doi: 10.25038/am.v0i26.465

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Gerd Bornheim and Brazilian Contemporary Aesthetics

Abstract: This essay weaves some comments regarding the performance and contributions of the philosopher Gerd Bornheim (1929–2002) for the starting, expansion and consolidation of aesthetic-philosophical studies in Brazil. It is noteworthy that today, 19 years after his death, the topicality of his statements helps us to understand – through the way he described political, artistic and historical-cultural scenarios – "the contemporary Brazilian tragedy", an agonizing and catastrophic imbroglio that we are experiencing in the country in face of an unprecedented political-health crisis. For Bornheim, it is not sufficient to understand the reality that surrounds us, it is necessary to actively participate in building new directions and perspectives of emancipation. In this sense, thinking about the impact and implications of his legacy is to cover the meanings that mark the transdisciplinary insertion of his work.

Keywords: Brazilian aesthetics; Gerd Bornheim; artistic languages; cultural practices.

In a letter from the poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade, addressed to Gerd Bornheim¹ in 1980, already intuiting the reception of this legacy, the poet comments: "I am sure that your substantive work will attract the attention and applause of those who, among us, devote themselves to the study of philosophical themes, becoming in all its merits, an instigating work of reflection and a deepening of Brazilian culture."¹ The poet's comment was accurate. Bornheim was an articulator of crucial dialogues and his work is recognized in the various media in which he worked. He stood out as one of the exponents of philosophy and Brazilian artistic and cultural criticism. He dedicated himself to teaching and research at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), later at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). In addition, he produced a vast collection of essays. Among his publications, some that directly influenced the aesthetic field

¹ Gerd Alberto Bornheim was born in Caxias do Sul (Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil) on November 19, 1929. It was between Caxias do Sul, in an area marked by German and Italian immigration, and Porto Alegre that he went through his benchmarks where he then began his philosophical training, complemented by studies in France, Germany and England. The Brazilian reality in a perspective of decolonization would be an intense laboratory for him, revealing the originality of his thinking. He, like Bento Prado Jr., Marilena Chauí, José Américo Motta Pessanha and Benedito Nunes advised researchers and formed other biases for the philosophical field in Brazil. He died in Rio de Janeiro in September 2002.

² Transcription of the original document preserved in the collection of the research group *Criticism and aesthetic experience*, Federal University of Espírito Santo.

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are: "Theatre: the divided scene" (Teatro: a cena dividida, LP&M, 1983); "The sense and the mask" (O sentido e a máscara, Perspectiva, 1992); "Brecht: the aesthetics of the theatre" (Brecht: a estética do teatro, Graal, 1992) and "Pages of Philosophy of Art" (Páginas de filosofia da arte UAPÊ, 1998). The first three titles deal with the performing arts from a perspective that also engages other artistic languages. In Theatre: the divided scene, discussions arise about popular theatre, the relationship between theatre and literature, and speculations about the direction of theatre and contemporary arts. In The sense and the mask, in order to understand the avant-garde theatre, the author raises aesthetic-philosophical issues that evoke historical contexts, such as the expressionist scene, the romantic condition3 or still the sense and transformations of the tragic,4 which are followed by original comments about Kleist, Goethe, Brecht, and Ionesco among others. In *Brecht: the aesthetics of the theatre* we face a landmark in the interpretations of the German dramatist and, as the title suggests, with an involving problematization of nodal themes of aesthetics, contrasted by artistic movements, trends and styles, conceptual displacements and by the content of Brechtian plays themselves. The book Pages of Philosophy of Art, a collection of essays, conferences and interviews, demonstrates the diversity of the author's interests. They are historical interpretations, studies of artistic criticism and readings on visual arts, cinema, literature and theatre. In this way, this collection allows to follow thought-provoking analysis of Brazilian artists, as well as revisiting posed questions, for example, from Aristotelian poetics, Hegelian aesthetics, or Winckelmannian readings of art, always with the criticality of Bornheim's positions. The genesis and metamorphosis of aesthetics, conceived by the author, are well connected to Shakespearean and Brechtian innovations and ruptures, which made history in their respective times and reverberate in the current scene. Such writings have become indispensable reading for those dedicated to aesthetics in Brazil. This field, it is worth remembering, was formed from the writings of prose writers, poets, and thinkers dealing with culture, social sciences and, particularly, literary criticism. All of these ways of perceiving arts inspired Bornheim.⁵ Recently, I organized with Thays Alves Costa and Erika Mariano the book Essays and conferences on theatre, literature, plastic arts, music and art criticism, a compendium of texts by Gerd Bornheim that adds itself to that mosaic of readings. These are texts from the last phase of his production (mostly from 1998 to 2002), and, in a certain sense, they continue the research published in Pages on Philosophy of Art. As we emphasize in the presentation of the book (which is in press):

³ Romanticism is also treated by the author in an important essay for aesthetic studies: "Filosofia do Romantismo", published in *O Romantismo*, ed. by J. Guinsburg. (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002).

