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FROM THE STREET TO THE STAGE, UNSUSPECTED RELATIONS BETWEEN POPULAR AND THEATRICAL DANCES

Marianna Monteiro. 2011.
Dança popular: espetáculo e devoção.
São Paulo, Terceiro Nome, 240p.

The conflicting relationship between an alleged “dancing nature” of Brazilian people and the only remote participation dance takes on stage in Brazil’s cultural scene is the initial provocation that led Marianna Monteiro to carry out her research, timely called *Dança popular: espetáculo e devoção* (Popular dance: spectacle and devotion). As suggested in the subtitle, research deals with seemingly opposite vectors - coming from the old dialectic of the sacred and the profane - however, marked by unsuspected relations, where politics, economics, aesthetics and religion intersect in the formative process of Brazilian popular dances, considered by the author as an integral part of the expansion of the Portuguese Modern State, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The research is the result of the doctoral thesis presented to the Department of Philosophy of the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo (FFLCH-USP), under the guidance of Professor Olgária Feres Matos.

One of the key challenges - and motivation for most of the reflections undertaken in *Dança popular: espetáculo e devoção* - is to develop a critical reflection on the ideological approach that understands the process of assimilation of themes from popular dance by theatrical dance as an alternative for restoring a supposed national identity on stage. Regardless of

developing value judgments on the aesthetic quality of theatrical dances inspired by popular culture, the research examines the conditions involved in the delicate process of interchange between the two artistic manifestations, a relationship that the author allegorically called “dialog of deaf people”, to highlight the distances and mishaps that underlie this presumption of aesthetic appropriation.

Arranged under the spectacle logic, the author emphasizes that aspects such as innovation, originality and authorship are mobilized to demarcate and legitimize the space of the stage dance regarding popular dances. However, Marianna Monteiro observes that these boundaries are attenuated when one wants to lend identity or even national language to stage dance, appropriations that “often feed the artistic renovation of dance” (Monteiro 2011, 14). From this point of view, and under the argument that this instrumental interest in popular dances does not affect the “prestige and exclusion logic”, which segregates the performance spectacle on the stages of dance on the streets, the author highlights one of the initial commitments in her research: “to understand the tensions and polarities that permeate the past and the present of Brazilian dances” (Id., 14).

Marianna Monteiro does not summarize her research to a diagnostic analysis, limiting herself to revolving contaminations between erudite and popular culture, then, being satisfied with the identification of a “predatory anthropophagy”. Quite different from that, the author breaks the formative processes of popular dance, developing a hypothesis of research that suggests there are “differences” between the popular dance and the theater dance, whose nature resembles those that separate the Old Regime dances from the 19th century dances. The researcher uses the historical approach as an initial research strategy, mobilizing an extremely wide and diversified set of sources, comprising theological and doctrinal writings of the 17th and 18th centuries, ethnographies on popular dances, as well as seventeenth-century documents and cordel, to name but a few. It is worth to mention that, instead of presenting a ready concept of *popular culture*, the author carries out a detailed scrutiny in search of references that allow her to lend historical weight to the analysis of this concept, a critical posture that permeates the whole work, making the research more fruitful and comprehensive.

When revisiting medieval documents attesting the use of dances in churches, in order to pay homage to the Blessed Sacrament, the author finds out, in the examination of the sanctions of the ecclesiastical authorities of Portuguese America, interposed to the practitioners of this custom, an analytical key that considers the relation between body and sin. Marianna develops a subtle association between gesture and word, emphasizing that the appropriation of the Church’s control over gestural exaltation to a certain

extent had direct relations with the purpose of restoring the symbolic power affected by the breaking of the ecclesiastical monopoly in relation to the written language. These restrictions, whether in the metropolis or in the colony, according to the author, highlight the “persistence of these popular practices even in the most official instances of cultural and religious life” (Monteiro 2011, 28). The consistency and plausibility of the argument, which gives rise to an interpretive plume, are surprised when the author identifies a contradictory relationship between institutions of civil and religious power. If, on the one hand, a combat was instituted in relation to the presence of practices considered pagan in spaces reserved for ecclesiastic exercises, on the other, the obligatory participation in the dances, which was imposed to Jews, gypsies and black brotherhoods, denounces the “existence of political control and affirmation mechanisms in Portuguese processional parades” (Monteiro 2011, 29).

