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# **When Peasants Enter the Scene: Brazil's landless rural workers movement (MST) theatrical work and the interface with audiovisual language**

Rafael Litvin Villas Bôas<sup>1</sup>

Felipe Canova<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universidade de Brasília – UnB, Brasília/DF, Brazil

**ABSTRACT – When Peasants Enter the Scene: Brazil's landless rural workers movement (MST) theatrical work and the interface with audiovisual language** – In this article it is analyzed the presence of peasants in the Brazilian theater, in a historical perspective from the pre-coup of 1964 until the recent period, in which connections were established between social movements like MST and political theater collectives and grassroots video. It is object of analysis in this paper the MST relations with these collectives and the places that the theatrical language started to occupy on MST, as well as the influences of several theatrical forms and the relation of this language with the audiovisual. The research seeks to highlight that the relation mediated by the socialization of the artistic means of production can replace the terms of the debate between theme and form: if the land can belong to everyone, art is also an inherent element of the human condition, not only relegated to those who specialized in the craft.

**Keywords:** Political Theater. Theater of the Oppressed. Grassroots Video. Agrarian Issue. Peasantry.

**RESUMÉ – Quand les Paysans entrent en Scène: travail théâtral MST et interface avec le langage audiovisuel** – Cet article analyse la présence de paysans sur le théâtre brésilien, dans une perspective historique allant des années précédant le coup d'État de 1964 jusqu'à la période récente, au cours desquelles des liens ont été établis entre des mouvements sociaux tels que le MST et le théâtre politique et des collectifs de vidéos populaires. L'objet de l'analyse du travail est la relation MST avec ces collectifs et les places que le langage théâtral a fini par occuper dans le MST, ainsi que les influences de différentes formes théâtrales et la relation de ce langage avec l'audiovisuel. La recherche cherche à souligner que la relation médiatisée par la socialisation des moyens de production artistiques peut remplacer les termes du débat entre thème et forme: si la terre peut appartenir à tout le monde, l'art est aussi un élément inhérent de la condition humaine, et pas seulement relégué à ceux qui sont spécialisés dans le métier.

**Mots-clés:** Théâtre Politique. Théâtre des Opprimés. Vidéo Populaire. Question Agraire. Paysannerie.

**RESUMO – Quando Camponeses Entram em Cena: trabalho teatral do MST e a interface com a linguagem audiovisual** – Neste artigo é analisada a presença dos camponeses no teatro brasileiro, em perspectiva histórica desde os anos pré-golpe de 1964 até o período recente, no qual as conexões foram estabelecidas entre movimentos sociais como o MST e coletivos de teatro político e vídeo popular. São objeto de análise do trabalho as relações do MST com esses coletivos e os lugares que a



linguagem teatral passou a ocupar no MST, bem como as influências de diversas formas teatrais e a relação dessa linguagem com o audiovisual. A pesquisa procura destacar que a relação mediada pela socialização dos meios de produção artísticos é capaz de recolocar os termos do debate entre tema e forma: se a terra pode ser de todos, a arte também é um elemento inerente à condição humana, e não apenas relegado aos que se especializaram no ofício.

Palavras-chave: **Teatro Político. Teatro do Oprimido. Vídeo Popular. Questão Agrária. Campesinato.**

## Introduction

*It was about a successful rebellion – in Brazil, only in theater the revolutions are successful...*

*Today, the creation of MST brings hope back* (Boal, on the play *Mutirão em Novo Sol*, 2000, p. 203).

Starting from the analysis of the peasant's presence in the Brazilian theatrical scenario, cinema and grassroots video productions, from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century until the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we seek to establish a reflection on the experience of theatrical and audiovisual production of the urban and rural working class through the mediation between social process and aesthetic forms.

In this regard, we point out and compare two moments when initiatives to socialize the means of production of artistic languages for the Brazilian rural working class happened: the first, since 1955 until the rupture of class bonds – following the 1964 civil and military coup – and the destruction of the organizations that operated through grassroots education, and by social mobilizations and struggles processes, seeking to develop participatory democracy instituting processes, such as the Peasant Leagues, the Grassroots Culture Movement and the Grassroots Centers of Culture; and the second, initiated in Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government, and strengthened by the cultural public policies of the Workers Party (PT) government, through the partnership between Augusto Boal – former director of Arena's Theater, and the Center of Theater of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro, which he coordinated since his return from exile – and the Landless Rural Workers Movement.

In both historical moments, it is possible to notice productive bonds between social movements and audiovisual and theatrical collectives of production, being the movie *Cabra marcado pra morrer* [*Twenty years later*],



directed by Eduardo Coutinho, the major expression of the partnership between the Leagues, the Grassroots Culture Movement (MCP) and the Grassroots Culture Center (CPC). In the contemporary context, we take as analytical object the path of distinct stagings of the play *A farsa da justiça burguesa* [*The farce of the bourgeoisie justice*], initially staged by the MST's National Theater Brigade, named after Patativa do Assaré, in partnership with the playwright Sérgio de Carvalho, member of *Cia. do Latão*, and later staged by urban and rural groups, and converted in a web series by the São Paulo company *Estudo de Cena*.

### **The Emergence of the Agrarian Issues in the Brazilian Theater**

Between 1955 and 1965, the agrarian issue occupied the Brazilian theatrical scenario, marking its presence in the decisive moment of the creation of the political theater in the country. It is not a coincidence that the period corresponds to the highest level of the struggle of the national working class in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among the proposals of basic reforms supported by the left-wing, land reform was the most controversial, possibly because, if it had been carried out, it would imply structural changes in the Brazilian society, and also because it was a proposal supported by the Peasant Leagues, which at that time advocated the slogan *Land reform by legal ways or by force*. Due to its power to agglutinate, propaganda and dissemination to the five regions of Brazil, the Leagues were feared by the USA as a movement that could turn the Brazilian northeast into a new Vietnam (Souza, 2008).

