



**DOCUMENTARY THEATER:
in search of its historical matrices and theoretical foundations**

TEATRO DOCUMENTÁRIO:
em busca de suas matrizes históricas e fundamentos teóricos

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Abstract: In this article, the author explores the historical matrices and foundations of documentary theater, starting from the artistic manifestations of agitation and propaganda, known as *agitprop* in the context of the Russian-Soviet revolution and the works of Erwin Piscator at the beginning of the 20th century. Highlighting the relationships between art and revolution that existed in the period and their reverberations in Brazil, manifested in the theater of Augusto Boal among others.

Keywords: documentary theater; *agitprop*; art and revolution; Erwin Piscator; Augusto Boal.

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Resumo: Neste artigo, a autora percorre pelas matrizes históricas e fundamentos teóricos do teatro documentário, partindo das manifestações de agitação e propaganda, conhecidas como *agitprop* no contexto da revolução Russo-Soviética e dos trabalhos de Erwin Piscator no início do século XX. Evidenciando as relações entre arte e revolução existentes no período e suas reverberações no Brasil, manifestas no teatro de Augusto Boal entre outros.

Palavras-chave: teatro documentário; *agitprop*; arte e revolução; Erwin Piscator; Augusto Boal.



1 Documentary Theaters

Nowadays, when using the expression documentary theater, we enter a vast field of scenic and research possibilities, which include the aesthetic choices of each group or director and different artistic treatments, allowing us to state that these are documentary theaters. Among these many scenic possibilities, it is possible to identify Documentary Theater, which starts from a historical materialist perspective with well-defined epic and political foundations, finding its roots in the artistic manifestations of *agitprop* in the context of the Russo-Soviet Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century and in the works of Erwin Piscator (which will be discussed in this article); Autobiographical theater, which can be traced back to *The Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the mid-18th century; another term, Autofiction, coined by Frenchman Serge Doubrovsky, emerged in the mid-1970s, without the same requirement for a truth pact as autobiographical theater; Biodrama, a term coined by Argentine director Vivi Tellas in 2002, which prioritizes the staging of biographies of so-called ordinary people; Verbatim, a political documentary technique that reproduces a real story in the same words, and which was first performed in 1974 by British director Peter Cheeseman; Playback Theatre, which consists of improvised scenes based on reports from the audience at the time of the performance, developed in 1975 by the Americans Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas; the so-called Theatres of the Real, a term first used by the French philosopher Maryvone Saison in the 1990s, referring to the different ways of putting the real on stage; some contemporary performance practices, among other scenic-documentary experiences.

Due to this plurality of scenic possibilities and artistic manifestations, a cut was necessary for this study, starting from a documentary theater, whose perspective is historical materialist, with well-defined epic and political foundations, finding its roots in the artistic manifestations of *agitprop* in the context of the Russo-Soviet Revolution at the beginning of the 20th century and in the works of Erwin Piscator. Based on this perspective, the historicity necessary for the [aesthetic] understanding of its manifestation was sought in the epic and political roots of documentary theater.

2 Historizing the artistic manifestations of *agitprop*

There is no fortune without blood!
(CINEMA [...]).

During the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, part of central Europe was undergoing a series of transformations, mainly due to the Industrial Revolution, marked by technical progress, the replacement of human labor by machines and the consolidation of capitalism. Numerous political and economic conflicts led to the Great War, resulting in social disintegration. Faced with intellectual, economic and political crises, Nazi and Fascist ideologies began to expand



in society, especially in Germany and Italy from 1919 to 1939. On the other hand, socialist visions and revolutionary theses progressed, which led to the emergence of European historical vanguards¹. According to Marcos Napolitano, at the beginning of the 20th century, the relationship between art and revolution was presented as follows:

Just like modernism, the communist movement carried with it the promise of a new society, born from the “ashes” of bourgeois society and world war. Another connection also seems pertinent to us: the importance of the field of culture as an element that propagates new ideas and values, fundamental for reorganizing consciousness in the face of new challenges. Thus, the word “vanguard” starts to operate in a double direction: on the one hand, those who were leading the political revolution and, on the other, those who fought for the aesthetic revolution. Around the 1920s and 1920s, the two meanings of the word seemed to go hand in hand, in the fight against the “bourgeoisie.” “Literary bohemia” and “revolutionary bohemia” found new possibilities for convergence and action (Napolitano, 1997, p. 7, our translation).

Faced with the political and social events of such a context, it was no longer possible to dissociate art and revolution “[...] ‘cultural unrest’ and the ‘construction of the new socialist order’ were terms of the same problem” (Napolitano, 1997, p. 7, our translation).

To better understand this period, here is a brief overview of the emergence of important popular movements linked to revolutionary art.

