



**THE ETHICS OF THE COMIC IN KING KONG FRAN:
clowning, gender, and resistance**

A ÉTICA DO CÔMICO EM KING KONG FRAN:
palhaçaria, gênero e resistência

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Abstract: This research focuses on the study of the dramaturgical text *King Kong Fran* (2023) by Rafaela Azevedo and Pedro Brício. The text, which originated from the show that is currently running in the theatrical circuits of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo since late 2022, incorporates elements of circus and clowning to take a stand against social and artistic misogynistic practices. Considering the resources used in the construction of the work, I aim to identify the strategies of comedy and humor employed and to reflect on how these aesthetic choices are articulated with a political discourse concerning the confrontation of misogynistic structures and practices that affect women. To this end, I rely on the theoretical foundation provided by studies on comedy (Bakhtin, 1999; Bergson, 1980; Arêas, 1990, among others), as well as research that links the discussion of comedy and humor with feminist criticism (Azevedo, 2018; Avilano, 2021; Espinosa-Vera, 2010, among others). I observed that, via the strategies of mirroring and gender role reversal, using resources such as irony, parody, and exaggeration, the text is politically positioned as a denounce of the sexist practices that have historically marked artistic productions, especially in the contexts of circus and clowning, and the social life of women. I consider that the artistic corpus under study assumes an amphibious character (Santiago, 2004) by articulating aesthetics and politics in an ambivalent manner, aligning with what I call an ethics of the comic, as it proposes social transformation via laughter.

Keywords: Brazilian dramaturgy; *King Kong Fran*; feminism; ethics; comical.

A ética do cômico em King Kong Fran: palhaçaria, gênero e resistência

Resumo: Esta pesquisa consiste no estudo do texto dramático *King Kong Fran* (2023), de Rafaela Azevedo e Pedro Brício. O texto, originado do espetáculo em cartaz no circuito teatral do Rio de Janeiro e São Paulo desde o final de 2022, articula elementos do circo e da palhaçaria para posicionar-se frente a práticas sociais e artísticas misóginas. Considerando os recursos acionados na construção da obra, meu objetivo consiste em identificar quais são as estratégias de comichidade e humor empregadas e refletir sobre o modo como tais escolhas estéticas se articulam com um discurso político no que concerne ao enfrentamento das estruturas e práticas misóginas que incidem sobre as mulheres. Para tanto, me amparo no embasamento teórico fornecido pelos estudos sobre comichidade (Bakhtin, 1999; Bergson, 1980; Arêas, 1990, entre outras), bem como nas pesquisas que vinculam a discussão sobre comichidade e humor com a crítica feminista (Azevedo, 2018; Avilano, 2021; Espinosa-Vera, 2010, entre outras). Observo que, por meio da estratégia do espelhamento e da troca de papéis de gênero, a partir de recursos como a ironia, a paródia e o exagero, o texto se posiciona politicamente como denúncia das práticas sexistas que marcaram historicamente as produções artísticas, especialmente no âmbito do circo e da palhaçaria, e a vida social das mulheres.



Considero que o *corpus* artístico em estudo assume caráter anfíbio (Santiago, 2004) ao articular estética e política de forma ambivalente, de modo que converge com o que chamo de uma ética do cômico, dado que propõe transformação social por meio do riso.

Palavras-chave: dramaturgia brasileira; *King Kong Fran*; feminismo; ética; cômico.



1 Preambles

In January 2024, I was in Colombia, on the first vacation trip I took alone in 34 years of life. Welcomed by the Colombians' kindness and in contact with other travelers, I had already lost the fear of being alone and wondered why it took me so long to live this experience when I heard about a piece of news from Brazil: the body of the Venezuelan Julieta Hernandez, who disappeared several days ago, was found in a municipality in Amazonas, in northern Brazil. She was 38 years old and had been traveling alone in Latin America for some time. Julieta was a victim of femicide on the bicycle route from São Paulo, where she lived, to Puerto Ordaz, Venezuela, where she would meet her family for the holidays at the end of the year.

She was a circus professional and gave life to Jujuba the Clown on the paths she took¹. Nomadism, clowning, and confronting a patriarchal and oppressive system was an ethical and conscious choice of Julieta. Her existence, on its own, was an outrage to this system. By making art, traveling alone, opting for a nomadic experience, and crossing the Amazon, she did not take risks, but on the contrary strained the structures of a society in which being a woman is already essentially being in danger. Julieta was a clown, like Rafaela Azevedo, who gives life to Fran the Clown in *King Kong Fran*. They share two experiences: violence and laughter. In Rafaela's case, the order changes, first came violence, then laughter.