The study on the connection between political theater and the agrarian issue faces the challenge of bringing back the analysis of an era of theater plays – as aesthetical documents that formalize decisive moments of the ongoing historical experience – that begins with *The moratorium* (1955), by Jorge de Andrade, and ends with *If you run, the beast bites, if you stay, the beast catches* (1965) by Vianinha and Ferreira Gullar (Villas Bôas, 2009).

In *The moratorium*, Jorge de Andrade portrays the point of view of the decadent rural oligarchy passing by a transition process that meant just one more step of the Brazilian conservative modernization. In this work, class struggle still appears as a hidden symptom, through the metaphor of ants

that insist on appearing in the kitchen of the failed oligarchy. In *The keeper of promises* (1959), Dias Gomes addresses the manipulation of the land reform proposal by the media power and, paradoxically, the autonomous grassroots organization appears implicitly as a threat to the thesis of class conciliation advocated by the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB).

Two plays by the playwright, PCB militant and political and cultural agitator Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, known as Vianinha, directly address the land reform and the struggle for land in Brazil: *Four blocks of land* and *The Azeredos and the Benevides*. Written in 1963, both plays were part of the repertoire of the Grassroots Culture Center (CPC) in the phase in which Vianinha worked in this organization. Following the military-entrepreneurial coup in 1964, Vianinha writes with Ferreira Gullar the play *If you run, the beast bites, if you stay, the beast catches*, in 1965, in the context in which Vianinha and other former CPC members and PCB militants regrouped into the Opinion group.

Until the 1950s, characters representing the grassroots classes in the Brazilian dramaturgy usually appeared as secondary characters. The life and problems of factories workers and peasants were not part of the repertoire of themes of Brazilian dramaturgy. In 1958, in *They don't wear black-tie*, Guarnieri introduced in the scene a working family as protagonists and the collective problems of its class, namely, overexploitation, lack of prospect of social ascension and the attempted insurgency against this problem by organizing a strike.

In that decade, the discussion regarding the agrarian issue gained weight in Brazil. As explained by Jaccoud (1990, p. 38):

The peasant leagues, after 1959, take on a new configuration. The movement, initiated in Pernambuco as a struggle against land evictions, widens its perspective and evolve to the struggle for land reform, assumed as a political proposal of movement that, since its beginning, was characterized by the defense of peasants' rights. At that moment, the peasant's struggles and the agrarian question would also start to face the 'national question' and to be assumed by the developmentalists theses and by the reformists proposals developed by wide social sectors.

During the campaigns for the basic reforms, the Peasant Leagues' struggles in defense of a radical land reform, advocating the slogan *Land*



*reform, by legal ways or by force!*, has placed the agrarian issue as one of the most important left-wing proposals and, alongside imperialism, large properties were fought as the more inner keeper of our underdeveloped condition, and of the high level of social inequality<sup>1</sup>. The agrarian question becomes, with the emergence of the peasant's movement, an urgent and decisive issue, what makes the Communist Party – the left-wing hegemonic force by that time – and intellectuals update their analysis about the peasantry's political role and the nature of the rural production (Sena, 1985).

The peasants struggle organization was decisive for the advance of progressive governments, such as Miguel Arraes's in Pernambuco, responsible for the Grassroots Culture Movement's creation, and the Leagues' territories became attractive centers for the expansion of the repertoire of political theater groups in São Paulo, such as the Arena, which began to tour the Northeast, in collaboration with the actions of the CPC of the National Students Union (UNE) and with the Pernambuco MCP.

Effectively, the interweaving of the progressive cultural elite with *the people* was only possible due to the engagement of the popular classes, that is, the rising degree of politicization and organization of the workers and peasants segments had opened prospects of *market expansion*<sup>2</sup> for the holders of the means of production that advocated the developmentalist thought and struggled with the audience crisis<sup>3</sup> of the Brazilian theater.

Besides imposing to political parties and progressive thinkers a new orientation for political and historical analysis, the peasant's actual engagement experience in the Leagues became an element for the production of many artistic narratives, through artists aware of their responsibilities as performers and formulators of the *national reality*. One example of the fertility of this emerging bond is the impact of the Arena's excursion through the Northeast, in 1957, with the stagings of *Rats and Men* and *Juno and the Peacock*, as a source of study material for Vianinha on the agrarian question (Betti, 1997). Moraes indicates, in Vianinha's biography, that the playwright had demanded Ferreira Gullar a *cordel* poem, "[...] according to the style of the northeastern fair singers. Gullar wrote *John Good Death, man marked for death*. The poem was published in a book by Editora Universitária. Vianinha choose not to include it in the



play, which he reworked alone” (Moraes, 2000, p. 154). The title of Gullar’s poem inspired another work, the movie *Twenty years later*, by Eduardo Coutinho, about the murder of one of the leaders of the Peasant Leagues, João Pedro Teixeira.

