

# Disquietudes: pandemic, crisis, necropolitics, Artaud

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**Abstract** | This paper starts from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 Brazil, to propose a reflection that combines concepts as Necropolitics, Crisis and Biopower with the anarchic thought of Antonin Artaud, a key figure to theatre studies, in order to set lines of flight alongside the current moment, while trying to think beyond the crisis. It articulates important references of the contemporary thought about the pandemic with the disquietude that plague us as artists and scholars from Aporia - Research group in Philosophy and Performance, virtually discussed over the months of social distancing.

**KEYWORDS:** Pandemic.  
Necropolitics. Antonin Artaud.

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**Inquietações:** pandemia, crise, necropolítica, Artaud

**Resumo** | Este artigo parte da pandemia por COVID-19, no Brasil de 2020, para propor uma reflexão que coadune conceitos como o de Necropolítica, Crise e Biopoder com o pensamento anárquico de Antonin Artaud, figura-chave para os estudos teatrais, de modo a propor linhas de fuga ao momento atual, tentando pensar para além da crise. Articula-se aqui referências importantes do pensamento contemporâneo sobre a situação pandêmica com as inquietações que nos assolam enquanto artistas e pesquisadores do Aporia - Grupo de pesquisas em Filosofia e Performance, discutidas virtualmente ao longo dos meses de isolamento social ocasionados pela pandemia.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:**  
Pandemia.Necropolítica. Antonin Artaud.

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**Inquietud:** pandemia, crisis, necropolítica, Artaud

**Resumen** | Este artículo se desarrolla a partir de la pandemia por COVID-19, en Brasil de 2020, para proponer una reflexión que reconcilia conceptos como el de la Necropolítica, Crisis y Biopoder con el pensamiento anárquico de Antonin Artaud, persona clave para los estudios teatrales, a fin de proponer líneas de escape al momento actual, intentando pensar para allá de la crisis. Se articula aquí referencias importantes del pensamiento contemporáneo sobre la situación pandémica con las inquietudes que nos acosan como artistas e investigadores del Aporia - Grupo de investigaciones en Filosofía y Performance, debatidas virtualmente al largo de los meses en aislamiento social ocasionados por la pandemia.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:**  
Pandemia; Necropolítica; Antonin Artaud.

Por que foi que cegamos, Não sei, talvez um dia se chegue a  
conhecer a razão, Queres que te diga o que penso, Diz, Penso que  
não cegamos, penso que estamos cegos. Cegos que veem,  
Cegos que, vendo, não veem. (SARAMAGO, 1995, p. 310)

Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this  
planet.  
(Agent Smith, *The Matrix*, 1999)

This is a disquiet writing. Disquiet either because of the events of this time (which is ours) – a strange time, permeated by hatred, misinformation, fear and even by a new type(s) of plague, as we will see, as well as by radical and Manichaeic opinions, capable of putting the human condition itself at stake. Beyond (or even falling short of) a pandemic of worldwide proportions, perhaps the most repeated word in the media is not “pandemic,” but another one: “Crisis.” A word that is repeated incessantly, often together (when talking about health crisis, for example) but also separately... Crisis of democracy, political crisis, crisis... “Crisis” has been perhaps, in the last decades, since the cold war, at least, the most heard word in the national and international political news, often justifying the most diverse actions. Although the idea of a “permanent crisis” is an oxymoron, as stated by Boaventura de Souza Santos (2020), it seems to be a usual survival mechanism for capitalist and neoliberal societies, aggravated by the current pandemic (and disquieting) context. In this sense, contributing to this discussion, in that it helps us to think about artistic practice in the face of such issues and the dream of possible futures, is our goal here.

### 1. Brief chronology of an announced tragedy

**Late November / December 2019.** First report of an unknown illness in Wuhan, China. Among its various symptoms, serious problems related to the respiratory system stand out. The first known cases are from November 2019, but the first official report is in late December. The disease, caused by SARS-CoV-2, would be called COVID-19.

**March 2020.** The World Health Organization (WHO) declares a pandemic state. The virus is no longer a distant rumor, forcing the world population to progressively adopt measures of social isolation and quarantine, in order to flatten the contagion curve so health systems are not overloaded. Unrestrained populational growth, technological advances applied to means of transport, associated with the accelerated pace of capitalism and globalization, enabled viral transmission at the global level, and within a few weeks there were records of the virus on all continents. The pandemic outbreak and its dimensions go beyond the effects caused by those infected; they lead to collective crises that triggered, at first, a rush to supermarkets and, also, social and financial instability, propagation of false news (*fake news*) and xenophobia/racism against people of Chinese parentage.

