

“Or it will be nothing”: thoughts on arts, aesthetics and politics in times of fascist Brazil

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Abstract | From Marcia Tiburi’s (2018) and Jacques Rancière’s (2005) thoughts on the relation between aesthetics and politics and considering the idea of regime of visibility proposed by the French thinker in Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible, we present a critical analysis on the current set of Culture sector in Brazil. In this perspective, we analyze the public political, the institutional censorship and the offensive by sectors of civil society over the artistic production and its non-hegemonic politics, reflecting on the aesthetics effects that curtailment provokes.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics. Politics. Brazil.

“Ou então não será nada”: reflexões sobre arte, estética e política em tempos de Brasil fascista

Resumo | A partir da leitura de Marcia Tiburi (2018) e Jacques Rancière (2005) acerca das relações entre estética e política e da ideia de regimes de visibilidade e dizibilidade proposta pelo pensador francês em A partilha do sensível, tecemos uma análise crítica sobre o atual cenário do setor da Cultura no Brasil. Nessa perspectiva, analisamos as políticas públicas, a censura institucional e a ofensiva de setores da sociedade civil em relação à produção artística e à política não-hegemônica que instauram, refletindo sobre os efeitos estéticos de tal cerceamento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Estética. Política. Brasil

O de lo contrario no será nada”: reflexiones sobre el arte, la estética y la política en tiempos del Brasil fascista

Resumen | A partir de la lectura de Marcia Tiburi (2018) y Jacques Rancière (2005) acerca de las relaciones entre estética e política y de la idea de regímenes de visibilidad y decibilidad propuesta por el pensador francés en El reparto de lo sensible, presentamos una análisis crítica sobre el panorama actual del sector de la Cultura en Brasil. Desde esta perspectiva, analizamos las políticas públicas, la censura institucional y la ofensiva de sectores de la sociedad civil en respecto a la producción artística e a la política no hegemónica que instauran, reflexionando sobre los efectos estéticos de tal cercenamiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Estética. Política. Brasil.

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In order to bring up a discussion on the proposed topic, we would like to take up an important work published by the French thinker Jacques Rancière (2005). In *Distribution of the sensible*, the author relates the political and the aesthetic spheres from what he called distribution mode of the sensible, referring to a “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.” (RANCIÈRE, 2005, p. 15 – author’s highlight, our translation).

At its turn, the *common* that the author refers concerns the range of “spaces, times, and forms of activity” (RANCIÈRE, 2015, p. 15 – our translation) that builds a community of individuals organized by a given government system. Rancière adds that, in this perspective, would be a Citizen any person who takes part of this common. Considering the democratic and republican societies experiences, those in which, by principle, the common interest subjects – health, education, economics etc. – are treated and decided by everybody through a representative system in which, by the power of the vote, the people elect their political representants, we may ask: who effectively takes part in this distribution?

According to the author, there is a kind of distribution that precedes the taking part quoted: the one which determines those who takes part. This kind separates people by spaces, times and activities that they do and that, in Rancière’s eyes, would define either their competent or not to the common. As a result, the kind of distribution in effect in each society in a given time period would organize the visibility and sayability regimes that determines that/those who became visible and who have voice and chance to be heard, in prejudice of those who are thrown to invisibility and excluded from the speech spaces.

The current fracture in the Brazilian social tissue between antagonistic political positions, emerged notably with the *impeachment* process that, in 2016, removed the Dilma Rousseff from the presidency, as presented in the documentary *The Edge of Democracy* (Petra Costa, 2019), put in evidence the differences present in the always relative rang of “all” of the Brazilian community. The process presented in the documentary indicates the fact that a portion of that community, realizing itself as excluded from the visibility and sayability regimes in effect or not seeing itself as an effective part of those regimes – what we can question –, begins to act in order to revert that scenery, instituting a kind of distribution aligned to its own political-ideological perspective.