⁴ It is interesting to note the development and updates of the author's arguments in different essays: "Brief observations on the meaning and evolution of the Tragic" (This text in *The sense and the mask* was a pioneer in the area); "Aristotle's Poetics: a delineation of its historical influence" (*Pages of Philosophy of Art* continues on the theme of tragedy) and "The meaning of tragedy" (*Teatro do Pequeno Gesto*, puts the issue in comparison to Beckett's theatre).

⁵ Following a similar line of contribution to the aesthetic-cultural field, the works of Benedito Nunes, Haroldo de Campos, Paulo Freire, Caio Prado Jr., Darcy Ribeiro, Sérgio Buarque etc can be highlighted.

[...] the reader will perceive at least six perspectives of the author's interpretations: 1. the problematization of artistic criticism; 2. theatrical aesthetics between the scene and the text; 3. literary instantiations that arise from political concerns with the democracy and culture in progress; 4. the aesthetic experience and the learning to look at writings about plastic arts; 5. music as an aesthetic paradigm; 6. the problem of communication and the new horizons for contemporary arts.

The considerations made so far aim to indicate to the reader some of the coordinates present in the works, but they do not exhaust the complexity and depth of the subjects dealt with by Bornheim. I only indicated some aspects, but it is important to realize that even in publications in which the theme is not restricted to aesthetics, such area is invariably mentioned by the author. This is the case of the books *The concept of discovery* (Eduerj, 1998), discussing alterity, body and subjectivity; *The idiot and the objective spirit* (Uapê, 1998), which walks through the Sartrian Flaubert and Brazilian reality in its cultural and philosophical aspects; *Sartre: metaphysics and existentialism* (Perspectiva, 2000) revives the controversial distinction between poetry and prose; in *Metaphysics and finitude* (Perspectiva, 2001), the essays on "Poetry and philosophy" and "On musical language" share space with denser philosophical incursions; *Themes of Philosophy* (Edusp, 2015), in which variants deal with artistic invention, with aesthetics between subject and norm and with the *Noble Savage* as reactivator of the sensitive world. In these and other works, the essayist trait and the accuracy of the author's positions persist, which has been gaining readings and re-readings in recent years.⁷

Now tracing brief observations about the author's profile and his way of dealing with aesthetic problems, I point to some nuances and languages that stimulated his way of thinking. I first met Gerd Bornheim in Rio de Janeiro in 2000. We discussed the most varied subjects, which he covered with perspicacity, inventiveness, and a unique intellectual generosity. As the filmmaker and writer Julio Bressane recalls, "he knew how to occupy spaces between speeches and had a somewhat forgotten ability nowadays: the ability to listen to the other". Bornheim transited through several areas and invested in a plural movement that included his interests in cultural and artistic practices, in political philosophy, history of philosophy and correlated fields. He has

⁶ Gerd Bornheim, *Ensaios e conferências sobre teatro, literatura, artes plásticas, música e crítica de arte*, organization and presentation Gaspar Paz, Thays Alves Costa and Erika Mariano, foreword by Rodrigo Duarte, Vitória: Edufes (in press).

⁷ Since 2002, several authors have written about Gerd Bornheim, among them: Rosa Dias, Marilena Chauí, Elena Garcia, Scarlett Marton, Fátima Saadi, Leandro Konder, Marcos Lutz Müller, Ricardo Musse, Renato Janine Ribeiro, Olinto Pegoraro, and Ernildo Stein among others. Since 2015, I have coordinated the group *Criticism and aesthetic experience*, at the Federal University of Espírito Santo, which has been dedicated to the study of the connections between life and the author's work. We are currently organizing the publication of a book with texts by the author on philosophy and politics, another book with texts on plastic arts and still research on the author's correspondence.

