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PETER SCHEIER AND MARCEL GAUTHEROT: BRASÍLIA LYRIC AND EPIC

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Abstract

Brasília was built from scratch in three and a half years, a rare occasion that attracted the attention of numerous photographers. Among them were Peter Scheier (1908-1979), a German Jew who fled the Nazis and settled in Brazil in 1937, and Marcel Gautherot (1910-1996), a French photographer commissioned by architect Oscar Niemeyer (1907-2012) to render his buildings. Gautherot's images circulated nationally and internationally, profoundly shaping the visual representation of the event as they advocated for the city's daring buildings. His photographs present the new capital as a monumental symbol of a grandiose national future built by strenuous work. e paper compares Scheier's and Gautherot's versions of the construction of Brasília, and localizes their documentation in relation to other cultural objects such as films and music that responded to the event. Especially relevant to this analysis is the documentary film Conterrâneos Velhos de Guerra, by Vladimir Carvalho, which strongly denounced the working conditions of Brasília. e examination concludes that both those who praised and those who denounced the endeavor resorted to an epic narrative centered around the feats of a hero: the candango, the migrant from the Northeastern States who built Niemeyer's modernist architecture. Scheier's coverage, however, deviates from the prevalent epic genre as his version of Brasília's early days is lyrical rather than epic, open to individual emotions and intimate experiences. e paper proposes that his pictures of the budding city nevertheless suggest a sense of impending doom that blurs the line between project and ruin, an aspect that relates to his condition as an immigrant.

Keywords: architecture photography, modernist architecture, Brasília, candango, epic

PETER SCHEIER AND MARCEL GAUTHEROT: BRASÍLIA LYRIC AND EPIC

Written by Mariana W. von Hartenthal

Dedicated on April 21, 1960, Brasília was built from scratch in three and a half years. The rare occasion attracted the attention of numerous photographers, among them Peter Scheier (1908-1979), a German Jew who fled the Nazis and settled in Brazil in 1937[1]. This paper examines how Scheier's documentation deviates from the prevalent discourse that narrates the construction of the capital as an epic centered, as all epics do, around the feats of a hero. In Brasília's case, the hero is the so-called candango, the migrant from the Northeastern States who built the modernist architecture of Oscar Niemeyer (1907-2012). By focusing on construction labor, the epic of Brasília functions as a working-class and male tale even though the city was primarily built to house public servants and their families – conspicuously absent from most photographic coverages. Yet unlike his contemporaries, Scheier was interested in the everyday life of middle-class women, children, and bureaucrats; moreover, when the photographer depicted Brasília's poorer population, he detached them from strenuous work and suffering. Unconcerned with the glorification of labor and apparently unimpressed with the city's architecture, Scheier's version of the endeavor adopts lyrical rather than epic language, more open to individual emotions and intimate experiences. His protagonists were neither heroes nor victims of hard work, but average people who went on with their lives in spite of the sense of impending doom that colors his photographs, an aspect that, I propose, reflects his experiences as an immigrant.

In 1958, during his first time in the city he would visit again two years later, Scheier took this photograph of two women and a boy wearing formal clothing, gloves, clutches, and hats. According to the Moreira Salles Institute, which owns Scheier's archive, the group was going to a wedding. One of the women holds her hat with the left hand while she is assisted by a boy, his back turned to us as he seems to tie something onto the woman's right hand. Another woman watches the boy's efforts. A little further away, a soldier looms beside the group, oblivious to his presence. The photographer cropped the women and boy under their hips but made sure to depict the full body of the man, suggesting his relevance for the composition. Due to the group's unawareness, the soldier seems menacing rather than protective. His eyes are hidden by the shadow of the helmet, and in fact, we cannot fully see the face of any of the people in the image. In the background, scaffolds cover a building, a wooden structure holds a water tank, a person walks in the distance, on the unpaved ground. The crude conditions of the site contrast with the formality of the group, giving the scene an air of absurdity. It is hard to tell that this is a picture of Brasília, as it does not exhibit the elements that came to characterize the representations of the city: daring white volumes rising against the open sky of the cerrado, the dry, shrubby region where Brasília was built; politicians, and construction workers. Instead, we see women and children engaged in some unremarkable activity, a soldier, and a messy jobsite.

