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Cannibalizing the Popular Work of Barbara Wagner

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of

at

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CANNIBALIZING THE POPULAR IN THE WORK OF BARBARA WAGNER

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Arts, Media, and Communications
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master in Fine Arts
at
Lindenwood University

by

Beatriz Arcoverde de Oliveira

Saint Charles, Missouri

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Abstract

This project offers an analysis of the appropriation of popular culture aesthetics and imagery in contemporary art through a critical examination of the work of Brazilian artist Barbara Wagner. Wagner's work contributes to an understanding of this increasing tendency, and also fosters the possibility of a discussion about its consequences in the social world, in creating a paradox of both challenging colonized sensibilities, and also working to maintain a structure of social inequality. Her work is also a good way to discuss the expanding contemporary definitions of popular culture.

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Table of contents

Abstract.....	I
Preface.....	II
Table of Contents.....	III
List of images.....	IV
Chapter 1 – Introduction/background information.....	1
1.1 – On Barbara Wagner.....	1
1.2 - The Brazilian context and <i>Brasilia Teimosa</i>	5
Chapter 2 – Literature review.....	14
2.1 – Barbara Wagner’s place of speech.....	14
2.2. – “The popular”	18
2.3 – Appropriation and distinction.....	21
2.4 – Brazil cannibalizes the popular.....	27
2.5 – Deconstruction of colonized dominant aesthetic sensibilities.....	29
Chapter 3 – Methodology.....	32
Chapter 4 – Findings.....	34
4.1 – Expanding the notion of popular.....	34
4.2 – Appropriation and distinction in popular class aesthetics.....	38
4.3 – Deconstruction of dominant aesthetic sensibilities.....	44
Chapter 5 – Final considerations.....	50
List of images.....	52
Bibliography.....	72

List of images

- Image 1. Photograph from the series *Masters of Ceremony* by Barbara Wagner, 2016.
- Image 2. Still from the film *Swinguerra*, by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2019.
- Image 3. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.
- Image 4. Display of Maracatu during carnival in Tracunhém, Pernambuco – Brazil.
- Image 5. Photograph from the series *Shining Star*, by Barbara Wagner – 2008.
- Image 6. Photograph from the series *The Cortage* by Barbara Wagner, 2013.
- Image 7. Photograph from the series *Masters of Ceremony* by Barbara Wagner, 2016.
- Image 8. Aerial view of Brasilia Teimosa Beach, Recife – Brazil.
- Image 9. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.
- Image 10. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.
- Image 11. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.
- Image 12. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.
- Image 13. Photograph of Barbara Wagner's work *Brasilia Teimosa* on display at MASP – Museum of Museum of Art of São Paulo Assis Chateaubriandm. São Paulo, Brazil.
- Image 14. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.
- Image 15. Photograph from the series *Masters of Ceremony* by Barbara Wagner, 2016.
- Image 16. Still from the film *Holy Tremor* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.
- Image 17. *Aboporu*, 1928, by Tarsila do Amaral. 85cm v. 72cm, oil on canvas.
- Image 18. Photograph from the series *The Cortage* by Barbara Wagner, 2013.
- Image 19. Still from the film *Set to Go*, by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2015.
- Image 20. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.
- Image 21. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.
- Image 22. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.
- Image 23. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.
- Image 24. Still from the film *Holy Tremor* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.
- Image 25. Still from the film *Holy Tremor* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.
- Image 26. Still from the film *Holy Tremor* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.
- Image 27. Still from the film *Bye Bye Deutschland!/Eine Lebensmelodie* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.
- Image 28. Still from the film *Bye Bye Deutschland!/Eine Lebensmelodie* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.
- Image 29. Photograph from the series *The Wedding of the Century* by Barbara Wagner, 2008.
- Image 30. Photograph from the series *The Wedding of the Century* by Barbara Wagner, 2008.
- Image 31. Photograph from the series *In Search of the 5th Element*, by Barbara Wagner, 2017.
- Image 32. Exhibition of the series *In Search of the 5th Element*, by Barbara Wagner. Instituto Moreira Salles, São Paulo – Brazil. 2017.
- Image 33. Photograph from the series *In Search of the 5th Element*, by Barbara Wagner, 2017.
- Image 34. Photograph from the series *Shining Star*, by Barbara Wagner – 2008.
- Image 35. Photograph from the series *Shining Star*, by Barbara Wagner – 2008.
- Image 36. Photograph from the series *Shining Star*, by Barbara Wagner – 2008.
- Image 37. Still from the video installation *Cinéma Cassino*, by Barbara Wagner, 2013.

