

UNIVERSITY OF LISBON

FACULTY OF LETTERS

ARTISTIC STUDIES



**THEATRICALITY: a transversal structure to the domains of power**

Paper to be read at the 4th International Seminar of Doctoral Studies of  
Theatre Schools in Brno, Czech Republic, 4th - 5th December 2009

**Bruno Schiappa**

**2009**

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**PHD program**

**in Artistic Studies**

**Specialty: Theatrical Studies**

**2009**

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# Theatricality: a structure transversal to the domains of Power

## Introduction

Theatricality is a concept that is not very clear for most of the scholars who are dealing with Theatrology<sup>1</sup>. In spite of being apparently a simple noun derived from the adjective *theatrical* it is, indeed, complex in itself. In the realm of common sense *theatricality* is used to refer to something that is either *fake like* or exaggerated. Something that is created to provoke some sort of effect.

Some directors who created methods for the actor's training (e.g. Stanislavsky or Lee Strasberg) used it to refer to the actors who were being caricatural or distant from what was considered "natural" or "authentic". Therefore, in this context, it had a pejorative meaning. Other directors (e.g. Meyerhold) used it to refer to what was artistically built on stage and would be taken as symbols. In this context, theatricality had a positive value.

Besides the suffix *ity* and the fact that we can use the term both in theatre and in other fields apart from theatre situations, which means that Theatricality is a structure of meaning in itself, this same structure has always been used by the Power in order to impose a certain kind of behaviour on the individual and on society at large. It's not new that some scholars and philosophers already referred that there was always

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<sup>1</sup> We should not, however, forget the very important book edited by Tracyy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, *Theatricality*, in 2003 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), where we can find illuminating articles by, among others, the Editors themselves and Shannon Jackson.

something “spectacular” in the ceremonies and rituals (e.g. Michel Foucault) but I believe that its format was broadened to the realm of secular power.

## 2 – Theatricality, Theatre and Spectacle<sup>2</sup>

The notion of *theatricality* had several dimensions according to the contexts in which it was used. In his work *The Apology of Theatricality*, wrote in 1908, Nicolai Evreinov (Russian playwright and director – 1879/1953) affirms that there is a theatrical instinct inherent to Man, referring to his capacity to play and imitate:

“Man has an inexhaustible instinct of vitality (...). I am referring to the instinct of transfiguration, the instinct of opposing the images received from the outside, the images created randomly in the inside: the instinct to transmutate the appearances offered by nature in something different. In short, an instinct which essence is revealed in what I would call theatricality. (EVREINOV: p. 35.

M.T.)

Marcel Jousse, an anthropologist orientated to the comprehension of the *pre-logical* universe of the human mind deriving from the cultural *phenoma*, considers the *mimesis* a fundamental role to any pedagogy and affirms in 1969 that “it is not the gesture that underlines the thought but the gesture that brings out the thought” (JAUSSE: p. 37. M. T.).

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<sup>2</sup> Just as a reminder, the word Theatre derives from the Ancient Greek *theatron* (θέατρον) meaning "the seeing place", while the word Spectacle derives itself a reflection of the Latin *spectaculum* "a show" from *spectare* "to view, watch". As we all know, the Greek culture is centuries older than the Latin (Roman) one. Also, according to Helga Finter, from the place of the spectator (*theatron*) derives the theatre and from its activity (*theaomai* – to look simultaneously with the eyes and with the mind) came the terms theatre and theory. Cfr. Helga Finter, 2003, *A teatralidade e o teatro; espectáculo do real ou realidade do espectáculo? – Notas sobre a teatralidade e o teatro recente na Alemanha*, in Revista Teatro al Sur, n.º25, Argentina, p. 1. I also would like to make clear that although Aristotle mentioned the existence of characters in the group of elements that compose Theatre, in no place he says that the absence of that element invalidates theatre. Of course a character can have traces other than the mask itself; it can be representative of the function of the person who is “acting”. But that is another entire chapter for another study.