**May 2020.** In the United States, a 46-year-old black man named George Floyd, recently unemployed due to the pandemic, is killed by police officer Derek Chauvin, staying eight minutes and forty-six seconds with the policeman's knee on his

neck. The reason he was approached by the police was the accusation that Floyd had bought a pack of cigarettes with a counterfeit bill at an establishment of which he was a regular customer. After the episode, a series of demonstrations began, some peaceful, others radical, as a sign of revolt. The protests spread to various parts of the world and consist of continuous activities, expanding the discussion on the theme of racism on several fronts such as TV channels, virtual festivals, marches in the streets, debates, among others.

**July 2020.** Brazil alone reached 130,000 deaths by COVID-19. In this period, in Brazil, the safety procedures suggested by the WHO are loosened, even though the pandemic shows signs of resurgence, while the federal government does not commit to building a unified plan of national dimensions to fight against the pandemic. Newspaper news not only clearly report the slaughter of indigenous peoples with the new plague, but also indicate the standard victim in Brazil as having well-defined features: being a man, poor and black.

An exclusive survey commissioned by ÉPOCA magazine from the Lagom Data consultancy, which analyzed data from 54,488 victims, shows what the characteristics of dead say about the pandemic in Brazil. The conclusion is that, for socioeconomic and sociodemographic reasons, the disease killed more poor and brown people, more men than women, and more young people than in other countries where the pandemic disabled health systems, such as in Italy and Spain. (SOARES, 2020, n/p)

**October 2020.** The country reaches 160,000 deaths.

## **2. Biopower and Necropolitics: the politicization of the pandemic in Brazil?**

One of the first contemporary thinkers to discuss the impacts of the coronavirus on Western societies was Slavoj Žižek, in a text published in late March 2020. According to him, above all, the coronavirus could represent the final blow to force capitalist & neoliberal societies to rethink themselves towards more sustainable forms of coexistence.

The continuous spread of the coronavirus epidemic eventually triggered certain epidemics of ideological viruses that had been dormant in our societies: *fake news*, paranoid conspiracy theories, and outbreaks of racism. The quarantine, duly based on medical evidence, found an echo in the ideological pressure for establishing strict borders and isolating the enemies that represent a threat (...). However, perhaps, another much more beneficial virus will also spread and, if we are lucky, it will infect us: the virus of thinking about an alternative society, a society beyond nation-States, a society that updates itself in the ways of solidarity and global cooperation. (ŽIŽEK, 2020, n/p)

Nevertheless, there are other perspectives. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in an article published even earlier, on February 26, 2020 (therefore, even before the COVID-19 pandemic reached its peak in Italy), fiercely criticized the isolation measures attempted to control the pandemic.

The disproportion in relation to what, according to the CNR, is a normal flu, not unlike those recurring every year, stands out. It almost seems that, with terrorism exhausted as a cause of measures of exception, the invention of an epidemic could provide the ideal pretext to expand them beyond any limit. The other factor, no less worrying, is the state of fear that has evidently spread in the consciences of individuals in recent years and which translates into a real need for states of collective panic, for which the epidemic once again provides the ideal pretext. Thus, in a perverse vicious circle, the limitation of freedom imposed by governments is accepted on behalf of a desire for security that was induced by the governments themselves which now intervene to satisfy it. (AGAMBEN, 2020, n/p).

The state of fear and the measures of exception refer here to another concept: State of exception – which, according to Agamben, refers to a device for controlling the masses in order to provide the maintenance of power. Interestingly, Agamben, a fierce critic of the current capitalist system, ended up strengthening some of the dissonant voices that have been voiced since the beginning of the pandemic, most of which incorporated by defenders of political spectra opposed to his, far-right liberal: voices that seem to be blinded to the importance of human life when pointing out percentages of “some” deaths as acceptable.

It is worth noting that some authors, such as Roberto Esposito, quickly rose against Agamben's text in question. Esposito published, a few days after Agamben, a response-text with some criticisms of this controversy. Also highlighting other biopolitical aspects of the global pandemic that is plaguing us:

The fact is that anyone who has eyes to see cannot deny the full unfolding of biopolitics today. From biotechnology operations to spheres considered, at other times, exclusively natural, such as birth and death, to biological terrorism, the management of imagination and more or less serious epidemics, all current political conflicts have at their core the relationship between politics and biological life. But it is exactly the reference to Foucault that should lead us not to lose sight of the historically differentiated character of biopolitical phenomena. It is one thing to maintain, as Foucault rightly does, that for two and a half centuries politics and biology have been tightening in an ever tighter bond, with problematic and, at times, tragic successes. Another thing is to ratify between them incomparable situations and experiences. (...) However, once again, with regard to concerns that are certainly legitimate, it is necessary not to lose the sense of proportions. (ESPOSITO, 2020, n/p)

Agamben would also have pointed out the “climate of panic” generated by the media and authorities and discussed how such measures would affect mobility,

educational issues, suspension of demonstrations, and human coexistence, due to the fear that adopting measures such as *lockdown* and social distancing would mean flirting with totalitarianism. Agamben (2020), on the contrary, prefers the defense of his individual freedom to think in terms of (bio)macropolitical proportions: according to him, it would be acceptable that 15% of the population developed severe symptoms of COVID-19 and 4% were put in intensive care, even resulting in death – deaths, on a global scale, mostly the elderly and people in a situation of social vulnerability.

