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Reflections on Theater in a Time of Barbarism

Iná Camargo Costa

Translated by Maria Elisa Cevalco

Apagam-se as luzes: é o tempo sófrego
que principia. É preciso cantar como se alguém
soubesse como cantar

The lights are out: it is the beginning of ravenous
times. We must sing as though someone knew how.

Herberto Helder, *The Blind Muses, II*

Art is in itself the historical voice of oppressed nature.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

Practice: News from the front

When we say that capitalism has nothing to offer humanity but more barbarism, those who are immersed in the fog it produces hasten to declare that there is no alternative, and they do so without taking into account the fact that they are subscribing to the thesis of the beneficiaries of the system — not to mention deeper complicities. It is for them that I begin by quoting some data which have been recently published in the alternative press, in places like the newspaper *Brasil de Fato* and the magazine *Caros Amigos*.

Between 2000 and 2004, the arms industry in the US grew 60%; it deploys about \$100 billion a year in infrastructure projects, technical assistance, operational analysis, logistics and security, surveillance, and information services. The United States officially has 725 military bases on all continents, except the Arctic — obviously the secret ones are not included

in this figure. There are about 500,000 soldiers, spies, technical personnel, teachers, and aides working for the Pentagon and the CIA in other countries (*Brasil de fato*).

In an article published in the January 2007 edition of *Caros Amigos*, properly entitled “Fragments of Barbarism,” Jose Arbex, Jr. presents the following appraisal of the beginning of the twenty-first century: “the landscape in whole regions of the planet resembles the shambles left by the Nazi monster at the moment of its collapse: 600,000 people were killed in Iraq in the last three years alone; Palestinian women and children are murdered by Israeli troops on a daily basis; one billion people are suffering from malnutrition or famine in the continents of the South; pockets of poverty fester in the suburbs of Paris and of other great capitalist metropolises; whole populations are abandoned to their fates in New Orleans and in other regions of the United States; the population in Russia is shrinking due to hunger and alcoholism; millions of peasants are expelled from their land by the supposedly communist dictatorship in China attending to the demands of transnational corporations; we are witnessing the vertiginous increase, all over the world, in the rates of criminality and corruption and in the number of armed gangs. ...In London there is a surveillance camera for every fourteen inhabitants.”

Once we have mentioned England, a country that has contributed so much to the violent consolidation and expansion of the capitalist system, we might as well take a look at France. In the country that was once the land of “liberty, equality, fraternity,” nine new bills on delinquency were approved between 2002 and 2006, and a new bill aimed at the “prevention of delinquency” is under examination by the legislature. Among other humanitarian measures, it reduces the age of penal majority to sixteen years of age; it envisages denying privileged status to communications between defendants and psychiatrists, educators, and social workers; and proposes administrative sanctions against the families of children and adolescents facing “difficulties.” These are measures that make the Foucaultian panopticon seem like child’s play.

Of course the choice of the three major Western capitalist nations to illustrate the advances of barbarism is not unmotivated. Not only do they constitute the core of the Allied Forces who won the last two wars (World War II and the Cold War) but they also constitute the models of “successful societies” and provide the economic, cultural, and social referents for the image of a First World. Meanwhile, in Pindorama,¹ the talk of the town since 2006 is the need to use the Army Special Forces, created in 2003 by the Lula administration, to fight “organized crime,” a phenomenon that has begun to

challenge the State itself — thus demonstrating to the destitute that in countries like Brazil security is a privilege.

These data confirm the theses presented by Robert Kurz in his book *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung (The Collapse of Modernization)* 15 years ago.² There this true twentieth-century Cassandra warned that countries like Brazil (as well as those of the African Continent and eastern Europe) had already been victimized by the exhaustion of the capitalist system, and the next victims would be the Western centers. Even people on the Left reacted with incredulity to these “predictions,” declaring that they were too pessimistic. It is worth quoting him at length so that we can appreciate how right he was. “It is highly probable that the bourgeois world of total money and of the modern commodity will enter, before the end of the twentieth century, into a time of darkness, of chaos, and of a decadence of social structures unprecedented in world history. The two dimensions of this collapse, which will only hit the Western World (its main cause) later on, are, on one hand, the worldwide social dimension of the system and, on the other, its massive dynamics. No one can predict the duration of this major historical crisis nor the forms it will take.”

It is possible to understand the main argument — which comes from the Marxist tradition — even without any basic understanding of political economy. Since the capitalist system can only develop on the basis of the exploitation of the work force, it begins to decline the moment it is no longer able to do so on the scale required by its own development. And this has been the case ever since the last technological revolution, responsible for the phenomenon economists and sociologists call “structural unemployment.” One of its most evident consequences is organized crime.