For us to keep each other company on this dangerous path – to be a woman, as Jujuba did to Julieta, as Fran did to Rafaela, and with the faith that no path is lonely or in vain – I propose to think about the dramaturgical text² that underlies the *King Kong Fran* spectacle, which is running in theaters on the Rio–São Paulo axis since late 2022, taking into account historical-social aspects implied in feminist comedy. To this end, I seek support in the theoretical support about the comical (Bakhtin, 1999; Bergson, 1980; Arêas, 1990, among other works) and feminist comedy (Azevedo, 2018; Avilano, 2021; Espinosa-Vera, 2010, among other works).

In dialogue with Silviano Santiago's (2004) reflections, I understand that artistic activity and political action are intertwined, especially in contexts such as Brazil, in which numerous and repeated cases of violence against minority groups are reported. In this panorama, I propose a reflection on the dramaturgical text on screen, considering its amphibious character (Santiago, 2004), characterized precisely by the intersection of aesthetics and politics, in an articulation with the power of laughter as a tool for the feminist struggle against the oppressive gender system.

1 Her work can be accessed on her Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/utopiamaceradaenchocolate/>.

2 I understand that the work with the dramaturgical text contemplates only one dimension of the work. It is necessary to consider, however, that transit in the Brazilian theatrical circle is an activity restricted to certain social groups, including in geographical terms, given the territorial dimension of the country and the concentration of this type of program in the large southeastern urban centers. The publication of the book, in 2023, by the Cobogó publisher, as well as the use of social networks by Rafaela Azevedo, does not replace such an experience, but is able to expand the circulation of ideas. Then my choice takes place, not being able to see the show until this moment, to reflect on the written text.



2 “But there is no female clown”

The show *King Kong Fran* premiered at *Teatro Ipanema*, Rio de Janeiro, in November 2022, under the direction and playwriting by Rafaela Azevedo and Pedro Brício. With a team mostly composed of women and the performance by Rafaela Azevedo, who embodies Fran the Clown, the work articulates elements of circus and clowning to address gender violence from a comical perspective, reversing roles that are traditionally played by men and women in the circus, taken metonymically in its relationship with patriarchal society.

The name, as Fran explains throughout the text (Azevedo, Brício, 2023), is based on a series of references. Using inter-art dialogue, the work is an explicit intertextual performance with the *King Kong* (2005) movie, directed by Peter Jackson, in which diegesis a gorilla is captured and taken to be a Broadway attraction. The second reference is not fictitious: the Mexican Julia Pastrana (1834-1860), who had a congenital disease and was exposed as a circus attraction (Ape Woman) by Theodore Lent, who later impregnated her. Julia and the baby died during labor and their bodies were kept on display, generating profit to the American entrepreneur. A third reference must be mentioned: the case Fran’s friend who sought to act as a clown but was not hired because the owner of the circus understood the profession as being exclusively male.

The cinematographic reference reveals the speciesist character of patriarchal societies. As ecofeminism stresses, sexism is articulated with other means of oppression, such as racism (addressed by post/decolonial studies and intersectional feminism) and the assumption of superiority of men not only in relation to women, but over other species and the environment in general, interpreted based on a perspective of exploitation. In the words by Braidotti (2022, p. 85, free translation), “ecofeminists extend the critique of humanist reason to the ecological dimension, adding to the accusations of sexism and racism an undue sense of right to use and abuse all other species: ‘speciesism’”³. In this sense, although the emphasis of the work lies on circus tradition, especially regarding the roles reserved for men and women, it also warns for intersecting points between women and non-humans, systematically excluded and disqualified.

In a book entitled *King Kong Theory*, Virginie Despentes reflects on this filmic narrative considering the gorilla island as a possibility of the polymorphous and hyper potent sexuality that men want to exterminate. Despentes notes that King Kong does not have physical characteristics that enable them to be assigned to a gender. “King Kong is, here, a metaphor of a sexuality that is prior to a distinction between genders as it was politically imposed around the 19th century”⁴ (2021, p. 130-131, free translation). This is a great force that puts at risk the cornerstones of society as they

3 In the original version: “las ecofeministas extienden la crítica de la razón humanista a la dimensión ecológica, agregando a las acusaciones de sexismo y racismo un sentido indebido del derecho a usar y abusar de todas las demás especies: ‘especismo’”.