Rancière proposes an interpretation of what he called visibility and sayability regimes from a point of view according to which the author sees that “there is [...], in the political basis, an ‘aesthetic’” (RANCIÈRE, 2005, p. 16). Considering the visibility and sayability spheres, the author presents an idea of aesthetics aligned to the one that the Brazilian philosopher Marcia Tiburi (2018) defined in a recent publication, relating it with all that makes us sensible beings, namely the “field of the affection, of the feeling, of the emotion and [...] the corporeity” (TIBURI, 2018, p. 12); in another words, relating the aesthetics to what happens in the level of the experience with the showing/looking. In the words of the author:

This aesthetic [...] we can understand it in a Kantian way [...] as the system of shapes previously determining what is there to feel. It is a fragment of times and spaces, of the visible and the invisible [...] and what counts in the politics as a form of experience. (RANCIÈRE, 2005, p. 16)

Rancière is keen to elucidate that the idea of aesthetics that he is using has no association with the “political aestheticization” in a Benjaminian sense. However, before we go into the point of how the current visibility and sayability regimes in nowadays Brazil are determining who and what works show up and in what conditions, let’s take our discussion back to the way politics has, historically, using aestheticization procedures in its practices. The framework we present in the following should contextualize the political scenario of Culture’s public politics developed in Brazil for the past two years.

1. Uses and abuses of the political aestheticization

In her theorization of the “political ridiculous”, Marcia Tiburi (2018) comments the political aestheticization process that she observes in the performance of certain candidates/politicians, Brazilian and foreign, for example, and in the way their images and speeches are used to manipulate the affections of who access them.

Here we are talking about the relationship between aesthetics and politics as it has been done in several countries which have the neoliberalism as their current economic policy. But the redistribution of the sensible rearrangement project is happening also in the artistic expression and symbolic goods level, provoking a new (?) relationship between art and politics. As Félix Guatarri (1996) has pointed out, in the peripheric countries with *capitalistic*¹ modes of production, such as Brazil, economic and subjectivation controls work together, in a way that the culture dynamics is equivalent to the capital’s: while this one works on the economic subordination, the other one works on the subjective’s.

Considering that the elite, those “groups that own the means of production in each sector and, therefore, power” (TIBURI, 2018, p. 19), also dictates the patterns to be enjoyed, what can show up, be seen, heard, felt, noticed – in other words, what can be part of the visibility and sayability regimes –, what kind of subjectivity construction is allowed from the taking power that came with the 2016’s coup? “Which bodies, which bodies’ images, which clothes, which homes, which cities, which faces, styles, body movements are allowed or forbidden [...]?” (TIBURI, 2018, p. 19). Ans which artistic projects?

At this point, we would like to bring up a clear example of how the doubled dimension we evoked – aesthetic/politics, art/politics – can work together. This example illustrates or discloses, in an institutional level, the redistribution of the sensible question about what we have spoken. We refer to the recent polemic involving the theatre director Roberto Alvim. In the end of 2019, the artist, declaring his support to the current Brazilian president, is invited by the Government to assume

¹ Guatarri uses this term to refer to those countries which are in the margin of the capitalist system and to those which, besides having a socialist economy, depend on the global capitalism – which leads them to the same subjectivity production and interpersonal relationship modes.

a job at the Culture Special Secretariat², at first as the FUNARTE's Performing Arts Center's director and then as the Secretariat's chief. As his "first action", announced even before he was nominated to the job, Alvim asks the "conservative artists" – those who would be aligned to the "conservative values in the field of Art" – to create a "cultural war machine" (Fig. 1). The months before the invitation, the director was manifesting his new political position in the social media, intensifying the posts once he assumed the job at the FUNARTE.

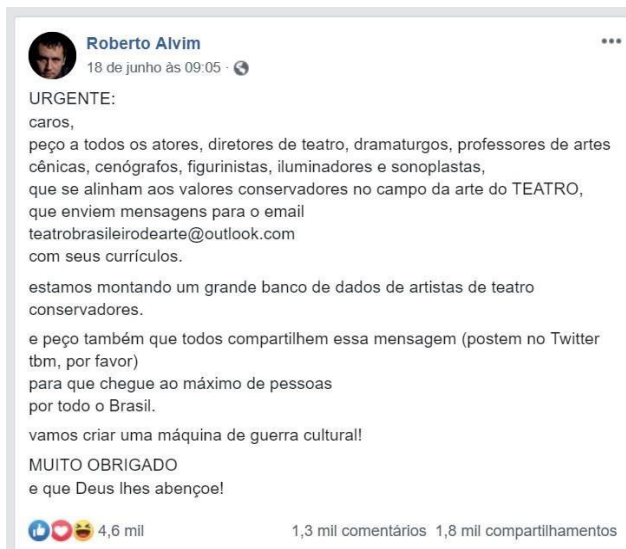


Figure 1 Printscreen. Roberto Alvim's post on Facebook. 18th June 2019.



Figure 2 Printscreen. Roberto Alvim's post on Facebook. 18th June 2019.