According to Iná Camargo Costa (2010), it was from the second half of the 19th century, with naturalistic experiments, developed by French workers, that theater began to gain rights that refer to the ways of choosing the subjects they wanted to deal with, especially those who were censored, which allowed the theater to amplify the voices of those excluded from bourgeois society, a project that enabled workers to become class-conscious.

Naturalism emerged as an offshoot of realism, and the latter was committed to portraying bourgeois reality, as it placed bourgeois values, behaviors and conflicts on the scene. While naturalism starts to place, in a certain way and with some reservations, the universe of the proletariat on the scene and expose the bourgeoisie as a class that owns the means of production and exploits the workers’ labor.

Thus, since the end of the 19th century, authors and theater groups began to stage public acts, worker rebellions (*The Weavers*, by Hauptmann and Jacques Damour, by Emile Zola), living conditions in the underworld of the poor (*Rabble*, by Gorki), maddening routine at work (*The Adding Machine*, by Elmer Rice), fighting for better working conditions or strikes (*They Don’t Wear Black Tie*, by

¹ According to Marcos Napolitano, the praxis of some of the movements included in the proposition presented here, even facing some dissonances in the apprehensions and characteristics of the various manifestations, can be understood as: “A set of artistic movements from 1909 to the mid-1920s, including (in chronological order): Cubism, Italian Futurism, Expressionism, Russian Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, to name the most notorious ones” (Napolitano, 1997, p. 8, our translation). Vanguard is also the name given to the military troop that head first into a battle. The meaning of the term as used by artists includes the ideas of confrontation, combat and protest, as well as “taking the lead.”



Gianfrancesco Guarnieri) and even carrying out true acts of political protest (in Brazil from the [19]60s: Show Opinion; Freedom, freedom). And even today we find those who claim that these subjects are not suitable for theater (Costa, 2010, p. 16, our translation).

At the end of the 19th century, very significant popular theater experiences emerged in Europe that not only dealt with themes involving the proletariat, but also included collective organizations and that included the participation of ordinary citizens, as Silvana Garcia states:

In Germany, Freie Bühne (Cena Livre, 1889) brings with it the proposal of Antoine's Théâtre Libre, and tests the idea of an associative participation structure as a financial support base. A year later, Bruno Wille, with the support of the socialists, launched the most massive popular theater experience in Germany: the Freie Volksbühne (Free Popular Scene). [...] In France, the Théâtre du Peuple (1885), an initiative by Maurice Pottecher, developed an irregular, seasonal production, based mainly on representations of folktales and dialectal adaptations of the classics. It presents, as a novelty, the fact that the actors are all ordinary citizens, inhabitants of the region (Garcia, 2004, p. 1- 2, our translation).

According to Silvana Garcia, this set of proposals will configure a Popular Theater Project that searched for a theater that celebrated the worker as a theme and as an interpreter, prioritizing the theater as a place for reflection.

The theatrical forms of the 19th century, which chose the simple language of the grandiloquent gesture, attracting large masses to the audiences, or, alternatively, which rescued social themes for theater from the acute observation of reality, collide, from the perspective of an intention to transform society, in the absence of an ideological framework that allows workers to recognize their exploited condition and envision the path to their emancipation (Garcia, 2004, p. 3, our translation).

This project, which would allow workers to recognize their exploited condition and envision the path to their emancipation, will be fully consolidated during the Russo-Soviet Revolution². According to Silvana Garcia (2004), the existence of a mass of workers without access to artistic means sparked reflection on the part of artists and intellectuals that theater could be a powerful mobilizer of workers in advancing the revolutionary struggle. "The political facts will determine the appropriate situation for the establishment of a theater of political nature, and the Communist Party and the State will have a preponderant role. Russia would be the cradle of this phenomenon." (Garcia, 2004, p. 3, our translation).

It was during the period of the Russo-Soviet Revolution that the most important proletarian art movements emerged:

² A period beginning in 1905 and culminating in the February Revolution and the October Revolution, both of which took place in 1917. Respectively, marked by the overthrow of the last Tsar Romanov and the Russian Provisional Government formed in Petrograd and the rise to power of Lenin's Bolshevik Party. The tsars of the Romanov dynasty were in power for 300 years, from 1613 until 1917, ruling absolutely. The term tsar (from Caesar), the name given to the emperor, was confused with the State.



In the newly established Soviet Union, two major trends debated the topic of culture: a) the formalists, linked to the journal of the Left Front of the Arts (LEF): Mayakovsky, Isaac Babel, Meyerhold (who would decisively influence S. Eisenstein's cinema), to name the most notorious; b) "proletkult," a movement created in 1904 by Bogdanov, which sought to establish a new proletarian art, differentiated from "bourgeois art." Throughout the 1920s, another current, more in tune with party orthodoxy, gradually gained strength, rejecting both the revolutionary "forms" of the LEF and the possibility of a break with the bourgeois "cultural heritage": they were the naturalists, linked to the social naturalism of the 1890s and the ideas of Plekhanov: Lelevich and Libedinsky, Demian Bedny, among others. Commissioner of Instruction A. V. Lunatcharski, more in tune with Proletkult, coordinated the various fronts of the "cultural" war effort. But the relationship between the Party and cultural movements was not free from conflicts and contradictions, and dated back to the period before the Revolution. (Napolitano, 1997, p. 7-8, emphasis added, our translation).