4 In the original version: “King Kong funciona aquí como una metáfora de una sexualidad anterior a una distinción entre los géneros tal y como se impuso políticamente hacia finales del siglo XIX”.



have been erected, since this force is opposed to the standard of the white and heterosexual man. From this we understand the desire to take it to the city and exhibit it: domestication as a form of control over the other.

Outside works of fiction, the violence suffered by Julia Pastrana is closely connected with a male vision that takes her away from the top of the hierarchy – White, Europeans (and North Americans), heterosexuals, owners, men, legal (Braidotti, 2022). Besides being a woman, she is racialized (Mexican) and bears features that approach her to non-humans according to the hegemonic perspective, which accentuates collusion with her exploitation. “They, or rather we, are not human in the same way, and some categories of humans are certainly more deadly than others”⁵, observes Braidotti (2022, p. 52, free translation). If being a woman puts us in danger, such vulnerability can be accentuated as the patriarchal gaze takes us away from the top of the hierarchy.

In addition to Julia’s case, the report on the experience of Fran’s friend brings a message from patriarchy: men choose the places women should fill, in a clear analogy with what also happens in the social structure. Historically, the clown role was performed by men in the circus. Orellana (2020) observes that, although women worked in popular theater companies, they acted behind the scenes, and the stage was restricted to the males. This fact implies that comedy was mostly made by men and for men, in the image and resemblance of society in general.

Such panorama only began to change from the 16th century, with the *Commedia Dell’Arte*, in which women also take on space in performance. But the existence of female clowns can only be found much later⁶. “The female clown in the comedy world is consolidated from the 80s, due to the fact that before being comedians, women were ballerinas, singers, painters, sculptors, writers, poets, filmmakers, musicians, acrobats, and theater actresses”⁷ (Orellana, 2020, p. 65, free translation). Just to be clear: the aforementioned “80s” are within the 20th century. Less than 50 years ago! This implies that until the last century, the job and the professional performance of female clowns were not recognized.

Such considerations about the history of female clowning contribute to a dimension of what represents the attitude of women who decide to make their function as clowns a way of being in the world and of acting politically against an oppressive structure. The text by Rafaela Azevedo and Pedro Brício addresses this matter when Fran reproduces the dialogue between her friend and the owner of the circus for the audience. Faced with the desire to occupy this space, the man says: “Humor, humor, humor... Clown, clown, clown...? But there is no female clown” (Azevedo; Brício,

5 In the original version: “Ellas, o mejor dicho, nosotras, no somos todas humanas de la misma manera, y algunas categorías de humanos son con toda certeza más mortales que otras”.

6 In this regard, Rafaela Azevedo informs that, although the circus tradition is millennial, the record of the first female clown in Brazil dates to 1940. This is about Maria Elisa Alves dos Reis, who performed under the male name of Clown Xamego, hiding her female identity (Azevedo, 2023, p. 44).

7 In the original version: “La payasa en el mundo de la comicidad se consolida a partir de los años 80, debido a que las mujeres antes que comediantes han sido bailarinas, cantantes, pintoras, escultoras, escritoras, poetas, cineastas, músicas, acróbatas y actrices dramáticas”.



2023, p. 13, free translation). What he recognizes as a possible role for women is to put on shoes and balance on a horse in motion or five meters tall, or to wear a bikini and be the target of knives thrown by a man. “If you fall, you die [...] if he misses, you also die... Come work with us. Come to our family” (Azevedo; Brício, 2023, p. 28, free translation).

On the one hand, what is implied as the risk involved in the “alternatives” that women have (death) is made clear; nevertheless, an irony lay is added when such risk is associated with the invitation to become part of the family. The reproduction of the dialogue places the audience in front of the pain resulting from the misogynistic structure. The contrast caused by the association of death as a probable end and family as an attractive invitation carries a comical value, due to the incongruity with which it is impregnated. In this situation, the comical is taken as “serious stuff” in which laughter and pain converge in what Reñones (2002) calls “painful laughter.” At this point, it is worth highlighting the presence of pain in the text, not as a perspective/lens from which the gaze is constructed (Arêas, 1990), but as an underlying background and as a rigid structure to be transformed by the comical approach (Bakhtin, 1999).