In the cinema, the agrarian question also appeared in a peculiar way. Parallel to the publishing of books and handbooks, the holding of debates and seminars, musical performances – which culminated in the album *O povo canta*, in which the well-known *Canção do Subdesenvolvido* was recorded –, the CPC cinema made the famous work *Cinco vezes favela* with episodes by Carlos Diegues, Leon Hirszman, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, Marcos Farias and Miguel Borges, having a strong influence on the movement that consolidates a new aesthetic-political tradition, the *Cinema Novo* (Peixoto, 1989). Commenting on the drought trilogy made by the *Cinema Novo* filmmakers, formed by the movies *Barren Lives*, by Nelson Pereira dos Santos (1963), *Black God, White Devil*, by Glauber Rocha (1964) e *The Guns*, by Ruy Guerra (1964), Celso Frederico (2007, p. 339) explains why, in his view, this set was one decisive event in the history of Brazilian cinema:

All these movies focus themes related to the agrarian question and this, evidently, has an explanation. Filmmakers, concerned with reflecting the Brazilian reality, had as their available reference and model the social-regional novel produced after the 1930 Revolution (richer and more expressive than the urban novel); everything, naturally, filtered by the political climate of pre-64, which encouraged the resumption of the agrarian question from a revolutionary perspective.

### ***Mutirão em Novo Sol, when the peasant becomes protagonist***

Despite the relevance of all the works of that period that were mentioned, there is a play that deserves to be highlighted for its critical consistency, the importance it had at its time and, above all, the fact that the text was rediscovered only at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and then published (Xavier, 2015), in a typewritten version of 1962, by the Pernambuco Grassroots Culture Movement (MCP) Theater Division. In a work of theatrical archeology that counted on the extreme solidarity of people who lived intensely that process and of militants and intellectuals who were engaged in the search for the text, a copy of the play was located

with Nelson Xavier. Besides being one of the authors of the play, he later directed the cast of the MCP, after leaving the cast of the Arena at the end of a tour of the group from São Paulo to the Northeast.

Nelson Xavier, one of the leaders of the play's dramaturgy – alongside with Augusto Boal, Hamilton Trevisan, Modesto Carone and Benedito M. Araújo –, accounts his version of the process of creating the work, in a testimony to Jalusa Barcellos (1994, p. 373):

We were in 1959, when a peasant insurrection takes place in a small town in northwestern São Paulo called Jales. From there, a peasant leader started to emerge and to obtain state projection. This leader, whose name I do not remember now, led the small farmers of Jales who were being banned from their properties, along with the settlers who could not have their livestock farming. The issue was the following: Jales was considered an area for cattle, big landowners released the cattle to eat all the plantations and, after that, cultivated grass. Then, a movement that would be known as *Rip Out Grass* started. Subsequently, he was known in the Northeast by that name, because this leader organized the peasants to pull out the planted grass. They wanted to take back their land, which guaranteed their livelihood. This fight gained an almost national expression, and when this leader passed through São Paulo, I went to him and did what you are doing with me today. With the recorded material, I wrote the play that, at that political moment, became a call to the rising – *Mutirão em Novo Sol*. And that was what I wanted the theater to be: a weapon to change history! Well, this was a period when the Arena Theater had already covered a good part of its course, and its members had already experienced the group's own path.

*Mutirão em Novo Sol* (1961), also known as *Julgamento in Novo Sol*, is the first play in the Brazilian theater in which the peasant struggle rises to be protagonist. The rural area is no longer a mere scenery, and its characters leave the picturesque position of old-fashioned rednecks, or secondary characters of elite dramas. The collective production manifests itself not only in terms of content, but, above all, in the formal structure, about the Brazilian agrarian issue by representing an actual experience of insurgency of rural workers against the arbitrary practice of farmers to expand their domain over the lands in which they work.

From the point of view of the relationship between political theater and agrarian question, this play has a historical importance equivalent to the one that *They don't wear black-tie* had for the relationship between



political theater and the factory worker question. However, even though the difference between them is only of four years, *Mutirão em Novo Sol* is situated in a context of greater radicality of grassroots struggles. The trajectory of the play shows the power of the language at that context: after being staged at national and state conferences for rural workers, the play went to the Northeast and was presented to the protagonists of the largest peasant movement of the period, the Peasant Leagues, and other sectors organized around the progressive government of Miguel Arraes and the MCP.

In that context, theater fulfilled the function of socializing the workers' experience of struggle among workers, and acted as a vehicle for integration, insofar as, through its specific mode of production, not only the content of the clashes was broadcasted, but also the production process itself. At the time, it played the role of a communication and intervention medium organically linked to the demands of the segments engaged in the class struggle, operating, through the dialectical mediation between the matter of the social process and the aesthetic form, a critical reading of the Brazilian experience in progress, which was not seen in other manifestations of language, such as news and political party documents, that is, in that context, the theater participated in the process as a productive aesthetic force.

It is not a coincidence that one of the first actions of the military dictatorship was the annihilation of social mobilization in the countryside (Schwarz, 2005), which marked the end of the Peasant Leagues, and of the cultural and political movements guided by the transfer of the means of production of various artistic languages to the workers, like CPCs and MCP. At stake was nothing less than the dispute for hegemonic forms of representation of reality, as the workers recognized the strategic character of struggle in this arena as well.

### **Boal's training method and the MST National Theater Brigade**

The missing link between the peasant movement and the political theater due to the 1964 coup reappears, in an emblematic experience, in the training work carried out from the 2000s onwards by Augusto Boal and the Theater Center of the Oppressed (CTO) with the Landless Workers

Movement (MST). Villas Bôas (2013, p. 287) points out that this was a contact that returned through a radical form,

[...] guided by the method and principle of transferring the means of production of theatrical language aiming at the autonomy of the multipliers and groups formed by the MST. That is, unlike the evaluation of many Brazilian theater groups, who see in the MST only the dimension of politicized public set in a space outside the urban area, Boal did not only intend to make theater for the MST, but in terms of grassroots education, set out to perform theater with the MST, proposing to theatrically shape the problems of the Movement, transferring the techniques that could be used in accordance with the demands and interests of the MST.