Introduction/Background Information

On Barbara Wagner

This project offers an analysis of the appropriation of popular culture, aesthetics and imagery in contemporary art through a critical examination of the work of Brazilian artist Barbara Wagner. It is understood that contemporary art is a field often relegated to intellectual elites, and articulated in official art spaces such as museums, galleries, biennales, prizes and film festivals. These places are very distinct from those in which popular art and culture, usually marginalized from dominant culture, thrive.¹ Wagner is an artist who, working with photography and film, researches and captures the idea and essence of popular art and culture, especially in Brazil. This thesis contributes to an understanding of this increasing tendency of appropriation of popular aesthetic sensibilities, and also fosters the possibility of a discussion about its consequences in the social world. It reveals a paradox that comes with this tendency, in both challenging colonized sensibilities by enhancing visibility and representation of more marginalized, popular groups, but also working to maintain a structure of social inequality through the symbolic violence and the perpetration of distinction.²

Wagner describes her work as “an exploration of the popular body.”³ Her work is known

¹ Nick Prior. “A Question of Perception: Bourdieu, Art and the Postmodern.” *The British Journal of Sociology*. 56, 1. (2005): 123-39.

² In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* describes how those in power define aesthetic concepts and "good taste," and so the social class of a person tends to predict and in fact determine his or her cultural interests, and cultural consumption spurts the maintenance of social inequality through perpetuation of status definition.

³ “Bárbara Wagner,” Bárbara Wagner, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://barbarawagner.com.br/barbara-wagner>.

for portraits, pictures, and videos of people who produce popular art and of popular aesthetic sensibilities. Many of them are artists and aspiring artists themselves, in artistic fields relegated from the mainstream society, such as those in her work *Masters of Ceremony* (2016), which pictures actors from the peripheric⁴ Brega Funk music industry of the cities of Recife and São Paulo, in Brazil (Image 1); and her music video *Swinguerra*. This work was commissioned for the Venice Biennale in 2019, and depicts popular dance competitions, also in the peripheries of Recife, where underprivileged queer youngsters practice choreographies and compete in gym halls and public parks, forming troupes to challenge one another (Image 2).

Wagner is also known for taking pictures with flashes and strong artificial lights, bringing up strong colors and sharp definitions, reminiscent of the aesthetics of publicity ads (Image 3). There is nothing abstract about her work. In this way, the people she depicts are presented with a celebrity-like artifice, that brings prominence, visibility and appealingly displays these “popular bodies.”

Coming from photojournalism and depicting different artistic cultures, Wagner has often been proclaimed to create a type of ethnographic work. However, she has refuted this assumption, arguing that it does not make sense to talk about her work in such terms.⁵ What she is after is the aesthetic and performative aspects of the groups she actively researches. Her work is definitively stylized and created with artistic purposes. Wagner seems well aware of the history of

⁴ Peripheries of Brazilian urban centers usually reference low income neighborhoods that lack the same services of the city's centers.

⁵ Edgar Homem. *Instituto Santander no Brasil Apresenta: Estrelha Brilante*. 2010.
https://www.santander.com.br/document/gsb/institucional_sala_press_fevereiro10_003.pdf

photography, photojournalism and ethnography in the problematic of portrayals and, thus, invention of the “other” in society. She mentions in interviews that, conscious of her status as an outsider, she aims at breaking these formulas through different kinds of experimentation and partnerships with the people she photographs and films.⁶

As previously mentioned, Wagner is also an artist that has been gaining notoriety in the established art spaces that are run by global intellectual elites. Her art is created through different kinds of experimentation and collaborations, that, on the crossroads of art, politics, and subjectivity, work as an examination of the political struggles that run across Brazil and also across the contemporary art world, imbricated in matters of race, class and gender, culture and coloniality⁷. Wagner herself has expressed that her work is created with political intent in mind.⁸

Yet, she is still a [Brazilian]White middle class artist who typically showcases people of color from unprivileged communities, and cultural scenes that are often deemed unsophisticated by the intellectual elites and dominant classes. As much as she contends that her creation is in collaboration with the people she shows, there is an embedded power imbalance that brings the question of whose point of view is being projected. Moreover, the way her art is consumed by her public may not be the way the artist intended the works to be interpreted, and some have argued

⁶ Guilha Barborá Ferreira. Micropolitics in the Tropics: Expressions of the Common in the Artistic Images of Barbara Wagner. 2019. *Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 50(1). 2019

⁷ Walter D. Mignolo argues that coloniality is the complex matrix of power that has been created and controlled by Western men and institutions from the Renaissance, when it was driven by Christian theology through the late twentieth century and that it dictates aesthetic sensibilities.