Irony is also a resource used to deal with Julia’s case, when Fran reports that, after buying, caging, and impregnating the woman, Theodore Lent went crazy, “everything was fine ‘till that moment, right?” (Azevedo; Brício, 2023, p. 25, free translation). Regarding the textual characteristics of feminist humor, Lobo (1997) highlights the role played by irony. In this double structure of the statement, the stereotypes or the misogynist-oriented discourse appear at the first level/of the text (if Julia was exhibited and marketed, it was because to some extent, for many, everything was fine) and at the second level/of the subtext there is the criticism of the cultural forces that created it, thus denying the value of the stereotype (for Fran, and it is assumed that for the public with whom she interacts, the behavior is inadmissible). While the first level represents a public voice, the second one makes the private voice present – one linked to the patriarchal pattern and the other to feminist demands.

The writing of Latin American women, according to Espinoza-Vera (2010, p. 7, free translation), tends to mock the stereotypes and norms of patriarchal values, “via a ‘double’ discourse such as satire, irony, and parody, in which transgressive elements are intertwined in the dominant discourse and constitute a subversion of the status quo”⁸. Looking at Brazilian feminist clowning, Pimenta (2023, p. 7, free translation) proposes that such resources function as scenic devices for subverting gender inequality and observes that inverting gender roles is an ironic act and breaks the public’s expectations, so that “it could act as a mechanism capable of transforming ideas, to provoke fissures in the current system and to boost the understanding of the patriarchal privilege experienced daily in our society.”

8 In the original version: “a través de un discurso ‘doble’ como la sátira, la ironía y la parodia, en los cuales los elementos transgresivos se entrelazan en el discurso dominante y constituyen una subversión del status quo”.



In this sense, note the parodistic and caricatured tone of the work, which reproduces with exaggeration the dynamics of the traditional circus, with a reversal of roles, as a means by which the dynamics on which gender difference/violence is established in the circus space, are highlighted. Hutcheon (1981) notes that parodying enables certain discourses to be recovered with critical distance, with the ironic perspective being an essential element in the sense of marking the difference in the realm of similarity. Amid literature, we can observe this ongoing process in a series of texts, especially from postmodernism or contemporaneity, which recover texts from the literary canon and, from an intertextual game, tension the meanings primarily evoked, adding another layer to them, the difference. The work is thus part of a broader panorama that is shown as a trend of Latin American and contemporary feminist comedy.

Based on the articulation between the references, the work shows how there are two possible places for women in the traditional circus space: the beauty or the beast. In both, passivity, violence, and subjection to male power prevail. In a parallel with society, Rafaela Azevedo points out that, from perfection and risk of life to beast, “women follow the script of idealization created by men or are marginalized.” Anyhow, they will never be clowns because “when we laugh at a clown, we laugh at what we identify as human among us” (Azevedo, 2023, p. 45, free translation) and, therefore, we share the understanding that humanity is not an exclusive trait of men. If this is the panorama of the traditional circus, the text points to the need for subversion, for the destabilization of this structure, so that other circuses can emerge.

In this perspective, from the displacement of women from the place of target/object of laughter to that of subject who laughs, we understand that the possibility of reflecting on a feminist humor arises, conceived, according to Avilano (2021), as a political act of resistance in the face of heteronormative patriarchal culture and, in the terms of Cintia Lima Crescêncio, in its subversive and revolutionary aspect.

For women, the act of taking the place of an assertive individual to herself, which makes other laugh by assuming humor as a way to affect people, is itself an act of transgression, to the extent that this action ignores the premise of women as passive subjects and, especially, without a sense of humor (Crescêncio, 2016, p. 117, free translation).

When women assume the position of individuals who create comical texts in their most diverse forms, they create the possibility to produce a humor that contributes to feminist agenda. In this sense, the transgressive element is revealed, which is *pari passu* with the ambivalent aspect of the comical, given that it will be used as means to criticize the current structure, based on ‘ethno-Euro-North-phalo-centric’ values. Laughter can then be explored as “a way of resistance to the places in which the system of patriarchal domination has historically placed us”⁹ (Azevedo, 2018, p. 47, free translation).

9 In the original version: “forma de resistencia a los lugares en los que históricamente nos ha colocado el sistema de dominación patriarcal”.



The look at the transformation follows the report about her friend and the owner of the circus, when Fran reveals: “I set, [corrects] she set, fire to the traditional circus!” (Azevedo; Brício, 2023, p. 29, free translation). The phrase condenses interesting elements for the debate regarding the intersection between her friend and Fran, which comprises the relationship between artist and clown. Regarding this connection, which will be further addressed, we will realize that the clown is an artistic creation whose existence contributes to settling accounts regarding the gender violence experienced by Rafaela. “Fran is my clown, she is my genuine humanity serving to question any and all structures that oppresses us. Fran is my superheroine who, by laughter, by the interaction with the audience, and subversion, draws new universes in which living is not so painful,” reflects Rafaela (Azevedo, 2023, p. 45, free translation). In this sense, a relationship of sorority is built between the two, which also extends to the others, to the audience.