[1] Other photographers who documented the construction of Brasília were, for example, Swiss René Burri (1933-2014), Brazilian Thomaz Farkas (1924-2011), and Mário Fontenelle (1919-1986), also Brazilian and the official photographer hired by President Juscelino Kubitschek.

MARIANA W. VON HARTENTHAL
Wedding Guests, 1958.
© Peter Scheier Instituto Moreira Salles Collection.

With no evident sign of construction activity in progress, the viewer is not sure whether the building in the background is still to be finished or already in ruins. The photograph presents themes that often appear in Scheier's documentation of the new capital: women and children, soldiers, and buildings that may be completed or have collapsed. Like most of Scheier's images of Brasília, the picture did not circulate much at the time.

It was not included in the book "Brasília Vive!" that the photographer published with Stefan Geyerhahn, a simple, soft-cover, spiral-bound volume of sixty-six photographs with a short text in Portuguese and English, written by John Knox[2]. Little known, the volume was commissioned by American Agency PIX and clearly destined to a foreign audience[3].

To contextualize Scheier's coverage we must compare it with the documentation that has most profoundly shaped the visual representation of the event, made by French photographer Marcel Gautherot (1910-1996). Gautherot's images circulated nationally and internationally; they appeared in Brazilian architectural magazines such as Módulo: Revista de Arquitetura e Artes Plásticas, directed by Niemeyer, and Brasília, edited by Novacap, the government organ that managed the construction of the capital. Abroad, they illustrated US-based Architectural Forum and Arts & Architecture, as well as French Aujourd'hui Art et Architecture and Architecture d'Aujourd'hui. Gautherot's photographs were also included in an exhibition on Brasília organized at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1960, and in an itinerant exhibition that circulated in Europe after opening in Bratislava in 1963[4]. With outstanding photographic technique, Gautherot emphasized the bold volumes of Niemeyer's buildings in high black-and-white contrast. Through discrete mechanical choices, the photographer can present architecture in different ways, and Gautherot adopted frontal takes, symmetry, uniform and bright lighting in images that endow the buildings with a monumental quality and make them seem bigger than in real life.

President Juscelino Kubitschek (1902-1976), in office between 1956 and 1961, had elected the transfer of the capital from Rio de Janeiro to the interior of the country as one of the main goals of his government. Unsurprisingly, the decision to build a city for 500,000 people from scratch was heavily criticized at the time due to its outlandish cost and perceived pointlessness but the President did not change his plans[5]. Lúcio Costa (1902-1998) won the competition for drawing the capital's urban plan, and Kubitschek chose Niemeyer to design the buildings.

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2 Scheier published other three photographic albums: on the city of São Paulo (Rado, Scheier, 1954), the State of Minas Gerais (Scheier, Barata, Fernandes, 1968), and the State of Paraná (Scheier, 1953).

3 Falbel, 2007.

4 Espada, 2010, p. 11.

5 Criticism of the project abound in every major newspapers of the time. For example, Eugênio Gudin called Brasília an "extremely expensive fantasy" (Correio da Manhã, Feb. 5, 1958); Correio da Manhã, acknowledging the fact that most public servants did not want to move away from Rio, suggested that the President would move on his own (Correio da Manhã, Feb. 6, 1957); Diário de Notícias referred to the project as an "adventure" and "populist" (Diário de Notícias, May 5, 1957); Senator Oton Mäder also called it an "adventure" (Jornal do Brasil, Jan. 4, 1959), while to Jornal do Brasil it was a "vanity impulse" (Jornal do Brasil, Jan. 12, 1957).

