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Theater of "bóias-frias[1]": rethinking anthropology of performance[2]

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ABSTRACT

The anthropology of performance, as understood by Victor Turner, provides interesting perspectives for the analysis of what may be referred to as the "theater of bóias-frias". Conversely, this theater may be of special interest for purposes of rethinking some of the main propositions which have arisen on the borders between anthropology and performance. Considering the specificity of "the practice which calculates the place from which one views things" of this theater, several topics present themselves as guidelines for the text which follows: 1) social dramas, 2) relations between social and aesthetic dramas, 3) symbols and montage, and 4) theater paradigms in anthropology. In this exercise to rethink some of the "classic" contributions of Victor Turner, Erving Goffman, and Richard Schechner, "elective affinities" have been found between, on the one hand, the writings of Walter Benjamin and Brechtian theater, and, on the other, the dramaturgical principles of the *bóias-frias*.

Keywords: *bóia-fria*, drama, montage, performance.

In the 1980´s, on the backs of trucks packed with "bóias-frias", in the sugarcane region of Piracicaba (SP), a climate of physical and nervous exhaustion interpenetrated with that of a carnival-like celebration. I will focus this experience in order to explore the reaches and limits of certain formulations in anthropology of performance. The approach I intend to develop here has been announced in Victor Turner's discussion (1987a, p. 76) on the distinctions between "performance" and "competence". According to Turner, while discussions centered on competence tend to privilege the underlying grammar of cultural manifestations, performance studies demonstrate a marked interest in structurally stray elements: residues, erasures, interruptions, stumbles and liminal elements.[3] A methodological twist characteristic of Victor

[1] Literally "cold chow" in Portuguese referring to the cold lunches these migrant farmhands take with them to work.

[2] I wish to express my special gratitude to Peggy Barlett.

[3] This distinction was first made by Noam Chomsky (1965)

Turner's anthropology – which might suggest, I suppose, the uses of anthropology for investigating a kind of "counter-theater" of everyday life – will also be explored. Comprehension of social life oftentimes breaks forth at moments when everyday roles are suspended (Turner, 1982c, p. 46).

Victor Turner's writings on anthropology of performance are suggestive for analyzing what we might call "bóia-fria theater". Yet this theater in sugarcane fields and on truck wagons is also suggestive. In fact, it may allow us to rethink a number of questions that emerge on the borders of performance and anthropology. Keeping in mind the specificity of the way in which this particular form of theater "calculates the place where things are viewed" (Barthes, 1990, p. 85), the following topics will here be considered: 1) social dramas; 2) relations between social and aesthetic dramas; 3) symbols and montage; and 4) paradigms of theater in anthropology. An observation may be made: in this exercise of rethinking certain "classical" contributions by Victor Turner (1974a, 1974b, 1974c, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 1982d, 1986, 1987a, 1987b), Erving Goffman (1985) and Richard Schechner (1985a, 1985b, 1988), I discover "elective affinities" between, on the one hand, the writings of Walter Benjamin (1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1993) and plays of Bertolt Brecht (1967, 1991/1995), and, on the other, the dramaturgical principles of the "bóias-frias". I thus invite my readers to the theater, which is about to begin in dramatic style, "falling in the cane".

"Falling in the cane": rethinking "social dramas"

The concept of "social drama", elaborated by Victor Turner (1974a), deals with a process involving four moments: 1) breach; 2) crisis and intensification of crisis; 3) redressive action; and 4) outcome, which may entail either some form of harmonious rearrangement of things or recognition of irreparable schism. This concept is inspired by Arnold Van Gennep's (1978) model of rites of passage, which presupposes three moments: 1) rites of separation; 2) transition rites; and 3) rites of incorporation. Liminal experience refers particularly to the second moment.

In the sugarcane region of Piracicaba, "falling in the cane" evokes the drama of becoming a "bóia-fria". Experience, in this case, is strikingly unusual: passage occurs to a passage-like condition (Dawsey, 1997). The "bóia-fria" emerges as a liminal figure. In sociological studies of the 1970s and 1980s (D'Incao, 1984), the "bóia-fria" became a classificatory problem: was the "bóia-fria" a displaced peasant, or an emerging proletarian, "ascending", or – as was also said at the time – in the process of being "purified"? In terms of Turner's model, attention is directed, in the first case – as we have learned in peasant studies – to the logic of the peasant's world, and to signs of a breach whose unfolding is manifested in the fragments of this world and/or attempts to reconstruct it. In the other case, as studies on the formation of the proletariat have shown, one might seek to reveal (as one who unveils the future) the logic of a process whose outcome – even if tragic in terms of the life stories of many of those involved – evokes the inverse of tragedy from the standpoint of a supposedly universal and unidirectional evolutionary history, narrated in grand style, under the sign of "progress". In both cases, an attempt is made to understand the unfolding of a process which begins with rupture and irruption of social chaos. Chaos, in both cases, serves to celebrate cosmos. In the first case, by evoking ancestors and spirits of the dead, one celebrates a cosmological order which, even if in ruins, can be reborn, according to some versions, as a phoenix from the ashes – in country, city, and metropolis. *Le mort saisit le vif*, "the dead seize the living" (Bourdieu, 1989). In the second case, one celebrates signs of a cosmos that is prefigured not so much by the shattered world of peasantry, as by the emerging world of

