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THE POLITICS OF THE DRAMATIC PLAY: DE-CENTERED MARGINALITY AS CREATIVE RESISTANCE

CITAC (Coimbra's Academy Theatrical Initiation Circle) is a university theater group created in 1956 in Coimbra, Portugal. The history of this group was used as a case study, leading us to the idea that there are theoretical conditions for the dramatic play to be an activator in the production of the artistic avant-garde and, endorsed in its mechanisms, is the ability to reinvent social resistance.

With the purpose of making modern theater, CITAC begins to engage in theatrical experimentation, as opposed to a bourgeois, commercial or instituted theater. Since its creation, the company has enrolled several generations of students, the average time of a generation being three to four years. In each generation the theatrical training is given by national and foreign stage directors who bring in new theater ideas³². This predisposition is very important. Guest directors come into the group motivated to practice new theater methodologies, rehearse new ideas, or guide and experiment new proposals, reproducing the context of contemporary theater movements. Therefore, the philosophy of the group is to bring forth new theatrical procedures, to test new processes, calling for the transgression of existing aesthetic standards. The group's territory is to educate theatrically its members.

The ambition to break away from traditional forms in theater is related with the desire to change society, as we can infer from Schechner's (2003) proposal for the relationship between social and aesthetics dramas. Thus experimental activity is a kind of political statement. Under the Portuguese dictatorship, the purpose of an "aesthetic revolution" is inherent to the act of experimentation, as if it was linked to the radical political posturing and practice of the student movement during the sixties. In another words, new forms of artistic expression carry about attitudes of social criticism inseparable from life, and fuel new projects of social alternatives. Beginning in the Portuguese dictatorial regime (and throughout the history of this theater group), this movement from art to life has been characterizing the ethos of all CITAC members.

We start with this extreme situation of living under censorship, and try to think about the connection between researches of new theatrical methodologies and the production of alternative resistance models that may promote sociocultural emancipation. We know dramatic play is on the backyard of theatrical processes. If the reinvention of the theatrical procedures is the initial trigger for the possibility of artistic vanguard, we think dramatic play is the basis of that work, where everything takes place. The research within these new procedures is linked to an attitude that opens to experiment with new ways to play. We also think this is linked to the sociopolitical context that comprises the territory of that experimentation. But how does this work? We need first to look at the dramatic play idiosyncrasies in order to realize the conditions in which it can participate in artistic and social transformation.

³² Some examples would be: Luís de Lima (1962), Victor Garcia (1966-1968), Ricardo Salvat (1969), and Juan Carlos Uviedo (1970).

The temperament of dramatic play

Dramatic play operates at the boundaries between the body, the cognitive and the symbolic through participatory experience in a group. It is a space of possible worlds, with possible meanings; it plays with emotion, participating in the construction of feelings. It is also a reflective process, one that uses mechanisms to produce extensions between self and other (people, objects, landscapes and ideas). It participates in building a personal gesture (in its widest sense) of a “thinking body”.

The general structural qualities of dramatic play involve³³: (1) willingness and freedom to play the exercise; (2) the re-framing of messages, which implies a sense of displacement, a transformation of daily life. Dramatic play begins by being framed out of life; the play plays us (Gadamer 1999). It also implies a subjunctive mode, which is, living in the “as if” territory. Therefore dramatic play takes the player to a different worldview (Schechner 2006; Turner 1992); (3) a set of rules or procedures for interpretation that may not be consistent with real life; (4) meta-communication (Bateson 1987), once play starts to refer to itself, introducing the possibility of reinventing and reclassifying actions by its own rules, developing new frameworks, even though paradoxically; (5) reflexivity, that is, the action is performed in its own play practice through the player; (6) liminality (Turner 1992) and paradox, by operating on the “as if” domain, is not what it represents, therefore, whatever there is, is “within”. By being liminal, at once inverts and subverts the everyday reality and the social structure. Because of the imposed rules, the roles we play might unknown the common sense hierarchies’ logic of relation; (8) expressions, which are objectifications, representations, sedimentations resulting from the play act experience.

