

## **The Trans-Man:**

### **Re-Writing Subjectivity in Teatro Oficina Uzyna Uzona's *Rebellion in the Backlands***

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This paper focuses on the way in which renowned São Paulo-based theatre company Teatro Oficina Uzyna Uzona challenges and deconstructs hegemonic concepts of subjectivity in their 2000 - 2007 25 hour-long production of Euclides da Cunha's seminal Brazilian novel *Os sertões* ("Rebellion in the Backlands"), and how this radical re-writing of the subject has a profound effect on the internal structures of the performance text itself.

Company director José Celso Martinez Corrêa has coined the term *Trans-Homem* ("Trans-Man") to refer to a notion of subjectivity beyond the confines of castration and phallogocentrism. In Portuguese, the prefix *trans-* means both "across", "over", "beyond" or "outside" of, as in English, but it also has the extra connotation of *transar*, a slang term for coitus.

We shall draw on Post-Freudian psychoanalytical theory to help elucidate the ways in which this notion of the "Trans-Man" serves as a guiding aesthetic principle, circumventing the castrating tendencies of logocentrism whilst shaping the writing of *Os Sertões* on a level of both content and form. Thus it is the sheer material impact of the resulting performance text, its heightened eroticism, epic scope and transgressive libidinal charge that promotes the company's Bacchic reinterpretation of their country's neo-colonial legacy, offering a subversive, alternative re-reading that contrasts with hegemonic, ethnocentric accounts of the discovery and domination of Brazil.

#### **The Teatro Oficina Uzyna Uzona**

The Teatro Oficina (later Teatro Oficina Uzyna Uzona) was founded in 1958 by a group of students from the Law School of the Largo de São Francisco, which is today part of the University of Sao Paulo. This amateur ensemble, which included the company's current director and longest-serving member, José Celso Martinez Corrêa, better known as Zé Celso, would go on to become one of the most influential theatre companies in Brazil, consistently creating groundbreaking theatrical performances that added a fresh sense of

technical innovation and artistic daring to the conservative, Eurocentric, elitist Sao Paulo theatre scene of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. From Stanislavski to Brecht, Grotowski to the Living Theatre, the Teatro Oficina spent the 1960s creating challenging performances that drew on the latest in European and North American approaches to theatre-making, increasingly filtered by practical experiments seeking to define a uniquely Brazilian form of artistic expression.

By 1972, the company's ever more anarchic stance, avant-garde performances and leftist leanings drew the wrath of the military dictatorship. Company members, including Zé Celso, were imprisoned and tortured by the secret police, a situation which culminated in Zé Celso's exile from Brazil in 1974. After spending four years in Portugal and Africa, Zé Celso returned to Brazil in 1978, and spent the eighties creating underground theatre performances and super-eight films, whilst re-grouping and re-forming the Teatro Oficina.

In 1993, after a 13-year period of building work, the Teatro Oficina inaugurated a radical new theatre space in central Sao Paulo designed by acclaimed Italian-Brazilian modernist architect, Lina Bo Bardi. The opening of the company's so-called "terreiro eletrônico" coincided with an artistic renaissance. Following on from a commended post-modern re-reading of *Hamlet*, the group went on to devise a number of critically acclaimed performances which showcased an increasingly coherent political, philosophical and aesthetic agenda.

The culmination of this artistic resurgence was, without a doubt, the company's epic, 25-hour mise-en-scène of the classic Brazilian novel *Os Sertões* (Rebellion in the Backlands). *Os Sertões* won several important Brazilian theatre awards, and was deemed to be the "best performance of the century" by influential Brazilian arts magazine "Bravo". Devised between 2002 and 2006, the performance travelled to Germany in 2005, and was a controversial success at the Volksbühne in Luxemburg Platz. In 2007, the five installments of the performance toured across Brazil, and were unanimously lauded by members of the public and critics alike.

### *Os Sertões*

The staging of *Os Sertões* was the culmination of a dream that was first contemplated in the '60s and then reattempted in 1988, but which only came to fruition at the beginning of the

millennium, to devise a performance based on Euclides da Cunha's decisive account of the War in Canudos (1896-97); a defining moment in Brazilian history which pitted the nascent Republican army against messianic leader Antonio Conselheiro and his followers, who had established their own autonomous community in the *Sertão* – the desert-like hinterlands of Bahia, in Northeastern Brazil. The events in Canudos marked the first example of State terrorism perpetrated on Brazil's subaltern population by the nascent Republican government, and it is estimated that twenty-five thousand impoverished peasants lost their lives during the War (TAVARES, 1947. Pág.32).

