

Juliana Siqueira Franco

University of Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil

The Aesthetics of Gilda de Mello e Souza in Writings on Fashion and Brazilian Painting

Abstract: This article aims to briefly present the aesthetic thought of Gilda de Mello e Souza, a Brazilian art critic, essayist and the first professor of aesthetics in the Philosophy course of Universidade de São Paulo in the 20th century. For this, it brings some excerpts from her works *O Espírito das Roupas*, that defends fashion as an art, and *Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores*, focusing on Almeida Júnior's paintings. Through these texts, it will also be possible to understand how her aesthetic thought is entwined with other areas of knowledge, when discussing anthropological, sociological and art history issues through the analyses of a singular object of art.

Keywords: Gilda de Mello e Souza; aesthetics; fashion; Brazilian painting; art criticism.

Introduction

Gilda de Mello e Souza (1919–2005) was one of the few women to study at *Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras of Universidade de São Paulo (FLC-USP)*, in the beginning of the 1930s, when it had just been founded. She graduated in Philosophy, obtained a doctorate in Social sciences and was a teaching assistant of Sociology courses, taught by Roger Bastide. She later became a founding professor of the Aesthetics subject and Head of Philosophy Department at the same University. At the end of her career, when already retired, she also received the title of professor Emeritus, for outstanding performance in her field.¹

As a professor, she influenced generations of intellectuals, critics and other professors who reflect still today on culture and art in Brazil. Besides teaching Aesthetics, she was an important essayist and art critic whose works fundamentally contributed to the reflection on art avant-gardes and Brazilian modernism during the last century. Among her other important activities, she founded with some peers the magazines

¹ Souza studied Philosophy at USP from 1937 to 1940. She defended her doctoral thesis in 1950 and became teaching assistant of Sociology in 1943, as well as professor of Aesthetics in 1954. She later became Head of the Philosophy Department in 1969, at the difficult time of the intensification of the military dictatorship in Brazil. The author retired in 1973, received the title of Professor Emeritus in 1999 and passed away in 2005; Gilda de Mello e Souza, *Exercícios de Leitura* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 2008), 365.

*Author contact information: julianasiqueirafranco@gmail.com

Discurso in the 1970s and also *Clima* in 1941, in which she published texts of fiction and literary criticism.

Having a clear artistic bent, she wrote mainly about cinema, literature and visual arts² addressing specific theoretical and methodological procedures, which she also used as a professor: the analysis of the singular artistic object³. The role of criticism in her view would not consist of over-reliance on theories (for example, only recognizing in a work what one already knows). On the contrary, “the function of the critic is defined by the term unravel (*desentranhar*). The critic is the one who tries to unravel the meaning that the artist embodied in the work.”⁴ This trait is defined by Antonio Candido as the “passion for the concrete”, a critical method which the *Clima* Group⁵ would never have essentially deviated.⁶

Not by chance, the members of this group became the most relevant Brazilian intellectuals throughout their careers. According to Otilia and Paulo Arantes, this group promoted studies of poor populations, the culture of the rustic man, and organizing new ideas to think about Brazil.⁷ Besides, Souza affirms they were interested in all manifestations of art – music, literature and plastic arts, theatre and cinema – inaugurating a generation of modern critics in the country. The group worked through a sort of “intellectual craftsmanship”⁸ since they lived in a transition moment, just before the advent of professional specialization. That is, “between the vanguards and the arrival of the specialists”⁹, as Souza defines it.

The author’s intellectual circle, formed by this modernist spirit, was concerned with delineating the formation of Brazilian art, as explained by Otilia Arantes. With this purpose, Souza could resort to theoreticians of the European tradition, but would not allow any their scheme to be assimilated without being submitted to a type of “critical acclimatization which would reveal the terms in confrontation”¹⁰ Ricardo

² The most important published works: *O espírito das roupas* (1950), *O tupi e o Alaúde* (1979), *Exercícios de leitura* (1980) and *A ideia e o figurado* (2005). There are some unpublished manuscripts in her personal archive, which is in the custody of Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros (USP). Elisabete Ribas and Laura Escorel, “Os arquivos pessoais de Gilda de Mello e Souza e Antonio Candido,” *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros* (2020), 76: 275–89.