The sociologist Erving Goffman, in his study *The presentation of the self in everyday life* refers to the social roles and the representative functions operating in today's rather complex societies. His main focus on the professional relations makes clear to us the subtle and essential sense of representation in our daily work as a professional performance. According to his study, those behaviours of the daily life embody the theatricality and dramatization inherent to the social life in itself. He concludes that:

“The political and dramaturgical perspectives intersect clearly in regard to the capacities of one individual to direct the activity of another. For one thing, if an individual is to direct others, he will often find it useful to keep strategic secrets from them. Further, if one individual attempts to direct the activity of others by means of example, enlightenment, persuasion, exchange, manipulation, authority, threat, punishment, or coercion, it will be necessary, regardless of his power position, to convey effectively what he wants done, what he is prepared to do to get it done and what he will do if it is not done. Power of any kind must be clothed in effective means of displaying it, and will have different effects depending upon how it is dramatized.” (GOFFMAN: p. 241)

As we can see *theatricality* is a concept that includes not only the play, the representation and, therefore, artifice or artefact but, also, and most important of all, it carries a value of exchange; an exchange of considerations and an exchange of “views” of the world. Our formation – the formation of the citizen that we are or of our *personae* – depends on the assimilation of models, patterns, examples, norms. Nevertheless, as a general rule, it is easier for us to behave in a certain way according to the demands of the situation. We “show” what is expected from us. The sense of opportunity, more or less spontaneously, activates this human ability of “getting into somebody else’s skin”.

Calderon de la Barca wrote *The Great Theatre of the World* and Shakespeare defined the world as “a stage”. They both referred to the same thing: the artificiality of the norms/rules and to the use of the right strategy to “gain” something, to seduce, to repress, to restrain or, simply, to impress. The aim was always the same: to dominate through appearance.

Besides these considerations and, continuing my argument on the issue of *theatricality* I became aware that, just like infantilism means what participates of or is related to infants or infancy without being necessarily confined to the time and space of infancy – i.e., we say that a certain attitude or reaction was infantile (or childish) even though (and above all if) the person who had that behaviour is already an adult – also theatricality is not subjected to the time and space of theatre. It is surely a signal of artificiality but it may occur out of the Theatre or, at least, of what is received as Theatre.

Consequently, I’ll use the concept of *theatricality* more in the sense given to it by Patrice Pavis:

“it is the theatre without the text; it is a mixture of signs and sensations which are built in the scene starting from the script; it is that kind of ecumenical perception of the sensory artifices, gestures, tones, distances; substances, lights which submerge the text under the plenitude of its external language”. (PAVIS: p. 358. M. T.)

The fusion of this definition with the notion that most people have of the theatrical or of the theatre, results in the hybrid which seems to me to be fair enough to consider *Theatricality* both a concept and a structure.

It is a structure because it is a complex system of interrelated parts: a script, music, text, sounds, lights, choreography, wardrobe, voice, gestures, props, set. But the way they relate can change according to the times and spaces of the production. This

brings us to consider another concept that integrates *theatricality* but is not always related to theatre although theatre is related to it: spectacle.

In general, *spectacle* refers to an event that is memorable for the image it creates; a specially prepared or arranged display; something to be shown and watched. According to some historians, the term was borrowed from the Roman practice of staging Circuses, in the rather famous philosophy of the Roman elite of "Bread and Circuses" to maintain civil order due to an inability to solve underlying social and economic problems.

*Spectacle* used to be a notion related to Theatre and operating in the high culture performances as in the low cultural shows. Since 1967, nevertheless, its meaning was broadened when Guy Debord published his work *The Society of the Spectacle*. The concept of a *Society of the Spectacle* may refer in a narrow sense to the people who appear in television, particularly the hosts of television shows and newsreels. A broader meaning refers to all the people living in a society, and whose behavior and lives are heavily conditioned by the behavior of TV presenters. The impact of the medium of television, labelled by Marshall McLuhan as the *timid giant*, is such that even the small minority of people that don't watch it at all, are indirectly influenced by their relationship with those who do. Historically in the capitalist societies, television outlets have not been public places where talented and skilled individuals can make a career and express their ideas without censorship. Instead, they have been owned by powerful corporations or controlled by directors appointed by political officials. The flow of ideas that go through a society come from, or are "sweetened" by, the television. This is in fact a totalitarian control of the public discourse, resulting in the contamination of ideas, tastes, behaviors, life styles, and political choices. The images that are produced form an actual social relation bound to influence people at large.

*The Society of the Spectacle* refers to the social relation mediated by the images that are produced by television and printed news. People watch television as an escape from life, but they also rely on it for news, life lessons, and examples of the norms of values of society. The main *situationist* critique is that the spectacle, because it is produced for profit and for political purposes, is a corruptive force and is certainly not art, which should be an actual expression of emotion, an existential release of higher value, which offers greater and better forms of relationship, at the same time that it creates situations of charity and altruism, and is, for that matter, of a more direct value.

With a point of view that we could label as Marxist, Debord defines spectacle as an event that:

“...presents itself at the same time as the society itself, as a part of the society, and as an *instrument of unification*. (...) The spectacle is not a group of images but a social relation between people transmitted by images. (...) We cannot oppose in an abstract way the spectacle and the effective social activity. (...) Reality shows up in the spectacle and the spectacle is real. (DEBORD: pp. 10-12. M.T.)

