



PEDAGOGY AND POPULAR ART FOR THE MASSES FROM THE CPC

Após uma introdução às origens do *Centro Popular de Cultura*, a discussão concentra-se na peça *Auto dos 99%*, um dos maiores sucessos do grupo. Parte do circuito pelo Brasil patrocinado pela *União Nacional dos Estudantes* em 1962, a peça adota muitos dos elementos do “auto” tradicional para realizar outra função característica do gênero: educar o público. Através da linguagem inventada e exagerada dos personagens, a peça mostra como as origens da dependência econômica na época colonial estão ligadas às condições antiquadas da Universidade nos anos sessenta. Embora a ideologia do *CPC* fosse fundada na conscientização do “povo”, o *Auto dos 99%* demonstra que a criatividade do *CPC* funciona melhor quando relacionada à própria realidade do grupo, isto é, à realidade universitária.

The *Centro Popular de Cultura*, founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1962, was one of several socially and politically active groups working in Brazilian cities and in the countryside to educate and politicize the disadvantaged lower classes during the populist presidency of João Goulart (1961-64). The most famous group, the *Movimento de Cultura Popular* from Recife, benefitted not only from the pedagogical theories and practice of educator Paulo Freire, but also the financial support of both Recife's mayor and the governor of the state of Pernambuco. Like its parent the CPC also pursued pedagogical goals but it developed different formats based on its organizers' talents and resources. While the MCP chose to build schools, organize technical groups, provide medical care and sponsor artistic programs, the CPC restricted itself to political education and indoctrination through artistic endeavors. Never an official government body, it sought and obtained funding from the leftist student organization, the *União Nacional dos Estudantes*. All of the CPC's activities, such as films, records, book publishing, local and national theatrical performances, art exhibitions, and the organization of other CPCs, served the double purpose of educating the audience and promoting the socio-political goals of the group.

Oduvaldo Viana Filho (1936-1974), one of Brazil's best known dramatists, organized the CPC out of frustration after leaving Teatro Arena, the nationalistic, experimental theater group of São Paulo organized by José Renato. He criticized Arena for not reaching out to the working class audience. For Viana, the role of the theater in society was one of consciousness-raising: "É preciso produzir conscientização em massa, em escala industrial". Viana wanted to organize artists and intellectuals and to use their talents to politicize union workers and farm laborers (Gullar 45).

The theoretical concerns on which the CPC based its operations were developed by the two presidents of the original CPC in Rio, Carlos Estevam Martins (1934-) and Ferreira Gullar (1930-). Estevam's "Anteprojeto do Manifesto do CPC" and Ferreira Gullar's *Cultura Posta em Questão* explain the CPC's commitment to "popular culture" and the manner in which such culture can be utilized to indoctrinate the "povo." The most important word in the name *Centro Popular de Cultura* is "popular" because it conveys the group's belief that the only true national culture comes from the "povo." In the eyes of the CPC the existing fare of national art was either consumer oriented, which meant elitist and/or imported (Gullar 9), or popular but without a reformist intent. The CPC saw its task as reintroducing popular art forms to the original producers and imbuing those forms with a revolutionary ideology that would bring about social reform. Members of the CPC believed that the educated and privileged could identify themselves with the "povo" and through that identification communicate both cultural and political values to and for them (Estevam, "Anteprojeto" 71,76).

The CPC was directly influenced by the work going on at the *Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros* through Estevam Martins. The ISEB, a think tank of economists and political scientists, had provided the economic model of industrial expansion for President Kubitschek (1956-1960). That model was based on the theory of developmental nationalism which held that by expanding industrialization and nationalizing foreign-owned industries Brazil could pass from an underdeveloped to a developing nation (Burns 332-36). Under Estevam Martin's leadership the CPC adopted ideological underpinnings similar to those of the famous research body. Members of the CPC were convinced that through their efforts in the arts, Brazil would develop socially from an archaic landowner society to a progressive society responsive to the needs of the working class (Gullar 23).

Along with its film department, the CPC's department of theater was the most important outlet for spreading its message. Originally the members of the theater division planned to write full-length plays and perform them in union halls and neighborhood associations where they imagined the urban working class to congregate. They immediately encountered problems with this

model when they discovered that the audience they hoped to reach did not meet in the halls where performances were scheduled. They also underestimated the intimidating role of the police in the peripheral areas of the city they had hoped to visit (Damasceno 84). Given such handicaps, it is not surprising that the CPC was unsuccessful at establishing any lasting relationships with labor groups or neighborhood associations. As a result of these failed efforts, the CPC abandoned full-length plays and union halls for a more immediate or situational theater. The plays were performed anywhere the group could collect an audience and were developed around recent events of social or political concern (Costa 53-4, Neves 43). The CPC soon found a receptive audience on college campuses where the clientele was educated and privileged and either shared or was open to the CPC's viewpoint (Estevam, "História" 78).