triumphant capitalism, in the bosom of which may be detected, in city and country, a working class in formation. In both cases, I believe, one looks away from actual experience of the "bóias-frias", while being seduced by contemplation and analysis of emergent, restored, or tragically vanquished grammatical forms.

By focusing on structurally stray elements, however, the anthropology of performance of Turner's later writings leads us to closely examine the experience of "bóias-frias". Scenes from everyday life on truck wagons and in sugarcane fields evoke the drama of "falling in the cane".

In daily encounters with sugarcane fields, "bóias-frias" dramatized the experience of shock and astoundment. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?!" "We've come to the place where a son cries without his mother being able to hear him." "Not even the devil knows where this place is!" People who, before coming to the city, had worked as sharecroppers, ranch hands, or land renters, meet up again with the land – now, as "bóias-frias". Yet, this land is no longer a place on which to make one's home. The place that was once a "dwelling of life" (*morada da vida*) (Heredia, 1980) has become "business land" (*terra de negócio*) (Martins, 1991). Rain turns into a sign of hunger instead of abundance. Rain makes it impossible to burn the sharp-cutting foliage of sugarcane – a procedure which becomes necessary so as to guarantee the use of sentient bodies at harvest. And trucks and buses are unable to make it out to the cane fields without sinking in mud or sand. Thus, for laborers who are paid according to how much sugarcane they cut, rain becomes ominous: a sign of hunger. The ludic exclamation that I heard on a truck one day, when the rain took our group by surprise in the wee hours of morning on a sugarcane field, irrupted with the energy of everyday surrealism: "We're all going to drown in this washed-up whale in the middle of the cane fields!"

The opening of food pots, cans, and containers was also accompanied by expressions of shock, much of which was fake or staged as comedy of the absurd. Using faces as masks of horror or disgust, "bóias-frias" provoked laughter. "Where's the food?!" "They forgot me!" "It's gone sour!" (grimace). "It's cold! Where's the *bóia quente*? (hot chow). *Bóia-fria* (cold chow) needs *bóia quente*!" (looking for *cachaça*, or rum, under the bench). "You damned devil pot! You despicable can full of holes! No wonder I'm always hungry!" (talking to the old rusty aluminum container, lifting it up to the sun, examining each crack and hole, and, suddenly, in a burst of anger, and with a kick, making it sail high as "bóias-frias" bend over with laughter).

As a metonym, the term "bóia-fria" evokes some of the more disconcerting aspects of the experience of working in the cane fields. The compound word signals the experience of estrangement, or even the breaking of ties with the land. While peasants in the North of Minas Gerais state and other parts of Brazil encounter (or remember having encountered) the products of their labor and their relations with the land in the food produced on "lands of labor" (*terras de trabalho*) (Garcia Jr., 1983; Martins, 1991), where they also made their homes, and in the "bóia quente" food containers that arrived from homes during workdays on the field, the "bóias-frias" encounter the products of their labor not only in the sugar that sweetens their coffee, but also in the bottles of *pinga* or *cachaça*, distilled from sugarcane, which they take to the cane fields ("Bóia-fria needs bóia quente!" "He works to make *pinga*, and afterwards he *eats* the *pinga* he made").[4] "Bóia quente", in this case, a term which expresses relations between "bóias-frias" and cane fields, produces the somatic conditions of one who works in a state of intoxication.

[4] *Pinga* is used as a synonym for *cachaça*, the white rum which is made from sugar cane.