Since the system is global, the signs of the general catastrophe first arise in the periphery and then reach the center. The end of the crisis may be, if we are lucky, the supersession of the system itself. But since this has not come about, we all live in the barbarous era which we Pindoramans entered long ago. The center has officially been hit by the crisis only in the present century, which, for this very reason, offers us a chance to live through interesting times — as the Chinese curse goes.

Characterizing Barbarism

With the movement “Art against Barbarism,” organized in the late 1990s, as its seismograph, the theater scene in São Paulo began to register the fact that the effects of the social catastrophe had hit even the sectors of Brazilian society that used to be relatively insulated. At the same time, some intellectuals, taking their lead from Kurz’s insights, began to turn sustained attention

to the theme. Thus, Marildo Menegat wrote his PhD dissertation “After the End of the World,” and in 2006 he published a collection of essays called *O olho da barbarie* [Regarding Barbarism]. The titles leave little doubt as to his interests. In one of the essays, he makes the timely observation that while in the first half of the 1990s it was considered weird to talk in terms of barbarism, “nowadays, when the latest event supersedes the previous one in its powers of destruction and already foretells the next one, the theme has become an obvious one.”³

With recourse to classics like Rosa Luxemburg, who made use of the concept of barbarism to understand the First World War, and to Marx and Engels, who on more than one occasion defined barbarism as the anachronism of social relations vis-à-vis the development of productive forces (in its modern form, an epidemic of overproduction that leads to the destruction of productive forces),⁴ Menegat, again taking inspiration from Kurz’s circle, this time from the *Manifesto against Labor*,⁵ reconstructs the process through which abstract labor (the kind we undertake to pay our bills), has been transformed into an archaic productive force on its way to supersession. This of course confirms Marx’s prediction that one day human beings would no longer be necessary as productive forces. This comes about precisely due to the fact that the “sociability articulated around the valorization of capital excludes millions of individuals from its social logic.”⁶ This is the essential aspect of barbarism that concerns peripheral societies in particular, as we are among the excluded. We will return to this later on.

Given the exclusion of millions of workers from the simple possibility of getting a paid job, or, to say the same thing in other words, to sell their labor power, it is timely to re-introduce another of the classics of socialist literature, Paul Lafargue’s *The Right to Be Lazy*. In this book, written at the time in which workers were fighting for the reduction of the work day to eight hours, Lafargue, who was a medical doctor, warned that work and its ascetic morality produced straitened souls and weak and degraded bodies. He thus recommended that we deal with work in the same manner that we deal with any commodity in times of scarcity: we should ration it and distribute it evenly to all. In this way, everyone would be able to dedicate their daily lives to “to accomplish the beautiful work of living a life among free and associated men.”⁷ As a militant of the socialist party, he knew that such rationing of the little work available would not come about on the initiative of those who were the beneficiaries of the over-exploitation of the work force, but as a result of a great deal of struggle involving both the unemployed and the employed.

With Paul Lafargue we introduce another aspect of barbarism, one that has been a theme on the Left since the nineteenth century: since the secret of

capitalism is the exploitation of the work force, its benefits can never be universalized no matter the level reached by the development of the productive forces. The main benefit, which is the right to idleness, is always denied to workers. This is an aspect of our current state of barbarism, as witness the systematic attacks on retirement rights.

In Brazil, Modernist writers like Mário and Oswald de Andrade dedicated themselves to this theme. The former created the character Macunaíma whose motto — “Oh, I feel so lazy” — speaks for itself. The latter, in the theses he presented when competing for a job at the University of São Paulo, “The Crisis of Messianic Philosophy,” echoes Lafargue when he says that “man accepts work in order to conquer idleness. ...Today, when we have reached an era in which machines work by themselves, man leaves his condition of a slave and arrives at the threshold of the dawning of the Age of Idleness. ...All social techniques aim at reducing work. This is the share of idleness to which every man has a right. And the common ideal becomes retirement, which is the metaphysics of idleness.”⁸

But we might as well remember that both those authors wrote under the optimistic inspiration which is a mark of all modernisms. As they were also defeated by barbarism, one of the tasks for those of us who have decided to confront the latter is to include them in our Garden of the Muses: we should learn both from Macunaíma’s laziness and from the revaluation of idleness which marks Oswald’s anthropophagic utopias. In this way, as he said, we can all be freed from the horrors of abstract work and can dedicate ourselves to speculation, to the arts, and to the feats of spirit.