This brutal subject matter was the material for one of the greatest novels in the history of Brazilian literature; Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões*. Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909) had trained as a geographer and geologist, and was steeped in the Positivist science of his time. This sense of rigour is apparent throughout the richly dense text of *Os sertões*, but is consistently tempered by a poetic sensitivity. Thus, his enigmatic book was not only a detailed account of the War in Canudos; it also offered a treatise on the Brazilian landscape, on the country's flora and fauna, on the people of the hinterland, and their tragic confrontation with the imported, supposedly superior culture of a "civilized" coastal society that treated them with utter barbarity.

It was the dramatic potential of the text, its vibrant depiction of Brazil and its people, and its inter-semiotic, polyphonic narrative that attracted Zé Celso to the book in the first place. The performance text was fashioned from group improvisations over a period of four years and then molded into a more coherent dramaturgy by Zé Celso and his collaborators. A number of rehearsals were open to the general public, who were also invited to contribute their ideas and opinions to the developing pieces.

The chorus would provide *Os Sertões* with the universal, cathartic dimensions of Greek tragedy, and was expanded during the devising process to include young people from the surrounding neighbourhood who were taking part in the Oficina's Bexigão project, an NGO working with impoverished youngsters from the surrounding neighbourhood of Bela Vista.

Zé Celso and his collaborators had drawn up plans over the years for the development of a "Stadium Theatre" in the area adjoining the Teatro Oficina, surrounded by trees, which would become the campus for a public university, or "multiversity" a phrase Zé Celso has

coined, “promoting orgiastic Brazilian culture” (CAROS AMIGOS, 2005, pág.32). However, at the same time, the Grupo Sílvio Santos, a corporate group headed by Brazilian media mogul and television presenter Sílvio Santos, was pushing to demolish the surrounding area and erect a shopping centre, as an alternative means of revitalizing the area, attracting wealth and capital, but to the detriment of the surrounding community, who would lose their homes and be pushed out by inflated property prices.

The Oficina’s struggle against the Grupo Sílvio Santos was incorporated into *Os Sertões*, and the five performances composing the oeuvre became a heady mixture of political activism and historic reflection fused with the Teatro Oficina’s potent, symbolic theatrical language to create a portrait of Brazil past, present and future; a vision of a land steeped in mysticism, rocked by injustice and kept afloat by the gritty determinism and courage of its multiracial population. The five performances followed the structure of Euclides da Cunha’s novel, which is divided into three different sections: *the Earth, the People, and the Struggle*.

The first performance, *The Earth*, is based on Euclides da Cunha’s technically rigorous yet stirringly poetic description of the unique landscape of the arid Brazilian Northeast. Euclides da Cunha’s description of the people of the *Sertão*, their customs and mores, is divided into two different performances. The first, *Man I: from the Pre-Man to the Re-Volt*, focuses on the historic miscegenation that produced the Brazilian people; the oppressive sexual conquest of Brazil’s Indigenous people and later importation of African slaves by the Iberian conquerors of Europe. The third performance, *Man II: from the Revolt to the Trans-Man* depicts the evolution of the marginalized oppressed into the *Trans-Man*: a subject capable of transcending the boundaries of law and language, offering an alternative to the brutal reality of (neo) colonialism.

The fourth installment, *The Struggle I*, focuses on the first three military expeditions to Canudos and the successful way in which these attacks were deflected by the local militants. The final performance, *The Struggle II*, focuses on the final expedition and the massacre at Canudos, which is represented as an (un) massacre and a (re) beginning by Zé Celso, as Antonio Conselheiro’s struggle is carried on by his spiritual heirs; the Teatro Oficina and fellow counter-cultural groups fighting against social injustice and mass

globalization.

### **The Trans-Man: Challenging Phallogocentric Subjectivity**

Let us now examine Zé Celso and the Teatro Oficina's concept of the *trans-man* and assess how it dialogues with and challenges Post-Freudian analytical thought and Critical Theory. It will be made apparent through this analysis that the Oficina are promoting a radical notion of subjectivity, drawing on the embodied, abject cultural heritage of Brazil's marginalized subaltern populace, and that this concept shapes the performance text on a level of both content and form.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Freudian metapsychology radically challenged traditional notions of subjectivity. The traditional Cartesian notion of the sovereign *cogito* was blown out of the water by Freud's tripartite notion of psychic functioning, which effectively hangs on the interplay between three interrelated structural aspects: dynamic, topographical and economic (FREUD, 2005: 218). Thus Freud would show that psychic functioning was largely unconscious, propelled by the instinctual drives towards pleasure seeking and excess, and therefore subject to repression, censorship and sublimation in order to maintain the organism's homeostasis and the subject's successful social integration.