On old trucks other uncanny aspects of everyday life manifest themselves. While giving way on a narrow road to a new Ford truck loaded with sugar cane, someone in the group yells out as if addressing the very truck wagon where he's seated: "Get out of the way, you old piece of junk, you washed-up whale! Don't you see that this is a new truck?! Cane stalks ride in a new truck, while bóias-frias…"

"Bóias-frias" saw themselves in a struggle with cane stalks. "I'm surrounded by wild cane (*cana brava*)! It wants to get me!" They spoke of "wild cane", "growchy cane" (*cana enfezada*), and "roaring cane" (*cana embramada*). The reprimand that I once received from a work supervisor evoked this sort of landscape: "Like that…?! If you're going to cut cane you have to get angry!" The cloth that frames the faces of "bóias-frias", and the long pants, worn by women under skirts and dresses, are like soft armor, fashioned according do Arabic ways for confronting cane fields under a castigating sun. One's own skin acquires the texture of leather – a shield of tissue. Callused hands, with calluses even on fists and backs of hands, forming "murundu", show the marks of a body which must deal with "wild cane". In the struggle with cane fields, a strange complicity is also revealed between cane stalks and their cutters. The "bóia-fria" who cuts the sugar cane, is also cut by the "wild cane" – by the blades of its foliage. Sometimes "bóias-frias" accidentally cut themselves with their own machetes. Actually, it is hard to know, in relations between cane fields and "bóias-frias", which of them brings the other down (*quem derruba quem*), "bóias-frias" or cane fields. Such relations, however, may be surprisingly loving – or sweet. In foliage of cane fields are found "love nests" (actually, the faded image of Marilyn Monroe which I saw on a girl's T-shirt while climbing on the wagon of a "bóia-fria" truck for the first time, would return to me in a daydream as if I had "fallen in the cane with Marilyn Monroe"[5]). Interruptions of work, or *trabalho* (*tripalium*), were marked by sucking "honey" from sugarcane. Gifts of sweet sugarcane for children, neighbors and friends were made by "bóias-frias" returning from work. "The bóia-fria is a sugarcane stalk (*pé-de-cana*)", the saying goes. The trajectory of sugarcane serves as a metaphor of the daily course of "bóias-frias" who return from work as if they had been through the mill grinder themselves. Sugarcane and "bóias-frias" both turn into *bagaço*.[6] Work in cane fields produces a numbing sensation, the mortification of the body, in baroque style, evocative of extraordinary moments of rites of passage. Yet, here, the extraordinary reveals itself as an everyday experience.

In some of their favorite stage acts on trucks "bóias-frias" presented themselves as scarecrows and ghosts. When leaving or entering the city, hanging from the backs of trucks, young men and boys enjoyed catching couples and pedestrians off guard, as ghosts. "Buuu!" They also presented themselves as scarecrows, objectifying the very images projected upon them. In these good-natured scarecrows and hauntings might one detect an irruption of the visceral experience of a logical scandal? If the image of a body without a soul is manifested in the figure of a scarecrow, the inverted image of a soul without a body flashes up as a ghost. In the mirror of performance, an inversion takes place as those living in a state of astoundment – dealing with the shock effects of daily life – are happily transformed into frightful creatures. In so far as shocking experience is a part of everyday life, there is nothing surprising about living in a state of shock.

On the basis of the ethnography of such drama, I risk three comments. In the first place, a simple remark may be made. The experience of a logical scandal (possibly expressed in unresolved areas between contrasting and interrelated grammars) – that is central to understanding what it means to "fall in the cane", or "become a "bóia-fria" in the interior of São Paulo – is revealed through stage acts, gestures and manifestations that constitute much of the business of performance studies.

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[5] *Cair na cana* ("fall in cane") rhymes with *cair na cama* ("fall in bed").
[6] Bagasse, refuse of crushed sugar cane.

In second place, a certain restlessness may here be expressed. In truth, when dealing with "bóias-frias", sociological studies of the 1970s and 1980s rarely focused on the experience of people who rode on the backs of trucks and worked in the cane. These studies were mainly concerned with the question regarding how to classify or define such social characters. Nonetheless, this work implicitly found inspiration in narratives that revealed affinities with Victor Turner's model of "social drama". While some looked to the tragedy of peasantry resulting from "rupture" of a way of life caused by agro-industrial expansion, others revealed their optimism regarding the "stages" of the historical process and its "purifying" outcome, as seen in the emergence of the proletariat. In both cases, the life experience of "bóias-frias" was left aside. As scholarly attention, by the mid 1980s, was redirected towards the MST (*Movimento dos Sem Terra*), or Movement of the Landless, the so-called "bóias-frias" turned into recent fossils of academic production.

Does the model of social drama lead one to focus on elements of disorder only in so far as they contribute to revitalize cultural schemes or grammars? When and if this does in fact occur – as we return momentarily to our initial discussion – are matters of performance transformed, in the end, into a celebration of competence?

A third comment may also be translated into a question. If Turner's model of social drama, like Van Gennep's model of rites of passage, leads us to think in terms of a dialectical opposition between everyday life and extraordinary experience, perhaps the case of the "bóias-frias" presents a methodological challenge. "Bóia-fria" theater may evoke another sort of dialectic, leading us to speak in terms of the extraordinary dimensions of everyday life and, at the same time, of the everyday dimensions of extraordinary experience. We are dealing with experiences of daily astoundment. More on this follows.