Regarding the terms art and revolution, there are many contradictions present in the directions made by the Communist Party³, as it went so far as to prohibit the artistic freedom of anyone who did not follow its guidelines. "The central point of contention was the thesis that the cultural revolution could only occur in conjunction with the political revolution, led by the Party." (Napolitano, 1997, p. 8, our translation). Initially, this direction provoked a series of dissociations and expulsions from the Party, which later persecuted and even assassinated some artists and intellectuals who refused to meet its demands, especially during Stalinism.

According to Iná Camargo Costa (2012), during the process of the Russian-Soviet Revolution, there was intense mobilization among intellectuals, artists and workers, who, after organizing themselves, decided to "inform" the population—especially the mass of peasants who formed a large number of illiterate people of the time—, about the essential events in the revolutionary dispute and disseminating revolutionary theses and praxis. The author states that during the moments before the October Revolution (in 1917⁴) that the artistic manifestations of *agitprop* emerged (agitation and propaganda corresponding to a left-wing praxis, based on a resumption of procedures characteristic of popular forms of culture), a kind of artistic arm of the Red Army commanded by Leon Trotsky⁵, with a very well-defined social and political nature.

3 The impositions on left-wing art followed the molds of Socialist Realism, whose guidelines to be followed by artists, called "engineers of the soul," were exposed by Zhdanov, Stalin's advisor on cultural affairs since 1939 (Mostaço, 2016). The years 1927 and 1956 (two years after Stalin's death) comprise the period when Stalinism had already dominated the Communist Party and the Soviet State, and increasingly strict guidelines were imposed on artists and artistic activities.

4 Faced with the inability of the Provisional Government to pull the country out of the World War and combat the misery that afflicted the Russian population, on October 25, 1917, Lenin took over the government.

5 An important articulator of the Russian-Soviet Revolution, in 1938 he wrote the Manifesto for an independent revolutionary art with André Breton (author of the Surrealist Manifesto), a period in which he had to take refuge in Mexico, where he was persecuted and violently murdered by the Stalinist government. Information taken from the interview: Michael Löwy: Marxismo e surrealismo, uma combinação revolucionária, conducted by TV Boitempo, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkSFI-Xe6ao>. Access on: April 16, 2022. More information about the manifesto can be found in: BRETON, André (1896-1966). Por uma arte revolucionária independente. São Paulo: Paz e Terra: CEMAP, 1985.



[...] the general function of the Soviet *agitprop* theater was political in the proper sense, that is, it was an activity determined and sponsored by the revolutionary State with the aim of building Soviet power. To specify a little more: the activists of the agitprop theater were linked to the political program of the revolution and defined their priorities based on it. Having emerged amidst the civil war, this theater initially fulfilled the function of gaining support and followers for the revolutionary cause and, therefore, of fighting its enemies (imperialism, bourgeoisie, and white armies) on a symbolic level. In addition, it also fulfilled the function of informing and training the population to actively participate in Soviet power, since it was about building a form of participatory democracy that was unprecedented worldwide (Costa, 2012, p. 170, our translation).

Mainly after the October Revolution, a period that also became known as Russian Theatrical October, a series of forms of *agitprop* were created, including two that make use of documents, scenifications, and newspaper theater. Iná Camargo Costa points out the main characteristics of the scenifications⁶:

They correspond to a peculiar update of revue theater (which has existed since at least the 18th century). Its thematic axis is some historical event, such as the October Revolution. Other topics: Paris Commune, French Revolution, Great War. It is the original matrix of documentary theater, as it uses as material documents of all types (reports, speeches, research) and pre-existing works of fiction (Costa, 2012, p. 173, our translation).

Another form of *agitprop* that emerged during this period, using newspapers as documents in its performances, is the so-called newspaper theater, as can be seen in the description below:

Originally it was just reading the newspaper out loud, given the high number of illiterate people. Afterwards, professional actors were invited or called upon to carry out these readings. Finally, we moved on to the broadly-known form, in which a complete newspaper edition is staged with all its sections, from the editorial to the literary chronicle. With information and agitation as its primary objective, this was the quintessential form of agitprop during the Russian Civil War (Costa, 2012, p. 172, our translation).

Thus, it is possible to locate some cornerstones of documentary theater at the beginning of the 20th century and, as previously indicated, in the artistic manifestations of *agitprop* called scenifications⁷ and newspaper theater, whose procedures, as we know them, will be developed later.