My understanding of Debord’s considerations about TV as the most prominent *spectacle* is because it vehicles mass spectacles like football games and political manifestations, but Helga Finter, in her text about theatricality and theatre, gives us the examples of the destruction of the World Trade Center (11/09/2001) and the invasion of the theater, in Moscow, by terrorists as spectacles of the real. She concludes her text by saying that:

“There is (...) a difference between spectacle and theatre or performance. The spectacle is given as “nature”, as “reality” and, at the same time, becomes unreal as an image susceptible of repeating itself to the infinite. Spectacle is not conscientious of its theatricality; theatre, on the other hand, proceeds from it conscientiously by its constitutive symbolic pact of the “as if”. It creates a

dialogue with what is absent from the image, a dialectic relation between presence and absence.” (FINTER: p.7)

These are the prerequisites which led me to infer that Theatricality is both a concept and a concrete structure that is used both in theatre and in theatrical events but also in manifestations of Power created to restore the order and to impose social behaviours and conventions. Those manifestations were produced for a certain effect and included the elements that form the structure of theatricality which I referred before.

### 3 – Some examples of Theatricality used by the Power

Several studies by renowned anthropologists demonstrated already how deeply Rituals are related to theatricality. Across the History of Societies, Rituals have played a very important role as far as the organization of communities is concerned.

According to Victor Turner, Elizabeth Tolbert and, more recently, James MacLynn Wilce, Man started ritualizing even before he started talking. We already referred Jousse’s premise that “it is not the gesture that underlines the thought but the gesture that brings out the thought” (p. 5<sup>th</sup> of this work).

Ritual can be defined as a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value, which is prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community. The term usually excludes actions which are arbitrarily chosen by the performers, or dictated purely by logic, chance, necessity, etc. We can also say that a ritual may be performed on specific occasions, or at the discretion of individuals or communities. It may be performed by a single individual, by a group, or by the entire community; in arbitrary places, or in places especially reserved for it; either in public, in private, or before specific people. A ritual may be restricted to a certain subset of the community, and may enable or underscore the passage between religious or social states.

Due to their symbolic nature, there are hardly any limits to the kind of actions that may be incorporated into a ritual. The rites of past and present societies have typically involved special gestures and words, recitation of fixed texts, performance of special music, songs or dances, processions, manipulation of certain objects, use of special dresses, consumption of special food, drink, or drugs, among other possibilities. Religious rituals have also included animal sacrifice, human sacrifice, ritual suicide, and ritual murder.

In religion, a ritual can comprise the prescribed outward forms of performing cult, of a particular observation within a religion or religious denomination. Although ritual is often used in a given context, related to worship performed in a church, the actual relationship between any religion's doctrine and its ritual(s) can vary from organized religion to non-institutionalized spirituality. As a social tool, alongside the personal dimensions of worship and reverence, rituals can have a more basic social function in expressing, fixing and reinforcing the shared values and beliefs of a society. Social rituals have formed a part of human culture. The earliest known undisputed evidence of burial rituals dates from the Palaeolithic period.

Rituals also help creating a firm sense of group identity. Humans have used rituals to create social bonds and even to nourish interpersonal relationships (cfr. GOFFMAN).

Anthropologists from Emile Durkheim through Turner and contemporary theorists like Michael Silverstein treat ritual as a social action aimed at particular transformations often conceived in cosmic terms. Though the transformations can also be thought of as personal, they become a sort of cosmic event, stretching into "eternity".

In general, the moments in which Power uses rituals - and therefore theatricality -, include not only the various worship rites and sacraments of organized religions and

cults, but also the rites of passage of certain societies, atonement and purification rites, coronations and presidential inaugurations, political campaigns, etc. Many activities that are ostensibly performed for concrete purposes, such as jury trials, execution of criminals, and scientific symposia, are loaded with purely symbolic actions prescribed by regulations or tradition, and thus partly ritualistic in nature which is the same as saying partly “soaked” in theatricality.

Concrete examples of the use of theatricality by the secular Power are: the Roman Circuses, where criminals were put together with lions and/or gladiators. Those were spectacles where the seats were set in a hierarchical order, taking place at certain hours and days and where Power would “show” the punishment that those who were “out of the rules” would suffer. *Auto de Fe* (literally “act of faith”) was the ritual of public penance of condemned heretics and apostates that took place when the Inquisition had decided their punishment (that is, after the trial). I shall elaborate on this particular case of theatricality in the next chapter.

