

## Rafael Marino

*Center for Law and Democracy at the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (NDD-CEBRAP), São Paulo, Brazil*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2659-6434>

# The Paths of Hélio Oiticica: Exoticism, Brazilian Identity, and Popular Culture

**Abstract:** This article aims to highlight how Oiticica engaged with significant issues surrounding the political and aesthetic challenges of underdevelopment, popular culture, and the formation of a Brazilian artistic system. To this end, we will revisit some of his works, specifically: (i) *Metaesquemas* (1956–1958); (ii) *Relevos espaciais* (1959–1960); (iii) *Núcleos* (1960–1966); (iv) *Penetráveis* (1961–1980); (v) *Bólides* (1963–1979); (vi) *Parangolés* (1964–1979); and (vii) *Tropicália* (1967). We suggest that Oiticica played a crucial role in constructing a Brazilian image of art in the world, although this process was not without contradictions.

**Keywords:** Hélio Oiticica; constructive project; contemporary Brazilian art; popular culture; exoticism.

## Political-aesthetic elements

The Neoconcrete rupture, the *Opinião* exhibitions (1965 and 1966), *Propostas* (1965 and 1966), and, most notably, the collective show *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity) in 1967 were milestones in the development and circulation of Hélio Oiticica's work. During this period, the developmental dream of aligning Brazil with more developed nations came to an end. Consequently, artists who had previously focused on providing Brazil with an autonomous constructive art, referencing Mondrian and Malevich, became increasingly motivated to pursue a form of new realism. This new realism was rooted in a more direct contact with the public, engagement with the country's pressing issues, and the creation of a Brazilian visual language that acknowledged underdevelopment.<sup>1</sup> In other words, by creating art, many of these artists believed they were engaging in a form of resistance to the processes that would ultimately lead to the military coup of 1964.

Neoconcretism, in contrast to Constructivism, turned toward the invaluable vector of art: expression, sidelining Constructivism's scientific rigor and rationalist exacerbation. Instead, it introduced a humanistic notion of the individual, viewed as a

<sup>1</sup> Maria Morethy Coutor, "Arte engajada e transformação social: Hélio Oiticica e a exposição Nova objetividade brasileira," *Estudos Históricos* 49, no. 25 (2012): 72.

being in the world, in its entirety, rather than a mere mechanical agent. From a spatial perspective, Neoconcretists sought to experiment with space, understanding it phenomenologically rather than merely sensorially, thus rejecting its rigid and passive apprehension. This opened opportunities for engagement in the social realm intending to deconstruct the canonical system of art and the dominant ideology that permeated it. Such an attitude significantly politicized the Brazilian artistic field and, according to some critics, laid the groundwork for contemporary Brazilian art.

If the “Manifesto Neoconcreto” was published in 1959, its consequences and criticisms of its ideology and practice would become common touchstones in the Brazilian artistic scene in the years that followed. Drawing from some ideas already developed within neoconcretism, artists such as Oiticica and Lygia Clark brought to the forefront works that showcased the state of Brazilian avant-garde art to the world, surpassing what had been accomplished by previous ‘isms’ and challenging the artistic status quo of the time. Exhibitions like *Opinião* and *Propostas* served as important moments to refine these endeavors, but it was in the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (1967) that the disruptive results of earlier experiments were witnessed. Held at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (MAM/RJ) in 1967, the exhibition featured around forty artists, including Sérgio Ferro, Nelson Leirner, Antonio Dias, Lygia Pape, Oiticica, and Clark. Most of the works presented had an object-oriented character and critiqued both traditional artistic codes and “the effective power of social transformation attributed to abstract art, particularly the constructivist movements, until the late 1950s.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that the exhibition was organized into two modules: one focused on a retrospective of object art in Brazil, aimed at showcasing the constructive impetus of national productions, and another dedicated to the manifestations of the period.

To elucidate the main lines of this moment of critical renewal, Hélio Oiticica published the written statement “Esquema geral da nova objetividade” in the exhibition’s catalog, which is crucial for understanding this movement and its impact on the art field. In this text, Oiticica asserts that new objectivity is neither a dogmatic nor an aesthetic movement, as was the case with cubism and other ‘isms’, but rather an ‘arrival’ at the state of Brazilian art composed of various trends. Thus, this lack of unity of thought would become an important characteristic of the movement, “the unity of this concept of ‘new objectivity’ being a general recognition of these multiple trends grouped into broader tendencies observed therein.”<sup>3</sup>

New objectivity, however, being a typical state of Brazilian art in general, would stand in opposition on the international stage to the *Pop*, *Op*, *Nouveau Réalisme*, and *Primary Structures* movements. It would have six main characteristics: i) a general constructive will aimed at providing the country with avant-garde art; ii) a tendency towards the object, surpassing the traditional easel painting; iii) the bodily participation of the spectator, intended to critique transcendental contemplation and propose

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hélio Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto* (Rocco, 1986), 84.

total engagement; iv) a stance on political, ethical, and social issues, with the aim of modifying them through transformation of consciousness; v) a tendency toward art and collective propositions, influenced by popular cultural and street manifestations, contributing to the abolition of ‘isms’; vi) a reformulation of the concepts of anti-art, in an attempt to justify the emergence of a Brazilian avant-garde understood as a collective progression of the country through effective popular participation. According to Fred Coelho, Oiticica’s project was rooted, precisely, in the strategic use of popular culture and mass culture as a space for subversion (rather than passive alienation).<sup>4</sup>

With this characterization in mind, the works “Caixa de Baratas” by Lygia Pape, “Máscaras Sensoriais” and “O Eu e o Tu: Série Roupas-Corpo-Roupa” by Lygia Clark, and “Tropicália” by Oiticica are paradigmatic examples included in the 1967 exhibition. The latter work left an indelible mark on the exhibition and the artistic field, perfectly embodying Tropicalism in the visual arts and even propelling other artistic areas of this movement. Nonetheless, one more interesting factor concerning Oiticica’s work and writings during this period is their connection to anthropophagy. During this time, Oiticica advocated for anthropophagy as part of a broader constructive will aimed at providing Brazil with a distinct cultural identity, separate from that of the Global North. In this way, anthropophagy would serve to reduce external influences on national art models.

