

## ***APOCALIPSE 1,11* IN SÃO PAULO: AESTHETIC VERTIGO OR EXPLOITATION?**

### **Abstract**

This essay is an account of my experience of the *Teatro da Vertigem* (Vertigo Theatre) production *Apocalypse 1,11* in São Paulo. I believe that the company and director Antônio Araújo were attempting to construct a show which employed transgressive tropes of received Catholicism and theatrical performance; and the way it was done rendered spectatorship and the use of the explicit body problematic. The use of transgressivity can be seen as politically effective, by revealing and challenging normative boundaries, but my argument is that it confused reality, realism and symbolism (particularly by the use of the explicit body), producing a ‘vertigo effect’ which undermined the play’s political ‘reach’.

### **A brief contextualisation.**

It was raining as we made our way to the venue, a feature of São Paulo’s microclimate created by nearly 20 million inhabitants and hundreds of square miles of concrete rimmed by industrial zones. It was a prison somewhere in the inner suburbs, a small and forbidding building where the sixty-odd audience members waited in an outer compound, as we might if we were there to visit prisoners. It was November 2000 and I was on the second of two academic-cultural exchanges, working as a writer and director with Dr André Carreira at the State University of Santa Catarina in Florianópolis. We met in São Paulo so we could see some ‘big city’ theatre and meet two influential Brazilian theatre practitioners, Antunes Filho and Gianni Ratto. We saw four contrasting performances: a production of Nelson Rodrigues’ *Toda Nudez Sera Castigada!* (*All*

*Nudity Will Be Punished*) in a studio theatre; three short improvised pieces called *Prêt à Porter* directed by Antunes Filho and shown in the foyer of his CPT-SESC performer training centre; a free musical play for teenagers about the Internet by Aimar Labaki in a large city centre theatre; and *Apocalypse 1,11*, which was performed in a disused prison.

There is not the space here to outline Brazilian theatre in general, but Fernando Peixoto's discussion of Brazilian theatre and national identity is helpful and informative, in particular in outlining the very different cultural context. As he says:

The two most important production centers for professional theatre are São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro – centers of industrial and economic development. A semiprofessional theatre exists in five or six other states, but it is plagued by poor business and irregular activity. It is very difficult to have a comprehensive view of such a diffuse reality. (Peixoto 1990:61)

*Teatro da Vertigem* seems to exist on both sides of 'professional'. The director Antônio Araújo is a member of the Departamento de Artes Cênicas of São Paulo University and set up the company, working collaboratively with playwright Fernando Bonassi and actors he recruited for the project. Such groups seem to exist all over Brazil and comprise theatre-makers who have a high commitment to their art, but may not be able to live entirely by it, particularly in the absence of subsidy.

It is a vast country of some 170 million people, with a complex history of colonisations, slavery, revolution and military dictatorship, containing states of strongly contrasting ethnic and cultural identity and economic activity. Paulo Freire wrote about his country that it was marked by:

... a rigid hierarchical social structure; by the lack of internal markets, since their markets are controlled from the outside; by the exportation of raw materials and the importation of manufactured goods ... by alarming rates of infant mortality; by malnutrition, often with

irreparable effects on mental faculties; by a low life expectancy; and by a high rate of crime. (Freire 1972:61)

Things have changed in 30 years, with much more manufacturing and internal markets, leading to increases in wealth and life expectancy. But while there are now far more millionaires, the per capita GDP for the country averages approximately R\$ 6,000 (USD 2,500); and this encompasses a range from the lowest income area in the north east with just under USD 1,000 to São Paulo with USD 4,000 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE)). While the IBGE statistics, as do those on many national government websites, provide a picture of increasing general economic activity and agricultural production, they do not give details of the vast numbers who are still homeless, living at or below the poverty line – or indeed the fact that a rigid hierarchical social structure of which Freire wrote still exists.

From the ‘native’ rainforests of Amazonas to the ‘African’ Brazil of Bahia to the ‘European’ (or as I was told, the ‘Italian’) Brazil of Rio, São Paulo and the south, cultural diversity is celebrated, at least in certain narratives of this huge country. I encountered complex and sometimes confusing tensions: between radically different accounts of regional diversity, between postcolonial capitalism and Third World poverty, between a struggle for national cultural and linguistic identity and the growing use of English as the international language of commerce, science and the Internet. Perhaps there is a ‘vertigo effect’ here, in any attempt to provide a summary of ‘Brazilian culture’. As one academic told me: ‘we are Brazilian, but in many ways we are still facing towards Europe’. But she was an academic, a ‘European’ Brazilian. An ‘African’ Brazilian from Bahia would give a different account, as would a native ‘Indian’ Brazilian from the Amazon, as do people whose ethnicity is a mixture of the three – many of whom live in *favelas*, vast urban areas of shacks built illegally on state land where the poorest people subsist.