² When he assumed the presidency of Brazil, in January of 2019, Jair Bolsonaro extinguished the Ministry of Culture, reducing its administration to the statute of a Ministry of Citizenship's Special Secretariat, with Henrique Pires in the head of it. This secretary quits in August of that same year, after an episode of censorship in which the minister Omar Terra suspended a public notice that contemplated the "gender diversity" theme. After him, the economist Ricardo Braga assumes the Secretariat, staying only a few weeks in the job. In November, the Secretariat was transferred to the Ministry of Tourism – that's when Roberto Alvim takes over the agency. Before that, more specifically since June, he was already in the government, as the director of de FUNARTE's Performing Arts Center.

It is important to say that the “new political position” that we referred has to do with a diametral shift of his artistic trajectory and of his poetic and political choices. One of the main Alvim’s thoughts on Theatre, before the mentioned shift, is a project named “transhuman dramatics”, that theoretically and poetically organizes his experiments, specially as dramatist. With this project, the artist sought to invent new ways of being in the world, developing a “work on the language, building linguistic architectures [...] from which he can invent characters-figures or characters-language and, from them, new archetypes” (BRITO, 2013, p. 102). In his words:

transhuman is an invention of (im)possible draws that let us experience life in others (and unpredictable) ways. it is the refuse of an idea, raised in the Renaissance [...], that expanded (in enlightenment and, paradoxically, also in the romanticism) and prevailed until the end of the 20th century about what is the human (and that has been acting as the major mechanism of control ever conceived); it is the creation of other ways of subjectivation, in unstable draws that problematize in a radical way an hegemonic idea of what is the subject. (ALVIM, 2012, p. 14)

This idea is fundamentally opposite to the conservative project that he presented later, as we will see below. Even when he staged classic plays, as the *Peep Classic Esquilo* trypic, the translation/adaptation and performance of these plays were designed in accordance to his idea of transhuman. Besides that, the author adapted and staged *Leite Derramado*, a novel by Chico Buarque (an artist whose political position is assumedly progressist) that problematize the Brazilian colonial heritage.

Alvim’s shift, as the story told by the director himself, came up in 2017 with an episode concerning his health. In an interview³ given to the Senso Comum podcast, the director said that he had been dealing with a tumor since the première of *Leite Derramado*, in 2016, and that he would have been healed after his domestic servant prayed for him. From that moment and on, Alvim, a so far atheist, converts himself to the Christianity, then to a conservative political position and, at the end, to the “Bolsonarism”.

Concerning to the Facebook posts, reacting to the critics that came to him, the director explained that he was referring to the conservatism “in the field of art” and not in the social-political field. But is it possible to make such a separation? Let us go back to Rancière: according to this philosopher, if the debate on the arts autonomy or its political submission is vain, he does recognize that something that intervenes as a formal revolution principle in the arts could indicate a principle of political reorganization of the common experience – of another redistribution of the sensible. Similarly, if instead of revolution, in a reactionary attitude such as that of the mentioned director, one takes back, conservatively, old forms and thoughts on the relation between arts and society, in a macropolitical level, would not a restoration of an also old social order what was being suggested?

In cultural political terms, what was being put (or imposed) was that just those

³ Available in: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2PpyaNY2wMZEOTAanvN2Ug?si=ehi23jw8Rwm3GLsJqG9Hsw>. Last access: 10/30/2020.

projects aligned to the government political-ideological perspective could be financed with public resources. The “curatorship” - as Alvim, as the head of the CAC/FUNARTE, preferred to call the censor to the occupation of the Foundation’s spaces by the RES PÚBLICA 2023 (RES PUBLIC 2023) play, by the Motosserra Perfumada Group, claiming that there was no “aesthetic allusion, but just political discourse” (TORRES, 2019) – would exclude, now openly, the so called “Marxist”, “progressist” and “ideological” art. Perfumada, alegando não haver nele “alusão estética, apenas um discurso político”.