Although few scripts of these short performances are available for study today, fortunately, *Auto dos 99%*, one of the group's most popular plays, did appear in print in September 1962, not long after it was performed, and then again in March, 1980. The play was written in haste but revised several times during a three-month tour sponsored by the *União Nacional dos Estudantes*. The tour of Brazilian capital cities was organized in order to undertake consciousness raising on a national scale and to help organize more CPC groups. The travelling repertoire consisted of three plays, each covering a controversial topic, and each aimed at a specific audience in need of political awakening. *Auto dos 99%*, the most popular of the three plays, addressed the need for university reform. It joined the playbill with *Brasil, versão brasileira*, a play about labor unrest, and *O formiguinha*, a study of agrarian problems (80).

The following discussion will analyze one play from the repertoire of the CPC, *Auto dos 99%*, in order to identify its ties to the popular *auto* tradition. Secondly, the play's subject matter and manner of presentation will be studied for evidence of the CPC's ideological and theoretical concerns. The CPC wrote several other *autos* (*Atto do Tutu Tá no Fim* and *Auto dos Cassetetes*), but they are not readily available for study, since the CPC was much more concerned with performing than with preserving its art. However, *Auto dos 99%* amply demonstrates both the CPC's creative use of existing popular forms and its

problems of turning its theories of popular art into truly popular performances.

The *auto*, on which *Auto dos* 99% is based, is the oldest and most popular dramatic form written in verse introduced to the New World. It came to Latin America with the explorers and missionaries from Portugal, where it was practiced by Gil Vicente in the early 1500's and from Spain, where Calderón de la Barca established the form in the 1600's. Although today the word *auto* is often associated with plays about the Eucharist and Corpus Christi, owing to the fame of Calderón's *autos sacramentales*, the earliest European *autos* were not concerned with the sacrosanct (Quackenbush 29-31). In Latin America the *auto*, evolving independently from its model of the Iberian Peninsula, developed its own themes and modes of communication (43).

In Brazil, Padre José de Anchieta composed and performed *autos* to facilitate catechizing the Indians and to correct the behavior of wayward colonists. His religious *autos* combined Portuguese, Spanish, and Tupi with historical, religious, and allegorical characters in order to reach his public more effectively (Bosi 26). The allegorical nature of the form and its reliance upon clear oppositions between good and evil, virtue and vice, encouraged an immediate response from religious recruits or disobedient colonists. The language of Anchieta's *autos* always drew on imagery from the everyday lives of the Indians and the colonists in order to turn religious doctrine into understandable experiences (24). It appears that Anchieta was the first Latin American playwright to perceive the advantages of the *auto* for non-religious purposes (Quackenbush 34). For Anchieta "the *auto* was a didactic weapon to counteract the subversive social and anti-governmental acts of the Brazilian colonists" (42).

The characteristics of the *auto*, especially its simplicity and focus on popular daily life, have made it an attractive theatrical form for 20th century writers. Brazil has witnessed a resurgence of the *auto* form especially among writers interested in popular culture or in communicating with non-traditional audiences. From the standpoint of the CPC, which wanted to educate and politicize the masses, the *auto* was a stunningly appropriate form. Traditionally, the *auto* was a portable art form designed to entertain different audiences from a float. This feature made it

well-suited to the CPC's goal of consciousness raising on a national scale. As a didactic form, the *auto* favors a rather simplistic treatment that breaks complex ideas down into more accessible parts. Clearly the CPC could more easily explain educational or agrarian reform if it were presented in this manner. The *auto* allows combinations of singing, dancing, jokes, and even the supernatural. This type of spectacle has the power to captivate and hold an audience's attention. Finally, the *auto* often featured combinations of historical characters and events with circumstances from quotidian life. The CPC took advantage of this link between the past and the present in both pedagogical and ideological ways. From a pedagogical standpoint the CPC could populate its plays with a variety of historical events and figures from different epoches in order to teach the audience about Brazil's past. At the same time it could show on an ideological level how conditions from the past had contributed to the social problems of the 1960's.