³ Some of her students have published texts about the author in the book: Sergio Miceli and Franklin de Mattos, *Gilda, a paixão pela forma* (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2007).

⁴ “A função do crítico é definida pelo termo *desentranhar*. Crítico é aquele que procura desentranhar o sentido que o artista encarnou na obra”. Gilda de Mello e Souza, “Entrevista a Nelson Aguilar,” in: *A palavra afiada: Gilda de Mello e Souza*, ed. Walnice Galvão (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2014), 77 (emphasis added).

⁵ Students of FLC-USP: Lourival Gomes Machado, Ruy Coelho Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes, Decio de Almeida Prado, Antonio Candido de Mello e Souza – who later married Gilda de Moraes Rocha, which became Gilda Rocha de Mello e Souza and was also part of the group., e

⁶ This term means extracting the categories of analysis from the work itself, avoiding conceiving the former beforehand. Souza, *Exercícios de Leitura*, 260–61.

⁷ Otilia Arantes and Paulo Arantes, *Sentido da Formação* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1997), 95.

⁸ Otilia Arantes and Paulo Arantes, “Ainda se trata de formação,” in: *Gilda paixão pela forma* (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2007), 79.

⁹ Otilia Arantes, “Notas sobre o método crítico de Gilda de Mello e Souza,” *Estudos Avançados* 20, 56 (2006).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 320.

Fabbrini explains: “her limpidly written essays have few theoretical references”, to the extent that she “does not use them as authority arguments aiming to legitimize her comments, although several authors are acknowledged between the lines”.¹¹

Furthermore, she and the colleagues were taught by the French Masters: Roger Bastide, Jean Maugué, Claude Lévi-Strauss, professors which, among others, came to Brazil through the *French Mission* to compose the faculty members and inaugurate the activities of USP¹². From different backgrounds in the humanities fields – sociology, philosophy and anthropology, respectively – these professors fostered studies on art and national culture, greatly contributing to Gilda de Mello e Souza’s critical thinking. It was also with them that she learned to look at the singular artistic object, without leaving aside theoretical acuity.

As mentioned, she became assistant of Bastide, a French sociologist who was *Maître à penser* for her.¹³ Besides translating his book *Arte e Sociedade*, it was under his guidance that the author defended her doctoral thesis, an essay on aesthetic sociology. With him, she learned to unravel the aesthetic phenomenon from the “significant details” of the object studied, which was made by empirical research.

Fashion as art in *O Espírito das Roupas*

*O Espírito das Roupas: a Moda no Século XIX*¹⁴ is the doctoral thesis of Gilda de Mello e Souza in aesthetic sociology, which was defended in 1950, under the guidance of Bastide. Choosing fashion as a theme was very innovative at the time. Heloisa Pontes¹⁵ explains that this choice meant the author might have discreetly inserted her own point of view in this thesis, by mobilizing and converting her own experience as a woman into a key of analytical inflexion (at a time when gender studies had not yet been consolidated). In doing so, she found a specific way to extract problems of social differentiation between classes and between men and women from a single object.

However, the work was considered “a kind of deviation from the prevailing norms”, or a “minor” work at the time of its presentation, because studying fashion was something almost unheard of in Brazilian academia at the beginning of last century, which was mostly formed by men of “scientific” vision. For this reason, the academic hierarchy of the faculty considered it “woman’s stuff”. Afterwards, 30 years

¹¹ “Seus ensaios de escrita límpida possuem poucas referências teóricas [...] não as utiliza como argumentos de autoridade visando a legitimizar seus comentários, embora diversos autores sejam reconhecidos nas entrelinhas”. Ricardo Fabbrini, “Pintura e nacionalidade segundo Gilda de Mello e Souza,” *Revista Valise* 6, 12 (2016).