In another sense of showing force and order, all the parades used by totalitarian regimes (i.e. dictatorships) have been intended to vehicle a certain “image” of order and discipline. For instance, the fascist parades which would present concrete images of the “new man” and virility:

“If fascism worked, fundamentally, with a pre-existent esthetic, it had to innovate in the form it presented itself. The fascist liturgy institutionalized a narrow bond between esthetic and policy, surpassing largely the isolated examples from the past, (...). It used the esthetic of the body, of the color and form to nationalize the masses, forming and controlling the popular rallies which were an essential part of the fascist policy. We already referred the esthetic of the human body, supposing that the young men (and even the not so young ones) who marched and saluted were the ideal representatives of the movement and of the nation. The *mise en scène* of those meetings, the set that was built or the one that

was chosen for its accomplishment, represented a spectacle charged of grandeur and beauty, allowing the reunited and disciplined masses, through its dynamic and virile movements, to symbolize again the order and progress as well its reconciliation.” (MOSSE: pp. 10, 11)

As we can see, the relationship between Power and Theatricality has always been (and still is) very strong and I would risk saying that it has always been essential for the Power to achieve whatever goal it wanted to achieve.

#### 4 – The *Auto-de-Fe*

In the previous chapter I already used a few lines to refer to the Auto de Fe as an example of the use of theatricality by the Power.

This is the real subject that I am studying for my doctoral thesis, therefore I will try to be more specific about it before speaking about the state of my research. *Auto de fe* in medieval Spanish (and in Portuguese) means "act of faith". In the popular imagination, it has come to refer to be burned at the stake for heresy but the *auto de fe* involved a Catholic Mass; prayers; a public procession of those found guilty; and a public reading of their sentences. The ritual took place in public squares or esplanades and lasted several hours with ecclesiastical and civil authorities in attendance. Artistic representations of the *auto de fe* usually depict torture and the burning at the stake. But, neither torture nor burning at the stake took place during an *auto de fe*, which was a religious ritual. Torture was not administered after a trial was concluded. Executions were always held after and separately from the *auto de fe*.

Portuguese Historian, Francisco Bettencourt, refers to this ceremony as a *mise en scène* and says:

“Auto-da-fe means literally *act of faith*, which at the time corresponds to a moral effect and (theatrical) representation of faith. This *representation*, which we

can now situate among the group of manifestations of the religious theatre in the Iberian Peninsula – v. g. the *Autos Sacramentales*, the acts of passion or the live pictures of bible scenes included in the processions of the *Corpus Christi* –, has the particularity of being produced with real accused, who surely know their parts but who are not actors in the literal sense of the term and do not rehearse: the spectacle is definitive and unique for them. The only permanent “actors” representing in the autos-de-fe are the Inquisitors themselves, who accumulate this role with that of the directors. It is above all a public *presentation* of the abjuration, of reconciliation and punishment which follow the precise rules that result from the Hispanic Inquisitions common model, with an evident theatrical dimension, made concrete on stage, scenography and in the distribution of the parts.” (BETTENCOURT: p. 201)

The Auto de Fe would start with a sermon during which the heresies were pointed out and condemned while catholic faith was exalted. A reading of the sentences would follow by decreasing order of gravity without the knowledge of the accused or any chance of defending themselves.

Early in the morning, the prisoners were brought to a large yard and dressed up with the habits for the procession (the sambenitos). In the procession they were led by Dominican friars carrying the Inquisition’s flag followed by the penitents in general, all of them dressed with long black robes with no sleeves, barefoot and carrying a candle. After them were the penitents who had barely escaped from death with flames painted upside down on their black vests, symbolizing that they had been saved but only from the fire. These were followed by the relapses whose destiny was to be burned at the stake; in this case the flames were painted pointing up. In the end were the heresiarchs who, besides the flames had their own bust painted surrounded by dogs, serpents and demons, all with their mouth open. This would make evident both the character of symbolic act and public spectacle of the auto de fe.

The prisoners who were going to be burned were kept company by a *familiar* – a member of the Inquisition – and by a Jesuit who would ask them to abjure their heresies. Only the heretic who would not confess the error he was accused of would

suffer the highest penalty: to be burned at the stake. Confession could free them from this penalty but not from others of diverse nature.