According to Iná Camargo Costa (2012), with the consolidation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—after the October Revolution of 1917 and the political transformations during the following years—, *agitprop* began to suffer several reprimands, becoming a prohibited subject in the USSR, starting in 1932, a period marked by the totalitarian regime led by Stalin.

6 Among other meanings, and because it is a manifestation of popular (and even ancestral) roots, in graffiti, the term scenification refers to the place where graffiti is made. It is the city-setting that will intervene in the passing public.

7 “Perhaps the best-known example of this modality is the Storming of the Winter Palace, staged on 7/11/1920 by Evreinov (a kind of “directorial coordinator”), with about 15,000 actors, including many of the people who participated in that action, and about 100,000 ‘spectators.’” (Costa, 2017).



3 Some of the reverberations of *agitprop* in Brazil

The newspaper theater present in the artistic manifestations of *agitprop* influenced the newspaper theater⁸ whose work was coordinated by Augusto Boal and practiced in Brazil in the early 1970s. Boal came into contact with this theatrical form in the 1950s when he studied theater in New York under the influence of the Federal Theater Project's Living Newspapers⁹. However, the newspaper theater developed by Augusto Boal stems from an acting course, taught by Heleny Guariba and Cecília Boal, with artists who will form Núcleo 2 (Celso Frateschi, Dulce Muniz, Denise Del Vecchio among others) who end up exploring different methods than those developed during the Russo-Soviet Revolution.

In Brazil in 1971, [...], in an improvised room on the second floor of the building [Teatro de Arena], Teatro Jornal – 1st Edition premieres, a work of collective creation based on periodical reading techniques, using a young cast trained in a course taught the year before. [...] The remaining young group from Teatro Jornal found themselves, overnight, struggling with the administration of the company and the venue. The Núcleo-Arena was then founded, intended to be a center for the dissemination not only of news-theater techniques, but also to serve as a meeting and discussion point for the countless amateur troupes that quickly began to form in neighborhoods and schools. The work had been inspired by Russian and German agitprop techniques and the procedures mobilized by the Living Newspaper, groups active during the Great Depression. Boal had decided to take this path after the Feira Paulista de Opinião, articulating scenic resources that also involved public participation, disregarding the traditional relationships that separate stage and audience, whose procedures aimed at contagion. Initially, nine techniques were developed to work with news, in order to remove the character of passive printed letters and convert them (or reconvert them) into the facts that engender them. Five successive editions of the show were staged. Amateur groups that formed its audience were immediately encouraged to function as news theater reproducers, through the creation of their own shows. In a short time, dozens of teams performed in the city, especially in villages and on the outskirts, proving the success of the new tactic (Mostaço, 2016, p. 152-153, our translation).

8 According to Iná Camargo Costa: “Augusto Boal elaborated a series of techniques for critical reading of the news and published them in the volume Latin American techniques of popular theater. At this moment, the task of democratizing the means of theatrical production and the function of theater as a resource to expose facts that the dictatorship intended to silence, such as arrests, torture and murders, are already present with the utmost clarity. In other words: the essence of agitprop has already been found in practice by Augusto Boal. [...] In the Brazilian case, it was a weapon of militant clarification and defense” (Costa, 2017).

9 “Living Newspapers were plays written by groups of theater researchers-writers who pulled newspaper news about current affairs, usually controversial topics such as rural politics, race relations, syphilis testing, inadequate housing. These pieces of news were worked on theatrically with the aim of informing the public and mobilizing them to action, always under a critical eye, looking for contradictions within the chosen facts. The stagings, of strong political character, did not hide the left-wing ideology that sustained them, usually provoking criticism from the US Congress. Harry Hopkins, head of the WPA and Roosevelt's confidant, further contributed to this antipathy on the part of U.S. government agencies by saying that the FTP would be “free, adult, and uncensored.” At the time, the directors of the WPA understood this phrase as a green light, no matter the political or social content. The play *Triple-A Plowed Under*, for example, directly attacked the U.S. Supreme Court for shutting down a farmer protection agency (Soler, 2010, p. 63).



During the 1960s in Brazil, numerous theatrical experiences also bore the marks of Soviet *agitprop* along the lines of newspaper theater, including sketches performed on the streets based on reading newspapers during the *agitprop* experiences of the Popular Culture Centers (CPCs), which will be further addressed.

The scenifications also generated reverberated in Brazil at the beginning of the 1960s, with very significant experiences, as Iná Camargo Costa states:

Augusto Boal was present in almost all the *agitprop* experiences that followed the 1964 Military Coup: he directed the *Show Opinião*, clearly an example of the scenification modality, whose script is also the work of a collective of authors; he produced *Arena canta Bahia*, similar to the *Show Opinião*; he wrote (in partnership with Gianfrancesco Guarnieri) and directed *Arena conta Zumbi* and *Arena conta Tiradentes*, at Teatro de Arena de São Paulo, also examples of documentary theater (or scenification), in addition to having developed in partnership with Cecília Boal and Heleny Guariba our extremely interesting version of *Teatro Jornal* (Costa, 2017, our translation).