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) would go on to relocate Freud's outwardly Positivist, pseudo-biological discourse within the sphere of language, drawing on theorists such as Lévi-Strauss and Saussure in order to develop his own tripartite analysis of the underlying structures of Freudian metapsychology, which was expressed through three inter-related "orders" shaping subjectivity, dubbed the *imaginary*, the *symbolic* and the *real*.

Within this Post-Freudian reading of psychoanalytical theory, the subject is shown to be at the mercy of the imaginary and symbolic orders, which represent phantasy and language, respectively. Reduced to a link in the signifying chain by castration and driven by the short circuit of his desire which eternally bars him from full *jouissance* and access to the unknowable real beyond signification, the only ontological basis for this alienated subject is an essential lack, which is engendered by a longing for the entropy of non-being.

To quote Lacan, "When we want to get at what was before the serial games of speech in the subject and what is prior to the birth of symbols, we find it in death, from which his existence derives all the meaning it has." (LACAN, 2006: 263). Thus beyond the castrating

confines of language as speech and desire as unfulfilling repetition, subjectivity is driven by the death drive towards annihilation and the void.

But how does this nihilistic view of the subject, based on the primacy of the phallus and language as spoken word, relate to the Teatro Oficina's notion of the *trans-man*? According to Zé Celso:

We invoke the PreMan and the Transman to put an end to this cursed figure of "Man" so that we can get ready for a never-ending Struggle, because life loves a struggle. A struggle to un-mask classified man. The un-massacre takes place during every performance; every run of *Os Sertões* (...) Many people will pass through these Mandalas, and many others beside. Theatre is potent in Sao Pan for this very reason. It's the city's unreason for being. (CORRÊA, 2006c: 22)

Throughout the course of *Os Sertões*, Zé Celso and the Teatro Oficina seek to dismantle phallogocentric notions of the subject as the castrated product of the *logos*. The company questions the very notion of *man*. What is a *man*, after all, if not a symbolic construct of language ensnared in the master's discourse by his own sublimated, fragmented desire? This *man* is an extension of global capitalism, a product of the neocolonial system. As Zé Celso states:

Today the Earth's atmosphere is surrounded by waves that filter and dictate the same polluted energy that is saturated by the competitive "news" broadcast in the nihilistic language of mass marketing. It's a birdcage-like astrolabe produced by the same financial dictatorship that deems the cultivated and un-catechized living body a sin, that must either be canonized or burnt at the stake (...) And the Earth is caught in a War produced by robots, fabricated men who are completely oblivious to the fact that they're on Planet Earth. (CORRÊA, 2006a : 9)

This reductive notion of *man* as a colonized, fabricated subject of a foreign, alienating, capitalist discourse is thus contrasted and compared throughout the performance text to the *pre-man* and the *trans-man*.

In *Os Sertões*, the notion of the *pre-man* is based upon all that is marginalized within the symbolic matrix of Brazil's hegemonic Eurocentric, patriarchal discourse – all that pre-dates or subverts the neocolonial project of domination and cultural genocide within the Americas. The *pre-man* is thus all that is repressed and rejected within Brazilian society –

which is essentially the *mother*, and more specifically the African and Indigenous mothers of Brazil's largely mestizo population.

As Zé Celso affirms,

After *O Rei da Vela*<sup>1</sup>, we discovered that Brazilian Theatre pre-dated the Jesuits; it was Anthropofagic<sup>2</sup> and above all African. The theatre, then, began speaking for the god of Rhythm, the god of Music, the god of Dance, beyond the proscenium arch, on the ground, in connection with the earth; an electronic *terreiro*<sup>3</sup>. (CORRÊA, 2006c: 18)

From the mid '60s, the company had already begun to break with realism, adopting a more rhythmic, libidinal, visceral performance style that drew on the Carnavalesque sub-stratum of Brazilian society and, from the '80s onwards, the embodied ritualistic forms of Afro-Brazilian religion. Candomblé, the matriarchal, African-derived religion of Brazil, is

(...) an accumulation and transposition of many kinds of knowledge (...) Embodied philosophy is read within the performance behaviours of worshippers and reveals cultural understanding of a suprahuman and interactive world within ritual performance (...) in these religions, more than singing drumming and dancing are present. Praise performance practices have guarded embodied knowledge for centuries. (DANIEL, 2005: 93)

It is this embodied philosophy, this sacred poetics on the margins of hegemonic, elitist Brazilian discourse, this silenced yet all-pervasive voice of the subaltern Brazilian *mother* that holds sway over the Teatro Oficina.