To better understand Oiticica’s trajectory, particularly how he approached issues such as popular culture and Brazilian identity, we will clarify how he appropriated Oswald de Andrade’s concept of Anthropophagy.

The idea of Anthropophagy, an ancient phantasmagoria of the colonizers, was revisited by various actors in the early twentieth century. Travelers’ literature, such as that by Hans Staden, Francisco López de Gómara, and André de Thevet, was read and discussed. Dadaists placed *Cannibale*, the name of one of their magazines, as a touchstone for revising and critiquing bourgeois morality. Mário de Andrade, upon reading a book by Theodor Koch Grünberg, also addressed the same theme, and Tarsila do Amaral painted “Abaporu” (the man who eats people) as a gift for Oswald. Oswald de Andrade launched his Manifesto Antropófago (Anthropophagic Manifesto) in 1928, in which a unity between aesthetics and politics is observed.<sup>5</sup> It was aesthetic because it aimed to forge a model of Brazilian national and cultural formation that would create friction with the duality of imported (European) versus local (national), opening the way for a radical avant-garde art contrary to the conventionalism of “civilized fine arts”. It was political because the Modernist from São Paulo viewed Brazil’s history through the lens of the oppressed indigenous anthropophagi, criticizing colonial violence and façade civilization. In this context, it is possible to understand its libertarian character, whose critique of religion, morality, and repressed sexuality brought to light the utopia of a humanity based on the unrepressed, technicized barbarian,

<sup>4</sup> Fred Coelho, *Eu, brasileiro, confesso minha culpa e meu pecado* (Civilização Brasileira, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Bruna Della Torre de Carvalho Lima, *Vanguarda do atraso ou atraso da vanguarda?* (Alameda Editorial, 2018), 122.

contrary to the decadent bourgeois civilization. Throughout the manifesto, one can note both a praise for the so-called marks of Brazilian backwardness, transfigured into civilizational outputs for the world, and a certain irrationalism, which condemned hegemonic intellectual ideas and constructions – understood as colonized, *bacharelescas* (pedantic/overly academic), and the fruit of bourgeois moralism.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, Anthropophagy should be understood not merely as an aesthetic achievement of great importance, but rather as a symbolic artifact systematically revisited and utilized to reflect upon and contest the meaning of decisive and constitutive notions for the political and social spheres in Brazil, such as: national identity, the configurations of society and its ‘people’, the social and political construction of Brazilian arts, and the place Brazil holds or should hold among the concert of nations. We assume that Anthropophagy is systematically revisited by contemporary authors and artists because it elaborates on essential and contradictory elements of colonization and Brazilian social formation, as well as the effects stemming from the colonization process. Thus, through the anthropophagic *mobile*, they could elaborate and create friction between such dyads as local–cosmopolitan, Brazilian–foreign, white–indigenous, Afro–Brazilian–European, civilized–barbarian, repressed–liberated. One of the artists who revisited it was precisely Hélio Oiticica, whose use of the anthropophagic *mobile* was concerned with the miscegenated construction of the Brazilian nation and culture.<sup>7</sup>

In our view,<sup>8</sup> the understanding of Oiticica’s Anthropophagy stems from two important texts, namely: the “Esquema geral da nova objetividade” (General Scheme of the New Objectivity) and a text from March 4, 1968 – subsequently collected in the book *Aspiro ao grande labirinto* (I Aspire to the Great Labyrinth). In both, for distinct yet complementary reasons, the figure of Oswald de Andrade and his Anthropophagy are central.

In the “Esquema geral da nova objetividade”, Oiticica states that New Objectivity is more of a state composed of various tendencies, or rather, an arrival marked by a lack of unity among its components rather than an organized movement. Be that as it may, one of the main points uniting these diverse orientations would be a general constructive will – based on an attempt to provide the country with a Brazilian avant-garde and cultural solidification – whose starting point was Modernism itself in 1922 and, more specifically, Oswaldian Anthropophagy. Anthropophagy, in his judgment, gave structure and direction to the most radical moments in national art. From this text, we can infer three elements highly important for understanding Anthropophagy in Oiticica’s thought: i) Anthropophagy would be a way to reduce foreign influences to national models; ii) these national models, forged anthropophagically from external influences, would be foundational for a national formation project

<sup>6</sup> Rafael Marino, “Rubem Valentim, Hélio Oiticica e o tropicalismo: dois caminhos para a antropofagia na arte brasileira,” *Novos Estudos* 40, no. 2 (2021): 335–56.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Rafael Marino, “Usos da antropofagia: canibalismo caleidoscópico,” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 37, no. 110 (2022): 1–24.

by endowing Brazil with an unprecedented cultural solidity; and iii) Anthropophagy would present itself as a defense that protects us from the cultural imperialism and colonialism of Europe and the USA, and as a material filter that would allow us to autonomously and creatively reuse foreign aesthetic and cultural influences, enabling us to erect a Brazilian culture.

