable form of work not tied to any kind of financial or symbolic remuneration.

This way of understanding poetic creation – these orgies – also traveled. In the late seventies, another Hora Zero poet, José Rosas Ribeyro met poets Roberto Bolaño and Mario Santiago in Mexico City. In 1977, after exchanging letters and poetry, Hora Zero relaunched and the Infrarrealist movement put out its first manifesto. In these documents, we can see how there starts to form a “Latin-American” imaginary of neo-avant-garde movements (or emergences, as I want to understand them). The Infrarrealist manifesto reads: “Nos anteceden las mil vanguardias descuartizadas en los sesentas¹³”. In 1978, other *horazerianos* travel to Paris, and here they meet French anarchist and radical poets Andre Laude and Tristan Cabral, as well as other committed Moroccan, Martinique and Greek poets; together they form Hora Zero International. Here, the enemy becomes not the local Casas de la Cultura, but global imperialism, the US and unfettered capitalism. The poets criticize intellectuals’ “obsessive” and “neurotic” linguistic debates, proposing instead the poem, once again, as corporeal and physical activity: “El poema será cuerpo físico, danza al borde de los precipicios y danza contra el vientre de los otros. El poema será vegetación, piel, esperma, bruma, agua, trueno, rayo, paño, labios¹⁴”.

Rather than as a poetic or literary generation, Hora Zero provides ample ground for analyzing the relationship between poetry and revolution, discourses of anti-intellectualism and precarious literary economies during the seventies. In particular, it allows us to consider these issues from a transnational rather than solely Peruvian perspective, because it set in motion a network of cultural

12 LONGONI, Ana, *Vanguardia y revolución: Arte e Izquierdas en la Argentina de los sesenta-setenta*, Buenos Aires, Ariel, 2014; Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

13 BOLAÑO, Roberto, “Déjenlo todo, nuevamente”, in Mora, Tulio, *Los broches*, *op. cit.*, p. 559-563.

14 HORA ZERO INTERNACIONAL, “Mensaje desde allá”, in Mora, Tulio, *Los broches*, *op. cit.*, p. 566-569.

and social dissent that was never affixed spatially but which relied on the constant movement of its members. This network, in true rhizomatic fashion, lacked a definite center, as poets joined and left Hora Zero in irregular fashion, establishing connections with other collectives of writers, artists and musicians that were in themselves ephemeral or seldom organized. As the use of concepts of cultural guerrilla warfare and orgies of work demonstrate, Hora Zero often borrowed ideas from other Latin American and European artists, reframed them, and sent them back globally through its traveling members. This helps us understand that discourses of political and cultural dissent were never merely “adopted” by Latin American artists, but rather that these emerged in spaces generated by the continuous travel and contact between artists of different regions. Hora Zero demands a reading from the lens of transnationalism, as it is only through emergence, movement and flow beyond borders that it consolidated its brand of poetic militancy. A further analysis of Hora Zero, therefore, should look more closely at the material connections with the Infrarrealist or Parisian poets, expanding the study of the global network of dissent in which these artists participated, perhaps unaware of its extent.