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**Another Valley:  
an alternative technology of the self**  
*El otro valle: tecnologías del yo alternativas*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Here I describe the spiritual sect "*Vale do Amanhecer*" founded in 1959 north east of Brasilia, the capital of Brasil. I contrast the technological and romantic aspects of *Vale do Amanhecer* with the techno-scientific fantasy architectural space of Brasilia itself, and examine the way in which one form of romance with technology (Kubitscheck's Brasilia) is complemented (and, we could say, incites) another, the spiritual sect barely 20 kilometres away.

## **KEYWORDS**

*Vale do Amanhecer*; Brasil, sects, spirituality, technology.

## RESUMEN

En este texto describo la secta espiritual “*Vale do Amanhecer*”, fundada en 1959 al noroeste de Brasilia, la capital de Brasil. En él se ponen en contraste los aspectos tecnológicos y románticos de *Vale do Amanhecer* con la fantasía tecno-científica que proyecta el espacio arquitectónico de Brasilia, y examina el modo en que una forma de romance con la tecnología (la de la Brasilia de Kubitscheck) se complementa con (y en cierto sentido provoca) la otra, la secta espiritual situada tan solo a 20 kilómetros.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

*Vale do Amanhecer*; Brasil, sectas, espiritualidad, tecnología.

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Outside the rationalist hyper-modern concrete techno-fantasy that is the city of Brasilia lies its absolute reverse, the truth of what it aimed to surpass, *Vale do Amanhecer*. This “Valley of the Dawn” was created in 1959, just as Brasilia itself was rising out of nowhere at the command of President Kubitscheck and honoured by the inhuman scale modernist blocks of Oscar Niemeyer. That Niemeyer was a member of the Brazilian Communist Party, and even managed to smuggle in a sculpture which still throws the shadow of a hammer and sickle on the ground at one point in the day, all the more confirmed that this architecture was meant to signal a break from the past. This Brasilia, designed to be the new capital of Brazil (and still functioning as such) was also intended to be the future, and it was sold to be so on news programmes in Britain, at least; I remember seeing a special item devoted to marvelling at these dazzling white space-age apparitions on the children’s programme “Blue Peter” in the early 1960s.

The new dawn that accompanied the birth of Brasilia barely twenty kilometres to the north east of the city is testimony to the failure of techno-culture to entirely capture the imaginations of every inhabitant in the country. Spirituality blossoms in and suffuses Brazilian culture, whether that it is in the Christian evangelical aspirations of the former environment minister Marina Silva and her ecological “*Rede Sustentabilidade*” or in the *Templo da Boa Vontade* (“The Portal of the Third Millenium” founded by Alziro Zurur’s “Legion of Good Will” and paid for by donations of many poor people) which is a massive melange of Christianity, Egyptian and New Age crystal housed on the city’s outskirts on *Lago Sul* in a gigantic pyramid (most visited tourist site of the capital). About 300 kilometres north of Brasilia is *Alto Paraiso*, which has the highest rate of UFO sightings in the whole of the country and a thriving astral yoga and sushi sub-culture that has pretty well taken over the whole town (though we were disappointed to find that the much-discussed “discoport” constructed for flying saucers turned out to be more a wishful construction by visitors than something that could actually be tracked down and recorded for posterity).



## Estrela sublimação

*Vale do Amanhecer* was founded in 1959 by a lorry driver Tia Neiva who was visited by spirits who guided her to set up her own temple complex, and we were shown around by Paulo, a bespectacled man perhaps in his late fifties who lives in Brasilia and travels nearly every day to be where his spirits are now. There are about 500 people living in the community (many of whom, it is said, were abandoned children adopted by Tia Neiva) and another 20,000 connected to it in the surroundings (which includes a school, hostels and shops). We traced the path taken by Tia Neiva, the woman Paulo referred to throughout our time there as “my mother”, a path that novices and acolytes themselves travel each time they arrive. We four visitors arrived unannounced – an informal visit by myself, Erica Burman and two colleagues from Brasilia – but were welcomed after some warnings about the inadequate cover the women in our group had on their arms and legs. This was actually a warning that was quickly forgotten, unlike at the more formal and sanitised *Templo da Boa Vontade* where uniform skirts and trousers were provided at the entrance to conceal flesh and show respect. Around the site were some hundred or so members of *Vale do Amanhecer*, the men dressed in one of the over twenty costumes that were revealed to Tia Neiva and women in one of a similar number specified for them.