I must also note that I speak little Portuguese, but understand some because of my knowledge of other Romance languages and my visits to Brazil. Of course André Carreira accorded me the privileges of exegesis and introduction and engaged in debate and interrogation that allowed me to pass beyond the perceptions and experiences where tourism subsists. Watching the performances, I could not engage in close textual scrutiny, but must rather attend to the *espectáculo*, to use the Portuguese word. Perhaps this limits what can be said: at least it produces an economy of response. It also positions me, as observer, on a precarious frontier between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, and everything I have to say about *Apocalypse 1,11* is mediated by this.

**... and so to the prison again.**

I knew nothing about *Apocalypse 1,11*, but made the assumption that the title must refer to the verse in the Biblical ‘apocalypse’ or *Revelation of St John*, where God speaks to John:

Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it into the seven churches that are in Asia.

The title also refers to a massacre at São Paulo’s Carandiru prison in 1992, when 111 prisoners were shot by the military police. Immediately, then, multiple signifiers: a vision of final judgement from the Bible; military dictatorships in the living memory of anyone in Brazil over about 25; trying to imagine the shooting of so many prisoners (in a huge prison population) in the same city; then this prison, disused, as André told me, for five years. Only five years: if I’d been told that it was much older, preserved as a record of nineteenth century Brazilian penal barbarity, or that it was film set for the same, I wouldn’t have been surprised. The whole building was starkly, violently ugly: stained white rough-plastered walls, concrete cells, rusting steel grilles everywhere. Beyond the outer compound lay an inner yard, a holding space flanked by blank

walls. Beyond that, through a steel door, lay a concrete-floored corridor, open for most of its length to the sky, with cells on either side closed off by grilles and containing tiers of concrete bunks which reminded me of photographs of concentration camp quarters. No closable doors, no privacy, no shelter. And further in, beyond another steel door, lay a roofed yard with two levels of cells and a central space, perhaps for exercise. The scenography at first seemed minimal, since the building itself was so oppressive. Pitiful rags of clothing and shoes hung here and there and the cells contained the remains of clothing, posters and graffiti – but even these could be the remaining traces of inmates who had left only five years before. These, and the lingering odours of drains, urine, a deep rottenness. Here was a site-sensitive location indeed, away from the three theatre spaces I visited, rich in potential for an apocalyptic vision.

The prison also summoned for me those complex cinematic narratives of American (in)justice, innocent men in brutal pens played by A-list male stars, scraping away at walls, brutalised by hard-faced guards and psychopathic governors. Were we supposed to make that connection; or just to know, if we knew Brazil, that this was still the penal norm? Either way, it seemed significant that, for the vast majority of the audience, this must have been their first experience of a real jail, as opposed to watching a simulacrum (which applies even to the ‘real’, disused Alcatraz, Mansfield Correctional Institution and others) in the movies. It existed at both levels, at least for me. Movie-prisons are sites where metanarratives of Justice, Innocence, Honour, Survival and the individual-versus- the-state are played out – and we were waiting, in a claustrophobic space in the midst of a vast city in which, in another such place, prisoners were murdered; and in other places again, the military secret police made people disappear during the dictatorships – waiting for actors to appear and engage with the space symbolically.

We were firstly allowed into the outer yard, the door to the compound closing behind us while more steel doors barred us from the inside. As we waited, we watched the silent figure of a young girl perched on a windowsill playing with a large yellow flower. Then the outer door opened again and a small man slipped through, dressed in a crumpled pale jacket and trousers and carrying a battered suitcase. He was João – John – of course, our guide and witness, the one who was, perhaps, going to obey the command to write. As this happened, the girl sang a simple song, set fire to the flower and watched it burn, then disappeared. Silently João then made his way through the audience to the inner doors, which opened to admit us to the narrow un-roofed yard flanked by desolate iron-barred rooms. Once inside, our attention was grabbed by the figure of a postman, played by the one Afro-Brazilian actor in the company of a dozen, who appeared on a chimney high above us. He began to read a letter, connected with João's journey and also a joke about the difficulty of trying to deliver letters. After this João's journey proper began, like his namesake in the *Apocalypse* or *Everyman*, into the bowels of the jail, or the contemporary world.