A fundamental aspect for not understanding the Boal's experience with MST as an insulated practice goes through the need to contextualize the movement's own experience in the cultural scope and, with special importance to this paper, in the artistic languages. Brennand (2017, p. 90) highlights that "[...] the MST's form of organization and resistance is constituted concomitantly with the aesthetical and artistic forms, creating with these forms a symbolic order of the landless culture and identity". There is, thus, a MST's cultural practice rooted in its lifestyle as a collective subject and in dialogue with historic cultural experiences from other movements and social struggles.

Art in the Landless Workers Movement emerges from that practice, as well as the art elaborated by various segments of the grassroots classes, as a "[...] meaning of the recovery of one's own voice and the right to participate equally in this peculiar form of representation and transformation of the reality that is the artistic production, a sensitive and pleasant apprehension of the world" (Caldart, 2017, p. 83). By bringing art into its daily life in music, poetry, mystique and in artistic languages such as theater, audiovisual and visual arts, MST affirms its own political culture, tuned with a historical legacy of the articulation between art and politics in the sense of social transformation, "[...] questioning the very conception of art and, fundamentally, the split that historically was created between art and work, between art and everyday life" (Caldart, 2017, p. 83).

The debate on art and culture in the Landless Workers Movement, as it matures and consolidates in the set of its dynamics and territories, unfolds into its own organizational form, the MST Culture Collective,

which begins its activities in 1996 and starts to organize the militants who have been developing artistic skills in different languages. The permanent elaboration of the meaning of its action in the fields of culture and art led the movement to elaborate its political lines in a seminar at the Florestan Fernandes National School (Guararema/SP), called Art and Culture in Training. Following theoretical studies and experiments in the production of artistic languages during the seminar, the collective's assessment was that the theoretical balance of the debates included three interspersed perspectives:

- a) Understanding the logic of commodity as a priority element for reflection on the contemporary meaning of class struggle;
- b) Favor structure as a mediation of the functioning of capitalism in Brazil;
- c) Understanding the form as an aesthetic element that organizes the social matter (content) (Coletivo..., 2005, p. 5).

It was important for the collective to understand the work of languages as an arena for experimentation and aesthetic production, seeking, by training and by the critique to the hegemonic forms of aesthetic representation, to avoid the reproduction of dominant values. One of the main challenges that were present, therefore, was to create “[...] a new culture that manifests itself and becomes social conscience through the daily practice of these manifestations, taking into consideration the development of aspects to perfect the construction of our social identity” (Coletivo..., 2005, p. 11). As a result of this seminar, fronts of organic performance in artistic languages within the movement have arisen, such as music; theater; cinema and video; visual arts: painting, illustrations, sculpture and crafts; literature and poetry, folk stories and *cordel* literature; preservation of cultural identity.

It is noteworthy that the experiences of the MST National Culture Collective had special relevance in higher education courses, made possible by the National Program of Education in Land Reform (Pronea), which worked with artistic languages, such as the Bachelor of Arts course for settlers of Land Reform, at Universidade Federal do Piauí (UFPI), youth and adult education courses in Communication and Culture, at the Josué de Castro Institute (Veranópolis, RS), the Land Journalism course, at Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), among others.



Amongst the various experiences, there is a common understanding that the “[...] sphere of culture must always be articulated with the sphere of politics and the sphere of economics, and that the method of languages appropriation must avoid the segmentation of knowledge that comes from the alienated division of work” (Corrêa et al., 2011, p. 185-186), seeking forms to merge the various languages while considering the specific historically constructed developments of each one.

In addition to formal courses at universities, various training experiences with partners, such as *Companhia do Latão*, *ViVeTV* (Venezuela), *TV Brasil*, *Companhia Estudo de Cena*, *Teatro de Narradores*, Rio de Janeiro Theater of the Oppressed, and several advisors such as Augusto Boal, Iná Camargo Costa, Walter Garcia, Francisco Alambert, Hermenegildo Bastos, among others, contributed to qualify the militancy involved in cultural and artistic activities, as well as to foster the creation of specific groups of artistic languages, such as the Patativa do Assaré Theater National Brigade and the Eduardo Coutinho Audiovisual Brigade. These training processes started from the understanding that the internal assimilation of that knowledge should not be restricted to a reduced group: “[...] it was necessary to train new militants who mastered the debates and the techniques in the artistic languages and, above all, had the capacity to foster a multiplication process in the states from which they came from” (Bonassa, 2011, p. 77-78).

MST’s theatrical language emerges within the struggle routine, in which it fulfills several functions, in addition to the specific work developed by theatrical collectives, namely: direct action theater in mass actions, Theater of the Oppressed in grassroots education work with communities, research with Bertolt Brecht’s didactic plays in training moments of educators and militants, use of theatrical techniques by coordinators of political training courses using the methodology of permanent evaluation of the learning process, research with popular and traditional theatrical forms of various regions, among others<sup>4</sup>. Also, theatrical collectives in the states develop parallel and complementary research in the scope of *agitprop* theater and the adaptation of theater texts or the work of collective dramaturgical preparation, based on theory and practice of dialectic theater.