By setting fire to the circus, Fran draws attention to the need for metaphorical death to access a new life/existence. One sets fire via laughter, which from this point of view assumes an ambivalent meaning, as observed by Bakhtin (1999, p. 10, free translation), according to whom “this laughter is [...] joyful and full of uproar, but at the same time mocking and sarcastic, it denies and affirms, shrouds and resurrects simultaneously.” This view on ambivalence also converges with Braidotti’s (2004) understanding of the political potential of joy and laughter, in what she calls festive poetics. Braidotti proposes a feminist nomadism, as opposed to the static, the hegemonic, and in favor of a future, arguing that “nomadic consciousness is a form of political resistance to any hegemonic and excluding view of subjectivity”¹⁰ (Braidotti, 2004, p. 232, free translation).

Despite all the violence suffered by women in general, by Julia, by Julieta, by Rafaela, Fran is a ball. She is the one who allows for the artist to act politically by laughter: “my humor, my pleasure, and my intelligence are my heritage, my shield, and my weapon” (Azevedo, 2023, p. 46, free translation). The power of laughter, that is, its fertility, lies in taking advantage of joy, celebration, and freedom to promote a displacement, enabling a new, more fluid, and flexible existence. This ambivalence lies on the potential to criticize, mock, and be sarcastic without giving up joy and celebration. After all, joy and celebration are diametrically opposed to any automatism, to the concept of a disciplined, trained body; they signal the life drive, the existence of a body/subject that moves, shifts, flows, and resists imprisonment, crystallization.

In a metatextual articulation, and by bringing to the stage elements that would be hidden in conventional theater, Fran talks about the conception of the show, incorporates reports of violence experienced by Rafaela Azevedo herself to the stage, and puts references to other texts and areas of knowledge in the foreground. The resource used to introduce the references to the movie, to Julia, and to her clown friend is the organization of an interview with Fran, who accounts having called Marina Abramovic, from whom she received the following advice:

10 In the original version: “La conciencia nómade es una forma de resistencia política a toda visión hegemónica y excluyente de la subjetividad”.



“Do you know what’s wrong with you? Are you going to spend your whole life doing humor, humor, humor? Clowning, five-minute number?” [to the audience] How long has it been already? Fifteen, right? I have already extended... Then she spells: “Fran, where is your contradiction!? Where is your hate? Where is your revolt? Come to the performance, Fran. Go reseaaaaaaarrrrrrrch!” And she hung up (Azevedo; Brício, 2023, p. 19, free translation).

Marina Abramovic is a renowned personality within Performing Arts. In 1975, with a performance entitled *Lips of Thomas*, the artist from Yugoslav gave rise to the so-called Performative Turn. In performance, events are produced instead of works, in which the spectators are actively involved. As events, “scenic events offer the possibility of experiencing changes in the course of events, that is, of transforming everyone who participates in them: both artists and spectators”¹¹ (Fischer-Lichte, 2004, p. 46, free translation).

The reference to time is used as a resource to make the audience laugh, since by mentioning the elapsed time Fran refers to the literal purpose of overcoming the five minutes to achieve success. Unlike the case in which the circus owner despises the insistence on humor and clowning, here the criticism put in Abramovic’s words takes on another connotation, becoming a mechanism to provoke laughter by laughing at themselves, after all a partnership is established between the two women and, as Viveiros de Castro (2005, p. 221, free translation) observes, “laughing together, laughing with someone else, is something that is only allowed to equals”. Abramovic, an experienced voice, advises, guides, and invites.

And if the advice is to research and perform, the work will follow this path: in the performative game, the limits between Fran the Clown and the artist Rafaela will be tensioned from the recurrence of personal accounts, of the violence suffered. Moreover, as the performative turn proposes, the spectator will be encouraged to leave a passive position and will be summoned to participate, as a collective that responds to Fran’s demands, or in a more individualized way: Fran interacts with three spectators, one of whom goes on stage and becomes a kind of assistant to the clown¹².