Theater groups in a time of barbarism

Many of the participants of our independent theater groups are engaged with theater for two basic reasons. The first is a subjective one and it is certainly the most important: it is, of course, the desire to become an artist. This is quite a legitimate reason but with one component that few have taken into account: why not do something else? Why choose to be an artist when there are so many other professions available, most of them more immediately socially useful ones like fireman, garbage collector, mason, teacher, agricultural laborer, doctor, etc.? One of the rarely invoked reasons for this is the economic one, and this in a sense that few recognize: until they discover the very real difficulties involved in this profession, all that choose it believe that it is not heavy work, and that if one succeeds, one will lead the good life, with lots of money and all the benefits of affluence. As this belief is a more or less generalized, we who work in the theater should not be surprised when we are regarded with some (or enormous) suspicion that we are vagabonds.

And all things considered, from the point of view of a mason or of any other worker who has to put in hard physical labor, there is really a hint of laziness (synonymous with light work) in the profession we chose. Whether this is really the case is another matter.

But another reason to become a member of an independent theater group may simply be the lack of a better option. It might well be the case that we are all on this bandwagon because we have not yet been able to enter the cultural job market: maybe due to our lack of capacity to invest or to raise funds, or to find sponsors to produce hit plays. Or, most probably, because the market — that is showbiz and the culture industry — have no interest in exploiting our work force. This, as we all know, is a highly trained work force (at the very least merely in terms of years of training: it takes about eleven years to form an actor, if we take into account primary schooling). In a country like Brazil, which officially recognizes a 70% rate of functional illiteracy in the adult population, eleven years of schooling almost configures high specialization — and I do not mean a university education.

Once we have made the choice, or have faced up to the lack of a choice, we call ourselves theater workers and yet we haven't posed to ourselves elementary questions like "why do we do it," or "for whom do we do it?" The usual answer, "we do it for those who want to attend our plays," is the best way to evade the problem and to remain comfortably within the hegemonic ideology of the market. By the way, our anxiety over how our work will be reviewed by the press is the clearest symptom that deep inside, all we want is to find a space in the market, even a precarious one marked as "alternative" or, at best, as a "cult" attraction — knowing full well that the culture sections in the major papers are nothing more than cultural supermarkets.

In other words, we are excluded from the circuits which constitute the market; that is, showbiz, very much including alternative spaces and spaces for erudite art. We are also excluded from the culture industry: radio, television, newspapers, publishing houses, film producers, or advertisement agencies. We produce a kind of art that the majority of the people in our societies have never even heard about. Paraphrasing the evaluation made by Augusto Boal at the end of the 1960s: if we suddenly closed our doors, there wouldn't be a single gesture of protest. This is our greatest precariousness: we only exist because we are stubborn. As it is organized today, society does not need us.

It does not need us because, first of all, as we saw above, the market as a whole, including the cultural market, is shrinking for reasons which are intrinsic to the logic of capital — this explains phenomena like the recent official patronage of enterprises like Cirque du Soleil, whose performances in

Brazil were underwritten by a massive tax break. This subsidy, to a profit-making enterprise that sells tickets at over \$100, was granted by a national government that cannot even maintain decent public schools. We have also mentioned the fact that we are among the millions excluded from the interests of the market: when we manage any sort of precarious integration in the market, it is always in the worst of conditions and within a very limited time span. Furthermore, we tend not to pay enough attention to the real functions theater and culture in general have in our times.

Having become fully industrialized, culture has also become part of the effort to expand capital.⁹ This is its most important function, but there is still its ideological function, to use a term which has been philosophically superseded. Updating Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis in their celebrated essay on the culture industry, Menegat introduces the concept of the culture of destruction in order to assess what remains of the diagnosis offered by the Frankfurt philosophers, what has been intensified, and what is new in these times of industrialized semi-culture.

In order to understand the function of semi-culture, it is important to understand the forms of articulation of the different levels of the social production of violence in the present era of barbarism. Thus, in the economic sphere, we have the arms industry as the forerunner in the process of destruction of the productive forces (as we saw above, it has grown at the rate of 60% in four years). In the social sphere, we witness the traumatic replacement of politics by the police, and individuals — both the included and the excluded — can find no means of representing to themselves the aggressiveness of the vulnerable.

In short, violence has become a habit: suffice it to observe how easily it manifests itself in everyday social relations, where we have the permanent war of all against all. We can then properly speak of a culture of violence, as it is aestheticized in the works of the culture industry, functioning as a stabilizing vehicle in the structuring of barbarism.