## Temple entrance

The numbers swelled from the late afternoon to sunset, and when we left there were already some few thousand milling around the site. Hand-sewn felt badges and insignia which indicated choice of spirit guide and degrees of engagement with the activities of the community ornamented the different multi-coloured designs. Many men wore high-necked long flowing capes around their rust-coloured trouser suits, and the women were dressed in combinations of bright sparkling sequined robes layered with glimmering chiffon.

Paulo led us into the main covered area of the complex, the Temple of the Dawn. To the right of the main door-way was a panel figure about five metres high of Jesus, and the entrance led us into a temple divided into two off which broke separate spaces made of brightly painted concrete and coloured tiling. These small rooms were subdivided by low tiled walls about a foot high which people walked around, and which made them look rather like municipal swimming pools emptied of water. The light was low, the music ambient and incense sweet. Tiled seating areas, which included sectors composed of groups of three seats arranged like small thrones, some decorated with Inca symbols, were occupied by groups of robed figures watching as processions of men and women and children seriously moved around the space. The mood was determined and sombre. I once or twice caught the gaze of a woman or child and then they shyly smiled. Paulo was told off when he carried on describing what was going on in one of the quiet rooms, in a *Templo do Silêncio*.



## Worship in temple

We were told we could take photos except of the *Castelo de Cura* area devoted to the process of “incorporation”. Here there were some figures, “clients” seated accompanied by a robed figure, a “medium” (most of which are reincarnations of giant *Equitumans* who landed on the earth 32,000 years back). Another medium (which are denominated either *aparás* or “doctrinators”) stood behind the client whispering and waving their hands over their heads. As I walked past one young woman she suddenly shouted out that something was present to her, that she could sense something. This “incorporation” of the spirits, we were told, is not to the inside but to the side of the body, so that the spirit then accompanies the supplicant for the rest of their journey. Some visitors not yet costumed were being given information and guidance in small ante-rooms to the main area.



## Outside temple

Paulo, greeting colleagues with “*Salve Deus*” along the way, led us out and around the town which has sprung up around the temple and to two lakes, one natural and another crafted in the shape of a five-sided shooting star, the *Estrela Candente*, where we waited to enter while watching one of the three-times-daily ceremonies that was taking place at the water's edge. This area was the *Solar dos Médiums* where *aparás* or “doctrinators” from the community lie on the concrete slabs tilted toward the water and wait for the afflicted spirits of the dead to descend from the space-ship that hovers over the *Vale*. And when those spirits have been released of their torment by the process of being channelled into the solar plexus of their host, then the energy can be carried down to the main building and there released for the good of all.



## Meeting spirits

Paulo told us that we are all reincarnated, and that he could remember his past life in France some centuries before; “some people would say that I am crazy” he said, and shrugged. He told us that the community had different names for what we would see as disorders or diseases. Someone who stole might be given the label “kleptomaniac”, for example, but the community would help find the afflicted spirit that was the cause of such behaviour. One of the ante-rooms off the Temple was devoted to those who had nothing and who needed advice about how to tackle the afflicted spirits that were over-attached to them; one wall was a portrait of a bearded man in a yellow-check cap and a jerkin with a Star of David on it who was smoking a pipe with the legend by his image (in English) “Teacher”. We asked about the gendered dress, and this reminded Paulo to insist that since his “mother”, a woman, had founded the community it was impossible for women to be treated as less equal than men. And, he added, since they had all been reincarnated from being men or women in the past, then they might be attracted to men and women today, regardless of the kind of body they inhabited. It did not make sense to treat such attraction as a sign of what outsiders called “homosexuality”. This is a very different approach from many other organised religions that pathologise non-normative sexualities.