⁸ Interview given by Julio Bressane and Rosa Dias to Gaspar Paz, Lays Gaudio Carneiro, Fábio Camarneiro and Pedro Marra. The audio can be accessed in the L. G. Carneiro, "A formação da imagem na linguagem cinematográfica de Julio Bressane" (Master diss., Federal University of Espírito Santo, Vitória, 2020).

thought about the connections between these fields with an acute social and ethical perception. For him, the pleasure of discoveries and the development of a critical spirit were fundamental. He exercised critical activity in a dialectical perspective, an aspect assumed from his incursions into the works of Hegel and Marx. It was about "learning to see", where artistic languages gained special relevance. But this "seeing", in his work, is not limited to vision: it is a broad feeling-perception of the world, of things, of reality. That is how he sought to understand the images, circumstances and contexts of cinema, visual arts, literature, of the theatrical scene and everyday life. For this, he dialogued with filmmakers, visual artists, actors and theatre directors, in order to understand the intricacies of their productions, to perceive the angular (points of view and positions taken) and the measure (dimension of the works) that together with other experiences (with the intuitions of space and time and the use of language and communication) serve as engines for contemporary aesthetic experiments. Thus, he frequented the works of Julio Bressane, Vasco Prado, Marta Gamond, Ilsa Monteiro, Bez Batti, Enio Squeff, Paulo Hecker Filho, and Nelson Rodrigues, among many others. In this "learning to see", criticism was constituted in the balance between the image-context and the imagination because, as Gaston Bachelard (whose last courses Bornheim attended at the Sorbonne) said: the role of imagination is not that of composing images, but of deforming them "to free us from the first images, to change the images. If there is no change of images, unexpected union of images, there is no imagination, there is no imaginative action"9. The critical spirit, the poetic impressions and the mobility of the imaginary synthetize Bornheim's philosophical experience and the way he perceives things, reframing them, recreating them from an intense exercise of interpretation. Peering the images, Bornheim realizes an entire movement of intensification of optics, which has its roots, according to him, in literature. For him, "contemporary man is basically optical; the overwhelming presence of cinema and advertising, more than a cause, is a result of the establishment of the contemporary optical"10.

The crisis in the West that we are experiencing today is not only evident from the collapse of certain values, but also from the claim of forgotten values, or of layers of the real that were never properly considered. From this point, one can understand the preeminence of the optical, as well in its ravings as in its merits. What is certain is that cinematographic art presents, in this perspective, an excellence that cannot be overstated; cinema is the best introduction to the man aesthetic education, in the etymological sense of the word aesthetics.¹¹

Here is where, for example, Julio Bressane's cinematographic angular and Vasco Prado's sculptural measure fit. In both cases, aesthetic experimentation presents

⁹ Bachelard, O ar e os sonhos, 1 (our emphasis).

¹⁰ See Gerd Bornheim's original typewrite and transcript in L. G. Carneiro, "A formação da imagem na linguagem cinematográfica de Julio Bressane," (Master diss., Federal University of Espírito Santo, Vitória, 2020).
¹¹ Idem.

impressive reliefs. In Prado (both in drawings and sculptures), Bornheim comprehends the sculptor's relationship with abstraction (formal research), monumentality (sensuality), the archaic (telluric sobriety) and typification ("It is practically non-existent in Prado's work the peculiar individuality, the biographical element, the portrait, the mishap. The artist's cast is stubbornly and healthily restricted: man, woman, horse and few other things, always with the well defined article"¹²). For him, these aspects are defined in Prado from two axes:

On the one hand, his acute social awareness and his gaze seduced by everything that is human; but on the other hand, the mastery with which he lets the free trace run, obedient to an internal need derived from the formal. The nerve of Vasco Prado's aesthetic lies precisely at this point: at the confluence of these two roots.¹³

These features are also useful for thinking about the image in Bressane or the image in a general sense. In the language game (self-referentiality), Bressane sees in the photo his drama, his plasticity, sonority, poeticity, spatiality and temporality. And literature is also one of the aspects that brings him closer to Bornheim in that learning to see. For example, both are avid readers of Brazilian writer Machado de Assis. Bornheim, in addition to frequenting de Assis' prose, pays special attention to the author's chronicles and artistic criticisms. Bressane shoots the film Brás Cubas, shoots also Erva do Rato, without adapting them, but in an intercurrent dialogue with de Assis' capitulation. Both (Bornheim and Bressane) are inspired by the humour and irony of the Brazilian writer to elaborate their productions. This literary arrangement, so to speak, that appears in Bornheim's typewrites (his work notes), is spotted by Marina Aragão in his master's dissertation.¹⁴ She dwelled on the philosopher's notes on the work of Rainer Maria Rilke. These typescripts show that in the wake of what Blanchot¹⁵ comments on Rilke, we can perceive at least three characteristics that make up Bornheim's personality. The first is the one that shows the author's livingness as the guiding hue of his studies on art and his interest in discovering the meaning of reality. The second is that, as in Rilke (and in the web of this inspiration), this livingness merges with the very 'vital' need of the experience with language (writing as an experience). And finally, in his involvement with cultural, artistic and philosophical areas, it underlies a critique of an alienated and inert way of life, which produces empty men (a perception analogous to that of Rilke in becoming aware of his time). Therefore, the perception in Bornheim transits through the understanding of plasticity, cinematography, literature to, through these languages, accessing the real.