About this entire spectacle Isabel Drumond Braga says that:

“The apparatus and the exuberance of the autos, the theatricality of all the acts and the intrinsic connection between the autos de fe and the relaxations to the secular hand, even though the actions of burning at the stake took place in different spaces and in posterior moments, made this ceremony one of the most marked images of the institution. The auto de fe, a religious feast and, above all, a theatrical representation of the faith, became, in last instance, the major rite of the Inquisition”. (DRUMOND BRAGA, p.185)

The first recorded *auto de fe* was held in Paris in 1242, under Louis IX. The first Spanish *auto de fe* took place in Seville, Spain, in 1481. The first Portuguese Auto de Fe took place in 1540.

The Portuguese Inquisition was established in 1536 and lasted officially until 1821. Its influence was much weakened by the late 1700s under the government of the Marquis of Pombal but returned strengthened with Queen Mary I. *Autos de fe* also took place in Mexico, Brazil and Peru. Contemporary historians, such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, recorded them. They were also held in the Portuguese colony of Goa, India, following the establishment of the Inquisition there in 1562-1563.

## 5 – My doctoral research and the state of it

As seen previously, my doctoral research is about the relationship between Theatricality and Society/Power. I have chosen the Auto de Fe as a specific case because it's one of the ceremonies that are less studied in Portugal as far as its relation with theatricality and spectacle is concerned. I am inclined to consider that besides all the apparatus that it included, the Inquisitors were also aware that it would work as a sort of *catharsis* for the audience. I still don't have enough elements to infer that, but by reading Roger Grainger's *The Drama of the Rite: Worship, Liturgy and Theatre*

*Performance*, it is getting more and more clear to me that there was that element of “purging” the audience during the proclamation of the condemned. Otherwise they would not include chants like *de te deum laudamus* or the *veni creator spiritus*, both hymns praising God.

Previously I devoted my time to the complementation of the credits which are obligatory by the Bologna process; I read and noted several historical and theoretical texts which are related to my work selecting and defining concepts of major interest for my research; I studied several images and documents related to Autos de Fe in the Portuguese National Archive of the Torre do Tombo and in the Portuguese National Library selecting the most pertinent ones for my project; I defined and deepened the concepts of theatricality, spectacle and representation as well as Victor Turner’s concept of liminality, Erika Fisher-Lichte’s concepts of phenomenal body and semiotic body, Friedrich Schiller’s concepts of formal impulse, material impulse and playful impulse; I wrote an abstract and a critical analysis on the text *The Performance of Culture: Anthropological and Ethnographic Approaches*, by Marvin Carlson (which was presented during the seminar on Documentation oriented by Professor Maria Helena Serôdio) dedicated to the issue of *performance* and how it operates on the individual level; I also wrote the study *No Women in the Theatre* (Queen Mary I and the prohibition of women both on stage and among the audience), a paper read in the framework of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the IFTR– July 2009 – that focused on Theatre and Censorship (the title being “Silent Voices, Forbidden Lives”). That paper is about to be published in the Portuguese theatre journal *Sinais de cena*, its issue number 12, which is due to be released in December.

I am now working on the issue of *performance/transversality/liminality* confronting the works of Nietzsche, Turner, Fisher-Lichte and Goffman. In articulation

with this issue I am developing a group of fundamental figures for “tremor and terror” (Kierkegaard) in the “spectacles of public execution” (Foucault).

Due to the scarcity of documents in Portugal on the actions of the Inquisition during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I asked the Vaticano a permission to do a research in the Secret Archives, which was granted, and I will be there during the whole month of March 2010. This research is based on the fact that it was from Rome that the control, alteration and regulation of the Auto de Fe would come.

After that, I will revise all the documents with a directional reading which will focus mainly on the relationships among citizens, the social space of the victims or condemned and the identification of the elements that led to the construction of the religious identity. Those aspects will serve as a parameter for the appreciation of the theatrical moments and their public effectiveness. My last action will be to cross theory and analysis of the documents through the elaboration of a critical text that will include all the information that I have found out and assembled. The interpretation of the data will constitute the basis for the final argument of my thesis. In parallel I will keep the bibliographic research in order to keep it updated which will allow me to include new acknowledgements if necessary.

Most of my actual conclusions and accomplished steps were already included in the previous chapters of this paper.