⁸ Ferreira “Micropolitics in the Tropics,” 2019.

that some of her works fans into people's ironic consumption of a kitsch mode of aestheticism.⁹

Wagner was born in 1980, in Brasília, Brazil's capital city. She graduated with a degree in journalism at the Federal University of Pernambuco - UFPE, in Recife – Brazil, where she lives today. She has an MA in fine art at the Dutch Art Institute, Arnhem. Since 2013, she has often together with her partner, Benjamin de Burca. However, this work will focus on Wagner. She has numerous personal shows in museums and galleries, including Berlinale, (2021, 2019); Stedelijk, Amsterdam (2019); Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (2018); and Museo Jumex, Mexico City (2019), and has participated in major group exhibitions, such as Manifesta 13, Marseille (2020); the 58th Biennale di Venezia (2019); Skulptur Projekte, Münster (2017); and the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo (2016). Her works have also been shown at the Berlinale (2019, 2018, 2017), the Locarno Film Festival (2019) and the International Documentary Film Festival in Tel Aviv (2017). Her photos have also been published in books and magazines.

Although she photographs marginalized populations, her work is nearly the opposite of a type of photojournalism that is sometimes criticized for making beautiful, artistic pictures out of images of poverty and misery. This practice has been referred to as *the aesthetization of suffering*, or the work of *concerned photographers*, such as acclaimed photographers Sebastião Salgado and Walker Evans. In elucidating the different approach of Wagner's work to this type of concerned photography, Cyro Almeida finds that Wagner's work differs from it in five ways: the use of

⁹ Diogo R. De Barros. "Os Evangélicos Na Produção Visual Brasileira: Análise Da Polêmica Em Torno De Terremoto Santo [The Evangelics in Brazilian Visual Production: an Analysis of the Polemic Surrounding Terremoto Santo." *Revista de Ciências Sociais* 50, no. 2 (2019): 1–13.

color, the use of artificial lighting, the exclusivity of pictures in a context of leisure, the performative actions of those photographed, and their intrinsic collaboration.¹⁰ Wagner's images are always capturing people who are, in social life, disfranchised and living in the margins of society, but her pictures are not about destitution, but quite the opposite. She captures their image while they are thriving.

The Brazilian context and Brasília Teimosa

The Brazilian geo-politics of race, class, gender and economy are essential to a better understanding of Wagner's work. She lives and works in the Northeastern part of Brazil, where Recife is located, which is one of Brazil's poorest regions. For most of its history, the Brazilian northeastern region has been a feudal-like environment where the legacy of slavery is felt in its enduring monocultures of sugar cane plantations, where workers still live on similar conditions. It is always important to keep in mind that Brazil had, by far, the biggest intake of African people brought to the Americas to work into slavery from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and the Northeastern region had the largest numbers in the country. It also had a great indigenous population, which were partly decimated, partly miscegenated into the general population.

The people of the Northeastern region of Brazil are highly racially mixed and, according to the census, majority Black or Brown. In recent years, more people have been recognizing

¹⁰ Cyro Augusto Gomes Almeida, "Corpo, Luz e Experiência Social No Livro Brasília Teimosa, De Bárbara Wagner [Body, Light and Social Experience in the Book Brasília Teimosa by Barbara Wagner]" (dissertation, 2018).

themselves as indigenous as well, in a process of reclaiming lost identities. This miscegenation was acclaimed during most the twentieth century, for that is now called the “myth of racial democracy.” This myth claimed that there was no racial inequality in Brazil, due to racial mixing. It was a lie to conceal a history of rape and colonial violence, for Brazil is one of the most racially unequal countries to date, as indicated in indexes of social welfare.¹¹

Nevertheless, different from the history of countries such as the United States and South Africa, governmental policy in the twentieth century Brazil never touched on the idea of race. There were never segregation laws, and race only came to be part of the census in the latter part of the twentieth century. The concept of a “myth of a racial democracy” was developed by Florestan Fernandes, who demonstrated how policy in Brazil was always racist but concealed under the rhetoric of class, so as not to address the issue and sell a cleaner image of the country.¹²

What proceeded was that the racialized populations in Brazil have been disenfranchised through history, with the constant attempt of erasure of their culture, religion and identity. For instance, during a part of the nineteenth century, samba playing, a Afro-descendent musical rhythm, was forbidden on the streets, with the argument of it promoting “places of perdition.”¹³ Afro-Brazilian religions have also been the targets of prosecution. However, as mentioned, the government would not admit that these were racial issues.