The author considers some of the stage productions of the period to be pioneers in documentary theater in Brazil. Of these events, *Mutirão em novo sol*¹⁰ and *Show Opinião* stand out, respectively:

[...] this piece mobilizes some of the most relevant modalities of *agitprop*. It is documentary theater (or scenification), it is news theater, as it is a “report” on events that actually occurred and, above all, its premiere took place among its most legitimate interlocutors: peasants organized in the struggle for agrarian reform, in a congress of the Peasant Leagues. (This is another reason for the lack of interest in this play in the official histories of theater in Brazil). [...] It is a case of scenification—basically written by Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, Armando Costa, Ferreira Gullar and others—which takes as its raw material the experience of three artists involved with the cultural industry in times of counter-revolution. In its final version, *Show Opinião* formally presents the testimony of different representatives of the social experience in Brazil: that of the migrant, that of the samba singer from the favelas and that of the middle-class woman. This is legitimate documentary theater. The three testimonies (basically the life story of each of the artists)¹¹ are developed through music and various types of illustration (exemplary cases in the form of reports). (Costa, 2017, our translation).

Other relevant experiences¹² carried out in the following years made use of documentation procedures and uses of documentary data or documents on stage, this was the case of the dramaturgy of *Rasga Coração* by Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, according to the preface written by the author in 1972

10 According to Iná Camargo Costa, “Informed about a confrontation between landowners and peasants in the state of São Paulo, which resulted in the arrest of one of the peasant leaders, members of Arena interviewed this leader and, based on the material collected, carried out some field research and in newspapers of the time and then wrote a piece called *Mutirão em Novo Sol*, which was signed by a collective of authors. The final version was written by Nelson Xavier, under the coordination of Augusto Boal. Its debut took place at a peasant congress in Belo Horizonte. It is already documentary theater, one of the *agitprop* modalities mentioned above, according to Piscator’s version” (Costa, 2017).

11 Respectively narrated by João do Vale, Zé Keti and Nara Leão, later replaced by Maria Bethânia.

12 Reflection shared by Professor Maria Sílvia Betti during the Qualification Board held remotely on November 26, 2021.



“[...] the piece presents data, retraces historical moments, etc., using the collage technique that we use in Opinião and other shows.” (Vianna Filho, 2007, p 144, free translation). In the same year, Chico de Assis wrote the theatrical text *Missa Leiga*, a work directed by Ademar Guerra. In the words of the author “Each part of this text follows the traditional parts of the Roman Apostolic Mass.” (Assis, 1972, p. 13, our translation). At a certain point in the play, the actors and actresses, equipped with recorders on stage, address the audience to record their reports in response to the following phrases: “Whoever has something to say, let them speak! Whoever has something to shout, shout! Whoever has something to offer, let them offer it!” and then these voices are heard overlapping the scene. Documentation procedures were also used by the actresses (Cláudia Mello, Nirce Levin, Lucélia Macchiavelli, Beatriz Berg, Nara Gomes, Isa Kopelmann, Zenaide and Simone Hoffman) in *Mural Mulher*, directed by João das Neves in 1982. The piece was advertised as a documentary-fiction “[...] it is an x-ray of Brazil from a female perspective. Everything is wrapped in testimonials from women from all social strata, collected by the actresses themselves.” (Levin, 1982, our translation), according to newspaper articles from the period.

There were many reverberations of Soviet *agitprops* in Brazil during the 1960s, the Popular Culture Centers (CPCs), for example, were a very powerful project for the dissemination of an art, which was intended to be popular and political, which included, among many activities, carrying out sketches about newspaper news, plays with themes coming from the local population, protest songs, cordel leaflets among other manifestations. “The CPC’s street theater took place in the best agitprop style” (Garcia, 2004, p. 104). And it involved not only theater, but cinema¹³, literature, adult literacy, visual arts, music and popular culture. It was a very significant experience of *agitprop* in Brazil, a project that was interrupted by the civil-military coup in 1964, when the main headquarters of the CPC, which operated in the UNE building, was burned down and its members were persecuted.

According to Silvana Garcia (2004), the CPCs received a strong influence from the Popular Culture Movement (MCP)¹⁴, founded months earlier in Pernambuco, an initiative welcomed by the government of Miguel Arraes¹⁵, which placed the State as a promoter of an integrated pedagogical experience. Initially focused on popular adult literacy education supported by the Paulo Freire method, it soon expanded its cultural production to other spheres, promoting film, theater and music festivals. And the production of the feature film *Cabra marcado para morrer*¹⁶, which had its filming interrupted in 1964 by the coup forces.

13 Some of the filmmakers active in the Cinema Novo movement were also involved with the CPCs

14 “Initially focused on a program of popular education, based on the method of educator Paulo Freire” (Garcia, 2004, p. 102, free translation).