In this dynamic, the traditional roles are inverted: the woman conducts the show, which is hers, and the man has the role of assistant, of the body that serves and follows commands. Fran makes repeated comments about their bodies, calls one of the men to the stage and in a tone of complicity with the audience accentuates the harassment: “[Fran points to the man’s penis] Can I? [Man agrees. Fran touches his penis. Look at the audience, points to her dildo] It doesn’t compare to mine!” (2023, p. 35, free translation). In a clear demonstration of power, she says she holds a lot of influence and can give opportunities for him, by which she coerces him to participate in a game

11 In the original version: “las realizaciones escénicas brindan la posibilidad de experimentar cambios en su transcurso, esto es, de transformar a todos los que participan en ellas: a los artistas tanto como a los espectadores”.

12 In an interview with Antonio Tabet, Rafaela Azevedo clarifies that the men she interacts with in the show are not actors, but people who were previously invited to interact, without, however, having rehearsed or received a script on how they should respond to the actress’s provocations. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyKEKmewKsk>. Accessed on: Jul. 16, 2024.



that consists of answering questions to find out if he has ever practiced any violence against women. “If you answer the questions correctly, you win a prize. If you get them wrong... you die” (2023, p. 36, free translation).

As a prize, the spectator earns the right to continue participating. The next activity will consist of a striptease. As the dynamic is based on setting fire to the traditional circus, the man takes off his clothes, while the audience applauds and Fran encourages: “C’mon, twerk! Like that! Hot!”, “Now on all fours. Barking!”. Here, the male individual ends up being animalized. As if that was not enough, there is also the traditional game of knives: “I’m going to get on my skateboard and I’m going to spin. As I spin, I throw the knives. And you keep your eyes closed. You can’t open it, if you do, I’ll cut your dick. Pray: ‘Our Father, Blue carts in heaven’” (2023, p. 39, free translation). If in the patriarchal structure women’s lives are subject to the power of men, here the knife is in Fran’s hands, she is the one who leads.

The strategy of inverting the traditional order of the circus, placing men in positions traditionally occupied by women, is the great retaliation. Instead of physical revenge, Fran chooses to take revenge by the game: “I will not take revenge in such a way. This spectacle is my revenge” (2023, p. 42, free translation). As Crescêncio (2016) observes, when a woman takes the place of an individual who laughs and makes people laugh, she assumes a transgressive role. This humor, which meets an ethical demand, with political engagement and the potential to transform society, has much to contribute to feminist agendas in the sense of destabilizing the crystallized patriarchal structure, to provoke openings for more flexible and multiple perspectives in which the masculine is no longer understood as the standard and being in the power.

In the words of the researcher, “humor with a feminist bias is, therefore, a humor that threatens the current order, destabilizes the norm, challenges authority, and reinforces the importance of rethinking a political, social, and cultural structure that is based on the evident inequality between men and women” (Crescêncio, 2016, p. 125, free translation). By proposing a displacement of the roles occupied by men and women, attributing to the male spectator taken to the stage from positions of risk, objectifying/animalizing his body and exercising power over him in the dynamics of the scenic game, Fran appropriates the power that is traditionally in men’s hands, promoting a momentary rupture of the current order. The inversion of roles highlights how marked they are due to an unequal structure, how much men favor positions of power while women are subject to practices that urgently need to be rethought.

In this sense, it is not surprising that it has been repeatedly maintained that women lack a sense of humor (Avilano, 2021), denying them access to certain professions in the comical scope. If laughter consists of “*Showing one’s teeth to the enemy*, aggressive, active, autonomous” (Lobo, 1997, p. 154, emphasis added, free translation), it serves better to maintain the patriarchal structure in which women are in the place of the public, of assistant, but never protagonists, never holding authority in the humor scope. After all, it is worth “remembering that laughter can be transgressive or oppressive. Laughter liberates and represses. It all depends on the moment and on how and who



provokes it and to whom, with whom, and of whom one laughs” (Viveiros de Castro, 2005, p. 257, free translation). If it is a weapon, let it not be used by the enemy. When women are in possession of this object of war, it is in the circus of patriarchy that they will set fire to.

The text by Rafaela Azevedo and Pedro Bricio uses a huge dildo attached to the waist, as a pyrotechnic resource that will assume the function of a microphone. By means of this resource, she shows her teeth to the enemy:

Testing, one, two, three, mic testing! Are you listening back there? [positive response from the audience] Impressive, this thing gives a voice. You just need one of these. It's a natural amplifier. [smiles, observes the audience] Sometimes they don't know what they're saying and everyone applauds and shouts: MYTH! Then I bought one! I immediately bought the largest one (Azevedo; Bricio, 2023, p. 32, free translation).