It is likely that the CPC's choice of the *auto* form was influenced by the success of Ariano Suassuna's *Auto da Compadecida*. Suassuna was one of the founding members of Recife's *Movimento de Cultura Popular*, which became the model for the CPC. His play, which drew on both medieval forms and Brazilian folk culture, was written in 1955 and performed in Rio de Janeiro in 1957 by an amateur group and then again from 1958-59 by a professional group (Ratcliff 284). *Auto da Compadecida* combines Brazilian folk culture and the *auto* form to criticize social and moral corruption of the church, commerce, and society in a Northeastern community. The last section of the play parallels a traditional religious *auto* in which the characters must answer for their sins committed on earth.

Following the model of Padre Anchieta and Ariano Suassuna, the CPC used the *auto* form to criticize social and political problems and to influence behavior. *Auto dos 99%* argues that the educational system is contributing to social ills by depriving most Brazilians of self-improvement, and by supplying those who do get into the university with meaningless or trivial information. The play studies the historical relationship between economic exploitation, political power, and education. It adopts the position that the colonization of Brazil led to the formation of

an empowered class that protected itself by maintaining exclusive access to the educational system.

The CPC altered only a few of the components of the traditional *auto* form. Instead of creating allegorical figures to represent Hope, Truth, or Love, the play uses representatives of social or racial groups. In the script these individuals are called Indian 1, 2, and 3, Student, or Old Person 1, 2, 3. In addition there are four historical figures that appear by name, Portuguese Cabral and Caminha and former rulers Dom João VI and Napoleon. The characters in the play can be easily divided into two opposing groups, the powerful and the powerless. The play consists of three historical moments in which the two groups come into conflict. The powerful, represented by institutions like the church, colonial or imperial government, or the university faculty, "defeat" those who have no social status, no voice nor organization, represented by the Indians, African slaves, and aspiring university students.

The chorus of *Auto dos 99%* preserves the traditional use of verse and the traditional function of the visionary or the commentator speaking to ongoing events. Unlike the characters who are restricted to the time and place of the events being dramatized, the chorus is privy to information from all centuries of Brazilian history. The chorus is able to provide the context that both integrates and explains the actions and words of the characters. In the body of the play the chorus links the historical periods together as the play moves rapidly through time from the discovery of Brazil to the present. It explains how changes in government and in economic development failed to produce changes in the exclusiveness of the university. It reveals that the 99% in the title of the play refers to those who cannot gain entrance into Brazil's universities.

Finally, like many traditional religious or social *autos* the play is designed to influence behavior. But, in the hands of the CPC the focus is not on the ways in which the past represents a good model to follow, but rather on how the past explains the conditions of the present. In the CPC's play, history reveals a pattern of economic exploitation supporting privilege. This pattern prevails from the colonial period into the 20th Century and permeates the institutions of higher learning. Through the repetition of this model the CPC hoped to show how and why the

university had arrived at its current state. By revealing the causes of the problem the CPC also hoped to suggest that viable solutions were possible.

The CPC develops the thesis that the Portuguese colonization of Brazil imposed an elitist, conservative social and economic structure on a native, and later a *mestiço*, population. Such an organization was unnatural and contrary to the better interests of the indigenous peoples and it was exclusionary in its relations with its *mestiço* population. The events of the play are organized to demonstrate this thesis through two major historical divisions that are not labeled as acts. The colonization of Brazil represents the past while the Brazil of the 1960's represents the present. A transition scene between these two divisions provides a rapid summation of key events that occurred between the two periods.

The opening scene, set at the time of the discovery, conveys an idyllic portrait of a Brazil rich in resources and with Indians who lived and worked in cooperation with one another. The arrival of the colonists and priests brings ruin to the country. The CPC characterizes the priests as the first capitalists and imperialists for the Catholic church and the colonial economy.

The CPC continues its criticism of Portuguese rule in a transition scene which treats the rule of Dom João VI. The monarch escapes from Napoleon and establishes a new empire in Brazil. Although Dom João brought social and cultural advances to the country, the educational institutions founded during his rule were only open to the privileged. Here the CPC spells out the prejudices of the colonial power that gave its own offspring access to education while at the same time denying it to the growing *mestiço* population.

The final scene in the play demonstrates the stifling conditions within the university in the 1960's. Students listen to an endless stream of meaningless and monotonous lectures given by professors who are depicted as ancient and out of touch. In fact, they rise from a sarcophagus to deliver lectures. The students are passive and do not even seem to think about what is being said.