We followed him into a barred space that may have been a guardroom, where he met the figure of A Noiva (The Bride), who might have been the flower girl grown older, having 'burned' her innocence (the flower). A Noiva was white-clad, a denotation of purity which wasn't going to last for long. In a *coup* (the first of many) the immobile and silent figure of Jesus appeared from beneath a bed (where João was not going to be permitted to enjoy A Noiva), looking like one of the fluorescent plastic figurines sold in Catholic churches across Europe. I felt immediately a familiar yet unsettling juxtaposition of cultures. I was watching a representation of St. John the Divine, who was a representation of a man in 'Biblical time' and 'Biblical place' who believed he was chosen by God to communicate a vision of the apocalypse to 'the seven churches that are in Asia'. Now this representation was located in a Brazilian prison – the world had become a prison. Here

were resonances of Jacobean tragedy from the period of Brazil's early invasions, the dramas of the colonising cultures: not only 'Denmark's a prison,' but the world as madhouse-jail in *The Changeling*, Hieronimo's fight for justice in *The Spanish Tragedy*; oppression, revolution and revenge in *Fuenteovejuna* and *The Major of Zalamea*. Already, then, a summoning of European Christian theology, distant dramas of justice, madness, power and loss.

Meeting the silent 'Catholicised' Christ-figure in the prison-world of Brazil, João, speaking a Mediterranean language, confronted the mythology of European theology, (re-) performing it transgressively. For, as in Rodrigues' *Toda Nudez Sera Castigada* we saw the next day, Christ was powerless, or rather his power was usurped by the Devil. In that first section of *Apocalypse 1,11*, a European image of Jesus appeared from beneath a bed and, while João watched from between Jesus and A Noiva (the Bride who was not going to be his bride), a black-clad priest appeared, ranting, and turned into the Devil. Then the priest-Devil summoned a gang of similarly black-clad military police, who beat Jesus and drove everyone out of the space, along a corridor and up a winding, dark staircase, pursuing us with their shouts.

We arrived, several floors up, in a large crepuscular cavern that might once have been a recreation room for the guards. Now its dirt-streaked dark red walls, hung with stained mirrors, enclosed a night-club. At one end stood a garish red and gold structure that looked like an entrance door, with a platform on top. This was the Devil's domain, while down the centre of the space a raised catwalk joined it to a lurid 'bower' hung with slit drapes, like the 'inner stage' of a strip joint; the domain of Babilonia, or The Whore of Babylon. And as we filed in and sat or stood around the catwalk, João quietly among us, a dumbshow was played before a mirror in which several men raped A Noiva, violently depriving her of any lingering innocence. Then a disabled woman named in the programme as Talidomida do Brasil appeared in a wheelchair. She seemed to

carry multiple signification: another innocent/bride ravaged; a result of the aggressive marketing of the drug Thalidomide; a Brazilian victim of global capitalism, first disabled by the drug, then raped. In the midst of the audience, crippled and wheelchair-bound, she sang a Brazilian national song in a tiny, enfeebled voice.

The priest, transformed into the Devil, enthusiastically welcomed us to his cabaret where, he announced, anything and everything was possible. The 'entertainment' that followed, framed by the rape of A Noiva and the appearance of Talidomeda do Brasil, was aggressive and accompanied by loud music, alternately hosted by the Devil and Babilonia. The Devil performed a crucifixion, loudly mocking the martyrdom of Christ while flaunting his genitalia in double-mockery of Christian theology and chastity. Babilonia, also mocking prudish values, performed a strip-without-tease, a simultaneous showing and deconstruction of 'exotic dancing'. She began ironically, wittily, by whipping off layer after layer of flimsy pants, always deferring the moment of revelation. But when she did, she (as had the Devil) performed the revelation in such a way as to go beyond Barthes' observation that the ultimate end of striptease (the sequined triangle of the G-string) 'bars the way to the sexual parts like a sword of purity' (1972:85).

The tempo built again: now there was Afro-Brazilian music familiar from Carnival and the Afro-Brazilian actor, dressed only in the 'grass' skirt of the slave-performer at Carnival, danced vigorously. Babilonia accosted him and began a eulogy of his abilities as dancer, as a powerful black man, yet clearly as a subordinate. She was asking him for sex, summoning the familiar racist caricature, a fact ironically underlined when she reached into his 'skirt' and took out a huge black rubber phallus. When the dancer refused her, she was angry and dismissive and the interlude was terminated by the appearance of a woman and a man dressed in signifying tokens of native Brazilian costume: she naked except for a black brassière, 'Indian' hat and beads; he also naked



except for beads, armbands and anklets. For a moment there appeared to be another phallus, but then we realised it was a real penis. The woman, down on all fours, was penetrated by the man in a joyless sexual encounter, mechanical and cowed, clearly performed under orders as the Devil watched. We were seeing a representation of the oppression of native Brazilians; but the sexual encounter, unlike the raping of A Noiva and the abuse of the black dancer, was real. This was interrupted by the Devil, who dismissed the performers and began to wind down the cabaret. Suddenly all the actors were naked and we were again driven out of the space, down another dark, winding stairway echoing with screams, to a dim alleyway below.

