

Towards the Post-Modern Art Week: Anthropophagic Reflexes in the Brazilian Larp Scenes

Abstract: The Brazilian Modern Art Week of 1922, a milestone in the Brazilian artistic avant-garde, completed its centenary last year. The intention of this text is to reflect on larp using the concept of anthropophagy: a cultural metaphor created by Oswald de Andrade, one of the members of the Art Week. Anthropophagy is characterized by the de-hierarchization of the hegemonic places of culture and by the critical digestion of the Other. Andrade's reflections crossed time: they influenced literature, theater, painting, cinema and music, to name a few. Applied to larps, the concept of anthropophagy is discussed from the point of view of the communicology of Vilém Flusser, who was also influenced by Andrade's thought. Finally, this essay seeks to reveal larp's resonance with the Theatre of the Oppressed, proposed by Augusto Boal – also one of those influenced by anthropophagic thinking. With this resonance, I seek to highlight the transformative potential of anthropophagy, here considered inherent to larps, interpreting one Brazilian larp as a case study. Although this essay does not commit the naivety of treating larp as a panacea, its ultimate intention is to highlight the dialogical and social character of larps, as well as their potential to challenge power structures.

Keywords: anthropophagy, larp, art theory, Brazil, Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal

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1. INTRODUCTION

This text emerges from the maturation of a previously published manifesto (Iuama 2018a). It reflects, after having our waves of Dark Coke and Caipirinha with Nordic Ice (Falcão 2014), what the characteristics of larps produced in Brazil would be.

For this, it makes use of bibliographic research (Boon 2017), as well as taking advantage of the fact that the author circulates through this subculture in an autoethnographic essay (Bolen 2017). Instead of seeking to outline an overview of larp, it seeks to study (Norander and Bradhorst 2017) a single larpscript.

2. MODERN ART WEEK: ANTECEDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

At the beginning of the 20th century, Brazil underwent several changes: industrialization was consolidated and European immigration policies were enacted. Thus, cultural exchange with Europe started to intensify (Nascimento 2015). In this context, the 1922 Modern Art Week emerged as a manifesto of Brazilian artistic production – at that moment, in dialogue with European avant-garde movements, especially Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism and dadaism.

Later, in 1928, Oswald de Andrade, one of the creators of the Week, prepared the “Anthropophagous Manifesto,” in an attempt to recollect the anthropophagy of the Tupinambás (Brazilian autochthonous population) as a cultural metaphor (de Andrade 2011). For Andrade, Anthropophagy means the Brazilian tendency towards dialogue with the different, in search of a critical digestion, both of the Self and the Other, with the goal of producing the new (Iuama and Silva 2022). Anthropophagy is both a critique of culture and a poetic model characterized by the de-hierarchization of the hegemonic places of culture and an assimilation of values guided by otherness (Silva 2020). It is worth noting that Oswald de Andrade had more dialogue with the European population than with the Brazilian autochthonous population, given the long periods he spent in countries such as France, or as part of the Brazilian elite

– notoriously white. Therefore, more than historical accuracy, what is projected here is a metaphor, with the intention not of rescuing a cultural heritage, but of building one.

Anthropophagy is certainly the movement that most yielded results from the Modern Art Week. It gained popularity in the 1950s when rescued by the Noigandres group, who started Concrete Poetry in Brazil. In the 1960s, there was a profusion of artistic movements whose source is Andrade's anthropophagy (Xavier 2017). In the plastic arts, in 1967 Hélio Oiticica created the exhibition *Tropicália*, formed by a garden-labyrinth with poems-objects that advocated, among other themes, that cultural purity was a myth. In cinema, it influenced Cinema Novo, with its aesthetics of hunger, and tensions between the roles of colonizers and colonized. In music, Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso founded Tropicalismo, a movement that takes its name from Oiticica's work and is recognized as one of the most important heirs of Andrade's provocation. In education, Paulo Freire is indicated as an author whose work dialogues with Andrade's manifesto (Silva 2021); in legislation, Gilberto Gil, at the time Brazil's Minister of Culture, endorsed the global launch of Creative Commons in 2004 (Branco and Britto 2013).