However... would we have the right to sacrifice them on behalf of the alleged freedom of all? Would the macro in fact be more important than the micro? What is the value of each human life? Is it possible to decide who lives and who dies? Would there be people who are "disposable," who "can die"? This discussion – whether or not it is intended by Agamben – reminds us of another one, produced by Zigmunt Bauman a few years ago. An equally fierce critic of capitalism, Bauman (2005) sheds light on the concept of "human waste," lives wasted because they are marginalized from the productive process – true castoffs from the industrial process and capitalist society, a perspective, undoubtedly, extremely reifying of human nature.

The concept of human waste or castoff, according to Bauman (2005), arises from the objectification of certain human beings, making other human beings bodies of constant production and consumption. If such bodies do not fit into this utilitarian mechanism, whose only value comes from their workforce and/or consumer potential, thusly we see why they are easily discarded, regarded as worthless objects and, therefore, worthless lives, as pointed out by Vinícius Siqueira:

Inevitably, the people who turn into waste are those who do not conform to the new rules of the order: they are workers who are impossible to be employed and, as a consequence, subjects who are impossible to consume. In other words, victims of economic progress, the populational surpluses with no planned destination, such as the poor and their children, are the unemployable, the non-consumers: they are not adapted to the construction of the order, they are the dead weight of an automated and inflexible capitalism, they are in excess and make the place where they live a superpopulated place. (SIQUEIRA, 2013, n/p)

Accordingly, when we think about the predominant profile of the victims of this pandemic in Brazil, mentioned in the previous section, it is evident that it affects the most vulnerable part of the population, the poor, living in *favelas*, black, older than young – i.e. those already at an "unemployable" age, at which both their ability to sell their own workforce has declined and, as a result, their consumer power (which was never very high) is also lost. The same portion of the population most easily discarded by the system – waste. We will return to this point very soon.

For now, we evoke Susan Sontag, in her already classic *Illness as Metaphor* (1984), who besides showing us, in a brilliant way, that nothing that is human is free from being mediated by meanings and interpretations, shows that the main metaphor that surrounds disease (and health) in Western medicine is, specifically, the thought of a combat against the disease or even a metaphor of the immune system as the body's defenses. In other words: thinking about the disease in the West necessarily requires a

metaphor founded on violence and on the military organization of the body. A reflection of Biopolitics in the representations of the body, no doubt. In this sense, we emphasize:

Illnesses have always been used as metaphors to reinforce accusations that a society was unjust or corrupt. (...) Critical illnesses (...) are the most specifically controversial. They are used to propose new and critical standards of individual health and to express a sense of dissatisfaction towards society as such. (SONTAG, 1984, p. 5)

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic is controversial. But what does it provide us if we use it, on a large scale, as a metaphor for thinking about Brazil today? Undoubtedly, this would be a metaphor underlying many of the current social representations in our country, in all their injustice. If we think about the Manichaeian political bias that plagues Brazil today, we see that there are narratives being constructed and that point, in a certain degree, towards eugenics: a society that tolerates well a high number of deaths (especially when considering the profile of those who die) has failed, in a certain sense, in its democratic and civilizing project, at the same time that this fact exposes its inequalities in a blatant way.

Judith Butler, in a text on the pandemic published in May 2020, questioned the limits of the capitalist system as to the comprehension of that which is human. Propounding the question: "Which deaths should we weep?" She explains that there is a distinction between deaths "worthy of mourning" and those that would not be, referring to people who are seen by the system as disposable and, for this reason, their deaths do not need to be wept or mourned, in a context where the "economy" or the "market" are more important. As she puts it:

It seems likely [...] a painful scenario in which some human creatures assert their right to live at the expense of others, reinstating the spurious distinction between worthy and unworthy lives, that is, those that must be protected against death, at any cost, and those whose lives would not be worth the effort to be safeguarded from illness and death (i.e., not worthy of mourning or regret) (BUTLER, 2020, n/p).