As Barba puts it, exercises (or dramatic play) are “pure form”:

There are several categories of exercises, each with different objectives: over-coming obstacles and inhibitions; specializing in certain skills; freeing oneself of conditioning, of ‘spontaneity’, or of mannerisms; the acquisition of a particular way of using the brain and the nervous system. All the different types of exercises involve the development of a scenic bios, which reveals itself onstage through a behavior guided by a ‘second nature’, as Stanilavski and Copeau said.

The exercises do not aim at teaching how to act. Often they do not even aspire to any obvious dexterity. Rather they are models of dramaturgy and composition on an organic, not a narrative level. They are pure form, a linking together of dynamic peripeteias, without a plot, but infused with information which, once embodied by the actor, constitutes ‘the essence of scenic movement’³⁴.

Everything begins by freeing ourselves to play. There is a predisposition to enter in a new frame, to separate ourselves from the daily life rules of conduct. It’s a state of mind, an attitude, an experience, a force. To enter in dramatic play mood all we need is spontaneity, participation, intimacy, pleasure, flexibility, freedom and risk (Spolin 1999). Because is dramatic, to play is also primarily action. Performance is, then, an essential requirement of drama. It gives the order of discourse and connects with the system of representations. So first there’s an energy to fulfill dramatic play goals, framed by the consented rules. Then there’s an explosion of spontaneity

³³ Several references were used to synthesize these structural qualities: (Bateson 1987; Caillois 1990; Gadamer 1999; Huizinga 2003; Schechner 1993; Schechner 2006; Spariosu 1989; Sutton-Smith 2001; Turner 1992).

³⁴ Barba 2002: 23.

projected on the action itself. As Spolin (*ibid.*) also says, these explosions take everything upside down. Everything is rearranged as we will see. There's an awakening of the "total person".

Dramatic play is also a collective practice providing knowledge about theater fundamental mechanisms. We cannot reduce theater to dramatic play but we surely can say there are performances combining one or several exercises. In a theater workshop dramatic play implies repetition, within given rules. Above all, time is paramount for the understanding of the rules and for action experimentation in each exercise. There may be different degrees in the purpose of working on repetition. Each exercise may have more than one degree: (1) whether you play the exercise just to play, with no dramatic purpose (may be the total free improvisation with no prior framing); (2) the exercise may have a purpose as free improvisation but within a given theme, or a purpose in framing a particular issue; (3) the exercise is part of the process of building an aesthetic performance, a specific scene for a theatrical performance or for a whole theatrical performance. It is the performance that gives body and hence meaning to the dramatic play.

Dramatic play allows a transposition of everyday life interpretive procedures into its own set of procedures. Here there is a reorganization of messages and contexts coming from everyday social interaction. As Susan Stewart clearly puts it: "In most play activities, the two major features of common-sense interpretive procedures, context and hierarchy, are transformed. All play involves a detachability of messages from their context of origin, the creation of a new play-specific space/time with its own rules of procedure, and a rearrangement of the hierarchical relationships characterizing common-sense discourse" (Stewart 1989: 37).

Dramatic play holds off messages from their original contexts, experiences, objects, time and space, giving them new frameworks. These messages or experiences come up as a breakup, an act of severance, a separation. The imposed framework is a limitation that assures the performer safety, inducing creative possibilities and spontaneous action. Dramatic play then imposes its own logic by forcing induced experience. Therefore, it seems that dramatic play operates in an authoritarian way since it demands for the compliance of its own set of rules. But its temperament is different: by imposing its world on the performer it is unlinking the performer from the logic of everyday life. So dramatic play is able to subvert both the daily world and (in conditions of absolute experimentation) subvert the logic imposed in the first place by dramatic play itself. It is both a paradox and an irony, as it subverts everyday life and the rules that are used as triggers to begin to play.

Dramatic play therefore simulates an independence or a distance from life drama. It first imposes a detachment from daily life in order to take the performer to another framework. This imposed framing then triggers dramatic expression, and here it connects itself back to life. In this part of the process, dramatic play, in order to feed itself, devours all made expressions and acts, demanding brand new scenarios, so as to escape boredom, so as to promote creativity. This is where dramatic play subverts itself and begins to comment on, question and play with the expectations produced in the process of playing, a kind of mimesis-play that soon starts to subvert daily reality itself.

