

# Approching the realism of Sérgio Ferro and Flávio Império

*Notas sobre o realismo de Sérgio Ferro e Flávio Império*

Felipe Araujo Contier\*, Lívia Loureiro Garcia\*\*

\*PhD in architecture. Professor of Theory and History of Architecture at Mackenzie Presbyterian University in Sao Paulo. He organized the book "A his-tória da arquitetura vista do canteiro" (GFAU, 2010), felipe.contier@mackenzie.br

\*\*Master degree in Visual Arts. She is a set designer, researcher of Brazilian set design and teaches scenography in open courses aimed at revealing the design and space creation process, livialou@hotmail.com

usjt  
arq.urb

número 29 | set - dez de 2020

Recebido: 06/01/2020

Aceito: 07/04/2020

<https://doi.org/10.37916/arq.urb.vi29.492>



---

**Keywords:**

Scenography,  
Brutalist architecture,  
Visual arts.

**Palavras-chave:**

Cenografia,  
Arquitetura brutalista,  
Artes plásticas.

**Abstract**

This text seeks to approach Brazilian realism in the 60's by looking at the thought and work of Sérgio Ferro and Flávio Império. After a general analysis of realism in visual arts, we examine how the intellectual orientation of Flávio Império's set design practice at Arena Theatre company and the critical debate on architecture led by Sérgio Ferro intertwine. It is possible to notice a convergence in their practice, although set in different fields, when we look at their critique of a realism that was not able to acknowledge Brazilian social reality.

**Resumo**

Este texto pretende realizar uma aproximação ao realismo na produção de Sérgio Ferro e Flávio Império. O tema foi abordado através de uma análise geral do conceito, entrelaçando as reflexões dos arquitetos pintores nos anos de 1960, algumas cenografias de Flávio Império para o Teatro de Arena, e o debate crítico sobre arquitetura. Apesar das diferenças entre cada um dos campos, é possível notar uma convergência em torno da cultura artística realista que os autores criticaram em reconhecimento à realidade social brasileira.

## Visual Arts

A few concepts in Art History were so extensively used, disputed and transformed by artists, critics and historians as Realism. It happens the more so if regional, chronological and artistic variants are considered: poetic, epic, fantastic, socialist, psychological, *neo*, new and *nouveau* realism.

Approaching realism as an artistic tradition composed by plural and contradictory movements engaged in the political commitments of their time is fundamental to understand the Brazilian reception of the new realism of the second half of the '50s and its impact on the group Arquitetura Nova.

Flávio Império and Sérgio Ferro graduated in the 50's, in close contact with the international artistic culture, which was quite up to date in São Paulo. In 1956, Flávio was admitted at University of Sao Paulo school of architecture (FAU-USP) and took the drawing course of the Sao Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) Handcrafts School. In the same year, he started working with theatre in the Community Cristo Operário, and in the following years he got closer to the Arena Theatre company. Sérgio was encouraged to paint by Pietro Maria Bardi while still a sophomore student, and as soon as he graduated as an architect, in 1962, he became Flávio Motta's assistant professor at USP and also assisted Ciccilo Matarazzo in organizing São Paulo Biennials.

The architects painted in line with the international artistic production, experimenting in an eclectic way the informalism, the tachisme or the pop art of that moment, represented in the São Paulo Biennials, but insisting in political themes lacking in foreign pieces.

In 1965, Ferro and Império took part in the collective exhibition "Propostas 65", set out to debate "aspects of the current realism in Brazil"<sup>1</sup>, in an initiative equivalent to the "Opinião 65", carried out at MAM, in Rio de Janeiro. In the following years, Ferro published texts about visual arts, such as "Pintura Nova" [New Painting] (1965), "Alberto Burri" (1966a), "A nova pintura e os símbolos" [The New Painting

and the Symbols] (1966b), "Ambiguidade da pop art: o buffalo II de Rauschenberg" [Pop Art Ambiguity: Rauschenberg's Buffalo II] (1967a), "Os limites da denúncia" [The Limits of Denunciation] (1967b) and "Enquanto os homens corajosos morrem" [While Brave men Die] (1968)<sup>2</sup>; Império wrote "A pintura nova tem a cara do cotidiano" [New Painting Has the Face of the Everyday Life] (c.1965), among other several texts published in spectacles programmes, whose scenography and costumes he created.

If the formal repertoire of this new generation was both eclectic and international, regarding themes, at the beginning of the '60s the Brazilian artists prioritized national and social matters drawn from Brazilian history and literature, as seen in music and cinema – the most popular manifestations of this artistic culture: *Vidas secas*, *Morte e vida Severina*, *Macunaíma*, *Canudos* and *Lampião*, Hans Staden and the Tupinambás, *Ganga Zumba*, *Zumbi* and *Tiradentes*, *Afrosambas* and "favelas". These historical themes were used as a malleable raw material, resonant of the country's political and economic conjuncture. And, as these works of art became popular, cross references among them allowed for a broadened reach as they acquired new meanings; it created semantic displacements and subtexts that the attentive public would not fail to notice. This artistic context raised the standards of critique in Brazilian artistic culture, which in turn became more political, focusing on daily life, empiricism, vernacular knowledge and documentation of reality.