The third section of the performance was a representation of the massacre at Carandiru. The long alleyway was lit only by the eerie, fugitive light from a crucifix made of two strip lights attached to the chest of the Devil, who reverted to the priest and clung to the inside of an iron grille at one end of the alleyway while ranting condemnations. Pressed back against cold brick walls, we cringed as the sounds of gunshots crashed out and naked prisoners ran, manic with fear, from one end to the other, brushing past us as they ran and fell. Then there was silence while the bodies of the dead were carried and dragged away, and we followed João silently down the dark stairway to ground level.

The last part of the performance took place in the 'exercise yard'. The audience watched from round the walls or the balcony above as the priest-Devil, standing on top of a rusty steel stairway structure that led nowhere, conducted a trial, now dressed as a lawyer, and directed by a judge played by an actor with a cage on his head. A Noiva, in her stained white dress, was mocked and dismissed, exiting by climbing slowly up a ladder, facing the audience, while one of the Devil's assistants poured petrol round its foot and fired it. It was an extraordinary image, as the blue flames licked and the gusts of rising heat turned her flimsy skirt into a parachute. Then she

was gone, into the dark realms of the beamed roof. Talidomeda do Brasil, alone in her wheelchair, unable to speak or move freely, was also mocked by the lawyer-Devil, whose assistants handed out eggs to members of the audience to throw at her. They did so, without question, and she was wheeled away, utterly humiliated, followed by all the actors except João, Christ, the lawyer-Devil and the judge. After the lawyer's a final speech, the judge condemned him and, in a last *coup*, he took a dangling rope, put it round his neck and launched himself off the stair structure, while the judge left and João and Christ smoked and talked quietly, seeming to say, Well, and what now? before wandering off, leaving the doors open for us to follow. There was no curtain call: the audience left in silence, beneath the swaying figure of the Devil hanged.

Here was a play performed in a site which itself spoke of brutality and oppression; performed by actors with great commitment and (as my companion said) Latin 'attack' and exuberance typical of Brazilian theatre. It was by turns shocking and comic, using *coups de théâtre* in the context of an 'Everyman' journey. What it said, as I also saw in the performance of *Toda Nudez Sera Castigada!* was that Brazil is a prison, in which the theology of the old colonisers still oppresses its people, forcing them to repeat acts of brutality, imposing on them normative codes of denial and abstinence – and yet permitting, encouraging, a bread-and-circuses culture of voyeuristic peepshows. For me, however, there were two major problems with the piece, which I believe constituted fatal contradictions. The first was the use of the live sex act; and the second was the pelting of the wheelchair-bound woman with eggs.

The cabaret revealed an obsession with sex, with the female body as object of male desire, which I encountered elsewhere in Brazilian culture. Yet there seemed little attempt to confront the inscriptions of objectification inherent in this, despite Araújo's claim on the *Teatro da Vertigem* website that the cabaret shows 'sketches that refer to the false spirituality of some religious sects,

the grotesque reality shows which are a common practice on Brazilian television'. (Translation by André Carreira). At Carnival, as in the theatre and on TV, the use of the (near-) naked body is customary and has become normalised in a mythology of exuberant, 'Latin' Brazilian spectacle. And yet, when you go to the beach, *Toda Nudez Sera Castigada!* That said, the aggressive 'strip-without-tease' in the cabaret may be read as a challenge to the audience's preconceptions, as consumers of terrestrial TV channels with their ubiquitous anodyne *Novelas* (soap operas) and tacky game-shows (many of which employ the female body exploitatively). The sign, here, (striptease) is the gradual revelation of the female body *up to a point*. In Barthes' account, the symbolic veil of the G-string denies access to the ultimate focus of male desire, the vagina. This is also, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, a signifier of loss (absence of the phallus), and the origin of male anxiety. In revealing her vagina – as indeed she did, spreading her legs to ensure a full view – Babilonia (transformed from her 'innocent' contrary, Mary) went beyond Barthes' analysis of signification, forcing the performance to fail as 'striptease' and become something else. Female striptease plays in a space of absence – the absence of woman and yet the presence of desire, or projected male fantasy. If Barthes is right, the barring of the way to the sexual parts maintains the myth of woman-as-object-of-male-desire, not the real female body. Babilonia's revelation of her vagina re-positions the audience, problematises the event. Rebecca Schneider seeks to develop the notion that feminist body-art, which (re-) performs the explicit female body, operates precisely in the traditional boundary between art and pornography, and 'the collapse of sign and signified onto the literal space of the body employs a binary terrorism that similarly makes evident and interrogates the social ramifications of the gap' (1997:23). This would suggest that Babilonia, performing a strip and then removing the last barrier to the myth of unsatiated (male) desire, challenges our perception, menaces the myth itself. The signified (woman baring