¹¹ Jessé de Souza. *A Elite Do Atraso: Da Escravidão à Lava Jato [The Elite of Backwardness: From Slavery to the Carwash Scandal]*. São Paulo: Leya, 2017.

¹² De Souza. *The Elite of Backwardness*, 2017.

¹³ Geroge Ruben Oliven “The Production and Consumption of Culture in Brazil.” *Latin American Perspectives* 11, 40 (1984): 103-115.

That means that a lot of the cultural and artistic manifestations that withstand in Brazil are ones of resistance and endurance, and that these are often perceived as authentic.¹⁴ These have resisted in hybrid and ever mutating traditions of dance, music, art, and whatever these people could still hold on to as some sort of shared existence and shared identity. This is what Homi K. Bhabha would call “acts of social survival,”¹⁵ which make possible for these destitute minorities to bring experience in the form of a creative existence. A lot of this today is recognized as Brazilian popular art and culture.

One of the these “acts of social survival” is Maracatu, which is the music and dance of sugar cane cutters, who mostly descend from indigenous and Africans peoples, and that today live in the inner regions of the Northeast. During carnival, they dress exuberantly in costumes that reference, while also mock the Portuguese colonial court (Image 4). Wagner has two different works with series of photographs of Maracatu players and dancers: *Shining Star* (2008-2010), where she photographs the players at rehearse times throughout the year (Image 5), and *The Cortege* (2013), where pictures are taken in the seconds before the Maracatu players went parading (Image 6). In the description of *The Cortege*, Wagner mentions adheres to conventions of 'light', 'frame' and 'pose' from portraiture in painting and photography of Renaissance and Baroque European painting of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁶

These traditions carry on a sense of shared identity. This sense of shared identity is also

¹⁴ Hahl Oliver, Ezra Zuckerman, and Minjae Kim, “Why Elites Love Authentic Lowbrow Culture: Overcoming High-Status Denigration with Outsider Art,” *American Sociological Association* 82, no. 4 (2017): pp. 828-856.

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁶ “A Corte / The Cortege,” Bárbara Wagner, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://barbarawagner.com.br/A-Corte-The-Cortege>.

found in groups from the urban periphery, who are also lacking in material and symbolic capital and are deprived of many privileges of citizenship, such as basic sanitation and police protection. It is common, for instance, for the marginalized urban peripheric youth to adopt signs and symbols of hip hop and rapper culture, such as the actors in *Masters of Ceremony* (Image 7) – foreign cultures that are, from their conception, class bound and racialized. Wagner often speaks of being interested in how popular culture and popular art are evolving, and this hybridity between cultures is something to take notice.¹⁷

Nevertheless, it is also important to point out that the years in which Barbara Wagner started working with photography were years in which Brazil was undergoing a structural transformation with progressive governments (2002-2016) that distributed wealth, income, and lifted over 55 million people out of poverty. Most of these were non-whites. This ascendance was to be a baseline structure in her work. There is a sense of pride in many of Wagner's photos, which depict people who, for the first time in history, move closer to an idea of citizenship, in the sense of belonging to the 'functional' fabric of society, by enjoying and utilizing its privileges.

The work launched Wagner's career, *Brasilia Teimosa* (2007-2008), is a series of 22 photographs, which had many exhibitions, and were later published into a book. This work is very emblematic of her artistic endeavor. The name of the series, which means 'Stubborn Brasilia' is

¹⁷ Maciel Nahima, "Fotos de Barbara Wagner Documentam a Cultura Popular Periférica [Barbara Wagner's Photographs Document Popular Peripheric Culture]," Archives of Correio Braziliense, accessed July 7, 2021, https://www.correio braziliense.com.br/app/noticia/diversao-e-arte/2017/07/25/interna_diversao_arte,612389/barbara-wagner-e-a-documentacao-da-cultura-popular-de-resistencia.shtml.

the name of a working class urban beach in Recife that has, for decades, resisted real estate speculation in one of Recife's most sought areas (Image 8). The area was occupied by dwellers who built stilt houses and a fishing village in the 1960s, at the same time the new capital of Brazil – Brasilia, was being built. Hence the name, “Stubborn Brasilia.”