## Theatre

On a notebook<sup>3</sup>, Flávio Império left the following comments about "the fourth wall" of the Italian stage:

The theatre accommodated between four walls seeks empathy by extreme resemblance, by the simulacrum of the dramatic fiction, by identification to situations lived by the characters in the weaving of the drama. This urge to reconstruct the written drama in the fictional found in the magic box of the so-called "Italian theatre" its elements of language and there it embedded itself comfortably for

<sup>1</sup> Expression used in the subtitle of the catalog Propostas 65 exhibition. According to an statement of Sérgio Ferro to the authors, the exhibition was organized in the architects' office, with the participation of Waldemar Cordeiro, Lina Bardi and Mário Schenberg, and held at FAAP, where Ferro and Império had been hired as teachers of the fine arts course

<sup>2</sup> As the final work of a semiology course with Umberto Eco, held at Mackenzie in 1966, Ferro would have drawn a comparison between the realism of Honoré Daumier and the naturalism of Gustave Courbet, based entirely on the theory of the novel by György Lukács. (FERRO, 2011, p.114)

<sup>3</sup> Flávio Império's notebooks were digitized and transcribed and are in the artist's collection at the Institute of Brazilian Studies (IEB-USP).

more than four centuries, not only regarding the demands of the spectacle but the ones from the audience as well, so much so that it ended up combining its own definition of theatre with this Italian arrangement of the stage, misapprehending a specific form of manifestation with the theatrical phenomena itself. Officially acknowledged as the “most refined cultural manifestation” (IMPÉRIO, Notebook 5.5).

According to the author, the Italian stage theatre preserves the shapes and signs of a “mummified” culture, officially protected, that lost its vitality and turned into an allegory for power. The theatre “black box” reaches the highest degree of realism, deluding and comforting the audience.

In São Paulo, the Brazilian Comedy Theatre (TBC), created in 1948 by the industrialist Franco Zampari, had a huge influence in forming a bourgeoisie culture in Sao Paulo and Brazil. The TBC brought a new perspective to the Brazilian theatre, with a solid infrastructure to create and manufacture scenarios, costumes and all the necessary premises to maintain two casts and two plays simultaneously. Working as if it were an industry, it was aimed at flattering an audience that was eager to see itself represented in the social patterns of a sophisticated lifestyle . It was a theatre whose formal artificiality and pageantry provided ideologically for a bourgeois imaginary (MAGALDI; VARGAS, 2001).

Despite Flávio Império’s familiarity with the theatrical stage codes of Italian tradition, his greatest contribution to TBC happened along with a series of dissonant reactions; among them, the one of a group of artists who searched for a theatre that reflected upon the problems of contemporary Brazilian society. In that regard, in the ‘60s, the Arena Theatre company and Oficina Theatre company stood out, both of them places where Flávio Império worked in many opportunities as a set and costume designer.

The Arena Theatre company was created by a group of students at the Dramatic Arts School (EAD), in 1953, directed by José Renato. At that time, there was a search for a theatrical approach different from TBC’s international language (IMPÉRIO, 1985). Theater-makers wished for a popular approach, one that would go find the audience wherever it was; one capable of more economical production. In any case, initially the formal and spatial innovations of Arena did not stem from the political and ideological positioning that became visible in the latter performances, one linked to criticism of Brazilian society, to social class divisions or with

a Marxist approach (MOSTAÇO, 2016, p. 29).

If, on the one hand, the opening of Arena headquarters at Teodoro Baima Street, in 1954, entailed a retreat from the previous company’s realist plays aimed at reaching a wider audience, on another hand, it allowed the premises to be used for several artistic activities, as well as for the development of a scenic outlook of that space. When members, some still amateurs, of Teatro Paulista do Estudante [Paulista Student Theatre] (TPE) joined the established staff of Arena in 1956, it triggered a change in the group’s emphasis, adding “a new critical thinking about the meaning of the political reality, in which people were living in” and about “the need to change reality, to seek a leftist political instance, participation, activism” (PEIXOTO, 2004). Augusto Boal’s arrival, in the same year, contributed with the search for a Brazilian theatre, both political and popular. In “Ratos e Homens” [Rats and Men] (1956), a play by John Steinbeck, Boal had already applied the selective realism concept:

the essential details give the idea of the whole. The performance, all of it, is characterized by absolute austerity, intentional and necessary. [...] In arena amphitheatres, maybe more than in stages with proscenium, human relations are of most importance. What matters the most is the essence of each scene, the meaning of things being said rather than the way they are said. And this results in austerity, in simplicity, as long as we can understand that simplicity does not mean the same as poverty. (BOAL, 1956)

It is possible to perceive a conceptual similarity between Boal and Bertold Brecht, even though it does not happen formally in the set design. Fernando Peixoto clarifies the set design approach defended by Brecht:

A selective realism: the reproduction of a site that offers elements to understand human relationships, emphasizing those which, in spite of existing in reality, are not immediately perceived . The set designer has the responsibility to reveal this truth. He must suggest it. Under the condition that these suggestions present a historical or social interest higher than what the real environment offers. (PEIXOTO, 1974, p. 336)

The group’s aesthetic choices demonstrate the option for a certain “realism”, sometimes considered socialist, other times critical or photographic, revealing a kaleidoscope of ideological, political and partisan beliefs held by the constituents of the group (MOSTAÇO, 2016). If the Arena arrangement forced the creation of a new

language, whereby it was impossible to escape realism (MIGLIACCIO, 2004), it also made possible the presence of students, of amateurs, of people that would hardly have the chance of being on stage, creating artistically. In their practice, there were the seeds of another pedagogy, aimed at making the process didactic and demythologizing the artistic technique.