15 He was elected Governor of the State of Pernambuco, in 1962, by the Social Labor Party (PST).

16 MCP project in partnership with CPC that aimed to film the struggle of rural trade unionists in Paraíba and the story about the union leader João Pedro Teixeira. In 1984, filmmaker Eduardo Coutinho resumed filming in the form of a documentary, interviewing the widow Elisabeth Altino Teixeira, who had lived for twenty years in hiding, separated from her children.



All cultural organizations that conveyed new ideas and were in some way committed to the nationalist front were made illegal, their leaders and participants persecuted, arrested or exiled. The CPC and MCP were literally destroyed; the ISEB dismantled, through numerous IPMs; the University of Brasília, especially, and other important universities, victims of endless purges that made precious brains for national intelligence flee. All cultural sectors linked to theater, music, cinema, TV, literature or popular culture—in addition to the press—became victims of strong censorship and a true witch hunt, where not even the lower levels were spared, without commitment to the leadership. Fear, insecurity and the lack of paths struck the dream, enjoyed for years, of a possible turnaround in the country's fortunes (Mostaço, 2016, p. 93, our translation).

Iná Camargo Costa points out that the heritage of *agitprop* in Brazil is currently present in social movements, such as the MST – Landless Rural Workers Movement¹⁷ -, which understand the arts space as a place to debate social structures and, in this way, transform them.

The MST is the first Brazilian workers' struggle movement that managed to create fronts such as education and culture. [...] Artists must be leaders and leaders must be artists, but it is the political discourse that organizes everything. Therefore, it must be very clear, very well-articulated, with legitimate arguments and a precise definition of the tactics and strategies adopted and defended in each action. The construction of a scene, or the composition of a song have the function of illustrating, or concretizing through images, the feelings, the dream or the struggle and therefore will have no meaning if they are made independently or contrary to political decisions. On the other hand, a political intervention that has the support of art is much more powerful (Costa, 2008, p. 15, our translation).

In this way, the character of agitation and propaganda present in the artistic manifestations of *agitprop* continues to be an important tool in favor of cultural workers engaged with a political art that seeks, through political and social content, to denounce the functioning mechanisms of hegemonic forces that oppress the working class.

From a practical point of view, the history of the struggle for socialism has already indicated some answers (always in the plural). Of those that I know, the ones that stimulate my imagination the most are linked to agitprop practices, as there are no limits to them. Agitprop is one of the most consequential and fun paths. Is there anything better than developing political actions while always cultivating a sense of humor? (Costa, 2008, p. 9, our translation).

Iná Camargo Costa offers clues about possible paths for artistic practices of a political and social nature, pointing towards a critical artistic praxis associated with fun and humor and provokes reflections on how cultural and political unrest can find resonance today in Brazil, the example of social movements and the MST, as explained above.

17 See online event that took place in 2020: 15ª Feira de Opinião-MST, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=haxJldUCmuo>. Access on: Sept. 04, 2021.



4 Erwin Piscator and *In Spite of Everything!*

Soviet *agitprop* artistic manifestations also had a strong influence on the works of Erwin Piscator (1893–1966) and Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), therefore on political theater and epic theater. From the 1920s onwards, Piscator began to make use of this form of artistic expression, exerting a great influence on *agitprop* in Germany, which became an important tool of opposition and resistance to the capitalist regime.

Piscator, considered the precursor of documentary theater¹⁸, joined the Communist Party in 1919 and the following year he founded the Proletarian Theater¹⁹. He participated in the avant-garde Dadaist and Expressionist movements and throughout his life was responsible for directing several theater companies and creating dramaturgy centers. In 1927 he started to direct his own theater company, the Piscator-Bühne in Nollendorfplatz.

The best elements, in a clear appreciation of their mental existence, saw the Nollendorfplatz Theater as a kind of bridge to the future. Doctors, jurists, teachers, writers, who, depending exclusively on their work, objectively belong to the proletariat, but at the same time are linked by a thousand threads to the bourgeois class, joined willingly, and even enthusiastically, at our front. The mainstream liberal democratic press became its mouthpiece. Alongside this, however, there was an upper layer that, entirely devoid of direction, aimed for the sensation promised by this theater. A fact that is constantly repeated in history: when a class closed in the disintegration renounces itself and, thus, its political enemies, it allows victorious attacks in the theater (Piscator, 1968, p. 138).

Piscator left Germany at the beginning of the 1930s, a period in which the country experienced a growing rise in Nazism. In 1939 he went to the United States with his companion and choreographer Maria Ley (1898-1999), where they created the Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research, being responsible for the theatrical training of countless artists, returning to Germany only in 1951. From 1962 onwards he took over as director of the Freie Volksbühne, in Berlin, until his death. His pedagogical-political theater was marked by collective work and commitment to the proletarian struggle.