In this sense, dramatic play limits the ideas within a mechanism that conjugates, combines, adapts and attempts to operate in harmony, even amidst chaos. It also deals with creativity, freedom and invention at the margins of ruled possible movements. By confining players to a world of its own, outside any external constraint, as we shall see, the enjoyable, frisky or playful nature of play

can therefore become an emancipatory space of possibility outside the oppression of daily life and, in feedback, one that is able to reinvent life.

Susan Stewart (1989) suggests that nonsense, which dramatic play establishes as condition of possibility, is a form, an important tactic in life and art, because it defines and limits the everyday, the ordinary. Without nonsense there is no common sense (which is a particular framework of worldly thinking). Nonsense is seen as the opposite of common sense, it plays by breaking the rules, and hence similar to a tactic, as defined by Certeau (1998). As Stewart (1989) refers, nonsense is “that which should not be there”: disorder, disorganization and reorganization. Its “goal” is a speech or action on the nature of the speeches or actions. Manipulation of common sense is a feature of playful or jocular behavior, and the beloved temperament of dramatic play – as suggested by Sutton-Smith (2001). This may be why Stewart (1989: 203-204), referring to the work of Bateson (1987), has suggested that nonsense turns out to be about learning how to learn. Nonsense is learning how to learn in the way that it depends on one’s ability to classify contexts, one’s ability to free messages from their initial situation or purpose, the ability to recognize and organize whatever shapes or form the context, or frame a common sense situation. With training this can be an embedded personal quality.

When we manage to learn how to learn, we come to the level of training a person’s unique character, individuality, and qualities. It is therefore at the level of dramatic play that the shaping of the self also takes place. In fact, it is not so much the content of dramatic playing that counts, but rather the frameworks, references, realizations and classifications that enable the production of a context; it is rather the flexibility, freedom and risk, giving hierarchy of importance to meanings given to things. What matters in dramatic play is mostly its ability to promote that “learning how to learn”, how to recognize and organize the conditions of response to a given context. As we have said, in order to make this possible, dramatic play decontextualizes messages, represented realities, to free these messages from the constraints of a particular situation, reframing it.

Therefore, dramatic play elicits a destabilization of common sense: its favorite space is nonsense in the context of theatrical radical experimentation. Dramatic play is also a collective practice that provides knowledge about the basic theater mechanisms. It is underneath theatrical performance or, better still, it participates in the construction of theatrical process. The theatrical process construction dares staging when we combine the dramatic text to the performance text – as named by Schechner (2006). To do this, imagination operates over play frameworks, manipulating its rules; a pretext for deconstruction by means of the gesture that disfigures formal artistic methodologies or procedures (in art) or that disfigures *habitus* (Bourdieu 2005) (in life). We may then say that dramatic play connects to ritual in the sense that it is also a “model for” (Geertz, 1993).

In experimental conditions, dramatic play can be comparable to what Deleuze and Guattari (1977) defined as minor literature, or the possibility of a minor theater (Deleuze 1979). As these authors put it (Deleuze - Guattari 1977: 28) the three characteristics of minor literature are: (1) the deterritorialization of language; (2) the connection of the individual to a political immediacy; (3) the collective assemblage of enunciation. The adjective “minor” means a revolutionary condition, a potential transforming power at the margin. When users of a given language subvert its standard pronunciations, syntactic structures, or meanings, they “deterritorialize” language: they switch it off from the clearly delineated and regulated grid of its conventional territory, codes, labels, its markers (Bogue 2008: 111). Minor opposes the major, the one which reinforces dominant linguistic norms.

Minor and major do not refer to the number of people who use them, but rather to the different uses of the functions of language (spoken, theatrical, musical, etc.). The second feature refers to this use of language as highly political, directly dealing with power relations, always aiming to subvert the dominant, it is a potential becoming. The third characteristic states that everything has a collective value, something that opens new possibilities for political action.

Minor literature can be compared to minor theater, in the sense that the latter may share this ability to subvert, not only through language but also by any other theatrical dimension (the performance text): speech, gesture, movement, set, lighting and sound, contributing to criticize power relations in both art and life. To understand this proposition further, we go back to our university theater group, CITAC, since we can put this clearer in the political context of a fascist dictatorship, as well as in the context of a constant search for new ways of theater experimentation (training in contemporary experimental traditions).