For *Brasilia Teimosa*, Wagner went to this beach every Sunday for two years, in order to photograph groups of local bathers. This work remits to a social class that was growing during the years of progressive government in Brazil, and which, no longer in the margins, could, for the first time, occupy civic spaces. They are no longer in the “reserve army” of the poor and unemployed, but people climbing from the margins into the core of Brazilian society (Image 9).

Here, one sees Wagner using the means of photography to register exactly this tension of class conflict that is so pronounced in Marxist traditions. Kiki Mazzuccheli writes in the presentation of this work on Wagner's Website, that Brasilia Teimosa is: “an urban beach populated by a community that has refused to leave one of the most pursued after spots of Pernambuco's capital. Brasília Teimosa is not only a natural stretch for the expansion of the international five star hotels, but also the place where shanty town dwellers gather on Sundays with their friends and families to bathe, eat, drink, listen to funk and enjoy the day off.”¹⁸ This beach is a contrast to others nearby, where the dominant classes prefer to attend. It is also a nuisance to the investors who want them to leave so they can exploit the touristic potential of the neighboring area.

¹⁸ Kiki Mazzuccheli, “Brasília Teimosa / Stubborn Brasília,” Bárbara Wagner, 2008, <https://barbarawagner.com.br/Brasilia-Teimosa-Stubborn-Brasilia>.

Jessé de Souza points out that this “new class,” which is also commonly called “the popular class,” is almost entirely Afro descendent. He argues that it is the very idea of consumption which brings them closer to a consciousness of citizenship, rather than a total integration in the fabric of society. That is because a commodity boom was happening through the years Brazil saw an economic growth, and not a radical reform of the political system.¹⁹

This popular aesthetic sensibility shown by the bathers in *Brasilia Teimosa* is what Bourdieu would have described as “lowbrow.” They may be dressed inadequately, and express themselves in ways that could be considered vulgar, such as this picture where a couple kisses with their tongues sticking out, while a man wears a winter hood at the beach (Image 10). Many of the bodies shown are not ideal, and they are racialized (image 11). Many carry marks that remit to social ostracism. In fact, Almeida takes notice that 9, out of the 22 photographs of the series, show people with scars (Image 12). He considers it not a coincidence, but an evidence that the people of Brasilia Teimosa show marks of a social experience of marginalization.²⁰

Wagner’s series depict *existing* as an act of resistance for the dwellers of Brasilia Teimosa. She depicts a population that lives in the brink of poverty, and yet, she refuses to show these people through the clichés of material deprivation, or even through the idea of dignified labor. She shows these people having irreverent moments, during their acquired and deserving leisure time. Moreover, the use of flash, even at strong sunlight, tells that ‘this is to be seen.’ In this way, Wagner brings a counter-hegemonic narrative that confronts pre-conceived ideals about

¹⁹ De Souza, *The Elite of Backwardness*, 2017.

²⁰ Almeida, “Body, Light and Social Experience in the Book *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner” (dissertation, 2018).

how a marginalized people should be portrayed. This may work at a level where people are exposed into a different points of view, portraying non-conforming bodies that sheer away from dominant ideals that maintain capitalist ideology.

Yet, invoking a more critical lens, her work can also be problematized as an appropriation of these “popular bodies,” showing them off at locations (museums, galleries, etc.) the same bodies would most likely never attend. The dominant classes do not attend Brasilia Teimosa Beach. For Wagner, Brasilia Teimosa is an option. If the “lowbrow” setting no longer suited her, she could opt for other beaches. The question raised then is why is it so alluring to see these pictures become art works exposed in expensive plexiglas at contemporary art museums, beautifully illuminated in its authorized settings (Image 13). Perhaps there is a lure for a space where the intellectual elite that consumes her work can have a vicarious experience of an authentic working class beach without the need to set a foot in Brasilia Teimosa.

By looking at Wagner’s work, one can also expand on Bourdieu’s theory of distinction. That this might seem counterintuitive because Bourdieu is so adamant that those with high cultural capital, the intellectual elites, look for distinction in consuming erudite and highbrow art. Bourdieu argues that popular of art is easily decoded and offers immediate pleasure, whereas “legitimate art,” which is considered highbrow, causes deferred pleasure, like abstract expressionism or avant-garde theater, demanding contemplative conceptual understanding.²¹

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Nice, and Tony Bennett, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015). p.486.

