

Culture under surveillance: the plays that annoyed the dictatorial Uruguayan regime, *Libertad, Libertad* and *La Reja*

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The independent Uruguayan cultural field has been conceived as suffering a "cultural blackout", due to the surveillance and the censorship deployed before and during the settlement of the military regime (Mirza, 2007). The regime also did have some particular effects on the independent Uruguayan theater movement, in terms of the political persecution and censorship that independent theater groups underwent, such as "El Galpón", [\[11\]](#) a legendary group created in 1949. Two plays "Libertad, Libertad" and "La Reja" were highly annoying for the regime and had negative effects for "El Galpón", as they caused the closure of the theater in the year of 1976, when the regime had been in power since June of 1973. The coup d'état that was established in Uruguay in 1973, responded to a continuity of certain "measures of exception" that had been settled since the late sixties, and which were contemplated in the National Security Doctrine during Jorge Pacheco Areco's government (1967-1972) (Rico, 2009). The Uruguayan dictatorship was part of the "Condor Plan", orchestrated with the help of the EE.UU in the Southern Cone region (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile). In this context the freedoms and rights of the population were restricted, the regime arrested under suspicion, violated personal correspondence and applied the worst tortures towards the population.

The importance that the cultural project had for the regime, since the establishment of the "Emergency Security Measures" and until the

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imposition of the coup d'état, was as a means to seek the people's support through a series of policies and measures in the cultural sphere and in the Uruguayan's everyday life, where they advocated a "cultural consensus" that they would achieve (Marchesi, 2009). More precisely this consensus was supposed to establish cultural definitions related to national holidays, national character and traditions, in order to settle a certain "catalog of images" that would generate public support of the military regime. Such a "cultural consensus" tends to be conceived as part of the foundational project of the nation, through the exaltation of national symbols, historical commemorations, folk traditions, among others (Cosse y Markarian, 1996; Marchesi, 2001; Caetano y Rilla, 2005).

Hence the annexation of the cultural field became a central objective for the constitution of this "cultural consensus" As a result, the margins that the independent theater movement had for the realization of their theatrical actions was restricted, and the life of the artist was defined by the displacement between three stages: jail, exile and the public sphere, as the theater director Rubén Yáñez defines it (Yáñez, 1986).

The different Uruguayan independent theater groups, such as "El Galpón" and "Montevideo Circular Theater" which were located in the capital city of Montevideo, worked with the vision of making theater as a historical and political action, which was conceived as a tool for the popular emancipation and organization (Pignataro, 1997).

For them being "independent" meant to invoke popular collaboration, such as unions and the neighbors around the theaters, both for the construction and the maintenance of the theaters, (Institución teatral "El Galpón" en México, 1983; Fernández, 1986).

Since its origins, throughout its collective creations, "El Galpón" had reflected the demands of the Uruguayan public, through a

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repertoire which included the great figures of the universal, the ~~Latin American and the national drama; which also led to the creation~~ of its own Drama School (Institución teatral "El Galpón" en México, 1983).

The two plays mentioned here were staged in the late sixties and in the beginning of the seventies during the prelude of the coup. Both "*Libertad, Libertad*" and "*La Reja*" were labeled as subversive by the regime, as they were considered to be related with communism and Marxist thinking, and everything the regime wanted to remove from society.

The play "*Libertad, Libertad*" was released in June 1968, the first version being directed by César Campodónico. The script was written by the Brazilians Flavio Rangel and Millor Fernandes, and discussed freedom as a general topic. According to one of the theatre critics of the time, this work is about " (...) texts that refer to the issue of freedom, in many cases the fragments belong to a well known, classic and contemporary repertoire, in concordance with testimonial and political theater; in others, the authors have simply collected quotes and documents about some facts that adequately express their respective historical periods (...)" [\[21\]](#)

This theatrical piece is a representation of the political commitments that "El Galpón" assumes, and it also shows how the socially and politically conscious theatrical event is conceived and configured, aiming to reflect the contemporary demands of society.

This is what several theater actors' testimonies [\[31\]](#) reveal for example Myriam Gleijer, a recognized artist from "El Galpón", who would later be taken into jail and tortured for two consecutive years before she was released on probation status.

In an interview Myriam told me that the theater group used to assume the theatrical event as a type of political and ideological

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commitment, as she says: "we were responsible for reflecting on
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~~what was happening in that country"~~¹⁴¹, "~~Libertad, Libertad~~" was the
right play for that time, it showed what was happening to Uruguay and
to the Latin American continent, beyond the artistic experience
itself, it meant a political act to performed it. As Myriam Gleijer
recalls, it was due to their participation in this theater piece that
she was imprisoned by the regime, she was also member of the Uruguayan
communist party, as most of the members of the executive committee of
the theater were.