At this time, Flávio Império, still a student at FAU-USP, was having his first theatrical experience at the Comunidade Cristo Operário company, working with the labourers of a furniture collective-factory called Unilabor. The theatre group built a platform, where they made presentations in non-conventional places, such as gyms and clubhouses, in a spatial set up close to the Arena Theatre's original design. However, the most important aspect of this experience for Império's later works at Arena was the direct conviviality with the population that would be represented at Arena:

This period was one of the richest ones of my life because it allowed for an interaction quite affective and intimate with certain groups of the population which I would come to find only later, in bus stop lines, in bars, but without any possibility of a deeper conviviality, as fellow humans. Restricted only to the sociability of my own social class, I became a member of Arena Theatre's group, beginning around the time that "Eles Não Usam Black-Tie" was on. I challenged the almost-photographic realism of the company the whole time, which was the foundation of dramaturgy and interpretation laboratories work. (IMPÉRIO, 1975, p. 40).

"Eles não Usam Black-Tie" ["They Do Not Wear Black-Tie"] (1958), by Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, directed by José Renato, was conceived in the middle of a crisis at Arena and changed its course completely. The text with a realistic range, almost naturalistic, brought for the first time to the scene the proletarian as the main character, with his specific problems and sensitivities. Before Flávio Império, the scenery and the costume design were a junction of elements made intuitively by the members of the company. After his arrival, the scenic image gained poetic strength and became a significant element, providing a second layer of meaning to the stage performances.

Initially, for the construction of the scene visual elements, Flávio Império would use a research structure similar to the one employed in the Seminars of Dramaturgy and Interpretation (started in 1958), which sought to understand the behaviour of Brazilian people. Following an almost "anthropological" research:

The same research that was applied in literature, on the seminars of dramaturgy or in laboratories of interpretation, I tried to apply to the image in scenography, studying the Brazilian people behaviour, through visual elements, watching candomblé, Carnaval, all the popular manifestations, documenting what I had seen, as I could manage. I used to watch what the characteristics of a student of that time were, or the shopkeeper, or the workman, or the industrialist, or the banker, and it became very clear. I used to watch how the politicians or the common people would dress in everyday life. I developed an anthropological work, bringing the image that we had of our own society to the theatre. It may have been the first time that it was done in a systematic way. (IMPÉRIO, 1985).



**Figure 1:** "Gente como a gente", by Roberto Freire. Direction: Augusto Boal. On the photograph: Flávio Migliaccio (Wilson) and Riva Nimitz (Jandira), 1959. Flávio Império's Archives, IEB USP. Available on Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos CD-Rom.

In 1959, Império worked on the graphic composition of "Chapetuba Futebol Clube" [Chapetuba Soccer Club], by Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, and on the scenic devices of

“Gente como a Gente” [People Like Us], by Roberto Freire. “Gente como a Gente” (Figure 1) presents, according to Boal (1959), “a catholic vision of a social problem”, it brought back to the stage the protagonism of regular workers such as railway labourers and switchboard operators. Despite the internal controversies regarding the making of the play (FREIRE, 2004) and its short-lived trajectory, we can see the construction of an image, starting from the rationalization of the arena. Flávio Império created five modulated scenarios: “Everything was square, straight, up to the nails of the train railway; they were either cubes or parallelepipeds” (BOAL, 2004). With the lighting design, Ziembski contributed to the creation of a succession of frames which focused only the characters in action. With a few resources, these scenic instruments guided the formal contents in a direct and synthetic manner, embedding them into the realism of the stage performance.

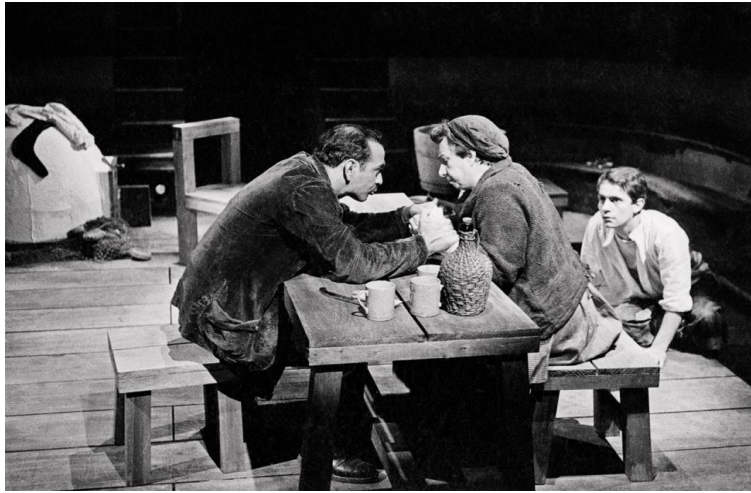
In 1961, “Pintado de Alegre” [“Painted of Joy”] (Figura 2), by Flávio Migliaccio, followed an empiric creative direction, driven by the text, in which the scenic elements were deployed according to the characters internal necessities, employing second hand and time worn elements, distancing from the clean and new: “a crutch adapted to the bed without its foot, the flower covers the patch” (IMPÉRIO, 1961). Flávio Império’s set up accompanied Boal’s direction. An “impressionist realism”, as the set designer classified it, who fragmented colors and highlighted details on the first plan (IMPÉRIO, 1961), in the quest for an atmosphere that brought popular urban life manifestations into the scene, not for its “folklore elements”, but for its “expressive reality”.