Daily estrangement: rethinking relations between aesthetic and social drama

There is no example more eloquent of our condition as *Homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1993) than the theater of "bóias-frias", with their stage acts and playfulness in sugarcane fields and on truck wagons. The ethnography of this everyday experience allows us to rethink a second question raised by the anthropology of performance: the relations between aesthetic and social drama. Here, the subjunctivity that Victor Turner (1982d, p. 83) and Richard Schechner (1985a, p. 6) attribute to performance, particularly aesthetic performance, as a characteristic of one who acts in a state of estrangement ("as if"), becomes habitual. Social performance presents itself as aesthetic performance as well. The relationship is condensed. The liminal state attributed to the actor during performance, as described by Schechner (1985a, p. 4, 1985b, p. 112), in Winnicott´s terms, as an experience of being at the same time "not-me" and "not not-me", becomes a part of everyday life with the "bóias-frias".

In an attempt to distinguish his approach from that of Erving Goffman, Victor Turner (1987a, p. 76) evokes a distinction between theater and meta-theater. While Goffman is interested in the theater in everyday life, Turner focuses on moments of interruption and extraordinary instances: theater of theater. Turner observed the meta-theater of social life. Yet "bóia-fria" theater might suggest, as an exemplary case, the necessity of merging both Goffman's and Turner's approaches so as to deal with an everyday sort of meta-theater. That which is produced on trucks and in cane fields is closely related to the "estrangement effects" (*Verfremdungseffekt*) that Bertolt Brecht sought in theater. It is a question of impeding the naturalization of everyday life.

According to Victor Turner, carnivals irrupt as extraordinary moments, or interruptions of daily life. In the world of industrial capitalism, they particularly interrupt work. Such moments of "folly" create contrast in regard to day-to-day existence. Yet, in the case of the "bóias-frias", carnival-like moments occur during the very course of work, or in the cane fields themselves. Here we are not dealing merely with manifestations of folly which break the normality of everyday life. The working day itself is seen as derangement. The everyday carnival of the "bóias-frias" produces not only an experience of "madness", but, in dialectical terms, of the "madness of madness". In this sense, the "bóia-fria" truck, this "washed-up whale", also became during the 1970s and 1980s a sort of "Ship of Fools", an allegory of madness worth figuring in a "History of Folly" written against the grain, resonating with voices that would otherwise drown in an "archeology of silence" (cf. Foucault, 1978, p. 14).

Walter Benjamin (1985b, p. 226) writes: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule." In the beginning of a chapter entitled "Performances", Goffman (1985) suggests that the distanced look which characterizes the sociologist's approach may also be found among "discontented" social groups. Here is a key to an everyday sort of meta-theater.

If reflexivity constitutes the central element for defining performance, as Schechner (1985b) suggests by proposing the idea of "restored behavior" or "the behavior of behavior", ethnography in cane fields and on trucks suggests the possibility that the everyday life of certain groups, such as the "bóias-frias", reveals traces of a performatic state. If Turner leads us to see social life from the perspective of moments of interruption, when roles are suspended, it would be difficult to imagine a case in which this methodological principle would be more relevant than that of the "bóias-frias". As trucks and cane fields turn into stages of *Homo ludens*, we may also there be astounded by the exuberant manifestations of *Homo performans* (Turner, 1987a, p. 81).

When trucks leave the city for the sugarcane fields, young men and boys in the group felt special pleasure in provoking pedestrians on sidewalks and streets, at bus stops and on their way to work in the city. One of their favorite provocations, which produced the carnival-like effect of role inversions – in this case, with collateral effects of social and bodily paralysis –, was to call them, especially *them*, their *others*, the pedestrians – by the pejorative terms of "bóias-frias" and "sugar cane stalks"! At the same time, as truck wagons turn into stage, these play actors become myriads of characters: Arab *sheiks*, Apache Indians, *cangaceiros*, saints, bandits, mayors, penitents, *boys, cowboys*, etc. Sometimes, they also become "bóias-frias". They are "bóias-frias" in a state of performance. In such "presentations of self in everyday life", an estranged *self* presents itself as "not not-me". Here is a self seeing oneself being seen by another, as other. Earlier studies detected the alienation of "bóias-frias" and their "lack of class consciousness". But they may have not perceived the specificity of this theater and the Brechtian effect thereby produced: alienation of alienation.