Besides being released in three different years, framed by a state of
internal military siege for the country, first in 1968, then in 1971
and finally on tour in 1974, as noted Gleijer, it was presented in
different cities of the country in acts for May Day and in union
committees of the political Uruguayan left force Frente Amplio, among
others.

The original play on which the theatrical group worked to make this
Uruguayan version, was first performed on April 21st of 1965 in Rio de
Janeiro by the "Opinion Group" and the "San Pablo Arena Theater" in
Brazil, which was directed by Augusto Boal. The play's fundamental
significance and eruptive force was its appeal to the public to
adhereto both the political content of the work, and to the protest
that the work was in itself.

This theatrical piece was meant to be a reflection of what was
happening in the country, in the context of the imposition of
Emergency Security Measures. It was a scenic creation approaching the
problems of the Uruguayan people of that time, with which Augusto Boal
and the "San Pablo Arena Theater", as well as political theatre in
general, started to gain increasing influence.: Both plays appear in
the reports of the Uruguayan office of intelligence, because the
regime considered that these plays were staged against the measures
and the surveillance state that was being established.

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The other play, "La Reja", was released on August 11th of 1972, under
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~~the direction of Rosita Baffico and written by Andrés Castillo.~~

When soldiers and policemen (who acted as joint forces) entered into the theater in 1976, they took the script of the play, which was about women prisoners in the detention center located in the former School of Nursing "Dr. Carlos Nery"^[51], in the "Old Town" of Montevideo City. The story on which this collective creation was based, took place in Uruguay in the context of the Emergency Security Measures in 1968 under the government of Jorge Pacheco Areco and that were made public in the official documents of the Uruguayan congress. This play was disturbing for the regime as it was a collective construction which addresses the issues of power and its excesses, ideological clashes and the making of popular consciousness.

The play responded to the need to expose facts that by the year of 1972 were wrongfully considered historical accounts of repression and state violence that had passed, since this was precisely the scenario which was about to repeat itself systematically: Jorge Pacheco Areco's government and the Emergency Security Measures paved the way for Juan María Bordaberry and the establishment of the dictatorial regime, Refusing to be reduced to a closed system of signs and internal relationships, the cultural field reacted to suppression by becoming fluid and rebellious, encompassing a network of narratives, representations, images and signifying practices, thus generating struggles over symbols, meanings and spaces under the authoritarian regime. (Comarof and Comarof, 1991; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001).

The independent theatrical actions and events in Uruguay took place over periods of political violence, suffering the repression and persecution by the government of Jorge Pacheco Areco. Also during the dictatorial regime, the independent theater movement had a fundamental role to play as a space and a form of nucleating and socializing the Uruguayan population. It therefore became an important target, as the military regime was supposed to be cohesive and untouchable throughout

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the implementation of state cultural policies that potentiated the
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national symbolisms, traditions and narratives.

In the words of the legendary Uruguayan theater director Atahualpa del Cioppo: "[T]he [most] terrible fact would be that the theatrical man would not orient himself towards history".^[6]

Facing the repression and threats of persecution this was indeed the independent Uruguayan theater movement's greatest challenge: not only to entertain Uruguayan society, but also to accompany difficult periods in the country with a message to the people: you are not alone and you cannot lower the arms in the struggle against the repressive state.

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Notes

^[1] They named the theatrical group this way, as it refers to a storehouse where the group began their activities.

^[2] Personal translation, the original quote is taken from a document

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accessed in the: Archive from the theatre "El Galpón"; "Estreno en "El Galpón" y "Teatro del Centro". "Libertad, Libertad" y también "La Heredera". Press publication, undated, unsigned.

[3] These testimonies or life stories were part of the field work done for my ongoing doctoral research project "The resistance forms during the Civil-military Uruguayan dictatorship (1973-1985): an anthropological study of the independent theatre" (2012-).

[4] Translation of a fragment of the interview to Myriam Gleijer, 25 of May of 2013, Montevideo, Uruguay.

[5] Located in the colonial neighbor of Montevideo City, this place "functioned as a detention center from 1969-1977 (....) under emergency security measures (...) It was a prison where there were several pregnant mothers and children in captivity. When it was finally evicted in 1977 lived about forty prisoners of different political tendencies." (personal translation from *Huellas de la Represión*, 2009)

[6] Document from the Archive of the Documentation Centre of the San Martin Theatre: "Nadie puede hacerme perder mi vocación de uruguayo", thursday 19 of July of 1984, Page 4, "Platea".

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