Doctor Atl's *Olinka*: the Search for a Utopian City

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As Susan Gauss, Diane Davis and many other scholars of economic history in Mexico have discussed, the 1950s represent for Mexico –and especially for Mexico City– a decade of unprecedented industrialization, urban growth, and development of the modern infrastructure necessary to accommodate both the new means of production and the increasing flow of workers that arrived to the cities. It was also a decade of confidence and hope in the progress and modernization of the country, what soon would begin to be called the "Mexican Miracle," a zeitgeist that nowhere was captured better than in José Emilio Pacheco's now classic *bildungsroman*, *The battles in the desert*:

> Nevertheless, there was still hope. Out textbooks confirmed this: Mexico, as can be seen on the map, is shaped like a cornucopia, a horn of plenty. For a still unimaginable year two thousand, a future of plenitude and universal well-being was predicted, without specifying just how it would be achieved. Clean cities without injustice, poor people, violence, congestion, or garbage. Every family with an ultramodern and aerodynamic (words from that era) house. No one will want for anything. Machines will do all the work. Streets full of trees and fountains, traveled by silent, non-polluting vehicles that never collide. Paradise on earth. Finally, utopia will have been found. (Loc 805)

Not everyone shared this optimism, which was officially sponsored by the governments of the postrevolutionary state. Among them was the famous landscape painter Gerardo Murillo, most commonly known by the name of Doctor Atl. By the 1950s, Doctor Atl was a disenchanted revolutionary and a harsh critic of the capitalist modernization Mexico was undergoing. And it is in this context how one has to understand *Olinka*, his project to build a utopian city for artists, scientists, and intellectuals.

Until now, few critics have studied or considered *Olinka* seriously. Cuauhtémoc Medina, now chief curator at the University Museum of Contemporary Art (MUAC) at UNAM, wrote his undergraduate dissertation about it in 1991 and Miguel Ángel Fernández Delgado, a literary historian of Mexican science fiction, mentions the project in an article that mostly follows Medina's work. My own interest in *Olinka* sprung out of a larger interest in urban utopias of postrevolutionary Mexico such as Estridentópolis, the future city of the avant-garde movement known as Estridentismo, or the "satellite cities" designed in the 1950s and 60s by architect Mario Pani as solutions to problems such as low-income housing, planned urban development and the decentralization of a crowded and unorganized city center. Considering the little work done until now on *Olinka*, I wanted to consult the archives myself and thus I travelled to Mexico City with the aid of a 2017 Tinker Summer Research Grant. The documents, schemes, memos, and diagrams on *Olinka* are located within Doctor Atl's personal archive, kept in very good conditions by the Biblioteca Nacional at UNAM. The photographic archive of the 1984 exhibit "Consciencia y Paisaje" at the National Museum of Art (MUNAL) was also very helpful. Considering that *Olinka* was never built, archival research is the only means to access this project, the last of Doctor Atl's endeavors, which occupied most of the last decade of his life.

According to Atl's own narrative, the idea of building a city for artists, scientists, and intellectuals first came to him in Paris during the 1910s, when he belonged to the avant-garde movement behind the publication *Action d'art*. It was nevertheless interrupted by the Mexican Revolution, which summoned Atl back to Mexico. The idea re-emerged forty years later, around 1952, just after Atl had finished one of his most important intellectual and artistic projects: the careful register –through notes, drawings, and paintings– of the emergence of the volcano known as Paricutín. From 1952 to 1963, Atl

searched in vain for a location for *Olinka*, the name he gave to his utopian city. Chiapas, Jalisco, the Santa Catarina range close to Mexico City, Tepoztlán, and finally the Cerro de la Estrella were all possibilities he worked relentlessly but in vain to secure. He also developed programmatic texts such as *Crear la fuerza* (1952), where both the idea behind his project and the image of the future city began to crystallize. Atl describes a city that would have housing facilities, buildings for the arts and for scientific research, an open-air theatre, an archaeological museum, a museum of modern art, and a "Temple for men" and a "Temple for women", which would be according to him the "spiritual center" (Atl, "Programa central…" 1) of the city.[1] The idea behind *Olinka* and its "re-concentration" of intellectual knowledge was to create a movement of such force that the alienated modernity Atl was so anxious about could finally be overcome. Of particular importance for Atl were the creation of a center for the study of the human mind and the center of outer-space investigations, which could potentially lead humanity out the Earth. For Atl, the research done on these two fields would lead mankind to discover its true, full potential, and thus to abandon what he considered a mediocre, utilitarian, and empty modernity. In this he echoes his own 1935 science fiction novel *Un hombre más allá del universo*, a journey to outer space in which mankind reconnects with the cosmic forces of the universe, forces that are lost to him in the mundane everyday life of the modern world.

Even if Atl became increasingly more pragmatic over the years, reducing little by little the ambitious designs he first exposed, his project was never seriously considered by a post-revolutionary state that during those same years was building the Ciudad Universitaria as central campus for UNAM and the Museo Nacional de Antropología as the main exhibition space for ancient Mexican cultures, among many other infrastructural

[1] Translation of Atl's texts by me.

developments. *Olinka*, a failed project of these times, thus remains somewhere in between the blind confidence in the modern progress of the "Mexican Miracle" –crystallized in the Utopian architecture of Ciudad Universitaria, for example– and the anguished, dystopian criticism of the state's modernizing project that would fully emerge only after the 1968 massacre in Tlatelolco, a student massacre carried out by the same post-revolutionary state that in the 1950s and 60s had supposedly lead Mexico out of the barbarism of the Revolution and into a democratic modernity.

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