As violence begins to express itself in the smallest technical innovations in everyday life — it is their content — "a bunker is formed around the individual, in order to protect him from any experience of a complex life or of the thinking necessary to face it." Vulnerability migrates to the permanent fear of economic catastrophe and the implosion of society: "The feeling of being permanently in a state of panic is the sensuous form of manifestation of insensitivity. That is, it expresses from a private point of view the feeling of the destruction of any sense of the public; it is the impotence of the individual manifested as fear. It is the emptiness that hounds the masses after depolitization, after its individual identities have been reduced to the necessary minimum for the fulfillment of its functions. The culture then

produced becomes an invisible shield protecting individual psyches..., it protects them from any form of alterity which might disturb their participation in the universalization of the commodity, which is precisely what produces the catastrophe of our times.”¹⁰

The production of insensitivity is a result of a procedure that has been fully demonstrated in the Frankfurtian analysis of the products of the culture industry, which all follow the same procedure, whether they are songs, novels, magazines, radio programs, television, video games, or virtual communities: the products of the culture industry are emptied out of any expressivity and they remind the individual how best to keep away from any feeling. This obstruction of sensitivity is essential to a social construction that legitimates the exclusion of the acting masses from public space. Instead of political rallies we have mega shows.

Properly trained in the construction of an insensitivity on the edge of a panic attack, enmeshed in the total commodification of the world and immersed in its semi-culture (with its daily ration of fiction, sports, religion, and boundless sex), the individual attacks everything that excludes him: real culture is hated by the masses, who, like pariahs, have already realized that in a bourgeois society their function is to keep their identity with the productive forces. Any form of refined behavior that carries within itself a hint of the possibility of another world in which the masses themselves would have more at stake, including a taste for what was once called high culture, appears as socially unacceptable and is always violently rejected.

As Walter Benjamin noted in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the function of art and culture in times of capitalist expansion was to cover the presence of barbarism.¹¹ Nowadays, its function is to condition individuals to live in a situation in which barbarism is visible in every pore of social life, and to allow them to be freed of any scruple that comes with the attachment to a civilizing process. Reality shows are true training processes in this form.

In concluding his book, Menegat warns us that efficiency now designates the principal criterion of the present day society of barbarism, and that under the current system it will never be considered efficient to organize social life around concepts like rights, dignity, freedom, or democracy. And yet what is at stake is precisely the right to life, and this not only for the excluded, but also for those who believe themselves to be included or to have a chance of being included through abstract labor.

Testimonials

With different degrees of critical consciousness of the functions of semi-culture, the work being developed by theater groups in this new century constitutes well-thought-out testimonials of the way we live (?) in times of barbarism. These groups refuse to serve barbarism — which of course makes their inclusion in the cultural market much more difficult than they suppose. Without any pretension to exhaustiveness, or of making use of any other criteria but the thematic — not even a chronological one — I will then enumerate what we have been seeing in the past few years.

Of course the first reference is to *Babylon*, a play written by Reinaldo Maia and directed by Marco Antonio Rodrigues. It was produced by the group Foliás D’Arte in 2001. This play is a radical aesthetic reflection on the many senses of exclusion. The play describes a group of street artists who are reduced to the condition of beggars or of homelessness. They have already got used to the state of barbarism and thus demonstrate with the utmost clarity that their rules are the same as those in the “organized world.” The play takes the logic of the commodity to its conclusion, as it operates even over the destinies of the totally excluded: the group in the play still cultivates the hope of being included in the art market. Their hopes are proved totally unfounded, with the analytic result that the artists have no chance of changing their status.

The Companhia do Latão [Tin Company] is one of the founders of a movement that since 1999 unites a number of theater groups in São Paulo under the significant name of Art against Barbarism. The Companhia do Latão take their name from Brecht’s essay *Der Messingkauf — The Buying of Copper*. In 1972 they produced the *Comédia do Trabalho [Comedy of Work]*, a text written by the group and directed by Sérgio de Carvalho and Márcio Marciano. This production demonstrates that a notion which emerged from our present phase of finance capital — that the work force has become a commodity that no one wants to buy — was evident much earlier and available as a theme of representation. And in the *Auto dos bons tratos [Down Home Hospitality: An Auto-da-Fé]* (2002) the company made it clear that in its Brazilian version, the civilizing effort has always depended on barbarian practices, like slavery and genocide. Part of what makes Companhia do Latão so special is precisely this revealing of the marks of barbarism which are always part and parcel of our so called cordial sociability.

Engenho Teatral [Theater Factory] produced in the last years two complementary plays, *Pequenas histórias que à história não contam [Little Histories That Don’t Make History]* and *Em pedaços [In Pieces]*. The first is

a detailed panorama of the dimensions of barbarism as seen from the angle of an intellectual who still tries to understand it and from the angle of those who are immersed in it. The latter range from the informal worker (who, because she goes to live TV shows, believes she will one day become an artist), to the urban poor (like a woman who is made homeless because authorities pull down her house to open a new street). The second play makes its characters face the infernal dialectics of market domination, which at one and the same time excludes and demands that those excluded keep on fighting for inclusion.