Nevertheless, Barbara Wagner's success fits well with the idea that tastes are always changing, and in post-modern times, there has been a strive to collapse the dichotomies of lowbrow and highbrow in contemporary art.²² Her success speaks to the tendency of appropriation of a popular arts and cultures in contemporary art, as it becomes more common to see popular aesthetic sensibilities in museums, galleries and film festivals. Moreover, this change in tastes is not random, and Bourdieu would point out that tendencies in art are tied to structures of power relation. What happens is that distinction is put forth by appropriating the images and sensibilities of "the popular," and elite artists gain notoriety with this appropriation.

Lastly, when talking about appropriation of popular art through the work of Barbara Wagner, it is important to take into account the Brazilian context and history that paved the way to this. Brazil is a place of hybrid cultures that endured long processes of colonization from European countries, a colonization of sensibilities as much as it was political colonization.²³ In the process of an independent identity formation, Brazil embraced popular aesthetics in order to create the symbolisms for a national identity.²⁴

George Oliven shows a pattern in Brazil, by which that dominant class appropriates, elaborates and finally transforms certain cultural manifestations originally restricted to the lower classes into national symbols.²⁵ For instance, once some of the *Brasilia Teimosa* pictures were

²² Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006).

²³ Dandelion & Burdock, "Venice Biennale 2019: Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin De Burca: Swinguerra," thisistomorrow, September 16, 2019, <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/venice-biennale-2019-barbara-wagner-benjamin-de-burca-swinguerra>.

²⁴ Néstor García Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008).

²⁵ George Ruben Oliven "The Production and Consumption of Culture in Brazil." *Latin American Perspectives* 11, 40 (1984): 103-115.

acquired by the MASP – Museum of Art of São Paulo Assis Chateaubriandm, Brazil’s most important art museum, and Wagner became the youngest artist to compose their collection – she was 29 at the time – and her images came to be part in the formation of Brazilian contemporary national identity, even though they found some resistance at first, for they “did not send a good image of Brazil.”²⁶ This topic was also covered with Wagner’s work *Swinguerra* representing Brazil at the Venice Biennale in 2019, and articles were written about this “shown face of Brazil.”²⁷

The idea of “cannibalization” of popular culture proposed by the title is a play on the idea of appropriation of popular culture and the Brazilian idea that its art is anthropophagic. It feeds on other cultures to create something new. Barbara Wagner’s work, though from another era and a very different movement, is very much feeding from artistic endeavors of those cultures other than her own.

In exploring Wagner’s work for the purposes of this study, there was a qualitative content analysis of some of the work of Wagner and its anthropophagic ways. Three themes were recognized to appear as a patterns in her work and will be discussed in this paper. They were the expanding the notion of “popular;” appropriation and distinction in popular class aesthetics; and deconstruction of dominant aesthetic sensibilities.

²⁶ Almeida, “Body, Light and Social Experience in the Book Brasília Teimosa” (dissertation, 2018).

²⁷ Dandelion & Burdock, “Venice Biennale 2019: Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin De Burca: Swinguerra,”

Literature Review

Barbara Wagner's place of speech

Barbara Wagner's work has been the subject of numerous electronic reviews on the websites of the art institutions where she has exhibited. In Brazil, at three two peer reviewed articles about her work and two post-graduate theses that delve into her creations have been published. Most of these analyses focus on her work with photography and journalism; her background with other media; and on the denomination of the "popular body," which is a major way the artist herself describes to anchor her work. Finally, most of what is written about the artist also analyses of her use of flash, artificial lightning, and how it creates this images of artifice.

Most reviews on her work are positive, elucidating to its relevance and formal quality. ArtReview, for instance, points out that her work is a stand out in the São Paulo Biennale in 2016.²⁸ In all that has been written about the artist and her work, there is hardly anything devoted to the fact that she is in this outsider position in her creations, and nothing on this idea of distinction and appropriation of popular themes, images and bodies. Most reference the way she depicts the "popular body" as simply a counter hegemonic narrative. Only one article was found to present the problematic idea of a "social voyeurism," in her work, in a sense that that it transforms the people she photographs into objects that can be symbolically possessed.²⁹

²⁸ "Future Greats: Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca," ArtReview, accessed June 25, 2021, <https://artreview.com/jan-feb-2019-future-greats-brbara-wagner-benjamin-de-burca/>.

