

The Theater of Terror

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When the French architect Grandjean de Montigny designed this building in 1819, his references were rooted several centuries earlier, in the late 1400s-1500s, during the Renaissance in Rome. Inspired by the French Revolution [1789] and its social and political transformations, Montigny and his contemporaries sought to rekindle, through the revival of Roman architectural principles—canonized as “classical”—some of its ideals of order, rationality, and morality, then considered necessary during the rise of the bourgeoisie: an anti-clerical, anti-aristocratic, and anti-monarchical class.

In contrast to the opulence of palaces, halls, and churches that had dominated Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, fueled by wealth from colonial exploitation, the neoclassicists [as they came to be known] aimed to revive the austerity of public aspirations from the Enlightenment, opposing the emotional extravagance of the Baroque. It is in this direction that the architecture of the Casa França-Brasil, originally built to be the Commerce Square, stands as both an imposing building and a modest square: a space simultaneously open and closed, governmental and popular, simple and monumental, secluded and collective.

Neoclassical revivalism was neither the first nor the last movement characterized by a kind of “return to the past” in search of meanings deemed lost or destroyed, which was why they were thought to require “rescue.” While in Western Europe the revival of Greco-Roman attributes recurred in different waves of revivalism, in Brazil, several returns are anchored in feelings of nostalgia for colonialism, monarchy, or the military dictatorship. Thus, a century ago, in the realm of architecture, Brazil began building neocolonial structures during the Republic, and in the early 21st century, in an overtly political context, we witnessed calls for a return to the dictatorial regime that ruled the country between 1964 and 1985.

Although the continuities between past and future are central to the construction of traditions and notions of ancestry, the reenactment of social and cultural aspects situated in other times, as a form of “reordering” the present, often aligns with politically

conservative perspectives. In these, the past is seen as the sole locus of knowledge capable of saving or correcting the “distortions” of the present, often ignoring the fact that the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions of the present are not merely signs of “degeneration” in comparison to an idyllic past but are the very engine of transformations and, perhaps, of processes of social emancipation.

Conservative revivalisms are, therefore, particularly destructive. In their eagerness to impose their “shock of order,” they often produce a discourse that legitimizes the dismantling—or even the radical destruction—of the current state of affairs in pursuit of a fantastical tabula rasa from which society “should be rebuilt.” Sustaining this supposedly “revolutionary” imaginary are, typically, the values of a mythical past that can only be approached through the denial of the present and the return to a quixotic “original state.”

The recent coup attempts in Brasília, on January 8, 2023, inhabited this political atmosphere. Covertly financed by far-right groups, inflated by praise for authoritarian regimes and the defense of outdated democratic practices—such as printed voting—the coup plotters enacted a destructive narrative claiming to be regenerating the country in the terms of a spectral “old Brazil.” Today, these plotters are imprisoned for their crimes against the Democratic Rule of Law, criminal association, damage to heritage, among others. At the time, however, they imagined they were serving the nation patriotically by “fighting” for the revival of a “national identity” whose enforced unity, contrary to democratic diversity, is achieved only through force: under the violence of the state, capital, coloniality, and other oppressive forces.

Thus, on that January 8, before televisions and cell phones, the world watched in real-time, as stunned as it was incredulous, the invasion of the Três Poderes Square and the destruction of its icons, which are also historical heritage sites for Brazilians and humanity: the Planalto Palace, the National Congress, and the Supreme Federal Court. The carnival-like green-and-yellow costumes and the brutalist performativity of the criminals—who destroyed, graffitied, defecated, danced, or posed for selfies in the hallways of public buildings—conferred an unusual dramaturgical quality to that coup attempt, an aspect revisited in *The Theater of Terror*, an installation by Ismael Monticelli now occupying the central hall of the Casa França-Brasil.