In the reproduced fragment, the verbal language highlights the meaning already invoked since the appearance of the object on stage: the dildo evokes the power exerted by men regarding the speech in social dynamics. An artificial object attached to the body with the purpose of making itself heard is laughable, in the foreground, due to the artificiality itself, because it is the simulacrum of a member of the human body. Bergson states that “an artificially mechanized nature is a frankly comical reason, on which fantasy can perform countless variations with the certainty of obtaining success with loose laughter” (1980, p. 24, free translation). Furthermore, the change of the object function, which becomes indispensable for projecting the voice is another comical aspect. Then a more complex layer of the laughable emerges, which concerns the incoherence that the phallus guarantees listening. At the social level, it is questioned why individuals with phalluses are heard and applauded regardless of what is being said.

The reference to “myth” alludes to the former president of Brazil, who was acclaimed by his electorate as a myth and endorsed in the outrageous and unfounded statements, such as those he made about vaccination and sanitary measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, to cite one of the countless examples. Although without mentioning names, occurrences like this one promote a shift from a more general denunciation of any male individual aligned with the values of patriarchal society to a specific one who occupied a position of power due to the political function performed. The fact that one can buy a phallus and the possibility of choosing the largest among all those available emphasizes that it is a power relationship, socially forged, and, therefore, susceptible to intervention, to transformation.

The dildo also appears in the outcome, when after the striptease, the man is taken to drink and ends up unconscious on stage. Given this, Fran brings the object closer to his butt and considers taking his underwear off, implicating the audience in the decision. She does not do so but refers to content of this nature made available on the Internet, and she says that she suffered violence of this kind: “Now imagine me in his place at 18 years old, and in my place a cis man, a physician. This environment is his clinic, he doped me. Can you believe he stuck it in? [Points to the dildo.



Audience responds] At the time almost no one believed me...” (Azevedo; Bricio, 2023, p. 41, free translation). At this moment, the layer that separates Fran from Rafaela Azevedo is diluted and the violence suffered in the actress’s body is put in the foreground.

If in the work the dynamics of harassment and objectification/animalization of the male body can lead to discomfort, outside the scene the violence is real, and it is not uncommon for the victim to be discredited or blamed. Virginie Despentes, who survived a rape, addresses this issue by stating that “culpability is subject to an unspoken moral attraction, which makes everything fall on the side of the one who was raped more than on the one who raped her”¹³ (2021, p. 53, free translation). Therefore, in addition to surviving the sexual violence, it is necessary to confront different forms of subsequent violence, whether via delegitimization of the discourse, disapproval of the woman’s previous conduct or, even, to cite a topic of the agenda in Brazil¹⁴, of the impossibility of access to legal abortion when rape results in pregnancy.

But Fran has a dildo, she has an audience, and her revenge is for artistic creation. The inversion of roles, in a kind of “reverse sexism” (comical language is often marked by exaggeration), is accepted as a pact between artist and audience, to make explicit a flaw in the social structure: the existence of sexist/misogynistic patterns. From this perspective, we understand that the work is aligned with comical ethics, given that the resources of comedy are used in favor of the destabilization of a structure that is rigid/inflexible. Part of an ethical project is the comical/humorous approach that denounces the inflexibility and uniqueness of certain institutions, discourses, or individuals. In this sense, the target of a comical approach that meets ethical prerogatives will always be the one who occupies a place of power, who is at the top of the social hierarchy.

In *King Kong Fran* violence, as an individual experience of the artist, or as a collective inheritance of the gender, takes on a foundational hue, as proposed by Despentes (2021): it is at the same time what disfigures and what constitutes. Approaching it aesthetically can configure a way to “liquidate the event, empty it, exhaust it”¹⁵ (Despentes, 2021, p. 63, free translation) or to take revenge, in Fran’s words. Revenge culminates in a body that, although it retains its hair, gets rid of the fantasy of an ape woman and from whose vagina laser rays come out illuminating the entire theater. On stage, the image comes to life via the corporality of Rafaela Azevedo; in the book, it is represented by the drawing (Figure 1) reproduced below:

13 In the original version: “la culpabilidad está sometida a una atracción moral no enunciada, que hace que todo recaiga siempre del lado de aquella a la que se la meten más que del lado del que la mete”.

14 On June 12th, 2024, the House of Representatives approved the urgent processing of a bill that amends the Penal Code (according to which abortion is allowed in cases of risk to the pregnant woman, rape, or fetal anencephaly) and equates the interruption of pregnancies resulting from rape with more than 22 weeks to homicide, a much higher penalty than that applied to those who commit sexual violence. The case generated repercussions and tends not to follow this course, which does not erase the seriousness of the event. There is an example of the punishment of the victim, in this case, institutionalized.