¹² Bornheim, Páginas de filosofia da arte, 153.

¹³ Ibid. 143.

¹⁴ Marina Pedreira Aragão, "A experiência estética em Rilke revisitada a partir de interpretações de Gerd Bornheim," (Master diss., Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo, Vitória, 2020).

¹⁵ Cf. Maurice Blanchot, O espaço literário (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1987).

In this itinerary, the theatrical scene was for him one of the most fertile spaces for reflections and sociopolitical actions. It was in this perspective that he saw in the Brechtian 'separation' an action "fundamental to reinstall in the reality the man, alienated by the Italian stage, passive, sitting in the dark, disconnected from the world" ¹⁶. He exemplifies the fact by saying:

I go to a movie and see a drama or a comedy, the film ends, I laughed a lot, cried a lot, I leave the cinema and I say: "So, tomorrow I have to work". I mean, I came back to reality. Art served to get me away from reality. Brecht wants a pleasurable, elegant, almost liturgical type of art, that immerses man, returns man to a reality that he forgets not only when he is at the cinema, but when he works, when he is walking down the street. That is it.¹⁷

One can observe that in his analyses, the positionings related to politics and philosophy are incorporated into cultural and artistic data and that is how he proceeds to read the social engendering of our reality. His texts help us to think about the present time. Certainly, he would not hesitate, amid the unbridled negationist and terraplanist tyranny now in Brazil¹⁸, to evoke the Shakespearean and Brechtian characters, who are back on the scene in the midst of power games, in political crises, and even in the Covid19 pandemic. Bornheim said: "the virus kills the god"¹⁹ [...] "What if Pasteur had been Greek? Would the tragedy make sense?"²⁰ [...] "What would become of a fiction without reality? And even in the usual behaviour of man, one cannot speak of a reality devoid of fiction. The man is inseparable from the mask, it is his misfortune and his passion."²¹ These are provocations that make us think about the purposes of our time.

Given the complexity of the Brazilian scenario, 22 how can we not remember the

¹⁶ Bornheim, "Estética brechtiana entre cena e texto," Folhetim, Rio de Janeiro, No. 10, 2001e.

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ "And it is in face of this true avalanche, blind to the limits between transformation and depredation, that critical awareness must be educated [...] In other words: critical awareness has been debating in a paradox: it wants to be active, but it often happens too late, and that may be the condition of its own vigour. Usually, the protest is based on the catastrophe. It is not even necessary to remember, as an example, this major scandal that is the situation of the Amazon Forest". Gerd Bornheim, *Temas de filosofia*, Gaspar Paz Organization (São Paulo: Edusp, 2015), 228. Ecological politics is also dealt with by Maria Marta Tomé based on Gerd Bornheim's interpretations in "Eco(re)existência:o elemento natural como expressão da força e do gesto político na arte de Frans Krajcberg" (diss., UFES, 2020).

¹⁹ Bornheim. "Sartre revisto," transcription, presentation and notes by Gaspar Paz., *Rapsódia: Almanaque de Filosofia e Arte* (São Paulo, n. 6, 2012).

^{20 &}quot;Brecht e as quatro estéticas," in: Arte brasileira e filosofia ed. by Rosa Dias, Gaspar Paz, and Ana Lúcia Oliveira (Rio de Janeiro: Uapê, 2007).

²¹ See original typewrite and transcript in Carneiro, L. G., 2020.

²² Indifferent to the population, inciting enmity policies and undermining the health crisis, the Brazilian president and his political allies promote a scenario of genocide that reached 4,000 deaths daily and a total of more than 590 thousand deaths by Covid 19 in Brazil until the time of this writing.

Shakespearean Richard III²³? How not remember Brechtian characters like Galy Gay (in *A Man's a Man*²⁴), the Mother (of *Mother Courage*²⁵), Kalle and Ziffel (in *Conversations of Refugees*²⁶)? Mother Courage had lost several things during the war, including her family. But she did not understand what was going on. She thought the war was just a fatality. Brecht showed, on the scene, that his character did not understand that what happened was due to economic causes and still that it was aggravated by military violence. But in face of "this crazy putrefied world, from this great play"²⁷, as Nei Lisboa sings, the spectator starts understanding these things...