Mire veja [Look See], by the Companhia do Feijão [Bean Company], superimposes several narratives that together construct a terrifying image of the ways in which the metropolis produces total inhumanity amidst illusions, dreams, and alienations. *Nonada [Nothing]*, by the same group, materializes class struggle as it historically manifests itself in Brazil. It also shows that as a consequence of this process, our ruling class preempts any type of movement by the dominated and imposes on them its own version of their history.

With the play *Bastianas [Abigails]*, Companhia São Jorge stages the results of its research among institutions that are dedicated to different categories of the excluded. It reopens the discussion of the frontier between public and private, and organizes and articulates the voices of those who were slaughtered by History. Starting from the political decision to equate the narrators of the many stories (interlocking, as in real life) with the female deities of candomblé,¹² the group is able to configure myriad experiences of the excluded, all of them of relevance to our theme here. And to go on with a play that establishes a close dialogue with this one, *Higiene*, by Group XIX, enacts at the same time a small genocide conducted in the name of urban development (or speculation) and the scientific/technological discourse that accompanies it.

And of course I could not fail to mention the work of Nucleo Barolomeu. They are undertaking perhaps the most comprehensive of all the research under way by São Paulo theater groups. They have even invented a new form, hip-hop theater. The group turned inside out the Calderon de la Barca classic *La vida es sueño [Life Is a Dream]* with their *Acordei que sonhava [I Woke Up That I Was Dreaming]* and have created temporary zones of striking autonomy with the project *Urgência nas ruas [Emergency in the Streets]*. They erupted in busy streets in downtown São Paulo and enacted lyrical interventions based on chosen themes such as love and passion, arrivals and farewells, and garbage collecting. In 2007 their play *Frátia [Brotherland]* incorporates more fully their experiments with hip-hop and presents an inventory of the most violent and scandalous aspects of

present day barbarism. And they do all that without losing sight of (or failing to represent) the thousand and one ways in which references to what used to be called high culture still permeate everything.

A possible horizon

The enumeration of theater groups I have just presented has the sole function of showing how independent theater groups have a clear perception of the advance of barbarism, and the ways in which, in defiance of the imperatives of the semi-culture, they endeavor to present it in its various manifestations. What seems to be lacking is a certain awareness of the significance of their aesthetic and political feats and the horizons they may open up. This is partially due to the fact that the fierce struggle for survival does not leave much room for certain luxuries.

It is partially due to this hypotheses that it might be a good idea to suggest that a fundamental part of the current research may be the search for utopia. Again professor Marildo Menegat's book is a possible inspiration. In the last chapter of his *O olho na barbarie*, he presents a version of a famous utopia as retold by Italian emigrants to Southern Brazil. This is the story of the country of Cocagne which was first told in thirteenth-century France, as a response to the scarcity and threat represented by the dismantling of the medieval world and the onset of the capitalist era. In Cocagne, "the more you sleep, the more you earn"; there is no need to work, no commerce, and no prohibitions. To dream of idleness seems to be the only solace left to those condemned to the sufferings inflicted by abstract labor.

Inspired in the research undertaken by Hilário Franco Junior, Menegat tells us the sad fate reserved for this dream in nineteenth-century Southern Brazil: the coyotes of the day used it to attract Italian migrants to Brazil, which they said was situated in Cuccagna.¹³

Through cordel narratives,¹⁴ as professor Hilario Franco Junior tells us, we have also created a version of Cocagne in a land called São Saruê. In a poem by Manuel Camilo dos Santos published in 1947 one reads:

Everything there is good and easy,
There is no need to buy;
There's no hunger, there's no illness,
Life is simply living high;
It is a lovely land of plenty,
And work is never nigh.

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It is an idle wondrous place,
Where I spent so many days;
I spent them happy and contented,
In a loving happy haze;
And I had nothing more to do
Than to recite my tender lays.

It is not by chance that another group, Teatro dos Narradores [Narrators' Theater], in their most recent experiment, a cabaret piece inspired by the *Manifesto against Labor*, includes in their play one of the most sophisticated versions of the trip to Cognac: the tango-habanera "Youkali," by Kurt Weill, with lyrics by Roger Fernay. This song was composed for an opera, *Maria Galante*, in 1934 — when Weill was in exile — and is inspired by the setbacks suffered by a prostitute in Panama. She dreams about going back home, and the story is more realistic than other versions of the legend as it ends referring to the need to face a hard and hostile reality. Any similarity with our present challenges is not a coincidence.