**Figure 2:** Pintado de Alegre, by Flávio Migliaccio. Direction: Augusto Boal. Rehearsal with Flávio Migliaccio, Milton Gonçalves, Angelo Del Matto and Altamiro Martins, 1961. Photograph by Benedito Lima de Toledo. Personal Archive. Available on <http://flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/509981/509999>

Even though at that moment Arena was quite concentrated on producing a national dramaturgy, the group did not abandon international texts. “Os Fuzis da Mãe Carrar” [Mother Carrar’s Rifles] (1962), directed by José Renato, is a dramatic play by Bertold Brecht about the impacts of bombings in Guernica. The play takes place for a specific time: the time necessary to bake a loaf of bread with the last package of flour left for Mrs. Carrar. The play is set in the houses of poor fishermen, where Mrs. Carrar and her two sons live. The text questions the notion of neutrality, the message is clear and didactical: in a situation of oppression, keeping neutrality is the same as walking with the oppressor. Flávio Império’s scenography brings the basic elements to the representation. In the scenography, there is no overlaying of elements as in “Pintado de Alegre”, but a synthetic rationality: Brecht’s selective realism. With only minimum and necessary objects, used in order to narrate the dramatic situation truthfully: the oven, the table and the benches forming a cross, a bottle, socks hung to dry over the oven, a fishing net (Figure 3). The scenario does neither delude the audience nor romanticize the characters.





**Figure 3.** “Os Fuzis da Mãe Carrar”, by Bertolt Brecht. Direction: José Renato. Rehearsal with Lima Duarte, Dina Lisboa and Paulo José. Photography by Benedito Lima de Toledo, 1962. Source: Flávio Império’s Archive - IEB USP. Available on <http://flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/507118/507132>

Capturing the reality helped the synthesis and accuracy of the scenic image, creating a theatrical and poetical response lived on the stage. Flávio “used to gather a bunch of photos, newspaper clippings, magazines, all apparently lacking any immediate relationship to each other[...] piece of fabric, photograph, object”. (FERRO, 2012).

“O Melhor Juiz, o Rei” [The Best Judge, the King] (1963), by Lope de Vega, belongs to a series of productions that, at Arena, was named “Nacionalização dos Clássicos” [Nationalization of Classics]. When putting the play together, the group performed an adaptation of the Spanish text, which takes place originally in the XVII century. The changes in the text aimed at echoing Brazilian circumstances. In order to so, the third act of the play, which is about a peasant that sues a nobleman, was altered. In the end, another peasant, friend of the suing part, came in dressed up as a king, to the benefit of his partner, delivering justice. If Lucrecia, the bride represented the power in “Lope de Vega”, in the adaptation, she enacted issues of land and agrarian reform.

In the spectacle program the choices for the space visual conception were clearly stated. Flávio Império (1963) affirmed that architecture, theatre and visual arts differed in regards of space, time and “mainly of mode and price of production” of production. So much so that the artist must submit to the “real possibilities of the ‘historic instant’ (IMPÉRIO, 1963). For him, the artist should always search for coherence with his own time and with the real possibilities of an underdeveloped country.

Flávio Império notices that the fact that they could not “count with good artisans” allowed for liberation on the one hand, while, on the other, it was a constraint as the country was not fully industrially developed, and most of the production was handcrafted or manufactured: “Finished goods offer a scarce opportunity for design training and their shortage and lack of quality are taken as an absolute limitation [...]” (IMPÉRIO, 1963). In TBC there was a team of craftsmen – sewers, carpenters, among others – ready and capable of executing any kind of project, but that kind of production was opposite to the impulses of Arena. Império explained that, in order to produce a scenic image, if in the theatrical language the object was employed by its “trait”, by its symbol, by whatever that distinguished it, using ready made objects in the scenic visual image would be efficient. But the lack of quality in ready made objects and of good artisans turned efficiency into challenge. The artist continued elaborating his choices:

If we take any object, made for a specific objective, and join another one to it, the result of this union is not necessarily a sum. Often, and this is one of those cases, the result is a third object. As in the scenic image it is always possible to control the whole and the parts, the object can have an entirely different meaning if isolated or as part of a composition.

Therefore, we can try to place the term ‘creation’ as something less esoteric and unexplainable, making it simpler, with a more straightforward sense of organization, ordination, systematization, a way of planning. (IMPÉRIO, 1963).

By the text, a process extensively used by Império becomes explicit. A process also explored in the visual arts since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the use of ready made and non-conventional objects. Besides creating scenic meanings, it carries the idea of dismissing the traditional artistic aura. The artist considers the handcrafts and the manufactured goods in a historical space and time, not abstracting or generalizing the handcraft production (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** “O Melhor Juiz, o Rei”, by Lope de Vega. Adaptation: Augusto Boal Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, Paulo José. Direction: Augusto Boal. Rehearsal with Gianfrancesco Guarnieri (Pelaio), Alexandre Radová (male peasant), Dina Sfat (female peasant), Arnaldo Weiss (executioner), Abrahão Farc (D. Nunho), João José Pompeo (D. Tello), Isabel Ribeiro (Feliciano), Carlos Maurício Ferreira Lopes (soldier), Juca de Oliveira (Sancho) e Joana Fomm (Elvira). Multimeios Archive/ IDART – 1963. Available on “Arena conta Arena 50 anos” CD-ROM.