¹² Gilda de Mello e Souza. “A estética rica e a estética pobre dos professores franceses,” in *Exercícios de Leitura* (São Paulo: Duas cidades, 2008), 9–41.

¹³ Walnice Galvão, “Um percurso intelectual,” in: *Gilda, a Paixão pela Forma* (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2007), 59.

¹⁴ Gilda de Mello e Souza, *O Espírito das Roupas* (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, Ouro sobre Azul, 2019).

¹⁵ Heloisa Pontes, “A paixão pelas formas,” *Novos estudos – CEBRAP* (2006), 74.

passed until the thesis could gain wide notoriety: “fashion became fashion”¹⁶ in the 1980s and her study turned into a seminal work on the subject in Brazil.

The empirical research of clothes through sketches, photographs and literary descriptions were the guide of the study, while the theoretical approach appears somehow in a secondary way.¹⁷ Nevertheless, fashion is understood as an aesthetic phenomenon, while situated in modernity and in the history of forms. For instance, the first chapter *A moda como arte* demonstrates how fashion depends on social conditions, without therefore ceasing to be art: “The tailor, when creating a model, solves problems of balance of volumes, of lines, of colors, of rhythms. Like the sculptor and the painter, he therefore seeks a Form that is the measure of space.”¹⁸

In this passage, Henri Focillon’s conception of the primacy of Forms emerges, according to which art could be found in the drapery of the skirts harmonized with the carving of the sleeves, as an agreement of the formal vocation of materials, colors, texture of the fabrics and lines of the models. Thus, “like any artist, the creator of fashion is inscribed within the world of Forms. And, therefore, within Art.”¹⁹

Moreover, fashion would have the characteristic of being completely submitted to some minor arts, with which it would form a single whole – that of the rhythmic arts, insofar “it is the movement, the conquest of space that distinguishes fashion from the other arts and makes it a specific aesthetic form”²⁰ When it comes to beauty, fashion would differ from paintings, statues or buildings, which judgment would be static. Whereas the art of clothes would necessarily need the *movement*: “Art of compromise par excellence, the costume does not exist independent of movement, as it is subject to gesture, and at each turn of the body or undulation of the limbs it is the total figure that recomposes itself, affecting new forms and trying new balances.”²¹

Clothes would thus live in the fullness of movement. As fashion, it would have to be recomposed at every moment, according to the unexpectedness of gestures. Moreover, the artist would entrust to us an always unfinished work of art, since it depends on each one to complete it with the movement of the body. In Souza’s words, that is why fashion is the most alive and the most human of the arts.²²

¹⁶ Ibid. 90.

¹⁷ Authors such as Charles Lalo, Henri Focillon, Gerard Heard, Willet Cunnington, Georg Simmel, Gabriel de Tarde, among many others.

¹⁸ “O costureiro, ao criar um modelo, resolve problemas de equilíbrio de volumes, de linhas, de cores, de ritmos. Como o escultor e o pintor ele procura, portanto, uma Forma que é a medida do espaço.” Souza, *O Espírito das Roupas*, 32.

¹⁹ “Como qualquer artista o criador de modas inscreve-se dentro do mundo das Formas. E, portanto, dentro da Arte.” Souza, *O Espírito das Roupas*, 34.

²⁰ “É o movimento, a conquista do espaço que distingue a moda das outras artes e a torna uma forma estética específica.” Ibid. 40.

²¹ “Arte por excelência de compromisso, o traje não existe independente do movimento, pois está sujeito ao gesto, e a cada volta do corpo ou ondular dos membros é a figura total que se recompõe, afetando novas formas e tentando novos equilíbrios”. Ibid. 40.

²² Ibid. 40.

