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Unusual, imaginative, dialectical reading: Liev S. Vygotsky's writings on art

Insólito, imaginativo, dialético: uma leitura de Liev S. Vigotski: escritos sobre arte

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The publication of the works by the Soviet writer Liev Semionovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) keeps holding his commentators in check, especially those who wish to convert him into a simple piece on the board of development and learning theories. *Liev S. Vygotsky: Writings on Art* exhibits an anthology of different texts by the author with the first direct translation from Russian into another language (many of them only recently published in their original language, with the issue of the first volume of Vygotsky's complete works in 2015).

With the edition of the publishing house Mireveja, in which materials previously published in journals and other academic works were reviewed, psychologist and translator Priscila Nascimento Marques, a professor at Universidade Federal of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), presents the result of 11 years of rigorous research work by Vygotsky as an art critic who was until today, unknown to the general public. The result even surprises the readers who are already familiar with the youthful Vygotsky whom we knew through his first book, *The Tragedy of Hamlet* (1916); the new publications contrast with the predominantly symbolist perspective of the debut book. Not because they are from a distant time in relation to this work: several works are still from the 1910s (written from 1912 to 1928).

But when it comes to Vygotsky, a scientist who died at the age of 37, a single year can be a long time. The theme of revolution is dear to Vygotsky in his writings *Theatre and Revolution* (2022) (which was published then in the important periodical *Letopis*) and in the review of *The ten days that shook the world*, by American journalist John Reed. The first makes sharp criticisms of the Russian theater, of its lack of harmony with the effervescent historical moment. The second, praises the multitude of workers aware of their historical role in the construction of a new society. In their

own scope, those are materials that will set the boundaries of the search for new forms and artistic patterns, taking seriously the discussion on the relationship between art and society, but raising somewhat different issues from the author's great academic work on the subject, the *Psychology of Art* (Vygotski, 1925/2001).

Let's look at some differences. The criticism works collected by Priscila Nascimento Marques are mostly texts addressing the general, non-academic audience, published in local periodicals in the city of Gomel, Belarus, where Vygotsky grew up and where he returned and dwell between 1916 and 1924, after his graduation studies. In the newspapers *Nossa Segunda Feira* (*Our Thursday*) and *Verdade Polesiana* (*Polesian Truth*), he reviewed the provincial cultural scene, for which,

of course the wind sometimes carries the scent of distant gardens, but more often it brings dust. Occasionally the tour winds bring precious fragments of the real theater, but more often they bring tiny torn particles of something hard to recognize as it is theatrical dust. (Vygotski, 2022, p. 282)

It is difficult to remain indifferent to the style of those texts, whose acidity is very reminiscent of Marx and Engels. Furthermore, those writings by Vygotsky are soaked in figures of speech converted into challenging exercises of dialectical imagination – an aspect in which Walter Benjamin's readers can also feel at home (I believe that the several writings by the Soviet author on the Jewish culture contribute to such a familiar feeling). The perceptive association between affection, thought and imagination is carried out in a beautiful style, almost baroque in its paradoxes and synesthesia, which is also surprising due to its enormous erudition, despite the texts being very concise. For these and other reasons, it is not uncommon to find the meanings of the writer's discourse challenging: Vygotsky writes to his contemporaries in Gomel, a city with around 120,000 inhabitants (Smolka, 2022), and does not explain or present the commented works of art. In this sense, Priscila Marques' notes are essential for the understanding of the material, demonstrating a huge effort to rescue Russian culture.