An interesting parallel can be drawn here between the Oficina's aesthetic and Julia Kristeva's concept of the *semiotic*; the illogical, pre-linguistic level of language, influenced by the drives and related to the child's initial relationship with its mother, who is imagined

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<sup>1</sup> The Teatro Oficina's 1967 performance of Oswald de Andrade's *O Reid a Vela* was a ground breaking moment in the history of Brazilian theatre. The company drew on popular Brazilian culture to create a unique, Carnavalesque vision of the comic, satirical play, heralding their later Bacchic excesses. The performance played an influential part in the development of the Tropicalista cultural movement in Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> The *Manifesto Antropofágico* was written by Brazilian poet and philosopher Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954) in 1928, extolling the virtues of Anthropofagy (cannibalism) as an inherent part of Brazilian national identity, linked to the country's roots within Tupi Indigenous culture (the Tupis were cannibals). Andrade affirms that Brazil's "cannibalization" of other cultures is in fact its greatest strength, and a means of asserting itself against Eurocentric neo-colonialism. Anthropofagy would hold a lasting influence on the Teatro Oficina's aesthetic from the end of the 1960s onwards.

as the *Phallic Mother*; an infantile phantasy of an omnipotent, primordial Other who fuses maternal and paternal traits. The *semiotic*, or *chora*, is “(...) unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted to such an extent that it merits “not even the rank of syllable”” (KRISTEVA, 1980: 133).

According to Kristeva, poetic writing is the artist’s attempt to fuse once more with this maternal level of language, circumventing castration by an incestuous (re) union with the underlying rhythmic materiality of the sign (KRISTEVA, 1980: 30).

*Os Sertões* is characterized by this fusion. The *mother*, the *pre-man* is present throughout the performance *as absence*, for she is implicit in the very rhythmic quality of the performance text itself. By drawing on the cadenced *semiotic* of Afro-Brazilian ritual and African-derived cultural manifestations such as *samba*, *capoeira*, *maracatú* and *frevo*, the Teatro Oficina re-write Brazil’s troubled neocolonial past, imbuing the performance’s animistic theatrical super-signs with a subversive, totemic *jouissance* that transcends the logic of the *logos*. Thus

(...) “Oedipus” comes out looking like Orpheus – singing (...) The Greek myth is deflated, replaced by a non-Oedipal incest that opens the eyes of a subject who is nourished by the mother. The Phallic Mother – as blinding pillar of the *polis* and unconscious buttress of the laws of the city – is apprehended, comprehended, and thrust aside. The subject of this drama can in no way be a “citizen” – neither Orestes, murderer of the mother nor Oedipus, castrated trustee of an invisible knowledge, occult wise man, tragic support of political religion. The “actor” subject, “poet” banished from the Republic because he has shot through his maternal pedestal, abides in the margins of society by wavering between the cult of the mother and the playful, laughing, stripping away of its mystery. By the same token, he alludes all codes; neither animal, god nor man, he is Dionysius, born a second time for having had the mother. (KRISTEVA, 1980: 192).

This incestuous, Bacchic son – the actor, the poet - is, in fact, the *trans-man*. In *Os Sertões*, the *trans-man* is the subject *as artist*, constantly seeking to imbue his discourse with the poetic *jouissance* of the maternal order of language. Thus, rather than the castrated Oedipus of traditional psychoanalytical thought, the subject embodies Dionysus, re-discovering himself as an ebullient, libidinous, subversive *agent* able to *re-write* history afresh,

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<sup>3</sup> The sacred, ceremonial space of Candomblé.



*transcending* the difficulties of the present and *transforming* the future. According to Zé Celso,

There are human cells that are infecting the rotten organism of this country, paving the way for regeneration and growth. Throughout the performance, we tried to follow the thread of Brazilian history by focusing on the human struggle for trans-human transformation. The seeds of Canudos are now, at this point of crisis, finding extremely fertile soil, they're budding, contaminating (...) we will have the power to emerge with the full force of Canudos as a "spontaneous convergence of all the demented forces present in the craziness of the *sertão*", the favelas, the rappers and the swingers, all those who believe in peace and produce it during war – the driving force of Brazilian Anthropofagy, Bacchic Goats proudly out of fashion. (CORRÊA, 2006b: 10)

Thus, imbued with the *semiotic* wealth of Brazil's subaltern masses, drawing on the country's rich cultural past and vibrant artistic present, the *trans-man*'s art is a *driving force* that can create real social change. The artistic endeavor transcends the stage, and art becomes a *way of life*, transforming individuals and communities, near and afar. No longer alienated and castrated, the Bacchic *trans-man* finds freedom through *struggle*. As Zé Celso explains,