MARIANA W. VON HARTENTHAL
The Alvorada Palace in Brasília, c. 1959.
© Marcel Gautherot Instituto Moreira Salles Collection.ANA

The architect, a staunch supporter of the President with whom he had worked closely in the State of Minas Gerais commissioned Gautherot to render his architecture. As expected, buildings are the protagonists of Gautherot's images, and his pictures eloquently advocate for the new capital by portraying Brasília's architecture as worthy of the financial and human investment. Gautherot's photographs awe the viewer with buildings that, as noted by Heloísa Espada, curator of an exhibition commemorating Brasília's sixtieth anniversary has noted, often seem to rise from the ground like miracles, with no apparent sign of human effort[6]. When workers do appear, they look like pieces of an efficient construction mechanism. But although workers are mostly absent from his coverage, Gautherot's photographs strongly contributed to the genesis of the heroic figure of the candango by implying that Brasília's sublime modernist architecture was the fruit of almost superhuman labor. To understand the significance of these photographs, we must

6 Espada, 2010, p. 11.

consider them not in isolation, but as threads that interlace with architecture, images, and texts to weave a discursive fabric of epic tones.

The birth of the heroic figure of the candango coincides with the birth of the city. Initially a derogatory term to refer to the poor and uneducated, the candango soon became a symbol of perseverance and strength, a representation of Brazilians dedicated to building a more just Nation through architecture. In 1960, Kubitschek wrote for Rio-based newspaper Diário Carioca that the "bronzed figure of this anonymous titan, who is the candango" was the "formidable hero of the construction of Brasília". The candango, he continued, "took upon himself the responsibility to respond to my call, working day and night". According to the President, the candango had proven that the image of the sertanejo as a weakling, prevalent in Brazil at that time, was no longer valid. The word "sertanejo" refers to the inhabitant of the sertão or backlands, home of many of Brasília's first construction workers. This geographical reference is of utmost importance, as the poor, troubled, and isolated sertão has long been connected to the idea of a "deep Brazil," home of taciturn peasants whose ways of living contrasted with the carefree environment of the country's then capital, Rio de Janeiro. One of the arguments for the dislocation of the capital to the interior was that distance from Rio's pleasant beaches and nightlife would foster the ethics of hard work that the candango came to embody.

A visual example of the hardworking sertanejo/candango, capable of the herculean task of building an entire city appears in an advertisement for oil giant Exxon, placed in the commemorative edition of magazine Brasília in 1960. The drawing of a candango illustrates the ad: a man with muscular body and strong hands who wears a half-moon shaped helmet that resembles the typical hats worn in the sertão as he looks at the viewer and says, "sir, I made this city"[7]. Another meaningful example of the conflation of construction work and heroism in the making of the candango is the misnomer of a prominent sculpture by Bruno Giorgi (1905-1993). Located in Brasília's ree Powers Square, it represents two stylized figures who embrace each other with one hand and hold a spear with the other.

Officially titled "Warriors," the piece is usually called "Candangos," which is how it currently appears on Brasília's Wikipedia page[8]. The entanglement of words and images implies that the strong, masculine body of the candango is the force behind the smooth geometry of Niemeyer's buildings depicted by Gautherot. The underlying message is that the rise of such magnificent modern city requires the complete dedication of a titan working day and night. Until then a menial occupation of the unprepared, construction work – undertaken after the arduous journey from the backlands – is the mission that transforms the weakling into the heroic candango who, in turn, can transform the country. According to literary theorists, the prototypical hero of epic narratives is one who willingly exposes himself to risk while pursuing a goal that will benefit others of his group[9]. Thus the candango presents the main features of a hero: he completes a journey and voluntarily struggles to execute a mission for the greater good.

Working incessantly to finishing his task on time, the trope of the candango was useful to those who supported the project, like the President and oil companies that would benefit from the

7 Holston, 1993, 211.

8 https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bras%C3%ADlia. Accessed Aug. 5, 2019.

9 Hogan, 2001; Selwyn, Eagly, 2004; Smirnov et al, 2007; Becker, Eagly, 2004.

dislocation needed to reach the new capital, whose urban plan emphasized automotive transportation. e other characters that participated in Brasília's first days – public servants, politicians, and their families – are not worthy of heroism. On the contrary, they were (and still are) perceived as spoiled, idle, or worse; moreover, many public servants and politicians were vocal about their dissatisfaction with the move from Rio. They stood in contrast with the candangos, who reached Brasília "voluntarily" (i.e., in many cases because of lacking other options). Unsurprisingly,white-collar workers and their families, who made up a substantial part of the city's first inhabitants, have remained mostly invisible in the narrative of Brasília's construction.