About this, Otília Arantes²³ states the essayist perceived the neuralgic point in which fashion is inserted: the autonomy of a work of art implies modern demands. It is, nevertheless, in this autonomous though ephemeral life that the argument is based, serving as an analysis of 19th century bourgeois society. The internal relation of the world of forms enables her to understand the evolution of fashion as a social process and this is how the chapter ends: “in summary, it is not possible to study an art, so committed by social injunctions as is fashion, focusing only on aesthetic elements.”²⁴

For this reason, it would be necessary to insert it in its moment and its time, in order to unveil its hidden relationships with society. As a social phenomenon that plays all the time with artistic principles, fashion reorganizes itself at each change of style, which phenomenon should be explained by sociology:²⁵ “The nineteenth century, bringing the liberal professions, democracy, the emancipation of women [...], will complete the social metamorphoses that made the stiff costume of previous centuries blossom into the shifting structure of today.”²⁶

The argumentative path taken from then on is explained by Otília Arantes: “Gilda always thought of fashion as an aesthetic phenomenon situated, due to the social frameworks that define it, at the intersection of the so-called major arts – such as painting, literature, etc. – and the minor ones, such as dance; conjugating gestures and attitudes through the social mediation of clothes, as an incomparable rhythmic art.”²⁷

Transiting between different arts, both the theses and her several later essays focus on gestures as a “line of indicative deciphering of the reality in the work”, Otília and Paulo Arantes affirm.²⁸ The author’s “critical expertise” would be an attitude close to the indicative (*indiciário*) method focused on the observation of insignificant characteristics of the works – a methodology of visual archaeology of Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Morelli and the Aby Warburg school, similar to practice of the *expert* or the *connoisseur* of nineteenth-century art criticism.

Regarding this matter, Bento Prado Júnior adds that Souza’s classes also applied these methods in an original way. Instead of exposing aesthetic theories, she preferred to analyze a painting, a poem or a film, trying to teach her students to *see* through

²³ Arantes e Arantes, *Sentido da Formação*, 89–90.

²⁴ “Em resumo, não é possível estudar uma arte, tão comprometida pelas injunções sociais como é a moda, focalizando-a apenas nos elementos estéticos”. Souza, *O Espírito das Roupas*, 50.

²⁵ There is an exegesis of women’s clothes, which are placed in contrast to men’s, in order to read them as an organization of signs based on social and psychological functions. The work follows the two main purposes of highlighting the opposition between the sexes and symbolizing class barriers. Galvão, “Um percurso Intelectual,” 61–62.

²⁶ “O século XIX, trazendo as profissões liberais, a democracia, a emancipação das mulheres [...], completará as metamorfoses sociais que fizeram o traje hirto dos séculos anteriores desabrochar na estrutura movediça de hoje em dia.” Souza, *O Espírito das Roupas*, 50–51.

²⁷ “Gilda sempre pensou a moda como um fenômeno estético situado, em razão dos enquadramentos sociais que a definem, no entrecruzamento das artes ditas maiores – como a pintura, a literatura etc. – e das menores, entre elas a dança; conjugando gestos e atitudes pela mediação social das roupas, como arte rítmica incomparável”. Arantes, *Notas sobre o método crítico de Gilda de Mello e Souza*, 317.

²⁸ Arantes and Arantes, *Sentido da Formação*, 88.

the analysis of the works of art. For this reason, her indicative method “essentially abductive or heuristic” and not compatible with the “epistemological hard line” that prevailed in the University at that time.²⁹

The painting of Almeida Júnior

“Fashion, depending on the gesture, as it recomposes itself at each moment of its play with the unforeseen, is the most socialized of the arts: these are the elements that have perhaps contributed most to the crystallization of the plastic sensation of searching the essential of the ‘Brazilian man’ in his bodily movement.”³⁰