Portraying the inevitable, tragic annihilation, the extermination of those who couldn't give in, the real life survival of all those who will continue the struggle in a myriad of different ways, has been our tragic rites of passage onto the battlefield of all those who, like the people of Canudos, didn't want to be massacred, a ritual initiation that we have devoured over the past six years together. Our little crowd has cultivated this rite together with the little Crowds from our Open Rehearsals and Performances in Sao Paulo, Rio Preto, Reklinghausen and Berlin (...) This huge and seductively infectious conglomeration of people have encouraged and will encourage us to continue on our journey beyond drama, beyond exhaustion, beyond poverty, disagreements, dis-love and dissonance, and have encouraged and will encourage us to achieve in every performance a state of being-in-the-moment, a non-being, serenading the people of the Sertão. (CORRÊA, 2006e: 17).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This last sentence (in the original Portuguese: (...) nos fez e nos fará atingir em cada apresentação um estado de ser estar, sertão, sem-ser, serestando) is extremely hard to translate, as it effectively plays on the *differance* between two of the Portuguese verbs that represent the English "to be" – *ser* and *estar*, which have a variety of subtly different connotations depending on the grammatical context. In general, *ser* is used for permanent states of being and *estar* for temporary, transitory states of being. Thus the relative

Hence, the War of Canudos becomes a living metaphor, a guiding principle, shaping the Teatro Oficina's innovative re-writing of *Os Sertões* and utopist vision for the cultural revitalization of the surrounding neighbourhood. The *trans-man* is the *sertanejo*, the dejected militant, the counter-cultural revolutionary, past, present and future.

Let us now turn to *Os Sertões* itself, to analyze the concrete ways in which this revolutionary notion of subjectivity as transcendence, transformation, trance and *transa* influences the performance text on a level of form, by focusing on the syntagmatic categories of *body*, *space-time-action*, *multi-media* and *music*.

### **Improper Bodies**

The taboo of incest, the incestuous fusion with the Other as mother and the blurring of the binary opposites of the phallogocentric symbolic order, shapes the way in which the body is represented and performed in *Os Sertões*. By transforming taboo into totem, the symbolic notion of the body as individualized, castrated product of signification is challenged by the unmitigated *jouissance* of sensuous abandon and perversion.

The subject, be he actor or spectator, loses himself and fuses with the group, becoming part of a collective Dionysian body, united by the sensorial orgy of images and sensations that bloom in the scenic context. As Zé Celso himself emphasizes, "Every actor, musician, technician, and member of the public is here as a human body, representing through every gesture and theatrical effect all the bodies that were ever involved in the history of Brazil and the world today. Everyone contributes energy to the witchcraft we cook up. (CORRÊA, 2006d: 12)

This physical proximity and playful embodiment emphasizes the central role that the body and kinesthetic experience play in *Os Sertões*. The body is at all times emphasized, fetishized, given centre-stage. Zé Celso plays with the physical diversity and charisma of his cast to create a blueprint of the heterogeneity of the Brazilian "povo" which at the same

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instability of *estar* undermines somewhat the ontico-ontological foundation of Western Metaphysics, which equates being with full presence. Zé Celso then goes on to play with the phonemic equivalence between *ser*, *Sertão* and *serestar* (to serenade). Thus, *being* for the Teatro Oficina is a playful, rhythmical non-being, a self-penned musical homage to the ancestral source of the Brazilian nation – the Sertão.

time is cast in an almost archetypical light through the sheer weight given to physical presence.

*Os Sertões* showcases this collective body in all its diversity, from the old bodies of veteran actors such as Zé Celso to the beautiful bodies of the young actors and the marginalized bodies of the community of Bixigão, thus creating “(...) a Team of Superstars who through Mutant Dramaturgical Creations re-write every week the cadenced Orgy of Stadium Theatre.” (CORRÊA, 2006e: 19)

Whilst superficially titillating, the overt use of nudity throughout the performance is so frequent that it strangely seems to wipe out the contours of the bodies on stage, one naked body blurring into the other, forming a single, orgiastic collective. In Portuguese, *próprio* has a double significance that the English word “proper” has lost. Thus, the body is both *improper* in the sense of “indecent” and *im-próprio* in the sense of non-self-contained, not “owned”, non-individuated. This blurring of traditional boundaries is reflected in the performance by the frequent breaking down of the fourth wall. Audience members are constantly invited to invade the performance space and interact with the cast members.