her body for men) is emptied of its customary inscription and we are left, if we accept Derrida's argument, where 'The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely' (1978:281). And in this domain, this space, the play of signification, or *différance*, endlessly defers the production of final meaning; perhaps as Babilonia deferred the revelation of her vagina. This might be a site in which, as Walter Benjamin claimed for Brecht's epic theatre, 'the dialectic is not born of the contradiction between successive statements or ways of behaving, but of the gesture itself' (1973:12). Well and good – except that *Apocalypse 1,11*, employing a variety of gestic tropes, wasn't epic in any Brechtian sense; at least not in an attempt to reveal rather than reproduce social conditions for an audience attentive to the surprises of dialectical moments.

It's difficult to know how the cabaret was read by its Brazilian audience – though we were, after all, predominantly white, middle class theatregoers; a prime target for the implicit accusation of João's silent witness, the Devil's mockery and Babilonia's thrusting her explicit body at us. I was struck by unease, of course, as was plainly intended, even though not directly to me, as representative of a colonising culture or as voyeuristic male. No attempt seemed to be made to use the space opened up by the collapse (or perhaps the explosion) of signification to make comment on the male gaze or the inscriptions of normative cultural representation of the explicit body, female or male. And this itself made the use of the actors' bodies problematic too, as I shall suggest. But in the cabaret I was made aware, by the grim location, by the tremendous sardonic energy of the Devil, by the representations of violence, by the aggressive displays, of my incarceration, my lack of ability to escape (we had lost all sense of the geography of the prison, even of the location of exits). We were prisoners inside the Devil's cabaret inside a prison inside a vast concrete city inside a country in which, despite its official claim to be Catholic, the binaries of

European theology had seemed remote. And yet clearly not, else why keep (re-)playing them: why offer this lurid spectacle? It was, for me, as though they were daring God (or the Devil, or the old colonising culture) to strike them (and us, for watching), rather than attempting to engage us in a dialectical performance that challenged or explicated normative myths.

I could understand, watching Nelson Rodrigues' blackly comic *Toda Nudez Sera Castigada!* (1973), how he, writing 30 years ago, sought to make his theatre-audience confront their inherited Catholicism. In the play, a 'good' widower vows at his son's request never to remarry, but is corrupted by his 'bad' brother, who manipulates him to have an affair with a whore, while his son goes to prison for corruption and is raped. The whore commits suicide, the son becomes a homosexual and the saturnine brother's triumph is absolute. The drama is watched by a 'chorus' of women who bake a cake in the 'prison' of their homely kitchen and comment on the action as we watch bourgeois mores (and their metanarratives) ripped apart. This was a morality play, a trope of Catholic theological certainty. It has a significant historical place in Brazilian culture, if we remember that it was written was during the military dictatorship. But now it seems the work is not done; the job of deconstructing and exposing the culture of oppression not complete.

João, who watched with us, was going to write, if writing was possible. But he was performing as an outside observer, detached from the action; and this invited (precipitated?) the presence of the audience as witness, perhaps as future writers (not this writing, but the writing of a different narrative of Brazil) even though not in any way as active participant. Christ also became absent; and perhaps this was a way of demonstrating a collapse of signification, too, though in practice the literal disappearance of the signified was occasioned by its usurpation by the contrary, the Devil. A Noiva was gang-raped, her spoliated innocence perhaps re-inscribed in the

wheelchair-bound Talidomeda do Brasil; the priest became the Devil rampant; Babilonia offered us the portal of her sex as though daring God, and us, to enter the (Freudian, Lacanian) site of loss, of absence, while the Devil, at the other end of the catwalk, flaunted his penis, again beyond the signification of the phallus. This refocusing, or disruption of boundaries, seemed to constitute a challenge to the disempowered Christ, the absent Father (absent in Europe, the old colonising powers whose cultural and theological myths still dominate). It was difficult then, and it is now, to articulate a coherent reading; to get around the fact that the theatre in Brazil is controlled by men who seem to engage with a deep unease in society, yet do it by (re)performing the phallic order.