This rescue shows the richness of the Russian theater at the time of the Revolution, challenging our belief that it was reduced to old acquaintances such as the directors Stanislavsky, Meierhold and Tairov, even though Vygotsky had been a follower of Stanislavsky. In this regard, we should open a parenthesis: it is worth mentioning that although a text from 1932 (Vygotsky, 1932/1999) actually aligns with Stanislavski's soul realism, we have very different impressions of Vygotsky (2022), who does not give greater prominence to the director's work, closely linked to the staging of Chekhov's work in Brazil. Similarly, albeit acknowledging Chekhov value as a "singer of gloomy subjects of the twilight and gray life" (Vygotsky, 2022, p. 252), he makes few comments on Chekhov's work, which he sets in an array of the other scenic portraits of the decadent and yellowish tsarist society. We have in Vygotsky a critic open to novelty and avant-garde but, at the same time, capable of loving Shakespeare even recognizing some merit in Tolstoy's priceless criticism of the compositional defects present in the work of the old Elizabethan bard (review *The King is Naked*).

The art critic introduced to us by Priscila Marques is, as we have pointed out, dissatisfied with Russian theater in the revolutionary period. At the same time, he sets a distance from what he calls "theatrical fashion with value in itself" (Vygotsky, 2022, p. 207). In this condition, his writings show a remarkable independence of spirit. In defense of a revolution in the theater, he does not spare even the Gorky's play *Enemies*, a writer of the people and one of the symbol-artists of that historical time: despite recognizing that in *Enemies* "we talk about classes; of the naked man, of the rabble and of the steppe", Vygotsky evaluates the play as "time-consuming and boring; there is no drama architecture, the workers' figures are conventional and affected" (2022, p. 203). Although, unfortunately, he did not witness the paradigm shift represented by Brecht's epic theater,

Vygotsky distances himself from naive forms of engaged art, which destroy the artistic effect, seeking to contaminate the public with a politicized discourse that is easy to assimilate. Providing that politics and art cannot be reduced to one another, the author shows his facet of cultural agitator by imagining ways to organize the cultural scene in the province, a theme that emerges, for example, *In the interval between tours* (1923). The theater revolution demanded the mastery of a whole new language, new themes, new perspectives – which would also be feasible with a new cultural organization of artistic work.

We have to admit: some of the writings follow paths that are difficult to access in Russian culture, but others dialogue with closer and more recognizable subjects, outlining important theoretical contributions in the dialogue between psychology and art that extrapolates the literature and theater artistic languages, better known by the Brazilian reader on account of the *Psychology of Art* (Vigotski, 1925/2001). In this connection, two texts call our attention: *E. V. Guéltser's Tour* (about classical ballet performances) and *Bykhóvski's graphic art*, already commented by Marques (2020). These are fundamental works in the understanding of Vygotsky's ideas on the concept of meaning (*smisl*) in the 1920s. Guéltser's dances expressed something new, Dionysiac, a fierce struggle between form and content, between two senses in their interplay.

A theme dear to Vygotsky, this struggle also appears in the review of Bykhovsky's graphic art, in which one thing is described, but it expresses another thing; they carry the material theme, but also its resolution, its particular graphic catharsis. In Bykhovsky, the three-dimensional-material-representative contrasts with the abstract-rhythmic plane. In such contrast, reality is raised to a higher level, to a height inaccessible to realism in which the artist reveals himself to be a "shrewd investigator of the secret skeleton of things" (Vygotsky, 2022, p. 293). With these and other comments, the critic Vygotsky takes a distance from primitivist or naturalist conceptions, reaffirming his defense of art as a pathos that is not always tragic, but always takes place in the field of struggle and artificiality.

The book ends with the text *Art psychology* (1927-1928), an essay separated in two parts that provides a summary of the author's complex conception of the subject, very useful for the purpose of introducing the author's ideas on art. Somehow, even in his accurate observations on theatrical semiotics, Vygotsky is interested in the human psychology represented in the characters, one of the elements of great interest to social psychology. It is worth getting in touch with this flaming critic, who elaborates complex ideas without losing a surprising dialogic style by mixing an erudite vocabulary with popular expressions, witnessing the priceless art of the translator, who, paraphrasing our author, offers us this selection of texts not only as the "worn out wardrobe of the great-grandmother", but also the living collection of an intellectual who has renewed both art and psychology in recent decades.

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