As I have indicated above, in reference to the opening of their food cans and containers, "bóias-frias" frequently make caricatures of the shock effects produced by "bóia-fria" experience, with unending variations on the theme. In tense situations – such as those which occurred during the announcements made by "cats" (work supervisors), at the end of the day, regarding how many meters of an "eito" (various rows of cane) were cut by each worker (after using "flying wands" in the counting process) and the "price of the sugarcane" (monetary value of each meter of an "eito" cut), or during the "speeches" made by the same "cats" demanding "clean work" from the group ("without foliage or stumps") – young men sometimes acted out the parts of upset, rebellious laborers: they would then throw hats on the ground, cutting the fool, brandishing machetes behind

the backs of “cats”, causing workmates to shake with laughter. After such "speeches", as the "cat" turned his back, some of the young men and boys – without a sound – also pretended to applaud enthusiastically. At such times, acting “as if” they were indeed “bóias-frias” – as play actors, characters or charicatures on stage – "bóias-frias" created distancing effects, illuminating their relations and the theater of everyday life.

The marvelous real: rethinking symbols and montage

Victor Turner (1974c) produces a methodological "deviation" as concerns the consecrated procedures of Radcliffe-Brown and other representatives of British Social Anthropology: the “place where things are viewed" which is assumed to enhance our understanding of social structure is its "anti-structure". In order to capture the intensity of social life, one must understand it from its margins. As one who calculates risks, and learns to expect the unexpected, the anthropologist is attentive to the movement of social life, and to the ways in which societies, while recreating cosmos from chaos, play with danger and undermine their own doings. Experiences of liminal states can stimulate estrangement effects in regard to everyday life. This is more than mere mirroring of reality. The subjunctivity that characterizes a performatic, liminal state, emerges as the effect of a "magic mirror" (Turner, 1987b, p. 22). Such experiences are propitious for ludicrous and fantastic associations. Altered or even grotesque figures become preeminent. What is seen to be real may be ruptured, revealing itself as unfinished. Suppressed tension is released. Deep-seated cultural layers and sedimentations of social life surface. In liminal places, a kind of knowledge is produced – with a jolt.

Truck wagons were places of transformation. Upon these wooden boards "bóias-frias" wearing hats or caps and tying cloth on their heads make what Alejo Carpentier (1974) calls the "marvelous real" come to life, stimulating the appearance of surprising associations among varieties of images, including that of the very "bóia-fria".

Some of these associations are highly revealing. I can give two examples. While passing by a cattle truck, one of the boys, in jest, stood up and cried out: *Ê boi! Bóia-fria! Sou boy!* ("Oh, cattle steer! Bóia-fria! I’m a *boy*!").[7] Fantastic, this conjunction of images was also real. Apparently arbitrary, this montage evokes the ruptures, interruptions and wanderings in the life histories of the "bóias-frias". Life history becomes montage. "Bóias-frias" were, many times, taken to the field in trucks originally destined to transport cattle. The rural exodus, which created in cities of the interior of São Paulo a labor-force reserve periodically incorporated during sugarcane harvests as temporary "bóia-fria" labor, was stimulated by a process of substituting small farm producers for cattle, turning “labor land” (*terra de trabalho*) into “cattle land” (*terra de gado*) (Garcia Jr., 1983). Substituted by cattle in the country, they substituted cattle on trucks. Thus, producing the raw material that gave impulse to grand national projects such as Proálcool and Planalçúcar, their labor efforts served to provide energy for the machines that populate the dreams of a society and, as the realization of forbidden desire, the dreams of a "bóia-fria" – to own one’s own car. During breaks in their work in the cane fields, young men would sometimes daydream: "I dream of owning a Passat. Ummmm. Just look at me… oh, with one hand on the

[7] In this montage, the word “boy” is spoken in English, while *boi* (ox or steer) and *bóia-fria* (cold chow) remain in Portuguese. The word “boy”, when used in Brazil, refers to someone who may count on the protection of a “rich” or middle-class father. It may specifically refer to someone who has access to his father’s car.

wheel and the other over here… holding my girl, just like that. Then you would see." At such moments "bóias-frias" became *boys*, "daddy's boys", with access to cars and girls. But the trepidations of the cars in which these *boys* "bóias-frias" daily rode was capable of producing wakening effects. On wagons of old trucks, on cattle cars that turned into cars of "bóias-frias", recuperated by "cats" from junk yards, these *boys* rode out towards the sugarcane fields.