When investigating exchanges between popular culture and erudite culture, Marianna revisits Mário de Andrade and his position on the involvement of the Jesuits in the institution of a Mamluk Catholicism in Brazil. In addition, other examples are presented to highlight the reciprocal influence between these two universes, a fact that, combined with the diversity of manifestations that would be embraced by the label of “popular”, deconstruct the idea of an unequivocal meaning that would guide the development of a popular culture concept. This perception leads the author to appropriate the notion of “subcultures”, in the form coined by Peter Burke (1989), a theoretical option that legitimates her thinking about specific popular cultures.

The rigor and refinement of the author in the management of conceptual instances persist in all the work, whether in constructs of her own work, or in the precision of the choice of references that inspire and embody her reflection. When she ponders over the convenience of analytical procedures aimed at the universe of popular culture, the incursion into the work *Danças dramáticas do Brasil* (Brazilian dramatic Dances), in which economic imperatives of a sociological order are deprived as an analytical instance, cannot be more fruitful in order to give way to recognition of a poetics of culture, which lends relative autonomy to forms of artistic expression. In this immersion into the thought of Mário de Andrade (1982), the author demonstrates the analytical power of notions such as “symbolic”, “dramatic dance” and the musical concept of “suite”, vectors that favor contextualizing the dissolution of boundaries between popular and erudite tradition. Suite specially suggests a singular interpretive approach to analyze the cosmopolitan character of the formative process of Brazilian dances, to the detriment of the folklore studies from European tradition.

From a reflection on the legitimacy of royal power in Portuguese Christian thought and the fact that Portugal is configured as an imperial vocation kingdom in a mystical and messianic project, Marianna Monteiro (2011) points out that the Portuguese modern political thought did not have secularization trends, and that the traditionalist and religious mentality would only be refuted from the late eighteenth century. Based on this study and pondering the overlap between politics and religion, particularly the problem of the popular origin of royal power, the author questions how festive social practices reproduce the mystical body of the Government. Among the various developments resulting from this discussion, let us cite the statement of the fragility of the argument that supposes the party symbolism as an immediate expression of a transcendent reality. Opposing this assertion, the author argues that the procession reproduces the mystical body of the Government, but instead of doing so in the condition of representing an absence, it promotes an “effective conjuring of social and spiritual forces” (ibid. 79) through its own syntax, that mobilizes material, plastic and sound signs.

Upon completing these considerations about the subtleties that underlie the formation of political and religious power in Portuguese America and assigning to them their concern about the symbolic components that emerge from its festive demonstrations, Marianna dedicates to studying the coronation celebrations of the kings of Congo and Bumba meu Boi, reflecting on the conditions of permanence in the current mirth of old poetic and artistic forms. Through an ethnography carried out in Ilhabela *congada*, to the Mozambicans of the Paraíba Valley and Minas Gerais Congo, the author identifies that ancient values remain fundamental instances for understanding the meaning of these manifestations, as in the case of the recognition of “royalty” as superior instance of the present *congado*, despite over a hundred years of republic.

The author points out that “the so-called folkloric manifestations have been constituted in a religious and cultural field consistent with modern political formulations” (ibid., 228). From these findings, the methodological commitment to contextualize the reading of popular dances considering the perspective of the complex society in which they occur comes out. In the preparation of her ethnography referring to the three mentioned manifestations, Marianna Monteiro favors the analysis of the artistic creation, directing the field research to an investigation in which the interpretation of the symbolic aspects of the mirth is predominant.

As a simple “set of assumptions”, Marianna Monteiro sets her investigation result. Projecting far beyond this perspective, *Dança popular: espetáculo e devoção* presents a deep and subtle reflection, combining theoretical density, methodological care and ethnographic refinement rare

to see embodied in the same work, notwithstanding the elegance and vigor condensed in her writing. It is with precision and ingenuity that each hypothesis is built and grounded and the authors who make up the conceptual fortune mobilized by the researcher are chosen. Combining an education of social scientist and a trajectory of artist and player, Marianna Monteiro developed an inspiring research with developments that are not limited to the universes directly themed in the work, but which reverberate in a multitude of domains, especially in the researches that dare to investigate the tensions involved in the aesthetic appropriation projects of popular culture by the so-called elite culture. On this point, it could not be more appropriate to finalize this review by repeating and confirming the author's question: "When we talk about popular dance, where do we do it?" (Monteiro, 2011, 224).

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received
06.06.2017
accepted
09.05.2017

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