15 In the original version: “liquidar el evento, vaciarlo, agotarlo”.



Figure 1 – Fran stripped of the gorilla woman allegory



Source: Azevedo; Brício, 2023, p. 51

The body revealed to the public, stripped of the clothes that had been attributed to it by patriarchy, as a source of light and power, reveals a woman's autonomy over herself and is opposed to the masculine ideal. In the words of Orellana (2020, p. 65, free translation), "The figure of the clown as a person capable of laughing and provoking laughter implies for women to take a place in the ridiculous, grotesque, misshapen, wrong; to feel freedom and pleasure in deviance, dissent, disorder, and play; seek subversive pleasure"¹⁶. The work displaces woman from the place assigned to her by the circus tradition, from attractive or monster, always at the mercy of male power, to another, in which she assumes the protagonism, uses the word, shows her teeth to the enemy, and metamorphoses. Fran's subversive power lies in transforming pain into art, moving from violence to laughter, inverting positions to show the incoherence of hierarchy.

Silviano Santiago (2004, p. 66, free translation) considers that this movement, guided by the articulation between artistic making and political positioning, is characteristic of the Brazilian literature, and that the "artistic activity of the writer is not detached from his political influence; the influence of politics on the citizen is not detached from his artistic activity." Resulting from the need for the intellectual to position themselves in a society marked by injustices and colonial legacies, the intertwining between Art and Politics attributes an amphibious nature to Brazilian literature, from the author's perspective. Given the aspects addressed so far, we see in this amphibious nature in *King Kong Fran* as an inherent trait of a comical production ethically positioned against the violence to which women are subjected in patriarchal societies. This amphibious character and the ethical concern implied are essential traits for the understanding of the text as part of a feminist comic piece/humor.

16 In the original version: "la figura de la payasa como persona capaz de reír y provocar risa, implica para la mujer hacerse lugar en lo ridículo, en lo grotesco, deforme, errado; sentir libertad y placer en el desvío, la disidencia, el desorden y en el juego; buscar el placer subversivo".

3 Final considerations

King Kong Fran plays with the tradition of circus and clowning and dialogues with other discourses, departing from the cinema, using the historical and theatrical discourses, to establish its link with politically positioned aesthetic making. The work resorts to resources frequently explored in comedy, such as fantasy (clothes of an ape woman and dildo) and the exchange of roles, as well as other resources that are prevalent in feminist comedy, such as irony, to provoke laughter and, at the same time, to challenge the current structure regarding gender roles in the Arts and in various social dynamics.

In this sense, it assumes the potential to tension the crystallized structures of the patriarchal society, questioning the hegemonic places occupied by male individuals and evidencing the arbitrariness of established conventions. By laughter, a reflection is proposed in which potential is revealed in the questioning and politically engaged character of artistic making. This comical that meets an ethical demand, with political engagement and the potential to transform society has much to contribute to feminist agendas by destabilizing the crystallized patriarchal structure, to provoke openings for more flexible and multiple perspectives in which the masculine is no longer understood as hegemonic.

By taking advantage of the reversed gender roles imposed by patriarchal society, exaggerating the marking of such roles, mainly by the objectification/animalization of the male body and by the game of harassment of men/viewers, the text is possibly uncomfortable, particularly for males. Such discomfort, in turn, plays a role in the creation of a feminist humor, concerned with subverting and resisting the violence resulting from the patriarchal structure. The ethical character is maintained since the established dynamics are not dedicated to put individuals who are already vulnerable at risk, nor to accentuate marginalities, but precisely to balance gender relations, destabilizing crystallized structures, violent hierarchies, and hegemonic discourses. By laughter, the text proposes a reflection on gender relations in the circus and society, thus promoting an articulation between aesthetic making and ethical commitment, politically positioned, thus consolidating itself as an amphibious practice, in the terms of Santiago (2004).

The actress' violated body gives way to the birth of the clown as a form of retaliation. In this sense, laughter is essentially resistance. The body on the stage is a body that resists. The laughing body shows its teeth to the enemy. The body that celebrates refuses to let itself be domesticated/die. If, as Vilma Arêas (1990) says, what differentiates the tragic from the comical is that the first deals with the inevitability of death while the other shows the inevitability of resurrection, *King Kong Fran*, as a discourse that retaliates and reclaims the space of women and particularly of the female clown, makes the memory of Julieta Hernández and the many clowns who could not be resurfaced in my reading, as an inevitable, unpostponable resurrection.



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