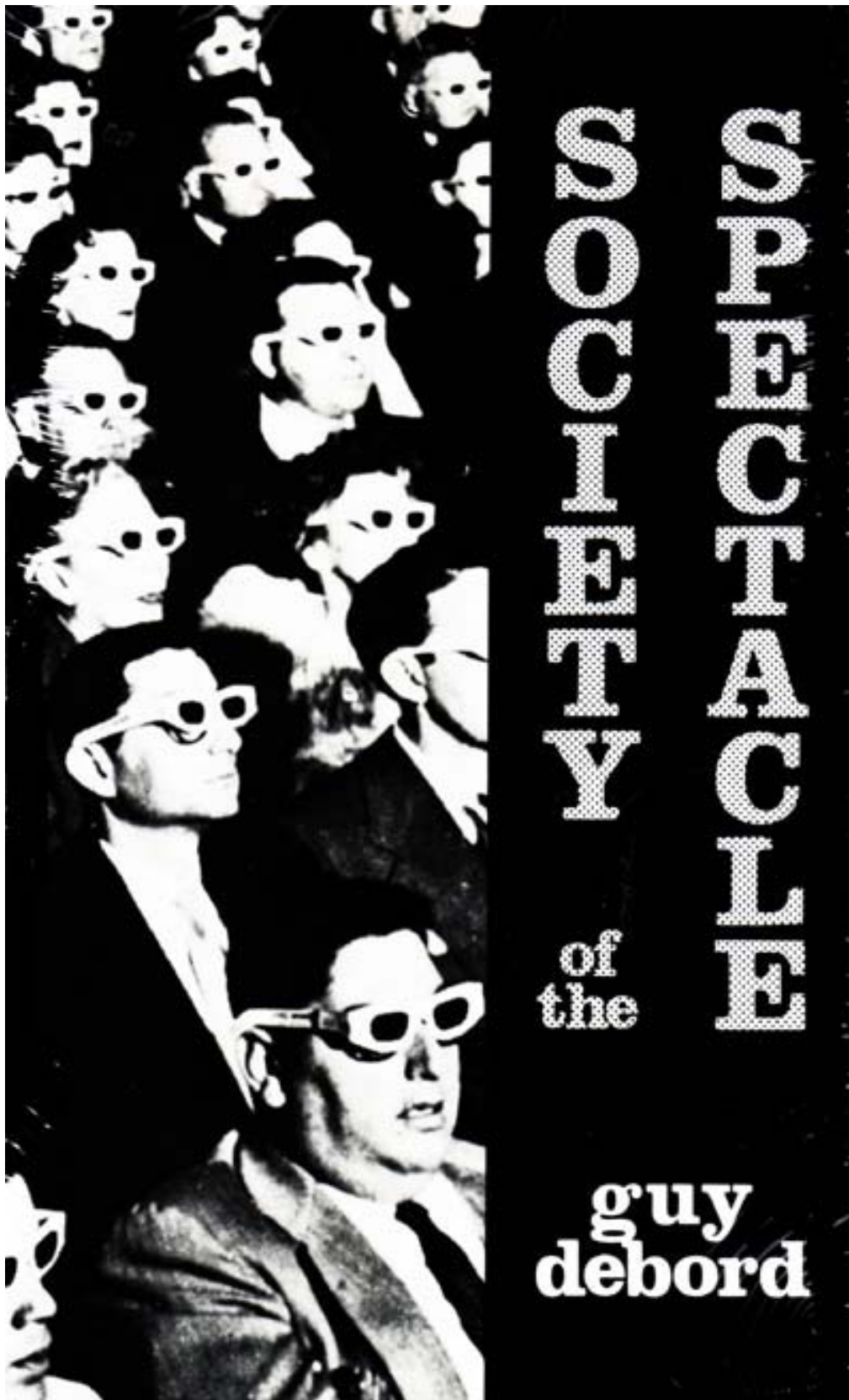
## 6 – A few considerations in manner of conclusion

Theatricality is a structure that is present in most of the human actions and operates in terms of consequence. Almost everything we do either in group or isolated is supposed to have a determined effect or result. It means that we always think in terms of what is going to be seen and whether or not it is going to be accepted. This “projected”

spectator can become real (a concrete person or group of people) or invisible, i.e., divine (e.g. God). During the duration of the “performance”, i.e., between the moment it starts until the moment it ends, there is a period that Victor Turner called liminality or liminarity. This period comprehends the transformation – the spectator is not what he was before and is still not what he is going to be in the end (even if there is only a slight and subtle alteration). In the concrete case of the Auto de Fe it was during this period that I believe that something similar to the *catharsis* would happen. The audience would fear for their souls and bodies because the possibility of being burned at the stake as the last and stronger penalty would horrify them. Even if they were “thirsty of blood” I believe they would be horrified or, at least, they would not be indifferent to the image of those condemned being burned (the fire would also symbolize Hell). But this last “show” was secular. It was not provided by the Church although it was due to the religious institution that it was carried out. The bonfire would just conclude what had already happened during the Auto de Fe (the proclamation of the convicted with hymns, chants and psalms). Theatricality had already taken place in the catholic ceremony and had a second and last act in the secular ceremony. The second “act” might not have included hymns or chants (I still lack that information) but it surely included the choreography of guards bringing the victim to the place of the bonfire, the cries of the people (whether encouraging or rebelling against the burning), the drums, the vocal effects of the announcement of the penalty having been accomplished. Theatricality, I am sure, was a structure transversal to the domains of both monastic and secular power in what concerns the Auto de Fe.