In the closing moments of the *auto* the CPC moves into the realm of encouraging political activism. It satirizes the self-protective nature of university professors who meet only to

discuss trivial or superficial matters. Furthermore, it provides an example of action to take in the form of a protesting student who interrupts the faculty meeting and demands reforms. Although the student in the play is thrown out of the meeting, the CPC seems to be challenging its audience to do better.

There is little action and even less open conflict in the *auto*, so that language itself becomes the major dramatic vehicle providing both the information and the entertainment of the play. The CPC exaggerates the characters' speech and personality in humorous ways to explain, in simple terms, Brazil's economic dependency on foreign sources and its antiquated university curriculum. The action of the play begins in the past where the dependence of Brazil as a colony and as a provider of raw goods is established.

The CPC exaggerates the virtues of the natives and the opportunism of the priests to show how economic patterns of exploitation characterized the initial presence of the Portuguese in the New World. The natives are portrayed as ignorant and innocent individuals who are easily outwitted by the priests and who are sent off into the forest to cut down "pau-brasil." Their use of sub-standard Portuguese reflects their primitive nature. They speak without conjugating the verbs and always refer to themselves in the third person: "Índio eu não deu boa caçada" (Auto 89). The Indians' positive qualities, respect for nature and generosity with each other, only serve to make them more vulnerable to the machinations of their colonial masters. Although eventually the Indians realize they are being mistreated by the priests and they rebel, the system of exploitation continues. The Indians are replaced by African slaves who do not even get trinkets in return for their work.

Although the priests are clearly the "bad guys", as witnessed by their deeds, their language composed of corrupted Latin combined with Latinized slang expressions makes them more interesting if not more likable. History tells us that the priests were sent to convert the Indians, however the major preoccupation of the priests in *Auto dos 99%* seems to be making money and instilling the work ethic among the native tribes. Any refusal on the part of the Indians to continue cutting down trees is condemned in terms that sound like a sermon. "Non sinhoribus. Essa essere onda de comunistorum. Mi paga para que trabalhorum

maiorum. Cada um por si et Deo por todos. . ." (91) The CPC includes religion in its criticism of colonialism by showing that the Catholic Church was involved in justifying inequity: "Deus dividiu os homens em dois tipos: os brasileiros e os inteligentes. Brasileiro trabalha, inteligente comanda."

A similar relationship of domination and dependence is developed between university students and their professors in the second half of the play. Exaggeration is used to emphasize the weaknesses of both professors and the faculty government of the university. Professors are great manipulators of language, much like the priests of the colonial period. They have numerous techniques with which to obscure the content of their lectures or their conversation. Their speech is overly pedantic, or they employ disclaimers, or emphasize theoretical details rather than application. For example, the professor of Architecture states:

Nos três últimos anos fizemos um estudo até certo ponto aprofundado da coluna jônica. Pena que o curso só tenha cinco anos. Para observar o significado íntimo desta coluna é preciso uma vida, uma eternidade. (95)

The students, like the Indians of colonial times, are easily overwhelmed by the self-importance of their instructors. They accept detail as being all important and the lectures as truth. But, after one student finds himself unable to convert the theoretical aspects of the classroom experience into a practical response to workers who are demanding a salary increase, the students also rebel against their "oppressors" by invading a faculty meeting and demanding reform.

The students in *Auto dos 99%* are the least exaggerated characters and the ones whose language appears to move ever toward political awareness and action. Unlike the other characters whose language undermines their credibility, the students' vocabulary and historical moment are contemporary with that of their audience. In this fashion, when a student interrupts the faculty meeting to demand change, he/she appears to be a spokesperson, even a model, for the audience, as well. In the following citation a rebellious student decries the irrelevance of the university curriculum in words that echo student protestors of the 1960's in Brazil, and world wide.

É preciso mudar tudo, professor. As coisas que se ensinam aqui nós não usamos, ou não são verdadeiras, ou são mentidas, ou são esquecidas, ou são roubadas! Nós saímos daqui jovens e ficamos velhos em duas semanas numa monotonia de estupidez que ninguém agüenta! (91)

The major link between the audience and the play is the chorus, which serves both as the interpreter of the events and as spokesperson for the CPC's political orientation. Its commentary transcends the historical limitations of the moment to predict the outcome of events underway and then directs those thoughts toward the audience. Its language, although sung in verse form, sounds like common wisdom, full of popular street vocabulary. The chorus orients the audience's appreciation of the events by defining and then reinforcing the meaning of each scene. Like other choruses from traditional Greek theater, the chorus of *Auto dos 99%* speaks mostly of doom, failure, and destruction, but many of its messages are softened with humor. In the following prophetic moment, the chorus equates the exploitation of the Indians with exploitation of Brazil's beautiful women in the present.

