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In Brazil, Curation is Just Another Word for Censorship

Gustavo Prado Sampaio · Wednesday, July 1st, 2020

Censorship just isn't fashionable anymore. Not in the Americas, anyways. So Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has a great new marketing strategy for censoring the arts.

Brazilian artists who lived through the military dictatorship have plenty of stories to share. The list of artists who fled to exile reads as a who-is-who of Brazilian talent: theater-maker Augusto Boal, and singers Caetano Veloso, Chico Buarque, and Gilberto Gil are among the best-known cases. Paulo Coelho, who would later become the best-selling author of the novel *The Alchemist*, was also arrested and tortured, before fleeing to Europe, where he resided until democratization.

Some remained in the country, and dealt with increased censorship as a result. Artist Marilia Pera was beaten, along with the rest of her cast, when members of Comando de Caça aos Comunistas (Command for Hunting Communists), a paramilitary group, broke into Ruth Escobar Theater in 1968 during a public presentation of *Roda Viva*. Actress Norma Bengell was arrested and questioned for two days about her involvement with leftists politics.

The 1964 coup d'état gave way to a repressive, authoritarian, murderous military regime which persecuted artists and political activists. During the military dictatorship, the Department of Censorship and Public Entertainment, a division of the Ministry of Justice, was staffed by dozens of public servants. These "specialists" lacked any artistic training (most had a background in the humanities), yet were the highest authority on what could or could not be read, watched, or listened to. Bolsonaro is following the same playbook. People who have no experience making art are the ones in charge of cultural policy.

After the fall of the military regime, in the absence of institutionalized mechanisms of justice, such as Argentina's Trial of the Juntas, Brazilian artists took it upon themselves to hold the military establishment accountable. Now, they are enemy number one.

They spent three decades making art that was critical of the regime he loved. There are countless examples since democratization. Movies such as *The Year My Parents Went on Vacation* (2006), *Zuzu Angel* (2006), *Tatuagem* (2013), and *Batismo de Sangue* (2007), became critical and audience successes. Plays like *Roda Viva*, censored during the regime, were re-mounted in major cities to sold-out audiences. Books and visual art also played their part, with the publication of memoirs by tortured political activists, and museum exhibitions about artists of the period.

To Bolsonaro, a military man and defender of the dictatorship, artists naturally became the enemy. His campaign framed artists as vermin. He's now working towards exterminating them.

Bolsonaro's tactic has been to increasingly censor work. Of course, this is the 21st century, and it isn't very fashionable to have a department featuring "censorship" in its name. Bolsonaro and his allies have instead pressured government organizations to begin "curating" the art they fund, to surprising success.

Television series, plays, and movies that relied on public funding have suffered drawbacks. The affected works usually deal with issues of diversity, such as LGBTQ rights. This year, the movies *Afronte*, *Transversais*, *O sexo reverso* and *Religare queer*, were competing for funding from ANCINE (National Agency of Cinema) as part of a government project surrounding themes of sexual diversity. The competition was cancelled after Bolsonaro deemed the subject matter "inappropriate." Unsurprisingly, his actions aren't finding much resistance in his side of the political spectrum. In fact, his allies have adopted the idea of State curation as their own.

The rhetoric that defined Bolsonaro's campaign has been consolidated. The Right has developed a clear vision vis-à-vis cultural production. It has taken key words and phrases out of the president's erratic ramblings, "family values," "national pride," "high art," and built a common vocabulary with which to talk about art and policy. Out of that vocabulary, it will build well-organized, well-oiled mechanisms. Rants against intellectuals and the creative class have evolved into a coherent argument, based on ideological censorship disguised as State "curation"; a consolidated vision for the future of Brazilian art.

The step after consolidation is implementation. What this new institutionalized censorship will look like once it's fully in place is anyone's guess. For now, he's happy to use buzzwords like a great marketer; simply pressuring government agencies into adopting "curation" as part of their decision-making process.

The only certainty is that Brazilian art will only thrive if it denies its politics, or aligns with the politics of the President.

Photo of Brazil's president Jair Messias Bolsonaro by Alan Santos/PR via Flickr

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