The curtain had come down on political theater; Piscator's ideas and theories were disseminated. Theater as teamwork. Art collectivism. Dramatological association. Programmatic. Technicalization. Optical dramatology. Total theater, participating spectators (Drews, 1962, p. 15, free translation).

18 It is necessary to ponder this statement, since before Piscator other historical subjects tried to reach procedures that we now know as documentary theater. The German playwright was responsible for organizing these procedures. This reflection was shared by Professor Marcelo Soler during the Qualification Board held online on November 26, 2021.

19 According to Silvana Garcia “[...] Piscator, together with Hermann Schuller, founded the Proletarian Theatre – Scene of the Revolutionary Workers of Greater Berlin” (Garcia, 2004, p. 55, our translation).



Brecht was Piscator's collaborator at the Nollendorfplatz theater during the 1920s, a period in which he approached the epic form and Marxist philosophy and received influences that were decisive in later systematizing and developing epic and dialectical theater. Brecht recognizes the pedagogical and political character of the theater developed by Piscator:

It was Piscator who made the most radical attempt to give theater an educational character. I participated in all of his experiences, and none of them were carried out that did not have the aim of enhancing the educational value of the stage. It was directly about dominating on the stage the great contemporary complexes of issues, the struggles over oil, war, revolution, justice, racial problems, etc. The need for a complete renovation of the theater was evident. It is not possible, here, to enumerate all the discoveries, all the innovations that Piscator, together with almost all the new technical achievements, employed to bring the great modern problems to the stage. Those present probably know some of them, for example, the use of film that he transformed into a supporting role, similar to the Greek choir, and they also know the moving band that gave movement to the stage floor, allowing the flow of epic events, such as the march of the brave soldier Schwejk in the war (Brecht *apud* Drews, 1962, p. 4, our translation).

Since 1920, Piscator dedicated himself to revolutionary theater and traveled to the outskirts of Berlin working exclusively with workers on stage. The playwright understood that art was an important instrument of political struggle at the service of the proletariat. "What I wanted was not only to provide spectators with an experience, but also to force them to make a practical decision, to actively participate in life." (Drews, 1962, p.5, our translation).

According to Silvana Garcia, proletarian theater for Piscator should fulfill two main tasks:

The first, more complex, involves breaking with the capitalist mode of production in theater. It means a change in hierarchical work relationships, internally, and between the theater and its audience, externally. For this to happen, the work must be the result of collective and politically conscious action [...] The second task naturally refers to the action of propaganda and political education of the masses, especially those who "are still politically hesitant or indifferent, or who have not yet understood that, in a proletarian State, bourgeois art and bourgeois manner of 'enjoying the art' cannot be preserved." (Garcia, 2004, p. 56, our translation).

In 1925, Piscator reviews the German historical-materialist panel, which covers the initial period of the World War to the wave of repression that culminated in the murder of Communist Party leaders Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg²⁰, in the montage *Despite Everything!*, the final sentence of the Liebknecht's last speech published by the press, "[...] to emphasize that, even after the astonishing defeat of 1919²¹, the social revolution had progressed." (Piscator, 1963,

20 On January 15, 1919, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Wilhelm Pieck, leaders of the Communist Party of Germany, are arrested and taken for questioning at the Hotel Eden in Berlin. Although the details of the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht are unknown, the most widely accepted version is that they were taken out of the hotel by paramilitary groups, the *Freikorps*, escorted out of the building, where they were beaten unconscious.

21 The German Revolution of 1918-1919 consists of a series of events that took place in that period with revolutionary objectives, guided by socialist theses, but failed in January 1919 due to pressure in the face of the risk of civil war.



p. 79, our translation). The montage had 23 scenes organized chronologically, highlighting 14 important historical dates. In addition to the multipurpose and functional scenario, which included a practicable, a set of ramps, stairs and platforms on a rotating disc, Piscator, who had already made use of documents (minutes, articles and reports) in the construction of previous itineraries, used in spite of everything! film projections and images of documents and news from the time. Introducing documentary film into its productions for the first time, showing scenes from War:

The documentary nature of the show is also revealed by the presence, on stage, of “real” characters, members of the government of the time, and by the organization of the text itself. At various times, especially in historically referenced scenes, the montage of excerpts from documents, pieces of news from the press of the time, and excerpts from speeches predominate (Garcia, 2004, p. 62, our translation).

These excerpts fulfilled the function of further elevating the theatrical scene to the historical, reinforcing a Marxist dialectical perspective in theater. “In *Despite Everything!* the film was a document.” (Piscator, 1963, p. 81, our translation). The film as a document on stage became an epic device that allowed documentary commentary on its time.

We take advantage, first of all, of authentic footage of the war, demobilization and a parade of all the ruling houses in Europe, etc. The footage brutally presented all the horror of war: flamethrower attacks, crowds of ragged beings, burning cities. [...] On the proletarian masses, those scenes must have had a much greater influence than that of a hundred reports (Piscator, 1963, p. 81, our translation).