De-centered marginality as creative resistance

In the 1960s and until 1974 Portugal had a censorship committee that had all performances evaluated before premiering in order to eradicate any possible critique to the regime. However, because the shows were using new theatrical logics beyond language and speech, the censors lacked commensurable tools to work with; they had no available rhetoric over which to practice censorship. On this account, many shows managed to go over censorship. On the other hand, the audience of the time was very much used to reading everything in-between the lines, like deciphering hidden transcripts (Scott 1990), by means of a parallel epistemology unknown to power reason. It was mostly by means of the performance text that the possibility of resistance might be read. Performance text de-structures reason, and people may not know why they were feeling something against the regime, but they surely knew that something very strong was happening. This had already occurred, for instance, in the physical and total theater, in the cruel and destructuring shows directed by the Argentinean Victor Garcia (in 1966-1968).



The Great Theatre of the World (Calderón de la Barca), CITAC, directed by Victor Garcia
© CITAC

Victor Garcia made performances using artistic and technical resources to make a scenography and performative machinery that goes beyond the dramatic text, subjugating the

audience with multiple possible meanings. As an interlocutor said to me, the text was secondary because the set was very perturbing, disquieting and subversive. And the censor was finding possible transgressions to the regime in the text. But there was nothing like that in the text. Anyway, the audience lived an interior perturbation and experienced a transformation by means of what was happening at the stage. But the censor wasn't able to grasp what was going on.

Another example can be the provocative, ritualistic and disconcerting performance of Juan Carlos Uviedo, also Argentinean, who had gone through the American avant-garde of the sixties and staged Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in CITAC (1970).



Macbeth, what's happening in your head? (based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*)
CITAC, directed by Juan Carlos Uviedo

Courtesy of Imagoteca Municipal de Coimbra © Formidável

Macbeth, what's happening in your head? was the performance title for this Shakespeare adaptation. It was a "bomb" at Coimbra's conservative scene. No one was indifferent to the performance, which means it was effective in its goal of shocking and intimidation (even the older CITAC members didn't like it). CITAC explored extreme paths of radicalization in Portuguese theater. It was a ritualistic direct action. And again, by means of the performance text. And again, the censor had no tools to understand the subversion. Curiously, contrasting to the performance reception in Portugal, CITAC performed at the Parma University Festival, Italy. As we could read in the report made by CITAC members, Alberto Rusconi, the director of the Festival, said that *Macbeth* performance was one of the most important performances, considering its new theatrical concept.

We want to mention an attitude that we believe was inaugurated by the dramatic play. In fact, these politically intervention processes are possible due to the conditions dramatic play produces when forming a daring and subversive attitude that destabilizes common sense. How? Well, by looking up new possibilities, new directions, new ways of becoming, new relationships between language and action. Subverted exercises lead to new practices, the terrain for avant-garde conditions of possibility. It also deterritorializes power relations, as consequence of a new created world, a new created form, a new created image, which will engender and induce new possibilities of being, or rather, new possibilities of becoming. In a community of practices (Lave & Wenger, 2009) as CITAC indeed is, when you put together production after production, year after year, you end up creating conditions for collective reinvention, you end up producing a particular ethos. We believe you end up creating a "minor becoming".

The territory we want to configure to understand this kind of marginal ethos comes from what Foucault (1986) called heterotopia. Utopia doesn't have a real place, although it can exist as a driving force for social action, or a persuasive fiction that is directly related to the real space of society (desire to change that in the end is inversion). Heterotopia is a real place, is a kind of

counter-place, a kind of realized utopia where you can find all the real places of culture. This real places can be simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. They reflect and challenge society (*ibid.*). This real places, despite its topographic materiality, unfold their functions producing an illusory space that mirrors all other real spaces of society (deviation places like cemeteries, prisons and mental hospitals, to give examples from Foucault). The heterotopia can juxtapose several spaces in one single place, like theater can do. Even incommensurable spaces can be juxtaposed meaningfully. It is also linked to ephemeral moments and can be isolated or penetrable, generating their own input and output systems. Finally, it may be a counter-balance to the chaos of real spaces.