This passage by Otilia Arantes elucidates the continuity between *O Espírito das Roupas* and the essay on Brazilian painting, which key of interpretation are movements and gestures – a procedure that also appears in different texts about other types of art, such as dance and literature.³¹ Since Gilda de Mello e Souza was also a translator, author of drama art plays and a systematic observer of theatrical choreographies,³² it would make sense to suppose a possible continuity of Almeida Júnior’s analysis as “the first chapter of a systematic inventory of something like a rhythm of Brazilian gestures.”³³

Other texts by this author continue to weave relationships between different areas of knowledge, such as art history, sociology, anthropology and aesthetics, always centered in the issue of gestuality. The essay *Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores*³⁴ – which discusses exhibitions of the precursor artists of Brazilian modernism³⁵ – attempts to understand an evolutionary line of plastic figuration of national experience.³⁶ This interpretation considers the painter José Ferraz de Almeida Júnior (1850–1899) – a Brazilian painter who had Eurocentric training and portrayed regionalist works – the “precursor of precursors”, since he brought a remarkable innovation³⁷ to Brazilian painting: he was the first to express on canvas a specific bodily dynamic of his own people.

²⁹ Bento Prado Jr., “Entre Narciso e o colecionador ou o ponto cego do criador,” *Revista IEB* 43 (2006), 34.

³⁰ “A moda, dependendo do gesto, à medida que se recompõe a cada momento de seu jogo com o imprevisto, é a mais socializada das artes: esses os elementos que talvez tenham contribuído mais de perto para a cristalização da sensação plástica de que o essencial do “homem brasileiro” deveria ser procurado no seu movimento corporal.” Arantes, *Notas sobre o método crítico de Gilda de Mello e Souza*, 320.

³¹ For instance, “Macedo, Machado, Alencar e as Roupas” and “Notas sobre Fred Astaire”. Gilda de Mello e Souza, *A ideia e o Figurado* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, Ed. 34, 2005).

³² She also participated in the University Theatre Group. Arantes, *Notas sobre o método crítico de Gilda de Mello e Souza*, 322.

³³ “O primeiro capítulo de um inventário sistemático de algo como uma ritmia dos gestos brasileiros”. Ibid. 320.

³⁴ Gilda de Mello e Souza. “Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores,” in *Exercícios de Leitura* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 2008), 273–52.

³⁵ Exhibitions at the Lasar Segall Museum in 1974 and 1975. Fabbrini, “Pintura e nacionalidade segundo Gilda de Mello e Souza,” 108.

³⁶ Fabbrini, “Pintura e nacionalidade segundo Gilda de Mello e Souza,” 109.

³⁷ For Souza, Almeida Júnior had important achievements: abolished the monumentality of the works made here, renewed subjects and characters, also establishing organic links between the figures and the environment, as well as reformulating the treatment of light. Ibid. 110.

For Souza, Almeida Júnior introduced the Brazilian man in painting for the first time not for painting the so-called *caipira*³⁸ (see *O caipira picando o fumo*³⁹) – which ends up becoming a merely decorative character in Brazilian art, like the representations of indigenous people by chroniclers or of black people by foreign travelers, etc. – but because of the deep truth of his new character, which singularity would be “not only the external appearance, the facial features or the peculiar way of dressing, but the dynamics of the gestures.”⁴⁰

According to the author, the apprehension of the Brazilian gesture in Almeida Júnior’s paintings marks a difference from the European art, which should be understood by Marcel Mauss’s conception of body techniques, for whom the dynamics of bodies and habits may vary between different societies. Here appears a brief anthropological grounding, but soon after, Souza insists on describing the canvases rather than delving into the theory. The Brazilian singularity found in Almeida Júnior’s works was due to his “acuity of observation”: “it is ours, above all, the way a man leans on his instrument, sits down, holds a cigarette between his fingers, expresses with a lying (*largado*) body the impression of tired strength.”⁴¹ This trait would be explicit in the paintings *O derrubador* (1879) and *O violeiro* (1889)⁴² but above all in the works from 1890 onwards, when he deepens his analysis of man’s bodily behavior.