These ideas can be illustrated with a costume: to compose the characters, Flávio Império used ready elements, such as a rubber boot, acoustic felt, cotton and tow fabric, painted lace, overlaying these elements in such a way that they could be understood as a 17<sup>th</sup> century garment, giving the idea of a “theatrical theatre” (Figure 5). The theatrical would be not only an effect of distancing but an appeal to the spectator’s capacity of accepting and appreciating an artistic truth” (LIMA, 1997).



**Figura 5.** “O Melhor Juiz, o Rei”, de Lope de Vega. Adaptation: Augusto Boal Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, Paulo José. Direction: Augusto Boal. Costume design by Flávio Império. India ink on paper. Flávio Império’s Archive - IEB USP. Available at <http://flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/507437/507520>

After the military coup, the political left made an effort to suppress its internal controversies, gathering their strengths against fascism. Theatre companies soon mobilized to create an artistic “model” of political resistance. After the destruction of the Center of Popular Culture (CPC) in 1964, some of their members joined to form a protest art group called “Opinião”. These spectacles acted as rituals, as described by Mostaçõ (2016), whereby internal mythology was transmitted to the audience in specific and implied codes. There was an identification between actors and spectators, in which both represent the people, according to Brazilian Communist Party’s (PCB) ideology of a national-popular art. While Boal directed “Opinião” [Opinion] in Rio de Janeiro, Guarnieri brought Arena’s cast together to create a spectacle with the same patterns of the “carioca” (related to Rio de Janeiro) group, but based on a more consistent dramatic situation: the “Arena Conta Zumbi” (1965) play.

Coming back to São Paulo, Boal developed a system called “coringa” [joker], whereby actors enacted the various characters in the scene, allowing each performer to play different roles and situations. With the screening of maps and pictures, the company sought to clarify the issues dealt with by the text; if this explanatory material was lacking, the narrative would be interrupted and the gap announced; the “result was similar to an academic seminar, a dramatization made by students for classes depicted by illustrations” (MOSTAÇO, 2016, p. 104).

Arena Conta Zumbi launched the studies about the positive hero. The spectacle was the source of a deep identification between audience and actors, one in which there was a sort of closed circuit, a catharsis embraces both in a kind of protest ritual. Flávio Império was already distant from the group and creation process when Arena conta Zumbi was assembled, and he criticized the spectacle:

When I arrived, it was ready. [...] I did not take part in Zumbi. I only saw the spectacle. It was still raw, but it was completely structured. When it was over, I laughed my head off. It was the funniest thing! I said: ‘It looks like a bunch of intellectuals, on their dad’s carpet, drinking whiskey and talking about the people’. [...] I changed the theatre structure for Zumbi a little bit. I decided to cover the floor with an expensive and quite fluffy carpet, a nylon carpet, and it was bright too. Like a corny thing from a rich Turk. Because I thought everyone’s parents were rich Turks. It was a quite large red carpet, with which we covered the whole stage. It was red on purpose, to make a joke. Everybody’s clothes were garments that the petty bourgeoisie wore to go to universities: Lee jeans pants and a colored shirt. If I am not mistaken, there were seven people singing, so I decided to use the seven colors of the rainbow, and each actor got one, and the pants were white denim. Pastel, not white. There was this idea that the play took place in the living room of a bourgeois and rich family talking about the Brazilian peoples’ history. (IMPÉRIO, 1985).

At this point, it is clear that we are dealing with an epic realism that goes beyond criticizing its own performance, searching for an identification by speaking to the audience, not about it. The costumes and the setting were like mirrors for the audience. This contributed to the identification process while bringing an epic tone to the stage performance (Figura 6).



**Figure 6.** “Arena conta Zumbi”, by Augusto Boal and Gianfrancesco Guarnieri. Direction: Augusto Boal. On the picture: Lima Duarte, Dina Sfat, Anthero de Oliveira, Marília Medalha, Chant Dessian and Gianfrancesco Guarnieri. Photograph by Benedito Lima de Toledo, 1965. Flávio Império Archives - IEB USP. Available at <http://flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/507872/507878>

In the tiny little stage in São Paulo downtown, a project of a specific aesthetics was established, letting go of the simulacrum. A project directly articulated with social reality and the group’s political choices. The choice of an aesthetic is also an ethical one. To Amélia Hamburger, what links Arena to Flávio Império’s work is the “continuous usage of intuition, of experimenting, of critical analysis; feeling like the Brazilian people, having an anthropological interpretation of the people’s expressions; being always unravelling and rejecting the authoritarianism in the relationships among individuals and between the individual and the collective”. (HAMBURGER, 2004, p. 2)

The “austerity” of the scenic image and the creation of a scenography specific to the Arena company is linked to Flávio Império’s work. The workmanship, combined with the materials that were most available, most ordinary, made the “understanding of things” (VARGAS, 1997, p.59) easier. It reveals features of the unfinished, informal, including and appealing to the audience to complete, with their imagination, the staging spaces. By so doing they could achieve a synthesis of the image, quite necessary to the arena spatial configuration. It creates strongly engaging



scenic atmospheres, which interact with the Brazilian social context, aiming at a sense of expression detached from the European one, critical of the economic developmentalism adopted by the military government.

### **Architecture**

In the second half of the '50s, international criticism to the formalist carelessness of the modern Brazilian architecture (BILL, 1953), to the absence of urban planning and predominance of real estate speculation (ARGAN, 1954), to the irrational rapidity on finding its own expression (GIEDION, 1956) all started echoing among young architects, who began questioning the artificiality of adopting the architectonic modernism and its unsuitability to the Brazilian context.