In his well-known 1985 critique of the city, American sociologist James Holston affirmed that the candango had been forgotten, but I disagree[10]. The "Living Museum of the Candango Memory" was founded in 1985; a species of crustacean discovered in the region was named Celsitonum candango; and there is a city on the outskirts of Brasília called Candangolândia. It is true that the State has failed to rightly compensate construction workers or even provide them with the bare minimum in terms of healthcare, safety and education, but the candango's lack of economic success does not invalidate his heroic status. Quite the opposite: as he continues to suffer, the candango has retained his heroism even after the completion of his task. In epic genre, the hero's accomplishment of a goal elevates his social status, but recognition does not necessarily entail actual lasting power. On the contrary, as literary scholar Patrick Hogan has demonstrated, several prototypical heroic plots have an odd ending that to an extent questions the hero's triumph, and he is always at risk of becoming a victim, otherwise the significance his actions decreases[11]. The blurry distinction between hero and victim explains why the candango has remained a useful trope for both those who praise and those who denounce the construction of the capital.

Among the most forceful eulogies of the candango and a strong denunciation of the construction of Brasília is the documentary film Conterrâneos Velhos de Guerra (Fellow Countrymen, Brothers in Arms) directed by Vladimir Carvalho. Released in 1991, the film was on the making since the early 1970s, when Carvalho moved from the Northeastern State of Paraíba to the capital, where he taught cinema. With footage from the city's construction captured by American artist Eugene Feldman, it exposes the terrible living and working conditions the candangos encountered, such as lack of breaks, hunger, and violence[12].

To demonstrate the inequalities of the new city, the film juxtaposes footage and interviews with candangos to depictions of the pleasant lifestyle of upper- and middle-class newcomers (later, as we will see, Carvalho would change his perspective on this population). The director also confronted Niemeyer and Costa regarding their knowledge of an alleged massacre of construction workers hired by the contractor Pacheco Fernandes Dantas in 1959, an accusation brought up by candangos and local newspapers that has never been investigated[13]. The film's music, by sertanejo troubadour Zé Ramalho and Othos Bastos's deep voice-over imbue the movie with a gloomy atmosphere. In 1995, the film editor Eduardo Leone described

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10 Holston, 1993, 212.

11 Hogan, 2001.

12 Feldman went to Brasília by invitation of Brazilian artist Aloísio Magalhães. They would publish a book of offset prints from the photographs taken during the visit, in 1958. The book has a preface by John dos Passos (Magalhães, Feldman, 1959).

13 For more on this case, see Sousa, 2011.

Conterrâneos as an “epic opera” paying “homage to all workers,” but white-collar workers mostly appear to imply their complicity on the exploration of the poor. Epic genre suits “calls to action” because clearly contrasts the victimized hero against his evil oppressors. This is not to say that wake-up calls such as Carvalho’s film are unimportant or disingenuous, but it is important to question the heroicization of labor, so convenient to those who benefit from it.

Hired by the architect most invested in raising the city, Gautherot’s main concern was not the hardships endured by construction workers, but the photographer was interested in their dreadful situation. He was the only professional to document life in Sacolândia, literally “Bag Land,” the most miserable workers’ camp in the new capital, an improvised gathering of shacks built with used cement bags, hence the name. Gautherot’s record of Sacolândia is extremely important because it is a rare testimony of a community completely erased when the area it occupied was flooded for the creation of Brasilia’s artificial lake, the Paranoá, which would be dedicated to leisure. One of his photographs of Sacolândia depicts a woman standing in front of a makeshift house, not made of bags but wooden boards, precariously put together. She places her right arm on the hip as she looks at us with inquiring eyes. Behind her, an improvised shelf holds plates and pots made with empty food canisters. In another picture, a woman stands between a shack (this one indeed made with cement bags) and an earth oven as she holds a baby in her arms; her two toddlers play a little further away.