In the MST's theatrical work, there is an attitude of political coherence with the proposal elaborated from the radicalization of the popular struggles in the 1960s: theater detached from its mercantile structures, the mediation of professional production, the imposition of the box office, the sponsors; theater inserted organically as a language that is part of the training process of the militants, the settlers and the campers. It is worth remembering that, until today, there are questions about the relevance of MST getting involved with theater, as well as for it getting involved with higher education courses offered in partnership with universities. Arguments that reinforce the social division of labor, relegating to some the impassable frontier of manual labor, and privileging others to the universe of intellectual labor and symbolic production.

MST systematically worked with the CTO and Boal during five training stages, two in 2001, one in 2002, one in 2004 and the last in 2005. The first three stages were to consolidate participants' experience as multipliers. In the intervals between the stages, the members had to create theatrical groups in the states and, upon meeting each other, they evaluated the limits of the experiences and the ways of complexifying them. During this period, the National Brigade produced five Forum Theater plays (Image 1; Image 2) with CTO, having Boal devoted much to the dramaturgical finishing of the plays and the formal staging of the works, with emphasis on interpretation, the construction of props and set design and costumes.



Image 1 – Boal (center) with the MST's militants being trained. Source: MST's National Theater Brigade.



Image 2 – Performance of the play *A peleja de Boi Bumbá contra a Águia Imperiá*, staged during the training process with Boal. Source: MST's National Theater Brigade.

In the fourth stage, the techniques of the Boal method of theater and therapy, *Arco-íris do desejo*, were worked out, which was important as a complement to the training process. In the fifth stage, in 2005, Boal taught the techniques of the Invisible Theater, the Newspaper Theater and the Procession Theater.

In the case of the Procession Theater, the Theater Brigade was challenged to tell the story of the struggle for land from the point of view of rural workers, in a four-season narrative, upon the arrival of the National March for Land Reform and Social Justice, that took place between Goiânia and Brasília, in May 2005. A total of 270 actors from the five regions of the country were involved, and the action was held on the lawn of the National Congress. During the march, that lasted 17 days, 18 theatrical plays were presented, by the most active of the approximately 40 theatrical groups that the MST had in the states in which it is organized.

### ***A farsa da justiça burguesa* as an emblematic work resulting from the productive relations between social movements and political theater groups**

The trajectory of the play *A farsa da justiça burguesa* illustrates the processes of collaboration and collective work between social movements and popular theater and video groups, as well as the diversity of forms that the same play, from the dramaturgy, can take when worked by collectives with diverse references and in the distinct, but confluent, languages of theater and audiovisual. We consider, in a schematic approach to the history and meaning of the play, that reflecting on the history and aesthetic



structure of the play brings us to some relevant moments of the contemporary history of Brazilian political theater.

*1<sup>st</sup>) The play appears as a demand from the Procession Theater created for the 2005 march*

The play was created by demand of writing a broad narrative about the history of the struggle for land, told by the rural workers' point of view, in the form of Procession Theater, to be staged upon the arrival of the National March for Social Justice and Land Reform, which took place in May 2005, from Goiânia to Brasília.

MST's Theater Brigade became interested in Procession Theater because of an argument by Iná Camargo Costa regarding the similarity of the MST's mystics to pageants, performed in European and US cities by communist or anarchist workers in demonstrations. In Brazil, there is the religious aspect of the tradition, with the Sacred Paths, and the carnival aspect, with the sections of the parades of samba schools. The goal was to dialogue with these traditions through procession theater from a political perspective, taking advantage of the arrival of the march of 12,000 people in the country's capital.

*A farsa da justiça burguesa* was initially the fourth station of the Procession Theater, planned by the Patativa do Assaré National Theater Brigade of MST, in partnership with Augusto Boal and the staff of the Center of the Theater of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro. Boal defined the general structure with the Brigade, explaining the dynamics of the sections and then each station was taken over by one of the major regions of the country, in the organizational division of the Brigade and the MST (Amazon, Midwest, Southeast and South)<sup>5</sup>.

To present the play in this fourth season, the São Paulo MST's theater group, *Filhos da Mãe... Terra* – which had among its militant members who have been working in MST's National Theater Brigade, such as Douglas Estevam and Maria Aparecida – continued the staging in partnership with Cia. do Latão, more specifically with the dramaturgy work of Sérgio de Carvalho, director and playwright of the company, who worked with structures that emerged in the workshops with the Carlos Lamarca Settlement group.

In order to be seen by 12,000 people, the stations had to be built so that props and set designs had extended scales. Therefore, the Brigade chose to work with giant dolls. Sérgio de Carvalho, from Cia. do Latão, contributed to the Southeast cast to design a structure with easels, raised stage, giant dolls manipulated by actors on large stairs, and large peasant choirs, reminiscent of German proletarians choirs experiments, in which Hans Eisler, Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, etc. took part.

In addition to the larger scale scenographic structure, the methodology for massifying the cast of the play, so that it could represent in the Procession Theater the entire Southeast region, was a sophisticated exercise in the organization of theatrical work, as Douglas Estevam narrates (2018, p. 41):

The final rehearsals were performed during the march, relying on militants from across the southeast region. The coordination's collective of the staging prepared a common planning of exercises and rehearsals, coordinated by members of the group and also by people who participated in the training processes in the national, regional and settlement workshops. With a group of about 70 people participating in the process, the coordination's collective of the rehearsal and creation process ensured the development of the work.