Despite a myriad of examples, the most notorious heir of anthropophagy for the present work is theater. José Celso Martinez Corrêa (commonly called just Zé Celso) led Teatro Oficina, a theater group founded in 1958. Among the authors that Zé Celso directed in his career, Augusto Boal stands out, who would later propose the Theater of the Oppressed, and would advocate that Anthropophagy is "a citizen's duty" (Boal 2009, 36).

3. WHAT ABOUT LARPS?

First, it is necessary to recognize Theater of the Oppressed as an interactive drama related to larps (Bowman 2010), with propositions about the former appearing as pertinent to discussions about the latter (e.g. Montola 2008; Harviainen 2016; Iuama 2021). It is possible to infer that when Boal instigates the taking over of the means of cultural production, in the sense that spectators become actors themselves, he is still trapped in a time whose paradigm does not admit a non-hegemonic artistic expression, as is the case of the larps. When read in the light of 21st century RPG Studies, the expression Theater of the Oppressed, in his work, is easily replaced by larp, without prejudice to understanding. Hence the argument that larps are the heirs of a movement that has the Theater of the Oppressed as one of its precursors (Bowman 2010; Hoover et al. 2018), to the point that knowledge of Boal's work "has explicitly influenced the development of larp art" (Pohjola 2015: 54).

Second, considering that Media Culture is one of the pillars for role-playing game studies (Deterding and Zagal 2018) and that the role-playing process is, in essence, a bleed-in (Montola 2014; Bowman 2017; Bowman and Baird 2022) from the player's biography to the character (Iuama 2018b), it can be said that anthropophagy appears as a critical digestion of the media and biographical contents that will be mixed and transmuted during the role-playing process; with identity being built from the constant digestion of contacts with other individuals, these being both concrete individuals and fictional individuals (accessed by the most varied media), everything that spills over from the person to the character during the role-play is a by-product of an anthropophagic phenomenon. And, consequently, everything that spills over from the character to the person will be a stimulus to be critically digested in a new step of the continuous process of identity construction. Hence the main relationship between anthropophagy and larps: the construction of the character is per se an anthropophagic process, a digestion between the different media and biographical references of the person and his interlocutors; during larp, the bleed-in and bleed-out phenomena reinforce the anthropophagic exchange between person and character; after the larp, the same becomes an element constituting the set of references to be continuously digested by the person.

Finally, when considering larp as a medium, the communicational discussion proposed here receives support from Vilém Flusser, another of those influenced by Andrade's thinking (Klengel 2013; Iuama and Silva 2022). For Flusser (2014, 35) "human communication is the storage, processing and transmission of acquired information." When placed in dialogue with other authors, other terms assert themselves as equivalent to storage, processing and transmission: respectively culture, dialogue and discourse.

According to Flusser, studying communication is less about studying messages than studying structures, hence its communicology, that is, the "meta-discourse of all human communications in such a way that the structure of such communications becomes evident, in order to be able to modify it." (Flusser 2007, 272) In summary, it is appropriate to seek to modify communication structures in order to transform society.

There are four information transmission structures (Flusser 2014): circle, amphitheater, pyramid, and bundle. The circle is the structure in which receivers and senders are in a position to respond to each other, so that reversal to information processing is always possible.

In the amphitheater structure, the circle is broken up into stage and audience. The individuals who are on stage are privileged to transmit to the individuals who are in the audience – thus creating the split between active transmitters and passive receivers. It is worth mentioning that it is precisely this theatrical structure that is questioned in the Theater of the Oppressed (Boal 2019).

The pyramid structure includes the notion of relays, which disseminate information from a sender to a receiver. The sender's inaccessibility by the receiver for information processing builds the notion of authorship, here taken as synonymous with authority. It is the basis for creating an elite that wields authority over a mass.

Finally, in the bundle structure, the sender becomes invisible. It sends in the void, and the receivers tune into this void, ideally precluded from any possibility of processing. For Flusser, it is this structure that characterizes the mass media and fascism.

In this sense, the communicational structure of larps, essentially dialogic (Iuama 2021), stands as an important counterpoint to help in the modification of contemporary hegemonic structures, essentially unbalanced to the discursive pole.

Since the purpose of this text involves comparing larps with the Theater of the Oppressed, definitions of both are appropriate. Briefly speaking, larps are "embodied role-based interactions and physically performed role-play" (Harviainen et al. 2018: 87), with role-play being the activity in which "players usually individually create, enact, and govern the actions of characters, defining and pursuing their own goals, with great choice in what actions they can attempt." (Zagal and Deterding 2018: 46).