The incident with Babilonia and the black dancer worked because it ironically exposed racist stereotyping; using what was plainly an oversized simulacrum of a penis. But the problems with the transition to the live sex act began when the first appearance of the man's erect penis was readable as another simulacrum. I don't know whether this was part of a shock-tactic; whether we were supposed to think it was another order of representation of oppressive sex, or whether we were supposed to sit there unsure of whether our 'theatre' had become a sex club. After all, the cabaret was a site of transgression, the Devil explicitly welcoming the performance of excess. And the gang rape of A Noiva, the 'crucifixion', the strip-show, Babilonia's fondling of the black dancer were just that. The rape had been *enacted*: it was a theatrical representation by actors of a brutality. The myth of 'black virility' (a huge phallus) was another *enactment*, a clear employment of the symbolic to make a political point. The strip-show played in a space opened up by the disruption of strip-joint signification, revealing the real genitals of the actor and perhaps (now I have to say, *only perhaps*) implicating us, as citizens, by exposing a site in a culture in which the explicit body is offered as an object. But the penetration of the woman by a real penis, the cowed and repetitive thrusting of the man, was beyond theatrical representation. And it was staged, as I

discovered afterwards, not by *Teatro da Vertigem* actors but performers hired for the purpose from a live sex show in the city. This was a moment of deeply problematic signification: actors who were not actors; the ironic use of a prop-penis displaced by the presence of a real one. Was this irony upon irony: a trope of theatrical convention which implicated us, not just as citizens but as theatre audience, by suggesting that too much reality, in the theatre, as in the ‘native Brazilian’ territories, confounds our comfortable assumptions? After all, middle class Brazilians (that is, the majority of the theatre audience) are also tourists in their own country, visiting areas of ‘native’ culture and ‘natural’ beauty that are also the sites of environmental degradation and cultural oppression. After I had written two drafts of this essay, in an E-mail discussion with André Carreira, he offered the notion that

[T]he live sex represents a way to say that reality is more than theatrical, it is a “live representation of life”, a double sense of reality, real and theatrical at the same time. Araújo takes something from “bad” theatre, marginal theatre from poor neighbourhoods and brings it to middle class eyes.

But I have to ask, then: for what purpose, beyond accusing the audience of being ‘tourists’ who are, essentially, blind?

This essay seeks to look beyond Araújo’s *j’accuse*, to figure how the performance worked, or didn’t. Perhaps the problem of the live sex act lay in its framing. Before and after the incident, symbolic representation was deployed to some effect: the gang rape, the black dancer, the strip-show before; then the staging of the Carandiru massacre afterwards. And of course Antônio Araújo didn’t shoot his actors in order to drive home the point about the barbarity in Carandiru, nor did he have actors actually raping the actor playing A Noiva. Clearly they were performers, actors separated from characters, all of them, including the wheelchair-bound woman. But in the ‘native

Brazilian' scene he decided to use 'professionals' from a sex show in place of theatre actors; and in doing so, I think he destroyed the framing, the symbolic ordering of theatrical representation. And the effect (on me, I have to reiterate) was to distract, to vitiate a key political moment by using the bulldozer of explicit sexual intercourse to demolish representation. Richard Schechner, discussing the notion of 'play' in sadomasochistic theatre in New York points out that,

Nips are "pretend" bites, and even if they hurt [participating audience members] they are forgiven (usually) if framed in play. But even these pretend bites remind us that nips are a "kind of" bite and can, if the play frame is destroyed, become "real" biting. (Schechner 1985:300)

In other words, 'a live representation of life' (Carreira) is still a representation.

We might say that the failure to frame the use of the explicit body coherently derailed its effect and left us wallowing in the very place of normative inscription (of the body, of sexuality) that should have been a site of interrogation, as suggested by Benjamin (1973) and Rebecca Schneider, at least to 'show the show' (1997:52); a reference, perhaps, to Brecht's

Show that you are showing! Among all the varied attitudes  
Which you show when showing how men play their parts  
The attitude of showing must never be forgotten.  
(Willett and Manheim 1976:341)

In other words, an opportunity for another way of seeing, a potential perhaps to reveal the 'historical and discursive dominance of patriarchal structuring within cultural and symbolic systems'. (Harris 1999:59).