One example of this takes place towards the beginning of *The Struggle II*. The fourth expedition of soldiers has set out to attack Canudos and is marching on foot through the arid hinterlands of the Brazilian Northeast, when they come along a group of prostitutes. The rigid, staccato movement of the marching troop, their military uniform and protracted, drawn-out speeches contrast starkly with the half-naked prostitutes, who loll around the performance space, proffering sex. The women then perform an orgiastic ritual to Saint Anthony – the patron saint of marriage – which culminates in a raucous choral song, with two young actresses centre stage rubbing their genitals together, mutually masturbating each other. The other actresses pull female members of the audience up out of their seats and imitate the other actresses’ frottage.

The orgy comes to an abrupt halt as the actor playing General Barbosa, a representative of aggressive patriarchal authority, breaks the two actresses up centre stage, screaming at them, calling them whores. The women reply to this aggression by standing up in pairs. One member of the couple performs a handstand and leans in against the other woman, spreading her legs upside down, revealing her vagina as her dress falls down. The standing

women sing the following lyrics – “You yawn/ whilst we get off / you get wound up / whilst we bravely cum” – before performing cunnilingus on their partners.

The prostitutes, wearing scanty red dresses and carrying mirrors, are embodied signs, which a Brazilian audience will effectively read as representations of *Maria Padilha* – a divinity within popular Brazilian culture who represents the sexually voracious feminine principle. Thus, this archetypal manifestation of abject female sexuality is defiantly contrasted with the stultifying, rigid, authoritative and aggressive paternal principle – the castrated subject of neocolonial discourse – represented by the soldiers. The women’s lesbianism represents the libidinal, sensual, self-sufficient force of feminine *jouissance* that transcends and threatens a phallic discourse that conquers, castrates and prostrates the subject. And it is this feminine principle, this glimpse of the omnipotent *mother*, which breaks with the laws and expectations of traditional theatre, as the actresses cavort with the female audience members, who are fused at that point with the orgiastic collective re-writing Brazilian history from a subversive, *transgressive* perspective.

### **Offensive Palimpsests – Space-Time-Action**

There is a scene towards the end of *The Struggle II*, in which the soldiers – on the verge of victory – are shown to be at odds with their commanders. A rap song called “Offensive Palimpsests” is sung over a drum ‘n bass soundtrack, as the actors and audience members rush down trapdoors along the main performance space to the underground “bunkers” beneath the theatre, and begin to graffiti the walls with charcoal, as technicians film them and project their scrawling across the space.

I would thus like to explore the notion of the *palimpsest* – an overwriting, the layering of one text on another in which the underwriting is effaced but still remains as *trace* – as a means of understanding the way that space-time-action develops within *Os Sertões*. By rejecting the phallogocentric notion of the primacy of the spoken word, rationality, presence and truth, the Teatro Oficina ascribe to a non-linear logic, a layering of different texts and spatial-temporal reference points that *transcends* traditional Western notions of historicity.

Hence an Aristotelian sense of drama as a controlled and surveyable flow of time is swept away by the orgiastic logic of the Teatro Oficina’s oeuvre, which offers a polyphonic

narrative that shows linear time to be “(...) an invention of the West. Time isn’t linear, it’s a wonderful mixture where, at any moment, different points can be chosen, and solutions invented without any beginning or end” (CORRÊA, 2006a : 11).

In rejecting the linear determinism of phallogocentric historicity which inscribes our being as a string of signifiers, the subject is thus free to find in poetic writing a means of subverting language and reshaping his own destiny, this freedom from the confines of the Law ultimately serving to liberate him further on his path towards fusion and *jouissance*.

Different atmospheres, epochs and locations are conjured up by a metonymic use of props and costumes, transforming the actors bodies into temporal-spatial graphemes. The vast performance space itself, with its exaggerated vertical and horizontal axes, further enables the concomitant layering of different discourses. The action occurs often simultaneously in different points of the long corridor of Lina Bo Bardi’s “cultural road”, eluding any decisive, reductive gaze, destabilizing the spectator’s daily perception by creating a “surround-sound” effect of physical presence that immerses the audience in the Teatro Oficina’s vision of Canudos.

Historically, palimpsests were often defaced pagan texts, overwritten by the Christian fathers. *Os Sertões* represents this process in reverse. The layering of different narratives here serves to subvert and radically re-assess hegemonic accounts of Brazilian history, imbuing the tragedy of neocolonialism with the *differance* of Dionysian ebullience.