Throughout the discussion that has been built here, we ended up referencing some central concepts, such as the very concept of Bio-politics and that of biopower, as developed by Michel Foucault (2008), which coined these terms as a way of designating the set of population management and life control practices. This set is built on two fronts in our society of control. The first would be the micro scale (or "individual scale"), that is, the front that takes place through the control of bodies, "an anatomical-politics of the body" (referring to the disciplines, born in the 17th century, and dedicated to the training of the body, the organization and the extraction of its forces and utilities and to the disciplinary devices responsible for extracting the productive force from the human body, by controlling time and space, within institutions, such as the asylum, school, hospital, factory or prison). The second front, on the other hand, would be the macro scale (or "collective scale"), that is, that which takes place through "a biopolitics of populational control and regulation" (which focuses on managing the masses, considering their fundamental

biological reality and using knowledge and practices that enable managing migratory flows, birth and longevity rates, life and death – even epidemics and plagues). Both fronts have the same purpose. They are established aiming at the use and exploitation of the worker's body and the liberal and profitable organization of the economy, to that end reinforcing and sustaining the hierarchical difference between bodies that integrate different social groups and peoples, established through their most external/extreme differences: supposed differences as to race, gender, age, nationality, etc. (FOUCAULT, 2008)

Thus, the effective action of biopolitics in society occurs through State institutions, being described by Foucault as biopowers that in turn manage issues related to education, public security, food, health and so on, as in addition to human needs, such issues become political concerns.

In addition, we also reference here, albeit indirectly, the concept(s) of Necropolitics (and necropower), developed by Achille Mbembe (2018), shown, in a certain sense, as the exacerbation of biopolitics as a historical development of a death policy, which creates unique and new forms of social existence, in which entire populations are subjected to degrading living conditions that give them the status of “undead,” or people who, expropriated from their rights (over their own bodies, their workforce, and their political status), have their lives subjected to economic and politically dominant forces.

Going beyond the previously presented concept of “human waste,” we have Necropower as a death management policy: of those who can live and of those who can die, those whose death “is not mourned”, consequently, those already considered “dead in life” and, therefore, not worthy of mourning. Those for whom the current powers would not weep...

And, in Brazil, there are so many who die daily, even before the pandemic, indigenous, marginalized, black men and women of all ages, the poor and other lives considered socially as having less value, castoffs from the system. Those who, with the advent of the pandemic, had their social vulnerability made even more evident – as in the survey cited at the beginning of this text, which defined the “features” of the standard victim of COVID-19 in Brazil.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his recently released book *A Cruel Pedagogia do Virus* [The Cruel Pedagogy of the Virus], in a chapter entitled *A sul da quarentena* [South of the quarantine], confirms – in a sense – this conjuncture, in addition to helping us understand it.

Any quarantine is always discriminatory, [however it is] more difficult for some social groups than for others (...), groups that have in common a special vulnerability that precedes the quarantine and is aggravated with it. Such groups constitute what I call the South. In my conception, the South does not designate a geographical space. It designates a political, social and cultural space-time. It is a metaphor for unjust human suffering caused by capitalist exploitation, racial discrimination, and sexual discrimination. (SANTOS, 2020, p. 15)

To understand this diagnosis, it needs to be read in the light of the context of

his work and his most famous book, *Epistemologias do Sul* [Epistemologies of the South] (2009), whose title already refers to the need for a decolonial and recovery perspective, for breaking the silencing and exclusion, of peoples and cultures that were dominated by capitalism and colonialism and thus cast to the fringes – the global south. In the case of Brazilian society, slavery has left such deep scars that they are still present today, through exclusion and the “socioeconomic apartheid” that characterizes us and relegates certain bodies (the black, the poor, the uneducated...) to the fringes, even in a pandemic. And more than that: building narratives that justify such marginalization.

The racialization of death can be explained by Foucault's term *redox* in Mbembe, which is that of “State racism” that follows the capitalist logic of viewing the human as an object that serves or does not serve a given purpose. Concerning which Mbembe tells us:

in the biopower economy, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to enable the murderous functions of the State. According to Foucault, this is the condition for the acceptability of making people die. (MBEMBE, 2018, p. 18)

Not forgetting that such mechanism occurs through “a history of the true that would not be the constitution of a number of historically successive rationalities and would be established through the rectification or the elimination of ideologies” (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 49). In other words, we are today in the midst of a war of narratives, proposed as supposed ideological truths, in a time of post-truths orchestrated and catalyzed by countless *fake news*, which have exacerbated the politicization of a pandemic in order to create narratives that justify who can die and who can live, and emphasizing, above all, that the most important thing is to 'save the economy.' (BARBOSA, 2019)

Boaventura de Sousa Santos also calls this “the normality of the exception” to refer to the crisis of the current social economic model in force in capitalist societies as a whole, since

The current pandemic is not a crisis situation clearly opposed to a normality situation. Since the 1980s – as neoliberalism gradually imposed itself as the dominant version of capitalism and subjected itself more and more to the logic of the financial sector – the world has lived in a permanent state of crisis. A doubly abnormal situation. On the one hand, the idea of permanent crisis is an oxymoron, since, in the etymological sense, the crisis is, by nature, exceptional and temporary, and constitutes the opportunity to be overcome and give rise to a better status quo. On the other hand, when the crisis is transient, it must be explained by the factors that cause it. However, when it becomes permanent, the crisis becomes the cause that explains everything else. For example, the permanent financial crisis is used to explain cuts in social policies (health, education, social security) or wage degradation. And so it prevents one from asking about the real causes of the crisis. The purpose of the permanent crisis is not to be resolved. But what is the purpose of this objective?