This criticism made by renowned experts who identified with the international Modernism was largely ignored by the previous generation. Vilanova Artigas defended Oscar Niemeyer of such criticism, recalling a negative Brazilian experience with the cosmopolitan and anti-popular character of functionalism (ARTIGAS, 1953). And even after having had, in 1952 and 1953, direct contact with the neo-classicism that was being employed by the USSR government, he insisted that the socialist realism recognized in Niemeyer's iconic modernism "the right position, the materialist position" regarding Brazilian people's aspirations (ARTIGAS, 1954).

On the other hand, in a conference in 1954, translated into Portuguese and issued by the magazine *Fundamentos*<sup>4</sup> in 1955, the leader of the Soviet Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, criticized the soviet architecture, declaring that the socialist realism should engage more with the economic dynamics and material necessities of the population rather than with its appearance. Khrushchev proposed to the architects that they would formulate a new poetics based on Russia's own constructive elements, seeking for a productive transformation towards industrialization (KRUSHCHEV, 1955).

It was only after Khrushchev's statement about the lack of realism itself in socialist realism that the architects of the Brazilian Communist Party reviewed their positions. Niemeyer and Artigas were the most emblematic architects to do so. Niemeyer's "testimony" (1958) and Artigas' support towards him (1958) played a big

part in this movement. But it is mostly in their projectual practice that we can observe this realistic turn. While Niemeyer declared that he was, since Brasília, committed to synthetic forms more adhering to the structure, restraining from multiple solutions in only one project, Vilanova Artigas reconciled himself with his Wrightian past and the morality of "material truth", exploring plastically the exposed concrete with his buildings.

The exposed concrete and the increasing dramatic configuration of structures – concentration of loads in a few supports, big cantilevers, muscled structures, exposed ribbed slabs, and so on – belong obviously to the celebrated and internationally widespread architectonic arsenal of the late '50s, quite identified with Le Corbusier's after-war work. This new architectural realism gathered many followers worldwide and elicited the most diverse and sometimes conflicting intellectual appropriation. Especially in the Brazilian context, even more in São Paulo, Joaquim Guedes was one of the first to embrace it, and the predominant explanation for its use was the economy, the common good and its relevance to the Brazilian historical and social reality.

Artigas quickly let go of his once decorative use of reinforced concrete, visible on the façade of Olga Baeta's house, built in 1956 (figure 7), for an emphasis on structural elements in schools, houses and social clubs in the following years: diagonal lines corresponding to the horizontal loads, continuity of the system foundation-pillar-gable-roof, mobile joints, thinning the edges of slabs and designing multifunctioning pillars and beams that served also to protection from sunlight, collection of rainwater and so on. In 1960, the term "brutalist" was already employed to refer to Artigas' work (ALFIERI, 1960), which converged appropriately to the continuity of a narrative started a decade before, which highlighted his severe morality, his engineer-architect rationality, his economy of language, his anti-bourgeois attitude and his realism (p. ex. BARDI, 1950).

---

<sup>4</sup>Magazine linked to the Communist Party of Brazil, edited by Editora Brasiliense.



**Figure 7.** Façade of Olga Baeta's Residence, Butantã, São Paulo. Project by João Vilanova Artigas and Carlos Cascaldi, São Paulo, 1956. Photograph: unknown author. FAU-USP Library Archives.



**Figure 8.** Simon Fausto's Residence, Ubatuba. Project by Flávio Império, 1961. Photograph: Benedito Lima de Toledo. Flávio Império Archives - IEB USP. Available at <http://www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/505589/509929>

Although Artigas became one of the most important names of Brazilian architecture in the 60's, this does not mean his work was an isolated or exceptional phenomena. Quite the opposite. His individual prominence was sustained by an ensemble of architects, and among them many of his students and teaching colleagues – Flávio Império, Sérgio Ferro and Rodrigo Lefèvre included –, whose projects sought for more objectivity on the one hand, and the consolidation of a new language on the other. (Figure 8).

This first brutalism, which prioritized didacticism, constructive rationality and a formal manifestation of an economic undertaking, making no concessions to deceptive representations of an enlightened bourgeois society, was related to the realistic artistic culture of that moment and its developmentalism, with expectations of deep social reforms. Tropicalism had not yet happened, and national movies and plays commented harshly on the country's obstacles and on the poor and marginalized from modernity. Architects equally seemed to acknowledge the country's underdevelopment, its limitations concerning materials and labor, which conducted them to a programmatic convergence around low tech. These same architects engaged in the defense of the working class and the promotion of its protagonism by an urban reform and public housing agendas (BONDUKI; KOURY, 2010).

If the bourgeois single-family residences constituted most of these architects' work, where common solutions were experimented, the projects for the State Government Action Plan(1959-1963) buildings and structures promoted by the government in articulation with the São Paulo Department of the Brazilian Architects Institute (IAB/SP) with, presented an unprecedented opportunity for the new generation, one "of a rational orientation in São Paulo" to disseminate, through the State, the new aesthetic principles. Worried about the enormous collective necessities, many could build public constructions with tolls that, in theory, were apt "to organize the space of a more human era" (FERRO, 1967c). It is what Sérgio Ferro himself acknowledges, possibly, including himself among the new architects from this generation.