Take for example the first scene of *The Struggle II*. The performance begins on the street outside the Teatro Oficina’s space, in central Sao Paulo. The road is cordoned off, and actors in contemporary Western combat gear patrol the street with rifles in hand. An actor playing the mutilated Lieutenant Pires Ferreira, a historic figure from the War of Canudos, gives a speech, accusing the Teatro Oficina of being monarchists (which was the accusation levied at the people of Canudos by the Republican government), conspirators of Left-Wing Bolivian President Evo Morales, immoral pornographers and of having vetoed Sílvia Santos’ plans to erect a shopping mall on the neighbouring plot of land.

The young child actors, all dressed in military gear, give Nazi salutes as a young actress dressed as a showgirl walks around collecting petitions to close down the Oficina. The petitions are placed in a ballot box which is strapped to her shoulders and decorated to look

like a vagina, with two splayed legs stuck on either side. Suddenly, she is joined by a line of other scantily-clad chorus girls who all make their way to the soap box, where they sing a paean to the glories of war, before welcoming back a wounded soldier from the previous installment of the performance (*The Struggle I*), who has now been cast as a media darling (in a reference to *Roda Viva*, one of the group's performances from the sixties).

The festivities are interrupted by an actor dressed as a jihad terrorist, a representative of Canudos/Oficina, who "sets off" an explosive strapped to his body. The actors then mime chaotic panic, rushing the audience into the performance space as copies of "Os Sertões", the book, are burnt.

The parallels drawn here between the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Republican army, the right-wing neo-colonial geo-oligarchy, the Grupo Sílvio Santos and bourgeois prudish morality is a recurring theme throughout the 25 hours of the performance. This portrayal of "the man" is contrasted throughout with the metonymic chain Candomblé – Canudos – Favelas – Pan-Latin American Socialism – Jihad Militia - Teatro Oficina, which represents the *trans-man* as a-temporal, trans-national revolutionary.

The scene is a grotesquely humorous critique of "democracy" – with the vagina-shaped ballot box and gyrating show girls paying homage to the glories of war – and is a staunch condemnation of the hypocrisy of our media-saturated, capitalist society. The dream-like condensation of the different theatrical super-signs forming the opposed metonymic chains *Man vs. Trans-Man* emphasizes the eternal return of patriarchal, hegemonic oppression and the constant need for revolutionary action. It is also significant that this performative palimpsest of neo-colonial reality was inscribed *on the street, outside* the theatre space, thus subversively realizing the Teatro Oficina's dream of taking their proposed Orgyastic Multiversity out to the surrounding community beyond the confines of the theatrical space.

### **That Object of Desire – Multi-Media and the Gaze**

In Lacanian theory, the child's own desire is founded on the desire of the mother as Other. Thus, after castration, the pleasure of oneness is replaced by fleeting fulfillment in insatiable desire. Separation splits the subject into ego and the unconscious whilst the other is split into the lacking Other and object *a*.

Thus the subject is unable to ever form a real relationship with an-other; his real partner being the object *a* of his phantasy, which is based on the desirousness of the primordial mOther figure, which the child adopts for its own. It is that which breaks the smooth flow of the symbolic, that which refers back to the real.

In later literature, Lacan refers to the object of desire as object (a), the use of brackets here a sign of the object's transposition from the imaginary register to the real<sup>5</sup>. For object (a) is more than mere fantasy; it is the *cause* of all desire in the subject. Desire has no real "object" as such, only a cause which will consistently manifest itself throughout the life of the subject in an endless search for the original *jouissance* of the original mother-child unity.

In *Os Sertões*, shots fragment the body, re-writing "reality" to fit an orgiastic vision of existence that distances presence, which is edited, perfected, captured, and eternalized by the gaze of the video technician. It is this gaze that transforms the subject into object (a), the fragmented fetish of phantasy.

However, these shots, which are projected throughout the space onto several, large television screens, exaggerate object (a) to such an extent that it transcends the fragmenting, reductive gaze of mere phantasy, taking on mythic proportions within the fictive universe of the Teatro Oficina's orgiastic *Canudos*, highlighting the fundamental incestuous desire driving the company's aesthetic fusion with the maternal order of language.

The lingering camera shots of genitalia, close-ups of actors' faces and takes that separate bodies from the ensuing action, magnify them, exaggerating the physicality of the actors. Thus, the performance magnifies the body and its effects to cosmic proportions, forging a tacit awareness of our essential interconnectivity in "a search for the human at the limits of our breathing bodies opened up to the cosmos. A search for Teat( r )o" (CORRÊA, 2006b: 9).

One extreme example of this cosmic cathexis of object (a) and its transformation into totem takes place at the end of *The Man II*. The scene in question is a farcical church service lead by Pastor Insônia (a parody of the founder of Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal Church Renascer,

who was imprisoned in the USA on charges of money laundering) featuring a fervent child preacher and a crucified Jesus, who watches on from the balcony above the main performance space. The scene reaches a climax as Insônia addresses the audience: “Attention Ladies and Gentleman / Pandora’s box will now speak”.