In the text of March 4, 1968, we find a greater deepening and refinement of the role of Anthropophagy in national culture and formation. According to the Brazilian visual artist, “at the beginning of the text on New Objectivity, I invoke Oswald de Andrade and the meaning of anthropophagy (before it became fashionable, which happened after the staging of *O Rei da Vela* (The Candle King) as an important element in this attempt at national characterization”,<sup>9</sup> whose most conscious result was precisely his work *Tropicália* – which aimed to impose a Brazilian image upon the world. The genealogy of the work “*Tropicália*”, still according to Oiticica, should be seen from the first “*Parangolés*”, in the experience with popular samba, in his visit and discovery of the *favelas* (*morros cariocas*) and their organic architecture – this popular organicity could also be seen, according to the artist, in the stilt houses (*palafitas*) of the Amazon. With one difference: the *Parangolés* still maintained a level of universalist ideas, such as the return to myth and sensory incorporation, whereas in *Tropicália*, the intention was to create an artistic and Brazilian avant-garde language that would give structure to the country’s cultural scene. In this Brazilian image exposed to the world, Oiticica ultimately intended to create a myth of miscegenation, understood as the construction of a Brazilian culture and arts in which the Black and indigenous elements and heritage would anthropophagically devour the European element:

That is why I believe that *Tropicália*, which encapsulates this entire series of propositions, came to contribute strongly to this objectification of a total Brazilian image, to the overthrow of the universalist myth of Brazilian culture, which is entirely based on Europe and North America, in an inadmissible Aryanism here: in truth, with *Tropicália* I wanted to create the myth of miscegenation – we are Black, Indigenous, White, everything at the same time – our culture has nothing to do with the European one, despite being subjected to it even today: only the Black and the Indigenous did not capitulate to it. Whoever is not conscious of this should fall away. For the creation of a true Brazilian culture, characteristic and strong, expressive at least, this damned European and American heritage will have to be absorbed, anthropophagically, by the Black and Indigenous heritage of our land, which are in fact the only significant ones, since the majority of Brazilian art products are hybrid, intellectualized to the extreme, empty of their own meaning.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Subsequently, Oiticica asserts that Tropicalism, which should have served as a project of a miscegenated Brazilian art radically against the damned European and American heritage, became fashionable. A consumer article among “bourgeois, sub-intellectuals, and cretins of all kinds preaching tropicalism, *tropicália*”<sup>11</sup>. It should be noted that, in the quoted excerpt, the ideas of miscegenation and hybridity are juxtaposed: the former would signify the creation of a non-colonized Brazilian art, and the latter would precisely mark a Brazilian art still with universalist and intellectualist pretensions. We should also recall that, in an earlier passage, the visual artist had already pointed out that the origin of *Tropicália*’s transformation into a fashion trend occurred after the staging of *O Rei da Vela* by the Oficina theater group. But why, for Oiticica, could Tropicalism have become a consumer article? According to Oiticica, the direct experiential element of art could not be consumed by bourgeois voracity, since experience and existence would not be possible for the bourgeois sectors, given that their culture was overly universalist and concerned with the discovery of exotic folklore. The image, in turn, opened space for an understanding of Tropicalism as superficial consumption. That is, what Oiticica called the supra-sensorial would be the most essential element for a non-colonized Brazilian avant-garde, and, at the same time, the non-marketable aspect of art, given that it was existential and not universalist. In truth, the supra-sensorial would be precisely the means to overthrow intellectualist universalism. Furthermore, only in this way could Tropicalism carry out its deepest and most critical project, which is: by noting that the tropicalist myth went far beyond banana trees and parrots, one would see that it is the “consciousness of a non-conditioning to established structures, therefore highly revolutionary in its totality. Any conformism, whether intellectual, social, or existential, escapes its main idea.”<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to consider two internal elements of the Tropicalist movement. It is known that the movement’s name came, as indicated by Caetano Veloso,<sup>13</sup> from a suggestion by filmmaker Luís Carlos Barreto for the opening track of Veloso’s solo album, recorded in 1967 and released in 1968. This music was, in turn, inspired by the eponymous art installation by Hélio Oiticica, exhibited in April 1967 at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ). In any case, despite the musical and artistic spheres having significant convergences – such as an avant-garde impulse that utilized modern trends in Brazilian art and music to create something radically new,<sup>14</sup> and the concern with forging a global image of Brazilian culture as a miscegenated construction of the nation and culture against American and European purism<sup>15</sup> – here is an essential distinction (which will not be fully developed here

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>13</sup> Caetano Veloso, *Verdade tropical* (Companhia das Letras, 2017). 51.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Cícero, “O tropicalismo e a MPB,” in: *Finalidades sem fim: ensaios sobre poesia e arte* (Companhia das Letras, 2005), 54–72.

<sup>15</sup> Marino, “Usos da antropofagia: canibalismo caleidoscópico,” 14.



due to space constraints). According to Basualdo,<sup>16</sup> there is a significant disagreement between Hélio Oiticica and the duo Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, which relates to their stance on the relationship between the arts and what might be called the Culture Industry. The latter two believed that there was a democratizing and even disruptive potential in integrating music with the culture industry, as it could both become less provincial by receiving external influences from international pop music and could effectively reach the masses. Oiticica, as seen in his texts explored above, was more suspicious of the possibilities within what Basualdo called the culture industry, arguing that it would strip Tropicalism of its supra-sensorial meaning and retain only a marketable image of Tropicalism.