From this first movement, the picture (Image 3) taken by photographer Valter Campanato – cover of the book *Teatro e transformação social* (Brigada ...; Coletivo ..., 2007) – is emblematic of the play's meaning: the image shows the staging, at dusk, illuminated by the spotlight of two sound cars, watched by 12,000 peasants, with their backs to the National Congress, and on the sides a line of lights from the police car headlights appears, ostensibly guarding the militants, right after they had made a mess to assure the press the next day's pictures illustrating the headlines, shifting the focus from the march's agenda to the narrative of violence, falsely accusing the marchers and the Movement of rioters and of being violent.





Image 3 – Staging of the play *A farsa da justiça burguesa* by MST at the Esplanade of Ministries, Brasília, 2005. Source: Valter Campanato (Agência Brasil).

2<sup>nd</sup>) *The circulation of the play included in the MST's book Theater and Social Change*

In 2007, the Patativa do Assaré National Theater Brigade of MST releases the book *Teatro e transformação social* (Brigada...; Coletivo, 2007), in two volumes<sup>6</sup>, and the play is included in the collection, becoming publicized inside (in training courses, schools in the countryside, sector training work) and outside the MST, among theater groups that were partners of MST in the states, universities etc.

In the seventh episode of *A farsa da justiça* web series<sup>7</sup>, called *The Trial*, actress Juliana Liegel appears reading the book from the MST's Brigade, first the preface by Iná Camargo Costa, and then opens the book on the play's home page (Image 4). The book appears as the liaison between MST's work with Cia. do Latão and the Companhia Estudo de Cena work with MST.



Image 4 – *A farsa da justiça* web series, with the actress Juliana Liegel. Source: Cia. Estudo de Cena.

### 3<sup>rd</sup>) Cia. Estudo de Cena starts working with the play in 2012

Cia. Estudo de Cena starts working with the play in 2012, making its first performance in November of that year. And, for staging a very different version of the play, it goes beyond and documents the history of the work in articulation with the narrative about the history of the theme that gave rise to the play, the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre, which killed 21 landless workers in 1996, in Pará.

*A farsa da justiça* web series, with 21 episodes, in honor of the 21 killed in the massacre, released on April 17, 2017, is an important work of reconstructing the memory of the political culture of the largest mass social movement in Latin America. There is, in the web series, both bold aesthetic language research work and a vigorous collection of testimony from militants, victims and witnesses of the massacre, researchers, which results in both the tragedy of the slaughter being brought to the surface again and a relevant trajectory of contemporary Brazilian political theater history being made available to the interested public.

MST's version for the march was, in the Cia. Estudo de Cena's version, scaled down to fit the smaller cast size, but it maintained parallels in the set design, based on often dissonant relationship between sound, text and scene, and in the movement of scene of the cast, keeping strong Soviet influences, as the gestural vocabulary of Meyerhold's biomechanical theater.

From the dramaturgical point of view, Cia. Estudo de Cena's version articulates rural violence with city violence, establishing links that dispel mystifications about the archaic character of Brazilian land conflicts. On the contrary, they are so modern and urgent that they remain bleeding, unpunished, alongside the countless urban slaughters, some of them uttered in chorus by the cast. The cast's costume, worker's overalls and rubber boots, also reminds us of another important connection: a collective of urban workers telling a story of land struggle.

According to Douglas Estevam (2018, p. 43):

The project developed by Cia. Estudo de Cena, characterized by a growing articulation with social movements and participating in organizational efforts in the cultural and artistic field, represents a genuine unfolding of the initial intent that characterized the staging of *Farsa*. It is part of a tactic that acquires increasingly importance to the strategy of the MST: the conception that there will not be a substantial transformation of our social structure without a deep articulation between the countryside and the city and without the construction of a society project in which art and culture are one of the central elements in the class struggle.

*4<sup>th</sup>) The Banzeiros Collective of MST in Pará appears with a new version of the play in 2016*

While the book by MST was the link of the play's resumption through a collective of political theater and popular video from São Paulo, two years later it is the presentation of this same group in 2014, at the Pedagogical Camp of Landless Youth on the S curve – place where the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre occurred, on the road that connects Marabá de Parauapebas (PA) – that made militants in the Amazon region interested in theater decide to put together a version of the play. In 2016, 20 years after the massacre, Banzeiros Collective of MST in Pará stages a new version of the play with giant dolls, with the support of a militant of MST's National Theater Brigade from Santa Catarina, Révero Ribeiro.

*5<sup>th</sup>) The play as an example of a counter-hegemonic system of political culture*

The play addresses, from the thematic point of view, the social struggle through the tragic experience of the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre. But what guides the play is the inner life of the MST's cultural production, which seeks professional theater artists in search of the improvement of symbolic production capacity, so it is not a conventional encounter between artists and workers, in which the former present to the latter the result of their work, conditioning the peasants to the static position of spectators.

Therefore, we can consider the play's trajectory as exemplary of the potential of a counter-hegemonic circuit of political culture production that articulates social movements and political theater and popular video groups. In a journey of about 13 years, since 2005, when the play's dramaturgy was built, we can observe in the work the strong connection between methods and forms, currently used in the MST's Brigade and collectives, with the Soviet and German tradition of political theater and the experiences of the Brazilian epic theater of the 1960s.

**Unfoldings of the Experiences**

The reinvigoration of political theater in recent years opens multiple possibilities for acting in the relations between theatrical collectives, social movements and universities. These relationships, in our view, must be understood in their contradictions, limits and challenges in connection with the historical legacy addressed. Here we present two paths that presently emerge as fruitful: the construction of articulation networks that act outside the logic of culture and art as a commodity and the experiments of fusion of theatrical language with audiovisual language.

