



Vagabonds and Zealots

One of the first thinkers of Brazilian art, Gonzaga Duque, said at the end of the 19th century that art would have no future in this land. Influenced by Positivism, its theories and prejudices, the critic saw the causes of this hopelessness in metropolitan life, specially at the capital, Rio de Janeiro. He considered its people "timid, ignorant, petty and small", forming a society of "vagabonds and religious zealots". He observed them in their social context, self-important lowlifes that lived as "bohemians", "playing *fados* on the guitar" and dancing *capoeira*. This analysis pioneered a way of thinking that would, years later, become one of the most important set of theories to deal with how Brazilians experienced rituals such as *carnaval*. Even back in the 19th century, it was not lost on the observers our inclination for the Dionysian in the way we dealt with our bodies, games and popular manifestations.

When we think of how much these supposed vagabondage and religious zealotry contributed to the image of Brazil, we see that History ignored the words of Gonzaga Duque. This vagabond and religious body, through the ages, was our instrument to achieve freedom, to subvert and transgress, as an extra-official presence. This body was the enemy of normalcy and discipline. We see, then, the subject playing soccer or at the beach, at public squares, roaming in the streets and forests, tired after the dances and the happiness authorized by the inversion rituals of *carnaval*. This same being, seen as the representation of Brazil, becomes political and reclaim its place in the world. These bodies were always imprisoned, always watched, but then the art, music and sports worlds started to pay attention.

There are many modes of ritualization in Brazilian culture. The anthropologist Roberto Da Matta has already pointed out the relationship between *carnaval*, religious processions and military parades. Daily dramatizations are a product of the mix and transformation of those bonds, often considered radically separate entities, and we can see the presence of faith and sensuality, ecstasy and delight on broad visual and latent signs. From the simple gesture of covering the face and body with masks, paint and glitter, emulating ecclesiastic situations, binarism is always set to fail or, at least, subjected to satire. But now, contrary to the anthropologist analysis, there is not an elusion of "work". There is, more likely, a symbolic economy that becomes watchful and critical, without submission. When the slightest indication that liberty is at risk, people take to the streets with signs, in full costumes, to protest and hold the *arrivistes* accountable.

To think of Brazil is to consider moments and people marked by several crises of sociability. Condemned to work, to slavery, to ethnical (racial) prejudice, this subject is now a threat to white sovereignty, to fixed gender roles and divisions, to the relationship between bosses and workers, to living arrangements in the cities and to selective media access. At *carnaval*, all those repressed questions come to the surface as fantasy, translated in the costumes worn, mixing the sacred and the profane, inverting laws and prohibitions.

This is the vagabond, a sexual exhibitionist who conquers the streets when *carnaval* comes and still reigns after Wednesday's ashes. A being that flexes its muscles dancing, an erotic being, cross-dressed, at the margins of everything, carrying flags and passions – scandalous to the official hypocrisy.

Brazilian reality is built on this intense mixture of beliefs. We pay tribute to catholic saints and *Orixás* from the *candomblé* afro-brasilians gods. Those beliefs come alive in prayers, icons and amulets used as adornment, in the faith that lowlives have in their patron saints, in idolatry, processions and parades. “They gathered in dancing gangs”, wrote Gonzaga Duque, “dressed in feathers and indigenous headdresses, with bells at their heels, laces and beads all over their bodies, with savage grimaces on their faces [...]”. On the subject of catholic faith, Duque has this to say: “This was the people of the colony; a weak and religious people, who asked instantaneously for convents to be built as the hungry would ask for bread”.

So we conclude that those rituals are representations of our delights and of our randomness. People gather, now, free and at the same time seen as suspects, as concept and threat. Spaces are cut through the flesh of the cities, backlands, woods and slums. A clearing can be seen. Limits are surpassed. The muddy, dirty, concrete landscape – as well as the seascape – changes.

In the costumes made for *carnaval* we can see changing genders, class transgression and subversion, the appeal of fake brightness, the marginality of capitalism. Legitimacies are lived in a vertigo of time, pleasure and illusion.

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