In Gautherot’s coverage of Brasília, heroic candangos do two things: work, and suffer. Despite its heroic undertones, however, Carvalho’s film does show a more complex perspective on their situation as the documentary gives them a chance to speak for themselves in interviews that are less edited than photographs. Numerous comments emphasize the opportunities to work and make money in the new capital, making clear that these men and women moved to Brasília not to “build a new Nation,” but to look for better opportunities for themselves and their children. The film also reveals the candangos’ other interests besides work: they frequented dance halls, organized popular festivities, had fun, as people who find mechanisms to cope, and even enjoy, life in harsh conditions.

One piece of footage from the time, in one of the rare moments of the film without voice- over, depicts a long line of men, almost stacked upon each other, waiting in front of a door in a poor neighborhood. The scene suggests prostitution, an activity common in areas that attract large numbers of young, often single, men, and an occupation that does not turn any of the involved into heroes. We also find Brasília’s early inhabitants entertained in Scheier’s pictures, which detach the poor from strenuous construction work and suffering. In his version of the event, the new capital is an uncomfortable, unfinished background for everyday life, not only for candangos but for all those who moved to a construction site. Civil servants wearing suits sit on the curb, women and children negotiate the muddy streets on their way to school. People wait for the bus, eat on the floor. They move on with their lives, not living for the construction works, but in spite of it. Men and women in simple clothes chat, look at things displayed on window shops, take pictures. In one of his most captivating images, two men on the sidewalk take a break from work and look at each other, about to talk. These are not construction workers: one holds a broom, and the other, a peddler, pushes a cart decorated with a stylized representation of the Alvorada Palace’s façade. From Scheier – and from Thomas Farkas (1924- 2011), whose photographic documentation of Brasília most resembles the German’s – we find a more pedestrian perspective of the capital’s first inhabitants. Rather than being obsessed with the

construction works that produced the modernist city, Scheier focused on the myriad of non-events that took place on the supposedly abolished sidewalks.

In fact, Scheier seems not much impressed with the result of that labor. Instead of solid volumes, his architecture photographs often play with transparent planes, an aspect analyzed by Anat Falbel[14]. He employed dislocations, asymmetrical compositions, and a range of gray tonalities rather than high black-and-white contrast. He often took pictures under overcast light, a choice that architecture photography historian Cervin Robinson saw as a "hostile criticism" to architecture, as it emphasizes blemishes and does not clearly distinguish the building surfaces[15]. Differently from Gautherot's, his pictures do not convey monumentality to Niemeyer's buildings, Instead, they present an architecture animated by people, an understandable characteristic since Scheier was a street photographer used to registering the hectic life of São Paulo, where he lived.

MARIANA W. VON HARTENTHAL
House in Sacolândia, Brasília, 1959.
© Marcel Gautherot Instituto Moreira Salles Collection.

MARIANA W. VON HARTENTHAL
W3 Avenue Commercial Area, 1960.
© Peter Scheier Instituto Moreira Salles Collection.

14 Falbel, 2010.

15 Robinson, 1975, 10.

Not hired to promote the endeavor, Scheier did not need to present Brasília as the miraculous result of efficiently run jobsites, and he unapologetically showed the improvisation and lack of planning that characterizes Brazilian engineering. In a photograph of the cathedral taken from the Brasília Hotel, both under construction, we see dust, debris, and dirt, and are made to question what those alien structures are doing in such an empty, drab landscape. A crack on the left door shows that the glass pane is already damaged. As in the first photograph, the distinction between construction and destruction is not clear-cut, in images that could hardly be used to justify the appalling cost of the new capital.

Scheier also had an eye for children, whose lack of agency makes them unfit for heroism, as well as middle-class women, almost absent from other visual coverages. Eight photographs in his book have women as their main subject. They buy flowers, have lunch, take care of the garden. Weddings and the many social events planned during the inauguration, such as dog competitions, are definitely not the theme of epic narratives. Women are rarely heroic protagonists, and when female heroes do exist, their plight is usually connected to the protection of their virtuous bodies (like Penelope), or to motherhood[16]. Prostitutes in Brasília could never be heroes, even though Carvalho's documentary shows that they worked hard. Only immaculate suffering endows women with heroic quality, and not by chance Gautherot's candangas strive to care for the family and the house. Yet women did not need to be in such dire straits to attract Scheier's camera lens.