In this same text, however, Ferro concluded that the 1964 State coup would have revealed how illusory was the perspective of social transformation by means of aesthetic. He turns, as it is well known, to a radical criticism of this "caboclo brutalism", which betrayed precisely the architectonic realism that would justify it, becoming a compensation for a frustrating reality, whereby emerged as symptoms the arbitrariness, the empty formalism, the hermetic character – self referent and anti-popular – and the radicalization of an alleged austere ethic, unsuited for the work's straightforwardness (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Fernando Millan's Residence, Morumbi, São Paulo. Project by Paulo Mendes da Rocha, 1970. Photograph: Hugo Segawa. FAUUSP Library Archives.



**Figure 10.** State Gym and Normal School in Brotas, SP. Project by Rodrigo Lefèvre, Sérgio Ferro and Flávio Império, 1966-1967. Photograph: Rodrigo Lefèvre. FAUUSP Library Archives.

Beyond criticism, Ferro highlighted the necessity of an architecture closer to what Flávio Império built on set design and in theatre: the return to objectivity in con-

struction, diving into the understanding of its own reality, and designing symbols rather than signs<sup>5</sup>. (Figure 10)

In "A casa popular" [The popular house] (1969), his last text about architecture written in Brazil, Ferro shunned the "paulista brutalism" programmatic issues even more - which according to his point of view were restricted to a luxury market despite its social discourse - to encompass a more representative ensemble of reality, in which the self-construction was the rule and the mass market was poorly developed.

In the late '60s, the Marxist theory became even more present in Ferro's texts and guided his understanding of architecture as a part of the construction industry, which by its turn is a part of political economy. This wide and systemic understanding of the profession increased the polarization between "practitioners and architectural critics. Despite setbacks in this not always productive debate, Ferro's realism left an astonishing theoretical legacy for the scholars at FAUUSP, who became more aware of the reality faced by cities and the building industry.

### **Conclusion**

In these notes about Ferro's and Império's realism, we sought to bridge two practices in fields that the authors themselves insisted on distinguishing, even though they both worked on several different fronts. Looking at, for example, the constant comparison made by Ferro between free work on visual arts and heteronomous work in architecture. This distinction also must be made when approaching the theatre practice, in which the high hierarchic position of the architect, well positioned to control the totality, corresponds to the stage director in the 60's. The scenographer was somewhat akin to the master builder, a bridge between the stage designer and the workers-makers, whose hand disappeared in the illusionist theatre to give light to the director's concepts. At Arena Theatre, Flávio Império upgraded the set designer-maker role -which he continued to be-, to the role of participating in directing decisions, which determined the meaning of the play as the scenography appears and reveals an autonomous work that carries its own poetics.

---

<sup>5</sup>To Ferro, symbols are forms of participation, as they arise from the "apprehension of something existing, of dispersed but real content", in opposition to the sign, which would be the "arbitrary addition of a content to a form". (FERRO, 1967)

Flávio Império and Sérgio Ferro kept a critical relationship with the artistic culture in which they participated, those of the Arena's realism and of the architectonic brutalism. Their positions were set to review realism without renouncing its artistic perspectives. One thing they both criticized was the schematic and coerced didacticism, the excessive rationalization and the unreasonable economicism of certain works. They defended that the artists should keep themselves engaged in the alive and shifting cultural dynamics, therefore formally flexible and curious and opposed to stylistic arbitrariness. They should resist to a self-satisfaction assured by the success provided by the educated middle classes and overcome the mere representation of the people by allowing effective popular participation.

## References

- ALFIERI, Bruno. João Vilanova Artigas: ricerca brutalista. **Zodiac**, Milão, n. 6, 1960.
- ARGAN, Giulio Carlo. Arquitetura moderna no Brasil [1954], In: XAVIER, Alberto (org.). **Depoimentos de uma geração: arquitetura moderna brasileira**. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2003.
- ARTIGAS, João B. Vilanova. Brazilian Experience. **Arkitekten, Arkitektens Forlag**, Kopenhagen, ano 4, n. 20, maio 1953.
- ARTIGAS, João B. Vilanova. Considerações sobre arquitetura brasileira [1954]. In: **Caminhos da arquitetura**. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2004.
- ARTIGAS, João B. Vilanova. Revisão crítica de Niemeyer. **Acrópole**, São Paulo, n. 237, julho 1958.
- BARDI, Lina. Casas de Vilanova Artigas. **Habitat**, São Paulo, n. 1, out-dez 1950, Republicado em XAVIER, Alberto (org.). **Depoimentos de uma geração: arquitetura moderna brasileira**. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2003.
- BILL, Max. A nossa moderna arquitetura. **Manchete**, Rio de Janeiro, 13 de julho de 1953.
- BOAL, Augusto. Ratos e Homens. Texto no programa do espetáculo. São Paulo: Teatro de Arena, 1956. In: TEIXEIRA, Isabel (Org.). **Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos**. CD-ROM. São Paulo: Cia. Livre e Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, 2005.
- BOAL, Augusto. Gente como a gente. Texto no programa do espetáculo. São Paulo: Teatro de Arena, 1959. In: TEIXEIRA, Isabel (Org.). **Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos**. CD-ROM. São Paulo: Cia. Livre e Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, 2005.
- BOAL, Augusto. Depoimento para o Projeto Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos, ocorrido em 15 de setembro de 2004. In.: TEIXEIRA, Isabel (Org.). **Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos**. CD-ROM. São Paulo: Cia. Livre e Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, 2005.
- BONDUKI, Nabil; KOURY, Ana Paula. Das reformas de base ao BNH. As propostas do Seminário de Habitação e Reforma Urbana. **Arquitextos**, São Paulo, ano 10, n. 120.02, maio 2010. Disponível em [www.vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/arquitextos/10.120/3432](http://www.vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/arquitextos/10.120/3432).
- FERRO, Sérgio. Pintura Nova. Publicado no catálogo da exposição **Propostas 65**. São Paulo: Fundação Armando Álvares penteado, 1965.
- FERRO, Sérgio. Alberto Burri. **O arquiteto**. São Paulo, n. 1, jan. 1966a.
- FERRO, Sérgio. A nova pintura e os símbolos. **O arquiteto**. São Paulo, n. 2, mar. 1966b.
- FERRO, Sérgio. Ambiguidade da pop art: o buffalo II de Rauschenberg. **Galeria de Arte Moderna**, n. 3, 1967a.
- FERRO, Sérgio. Os limites da denúncia. **Rex Time**, São Paulo, n. 4, 1967b
- FERRO, Sérgio. Arquitetura Nova. **Teoria e prática**, São Paulo, n. 1, 1967c.
- FERRO, Sérgio. Enquanto os homens corajosos morrem. **aParte**, São Paulo, TUSP, n. 1, 1968.
- FERRO, Sérgio. A casa popular (1969). Republicado como "A produção da casa no Brasil". In: Arquitetura e trabalho livre. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2006.
- FERRO, Sérgio. Entrevista publicada em CONTIER, Felipe. História da Arquitetura e projeto da história. **Desígnio**, São Paulo, Annablume, n.11/12, p. 113-126, mar. 2011.