7 – Images

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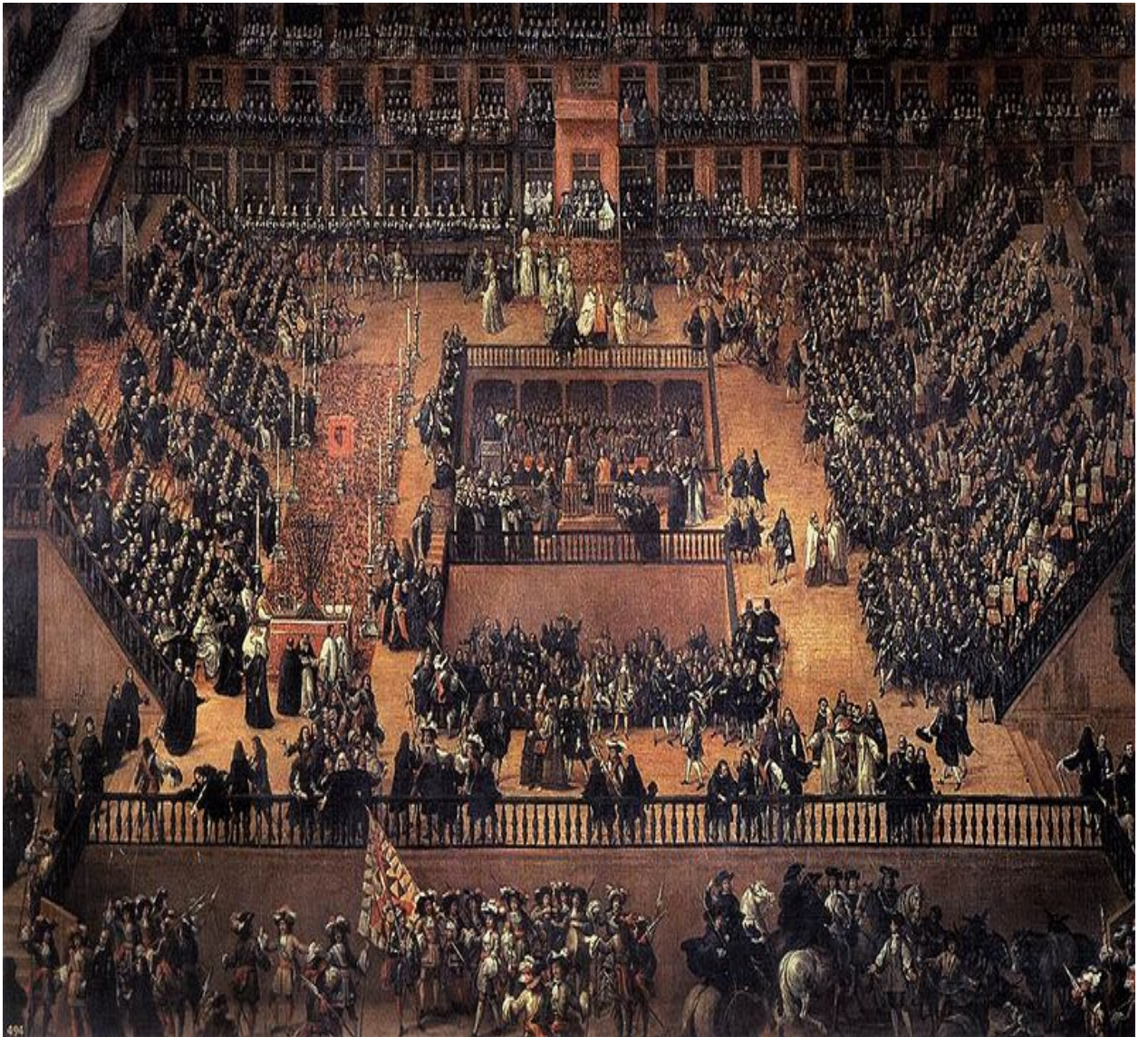
7.



8.



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10.