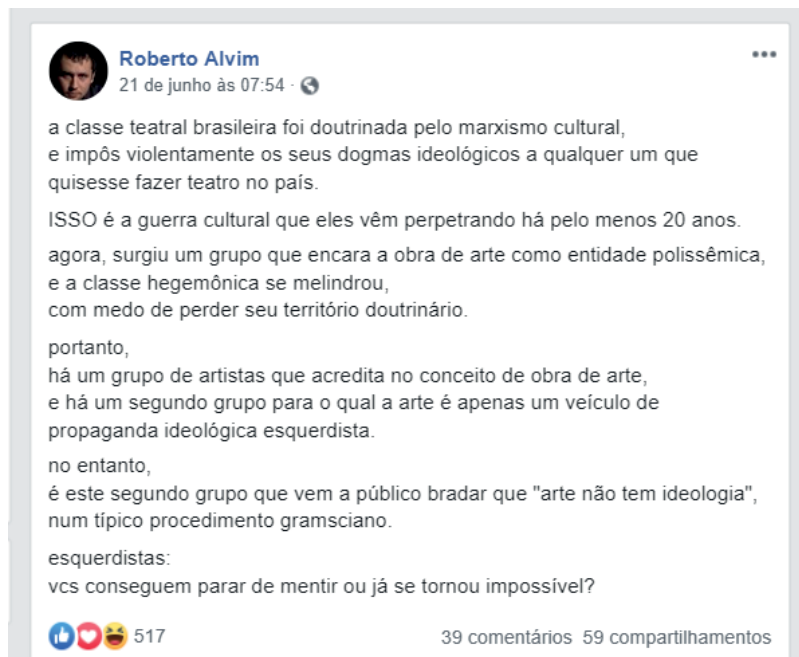


Figure 3 Printscreen. Roberto Alvim’s post on Facebook. 21th June 2019.

In Rancière’s (2005) terms, we can understand that the redistribution that was being organized from that moment and on sought to exclude from the artists identified to the progressivism the possibility of take part in the common.

The director pleaded for a “counter-war” against that art, once the Brazilian artistic class of the last 20 years, in Alvim’s understanding (Fig. 3), had been perpetuating its own war, hegemonically controlling the culture field, as he claimed in another Facebook post, from the 22nd June 2019, and imposing the “ideological dogmas of the cultural Marxism”.

However, a miscalculation impeded him to realize his project: in a moment of power delirium (TIBURI, 2019), already as the head of the Culture secretariat, in 16th January 2020 the director abuses of a political aestheticization procedure and mimetites a speech that Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister of the Hitler government, made in 1933 to a group of German theatre directors. In the video published to promote an Arts National Prize, Alvim says:

The Brazilian art of the next decade will be heroic and will be national. It will be endowed of great emotional involvement capacity, and it will be equally imperative, once it will be profoundly bounded to the urgent aspirations of our people. Or it will be nothing.⁴

The emulation of the Goebbels' speech gets evident when we compare it to the excerpt:

The German art of the next decade will be heroic, will be strongly romantic, will be objective and free of sentimentalism, with great pathos and equally imperative and binding, or it will be nothing. (BARROS, 2020)



Figure 4 Goebbels in the left; Alvim in the right. By Folha de São Paulo (<https://bitlybr.com/vADhH>).

However, in the video we can notice that the mimesis goes beyond the speech, bringing other signs to the audiovisual composition. In a journalistic report to the Zero Hora newsletter, Carlos André Moreira (2020) lists: the way Alvim pronounces the speech, almost without blinking, "eye in the eye" to the spectator, as well as the almost absence of gesture, would have the intention to make his speech not to seem rhetorical; the simple scenario, seeking to sell the government as an impersonal and efficient one; the photograph of the president in the back, referring to the image of a great leader; the cross with two arms, a possible reference to the Jesuitic Missions' cross or to the Caravaca's cross; and, last but not least, the Wagnerian opera *Lohengrin* played in the background.

The reference to the opera matters because its author, the romantic composer Richard Wagner, was one of the greatest idols of Adolf Hitler. The nationalism and antisemitism of Wagner, declared, for example, in pamphlets as the one entitled "The Judaism in the music", from 1850, in which he signs up, under

⁴ Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAAZ7Q49VUE>. Last access: 04/02/2020.

pseudonym, his despise to the musical production of the Jewish artists of his time (RIBEIRO, 2013), would be one of the reasons why Hitler admired him. The choice of this specific work appears even more significant when we realize in *My fight*, the autobiography written by the German dictator, that the experience of watching Lohengrin, at the age of 12, was a watershed in his life. The argument that Alvim gave, that the similarity to the Goebbels' speech was due to simple "rhetorical coincidence" (BARROS, 2020), seemed unsubstantiated.