FERRO, Sérgio. Entrevista publicada em GUIMARAES, Andreas; CONTIER, Felipe; LOUREIRO, Livia. "Flávio Império e as múltiplas facetas de um projeto brasileiro" **Entrevista**, São Paulo, ano 13, n. 051.01, jul. 2012. Disponível em [www.vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/entrevista/11.051/4405](http://www.vitruvius.com.br/revistas/read/entrevista/11.051/4405).

FREIRE, Roberto. Entrevista para o Projeto Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos, ocorrido em 14 de outubro de 2004. In: TEIXEIRA, Isabel (Org.). **Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos**. CD-ROM. São Paulo: Cia. Livre e Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, 2005.

GIEDION, Sigfried. Prefácio [1956], In: MINDLIN, Henrique. **Arquitetura moderna no Brasil**. Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 1999.

HAMBURGER, Amélia Império. A cenografia do Arena - Flávio Império. Palestra para o Projeto Arena conta Arena 50 Anos. Transcrição da palestra ocorrida em 31 de agosto de 2004. In: TEIXEIRA, Isabel (Org.). **Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos**. CD-ROM. São Paulo: Cia. Livre e Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, 2005.

IMPÉRIO, Flávio. Texto para o programa do espetáculo Pintado de Alegre. São Paulo: Teatro de Arena, 1961. Disponível em [www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/509981/509990](http://www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/509981/509990).

IMPÉRIO, Flávio. Uma boa experiência. Texto para o programa do espetáculo Melhor Juiz o Rei. São Paulo: Teatro de Arena, 1963. Disponível em: [www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/507437/511385](http://www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/507437/511385).

IMPÉRIO, Flávio. A pintura nova tem a cara do cotidiano, (c.1965). Disponível em [www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/512786/512791](http://www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/512786/512791).

IMPÉRIO, Flávio. Depoimento de Flávio Império a Fernanda Perracini Millani. 1975. In: KATZ, Renina e HAMBURGER, Amélia Império (orgs.). **Flávio Império**. Artistas Brasileiros. São Paulo: Edusp, 1999.

IMPÉRIO, Flávio. Depoimento de Flávio Império a Professora Margot Milleret, Dept. of Spanish & Portuguese, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, 1985. Editado por Maria Thereza Vargas São Paulo, 2012. Disponível em: [www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/511162/511163](http://www.flavioimperio.com.br/galeria/511162/511163).

KRUSCHEV, Nikita. Rumos da arquitetura soviética. **Fundamentos**, ano VII, n. 39, nov. 1955.

LIMA, Mariângela Alves. Flávio Império e a cenografia do teatro brasileiro, 1997. In: KATZ, Renina e HAMBURGER, Amélia Império (orgs.). **Flávio Império**. Artistas Brasileiros. São Paulo: Edusp, 1999.

MAGALDI, Sábado; VARGAS, Maria Thereza. **Cem anos de teatro em São Paulo**. São Paulo: Editora Senac, 2001.

MIGLIACCIO, Flávio; GERTEL, Vera. Depoimento para o Projeto Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos, ocorrido em 1 de setembro de 2004. In: TEIXEIRA, Isabel (Org.). **Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos**. CD-ROM. São Paulo: Cia. Livre e Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, 2005.

MOSTAÇO, Eldécio. **Teatro e política, Arena, Oficina e Opinião**. São Paulo: Annablume, 2016.

NIEMEYER, Oscar. Depoimento [1958]. In: XAVIER, Alberto (org). **Depoimentos de uma geração: arquitetura moderna brasileira**. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2003. PEIXOTO, Fernando. Brecht Vida e Obra. São Paulo, Paz e Terra, 1974.

PEIXOTO, Fernando. O legado de um mito. Transcrição de palestra ocorrida em 17 de agosto de 2004. Projeto Arena conta Arena 50 Anos. In: TEIXEIRA, Isabel (Org.). **Arena Conta Arena 50 Anos**. CD-ROM. São Paulo: Cia. Livre e Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, 2005.

VARGAS, Maria Thereza. Texto para o programa da exposição Flávio Império em cena. São Paulo: SESC, 1997