It must also be noted that Anthropophagy was mobilized by Oiticica when, during his period in New York, he came into deeper contact with the rock music of Jimi Hendrix and Mick Jagger. The artist indicates that, unlike Brazilian samba, rock does not require initiations, dispenses with a connection to territory, and its dance is created not through choreography, but from what each person makes while listening to it.<sup>17</sup> Be that as it may, rock would allow for a total and anthropophagic synthesis of various cultural tendencies, which would mark a rupture with what he conceived as the elitism of styles like jazz and would decisively mark the American cultural fabric.<sup>18</sup>

Now, we will proceed with a detailed analysis of Oiticica's works throughout his career.

## Works and developments

In his “Metaesquemas”, we see works that engage strongly with the geometric abstractions of the *Grupo Frente* (1954–1956) and the *Grupo Neoconcreto* (1959–1961), which had a significant influence on the still relatively young Oiticica. Thus, these productions by the artist demonstrate a strong impetus for concrete-abstract investigation, materialized in numerous rigorous painting exercises marked by variations and combinations of geometric shapes, their positions, spaces, optical games, and a select number of colors, such as black, blue, red, orange, yellow, white, and green. The materials used were gouache and cardboard, with dimensions of around 40 x 60 cm. It is noteworthy, however, that from the very first “Metaesquema”, Oiticica had already begun to break away from the orthogonal primacy characteristic of the concretists who influenced him, thereby imparting a particular gestuality and rhythm to his abstraction exercises. In addition to this, Oiticica was also revolutionizing symmetries, which opened space for more fluid and dynamic formalizations.

<sup>16</sup> Carlos Basualdo, “Vanguarda, cultura popular e indústria cultural,” in: *Tropicália: uma revolução na cultura brasileira* (Cosac Naify, 2007), 11–31.

<sup>17</sup> Hélio Oiticica, “Um mito vadio: entrevistado por Jary Cardoso,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 05 nov. (caderno Folhetim), 1978, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Vivian Crockett, “War heroes: por uma poética da negritude em Hélio Oiticica,” in *Hélio Oiticica: a dança na minha experiência*, ed. A. Pedroso and T. Toledo (MASP, 2020), 135.

While the early works from this stage of the artist's career still exhibited a certain rigidity, emphasizing diamond and rectangular shapes scattered as if emerging from the core of a recently exploded point, later card works embraced formal diversification where bulging shapes coexisted with more linear geometries and structures with recesses. Within this context, the thicker edges and rougher figures, which became common since mid-1958, did not ossify the paintings; instead, through optical and pictorial games and subtle approximations, they imparted a vibration whose rhythm gave them a dancing quality. Their balances, when present, seemed to threaten to give way<sup>19</sup>, which brought a particular choreographic tension to the works.

If it were possible to establish a temporal continuum between the early and later “Metaesquemas”, it is remarkable how the forms increasingly seem to want to leap from the space and emerge from the surface of the paper cards. Keeping this in mind, it is interesting to recall the analysis made by Favaretto,<sup>20</sup> who argues that through this exploration of spatial possibilities, Oiticica was already foreshadowing the future developments of his works, such as his “Labirintos” (Labirints), “Relevods espaciais” (Spatial Reliefs), and “Pentráveis” (Penetrables). Regarding dance, it is worth noting, echoing Conduru's<sup>21</sup> analysis, that it is not only present in the dancing plastic arrangement of the “Metaesquemas”, but in the very invitation to movement that they extend to the observer. This occurs because some of Oiticica's abstraction exercises contain metallic microparticles, which ‘turn off’ or ‘turn on’ as the audience moves in front of the artwork, thereby creating a particular choreography.

In “Núcleos” and “Relevos espaciais”, the desire to occupy space beyond the pictorial gains full citizenship. It is not difficult to see, embodied in these works, the neoconcrete impetus to surpass the exacerbated rationalism of constructivism and to create almost-corpus works, which resemble organic bodies endowed with their own phenomenological reality. In “Núcleos”, one can observe how the abstractions present in “Metaesquemas” are liberated and gain space beyond the canvas. The colors, now freed from gouache on paper, extend outward from the surfaces and acquire a three-dimensional spatial dimension of their own. However, the transformation of colors does not only occur in space in “Núcleos”; it is also of a temporal order: the color, through various brushstrokes and layers of pigment that introduce subtle differences and vibrations in an apparent repetition, gains duration and acts upon viewers, making them active participants in the artwork. Thus, for Oiticica, the structure of the productions comes together with their color; that is, there is no a priori structure, as it is constructed “in the very action of color-light”<sup>22</sup>. The wooden plates, supported by thin nylon threads, invite the spectator-activator to circumnavigate and, when possible (as in the case of “Grande Núcleo”), to enter them as if navigating a labyrinth. In the work “Núcleo n.01”, the presence of a mirror on the floor below the artwork

<sup>19</sup> Rodrigo Naves, *A forma difícil* (Companhia das Letras, 2011), 248.

<sup>20</sup> Celso Favaretto, *A invenção de Hélio Oiticica* (EDUSP, 2015), 52.

<sup>21</sup> Roberto Conduru, “Metaesquema, metaforma, metaobra,” *ARS* 15, no. 30 (2017): 70.

<sup>22</sup> Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 17.



amplifies chromatic conflicts, creating the sensation of two wooden bodies dancing in space. By incorporating the movement of the spectator, Oiticica not only “attributes to color the time of the movement of one’s own body, a movement that causes subtle changes in the perception of color”<sup>23</sup> but also opens spaces for the rhythms and choreographies specific to the audiences. Therefore, there would be rhythms and dance in the colors, in the wooden plates, and in the people.