Almeida Júnior would have apprehended the man’s “clumsy way of walking, without nobility, keeping his knees half bent while supporting his feet on the ground. It fixes him in various positions and in the different daily tasks, sharpening the axe, harnessing the horse, wielding the rifle, cutting tobacco; or in his spare time, playing *viola*.”⁴³

However, the uniqueness of the bodily dynamics of the Brazilian apprehended by the painter is placed in opposition to works of foreign chroniclers who failed in

³⁸ The term “capiria” is defined by Antonio Candido: “to denote the cultural aspects, here *caipira* is used, [...] always expressing a way of being, a type of life, never a racial type [...] being restricted almost solely [...] to the area of historical influence of São Paulo”. In reference to the inhabitants of rural areas in the countryside of São Paulo state, its meaning is close to that of rustic man. “Para designar os aspectos culturais, usa-se aqui caipira, [...] exprimindo desde sempre um modo de ser, um tipo de vida, nunca um tipo racial [...] restringir-se quase apenas, pelo uso inveterado, à área de influência histórica de São Paulo.” Antonio Candido, *Os Parceiros do Rio Bonito* (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2017), 25–27.

³⁹ Almeida Júnior, *Caipira picando fumo* (Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 1893).

⁴⁰ “[...] não apenas a aparência externa, os traços do rosto ou a maneira peculiar de se vestir, mas a dinâmica dos gestos.” Souza, “Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores,” 275.

⁴¹ “É nosso, sobretudo, o jeito do homem se apoiar no instrumento, sentar-se, segurar o cigarro entre os dedos, manifestar com corpo largado a impressão de força cansada.” Souza, “Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores,” 276.

⁴² Almeida Júnior, *O derrubador* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, 1879); *O violeiro* (São Paulo: Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, 1889).

⁴³ “Apreende a sua maneira canhestra de caminhar, sem nobreza, mantendo os joelhos meio dobrados enquanto apoia os pés no chão. Fixa-o em várias posições e nas diversas tarefas diárias, amolando o machado, arreiando o cavalo, empunhando a espingarda, picando fumo; ou nas horas de folga pontecendo a viola.” Souza, “Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores,” 276–77.

trying to apprehend the gestures of other people.⁴⁴ According to the essayist, they transposed to the Brazilian jungle certain traditional schemes more truthful (*verossímil*) to them. Therefore, one should not look to foreign chroniclers for a reliable record of Brazilian body techniques.

To explain this idea, Souza resorts to a discussion of aesthetics and art history, referring to *Art and Illusion* by Ernst Gombrich. She pointed out that it would be “impossible to recover the innocence of the eye”, since “things never appear to a virgin eye, free of ‘conceptual habits’”. The act of seeing would presuppose learning, establishing a relation between nature and the perceptual schemes previously apprehended. Therefore, even the naturalist artist would not transpose to the canvas “a neutral and objective result of his analysis of the external world”. On the contrary, he would apply “to the analysis of the real the perceptual schemes he inherited from tradition” – the history of taste being the “history of preferences”.⁴⁵

In contrast, Almeida Júnior would have expressed the Brazilian manner with trustworthiness because his strong personality was molded in the province, away from the influence of the court. Freeing the artistic representation from the prevailing schemes and preconceptions of the time, he established a profound link between him and the new reality of the country to achieve this singular vision.⁴⁶ Even when he attended the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro or when studied in Paris, he “had already incorporated into his vision of the world the truth of the gestures of his people”, and nothing could make him forget the “experience of a farm boy from the countryside of São Paulo, which had been engraved in his body’s memory and through which he would revitalize the art of Brazil.”⁴⁷ Accordingly, his miraculous apprehension of the gesture would have surpassed the artistic reminiscences of the civilized European posture.