Basically, there are two: legitimizing the scandalous concentration of wealth and boycotting effective measures to prevent the impending ecological catastrophe. That is how we have lived for the past forty years. Therefore, the pandemic has only aggravated a crisis situation to which the world population has been subjected. Hence its specific danger. (SANTOS, 2020, p. 5–6)

The crisis, even though it is a necessary component in the global context for the maintenance of death and control policies, is nowadays exacerbated by the pandemic conjuncture. However, this is no novelty. If the crisis (and inequality, as well as the death policies described above) is the “normal,” overcoming the pandemic is not enough, returning to “normality” is not enough: it is necessary to overcome such policies of death and domination. If the macropolitical context, in terms of foreign policies, is annihilating, would it be possible to think of micropolicies of resistance as an alternative and way of survival? We need new metaphors, capable of overcoming the “fight against poverty” as well as the “war on disease”: yes, we must overcome the crisis, but also go beyond the narratives that justify it and the whole war paradigm of a society of control, going deeper into the real causes of the problem, beyond the crises used to justify small changes that are nothing more than palliative measures. How to do this, however, remains a central issue and a future task.

### **3. The blindness that paralyzes us or the virus-like behavior**

Although briefly, we can extrapolate this discussion through a literary illustration: José Saramago (1995), in his book *Blindness* (whose quote we chose as an epigraph to open this article, apropos), narrates the outbreak of a fictitious disease called “white blindness”: a state of whitened darkness, contagious, which passes from individual to individual, until everyone contracts it. Saramago's reading can, in some way, prove to be of great help in thinking about the situation of the viral outbreak that affects us – as well as the general crisis that permeates us and even the war of narratives that surrounds the pandemic, now exacerbating, now minimizing its extension and severity.

To think about blindness in this book is to think, in a certain sense, about “not seeing” – the facts, the people, the events... But it is also, above all, the absence of discernment of reality, that is: to be trapped in a condition that would prevent differentiating the true from the false. To be blind, according to Saramago, is to be with an exaggerated irradiation of information so large and grotesque, that we lose the capability to see it, achieving disinformation. Likewise, in a time of a viral pandemic, the disinformation caused by the war of narratives makes us lose ourselves in “post-truths”, blind to what is really happening and paralyzed by the succession of absurdities that overwhelm us daily through the media and other information technologies. The manipulation and bombardment of information means that we are, more and more, a blind mass led in herd by biopolitics and considered disposable by the necropower. How to escape that? Alain Badiou provided us with an extremely lucid analysis. According to him,

it is necessary to show publicly and without fear that the so-called 'social media' have shown once again that they are above all – in addition to their role in fattening the pockets of billionaires – a place for the spread of the mental paralysis of bullies, uncontrolled directions, the discovery of antediluvian 'novelties,' or even fascist obscurantism. We will not give credibility [to these], even and especially in our isolation, and give credibility, above all, to the truths controllable by science and to the grounded perspectives of a new politics, of its localized experiences and its strategic objectives. (BADIOU, 2020, n/p)

It would be somewhat commonplace – although necessary – to discuss here that artistic and humanistic thinking tries to advance and oppose the situation described above in the sense of building networks of affection, of micropolitics, of the rise of identity movements, among others, which, being poorly received in these strange times, ends up generating a binary and Manichaeian separation of political views biased either to the right or to the left (so they still remain trapped in the cyclical path of the history of the great wars that plagued the 20th century)

The pandemic that paralyzes us – just as it paralyzes to a certain extent our fragile techno-capitalist society organized into national States, but featuring huge transnational businesses – also undermines the growth of what is the greatest value and the foundation of our fragile civilization: the economy. Butler, for example, adds further:

The imperative of isolation [brought about by the pandemic] coincides with a new recognition of our global interdependence in the new time and space of the pandemic. On the one hand, we are asked to retreat to family units, shared living spaces, or individual homes, deprived of social contact and relegated to spheres of relative isolation. On the other hand, with the coronavirus and Covid-19, we are facing a virus that smoothly crosses borders, completely oblivious to the very idea of domestic territory. (BUTLER, 2020, n/p)

Much is said about the post-crisis world, with the end of the pandemic, or the “new normal.” However, as argued by Boaventura de Souza Santos (2020), will the end of the pandemic necessarily mean the end of the crisis that precedes it? New crises will reappear in this “Lernaean Hydra” that we call capitalism, the foundation of our modernity. Are another path and other metaphors possible? Or would it be time to get rid of all the old metaphors?