In the “Relevos espaciais”, this color-light that is active and possesses duration is also present. Unlike in “Núcleos”, where a grouping of geometries is present, the “Relevos” are specific, abstract forms shaped through the overlay and composition of wooden plates. The color, as observed in “Núcleos”, constitutes the very structure rather than being a part of it, and reveals itself in various ways, through smooth and continuous transitions between pigments or shades of the same color. Their recesses, in relation to them, open other reliefs and worlds to be explored. These diverse ways of looking at the “Relevos” also invite the participation and bodily movement of the audience, whose circulation opens new perspectives on the creation and even ‘creates’ other works. In this manner, these complex bodies floating in space build rhythmic and choreographic possibilities for themselves and for others that break with the present.

In relation to the “Penetráveis”, we focus on the analysis of “Penetrável n.01”. This is a construction made with movable wooden panels, larger than those seen in the “Relevos” and “Núcleos”, erected on the floor and composed of warm colors. It was common for Oiticica to combine a series of “Penetráveis” in exhibitions, creating large environments from this combination. One such environment, highly relevant to contemporary art, was *Tropicália*, which made its first appearance in the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (1967). Nonetheless, the chromatic-phenomenological experiments of Oiticica acquire another dimension with this production: the activating audience participates in the work by entering it, where they experience color (and its changes) around and through their bodies. This, according to Nunes,<sup>24</sup> informs an authentic aesthetic of involvement and movement. The “Penetráveis”, due to the way they exist in space, integrate more radically with the environment, such that the very traditional notion of a work of art is shaken: space becomes ‘organized’, quotidian life is aestheticized, and the artistic production ceases to ‘exist’ without the activation of subjects.<sup>25</sup> This aestheticization of everyday space, which blurs more rigid ideas of inside and outside – from its color-structures saturated with chromatic tensions to the choreographic activation of the participating public – opens escape lines for a rhythm that disrupts the monotony of life.

The “Bólides” are small constructions made from materials such as wooden panels, pieces of colored fabric, glass vases, mirrors, sand, sawdust, iron, nylon, plastic bottles, and tulle. With their openings, recesses, bulging shapes, stackable objects,

<sup>23</sup> Braga, “A cor da música: há uma metafísica em Hélio Oiticica,” *ARS* 15, no. 30 (2017): 55.

<sup>24</sup> Nunes, *Lygia Clark e Hélio Oiticica* (FUNARTE, 1987), 42.

<sup>25</sup> Favaretto, *A invenção de Hélio Oiticica*, 67.

secret compartments, doors that open, and unexpected openings, they sometimes resemble miniatures of the “Núcleos”; at other times, they evoke small houses reminiscent of those in Anna Mariani’s photographs and, in other situations, everyday objects like plant pots and colored bottles. Oiticica’s chromatic experimentation takes on a different scale in his “Bólides”, becoming more concentrated and smaller. This, in fact, is not a drawback, as it opens diverse possibilities for activation, in which the participating audience spins around, walks around, displaces objects, opens and closes compartments, explores recesses, discovers escape routes, hidden spaces, and experiences subtle variations in pigmentation. Therefore, as previously mentioned, it is a pity that the audience has not been able to fully experience them, particularly due to their established significance.

With “Bólides”, the playful takes on a new prominence within the body of works by Oiticica. In the manner of the threshold toys described by Benjamin<sup>26</sup>, the “Bólides” suggest, even and especially to those who are no longer children, the childhood experiences of engaging with what is deemed useless by capital and with a temporality whose duration is not measured by the empty time of the clock. It is worth remembering that Oiticica was a devoted reader of Bergson. From this perspective, it is possible to notice similarities between these works by the artist and the subversively unclassifiable Odradek, as depicted by Kafka in the short story “The Cares of a Family Man”<sup>27</sup>. Both are movable, colorful, irresponsible, modest in scale, and made from waste and materials declassified by society. Moreover, both, in one way or another, reveal aesthetic and historical virtualities that transcend bourgeois commitments to conservative rituals and capitalist productivity. In other words, they point to alternative ways of life distinct from those of petty-bourgeois morality.

The politics of the “Bólides” do not stop there. We can see direct indications in them of the repressive scenario experienced in Brazil during the mid-1960s and 1970s. We refer here to “B 33 Bólido Caixa 33 ‘Tributo a Cara de Cavalo’”. This work, in the form of a box open at the front and top, is made from wooden panels painted black on the outside and featuring collages of newspaper images inside that depict Manoel Moreira, known as Cara de Cavalo, lying dead with numerous bullet wounds on his body. A red tulle completes the work stretched diagonally, extending under the edges of the “Bólido”, and a bag of pigment on which is written: “Here it is/ and it will remain/ contemplate/ its/ historical/ silence.” Straddling the line between a tribute-protest and a tombstone, the “Bólido” recalls the death of the first victim of the Le Cocq Squad. Cara de Cavalo was also honored by Oiticica in one of his banners – a silkscreen on fabric, more specifically – entitled “Seja Marginal, Seja Herói” (Be Marginal, Be a Hero), which had one of its first appearances in the political happening “Bandeiras”, which took place at General Osório Square in Rio de Janeiro in 1968 and featured the participation of various experimental artists.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Reflexões sobre a criança, o brinquedo e a educação* (Editora 34, 2009), 81–89.

<sup>27</sup> Roberto Schwarz, *O pai de família e outros estudos* (Companhia das Letras, 2008).