Gilda de Mello e Souza argues that this painter would have “reacted to the pictorial schemes of representation of the body according to the conventions of genre painting such as the painting of manners or portraiture”, giving importance, on the other hand, to the *caipira* gestuality, in the words of Fabbrini.⁴⁸ If the painter should have the connection between sensibility and the reality of his country in the memory of his own body, it would be possible to ultimately suppose that the painter portrayed

⁴⁴ The posture of the bow and arrow in Hans Staden’s woodcuts (1557) whose characters would resemble Renaissance mythological engravings of Baccio Bradinelli. Souza, “Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores,” 278.

⁴⁵ “Mesmo na arte naturalista, o artista não transpõe para a tela o resultado neutro e objetivo de sua análise do mundo exterior, mas aplica à análise do real os esquemas perceptivos que herdou da tradição. Deste modo, a história do gosto se apresenta como a ‘história das preferências.’” Souza, “Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores,” 274.

⁴⁶ Souza, “Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores,” 280.

⁴⁷ “já havia incorporado à sua visão do mundo a verdade dos gestos de sua gente. Nada o fará esquecer – nem a estadia na Europa – a experiência de menino de fazenda do interior paulista, que se gravara na memória do seu corpo e através da qual irá revitalizar a arte do Brasil.”

⁴⁸ The pictorial schemes of Gustav Courbet or Jean François Millet, contemporaries of the Brazilian painter. Fabbrini, “Pintura e nacionalidade segundo Gilda de Mello e Souza,” 111.

himself, since he was also a *caipira*.

Last but not least, Otilia and Paulo Arantes also point out that Souza was also a “farm girl from the countryside of São Paulo”⁴⁹ and her critical interpretations would also come from her familiarity both with the *caipira* culture⁵⁰ and knowledge of the national and foreign artistic tradition. Through an enduring critical dialogue, Souza seems to somehow have assimilated the search for a “Brazilian difference” in the national culture, likewise her cousin Mário de Andrade,⁵¹ which supported her in the studies of arts and theories of western tradition since a very young age. According to Walnice Galvão, her thought was permeated by a tension between the local Brazilian contribution and the European references, which the verse by Andrade (which Souza uses as a title of her book *O Tupi e o Alaúde*) would clearly express: “I am a *tupi* playing a lute”⁵².

Conclusion

Finally, it is possible to affirm that, due to the analytical attention to gesture and bodily movement, Gilda de Mello e Souza was able to draw the aesthetic phenomenon from details and objects of no grandeur, entwining aesthetics to anthropological and sociological issues. Instead of the simple exposition of theories, she wrote essays and art criticism works that tried to adapt European theories⁵³ to Brazilian culture without distorting either of them.

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⁴⁹ “Menina de fazenda do interior paulista.” Arantes and Arantes, *Sentido da Formação*, 87.

⁵⁰ Souza was born in São Paulo, but spent her childhood on a farm in the city of Araraquara (countryside of State of São Paulo). There, she learnt the *primacy of the visual*, when in direct contact with the outside world: “The knowledge did not come to us through books [...] it was done to our eyes: the bread came out of the oven, the vegetables came from the garden.” “O saber não chegava até nós pelos livros [...] faziam-se aos nossos olhos: o pão saía do forno, a verdura vinha da horta [...]” Souza, *Gilda, A Paixão pela Forma*, 202.

⁵¹ Walnice Galvão, “Um percurso intelectual,” 51.

⁵² “Sou um tupi tangendo o alaúde.” Gilda de Mello e Souza, *O Tupi e o Alaúde: uma interpretação de Macunaíma* (São Paulo: Duas cidades, Ed. 34, 2003), 7.

⁵³ There is a wide range of themes and authors which Souza’s work seems to engage with. Among them, the gesture and movement reminds us of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology or Ervin Panofsky’s concept of *habitus*. The art criticism can recall Walter Benjamin’s Baudelarian studies as well. Although de Souza’s read these authors, it is still not precisely identified (beyond the “between the lines”). This is a research to be continued in her personal archive.

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