Looking at the collapse of our context is in a way representing it, feeling it and even understanding it through a virus. If the pandemic is a metaphor, it can have many levels of interpretation. And if the virus can be seen as a metaphor, this is not even a new idea, having already been present in the film *The Matrix*, produced by the Wachowskis siblings, for example, in which a character, representative of the system of domination of the human species by machines, called Agent Smith, compares humanity to a virus that preyed on the planet to exhaustion, until there are no resources left, thus compelling the machines to feed on the energy produced by

human bodies, kept asleep in a virtual reality.

From a biological point of view, Smith's comparison is not unmerited. As far as we know, viruses differ from other microorganisms by self-destructive behavior. In order to multiply, they attack blindly and end up destroying their own means of multiplication. Conclusion: the success of the viruses, in eliminating their hosts, is a sort of suicide. (DIEGUEZ, 2002, n/p)

Like the virus, we destroy our host, the planet, we exhaust the nature that sustains us and, even other human beings (through Bio- and Necropolitics), in an absolutely instrumental and reifying relationship, capable of counting lives and deaths as if they meant nothing. This is a strange metaphor for understanding our misconducts, our mistakes and crises: precisely that of the disease that today affects us on a planetary level.

The reality on the loose and the exceptionality of the exception. The pandemic gives reality a chaotic freedom, and any attempt to analytically imprison it is doomed to failure, given that reality always surpasses what we think or feel about it. To theorize or write about it is to place our categories and our language on the edge of the abyss. As André Gide would say, it is to conceive contemporary society and its dominant culture in a mode of *mise en abyme*. (BOAVENTURA DE SOUZA SANTOS, 2020, p. 13)

Would we be ready to face "the emptiness of the real," piercing the different layers of meanings and narratives that compose, order and legitimize the world in which we live, peeling it like an onion (and remembering that the onion, as Umberto Eco puts it in *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989), the onion is all peel: peel within peel, within peel...)?

Could the plague of our time, COVID-19, be the beginning of a new way of existing on a planet in an accelerated state of deterioration caused by our current mode of existence, in itself "virus-like"? New plagues derived from the current one are yet to awaken, such as the great economic crisis that is gradually being established around the world and is already being used as a mechanism and justification to disable the safety measures adopted in some countries and to seek the resumption of activities as they were before the virus arrived. We would like to believe that post-pandemic changes would be natural, as they are necessary. However, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, in a chapter entitled *The intense pedagogy of the virus: first lessons*:

The new organization presupposes an epistemological, cultural and ideological shift that supports political, economic and social solutions that guarantee the continuation of dignified human life on the planet. This shift has multiple implications. The first consists in creating a new common sense, the simple and evident idea that especially in the last forty years we have lived in quarantine, in the political, cultural and ideological quarantine of closed capitalism and that of racial and sexual discrimination without which it cannot survive. The quarantine caused by the pandemic is, after all, a quarantine within another

quarantine. We will overcome the quarantine of capitalism when we are able to imagine the planet as our common home and Nature as our original mother to whom we owe love and respect. She does not belong to us. We belong to her. When we overcome this quarantine, we will be more free from the quarantines caused by pandemics. (SANTOS, 2020, p. 32)

We need a new worldview, which surpasses all current narratives. A great paradigm – more inclusive, more loving, based on affection, respect for others, balance with nature, exchanges, and not on a predatory model that guarantees the profit of a few through the exploitation of everyone else. Art, perhaps, art as proposed by Antonin Artaud – not subject to established powers, in its anarchic body and averse to biopower – can indicate the way. Art as that which has the power to cause cataclysms and overthrow all social masks.

#### **4. Antonin Artaud: the plague, the cruelty and the pursuit of freedom**

If you want, you can put me in a straight jacket, but there is nothing more useless than an organ. When you have obtained a body without organs, then you will have freed it from its automatism and returned its true freedom. (ARTAUD, 1983, p. 161)

Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) is undoubtedly one of the greatest names in the performing arts of the 20th century. His famous book *The Theater and its double* (1938) presents us with an essay, written in 1933, called *The Theater and the Plague*, which we could not fail to evoke in the current context. According to Artaud, there would be an analogy between the plague and the theater, since both are capable of bringing down the masks of society, revolving it in its intestines, perverting the current order with its virulence.

Artaud thought of the disease – in this case the plague, the great epidemic of yore (and, by extension, we could also call it a pandemic today – in our accelerated and technological time) – as a metaphor. A metaphor for theater itself...