The production was presented at the Grand Show House in Berlin, the theater that was built by Max Reinhardt to host bourgeois classics. The room was filled with a tour of unions and workers, with very well-defined class consciousness, who occupied the stairs, corridors and passages of the theater.

But immediately the disposition turned into effective activity: the masses took charge of the artistic direction. Those who filled the house had, for the most part, actively lived through that time which was truly their destiny, their own tragedy, unfolding before their eyes. Theater, for them, had become reality. In a short time there ceased to be a stage and an audience, and there began to be a single large assembly room, a single large fighting field, a single large demonstration. It was this unity that, that night, definitively proved the inciting power of political theater. [...] It was proven that the strongest effect of political propaganda was in line with the strongest artistic achievement (Piscator, 1963, p. 84, our translation).

When later asked about the fact that the use of documents on stage through film projection was already present in the artistic manifestations of *agitprop*, Piscator stated:

[...] I never knew that the Russians had used film functionally, like me. In fact, this question of priority is insignificant, since it would only be demonstrated that it was not a technical artifice but rather a form of theater learned at birth and based on the historical-materialist philosophy common to us. In all my work, what thing did I care about? Not the simple propagation of a philosophy



through clichés and poster theses, but the demonstration that such a philosophy, and everything that follows from it, is the only valid thing for our time (Piscator, 1963, p. 81, our translation).

In view of Piscator's statement, it is evident how much his [aesthetic]²² choices were not dissociated from the political context and the historical period in which he lived. In this way, it is possible to consider that the historicity of the period was decisive for the political and aesthetic elaborations present in documentary theater.

Among the many aspects present in Erwin Piscator's theses, it was possible to locate one of the main foundations of a documentary theater praxis, the use of documents in the theatrical scene, whose main function was to elevate the scenic meaning to the historical/political one, as the document allowed comment critically his time, from a historical materialist perspective.

Piscator's praxis is related to collective thinking and doing, where one can notice the presence of artistic processes not dissociated from the pedagogical, including public participation and the presence of workers on stage, reinforcing the political character of his work, whose core discussion, as in epic theater, later systematized by Bertolt Brecht, is the class struggle, with the objective of calling for participatory decision-making in necessary social transformations.

5 Final considerations

Aware of the impossibility of exhausting the subject, from the paths taken it was possible to observe the significant contribution of historical, political and social events at the beginning of the 20th century, in the emergence of Soviet *agitprops* and in the work of Erwin Piscator, which converged in the elaboration of a documentary theater, whose perspective is historical materialist.

The documentary theater developed by Erwin Piscator presents a relevant aesthetic and political contribution, by pointing out paths for a theatrical praxis that aims to break with the capitalist mode of production, starting with collective organization, the participation of citizens, so-called ordinary, on stage. and significant changes in hierarchical relationships at work and with the public.

In Piscator, the pedagogical meaning of the word document is realized, from the Latin *documentum*, derived from the verb *docere* which means to teach, whose function is historical testimony, enhancing critical reflections on its time.

22 The term used here brings together the words aesthetics and ethics, evoking, respectively, their Greek origin *aisthesis* and *ethos*, the first meaning perception or apprehension by the senses, it is an action linked to the sensible and the second refers to the set of habits and customs concerning the behavior and culture of a given collectivity. In this sense, we refer to an "aesthetics at the service of ethics" (Vieira, 2015, p. 46), that is, an aesthetics that proposes itself through the elaboration of meanings, the construction of a look, a collective feeling and thinking aimed at reflecting on life in society.



Furthermore, his work finds relevant resonance in the praxis of documentary theater in the socio-historical contexts of the 21st century, especially in the collective works developed by the historical group theater subject²³, where class, gender and ethnic-racial struggles are at the heart of discussion, ratifying the critical function of the document in the scene and its epic-political-popular matrix, transforming the society in which we live.

23 This term is used mainly by the researcher and professor Alexandre Mate.



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Funding

CAPES-DS

Ethics Committee Approval

Not applicable

Competing interests

No declared conflict of interest

Research Context

This article, revised here and with some changes and additions, is originally derived from a chapter of the master's thesis Poetics of collective memory: a praxis of documentary theater and its intervention processes in the city of São Paulo, guided by professor Dr. Alexandre Luiz Mate. Dissertation (Master of Arts) – Unesp Institute of Arts, Universidade Estadual Paulista (Unesp), São Paulo, 2022. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/11449/235494>. Accessed on: 27 Mar. 2024.

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Evaluation Method

Double-Blind Peer Review

Editors

Dr. Ernesto Gomes Valença

Dra. Pamela Brownell

Peer Review History

Submission date: 07 October 2023

Approval date: 10 January 2024