One of the actresses – whose surgically enhanced, exaggerated silicone breasts, evident rhinoplasty and inflated lips actually serve to make her gender ambiguous, transforming her into an embodied manifestation of the Phallic Mother – slowly walks to the centre of the stage in an elegant black dress and headdress towards the preachers’ pulpit. On arriving at the pulpit, she lies down upon it and pulls up her dress, revealing her vagina. Insônia places the microphone she is holding up to “Pandora’s” vulva, and the prone actress tugs on her vaginal lips, making her genitals “talk” in a mixture of Latin and Italian as cameras close in around her, projecting the image of “Pandora’s box” across the space.

After a long scene parodying the hypocrisy of Neo-Pentecostal Christianity in Brazil and its close connection to the violent discourse of neocolonial capitalist oppression, the female sexual organ, that which is most abject within phallogocentrism, that secret object of incestuous desire, that gateway to fusion, is placed centre stage, and shown to be the guiding principle behind the scene’s transgressive, deliberately crass humour. It is the revenge of the abject, undermining the hollow, empty speech of the corrupt upper-echelons of Brazilian society that drives this scene and gives it a subversive potency.

### **Echoes of Abjection – Musicality and the Semiotic**

By emphasizing the semiotic rhythms of Brazil’s abject maternal heritage throughout the course of *Os Sertões*, the Teatro Oficina subvert hegemonic versions of historicity, re-writing Brazilian national identity by accentuating the hidden trace of the mother imbedded in the materiality of subaltern Brazilian culture. From the rhyming spoken text, which draws on Northeastern Brazilian *Teatro de Cordel*, to the polyphony of different musical styles used to create the performance’s breath-taking soundscapes, all drawing on contemporary and traditional music of African and Indigenous origin, the musicality of *Os Sertões* resonates profoundly, transcending signification, striking a deep inner chord,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Pág.91



pointing back towards the barred, forever lost, mythical “originary” trace of the Brazilian people.

A strikingly beautiful moment towards the end of *The Man II* should help illustrate. After being sent by local land owners to convince the people of Canudos to repent and give in to the authorities, a delegation of priests lave the town, cursing the inhabitants. The scene, which contained copious amounts of dialogue, ends in a song sang by Conselheiro’s female followers:

*Time will reveal / another Constructivism / However much you wish to massacre it / It will always be eternally alive / We are all / You are all / So much more than so-called Man / And his damned civilization / We are more... We are more... (The men now join in): A story of love / and Unlove / Crowned cuckolds / passionately in love / Desire knocks / on the door of what is called God / who is Creation / Struggle pours forth from what is called love / which is passion.*

After swathes of spoken text, the women’s polyphonic singing offers melodious respite, and would seem to represent the voice of the abject mother as that sonorous echo on the margins of speech, the material trace rejected and barred by the patriarchal order. The song lyrics sum up the performance’s philosophical perspective: the subject is more than *man*, more than the castrated subject of the *logos*. The *trans-man* longs to fuse once more with the *pre-man* in a tacit union that transcends the confines of the symbolic order. It is through imbuing creative writing with the incestuous, material *jouissance* of the semiotic that the *trans-man* re-engenders himself through poetry, recreating his past, present and future. There are no fixed truths. All is void. All is struggle, creation and love.

## **Conclusion**

In 2006, on concluding the five performances that made up *Os Sertões*, Zé Celso wrote:

(...) the Oficina is now an island surrounded by devastated earth where a great social conflict is taking place that is being played out across Brazil and the world as a Wole: the imposition of yet another Shopping Mall. But it could and should be:

A place to be-in-the-moment, a little piece of the *Sertão* implanted as an Area of Social Inclusion through Art; through Living Culture; through Education –

transforming values; through New Health thanks to the old *Catharsis* of Hipocrates, who performed at Epidaurus, with Dionysus; through Cyber Technology, a great ally in the battle against “isms”; through a Tropical Rainforest, the so-called “Oficina das Florestas” of Sao Paulo. (CORRÊA, 2006e: 14).

On the 24 June 2010, the Institute of Historical and National Artistic Patrimony finally officially deemed the Teatro Oficina’s space a listed building, in recognition of the group’s groundbreaking work over the past fifty-three years, a period of time in which the company have bequeathed a legacy of creativity and culture to the people of Sao Paulo, rooted in their orgiastic vision of subjectivity as an active agency, a subversive, poetic potential for re-writing reality to effect positive change.