Artaud would end up comparing theatrical making to an agent of disorder, an instrument to make the masses think, the "cruel action" capable of waking them from their sleep and paralysis in the face of death policies that dominate us all. Wake us all, everyone, and situate us at the center of the action, assuming our "protagonism" in everything that is happening.

According to Artaud, for example, it would be through the proposal of no longer looking at theater or art as objects distanced from the spectator that the subject could contemplate himself while watching others:

Therefore, for theater, the point is to create a metaphysics of the word, of the gesture, of the expression, with the purpose of taking one out of one's psychological and human stagnation. But none of this will do any good if there is not a sort of real metaphysical temptation behind this effort, an appeal to certain unusual ideas, whose fate is precisely that they cannot be limited, not even formally outlined. These ideas, which refer to Creation, to Becoming, to Chaos, and which are all of a cosmic order, provide a first notion of a domain to

which the theater has become completely unaccustomed. They can create a kind of passionate equation between Man, Society, Nature and Objects. (ARTAUD, 2006, p. 102).

Certainly, it is this "real metaphysical temptation" that will allow us all to dream a new paradigm, since art must enable human beings to escape the prison of common sense so they can face with their eyes open the real problems of the whole of which they are a part. Since "Theater, like the plague, is a crisis that is resolved by death or cure." Concerning which Artaud adds:

And the plague is a superior evil because it is a complete crisis after which only death or extreme purification remains. Theater is also an evil because it is the supreme balance that cannot be acquired without destruction. It invites the spirit to a delirium that exalts its energies; and, to conclude, it can be observed that, from a human point of view, the action of theater, like that of the plague, is beneficial because, by leading man to see themselves as they are, it makes the mask fall, exposes the lie, the lukewarmness, baseness, deceit; it shakes the asphyxiating inertia of matter that reaches even the clearest data of the senses; and, revealing to the communities their dark power, their hidden strength, it invites them to assume a heroic and superior attitude towards destiny that, without it, they would never assume. And the question that now arises is whether in this declining world, which is committing suicide without realizing it, there will be a group of individuals capable of imposing this superior notion of theater, which will return to us all the natural and magical equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe. (ARTAUD, 2006, p. 28-29)

The concept of cruelty is at the core of *The Theater and its Double* (2006) and thinking about cruelty is thinking about life, whose "supreme balance" cannot be acquired "without destruction." Cruelty has nothing to do with sadism or bloodshed, but with the contagious (and necessary) convulsion that can awaken a more extreme, more "raw" existential dimension, beyond the current cultural and social conditions – "leading man to see themselves as they are." This awakening is, to Artaud, the ultimate task of art, precisely that capable of giving us back that "in which we no longer believe." And, to that end, for real cruelty to happen, theater needs to return to its place of "dreams and events," capable of provoking in man the impetus to once again look into himself and his own existence, in his obstacles and possibilities. By "revealing to the community its obscure power," urging humanity to assume a heroic attitude, which can thus give us back the power that was taken from us, or that we gave up without realizing: our autonomy.

In this context, it is pertinent to recall that the questions of Artaud's Theater of Cruelty are generated from his own life. It is worth noting, for example, that his work will reflect the cruelty suffered by his body, a body marked by disciplinarization, by years hospitalized in asylums in France. A body marked by brutality and the attempt to control it, which enables a strong dialogue with the thinking of French philosopher Michel Foucault (2008) regarding the influence and interference of control and biopowers in our bodies and in our lives – to which, without exception, we are all

subject. The point of intersection between the artist's and the philosopher's thought occurs, precisely, to the extent that, to Artaud, the experience lived in the flesh – in the body – is the key to experiment with and seek other levels for his own existence, which can serve, here, so we also think of ways to resist biopower. This reflection becomes urgent since it was born from pain, from the shock with the external domain of the body and from the possibility of remaking oneself, of rebuilding oneself, even in the face of the greatest atrocities and control mechanisms, through the desire for life.

The Theater of Cruelty thus becomes the exercise of poetic creation, capable of enhancing existence also as resistance. Artaud's Theater of Cruelty project was the reconstruction of human existence. And the plague, like theater, in its virulence, strips off masks to fully understand life. In this sense, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari see in Artaud's work what can be called a "deterritorialization movement," since he fought the western "judgment" – the established and hierarchical determinations of a rational thought that is already in itself biologically determined, i.e. "territorialized," having racial connotations (because it is European and white) and gender connotations (because it is male and phallogocentric), for example. The judgment we need to destroy is that of a

reason that invents meanings, which forged a subject that promotes a subjectivation aimed at preserving the orders of things, which bends to the judgment of values. (...) Artaud fought, until the loss of his judgement (but achieving a perverse lucidity about it, characteristic of the cruelty that would enliven the ritualistic aspect lost in the theater of dialogue, of text, of the imperative of reason), to free the body, the matter, the concrete language from the yoke of a rationalism that intended to encompass all phenomena and become the only form of access to knowledge. The body without organs, as a proposal to deconstruct the organism, would effect a way of opposing the extreme rationalization of the world. (MARCELO, 2013, p. 286)