Theater of the Oppressed, in turn, starts from the premise that "the words oppressed and spectator are almost synonymous. A dialogue requires at least two interlocutors. . . The obscenity begins when the dialogue turns into a monologue, when one of the interlocutors. . . specializes in *sending* messages and the other, in *receiving* and *obeying* them." (Boal 1980: 26) In this sense, the theater, which once was "the people singing freely in the open air: the people were the creator and recipient of the theatrical spectacle" (Boal 2019: 11), suffered two setbacks throughout history: first, the hegemonic powers separated the actors from the spectators, then created hierarchies among the actors. Thus, Theater of the Oppressed is the theater's return movement in that sense of popular manifestation where the sender and receiver roles would no longer be crystallized. The main differences between both reside in both the role of the director, liable to be ignored in larps (although, sometimes, the role of GM sometimes replaces it), and in the need for exercises to increase the performance skills of spect-actors in the Theater of the Oppressed.

In the context of Theater of the Oppressed, the essential difference between an exercise and a game is that, while the former is a monologue, the latter is a dialogue (Boal 2014): it presupposes

the Other. In accordance with its anthropophagic root, it is guided by otherness – therefore, it is fundamentally political. Thus, it can be considered “a process of sensitization of the body, the look and the performance of the subject in his daily life” (Canda 2014, 22). The same can be said about larps (see Bowman 2010; Iuama 2021), although in this case the fictional layer involves other issues: at the same time that the distancing of the body from everyday situations can distract from this sensitization of the body, the metaxis (participation of the fictional world in the social world) can allow a body to perform situations that, without this fictional layer, could be impossible to be expressed and, consequently, sensitized (Boal 2002).

It is worth noting that the transformations do not operate only in the social aspect, but also in the psychic: one of the confirmations of this statement is the *rainbow of desire* method (Boal 2002), which, although it contains differences, is often compared to Jacob Moreno’s psychodrama (Oliveira and Araújo 2012). The central concept of this method is *metáxis*.

During the theater (and also during a larp, as defended here), the individual creates images produced from the oppressions of his daily reality. In this sense, metáxis¹ is the statement that “in the second (aesthetic) world, a person exercises itself to modify the first (social) world” (Boal 2002, 57). In this way, an individual makes use of his imagination and the playful structure to operate transformations both in the internal world(s) and in the social reality, an affirmation that builds bridges with the creation of communities, problem solving, and identity exploration – functions of role-playing games (Bowman 2010). In summary, we could define metáxis as an anthropophagic process between fictional and social realities.

4. PARTICIPATORY AWARENESS AND PLAYFUL CONSTANT: THE BRAZILIAN SCENE(S)

It is fruitless to try to encompass the diversity of Brazilian larp scenes: documentation is scarce, dialogue between them does not often take place, and dissemination is precarious (Iuama and Falcão 2022). What can be said is that the first anthropophagic mark is notorious: the *blockbuster* – a larp genre that is characterized by the use of an aesthetic exuberance and a combination of puzzles, events, power hierarchies and conflict agendas (Fatland and Montola 2015) – is not common for us, whether due to the financial precariousness of the designers and organizers, or the lack of interest in this aesthetic.

Thus, the anthropophagic aesthetic appears less as pastiche, more as palimpsest. It is not the attempt to achieve a blockbuster aesthetic, without the corresponding budget. This also exists in Brazil, of course. But it is not the main characteristic of Brazilian production. As a palimpsest, it seeks the critical assimilation of foreign influences, without losing its own verve: an overlay logic. In larps, this cultural exchange took place by devouring other larp traditions (Falcão 2014). As anthropophagi, Brazilian larpers digested it in their own way.

In this context, *Evangelho 2020* (Prado 2021) is a larp that represents anthropophagic poetics very well. Created in 2021, the game reflects the social chaos experienced by Brazil in 2020: a government that flirts with fascism on a daily basis (Arruda and Iuama 2021), the Covid pandemic reaping more than 200,000 people, economic catastrophe, environmental destruction, and the tearing of the social fabric, to cite just a few examples. In the larp’s fiction, a streamer carries out shows, in the near future, where he applies a truth serum to former supporters of the president, so that they reveal the reasons that made him support the “messiah” (a joke about the president’s middle name), despite the atrocities perpetrated.