Since the experiences of Sergei Eisenstein, in the migration of theater to cinema in films such as *The Strike* – made with workers of the Soviet *Proletkult* in 1924 –, and of Erwin Piscator, from the staging of *Flags* (also in 1924), with the first projections at the *Volksbühne*, research on theater-audiovisual convergence arouses the attention of those interested in the relationship between art and politics. Nowadays, the paths of this aesthetic research include considering the protagonism of the cultural industry as elaborator of a dominant narrative, in which hegemonic patterns of

representation of reality predominate and the permanent disqualification of social movements, which at the same time face the challenge of dialoguing with a wider audience and the confrontation of media monopoly.

The potential developed in the theatrical work of the MST, as “[...] counter-communication tactics, as a training method, as a vigorous language in the literacy process by the dynamics of multiple literacies, as a combat weapon in massive direct actions or by compact brigades” (Villas Bôas, 2014, p. 209), inspired the creation of a collective of audiovisual directors that were organic members of rural social movements, the Via Campesina’s Audiovisual Brigade<sup>8</sup>.

Created in a training course for militants from the Culture Collective and MST’s Communication Sector in 2007, the Brigade starts from a film analysis process of works built on, for and with movements to understand the role of form in audiovisual content expression. With the viability of accessing to the means of production, supported by the Culture Points, a cultural public policy initiated by the first Lula’s government (2003-2006), the next step was a collective appropriation of the technique, as pointed out by Gomes et al. (2015, p. 182): “[...] the challenge was not only to create a language, but also an audiovisual practice that, from a dialectical point of view of the world, was consistent with the proposals of social transformation of our organizations”.

As “[...] in the specific process of living in theatrical language, based on the socialization of the means of production, it is essential for future trainers to immerse in language from multiple perspectives and work positions” (Villas Bôas; Campos; Pinto, 2017, online), the work with the audiovisual language at MST assumed the assumption of integral production, in which the participants assume the collective authorship breaking with the alienated division of labor of the commercial cinema. For this, it is essential the understanding, by each member of the collective, of all the necessary functions for the making of a film, from its planning, script, filming and editing to distribution, exhibition and debate with the public, as well as the multiplication of the accumulated knowledge in their communities.

The audiovisual training processes of the MST led the members of the collective to realize that, in the relationship between form and content, two

types of representation were recurrent in the films created for and with the movements: the linear record restricted to the context of social struggles and the overestimation of specialized discourse, in which the landless workers as a collective subject had less power. Understanding, in contrast, the audiovisual as a trigger for debates aiming the training and politicization of workers, as well as a type of dialogue with other popular segments, it was realized that it was necessary

[...] an audiovisual production that deepens and problematizes reality without detaching from it; that goes beyond simply finding images and sounds of poverty, misery and violence – without offering any possibility of modifying them. On the contrary, that makes explicit an image of reality that can be transformed, beyond the visible everyday life and that can provoke awareness in the viewer (Gomes et al., 2015, p. 186).

This perception came together with the demand to break the frontier of documentary, in its logic of denunciation and registration of social struggles, as the only legitimate aesthetic form for the audiovisual production of a rural social movement. Partnerships with Cia. do Latão, the Ponto Brasil Program, coordinated by Leandro Saraiva on TV Brasil, and ViVeTV (Venezuela), broadened the aesthetic-political perspectives of the Audiovisual Brigade for videographic experiments, as the episode *Essay on the crisis – Coffee* (created from the text of Mário de Andrade<sup>9</sup>), which led the group to face issues close to those faced by the Patativa do Assaré Theater Brigade.

The study of dialectical forms in epic, forum, and *agitprop* theaters – commonly referred to as *aesthetically poor* or *pamphleteering artistic forms* – led the theatrical work in the MST to reflect on the technical and aesthetic choices in line with the objective conditions of social struggle, by elaborating forms according to the real elements – that could take on a complex structure in a national march of the MST, as we saw in the play *A farsa da justiça burguesa*, for instance, or simpler forms for short interventions.

Taking on the demand to create counterpoints to the hegemony of dramatic form in theater and audiovisual, by facing the predominance of a narrative based on an illusion of non-distanced reality, both in fiction and documentary, posed for MST the problem of mediation between aesthetic



form and social form in the radical perspective, “[...] prioritizing the element of synthesis that makes that the structure of the social process can be contained in a transfigured way in the artistic form. What is at stake is the progressive possibility of breaking with the hegemonic patterns of reality representation” (Villas Bôas, 2014, p. 212).

Another factor of convergence between theatrical and audiovisual works in the MST is the articulation in networks of collectives concerned with common aesthetic-political proposals. The engagement of the Audiovisual Brigade at the Popular Video Collective of São (2005-2011), that resumed the legacy of the Brazilian Popular Video Association, created in the social struggles of the 1980s, as “an audiovisual aspect of the collective behavior of challenging the prevailing social order” (Noventa, 2014, p. 69), placed the MST’s audiovisual production into a fertile dialogue with 29 other counter-hegemonic and peripheric collectives of film production and exhibition such as *Cine Favela*, *Coletivo Nossa Tela*, Cia. Estudo de Cena, Favela Atitude, Worker’s Class Latin American Festival (FELCO) and the Alternative Communication Center, among others. Among the actions of the Popular Video Collective of São Paulo, we highlight the creation of its own Popular Video exhibition circuit, which was even shown on an open signal on Workers TV (TVT), the holding of four editions of Popular Video Week at the Olido Cinema, in downtown São Paulo, and in peripheral neighborhoods, and the creation of its own magazine.