And let us never forget: the process of rationalizing the world, although it started much earlier, it has been occurring in an extreme and violent way since the Renaissance, being the very generator of Colonialism. Colonialism, slavery and genocide are the "dark side of the Renaissance," as already emphasized by Walter Dignolo (2003), who always affirms, in his books, the need to think from decolonizing perspectives: beyond the modern and western categories. Let us not forget: colonizing is mapping the world, exploring the world... but it was also mapping bodies, exploring bodies. Two facets of the same mechanism of control and domination perpetrated by the Necropolitics (MBEMBE, 2018).

Artaud remains challenging for multiple types of knowledge as an anarchic and highly provocative thought. How can art destroy old powers in favor of a new paradigm? We could (like Theodor W. Adorno, who raised the question of whether poetry would still be possible after Auschwitz) ask ourselves: is there poetry, is there art, is there theater after the pandemic?

The body without organs (BwO), famous expression of the final phase of

Artaud's thought, constantly reappropriated by Deleuze and Guattari (2004), from the perspective of these philosophers, does refer to a deterritorialization of the body, as previously stated, but it can also go further: it also involves paralysis and anti-production, the refusal to cooperate with biopowers. According to Peter Pál Pelbart (2013, p. 33), the body without organs would be "a variation around this biopolitical theme par excellence: life getting rid of what imprisons it, of the organism, of the organs, of the inscription of diverse powers over the body." The body that knows it to be more than just a part or gear in a global system.

I don't know, but I do know that space, time, dimension, becoming, future, destiny, being, non-being, self, non-self, are nothing to me; but there is a thing which is something, only one thing which is something, and which I feel because it wants to get out: the presence of my bodily suffering, the menacing, never tiring presence of my body (ARTAUD, 1947 apud WILLER, 1983, p. 158).

Building "a new body," in Artaud's poetics, is, in a sense, escaping biopower. It is also to make oneself as an anarchic, creative body, which can thus be refractory to any form of necropower, being aware of one's own finitude and fallibility, awakening up to one's own pain, to one's own limitations and oppressions, without "gilding the pill", without "sugarcoating the pill," but accepting life in its cruelty and wholeness and with that oppose a tamed, mapped, controllable body, that can be labeled...to then find oneself in the body without organs, the body that creates, the body that resists all power and control. Indomitable body.

May art strip us, may theater strip us of all masks. May our body become without *hierarchy*, without structure, may divergent bodies impose themselves, all as worthy of mourning. May the paradigm of the body without organs break with the metaphors of biopower that pervade and devour us all. The organized body, the militarized body, the body tamed and controlled by the biopowers of a death policy, is opposed by the anarchic body potentiated by artistic creation. The body that can be pure presence, without purpose, not objectifiable. The art-body, the performing body...

Surviving the various "quarantines of capitalism," as stated by Bonaventura de Souza Santos (and capitalism itself being yet another facet inherited from modern colonialism), requires that we deconstruct our social organism and its hierarchies, which is, in fact, deeply sick. And this is the best way, perhaps the only way, to resist this biopolitics that controls us and the necropower that destroys us all, with or without a pandemic. Black lives matter. Indigenous lives matter. Women and gays matter. The poor and marginalized matter....

We are not castoffs from the capitalist process, we are not "human waste," nor are we "living dead" for whom no one would weep, a dead weight for the country, for the economy. Persons are irreplaceable, unique, a world in themselves. Creative. Power. Bodies are desire, will, pleasure, love, pain. Bodies are potential not yet leveraged and they are so much more, but so much more than parts in a system whose only value would result from moving the economy wheel or not ...

Yes, the plague brings down the masks, showing more than ever the injustices of our society, as Artaud told us. Nevertheless, whether the COVID-19 pandemic can really conduct us beyond the abyss on whose edge we already are, beyond the *mise en abyme* as a way of being of the dominant culture in our time, as stated by Boaventura de Souza Santos (2020), only time will tell. We have no final considerations here. The history of the future has not yet been written.

How humanity will overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and its short- and long-term impacts, we do not know. But one thing is urgent: we need to overcome the crooked logic of the Necropolitics.

It is the economy that should serve people for the sake of freedom, of a fuller, freer, more balanced, more powerful life. If theater has the power to be the mirror of life, art can only exist if it transforms society, if it transforms the mechanisms that control bodies and masses, thus leading to a new conception of the human, which escapes modern organizations, either institutions, anatomy, colonialism or even racism. This, more than ever, remains as an urgent task for performing arts today.

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