While one of the players plays the role of the streamer, the others are Evangelists (nickname

¹ It is important to emphasize that Boal’s metáxis is a subversion of Plato’s metáxis, since, although it starts from the same notion of participation (to unite without confusing), in Boal’s case, metáxis is the search in the fictional world for improvements in the social world - a premise that goes against the notion of fiction as an imperfect copy of an imperfect copy (Plato 2017).

that the zealot supporters of the messiah have received). Both must research before larp starts: while the streamer must search for news of government atrocities, evangelists must research comments on social media from real supporters, and build their characters from the profiles of those supporters.

The larp plays out like a talk show. The innovation is that, as a parody of the profusion of *live streamings* that took place in 2020, the larp should itself be a live, broadcasted on social media. Anyone who is watching, despite not being inserted in the magic circle and in the larp social contract, can comment and these comments must be considered by the streamer – a social expansion of the contract that distinguishes players from non-players that characterizes pervasive gaming (Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009).

The author himself points out that “[He] believe[s] that understanding the reasons of those who support horror is crucial to devising strategies of struggle. [He] also believe[s] that larp is the production of knowledge and an instrument of combat” (Prado 2021, 3). In this sense, it purposely weakens the barriers between in-game and out-of-game, and takes advantage of the playfulness of the experience to expand the players’ political repertoire. It is overtly politically positioned, so that it evokes the notion of *political poetics* - the original name Boal called his Theater of the Oppressed (Boal 2019).

It does this by borrowing and stacking different techniques and aesthetics: the fever of live streamed podcasts from amateur interviewers, the countless number of digital influencers who support the president, the identity poems (Holter 2012), and the mockumentary trend, to mention a few. This combination makes the larp sound like a pastiche with the goal of becoming a parody: a sharp social critique. It is based on the premise of being an unpretentious comedy fiction, to actually deliver an instrument of political awareness and discussion about events in the social world.

5. CONCLUSION

“Only Anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.” (de Andrade 2011, 67). This is the opening part of the 1928 Manifesto. Perhaps this is the greatest truth he proposes. On the one hand, it does not matter if we are roaming the cities like vampires from the World of Darkness (wearing trench coats, despite the tropical climate); if we are crossing swords in a medieval battle (despite this weapons that were never part of the history of Brazil, who saw no need for metallurgy until colonization in the 16th century); if we are wandering through an event while hunting international criminals; or if we are locked in a room aiming to change the future of our country: only anthropophagy unites us. Poetically.

On the other hand, larp, regardless of which country creates it, is the Other’s game. It presupposes the dialogic. It is, therefore, anthropophagic, since “all that matters is what is not mine” (de Andrade 2011, 67). It dies, in the absence of cultural exchange. Despite the geography, only anthropophagy unites us. Playfully.

Within the scope of RPG Studies, the notion of anthropophagy is seen as a coherent tool with the blurred (if not non-existent) perspective of the division between sender and receiver, I and Other, product and process, researcher and researched. Everything participates.

This essay does not seek to close an argument. Instead, it intends to launch a series of uncertainties, to be discussed. The anthropophagy is not exclusive to Brazilian larp production: perhaps we, who are familiar with breathing it artistically, only have a term to describe something that happens to most of us players. The Theater of the Oppressed metaxis perhaps explains the social activism sometimes seen in larpers. Flusser’s circular communicational structure is perhaps indicative of why the fascist communicational structure (the word equivalent to bundle in Latin is *fasces*, which gives rise to the term fascism) often bothers us. Perhaps it is precisely in these marginal theoretical strands, in these

oppressed studies, that some of the understandings of why we continue to be fascinated by this “Game of the Other” are to be found.

Finally, both Andrade and Flusser placed their bets on *Homo ludens*, on the player, as the hope for a more ethical future. “The active life of this being of the future will be the ethical creation of deliberate and replaceable worlds. And the contemplative life will be the vision of the dependence of all these worlds on the ineffable” (Flusser 2017, 374). Such a statement sounds very close to the daily life of a larper. For both, in addition to these idealized beings of the future being players, they are guided by intersubjectivity, by otherness. In the bottom line, maybe what these (among other) authors are implying is that we do not role-play because we are human. We are only human because we role-play: occasionally we not only feel what the Other feels – empathy – but we *are* the Other.

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