

# **The Theater of Terror**

**Ismael Monticelli**

**2024**

"The Theater of Terror" is an installation that emerges from the events that took place in Brasília on January 8, 2023, where around 5,000 people mobilized, vandalizing and destroying public property in an attempt to incite a military coup against the elected government.

This episode revealed a mixture of violence and spectacle, where the attack on the palaces took on the atmosphere of an "amusement park," as Pedro Arantes, Fernando Frias, and Maria Luiza Meneses comment in the book "8/1: a rebelião dos manés". On one side, there was rampant destruction; on the other, a kind of barbaric voyeurism, a form of violence tourism, where people captured Instagrammable selfies amidst the chaos. The scenes of devastation were punctuated by fervent prayers and war cries, euphoria and exorcism, where each invader recorded their own participation while invading and destroying public property. Amid punches, kicks, and selfies, the coup plotters seemed to move like video game players, in a war game, broadcasting the event on their social media in real time, with the expectation of "advancing to the next level" and consummating the "seizure of power."

One of my main artistic approaches is to rethink established images, stories, and narratives by reorganizing them and confronting them with present-day issues. In "The Theater of Terror", I revisit the events of January 8 considering one of the avant-garde movements from the early 20th century—Futurism. One of the first questions I asked myself during the research process was: how can this event be approached with an aesthetic and ideological program that aligns with it? Futurism seemed to me a way to think about the invasions in Brasília, especially because both this avant-garde movement and the events of January 8 seem to share a longing for the destruction of everything.

Inaugurated over 100 years ago, the Futurist Manifesto (1909), written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, laid the

foundations of a program that would be developed and refined by Italian artists over the years. The manifesto exalted speed, violence, and destruction as sources of energy and renewal. The Futurists celebrated war, masculinity, militarism, and patriotism as purifying forces capable of paving the way for a new order. The complex relationship of Futurism with war is highlighted by its paradoxical stance during the conflict. While other avant-garde movements, such as Dadaism, condemned the war and the institutions responsible for it, the Futurists enthusiastically supported it. They advocated for the destruction of museums, libraries, universities, and any remnants of sentimentality, which they saw as signs of weakness. For the Futurists, starting from scratch was essential, including the rejection of feminism and social equality, which were outdated and cowardly values.

The values exalted by the Futurists seem to echo in the motivations of those involved in the events of January 8. Militarism is part of the Brazilian reactionary imagination. A clear example is the '300 of Brazil' camp (2020) at the Esplanade of Ministries, near the Ministry of Justice in Brasília, which included armed and uniformed members forming a paramilitary battalion supposedly prepared for war, with the Supreme Federal Court (STF) as its main target. One of the inspirations for this action came from the American film *300* (2006 and 2014) — criticized for its fascist aesthetic — which has become a global reference for far-right movements.

The installation, which occupies the 30-meter length, presents a combat scene with life-sized human figures, painted in acrylic on open and cut cardboard boxes. To create these figures, I drew upon the imagery of the works by Italian artist Fortunato Depero, produced in the 1920s. During this period, Depero was aligned with the aesthetic and ideological program of Futurism, creating images that explored the theme of war and combat. In one particular work, titled "War = Party" [Guerra = Festa] (1925), Depero depicted a scene from World War I in a tapestry. However, contrary to expectations of brutality and bloodshed, the image presents violence through a profusion of colors and forms. It is at the border between violence and play that "War = Party" is situated, where Depero portrayed the conflict as a grand spectacle, a celebration, fully aligning with the Futurist program of "glorifying war" as a force capable of "healing and purifying society."

Depero's works from this period seem to resonate with the events of January 8, which turned violence and destruction into a festive game. In the WhatsApp groups

organized to plan the action, the organizers used a coded message to signal the occupation of the Esplanade of Ministries, referring to the event as a "day of celebration." The chosen code word was "Selma's Party" [a reference to the military Brazilian shout "Selva" (Jungle)].

I chose cardboard as the main material for the installation, not only for its physical properties but also for its symbolic history. During the World Wars, cardboard played a crucial role in various military applications, such as the manufacture of helmets, storage containers, and even vessels. Due to the need to redirect metals for the war effort, many everyday items that were once made of tin, lead, and cast iron began to be produced from cardboard. Another crucial aspect of choosing this material is its precariousness. The installation, with evident frontal display, uses the mezzanine of the Museu Nacional as a theatrical stage devoid of its scenic box, exposing the fragility that underpins the conflict depicted at the forefront. Observing the work from behind reveals a landscape of cardboard silhouettes, with edges blurred by paint and supported by concrete blocks. This scenography undresses itself, intentionally revealing its own innards and highlighting the vulnerability inherent in the materiality and narrative it comprises.

One aspect of Depero's works that comes through in the installation is Futurism's fascination with technology. Depero's human figures are often representations of mechanical bodies, resembling automatons, robots, and cyborgs, with a quality that frequently evokes science fiction. Linear geometry automatons populated Depero's paintings in the 1920s, and this characteristic from the past resonates with recent events.

Since 2017, the use of robots to generate mass supportive statements for Jair Bolsonaro on social media has been widely reported, especially before the 2018 elections. In April of that year, suspicions intensified following a report by VEJA magazine, which pointed to the use of robots to boost pro-Bolsonaro messages and fake news on WhatsApp, possibly funded by supportive businessmen. In response, a group of Bolsonaro supporters recorded a video in which they mimicked robots while repeating the phrase "I am Bolsonaro's robot." The video went viral on Facebook and Twitter, turning the joke into a meme that the creators themselves embraced. Starting in 2019, during the Bolsonaro administration, this meme gained further traction due to identical

posts made by different users, suggesting the continued use of robots to promote hashtags, often with the same typos.

Technology and social media played a crucial role in the coordination of the invasions that took place on January 8. The mobilization of protesters was largely organized through social media and messaging apps, where Bolsonaro support groups arranged caravans and discussed strategies, including the selection of targets in Brasília. The dissemination of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and polarizing narratives intensified the radicalization of the protesters, fueled by digital influencers and public figures who supported the movement. This phenomenon also finds a parallel in the European avant-garde: inspired by theories about crowds and human behavior, Futurists viewed collectivity as a force that could be manipulated. The Italian artists suggested that, in a crowd, individuals lost their individuality and adopted a collective mentality, like the behavior of a beehive.

Claire Bishop, in her book “Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship”, suggests that destructive modes of participation can be more inclusive by exploring basic human instincts, which may make negative participation more accessible than constructive forms of engagement: “In Futurism, then, performance became the privileged paradigm for artistic and political operations in the public sphere. More than painting, sculpture or literature, performance constituted a space of shared collective presence and self- representation. The Futurist desire for dynamism, activation and emotional arousal is repeated in innumerable avant-garde calls of subsequent decades, when performance was perceived as able to rouse emotion more vividly than the perusal of static objects. But if the Futurist approach to participation was via negativa – as a form of total emotional response in which one could not occupy the position of a distanced observer but was incited to take part in an orgy of destruction – then the 1960s model would be conducted in a more optimistic light, as an artistic metaphor for emancipation, self- awareness and a heightened experience of the everyday. Paradoxically, the creative options available to audiences seem less determined in Futurist performances than in the scored participation of the Happenings and other experiments of the 1960s, suggesting that destructive modes of participation might be more inclusive than those that purport to be democratically open. This is an uncomfortable conclusion to support: as is well known, Futurism’s embrace of nation and war came to establish the ideological

foundations of Italian Fascism, and as Walter Benjamin pointed out, Fascism is precisely the political formation that allows people to participate in, and enjoy, the spectacle of their own destruction.”