Here is a second example. When leaving the city, early morning, and passing by a group of people, one of the young men in our group, adopting the manner of a circus announcer, calls attention to the person of his workmate standing in the back of the truck, a "bóia-fria" with white cloth tied around his face: "I present to you the Arabian *sheik*!" And, then, "Here we have the pharaoh of Egypt!" Such montages of a "bóia-fria *sheik*" and a "bóia-fria pharaoh" are revealing. The figure of the "bóia-fria" became part of the social imaginary of the 1970s, after the first oil crisis and downfall of the Brazilian "economic miracle". Dreams of a Brazilian giant who, while "lying in a splendid crib",[8] awakened at last from secular grogginess, were perturbed by the refusal of Arabian *sheiks* to send the oil that fueled the world of industrial capitalism. Still under the effects of the "economic miracle", in an almost drunken climate of a nation moved by what Walter Benjamin would call the "narcotic of progress", large-scale national projects were developed for purposes of substituting oil for sugarcane. Sugarcane emerged not only as a shining "modern" product (Graziano da Silva, 1981), requiring heavy capital investments, but also as a renewable source of energy for sustaining projects of national development. In the midst of social unrest which irrupted during these years of "conservative modernization", a distant image was articulated with realities close by: Egyptian pharaohs and their pharaoh-like public projects. From the perspective of the "industrialization of agriculture", sugarcane production, however, presented a problem: the harvest cycle had not been totally mechanized. Hence, the necessity of using an immense quantity of seasonal laborers for sugarcane harvests. At this very moment, in one of the "primordial scenes" (Berman, 1990, p. 148) of Brazilian modernity, the figure of the "bóia-fria" sugar cane cutter irrupted in cities and on roads sending tremors throughout the social imaginary. "Bóias-frias" substituted Arabian *sheiks*. On truck wagons rode "bóia-fria" *sheiks*.

Victor Turner shows how powerful symbols that are capable of unifying social groups, articulating differences and partially resolving social tension, emerge at liminal moments when everyday life is interrupted. Yet what calls attention when dealing with the "bóias-frias" are the tension-packed montages. Short of being symbols, they reveal more than they resolve. They bring to light buried and possibly volcanic elements of the social landscape. In respect to the dreams that populate the social imaginary, they possibly provoke a wakening effect. They are similar to the dialectical images that Walter Benjamin (1985a, p. 40) speaks of. They produce effects which are evocative of Brechtian theater (Willet, 1964). Here, the activity of interpretation is accompanied by bodily innervation which is manifested through laughter.

"Calculating the place where things are viewed": rethinking paradigms of theater

Anthropology of performance, according to Turner, is part of the anthropology of experience. While performance may be thought of as an expression, expression may be thought of as a moment in a process, or better, of an experience. On the basis of Wilhelm Dilthey's writings, Turner (1982a, p. 13) delineates five moments which are seen to constitute an experience: 1)

[8] The image evokes words of the Brazilian national anthem: *Deitado eternamente em berço esplêndido* ("eternally lying down in a splendid crib") and *gigante pela própria natureza* ("a giant by very nature").

something is perceived, placing person and interpretive schemes at risk; 2) images of the past are evoked; 3) emotions associated with these images are revived; 4) images of the past are articulated to the present "in a musical relationship", enabling the creation of meaning; and 5) an expression completes and fulfills the process of experience. While the etymology of the term "experience" has to do with the idea of risk, or danger, as Turner (1982a, p. 17; 1986, p. 35) emphasizes, the word "performance" refers us to the French *parfournir*, "bringing to completion", "accomplishing" (Turner, 1982b, p. 91).

In order to understand the specificity of the experience of "bóias-frias", I believe, we must discuss something that Roland Barthes (1990, p. 85) defined as theater: "a practice that calculates the place where things are viewed". The "bóias-frias" with whom I rode looked towards the margins, to things which are discarded, forgotten or about to be forgotten. These are also the places from which they observe the world. When images of the past flash in the present, the present is also presented as that which is on the verge of becoming part of the past, turning into fossils, ruins, and debris. Yet, here, melancholia turns into laughter. As Mikhail Bakhtin might remind us, this is how the world presents itself from the perspective of carnival. Bakhtin's (1993, p. 35) statements regarding the use of masks in popular Middle Age and Renascence culture, are also appropriate for theater of "bóias-frias": such masks translate the "joyful alternations and reincarnations, the joyful relativity of things, the joyful negation of identity and single meaning, the negation of stupid coincidence with oneself."

Two examples come to mind. The first refers to relations between the so-called "bóias-frias" and machines. "Man invents the machine, and the machine destroys man." This is what "Pajé",[9] one of the workers, told me as he observed the approximation of a huge sugarcane loading machine. If "Pajé" was trying to impress a "bóia-fria" apprentice who also happened to be trying to pass off as an anthropologist, he did. The stalk loaders were responsible for increasing the number of rows of sugarcane under each worker's responsibility. The number of these rows had increased from three to five, in order to make room for the machines. In certain regions, experiments were being made with seven rows of cane. Before coming to the cities of the interior of São Paulo, where they became "bóias-frias", many of these people had been substituted in the field by tractors, and mechanized loaders and harvesters. Many of the people I knew came to Piracicaba in the 1970´s, where, as construction hands and bricklayers, they helped to build Caterpillar, a multinational factory that was making some of the very tractors and farm machines that were taking their jobs in the country. After the factory was constructed, they "fell in the cane". Substituted by machines in the field, they were under threat, as "bóias-frias", of being substituted by mechanized harvesters that, in the mean time, remained on display in show rooms of agro-industrial corporations.