The “Parangolés” are somewhat amorphous capes and garments to be worn by people. There are also those made in the form of flags, banners, standards, and tents, such as the “Parangolé Estandarte” and “P03 Parangolé Tenda 01”. Their materials, as in the artist’s previous works, are quite varied: different fabrics, pieces of wood, plastics, tulle, nylon, newspapers, vinyl, and more, which are crafted into layers, intersections, recesses, and spaces to be discovered. The name of this collection of works by Oiticica is revealing of his intentions, as the word “Parangolé” was found written by him in a makeshift dwelling constructed from plastics, string, and leftover materials. Characteristics that his “Parangolés” elaborated upon.

The “Parangolés” only truly come into existence when they are worn, manipulated, danced, transported, and interpreted by the public, who, in an even more radical manner than in the previous works, become active participants in the art. While the “Parangolés” ‘exist’ with the activation of individuals, participants can perceive these creations as a kind of new sensory organ attached to them, allowing them to perceive a collective wave of Dionysian celebration.<sup>28</sup> The “Bólides” and other works discussed above, although they possess their own rhythms and create shared, spontaneous choreographic scores with their activators, are still marked by a certain contemplative introspection. In contrast, the “Parangolés” exhibit research into colors, where pictorial experimentation occurs through and within the movement of dancing bodies.

The maturation and conception period of these creations coincides with two important elements in Oiticica’s trajectory: his involvement with the Escola de Samba Estação Primeira de Mangueira (where he served as a dancer) and the concerns arising from his readings of Nietzsche. From the second element, the visual artist began to desire an art of incorporation in which the Dionysian celebration could facilitate a transvaluation of the prevailing aesthetic and political values. Mangueira, in turn, seems to have prompted Oiticica to develop a greater sensitivity – or an expansion of it – towards what he perceived as the religious, corporeal, festive, musical, and choreographic elements of the popular universe of Mangueira hill.

This attempt at a radical Bacchic transvaluation stemming from Mangueira yielded various fruits in Oiticica’s art. Such an impulse can be distinctly observed in two of his “Parangolés: P17 Parangolé Capa 13 ‘Estou Possuído’” (I Am Possessed) and “P15 Parangolé Capa 11 ‘Incorporo a Revolta’” (I Incorporate the Revolt)”. Both phrases, with titles embroidered and printed on some of their material layers, reference the Afro-Brazilian political and religious universe. For Oiticica, it was as if, by activating these “Parangolés”, people could close off their bodies and resist the obstacles of everyday life, the prevailing values of petty-bourgeois morality, political repression, and the conservatism of artistic circuits. Thus, it is possible to interpret, following Oiticica’s intentions, that the people, the “Parangolés,” become carriers (as steeds) of the transvaluation of everyday life and institutions, bringing art and life closer together and ultimately tying everything to celebration. It is also interesting to

<sup>28</sup> Paula Braga, “Hélio Oiticica and the parangolés: (ad)ressing Nietzsche’s Übermensch,” *Third Text* 17, no. 1 (2003): 56.

recall various photographs in which the residents of Mangueira themselves appear activating the “Parangolés”, which, according to Conduru<sup>29</sup>, indicates Oiticica’s political and emotional interest in the condition of the people from the hill.

The Dionysian incorporation of the “Parangolé” was imbued with a radicality grounded in an engagement with all forms of social dissent – from organized movements, such as revolution, to dispersed and individual acts, like the banditry of Cara de Cavalo – and in Oiticica’s experience on the Morro da Mangueira, which was unsustainable for the artistic and cultural institutions of the time. Evidence of this is found in the fact that, as previously mentioned, Oiticica, along with several other dancers and members of the Estação Primeira de Mangueira, was prevented from entering and activating the “Parangolés” at the *Opinião 65* exhibition held at MAM-RJ. This event perfectly embodies Oiticica’s idea that the “Parangolé” would serve as a form of subversive anti-art, opposing the traditional divisions between art and life, as well as the rigid distinctions within the institutionalized artistic field.

Oiticica, in his work “Tropicália”, aims to create a tropical environment – complete with gravel, macaws, palm trees, sand, and “Penetráveis” – that resembles what he referred to as the organic and fantastic constructions of the favelas and the experience of walking through their alleyways<sup>30</sup>. In this setting, he sought to construct a comprehensive Brazilian image and, more importantly, an extrasensory existential experience, countering intellectualist culture and established structures. Ultimately, “Tropicália” consisted of a penetrable space through which the spectator/participant entered barefoot into a tropical setting filled with buried poems, strong-smelling roots, plastic objects, and more. This journey culminated in a television that was turned on, imbuing a total Brazilian imagery into the state of global art and fostering a consciousness of non-conditioning to established structures.

Critics received “Tropicália” as a landmark in Brazilian art, not so much for its construction and manifest images – which would be the obvious interpretation of the tropical – but more for its profound agency. Brett<sup>31</sup> argues that the tropical appearance should be contrasted with its deeper meaning, endowed with sensory images, such as that of a television turned on in complete darkness, producing intimate confrontations that could change individuals. Favaretto,<sup>32</sup> in turn, assesses that what is hidden in the work is what is most manifest about it, with the agency of behaviors, languages, and figures that shatter any total image or representation of Brazil, forming a critical language of the dominated against colonialism and its petrified images. Penna,<sup>33</sup> furthermore, sees in Oiticica’s work a profoundly anticolonial sense, and using the Aristotelian distinction between simile (comparison between two elements) and

<sup>29</sup> Roberto Conduru, “Índices afro na arte no Brasil nas décadas de 1960 e 1970,” in *Arte não europeia: conexões historiográficas a partir do Brasil*, ed. C. Avoletse and P. Meneses (Estação Liberdade; Vasto, 2020), 145.

<sup>30</sup> Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Brett, *Brasil experimental* (Contracapa, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Favaretto, *A invenção de Hélio Oiticica*.