In 2011, middle-class stories about mothers, children, and also men – as fathers – would gain prominence in a different cinematic narrative of Brasília. Carvalho released Rock Brasília – Era de Ouro (The Golden Age), a documentary about the rock bands that sprouted in the city in the 1980s such as Capital Inicial, Plebe Rude, and Legião Urbana. These would sell millions of records all over the country and influence a whole generation; Legião Urbana attained such a cult status that it earned the moniker "Religião Urbana" (Urban Religion). Many band members were children of diplomats, professors, and other public servants who moved to the capital around 1960. Rock Brasília deviates from the author previous position of not "being able to make films about the middle class," and adopts a more intimate approach, interviewing mothers, fathers, and siblings of the musicians in their homes[17].

Still, by emphasizing the bands' encounters with the police during the military regime, the film amplifies the political significance of the movement. It is true that some of the songs by brasiliense groups evidently criticized the country's situation. In "Que país é este?" ("what country is this?"), Renato Russo, Legião Urbana's leader and singer, proclaims "third world it is, a joke abroad, but Brazil will make a million when we sell all the souls of our Indians in an auction." Yet it would be a stretch to classify the groups as political activists. Social justice or the dictatorship were not their main concern, and their songs approached youth angst from different angles, talking about relationships and the sense of not belonging.

16 Ibid.

17 Santos, 2006, p. 78.

MARIANA W. VON HARTENTHAL
Brasília's Metropolitan Cathedral under construction, 1960.
© Peter Scheier Instituto Moreira Salles Collection.

Nevertheless, the most interesting aspect of the film is how clearly it shows the entanglement of national history and private stories, how the personal is truly political. In this sense however, it is unfortunate that the movie does not dig deeper into the role of Renato Russo in Brazil's history of gay rights, as he is still to this day one of the only rock stars in the country to talk about his homosexuality.

I suspect that the intermingling of the personal and the political also impacted Scheier's picture-taking, coloring his otherwise light-hearted images with darker tones. As in the first image, a soldier or a police officer often appears in the scene. We might interpret these images as omens of the military dictatorship that would take control of the country and the capital just four years later, but of course this reading is possible only in hindsight. Also, some of the most disquieting of Scheier's photographs – his series depicting children walking and playing on a barren ground, under the bleak sky – do not include soldiers. As in the first picture, it is hard to tell that this is Brasília (or even Brazil) and whether the buildings in the background are under construction or already in ruins.

Instead of being a glimpse into the future, maybe it was the past that influenced the photographer's vision. Scheier was born in 1908 into a German Jewish family in Glogow, then part of Germany and now in Poland[18]. His parents had a department store in his hometown where he worked until it closed in 1928. When Hitler founded the III Reich in 1933, Scheier

[18] For more on Scheier's trajectory, see Falbel, 2007, and Gouveia, 2008.

moved to Hohenau, in Bayern, where he started to plan his emigration while working at an uncle's sugar factory. His uncle had connections in Brazil, and in 1937 Scheier embarked on a ship to Rio. He got a job at his uncle's acquaintance's meat packing plant in São Paulo, where he would settle. After leaving the packing plant, he spent some time selling lamps and eventually became a photographer, working for magazines such as O Cruzeiro, for the TV channel Record, and for modernist architects such as Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992) and Gregori Warchavchik (1896-1972). In 2013, I spoke with Scheier's grandson, São Paulo-based photographer Lucas Lenci, who told me that his grandfather had an "immigrant mindset."

According to Lenci, Scheier's perspective was more pragmatic than dramatic, to the extent that towards the end of his life, the photographer had no problem with moving back to Germany, close to one of Hitler's country homes. Scheier was prescient and resourceful; he was a refugee and then an immigrant. But he was not a hero, just someone who knew about life in dangerous times. Like himself, his subjects in Brasília were not fighters, but people who negotiate, who adapt, who move in less than ideal circumstances shaped by the will of others.

Even his denouncing coverage thus still aligns to the epic tradition, which presupposes that the actions of heroes must be single, and great[19].

MARIANA W. VON HARTENTHAL
Children near a School, 1960.
© Peter ScheierInstituto Moreira Salles Collection.

19 Lauber, 1968.

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