In this context, the relations between "bóias-frias" and the old trucks on whose wagons they rode deserve special attention. They talked to the trucks, and cursed them. Even in their anger and revolt, they expressed complicity with the old trucks: "you washed-up whale!", "scrap metal!", "disgrace!", "go back to the junk yard!", "you poor man's truck!", "The poor make me sick!" (*Tenho horror de pobre!*). At such times, these old machines took on the imponderable qualities of sentient beings. The old trucks on which "bóias-frias" rode were obliged, as seen above, to give way on narrow roads to the new trucks loaded with fresh-cut sugarcane. "Modern products" – such as sugarcane, associated with the process of "industrialization of agriculture", that took the place of "traditional products", the so-called "poor man's" products, as well as of their producers in the field – also displaced to the roadside old trucks on which these producers, now transfigured

[9] *Pajé* is a nickname which literally means "witch-doctor".

as "bóias-frias", rode. Many "bóia-fria" trucks had, in fact, "resurrected" from junk yards. Like the "bóias-frias" themselves, these old trucks, under constant threat of being substituted by new machines, "saw themselves" in the face of imminent danger of turning into recent fossils of modernity.

One Friday night, after a long week of work, returning from cane fields to the city, the carnival-like atmosphere among "bóias-frias" was especially intense. On a long, steep hill, and one-lane road, when velocity dropped to the pace of a turtle, a line of cars and new trucks formed behind the old “bóia-fria” truck. Attempts at passing the truck were frustrated by the flow of oncoming traffic. Impatiently, several motorists honked. Others revved up their engines. Then, one of the young men, while hanging from a ladder on the back of the truck wagon, brandished his machete, and dared the cars and trucks behind: "Come on! Come on!” Immediately, he lowered his britches, and, like Gargantua peeing on Parisians (Rabelais, 1991, p. 99), he irrigated the road and, most likely, the car that was tailgating after. The group burst out in laughter. From the back of the junk-yard truck they viewed their world. Although Piracicaba is not exactly Paris, it may not be so inopportune to evoke Louis Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris* (1996) as a way of discussing how dream-like dimensions of the real manifest themselves on trucks and in cane fields. Benjamin’s comment (1985c) on the surrealists is appropriate: they were the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded", in the first iron constructions, in objects that have begun to go extinct.

The second example also says something about "the practice that calculates the place where things are viewed". One morning, entering a small vicinal road on the way to the cane fields, the truck went by pasture where there was a group of haggard, cadaverous-looking cows. On the parched land, next to them, there was a carcass and skull. The group was moved with emotion. Various people – both young and old, boys and girls, and women and men – stood up to look out from the back of the truck. "Look how thin they are!" "There’s no grass!" "It’s famine, they’re dying of hunger!" Shortly afterwards, the truck entered a road flanked by old imperial palm trees. They looked dried out, poorly cared for. Some had fallen, or exhibited broken trunks. Suddenly, we came upon an extraordinary scene: the ruins of a big house. “Look at the mansion!” someone said. Laughter irrupted. "First Class!" Some of the people roared with laughter. They laughed before the ruins of a *casa-grande* (plantation manor), a recent fossil of the interior of São Paulo. Perhaps, in the “shade of an allegory of embalmed pharaohs", as go the lyrics of the song *Rancho da Goiabada*, by Aldir Blanc and João Bosco, the "bóias-frias" were involved in carnival-like celebration.

The laughter of "bóias-frias" may cause one to shudder. A good actor, when laughing, is capable of making an audience cry, and, when crying, can invoke laughter, as Brecht has said (1967, p. 70). I believe that there are affinities between the boards of “bóia-fria” truck wagons and the stages on which Brecht rehearsed epic theater and "estrangement effects". Both cases reveal "a practice that calculates the place where things are viewed". Possibly, in both cases, as Roland Barthes has also said (1984, p. 194) in regard to Brecht´s epic theater, one must deal not so much with matters of semiology as of seismology. On such stages are produced "seismic jolts" in the "logosphere".

Victor Turner’s approach is especially appropriate for analyzing the experience of "bóias-frias" and their carnival-like practices on truck wagons. “Bóia-fria” theater, as the anthropology of Victor Turner, approaches society from its margins. On these margins, society reveals itself as unfinished. As a sort of "practice that calculates the place where things are viewed", the theater of “bóias-frias” has remarkable affinities with perspectives which Turner was apparently looking for

as he and Richard Schechner helped formulate an anthropology of performance". Attention is directed towards residues, ruptures, interruptions and the unresolved things of social life.