²⁹ Amanda Areias, Ingrid Hötte Ambrogi, and Mateus Henrique Rodrigo Teixeira, "Funk Brega e Funk Ostentação: Concepções de Identidade, Gênero e Consumo na Obra Imagética De Barbara Wagner [Funk Brega and Funk Ostentation: Conceptions of Identity, Gender and Consumption in the Imagetive Work of Barbara Wagner]," *Illuminuras* 19, no. 46 (2018): pp. 351-378.

Moacir dos Anjos speaks of Wagner's work as an intersection of art and photojournalism, operating in a position of refuting stigmas and amplifying narrative possibilities. Dos Anjos delves into her intense participant-observation techniques, highlighting she spends a lot of time with the people she photographs and films prior to their creations. He also emphasizes the sociopolitical importance and a documental elaboration in Wagner's work, which privileges the self-esteem of those localized in subalternity. He calls her art "journalistically contaminated," in that it proposes a reflection in the field of the art, emerging as an apparatus against hegemonic narratives of daily life.³⁰

Fabiana de Moraes highlights the reality vs. fiction in the work of Wagner, which she gets from mixing investigative journalism with contemporary art, design and music videos.³¹ De Moraes emphasizes that music videos is an important genre to take notice when looking at the works that Wagner's calls "musical documentaries", such as *Holy Tremor* (2017), and *You Are Seeing Things* (2016). In this article, the author also highlights that many of Wagner's images are ones of leisure and sensuality (Image 14).

Guilherme Ferreira comments that there is an ethnographic character to her work, while also recognizing the performativity act of a complex, hybrid effort. The author also highlights the political level in which a lot of Wagner's work is a showcase of class mobility through consumption. In many works, such as *Brasilia Temosa* and *Masters of Ceremony*, she shows

³⁰ Moacir dos Anjos, "Arte-Jornalismo: Representação, Subjetividade e Contaminação [Art-Journalism: Representation, Subjectivity and Contamination]," *PPGCOM* 14, no. 2 (2020): pp. 39-54.

³¹ Fabiana De Moraes, in *Jornalismo/Estética: Contaminações Contemporâneas Na Produção da Arte e Informação [Journalism/Aesthetics: Contemporary Contaminations in the Production of Art and Information]*, 2017.

people of a class that marks its presence through the boom of consumption goods, ostentating international clothing brands and cars (Image 15).³²

Diogo de Barros exposes the challenges of political art when the reception of the public is different than the intention of the artists, and the multiple possibilities of interpretation and appropriation.³³ He shows the example of Wagner's work *Holy Tremor* (Image 16), which she calls a musical documentary and was made in collaboration with a Neo-Pentecostal Evangelic church group. Though the artist clearly states in interviews that it thoughtfully made with collaboration with the church group, so as not to stigmatize it, De Barros recounts the episode where the film was shown at a film festival in Recife, and it was met with laughs, for it seemed extremely kitsch and out of place. Other authors have also written about how Wagner's depiction of "the popular" also feeds into the consumption of kitsch/camp fascinations for elite audiences using this specific episode of *Holy Tremor*.³⁴

Another major aspect of her work that has been emphasized is her use of flash and artificial lighting. That is one of the main hallmarks of her work, which appears in most reviews. Amanda Areias et al say her use of flash reinforces a cinematic atmosphere and highlights that she uses flash even with strong sunlight, creating temporal complexities, for the artificial lights prevents one from knowing the time of the shot. Her focus is also always very sharp and gives a

³² Guilherme Barbosa Ferreira. "Micropolítica Nos Trópicos: Criação e Expressão Do Comum Nas Imagens Artísticas de Barbara Wagner [Micropolitics in the Tropics: Expressions of the Common in the Artistic Images of Barbara Wagner]," *Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 50(1). 2019.

³³ De Barros. "The Evangelics in Brazilian Visual Production," 2019.