The CITAC as heterotopia constitutes itself as a locus where several real sociocultural issues arise by means of dramatic play. It's on this territory that the consensus of common sense is subverted, is destabilized, and is deterritorialized. How? By an active transformation of the theatrical process dramatic play elicits; by experimental exploration weakening the mainstream, but also the provincial (in a word, undermining hegemony). In this territory of heterotopia, different realities are juxtaposed: 1) represented dramas, experienced lines of flight coming along with the scenario, the environment created by sound and visual components, or possible mimesis-play with the body framed in the drama (for instances, to be able to become an animal or a monster subverting the standard perception); 2) drama interpretations are combined with interpretations of lived reality, collective and individual, rational and emotional, between the fiction of a possible presented or represented world and the pragmatic reality of the lived world. Here nonsense is, as we argue, the favorite tactic.

This processes are possible, given the conditions produced by dramatic play when working on a daring and subversive attitude, destabilizing common sense. Through nonsense we should look for new possibilities, new directions, new ways of becoming, new relationships between language and action. The subverted dramatic play lead to new procedures. Power relations inherent to the common sense world are deterritorialized by means of new forms, new images, and engendering new possibilities of being along with these variations. And this movement, from the perspective of a CITAC generation of people who experience these new possibilities, creates conditions for perpetual collective reinvention, a new collective in perpetual becoming, and a particular group ethos. These are precisely the characteristics of becoming minority, a heterotopia as a space where everything can be reversed, contested, subverted, deviated, a space of possibility.

At the level of theater process, the creative space allowed by dramatic play practice may be considered as an immanent power emerging as experience. This will have an impact on personal identity by becoming a mode of action, a production of a concrete place. Members of CITAC have proven this by being involved, as political activists, in the student resistance movement against the fascist regime. Their ambition was, in fact, the annihilation of the center. But to do so, they would also have to go through subverting the logic of resistance. The transforming attitude created in the margins, but within the creative process, severed from power reason and refusing a dominant center, this attitude seems to feed resistance.

In the 1960s, in Coimbra (a university town), members of CITAC were the active heads behind events of alternative resistance. In 1969 there was an academic crisis, and protesting students reclaiming a democratic education were brutally repressed by police power. The breach for this crisis began when authorities refused to let the Coimbra's student Association President to speak during the opening of a new university building. Hundreds of students protested in that same

day and police didn't wait to react, arresting the President in that night. Students didn't gave up making several assemblies, preparing strikes on exams.

During this strike period, at the heart of the crisis, the expression of the students' resistance exploded, in the sense of a radical rupture, through art (in informal concerts, in performances) in order to mobilize the whole academy for the strike. These performances have also contributed to forge a sense of "communitas" (Turner 1992). Thousands of students kept on gathering every day at the Association building.



Performances during the crisis © Academy Museum of Coimbra; © António Portugal

Curiously, elements of CITAC – some of them members of the Academic Association of Coimbra's direction board, the resistance institutional organizer – were at the center of these alternative resistance events, creating ironic drawings, political caricatures, exposing the regime's faces, claiming for student causes. CITAC presented Bertold Brecht' *The Exception and the Rule* at the Association space, a performance forbidden by the time's censorship. These people were trained in the mechanism of dramatic play which, in turn, takes nonsense as it beloved temperament.

CITAC member and others created and became involved in collective happenings ("direct political theatre", as Schechner (1993) calls it). One of such events was "Operation Flower", an improvised distribution of flowers to the community. Some days before this event, a police charge had made hundreds of students run, managing to escape through the downtown market, but destroying all balcony products in the process. Operation Flower was thus a reparation of an accident as a form of alternative resistance. As newspapers were also censored, people from the town weren't really aware of what was going on. Anyway, an interlocutor said to me that despite the lack of news it was not necessary to explain nothing because the attitude was enough to clarify the reasons for that manifestation.



Operation Flower © Academy Museum of Coimbra; © António Portugal

In another event, “Operation Balloon”, hundreds of students marched in silence down an avenue with their claims written on balloons; in the end they all freed their balloons to the sky, creating a visual performance of exceeded freedom. Again (as told by an interviewed participant who intercepted police communications during the strike period), the police could not understand what was going on, they just knew gatherings were forbidden, but this wasn’t really a gathering. This manifestation escaped the perceptible logic of repression. The police just could inform that students were walking with balloons.