Keeping an eye on the enemy

When stumbling over the obstacles created by older forms of the culture industry (radio and cinema), Brecht formulated a challenge that remains, to this day, largely unacknowledged by those who work or reflect on the theater. He observed that intellectuals and artists, even though they work under ignoble conditions, see themselves as free from the determinations that other workers must submit to. And this is due to the fact that they understand freedom as the free market and the freedom they aspire to is the freedom to compete in the sales of opinions, knowledge, or technical abilities. They do not even admit being called intellectual workers, as they see themselves as entrepreneurs, or as petty bourgeois. Among these creative entrepreneurs we can still find some who believe they are free to renounce the new instruments of work. But this kind of freedom is exercised outside the productive process: there are no forms of thinking or of art that are exempt from the influence of modern technologies. Thinking and art are commodities through and through, or else they do not exist.

In simpler terms, the rise of the culture industry transformed the idea of art and thought as independent from the market into a thing of the past. Whoever makes art, regardless of what one wants to say with it, will only have any impact if he or she fights for the right to do so inside the productive process which, in our days, is controlled by the culture industry, including, of course, showbiz.

Reflections on Theater 75

This was already clear for Brecht in 1930, when there was no television and no monopoly of the means of communication that determine the form of content. In his terms, the idea that it is only by renouncing the themes and forms we are interested in — that is, by submitting to the requirements of capital — that we will gain access to the means of production and diffusion of the arts, is a false one, and it can be explained politically. If capital and its agents no longer produce either art or culture, they can no longer open up a space for those like us, and we have to impose on them a "rationing of labor" so that we can all have access to the modern means of production. Those are the obstacles we have to remove from the path that will take us to the country of Cognac. And there it will no longer be necessary to sell either our work force or our products: as the proponent of "temporary zones of autonomy" put it, the removal of all barriers between artists and users of art will tend to be a condition in which the artist is not a special kind of person, but very person is a special kind of artist.

Theory: Acquired rights

Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, with the experiments of the naturalists, theater has conquered rights that are not, to this day, respected by the critics, by part of the public, and worst of all, by practitioners themselves. Those rights refer to ways of writing plays, of choosing their subject matter, and of staging them — very much including the work of the actors and the function of the director.

The most important conquest, which is to this day contested by the adversaries of a theater that conceives of itself (to start right away using the language of Hegel and Adorno) as the consciousness of the destitution of our world, is the right to deal with any subject without submitting to the interdictions of the dramatic sphere, which prescribes as a fit subject only the field of interpersonal relations within the sphere of private life. For over a century the theater has been able to deal with the most intimate subjectivity as well as with the most epic matters — including history, economics, and politics. No one can say, without betraying his academic conservatism, that there is any subject which is not fit for the theater.

This conquest has led theater which is still vital to force the most important traditional categories of dramatic form into early retirement. These traditional forms are now reduced to possible choices among many options. The first to go was the category of closed action, to this day better known as "unity of action." That was soon followed by jettisoning the category of the empirical flux of time, that is, a present that points to a future. In its place we

now have experiments with simultaneous time, flashbacks, flashforwards, and all the possible combinations of temporal dimensions.

Strindberg, even though he was not aware of it, invented a narrator and thus did away with the absolute or self-sufficient scene in which characters evolve without the mediation of a point of view. His narrator practices a monologue disguised as dialogue which we call free indirect discourse. This type of discourse discards the verisimilitude of realist theater, undoes all the conventions or categories of character-individuation and causality. For the first time, he structures a drama according to the categories of composition identified by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: condensation, fusion, superposition, substitution, allusion, metaphor, and metonymy, among other less prestigious ones. His station-drama even makes use even of explicit quotes in form and in content. It is then no exaggeration to say that with this playwright, theater has technically consummated its freedom to deal with all literary, theatrical, and rhetorical genres.

The next chapter was written by expressionist theater. From then on, one cannot separate the text from the staging. With expressionism comes the awareness that all elements in a scene — actor and set, costumes, props, makeup, setting, lighting, sound effects: all have the same weight in the definition of the work as the text, which had hitherto reigned supreme. From now on, the text is one element among others in the theatrical experiment. Georg Kaiser identifies, among others, the following conquests of twentieth-century technical repertoire: in order to specify subjective (rather than purely objective) aspects, setting has become abstract, indeterminate, non-existent, distorted. Props, which can also be used as a substitute for costumes, are reduced to essentials so as to symbolize, rather than identify, social types; figures are used instead of characters to represent social groups; dialogue and action are fragmented; collective scenes are composed through allusion, through the use of choreographed rhythms. Expressionism also conquered a right which had been claimed since naturalism; that is, the right to speak openly about class struggle and to show the classes engaged in all direct and indirect forms of struggle, as was the case of Ernst Toller.