Indio quer bugiganga.

Mesmo que continue de tanga.

Parece que será essa a história do Brasil:

Cheio de bugiganga,

Sempre de tanga. (90)

Through the words of the characters and the chorus of *Auto dos 99%* the audience learned the major components of the CPC's reformist ideology. The play taught that there was an historical and economic cause for what amounted to preferential treatment in Brazilian universities. It also affirmed that access to the university was the only means by which young people would gain power to change society. Finally, it saw the university's primary responsibility as one of training individuals to use their knowledge to improve social conditions. The CPC believed that the university should serve a larger constituency so that more human resources would be prepared to engage in social reform. The members of the group constructed a play about economic and educational exploitation in order to question both national policies and to challenge rules governing the university.

Like other reformist or revolutionary groups, the CPC suffered from a disparity between its theory and its practice of creating and disseminating popular art. In theory, the CPC believed that its art was popular sources and designed to speak to the masses. In practice, the CPC was most effective when communicating with its peers. *Auto dos 99%* captures the classroom environment and academic oratorical style with great insight, insight drawn from creative minds, but also from familiarity with its subject matter. The group might have chosen the "popular format" of the *auto* to speak to the common man or woman, but in practice the audience best prepared to understand the vocabulary and the exaggeration of this particular play were other students.

Recent studies of the CPC (see Kuhner, for example) suggest that the group was not so much a populist movement for social reform among the disadvantaged classes as a consciousness-raising movement for the privileged. Even though the group failed to reach its proposed audience, its performances of plays, along with other cultural activities, left an indelible mark on Brazilian arts. First, the CPC was an organizational experiment and an example that succeeded because of the limitless energy given by the young people associated with it. Nothing like the CPC, with its intellectuals, artists, and students, had ever been tried before in Brazil (Kühner 184-190). The list of accomplishments, including publications, films, and theatrical performances, is remarkable for a two-year tenure. Secondly, the CPC was a technical training ground for cinematographers, poets, artists, and dramatists who, in turn, carried their skills with them when they entered the professional world. Finally, while plays like *Auto dos 99%* may not become part of the theatrical canon, they serve as testimonies to the creativity and resourcefulness of the CPC. By capitalizing on the strengths of the *auto*, its power to communicate and to educate, the CPC developed a dramatic form that was both "popular" and at the same time reformist. The performances of plays like *Auto dos 99%* were successful at bringing entertaining and understandable theatrical forms and social/historical content to a student audience throughout Brazil.

Soon after the coup of 1964 most of the popular/political groups such as the CPC and the MCP were dismantled. The CPC and its parent the União Nacional dos Estudantes were declared

illegal and the UNE headquarters in Rio de Janeiro was burned. Many student activists associated with CPC/UNE as well as its own directors and participants were jailed or called before boards of inquiry (Terrorismo 257). Many of the other reformist organizations suffered the same or a similar fate.

Since the move toward a democratic government began in the late seventies, interest in recovering the history and the art of groups like the CPC has grown.¹ The lessons to be learned from these enterprising organizations are numerous. In a country like Brazil where illiteracy and social inequality continue to limit the opportunities of its citizens, popular art forms offer one viable means to educate the public. The pioneering efforts of the CPC provide models which can be reviewed and revised so that present and future generations of artists and educators will achieve greater success than their forebearers in communicating with the masses.²

NOTES

¹ Examples of renewed interest in the CPC can be seen in both journal articles and in several monographic studies. See Helofsa Buarque de Hollanda, *Impressões de viagem: CPC, vanguarda e desbunde: 1960-70* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1980); Buarque de Hollanda and Marcos Augusto Gonçalves, *Cultura e participação nos anos 60*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1982; Buarque de Hollanda and Carlos Alberto M. Pereira, *Patrulhas ideológicas, marca reg.: arte e engajamento em debate*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1980.

² I am indebted to Leslie Damasceno for sending me photocopies from the manuscript of her dissertation. Her insights on Oduvaldo Viana Filho and the CPC were invaluable.

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