

A Pop Project in a Hick World

(Or, How Ultralocal Becomes a Respectable Place)

by Guadalupe Echevarría

In this text, **Guadalupe Echevarría** compares examples of the political power of pop in various yet specific contexts at different points in history. From the birth of American folk music to Brazilian *tropicália* via Bob Dylan, her essay offers insight into the transgressive function of experiences that juxtapose art, popular culture, and politics in an age of ultralocal critical theory. Echevarría is the director of the École des beaux-arts in Bordeaux.

Somewhere, I'm not sure exactly where, I read that "Bob Dylan liked Rogerio Duprat." The studio arranger—considered a maestro by many (David Bowie, David Byrne, Kurt Cobain, Beck, and others greatly admired him)—and co-creator of the *Tropicália* movement alongside Os Mutantes, Caetano Veloso, and Gilberto Gil (not to mention Helio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Glauber Roscha), had already forged an amazing career that ranged from the founding of the São Paulo chamber orchestra to apprenticeships under Stockhausen in Cologne and Pierre Boulez in Paris.

What might they have shared, apart from the trying experience of spending billions of hours in the recording studio? The *Tropicália* movement has had an incalculable impact—even up to the present—on the emergence of "local scenes" (Western and non-Western alike) ever since the 1960s, and it furthermore influenced the Cuban revolution's cultural project (especially for Africa) not just musically but also in terms of literature and the visual arts in hundreds of *secondary* places. Right from the start it identified with constructivism and the modern visual artists who immigrated to Latin America, and above all with the *Manifesto antropófago* (Anthropophagic Manifesto) issued by poet and philosopher Oswald de Andrade in 1928. Nothing could have been more appropriate to this "pop" movement than to consider itself primitive, ritualistic, cannibalistic ("anthropophagic"): ultralocal. Cannibalistic meaning rooted, nourished on oneself. *Tropicália* provides the most convincing model for an understanding of the cultural changes associated not just with the transformations of systems of mass production at the time, but also of post 1940s modernism.

Dylan's surrealist writings—like those of Os Mutantes, for that matter—heralded a new literary era in popular music. Such writing was introduced into the Americas by anti-fascist European immigrants, bringing double meanings (as already practiced by bluesmen!) to the hypocritical international society of pre-1968 days. Through this kind of writing, artists could focus on automatic forms of expression (dreams and free association) when composing songs—or paintings—and then drift into other spheres of everyday language, like rural and lower-class American slang, not just *folk* but *hick*.

I particularly like Dylan songs such as "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" and "Masters of War" from the *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* album, because there he uses a very harsh, Woody-Guthrie-like *folk* style, evoking those ex-Methodist Communists who wandered the highways and byways of America, hiding in trains with guitars that bore inscriptions such as "this machine kills fascists." In his surrealist songs, Dylan draws up an inventory of geographic localities of the Far West with prehistoric reminiscences, an increasingly distant return to a kind of roots or lost paradise, in the manner of a paradigm of the local landscape. Ever since this founding period in the early 1960s, real-life experience and the question of localization and "common places" have nourished generations of musicians and the Pop arts. "Place for me is the locus of desire" is the opening sentencing of *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society*, a book by Lucy Lippard, one of the first American writers to resoundingly grasp Pop Art.

Dylan made a real effort to appear more of a *hick* than he really was. His austerity was blatant, and of poor quality—that is to say, was a pure exercise in Pop artifice.

Translated from the French by Deke Dusinbere