Against the backdrop of the neo-reactionary movements that have spread across the globe over the last decade, Monticelli, like other artists, faces the challenge of

addressing this episode of violence without reiterating its cruelty or echoing its anti-democratic spirit. Similar to what occurred after September 11, 2001, the question arises of how to produce poetry in the face of tragedy while critically avoiding naturalizing or aestheticizing it. How can art touch social wounds without retraumatizing them, exploring ethical and political positions that go beyond the “denunciation” or “apology” of the episodes it seeks to reframe?

There are no unequivocal answers to this question. The choice of *The Theater of Terror* is not, however, to comment, critique, or expose “the truths” of the coup attempt, but to inhabit its mimetic theater. Rather than conducting a politically realist examination of Brazil’s far-right movements, Monticelli doubles down on fabulation: abandoning any desire to domesticate the indomitable, he makes art not a strategy of reprimanding or rectifying that collective political delusion but a way to emphasize its absurdity by amplifying it. As the writer Karl Ove Knausgard states—claiming that his literary approach is to “combat fiction with fiction” [1]—in his installation on January 8, 2023, Ismael Monticelli chooses to counter that conservative revivalism precisely with *more* revivalism.

To do so, the artist evokes the world’s most extensive right-wing avant-garde, Italian Futurism from the early 20th century, whose aesthetic-political project was aligned with fascism, advocating the “destruction of everything” as a way to make space for a future disconnected from the present, deemed decadent. In their glorification of destruction—of war, speed, and mechanization—the Futurists sought to promote a “hygiene” from which, through social, racial, and gender extermination, a triumphant Italy of the future would emerge: a discourse that was clearly supremacist and fascist.

It is this imaginary that Ismael Monticelli revisits, appropriating the compositions of one of Futurism’s leading figures, the artist Fortunato Depero [1892–1960]. Mimicking his monumental tapestry *War = Party* [1925], *The Theater of Terror* three-dimensionalizes the allegorical structure of the Italian’s work, erecting a tragicomic theatricality through sculptures made of cardboard sheets supported by concrete blocks. While the installation, viewed from the front, exudes beauty, ornamentation, organization, provocation, and strength in its dramatic battlefield, when seen from behind, it reveals the simulacrum that constitutes it: a contrivance of emotion akin to the walls of the Casa França-Brasil—painted to resemble marble—to fake news or to the facade of patriotism in coup movements.

Much like the popular Brazilian meme EXPECTATION/REALITY, part of the satire of *The Theater of Terror* lies in playing with the disjunctions between its appearance and its actual structure: front and back, elegance and blur, struggle and mockery, among other poles the work juxtaposes. Its critical vocation lies in its willingness to deceive us only to soon disillusion us, playing with the fictions underpinning theatricality or politics as performative systems based on collective agreements whose conventions, when broken, often border on the ridiculous because they expose the utopian inconsistency of our social and aesthetic pacts.

In the wake of the failed coup attempt of January 8, *The Theater of Terror* takes the collapse of revivalism as its subject. By reenacting Futurism, the work draws our attention to the many “returns to order” that have so often defined Western political conservatism over the past six centuries, as well as influenced art and cultural production in different territories, as evidenced by the neoclassical architecture of this former Commerce Square.

Among its bodies, horses, cannons, explosions, and layers of acrylic paint on cardboard, emulating the Futurist ethos, *The Theater of Terror* silently evokes the frenzy of uprisings and the imaginative clamor of battles that seem never-ending, conjuring the ghostly memory of the “Bragança Slaughterhouse”—the bloody conflict that took place here between April 21 and 22, 1821—and the reminder that, despite the polished floor of this museological space, it was and remains a site of struggle, both left and right. After all, as Walter Benjamin once taught us, “there has never been a monument of culture that was not at the same time a monument of barbarism.” [2]

[1] “The feeling that the future does not exist, that it is only more of the same, means that all utopias are meaningless. Literature has always been related to utopia, so when utopia loses meaning, so does literature. What I was trying to do, and perhaps what all writers try to do – what on earth do I know? – was to combat fiction with fiction.” Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle: Book 1*, 2009.

[2] Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1940.