Beyond representation, the sex-act was performative excess. Its function in the piece was to say to us (in a cabaret where anything and everything can happen, anything be said, remember):



‘look, we make the native Brazilian people fuck each other for us – yes, *really*.’ There might be any number of ways of representing this theatrically, but as soon as the frame is broken, as soon as the switch in performative modes wrong-foots us, I believe the point is lost. We attend to the complex ramifications of the act (is that his real penis? Are they actually going to fuck? Are they actors?) rather than acknowledging our complicity in colonial oppression. So was *Apocalypse 1,11* suggesting that watching theatre is no different from watching a sex show? Was that the level at which it held its audience, or was it really attempting to employ an ironic performative trope to destabilise our quotidian cultural constructs?

The incident was so riddled with contradiction that it made analysis problematic, at least for me. The director chose not to use ‘company’ actors (we must assume that he couldn’t or wouldn’t persuade them that explicit sexual intercourse onstage was consistent with their art, even though the explicit body apparently was, both in the cabaret and the massacre sequence), so he employed paid performers from a sex show. And whether or not we want to debate whether such performers are ‘artistes’, in using them he reinforced the reification of the act, both as porn (commodification of sex) and as exploitation of the performers themselves. If he was seeking to demonstrate the oppression by postcolonial capitalism of the remnants of an indigenous people, he did it by collaborating in the contemporary oppressions of the ‘sex industry’. I want to say that by explicitly *showing* abuse, it disqualified itself from condemning it (or us, for watching without choice).

We might wonder whether, more radically, the show lay in the territory of liminality outlined by Susan Broadhurst. She claims repeatedly that post-modern performance is marked by an engagement with ‘the almost chthonic’ (1999:1 *passim*). I don’t believe that *Apocalypse 1,11* either existed (*almost?*) in or summoned an underworld, despite the prison location. For the most

part it employed a fairly consistent pattern of metaphor: the prison as a site of theatrical performance and a signifier of oppressions; the parallels between the spoken text and the underpinning myths of Catholic theology in Brazilian culture and so on. What it didn't do was to frame itself – or perhaps we should say resist framing itself – by its liminality, in the manner, say, in which the Wooster Group deconstructed 'presence' in *L.S.D. (... Just the High Points ...)* as discussed by Philip Auslander (1987); or as Squat played in the margins of life and art as discussed by Richard Schechner (1985:302). It was more a performance of the kind Baz Kershaw describes (in his case, Welfare State International's 1983 *Raising the 'Titanic'*) as being 'both modernist and post-modernist, a strongly allegorical mysterium and a pattern of signs that were forever slipping beyond shared sets of references, away from stable meaning' (1999:12). Later in the same book Kershaw pertinently asks, in regard to a would-be modernist, transgressive avant-garde: 'The key political problem then becomes: how can performance, in being always already implicated in the dominant, avoid replicating the values of the dominant?' (1999:70)

And against this, therefore, the devil or his advocate might ask: isn't a sex show art, too? Aren't sex show performers well paid, don't they work willingly and are not therefore oppressed? Don't audiences for sex shows attend by choice and keep the performers in work? To which we might answer that a sex show is an enterprise that exploits both spectators and performers for commercial profit (a possible point lost in the 'sex show' scene). It is also in danger of reinforcing an oppressive domination of women, that they are to be known (possessed) but not to know; to be inscribed as the site of desire, functionaries in the phallic order. A sex show performs intercourse explicitly but perhaps also according to the dictates of male fantasy; and it does it without comment, without disrupting customary signification, without *question*. Were it to do this, it might become a site of interrogation, of Benjamin's 'dialectical moment' – in other words, *theatre*,

no matter how problematic this might turn out to be in terms of showing something that was both erotic and playful; explicit and aesthetically pleasing. Perhaps *Teatro da Vertigem* was attempting to play in this troubling maze, in these vertiginous signficatory lacunae. But I have to say that my spectatorship was not up to the task of navigating the maze without a more coherent, interrogatory or revelatory perspective from the performance itself.