In a similar way to Brecht, Bornheim engenders in these scenes, adapted to tropical environments, readings about the meanings of tragedy, meanings of such crucial issues as social inequality, public education, the directions of the university, technology and its implications (which favour private conglomerates in times of explicit neoliberal violence), ecology and political decisions. Many of these themes are already discussed by him, for example, in "Marxism and the demand for its renewal" or in the "Revolution of leisure". Also essential, in order to visualize the situation, are the essays "The noble savage as a *philosophe* and the invention of the sensitive world", "Education by the machine" (paraphrase of the poem "Education by the stone", by João Cabral de Melo Neto²⁸), "Democracy and culture" and "The perplexity of contemporary man", to name a few. To the counterpart those who "insist on ignoring politics," ²⁹ Bornheim spoke up. Similarly to Paulo Freire, and to other professors at Brazilian universities, he was censored, prevented from teaching, and had to go into exile during the civil-military dictatorship. We are, so to say, in a revival of old films in our current political setting, tainted with disrespect and violence against teachers, the annihilation of rights and inconsequential defenses of "schools without a party". But even with all the vicissitudes, artistic and cultural performances make resistant, as Bornheim said, "the descendants of Machado de Assis"30.

To conclude, I highlight an excerpt from one of the author's interviews about cinema (typewritten and undated, found within his work notes). Asked which category "would best express Brazilian social problems (whether epic, tragic or dramatic)",

²³ Heliodora, Shakespeare. O que as peças contam, 95-102.

²⁴ Brecht, *Um homem é um homem*, trans. by Fernando Peixoto (Autêntica/PUC Minas, 2007).

²⁵ Brecht, "Mãe Coragem e seus filhos," trans. by Geir Campos, *Teatro Completo* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1991).

²⁶ Brecht, Conversas de refugiados, trans. by Tercio Redondo (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2017).

²⁷ Reference to Nei Lisboa's song. Nei Lisboa, "Rima rica/frase feita" – Hein?! (São Paulo: EMI Music Ltda, 1988).

²⁸ It is noticeable how the documents are taking part in the texts and dialogues. It is not just an illustrative paraphrase, but the understanding of the world expressed in the poem, confronting it with the time of the "technological upheaval" (expression used by Bornheim in "Ética, ciência e técnica: interfaces e rumos"). This essay "Educação pela máquina" has an impressive relevance in times of remote teaching.

²⁹ Gerd Bornheim. "Prefácio sobre Nelson Rodrigues," in: Nelson Rodrigues, *A mentira*, ed. by Caco Coelho (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002b).

³⁰ Gerd Bornheim, "A propósito da história de uma vida: o livro," in *O lugar do livro hoje*, ed. by Eduardo Portella (Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro, 2000c).

Bornheim says:

Today, all categories are weakened or worn out somehow by a tradition that tends to lose meaning. Nowadays, a little of everything is done, or at least one tries, as if it depended on the artist's discretion. In the past, literature was, for example, first epic, then tragic, i.e., literature takes the form that best responds to the nature of time. The current weakness of these categories is already revealed in the fact that they intend to coexist, as if they were supra-historical possibilities. But when subjectivity becomes an addiction, man can no longer be fully epic or fully tragic; and drama is just a hybrid product. [...] But if one had to choose between the genres, I believe that the problem lie in the epic. In contemporary art, the other genres almost always have a taste of party remains. The epic, by contrast, is by nature more open. I explain better. The overthrow of the great illusions and the consequent social revolution, whatever the meaning lent to this word, is a striking feature of the twentieth century. And the revolutionary man is epic, for a quite simple reason: he is not committed to confessing himself, to restoring a lost harmony; what afflicts him is the establishment of a new kingdom, a new order of things. He wants to build a world. And this is undoubtedly the fundamental concern of our days, in all branches of culture.31

In any case, Bornheim does not intend to give the problem as solved. He thinks of the dubiousness of this category, which presents a variety of problems that need to be discussed.

I started this brief writing talking about readings and re-readings. In fact, Bornheim's concerns, in the quote above, have been addressed by the research group *Criticism and aesthetic experience* at the Federal University of Espírito Santo (UFES). Since 2015, there have been seven master's dissertations, ten scientific initiation researches, two course completion works, several publications and interlocutions with collaborators on the theme of Bornheim's work, directly or indirectly in that research group. Some of these results can be accessed at https://gerdbornheim.wixsite.com/meusite. With such actions, it is intended to keep the work of the philosopher pulsating.

Translation into English by Cristina Moura

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Article received: April 20, 2021 Article accepted: June 23, 2021 Original scholarly paper