As Tiburi (2018, p. 19) recalls, "the Fascist waves come with an aesthetic weight, with a publicity distortion that imposes itself", the "manipulatory use and abuse of the image in Nazi Germany" being exemplary in that sense. The documentary *The Architecture of Doom* (Peter Cohen, 1992) presents this weight well, revealing how the adherence of the mass to the political project of the National Socialist German Workers' Party came primordially from the aesthetical control of the population, to which the advertising campaigns directed by Goebbels were essential. A good example of that is *The Eternal Jew*, movie which, according to Cohen's documentary, marks the campaign against the Jewish people. Premiered in 1940 in one of the biggest movie theatres of Berlin, the film, that had been shot in the Polish ghettos after that country was invaded, compared the Jewish to rats that spread destruction, disseminating diseases that would bring profit to themselves.

The so claimed Jewish degradation would extend, under Wagnerian influence, to the field of the Arts: according to the movie, the artistic expressions of the Modernist *avant-garde*, presented by the Jewish Art theoreticians as "sublime artistic revelations", would in fact exhale the "stink of the rottenness and the disease", bringing grotesque, pervert and pathological aspects more compatible to the Jewish community. In that sense, the Jewish people representation by the Nazi propaganda opposed them necessarily to the Arian ideal worshiped by Hitler in his eugenicist project. The obsession to the hygiene that was part of it made the representation of those individuals as rats have, as an aesthetic effect, in the level of the sensation and the feelings, the disgust, the abjection – which can quickly be translated into a population control biopolitical project (FOUCAULT, 1999).

But the aesthetic manipulation in favor to a given political project implies the presence of what Tiburi (2018, p. 165) called the "aesthetically correctness", in other words, the "conservation of the appearance as [...] a strength that keeps the domination conditions". In the "political ridiculous" ethics, in effect in the current political culture, the aesthetic would do the role of "cover ethics and politics that, if known by the community, would be harmful to its own conservation" (2018, p. 140). Alvim crossed the boundaries of the aesthetically correctness. Besides the fact that he was dismissed of his job as Culture secretary the next morning after the video went online, the project that had been designed to the national culture went on with the next secretary, the actress Regina Duarte, who assumed the job on March 4th.

In an interview to the *Fantástico*⁵ show, when asked by the journalist Ernesto Paglia about how the Culture Secretariat could work in the face of a "conservative movement that would be trying to curb some artistic expression forms", the so

⁵ Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck7uC9yVy3A>. Last access:

04/11/2020.

secretary just affirmed that “everyone is free to express themselves, as long as they look for investors in the civil society”, once “the public funds must be used according to some directives [...], considering that this is what the people that elect this government expects from it”, and not to “please a minority”.

In other words, concerning to public policies, in this redistribution of the sensible, there is a group that would take part of the public funds while to the other group would be dealing with the premises of the minimal neoliberal State. The space, time and activity criteria that, according to Rancière’s (2005) analysis, separate the individuals and define either they are, or they are not competent to the common, in this context these are separating the artists not simply because of their activity as artists - category that, in Plato’s *Republic*, for example, would not even take a part in the common -, but because of one’s political-ideological position.

2. The Culture workers: a class adrift

In a country historically deficient in the field of cultural public policies such as ours, the restraint of the ones who can be contemplated by funding public notices and other means related makes this working field – let us not forget that the Culture also implies jobs – even more hostile.

A proof of that is the laudable, in its resistance strength and, at the same time, precarious action launched by PAVIO, the recent created Northeast Theatre Workers Organized Movement. The action, the I Theatre of the Brazil Festival, is presented by the organization itself as a political/artistic one, with the “initial goal of demarcate the fight against the censorship, the criminalization of the artists and the federal government break down on the Brazilian culture.”⁶ Ambitious in its tittle, however, the action consists simply in a kind of national network that would publicize plays that were already happening between March 19th-29th (then postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemics) “in any place of the country”. The group or the artist that had interest in “join the festival”, taking part of its agenda, should just subscribe, add the festival logo in the advertising material e read to the audience, before, during or after the play, the Manifest⁷ written by the organization against the government actions to the Culture.

Without meaning to discourage the resistance initiatives to the current Culture break down in the country, our goal is to demonstrate, with this example, the drift to which the artists are left at in anti-democratic projects such as those that are going on not only in the Culture, but in many other sectors in Brazil. One of the Rouanet Law’s main problems – Law that, even with the set exposed, is still the major cultural policy in nowadays Brazil – is the fact that, although working throw tax incentive, the adhering companies use to prefer to fund works that tend to give their mark other kind of benefit, the most common being the promotion. Because of that, they prioritize well-known artists, whose career is already consolidated and that have great reach of audience.