The incident of the egg throwing underlines the point. Watching from the balcony, I was stirred when I saw some of the actors handing out eggs to audience members sitting and standing at the sides. At last, I thought, after all that's happened, a moment when the initiative is going to shift, when we will participate and exercise some power in the creation of meaning. But not so: the moment came when the audience was invited to throw their eggs in that final act of humiliation and they did it, without question. I very much wanted it not to happen; at least for the audience to take control, within the context of the lawyer-Devil's trial, to refuse his power and throw the eggs at him, the oppressor. Lacking the fluency to shout it in Portuguese – and I have to say feeling by then that resistance to the show's aggression was futile – I remained silent. But I hoped, too, that there would be a final *coup*, in which the lawyer-Devil or another character made the egg-throwers realise what they had just done. It would have been a perfect opportunity, had the performance not been one in which the audience was bound to silence even while being implicated, accused and then made complicit in the Devil's assault on the symbolic and material order. It could have been a democratising moment, uncomfortable perhaps (we'd had plenty of that already) but one that made the audience face the fact that they had chosen to go along with an oppressive, repugnant act: that they had *obeyed orders*. If the director, writer and actors, in writing-devising this complex piece, had really wanted the audience to interrogate normative drives – in the theatre as well as

Brazilian society – here might have a place to do it, to ‘turn’ the play. But the moment passed, as had the others, and we were left to make our silent way out into the damp São Paulo night.

It seemed possible, though it was difficult to tell, that *Apocalypse 1,11* was ultimately an assault on theatricality itself, attempting to prise apart all signifiers, all notions of representation, all actor-audience relations. If it was, it would help to explain why *Teatro da Vertigem* is so named. Vertigo is a psychological phenomenon of disorder, of whirling or spinning, which may induce a somatic effect, of loss of balance, falling. Perhaps Araújo and his company seek to precipitate these sensations in their audience, but the question arises: vertigo as an end in itself, or a disruption of customary perception and function which is intended to engender another way of seeing? The problem I had, as a spectator, was in seeing beyond the rather gleefully anarchic; the breaking of rules; daring old gods (the one who commanded João, the ones who sent their culture to Brazil, the rulers in the military dictatorships) to show themselves. The company had previously performed versions of *Paradise Lost* in a church and *The Book of Job* in a disused hospital, performances of which I know nothing. But there is the site-sensitive connection – and more importantly there is, in all three texts, the struggles of humans to come to terms with the rules and commands of a distant authority. ‘Are you there?’ Job and Adam ask. ‘What do you want me to do now?’ And God says to João, ‘what thou seest, write’, which is perhaps another way of saying, ‘you do it, it’s got beyond me.’

One of the richest and yet problematic dynamics of ‘Brazilian’ culture as it appears to me is the complexity of narratives: of colonisers who were often poor people becoming oppressors; of the importation and brutal treatment of African people as slaves, as animals, as ‘other’; of the co-existence of European Catholicism with ‘native’ and African mythologies and beliefs. If *Apocalypse 1,11* sought to politicise or inform its audience – to reach beyond its frantic

deployment of theatrical *coups* and tropes – it failed, for me at least, to move beyond its own gleefully explicit transgressiveness and develop a coherent critical narrative of the state of Brazil that could begin to empower its audience, to ‘transform mythical revelation into social conscience’, as Araújo claims on *Teatro da Vertigem*’s website.

## References

- Auslander, Philip (1987) ‘Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre’. *Theatre Journal* Vol 39 No 1, pp 20-34
- Barthes, Roland (1973) *Mythologies*. London, Paladin
- Benjamin, Walter (1973) *Understanding Brecht*. London, NLB
- Broadhurst, Susan (1999) *Liminal Acts*. London, Cassell
- Derrida, Jacques (1978) *Writing and Difference*. London, Routledge
- Freire, Paulo (1972) *Cultural Action for Freedom*. London, Penguin
- Harris, Geraldine (1999) *Staging Feminities*. Manchester, Manchester University Press
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatístico (IBGE), at: <http://www1.ibge.gov.br/english/#>
- Kershaw, Baz (1999) *The Radical in Performance*. London, Routledge
- Peixoto, Fernando (1990) ‘Brazilian Theatre and National Identity’. *The Drama Review* vol 34 number 1, pp 60-69
- Rodrigues, Nelson (1973) *Toda Nudez Sera Castigada! (All Nudity Will Be Punished)*. Rio de Janeiro, Distribuidora Record
- Schechner, Richard (1985) *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schneider, Rebecca (1997) *The Explicit Body in Performance*. London, Routledge
- Teatro da Vertigem* website at: [www.estado.estado.com.br/edicao/pano/00/01/13/ca2975.html](http://www.estado.estado.com.br/edicao/pano/00/01/13/ca2975.html)
- Willett, John and Manheim, Ralph (Eds) (1976) *Bertolt Brecht Poems, Part Three 1938-1956*. London, Eyre Methuen.

William Stanton,  
University of Exeter,  
Department of Drama,  
Thornlea,  
New North Road,  
Exeter EX4 4LA,  
UK  
+44 (0)1392 264531  
W.R.C.Stanton@exeter.ac.uk