Performances of "bóias-frias" are of particular interest as to how they allow for the irruption of residual elements of history. What they tell is not just a story of what happened, not even a story as told from within a store of memories. They tell a story of things as they have been forgotten. Such aesthetical principles are found not in the image of the manor house at its glorious peak, but, rather, in the juxtaposition of that image to another of itself in ruins. In these ruins, of course, are found some of the fissures – and openings – of history. In stories told by society of and for itself – here, obviously, I'm evoking one of Clifford Geertz´s classic formulas (1978b, p. 316) - the "bóias-frias" sniff out by laughter a story of forgetting. In order to understand what happens on these truck wagons, perhaps one must to as Walter Benjamin says – "brush history against the grain" (Benjamin, 1985b, p. 225). From the perspective of Benjamin, one might suggest, "thick description" (*descrição densa*) (Geertz, 1978a) also becomes a sort of "tension-packed description" (*descrição tensa*) capable of causing an opening and shutting of eyes, an experience of astoundment in face of everyday life, now estranged – a wakening (Dawsey, 1999, f. 64).

The "angel of history", Benjamin has suggested (1985b, p. 226), would be like the angel of one of Paul Klee´s paintings. On his face, the expression of horror. His eyes are fixed on the debris of the past, which accumulates at his feet. Yet he can not stop so as to gather the pieces. His wings are ready for flight. Indeed, the winds of a storm blow at his back and he is impelled in direction of the future. This storm goes by the name of "progress". On truck wagons, the "bóias-frias" also ride backwards, heading towards the future, driven on, we might say, by a storm called "progress". And they look towards the debris. But they also know how to recreate, with playful effects, this look of horror. Their laughter, I believe, produces knowledge.

The anthropology of performance, especially in Victor Turner's writings, illuminates one of the "primordial scenes" of Brazilian modernity: the "bóia-fria" trucks. At the same time, the theater of "bóias-frias" may suggest ways to rethink some of the questions raised by anthropologies of performance:

On the margins of margins

If the concept of "social drama" emphasizes a type of knowledge acquired in extraordinary moments of everyday life, the theater, or better, the meta-theater of "bóias-frias" may provoke an inverted effect. On such a stage, everyday aspects of extraordinary experience are illuminated. On the margins, Turner says, social life is revitalized. The theater of "bóias-frias", however, seems to occur on the margins of these margins. Such places produce – as Walter Benjamin (1985c, p. 23) discovered in surrealist practices – "profane illuminations", with estrangement effects upon extraordinary experience. Thus, we return to an initial perception: on the backs of trucks packed with "bóias-frias" a climate of physical and nervous exhaustion interpenetrated with that of a carnival-like celebration.

Everyday Meta-theater

On the backs of trucks, social performance is experienced as aesthetic performance. As they impede the naturalization of everyday life, "bóias-frias" live in a state of performance. While Goffman proposes to study the theater of everyday life, and Turner the theater of this theater, or meta-theater of social life, truck wagons and cane fields become stages of everyday meta-theater. Astoundment is produced and daily life estranged. This effect emerges as one discovers, as in

Kafka´s narratives, that, in so far as shocking experience is a part of everyday life, there is nothing surprising about living in a state of shock.

Undergrounds of symbols

In an article on Hidalgo and the Mexican Revolution, Turner (1974b, p. 105) stresses that Our Lady of Guadalupe, a powerful symbol of an emerging nationality, is the successor to Tonantzin, the mother of the gods in Aztec cosmology, whose worship, previously celebrated on the same grounds now dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, was eliminated by the Spaniards. The theater of "bóias-frias" is less noteworthy for its symbols than for the images and montages which on its stages are produced, in the manner of Eisenstein (1990, p. 41), packed with tension. On such stages, cthonic elements of social landscapes are revealed. Symbols decompose into fragments in an energized field, bringing to light unresolved aspects of social life, such as one might find in Our Lady of Guadalupe's "underground history" (Ginzburg, 1991).

Bricoleur

At times of danger, in cane fields and on trucks, images of the past may articulate with those of the present (cf. Benjamin 1985b, p. 224). Images flash from ruins and residues. Revelatory, astounding associations irrupt from a theater whose stage evokes the landscape of a junkyard or a construction site (Benjamin, 1993, p. 18). Maybe this is one of the *bricoleur´s* secrets: the remains and residues of symbolic structures which are most precious linger on the margins of his work, hidden in the folds of culture, bearing witness to unfinished "solutions", as a collection of things that are good for *making* one think.

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