<sup>33</sup> João Camillo Penna, *O tropo tropicalista* (Azougue, 2017), 235–36.

metaphor (replacement of a component by another), argues that the trope, or the tropical figure contained in the work of Oiticica, consists “precisely in the transportation – in the Greek sense of metaphor – of a figurative meaning that replaces the literal meaning, thus introducing a kind of void of ownership.” In other words, one would see in such work “a movement of figurative transportation, anthropographic”, in which “the black and indigenous heritages, the ‘only significant ones’” – as we noted in Oiticica’s quotation in the second section of this chapter – should occupy the void of significance previously assigned to Brazilian art, imposing a Brazilian image on the world. In other words, the “tropical trope would consist of this anthropophagic devouring of our own void, installing in its place the Amerindian and Afro-Brazilian figure, the ‘Brazilian state of art.’” According to Oiticica, with this work, he aimed to create the myth of miscegenation within Brazilian art.<sup>34</sup>

Considering the above, we will now make brief comments on a specific debate regarding Oiticica’s artistic trajectory and his relationship with Afro-Brazilian and popular cultures and arts.

### Exoticism, ginga, and Brazilian art

In the essay “O Hélio não tinha ginga” (Hélio did not have ginga), Asbury accuses the creation of a populist myth surrounding Oiticica and his work, which he argues is based on an overvaluation and reification of Oiticica’s relationship with the favela and the Escola de Samba Mangueira. Consequently, the criticism suggests that the “discovery” of the popular and samba became the driving force of the visual artist’s entire trajectory. This attitude resulted in an inflation of works, such as the “Parangolé”, revealing an effort to politically correct multicultural inclusion of a Global South artist in the world art circuit, based on his supposed Brazilian cultural difference. Asbury presents evidence for his argument, including elements such as: the incorporation of other influences in the structuring of Oiticica’s creations, like the pictorial research and the readings he conducted of Bergson and Nietzsche; the analysis of works created after Oiticica’s departure from Brazil; and the use of photographs of the artist dancing samba in Mangueira, which he claims illustrate Oiticica’s Herculean effort to perform the ginga, and therefore his non-belonging to the community. We suggest, while nuancing Asbury’s critique, that the ginga, rhythm, and incorporation of the popular were present in Oiticica’s work from its earliest stages, which, far from being merely a tropical exoticization by critics, were decisive for a considerable portion of the creations of Oiticica and for his overall trajectory. Antonio Cicero himself argued that one of the great discoveries in Oiticica’s work was its use of a certain exoticism to ironize the stereotyped manner in which the tropics were understood.<sup>35</sup> This incorporation, however, did not occur without contradictions.

<sup>34</sup> Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 108.

<sup>35</sup> Antonio Cicero, “O construtivismo brasileiro,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 27 nov. (caderno Ilustrada), 2010.

To demonstrate this in practice, we will make a quick comparison between Oiticica's "Tropicália" and the work of artist Rubem Valentim.<sup>36</sup> Herkenhoff<sup>37</sup> emphasizes the proximity between Oiticica and Valentim in their use of geometry to dynamize the plane with graphic rhythm and their references to Afro-Brazilian religiosity.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Herkenhoff distances the aesthetic experiences of Modernists from those of Valentim, given that while the former's references to indigenous cultures are destined for the Other, the latter's work in relation to African heritage stems from his personal experiences. This metric is not, however, applied to Oiticica, whose approximations with Afro-Brazilian culture, in truth, also configured a kind of journey to the people – that is, to an exterior popular sphere that was not part of his initial formation. Note, in this sense, that Oiticica, in a text about the *Parangolé*, will state that this work could be understood as the basic structural search for the constitution of the world of objects, an interest, "therefore, in popular constructive primitivism"<sup>38</sup> – the opposite of Valentim's perspective.

This, in itself, cannot be understood as an aesthetic critique, as the 'primitivisms' of Dalí, Gauguin, Klee, Tzara, Matisse, etc., based on a rejection of official art and an impulse of evasion toward the Other of the West,<sup>39</sup> produced unavoidable aesthetic results. However, we argue that in the cases of Oiticica and Valentim, this difference ultimately yielded distinct aesthetic results.

In this sense, we disagree with the analysis of Dardashti,<sup>40</sup> for whom Oiticica and Valentim's aesthetic treatment of the repressed Afro-Brazilian culture would be similar. Furthermore, we also distance ourselves from the perspectives presented by Conduru<sup>41</sup> and Asbury,<sup>42</sup> for whom criticism and reception would have rendered Oiticica's relationship with the *morro*, the samba school, and popular elements as something romantic or exoticized. For us, in fact, this exoticization was present in Oiticica's own works and writings.

Rubem Valentim, as previously stated, invested in a universal language, but with a Brazilian character: a Brazilian *riscadura* (ritual mark-making), in which the primary source would be the living, requalified Afro-Amerindian-Northeastern-Brazilian iconography. Subsequently, through his European and Senegalese experience, where he encountered a rich Afro-diasporic visual language, the aforementioned iconography was transposed into a contemporary language without falling into

<sup>36</sup> Marino, "Rubem Valentim, Hélio Oiticica e o tropicalismo."

<sup>37</sup> Herkenhoff, "A pedra do raio de Rubem Valentim, Obá-pintor da casa de mãe senhora," 422.

<sup>38</sup> Hélio Oiticica, "Bases fundamentais para uma definição do parangolé," in: *Hélio Oiticica: a dança na minha experiência*, ed. A. Pedrosa and T. Toledo (MASP, 2020), 291.

<sup>39</sup> Mario de Micheli. *As vanguardas artísticas* (Martins Fontes, 2004), 55.

