OCCUPY SPACES

Research project (first versión)[1]

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I.- Introduction

This project proposes a study on a successful corpus of contemporary Latin American works (theatre, poetry and narrative), published or represented between 1990 and 2010, a period whose most economical and political visible manifestation was Argentina's crisis in 2001. Despite their sceptical distance – avant-garde and/or postmodern techniques – these works show a strong commitment and are called "real", "sincere" and "true" by the authors themselves, the critics and the readers.

This apparent contradiction raises a question of both aesthetical and political importance: if one no longer believes in representation, what is the "reality" or "truth" of words, images and scenes? The answer may be found in the syllogism of lying: when I say I am lying, I am telling the truth**.** These artists often incorporate 'found' historical and artistic materials in their works – most of them identitary - and also

everyday images and discourses. Everything – even painful elements - becomes *readymade*, and treated with indifference or with humor. The effect, however, is always committed. The fragments are recognizable, they show the lies, and also the truths: the desires, social bonds and political antagonisms that a shared language and a shared memory still bring about.

Three subprojects will compare Argentinean works with productions of other countries, and detect for each of the three genres specific techniques of realist absorption (Field) and avant-garde distance and their interaction. The intergeneric and intermedial analysis and the theoretical research will be done in teamwork, and a synthesis will be written by the project leader.

2.- An Example.

In December of 2001, both the "peso convertible' and legal security came to a sudden end in Argentina and as result the government collapsed. All confidence in the economic and political representation was impossible, and the people went out into the streets.

Two years later, Rafael Spregelburd staged the "impossibility" of 2001 in a play that was also impossible, but that came to be a local and international event: *Bizarra*. It is a "teatronovela" (a "theatersoap"), as the author calls it (Spregelburd 2004), with ten chapters or presentations of three hours each, in which seventy-eight actors acted heroically during ten weeks – one chapter a week – without being paid. Eight thousand spectators (Friera) participated with them in a strongly political experience, which was repeated with the publication of the play in the form of a book in 2008. *Bizarra* shows the exhaustion of all national stereotypes yet at the same time involves every member of the audience in the shared pain of that depreciation. The effect was tragic – "everyone cried in the last act", recalls one participant – although it concerned an "optimistic tragedy" (Spregelburd 2011): the destruction did not lead to melancholy, but to a desire to overcome the situation. The work became a symbol, not only of the economic and political recovery in Argentina, but of the

crisis in other countries as well. *Bizarra* was performed in Italian in Naples and Rome in 2010 with great public success. In 2011 a phrase of the play – "how sad is prudence", "come è triste la prudenza" – was the motto of the theatre workers who occupied – and still occupy – the Teatro Valle.[3] The phrase rapidly appeared on stickers in all types of public vehicles in Rome, and continues to appear every now and then, without anyone knowing why.

3.- Question and hypothesis.

The main <u>question</u> of this project concerns the power of images and fiction: how do they work when we no longer believe in representation? The <u>hypothesis</u> is that, despite the today's disbelief – in art as much as in politics –, it is possible to make sincere use of the images and fictions of our everyday and contemporary life, cultural and affective memory, and that this use commits us. The works of this corpus question representation and manipulation and propose at the same time a creative activity – and not a melancholic one –with the *ready-mades*. The avant-garde or postmodern techniques reveal the arbitrariness of the *clichés*, but their seduction and the realist skills of the works are still powerful. The juxtaposition of contradictory procedures provokes a strong political effect: emotion, abjection, antagonism and revolt (Rodríguez Carranza 2012a and 2012b).

4.- Theoretical framework.

4.1. State of art.

The starting point of this research is Hal Foster's reaction to the postmodern assumption that western culture was dominated by the *simulacrum* (Baudrillard): he argues that certain artistic trajectories of the nineties of the last century need to be read in terms of *traumatic realism*. There is a drive provoked by the dissatisfaction with the dominant model of culture, to reach the real, "as if the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic". There is also a tendency to redefine experience, which converges in the rebirth of the

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[3] http://romethesecondtime.blogspot.com/2011/10/occupy-theater-teatro-valle-occupato-in.html

author and the return of the referential. Other facts confirm the claims of Foster: many cultural events focusing on the real, from *reality* TV shows to museum exhibitions and events.[i] The performance and rhetoric of sincerity, which should be considered "a 'doing' instead of a 'being'" (van Alphen & Bal) is omnipresent in the media and culture in general. The dissatisfaction indicated by Foster also coincides with another "return", that of the political as conflict (Mouffe Rancière).

In Argentina the critics point to the extraordinary production of reality shows, "life stories" (Arfuch; Sarlo 2005) "testimonies" (Kamenszain) and autobiographical narratives (Amícola; Giordano). The "biodramas" of Vivi Tellas are one of the most important references for the Latin American theatre criticism (Trastoy). Many critics speak in this context of "realism" (Contreras, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Speranza 2001, 2006, Rodríguez Carranza 2008; Horne 2012) and of literary performances or "reality spectacles" (Laddaga). Some of them emphasize the political implication of these works (Dubatti 2006, Rodríguez Carranza 2010)

4.2. Issues

a) Theoretical.