Another productive perspective in progress is the construction of networks and articulations, such as the Nuestra America Latin American Network of Popular Political Theater and Video, which has been assembling, since 2016, schools of political theater and popular video, that are located at Buenos Aires, Brasília, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Florianópolis. The network aims to integrate and exchange collective experiences in the field of production and circulation of their works, involving professional collectives, research groups based in public universities and social movements.

This process of articulation benefits, to a large extent, from the advance in quantity and quality of research on political theater and popular video, developed by university groups or social movement activists,





providing information that deconstructs prejudices and misunderstandings that were historically perpetuated by decades. We mention, as examples, the books written by the Theater and Society Investigation Lab (LITS), coordinated by Sérgio de Carvalho at Universidade de São Paulo (USP) (Vianna Filho, 2016; Xavier, 2015), the book *Agitprop: cultura política*, made to fulfill a demand by the MST militancy (Costa; Estevam; Villas Bôas, 2015), the productions from the group *Modos de Produção e Antagonismos Sociais e do Coletivo Terra em Cena da UnB*<sup>10</sup>, and the books prepared by the political theater collective from São Paulo, such as *Cadernos de Erros da Brava Companhia*, the *Cadernos de Erros da Brava Companhia*, a *Revista Contrapelo*, by Cia. Kiwi, the *Vintém*, by Cia. do Latão, the notebook of *Ensaio do Teatro de Narradores*, the *Metaxis Magazine*, by the Theater of the Oppressed Center at Rio de Janeiro, and the Augusto Boal Institute's blog<sup>11</sup>, among many others.

The unfoldings of the experiences mentioned here and the growing articulations between theatrical collectives, social movements and universities, as well as the interlocutions between theatrical and audiovisual languages point, therefore, to a fertile horizon of potentialities. Far beyond a distant relationship between artistic producers and producers of social life, what is at stake is a relationship mediated by the socialization of the means of production that promotes a dialectical overcoming capable of replacing the terms of the debate on the correspondence between theme and form.

MST, as a collective subject of land struggle, sought partnerships with Boal, Sérgio de Carvalho, Cia. Estudo de Cena, and was also sought by these artists and collectives. This reciprocal search is the result of an attempt to overcome the contradictions of our time: if the land can belong to everyone, art is also an inherent element of the human condition, not just relegated to those who specialize in the craft.

In this sense, it is worth recovering Brecht's assessment, which stated that the existence of epic theater assumed "[...] beyond certain technical standards, a powerful social movement that has an interest in the free expression of vital issues in order to find solutions and can defend this interest against all contradictory tendencies" (Brecht, 1967, p. 103).





## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to note, according to Miguel Stédile, that the struggle against large rural properties, articulated with the anti-imperialist struggle, was already a political topic of the National Liberating Alliance (ANL) program of 1935, elaborated by the PCB and the lieutenants movement. However, despite the programmatic emphasis, the author points out that “the ANL had very little presence in rural areas” (Stédile, 2008, p. 30).
- <sup>2</sup> “People were part of the CPC because they were artists or because they wanted to make an artistic career, and they got into the CPC adventure because they thought it was possible to be an artist and, at the same time, to make art for the people” (Martins, 1980, p. 81).
- <sup>3</sup> “[...] already in the early 1960's the 'public crisis' faced by all companies is clear, without exception. Here, the most commercial, enjoyable and fertile side of the development of the mainly claimed state paternalism of 'popularization of the theater' is more specifically the need to expand consumption or, as it was said, reach new audiences” (Costa, 1987, p. 39).
- <sup>4</sup> See the following academic works and publications: Silva (2004); Silva (2005); Mittelman (2006); Nóbrega (2006); Coletivo... (2007); Estevam (2007); Betti (2006); Villas Bôas (2001; 2007).
- <sup>5</sup> The Northeast regions did not take any duty in the Procession Theater because it was underrepresented in number of militants that were sent by the states at that training stage.
- <sup>6</sup> Available at: <<https://pt.scribd.com/document/126898565/Teatro-e-transformacao-social-CTO-MST-Vol-2-pdf>>. Accessed on: 12 March 2019.
- <sup>7</sup> Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQeXmLjce9U7H6o8igBWetQ>>. Accessed on: 12 March 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> Later reorganized only with MST militants as Eduardo Coutinho Audiovisual Brigade.
- <sup>9</sup> Available at: <<http://www.iteia.org.br/ponto-brasil-ensaio-sobre-a-crise-primeira-temporada>>. Accessed on: 13 March 2019.
- <sup>10</sup> Cadernos do Residência Agrária da UnB n. 2, Cultura, Arte e Comunicação e n. 4 - Teatro Político, formação e organização social. Available at: <<https://www.matrizesprodutivasdavidanocampo.wordpress.com>>. Accessed on: 12 March 2019.



<sup>11</sup> Available at: <<http://www.institutoaugustoboal.org>>. Accessed on: 12 March 2019.

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Rafael Litvin Villas Bôas is a theater professor in the Countryside Education course, at the Planaltina campus of Universidade de Brasília (UnB). Post-Doctor in Performing Arts by Universidade de São Paulo (USP) (2017), PhD in Literature (2009), master's in communication (2004) by UnB. Coordinates the research group Land in Scene – UnB

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1814-710X>

E-mail: [rafaellvboas@gmail.com](mailto:rafaellvboas@gmail.com)

Felipe Canova is an audiovisual and visual arts professor at the Planaltina campus of Universidade de Brasília (UnB). PhD and master's in communication by UnB. Member of the research group Land in Scene – UnB

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0752-5275>

E-mail: [canovagoncalves@gmail.com](mailto:canovagoncalves@gmail.com)



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