## Sunset ceremony

While we were in the *Solar dos Médiums* a man overheard us talking, thought we were talking about him, and accused us of being in the CIA. He demanded to know of Erica where she was from, and calmed down and wandered off when she said she was English. Paulo simply said “we know him”. One of us commented that the man was “disturbed”, that perhaps he had “some problems”, but that went well beyond what Paulo had said, though did not always find it easy to understand him. Paulo had very bad few teeth, which in São Paulo (according to a colleague who works there) would mean that he would be unwelcome in any kind of service-sector job. There men who lose their teeth, and cannot afford to fix them, will apparently be the ones who take quite privileged positions in cardboard-scavenging street-work.



## Vale group on road

*Vale do Amanhecer* mixes together Christian imagery – the incorporated spirits accompany members as their guardian angels – with a number of other traditions. The Vatican sent an emissary to live with the community some years ago, and after six months a report was sent which gave some kind of mixed blessing, which concluded that it was not a dangerous racket at least, that it was (as if this is the opposite of a racket) a real religion. In the mix come mandalas and, inside the Temple, a large statue of *Pai Seta Branca* (Father White Arrow, a reincarnation of Francis of Assisi who first appeared to Tia Neiva in 1957 and led her along her journey to found the community). *Pai Seta Branca* wears an American Indian head-dress, leather sandals and holds in his hand a white arrow. Visitors pass and stop and stand for some minutes with their arms outstretched toward the lit gauze covering in front of the figure.

The entrance to the temple and the walls of a number of the ante-chambers are covered with Egyptian designs. A kiosk nearby which sells insignia for the uniforms has images of manga-style "entities" (which it was forbidden to photograph), and an advertising hoarding over the door is for a book "*Espiritualidade*" (about, it proclaimed in Portuguese, "an enigma that psychoanalysis and neuroscience is unable to decipher"). There is little explicit African imagery, a few statues of *orixas*, of Yoruban spirits (and that imagery is completely missing from the more mainstream *Templo da Boa Vontade* back in the capital). In a country where class is so racially marked, this was an absence all more curious given the greater number of black people in and around the Vale and the prevalence of this imagery in other syncretic forms developed by ex-slaves in other regions (Candomblé, Santo Daime and Umbanda).

The other-worldly aspect of the setting and its inhabitants was heightened by the presence of folk in ordinary dress behind the ice-cream stalls or wandering up and down the alley-ways off the dusty streets. Mediums stood in small groups chanting softly or sat alone on plastic chairs smoking and watching the others pass by. At one moment it was as though we really were on some alien planet imagined in an episode of *Star Trek*, and at another it was as though we were surrounded by extras on a film set waiting for the cameras to roll. There was no gift shop at the end of our tour, and Paulo wished as well and hoped to see us there again, any time we would like to return and learn more. He had already reminded us that a community that had been going for so many years "could not possibly be a lie".

After the last ceremony finished beside the natural lake people streamed into the *Solar dos Médiums* and a loud-speaker played “Silent Night”. It was full moon. The bright red earth around the Vale gave to the sunset a luminous unearthly glow, and livid scarlet drizzled and splashed from the streak of cloud onto the dark blue sky. My friend worried for a moment that I would have a conversion experience as I muttered that this is the sort of thing we will all be able to do when we are free. And it is indeed the fantasy of freedom that contemporary alienated technological landscapes like Brasilia provoke. Here in this valley was a place for an alternative technology of the self that seemed, in contrast to life in Brasilia, to be “free”. It was indeed as if the hopes of the World Social Forum movement and its allies in protest against neoliberal governmental reforms were for a moment realised, and another world was present to us already here. It was as if here was an alternative to alienating technology, the reverse of an instrumentalist vision of reason at large in the world now and which was condensed in the bureaucracy in Brasilia. This was an alternative "technology of the self" that was still conditioned by the world it set itself against.