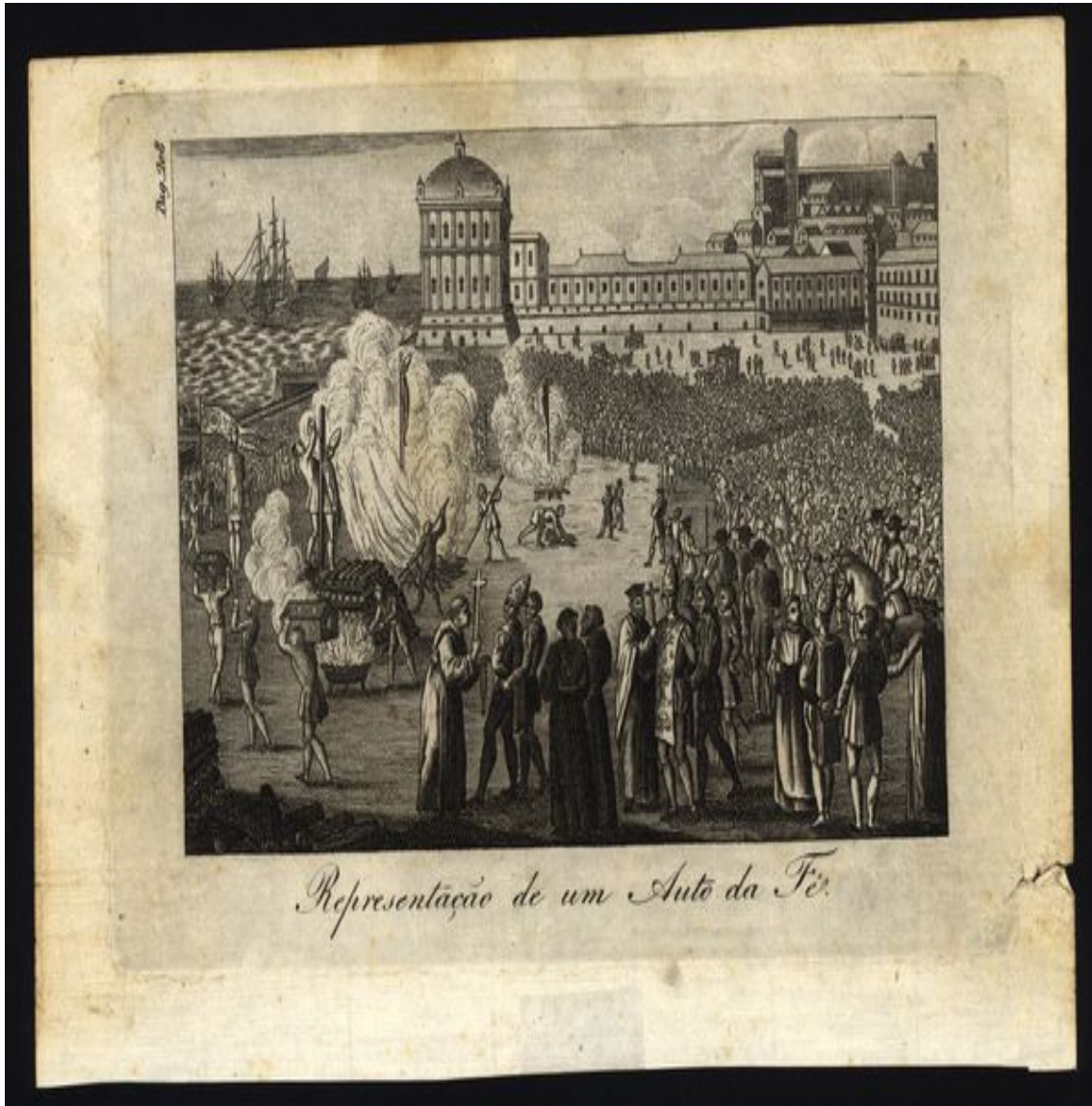
11.



12.



13.



*Representação de um Auto da Fé.*

## 8 – Images credits

- 1 – Cover of the first French Edition of “The Society of Spectacle”
- 2 – World Trade Center attacked 2001
- 3 – Moscow Theatre Siege 2004
- 4 – Chechens accused of the Moscow theatre siege
- 5 – Pagan ritual
- 6 – Caddo Indian with antler headress dances in a ritual ceremony marking the death of a special chief or leader in the tribe
- 7 – Roman Circus
- 8 – Fascist parade in Barcelona
- 9 – Auto de Fe in Spain, 1683, by Francisco Ricci
- 10 – St Dominic judging "heretics" who are about to be burned at the stake
- 12 – Inquisition in Portugal
- 13 – Representation of an AUTO DA FE, 1822

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