⁶ Text founded in the application form available in: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfpZGOIS5DCJ3UMg5XqRRWhDMhtyIMgncNnPatG2YOdmNK_-g/viewform. Last access: 04/12/2020.

⁷ Check on page 2 of the form mentioned above.

If this is it, what civil society sectors would be willing to finance, as Regina Duarte suggested, a performance like *DNA de Dan*, by the artist Maikon K, or *La Bête*, by Wagner Schwartz, or the play *O evangelho Segundo Jesus, rainha do céu*, directed by Natalia Mallo and performed by the trans actress Renata Carvalho? What private spaces would be willing to show expositions such as *Queermuseu – cartografias da diferença na arte brasileira*?

We mentioned here specifically four of many works that, at least since 2016, were and have been target not of a curatorship, as Alvim told in the occasion mentioned above, but of an institutional censorship and of a violent offensive by part of the civil society. As observed by Francini Pontes and Elton Siqueira (2019), all those cases reveal that the aesthetic and political potency of these works have come up against the once colonial State characteristic conservatism. On that basis, the society hegemonic structures are guided by bourgeois, Christian and patriarchal values, that constitutes its moral, in Deleuze's (2010) words, a group of coercitive rules that consist in judging actions and intentions by transcendent values: right and wrong, good and bad etc.



Figure 5 Renata Carvalho in *O evangelho segundo Jesus, rainha do céu*. By the play's page on Facebook (<https://cutt.ly/5tZj3f4>).

That way, considering that in the Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" the image is the great capital (TIBURI, 2018), what companies with enough capital to fund such projects would have interest in associate their images to the topics raised by those works? As an example, let us recall that was precisely that the argument that the Caixa Econômica gave to cancel the contract with the theatre group Clowns de Shakespeare during Abrazo's season in Recife city, at the end of last year. According to an official note posted by the group⁸, the Caixa claimed that they had broken a clause of the contract that obligated them to "look after the good image of the sponsors, not making public references with pejorative aspect", which would

⁸ Check on the link: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2UwTxhFLaH/?igshid=ow9koon0sofl>. Last access: 10/29/2020.

have happened in the talk that took place after the first presentation of the work.

3. The censorship and its reverse aesthetic effect – as a conclusion

The aesthetic control of what can and what cannot show up – in other words, what enters and what have to be put outside of the visibility and sayability hegemonic regimes – constitute just a layer of the biopolitical control, one “that [define] the place of the bodies and the place of life itself”. Under the elite yoke, “the others succumb as they were born in a wrong shape, as their hole being and its appearance were freaks.” (TIBURI, 2018, p. 19). In that sense, in an article about politics and subjectivity matters, José da Costa (2008) stands that, in arts, the decisively political is now the enquiry on the biopower machinery in order to produce subjectivities and identities beyond those instituted by the hegemonic structures – curiously, what Alvim (2012) himself used to defend in his dramatics. It is setting up procedures that can stablish disputes on the visibility and sayability hegemonic regimes and that indicate a way out of the submission to any moral determination.

It is interesting to observe and highlight that the attempts of making invisible – let us recall once again Rancière’s (2005) idea of visibility and sayability regimes – the works mentioned above have had a reverse effect: the Marvel’s comic book collected from the Rio Bienal was sold out in less than an hour; the actress Renata Carvalho became a national renown after the polemic around the play that brought up the figure of a transgender Jesus, attracting a numerous audience where she went by; the Caixa Econômica censorship to the Clowns de Shakespeare provoked the protest of Recife’s cultural movements, with the adherence of social movements and the civil society. With that support, they got to present the play in the Apolo Theatre, where, after the protest organized, they made a free presentation of *Abrazo*. So we have seen the censorship provoke, as an aesthetic effect, in the sensation, the feeling level, on one hand, some conservative groups’ abjection and, on the other hand, also the desire, the interest for those works.

In similar cases, we can see the “relativization of the purely structural (syntactic) or aesthetic (in the sense of what is taken as beautiful or sublime) value” of the works in benefit of the subjectivities and non-hegemonic ways of life production (COSTA, 2008, p. 1). According to Pontes and Siqueira (2019, p. 19), the worry shifts from what is said or done artistically to the way of life that those actions imply and its micro and macropolitical consequences. It is important, though, even in adverse conditions, to keep working and co-creating spaces in which non-hegemonic ethics and politics can be seen and heard, tensioning the current redistribution mode of the common and its regimes, putting on light what, in this context, is excluded from the aesthetic economy dictated by the elite (TIBURI, 2018).

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