The challenge of this project is to conceptualize the political implications of works that clearly question the representation of reality, and this requires a combination of approaches and tools of different disciplines. The following concepts form the core of our investigation:

- *Political*: we want to understand the way the works of our corpus make visible the antagonistic dimension of society that Mouffe, following Schmitt and Rancière calls "political", as distinguished from "politics", i.e. "the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence". Rancière calls that second order "police" and defines it as "a symbolic constitution of the social" that excludes certain practices, groups and spaces from the political, by attributing them specific locations and functions .However, it is possible to "occupy" and reuse those spaces and practices: Rancière speaks of "intervention" They are the best places to make

antagonism visible, because they frequently have – especially when they are identitary - a great affective power.

- *Affection* (Deleuze) does not necessarily require belief to exist: the symbolic places and practices can escape manipulation without losing their emotional force. Jeremy Bentham explains how fictions are powerful language tools capable of inflicting damage or satisfaction that can be experienced in the body (Ogden). These have nothing to do with either illusion or deception (Lacan 1992; 1998; 2005): they are symbolical – belief is not of any relevance – and work through the mechanism of repetition.

- *Repetition* is frequently dismissed as traditional and conservative, as "death drive" (Freud), and as obstacle to the rise of the New (Badiou). Žižek, however, goes back to Deleuze, Benjamin and even Kierkegaard to affirm that: "repetition is inverted memory", i.e., a movement forward. The death drive is, paradoxically, an excess of life, and does not - or not only - refer to the past, but to the present. Popular culture also employs repetition to refer to the present: the very example is the formulaic mechanism of traditional epic (Parry, Menéndez Pidal), still present in secondary orality today (Ong). Moreover Paulhan discovered that the Malagassy proverbs only work by formal analogy with a specific situation (2008, also in Lacan 1998).

- *Realism* is, following Barthes understood as a "reality effect". It is produced by the repetition of "the concrete details" that refer to the real: they are *signifiers* that eliminates their sedimented – or dead – referent, what they mean in a cultural code. Their *signified* becomes, then, the present (ibid.). Our point here is that these repeated signifiers nevertheless do not "forget" their "old" or "original" meaning. They are "indicial", like the *ready-mades* of Duchamp (Krauss), but at the same times "trace" (Didi Huberman) of cultural memory. They make visible and politically unbearable the cut between signifier and referent and also point to their analogy with the present.

b) Methodological

Existing research points to the simultaneous presence of both Realist (absorption) and Avant-Garde (alienation) techniques and motives in the works of

our corpus. Taking these findings as a starting point, the first step will be to identify and classify the procedures used in the individual artworks according to the criteria applicable to each of the three genres (drama, poetry, narrative). This will enable us to, in a following phase, study forms of cross-generic interference and interplay.

One of the most challenging aspects of our analysis is the fact that the estrangement techniques deployed in these works evoke a Barthesian 'reality effect' (instead of a Brechtian alienation effect). The stereotype is not used, but respected, and traces of cultural memory are preserved. The aim of our approach is, then, to analyze 1) how these works pull a story, a poem, a scene, as it were, out of the 'generic museum' and 2) how the inscription of the Ready Made into the present opens up a political space.

5.- Originality.

The originality of our proposal is twofold. On the one hand, it suggests a) that an aesthetical activity establishing a critical distance can create communitarian and political ties simultaneously, and b) that the generic exchange is an important procedure for achieving this simultaneity. On the other hand, it suggests that this political potential can be found in images and discourses in any social setting. The specialists in Latin-American populism (Laclau, Mouffe) have shown the effectiveness of popular theatre, narrative and poetry in the construction of the Nation as an "imaginary community" (Anderson, Martín Barbero, Monsiváis). They did not, however, take into consideration that today these forms mark a failure and an absence, yet continue to act politically and as community. They can be *occupied* by real communities, "inessential" ones in the words of Agamben: those which assume that they lied, that there is no origin and that nothing has been done yet.

6.- Coherence.

All subprojects share the same theoretical questions and have to work together, because the main feature of the corpus is the loan of generic skills. This is evident in the theatrical and narrative works but occurs too in the neo-objectivist

poetry, the genre that allows us to formally perceive the activity of the *readymade* in the totality of the corpus. Obviously, the dialogue with specialists in art and film, amongst others, will be indispensable (cf. 9.6).   The *added value* is the joint elaboration of a new frame for analyzing the power of the genres – fiction and image – in contemporary society (cf. 9.4 and 9.6.).

7. Embedding.

Our project will be inscribed at the LUCAS institute (Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society) at the Faculty of Humanities of Leiden University, and will participate wholly in the research profile area 'Political legitimacy: institutions and identities.'

8. Social, cultural and technical relevance.

Our main question is an aesthetical, but also a political one, for representation deals with the totality of institutional and social life. This project can contribute to the understanding of one of the most interesting cultural and political issues today: the *Occupy Movement* and its use of all (both new and mainstream) media and communication networks (Sassen). The works of our corpus occupy genres, images and discourses. They are part of that wave of initiatives that take an existing common place, turn it to space (Bachelard, Tuan, Sassen) and use it for *dissensus* (Rancière, 2010). They make what Badiou, analyzing Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918), calls "the vanishing difference […] a minimal, albeit absolute difference; the difference between the place and what takes place in the place" (2007 [2005] 56).