At the same time that the experiments and achievements of expressionism were taking place in Germany, the repertoire I have listed so far was taken to its ultimate consequences in Russia, and later in the Soviet Union, for the simple fact that they had had a proletarian revolution.

The last chapter in this history of achievements was written by Brecht's generation, starting with Erwin Piscator. It was actors and directors like them who adopted the concept of epic theater to make it clear that the theater they made had nothing to do with the categories of dramatic theater, which were still invoked by adversary criticism. On more than one occasion Brecht

declared that his own theater was part of the tradition inaugurated by naturalist experiments, by which he wanted to emphasize that epic theater claimed all the categories introduced by the break in the unity of action, which had been developed by the introduction of the narrator and radicalized by the political engagement of agitprop. After Brecht, there is no place for any normative aesthetics in theater.

The aesthetics of materials

In the field of aesthetics, dialectical thought, which was inaugurated by Hegel and taken to its final consequences by Adorno, showed us that the very separation between form and content is in itself a strategy employed by conservative thought in order to delay, or even to prevent, the comprehension of more significant artistic praxis. In other words, we can say that ever since the bourgeoisie succeeded in transforming all spheres of life into commodities, it is part of the duties of mercantile thought to secure, in the field of culture, the separation between form and content and the upholding of normative categories and values that have already been superseded in theater. Among those values are a rigid division of genres and their respective rules of composition and functioning; the professionalization of artists (meaning their submission to the rules of productive work under capital); the radical separation between art and truth; the definition of success as acceptance and consecration by the market (even though this may be restricted to a niche); and, in order to avoid endless enumeration, we can sum it all up by saying that the main duty of this kind of thought is to maintain itself as an active vehicle for the conservation of the dominant ideology though the defense of its formal components (in the case of the theater: dramatic action, rhythm, characters, realistic dialogue) as supposedly eternal and independent of content.

Instead of serving the values of the continuity of domination, a consequent theatrical criticism, allied with the experimental practices inaugurated by naturalism, can cultivate other values like the ones enumerated below, all present in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* — which I am not going to quote so as not to fill up this brief compilation with footnotes.

Criticism can only be justified because, as in social reality, the truth content of the works of art cannot be immediately apprehended. The task of criticism is to apprehend the truth or falsity of a work. Works of art are not conceptual, neither do they enunciate judgments in discursive form. Nonetheless, they have a specific logic, and the task of analysis is to identify this logic. The consonance of all the logical moments of a work constitutes its form. The difficulty of isolating the form is conditioned by the interlocking

of aesthetic form and its content. Form must be conceived either against the content or through it, and the artist can decide freely what kind of relation he wants to establish in his own work. In other words, we cannot establish from outside or a priori what kind of relation it will be.

Aesthetic form is the objective organization of everything that appears as coherent language in the work. Form is an unfolding of the truth of the dispersal that form organizes and conserves in its divergence and contradictions. Every work is a system of contradictions. It is in form that works reveal themselves to be self-critiques, and it is through form that works annihilate the practices and works which were consecrated in the past — even as they reinvent practices that have been suppressed by domination. Form is, in itself, sedimented social content. The secret model of a work of art is history.

Once it has been disentangled from convention, no work of art can convincingly present a conclusion in an overt form. That is why the audience of the most consequent plays cannot know whether the play has finished or is going to continue. The incapacity to conclude becomes a freely chosen principle of procedure or of expression.

A concept that may help advance the dialectics of form and content is that of material. This can be defined as the content mediated by the form. A definition for content may be “everything that happens in time.” Materials are everything an artist deals with: words, colors, sounds, their combinations, and the technical procedures proper to them. Forms are also materials.

The amplification of available materials in modern times mocks the old divisions between artistic genres. The material is historical through and through: it depends on the transformations of technique in the same way that the latter depends on the materials it elaborates.

Giving artistic configuration to any subject, theme, or motif consists in turning it into an important thing. Profound and socially relevant experiences are sedimented in the form this configuration takes. The artist’s intention, which is not to be mistaken for the content, works as a subjectively organizing force. That is why the analysis has to take into consideration the process that relates intention and material (many intentions turn into their opposites). The meaning of the work, which is not the final word about it, is a result of this dialectic. In contemporary works of art the ruptures between intention and effective realization multiply: the content manifests itself in those ruptures as well as in the realization itself.