<sup>40</sup> Abigail Dardashti, "Negotiating Afro-Brazilian Abstraction: Rubem Valentim in Rio, Rome, and Dakar, 1957–1966," in: *New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America*, ed. by M. Alavarez and A. Franco (Routledge, 2019), 85–86.

<sup>41</sup> Conduru, "Índices afro na arte no Brasil nas décadas de 1960 e 1970," 145.

<sup>42</sup> M. Asbury, "O Hélio não tinha ginga," in *Fios soltos: a arte de Hélio Oiticica*, ed. P. Braga (Perspectiva, 2011), 27–52.



folkloric or caricatural visions, thus avoiding a sub-kitsch typical of exoticizing tropicalisms.<sup>43</sup> This position shaped almost the entirety of his production, as we have already seen.

In view of this, and in light of Herkenhoff's analysis, the difference between the reformulations made by Oiticica and Valentim, based on Afro-Amerindian experiences and iconographies, is striking. Here, we can see differences in the very form and mediations through which both artists transfigured them into art. Thus, while Oiticica directed himself to the Other, Valentim sought to give form to what was intrinsic to his own experiences and perspectives, which ultimately helped to shape distinct aesthetic results. Not least because, as Veloso explains,<sup>44</sup> part of Tropicalism's relevance came from its tendency to "make Brazil exotic for both tourists and Brazilians", since the eccentricities of this tropical Catholic monster could not be neutralized.

In a comparative analysis, while Oiticica sought to construct a violently exotic Brazilian image for both foreign avant-garde artists and Brazilians, Valentim sought to forge, from the inside and through a radical anthropophagic experience of decentralizing and devouring the abstractionist language of the capitalist center, a universal language solidified from the Afro-Northeastern-Amerindian Brazilian experience. In short, while Oiticica created an exoticizing work that had a critical purpose, Valentim circulated Brazilian-Afro-Atlantic constructions forged as a universal language, which, incidentally, explains Valentim's critiques of tropicalisms. While Oiticica practiced an art based on an external, foreign gaze upon exotic characteristics of Brazil, Valentim, from a peripheral viewpoint, destabilized and criticized the European norms imposed by imperialist power relations, demonstrating their incompleteness and particularisms, which the Afro-Amerindian-popular Brazilian iconography would correct.

Despite the notable presence of popular culture in Oiticica's experience, one cannot overlook the way in which the visual artist relates to popular and Afro-Brazilian cultures and arts. There are numerous instances in which Oiticica refers to the Mangueira favela as a kind of exotic repository of life, creativity, and spontaneity, rendering, as Crockett<sup>45</sup> pointed out, the favela is a malleable signifier subject to external projections. Oiticica's quest for "popular constructive primitivism"<sup>46</sup> and for an art that resembled the "beauty of the mulata sambando"<sup>47</sup> thus approaches a kind of escapism and an exoticizing search for the Other – like significant trends in modern avant-garde art. While this critical observation does not intend to discredit Oiticica's work, it cannot be neglected for historiographical purposes.

<sup>43</sup> Rubem Valentim, "Manifesto ainda que tardio," in *Rubem Valentim: construções afro-atlânticas*, ed. A. Pedrosa and F. Oliva (Masp, 2018), 133–34.

<sup>44</sup> Veloso, *Verdade tropical*, 264.

<sup>45</sup> Crockett, "War heroes: por uma poética da negritude em Hélio Oiticica," 135.

<sup>46</sup> Oiticica, "Bases fundamentais para uma definição do parangolé," 291.

<sup>47</sup> Oiticica *apud* Crockett, "War heroes: por uma poética da negritude em Hélio Oiticica," 136.

In this regard, the critic Teixeira Coelho<sup>48</sup> noted that, as a cultural habit, the *Semana de Arte de 1922* is viewed in Brazil as the founding moment of Brazilian art. However, international manuals, “authored by unknowns or stars like Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, overlook the week: for many of them, Brazilian art only begins with Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica.”<sup>49</sup> From a different analytical perspective, Naves observes something similar in the international reception of Oiticica and Clark. According to Naves, the distinction and discussion between modern and contemporary art are extensive; however, a common differentiating feature in this debate is the “defense, by contemporary critics and artists, of a strong rapprochement between art and life, in a movement that opposes the modern claim for the autonomy of art.”<sup>50</sup> Continuing Naves’ reasoning, since the late 1960s, *Pop Art*, *Minimalism*, *Arte Povera*, *Happenings*, and *Neo-Expressionism* have focused on this connection between art and life. During this time, an ideology has developed those contrasts with the so-called formalism of modern art and its defense of the formal autonomy of the work. This constellation of concerns, critiques, and works is what has brought remarkable notoriety to the works of Clark and Oiticica. Also crucial to the enthusiastic reception of their works was an expectation from international critics for the exotic. That is, using Asbury’s categories critically, they were perceived as having more “ginga” than art produced in the Global North.

Although potentially advantageous in allowing for entry into the international art scene, the paths of exoticism can sometimes act as a steel cage that suppresses other grammars and aesthetic solutions in the Global South. As a result, when artists from the Global South exhibit their art, critics from the Global North and their audiences often expect elements of an Edenic tropic or solutions to issues unrelated to the artistic field in which the artist operates. In our view, Oiticica adopted an ambiguous stance, both denouncing and participating in such a movement.

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<sup>48</sup> José Teixeira Coelho, “22 e o final (feliz) da arte brasileira,” *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 11/02/2012, S8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Rodrigo Naves, *O vento e o moinho* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2007), 202.

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