Operation Balloon © Academy Museum of Coimbra

“Operation Ice-cream” was yet another of such performances. In front of a coffee shop a group of students quietly remained at the door. The police arrived and asked what they were doing there, because gatherings were forbidden. And they just answered they were waiting in the line to

buy an ice-cream. The nature of the events challenged censorship, and these collective one-time events were creative ways of spreading a political stand to the city community (because press was also censored, not many people were aware of the student protests). The nature of these events defied censorship, by placing a logic of exteriority to the center, by refusing that center, although still resisting it and emancipating its proponents. Schechner (2003, 2006) seems to be right when inferring that theater practices can work as a pretext, that is, a hidden rhetoric, to public demonstrations.

The sturdy performance that breaks away from established tradition canons and hegemonic configurations may not find legitimizing structures to recognize that experienced disruption. As Spivak (1994) pointed out, the “subaltern cannot speak”, are not heard or read, or are given access to the public sphere, which means that their resistance is not recognized as such. Within the formal institutionalization of art, this emancipation strategy seems doomed. It turns out that this is not the purpose of CITAC artistic expression; it does not need to be legitimized by the center who controls and decides on what is “good and bad art”.

The argument that defines the margin as the only space of subalternity (which in turn goes along with a monolithic resistance) deserves some suspicion. Marginality, seen in the light of the opposition between control and resistance, promotes the idea that the subordinate does not exist beyond a struggle produced by domination. It is just one side of the coin, insofar as there is no power without resistance (Foucault 1992). In other words, resistance is never in an external position regarding power, and vice versa. The ultimate power is that resistance is first (Deleuze 1998: 122), since the forms of domination are imagined, designed and justified in an effort to subject others to that will, which in turn always will find some feedback resistance (Scott 1990).

Here, and to describe the political action embedded in this theater group (CITAC), especially during the Portuguese dictatorship (because of writing space I avoid here a similar argument for the time after the democratic revolution, where CITAC member continued to subvert the new logics immanent to the new democracy, being sustained by capitalism), marginality is not definable as a function of oppression. By refusing and annihilating the discourse or the inherent logic of power, they took on an anti-logocentric attitude. As we know, to resist or fight censorship would have had repercussions on real life: being arrested without trial, expelled from the university, or most likely, if you were a man, be sent to the colonial war – what Agamben (1995) calls “bare life”. They resisted anyway. How? Well, we argue that such marginality is related to the effects of dramatic play experienced by the forefront of theatrical traditions. To become imperceptible to the logic of power was a consequence of those experiences driven by avant-garde practices. This marginality was formed by the inlaid effects of performance text, in its procedures and artistic resources, rather than by dramatic text, where we would find the measurable pretexts on which censorship would act. It gained strength in the dimensions of physical theater, in the reign of implicit intentions, as well as through set design and its possible hidden visual provocations, mainly because dominant discourses are also incarcerated in the logic of its language.

If we consider negative marginality to be the one that translates subalternity, we shall call this positive marginality. It arises from Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy (Derrida 1981), where the author defends that there is no centrism in deconstruction, hence marginality is not defined by reference to a center. Beyond the edges, or margins, power cannot rule, it has no chance of domination, and has no means for control. This is the territory of a de-centered marginality. And this is what explains CITAC’s cultivated ethos. It also explains why certain subversive theater

productions escaped censorship: they escaped the linear, hierarchical and centralized representation of the regime, what Deleuze and Guattari (1996) would call a “cancerous body without organs”, where there is too much sedimented and territorialized coding overpowering everything.

After the 1974 democratic revolution, and even today, this ethos of permanent becoming remains in CITAC, whose members are still searching for new theatrical procedures. Marginality as power, but outside power perspectives, still conveys meanings of resistance, through the performance, to a destabilized audience. Even if these messages of resistance fail to communicate effectively, this concrete and creative condition of possibility has been built and is still important. Concluding, one could say that marginality is therefore a kind of magnetic field much more powerful than formal resistance (the one which feeds power or the center). Likewise, this creative resistance frees marginality from a dominant center, in what we have called a de-centered marginality. And here we can finally dream for social emancipation.

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