Everything that is part of a work of art contributes, in a mediated or in an unmediated form, to the production of its meaning, but the parts have not all the same weight. The differentiation of weights is one of the most efficient ways of articulating the parts. Montage, one of the most eloquent of the

means of articulation, is also the way art makes explicit its impotence before capitalism. The negation of a synthesis becomes a principle of configuration; its residues suggest the meaning of visible scars. Montage denounces and negates the appearance of the organic character of experience. By means of the episode, the work admits in itself the impossibility of the identity of the one and the many as a moment of its unity. But there is a ruse of the work as well as of Reason, and the renunciation of unity as a formal principle still remains a unity. That is another of the reasons why every contemporary work is exposed to the risk of total failure. With its weaknesses, its stains, and its fallibility, the work of art is a critique of success.

Given its linguistic character, the “I” that speaks in any work is collective. In works of art, even in the ones which are considered individual, it is a “we” that speaks. Music says “we” right away, regardless of its intention. The aesthetic “we” is globally social, within the horizon of a certain indeterminacy, which is, nonetheless, as determined as the productive forces and the relations of production which are dominant in a given period.

The internal structuration and the rigor of a work depend on some sort of comprehension of reality. Therefore, what gives the work internal coherence comes from outside. The name of this comprehension is social reflection. The historical moment is constitutive of works of art; authentic works are those which surrender without reserve to the material content of their time and have no pretensions over it. They are the unconscious historiography of their period. The realization of art is in itself. Likewise, its cognitive power also proceeds in a dialectical way.

Art manifests itself at its most vivid precisely in the moments in which it destroys its own concept. What art is does not depend on the consciousness works have of themselves. Many works, such as documents, to give one example, are art even though they do not present themselves as such.

The artist does not fear the accusation of incomprehensibility leveled at demanding works. What seems intelligible to all is precisely what has become incomprehensible. Individuals manipulated by ideology reject what is in fact perfectly comprehensible: as Freud says, at bottom the uncanny is too familiar. That is the reason why it is rejected. Works that are submitted to conventions (because these are well known) die at the very moment in which they become accessible. The opposite is also true: vanguardist interpretations of traditional works, with rare exceptions, are false, absurd, and objectively incomprehensible.

The quality of a work of art is defined essentially by whether it exposes or avoids the irreconcilable. Profound works are the ones that do not mask divergences or contradictions. When they make contradiction appear, such works thereby admit the possibility of reconciliation. But of course giving

form to antagonisms does not suppress or reconcile them: present times radically refuse any possibility of reconciliation. The quality of a work also depends on its degree of articulation, and the demand for articulation means that every single idea must be pushed to its extreme. The more a work is articulated, the more it expresses its conceptions through this articulation. Last, the quality of a work of art depends on its truth content, which is profoundly historical.

Technique is the aesthetic name given to the mastery of the material, and the technique of a work is determined by its problems. In themselves, the technical forces of a period are nothing. They receive their positional value in relation to their function in the work and, in the final analysis, to the truth content of what is written, composed, or painted.

Every formal element in a work has implications for content that extend into the realm of the political. Art must proclaim its freedom in relation to the principles of property. And the function of aesthetics is to make forms eloquent. This can be done even in a time of barbarism, as the recent work of theater groups in São Paulo attests.

Notes

¹ A Tupi word for the territory they called “Land of Palms,” hence a non-nationalist word for Brazil. [Trans.]

² Robert Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1994).

³ Marildo Menegat, *O olho da barbárie* (São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2006) 10.

⁴ See *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (New York: Norton, 1988) 59-61.

⁵ http://members.blackbox.net/oebgdk/krisis_manifest-englisch.html

⁶ Menegat 39.

⁷ Cited in Menegat 348.

⁸ Oswald de Andrade, “A crise da filosofia messiânica,” cited in Menegat 346.

⁹ In this and following paragraphs we will be paraphrasing ideas proposed in *Depois do fim do mundo* [*After the End of the World*] (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2003) ch. 3, “Cultura da destruição” [“The Culture of Destruction.”] 115-90.

¹⁰ Menegat 170.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” esp. Thesis VII. *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 253-264.

¹² An Afro-Brazilian religion. [Trans.]

¹³ See Hilario Franco Junior, *Cocanha: várias faces de uma utopia* [*Cocagne: The Many Faces of a Utopia*] (São Paulo: Ateliê, 1998), and *Cocanha: A história de um*

país imaginário [*Cocagne: The History of an Imaginary Country*] (Companhia das Letras: 2001

¹⁴ A popular folk literary form, illustrated by woodcuts, from Northeastern Brazil. [Trans.]