³⁴ Bárbara Bergamaschi, "Um Dia Da Caça, Outro Do Caçador [A Day for the Hunted, One for the Hunter]," *Janela Internacional de Cinema*, 2017, <http://www.janeladecinema.com.br/2017/11/12/um-dia-da-caca-outro-do-cacador-peixe-de-jonathas-de-andrade-2016-terremoto-santo-barbara-wagner-e-benjamin-de-burca-2017/>.

great sense of perceptiveness.³⁵ Ferreira argues that Wagner's use of flash is way of bringing plasticity to her work and that she is adept in technical conventions. She launches light, showcases colors, marks counters, and is skilled in chiaroscuro.³⁶ Wagner's films have a real cinematic quality, with extreme attention to the details of image and sound.

Almeida offers a view that Wagner is using the idea of stereotypes in her favor and turning them against their own potency. On one hand, there are the stereotypes of marginality, and on the other hand, the beautiful and exotic. She gives these images a sense of constant reinvention and a view that, although it is about "the popular," it is very different from the conservative view tied to folklore – which is a view of popular culture is always tied to mysticism and tradition. Wagner shows that popular culture is something that is always evolving.³⁷

Pedro Freitas Lima also tackles the issue of stereotypes in the work of Wagner and proposes that her work distances from the stereotype while using them, but she actually confers it as an identity representation mechanism. In other words, she makes use of stereotypes in order to criticize them.³⁸ Callou highlights her work as fundamental in the formation of Brazilian contemporary national imaginaries, with matrixes of political significant ideas, such as identity,

³⁵ Areias et al, "Funk Brega and Funk Ostentation," 2018.

³⁶ Ferreira, "Micropolitics in the Tropics," 2019.

³⁷ Almeida, "Body, Light and Social Experience in the Book Brasília Teimosa," 2018.

³⁸ Pedro Freitas Lima, "Crentes, Pregadores, Funkeiros e Drags: o Baile Da Diferença Nas Convenções De Bárbara Wagner [Believers, Preachers, Funk Dancer and Drags: the Show of Difference in Barbara Wagner's Conventions]," *Visualidades* 16, no. 1 (2018): pp. 119-140.

tradition, community, belonging and authenticity. He argues that Wagner's work is an invitation to pay attention to the body in "state of image."³⁹

In this article, the proposition is that Wagner's work is important in this space where art meets the non-fiction, takes interest on diversity, appropriates popular aesthetics and places it in the displays of museums, galleries and film festivals. Moreover, in challenging the distinction between the "fine" and the "popular" arts, and bringing positive visibility people and cultures that are less valued in society, her art can ultimately aid in decentralizing the fictions of Eurocentrism. Wagner is important for the Brazilian contemporary scene and the imagination of a national identity that values pluralism and non-conforming bodies. Her art is interdisciplinary and hybrid, appealing and stimulating. Yet, by engaging by appropriation of the images and sensibilities of these popular, underprivileged communities and cultural scenes, and turning it into "distinct" artworks, she also engages in the structure by which social inequality maintain its place through the consumption of art and cultural products.

"The popular"

A better understanding what is meant by "popular", "popular culture" and "popular art" is of utmost importance in the analysis here presented, for it is at the core of the work of Barbara Wagner, and of which she, dialectally, helps to shape as well. However, it is also important to point out that there is not one all-encompassing definition of such terms. Here, "popular" takes on

³⁹ Hermano Callou, "Bárbara Wagner," *Cinética*, accessed June 10, 2021, <http://revistacinetica.com.br/nova/tag/barbara-wagner/>.

characteristics put forth by Nestor Garcia Canclini, which, when speaking of “popular,” allows it to embrace synthetically every situation of socio-economic subordination and gives it a shared identity to groups that converge.⁴⁰ This frees the term “popular” from a connotation of class and allows it to encompass the aesthetics of minority groups.

Moreover, studies of social reproduction put into evidence that “popular cultures” are not simple manifestations of the creative necessities of “the people,” the autonomous accumulation of traditions prior to industrialization, or the results of nominated powers of political parties or social movements.⁴¹ This means that popular culture is not opposed to modernity, like the works of Wagner argue for. According to Renne Silverman, popular art cannot be nailed down to a singular definition; it is at once popular culture, popular tradition, popular forms and ways of making art, that which is popular among large numbers of people, and something that can be wielded to exert or deflect hegemonic forces.⁴² In Stuart Hall’s formulation, popular culture is neither the popular traditions of resistance to these processes nor the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is, “the ground on which the transformations are worked.”⁴³

Popular culture also differs from “mass culture,” which is culture that arose with the industrial revolution in the cities and ends up submitting other cultures to its common homogenous project. In opposition, erudite culture is privileged in the academic, and by official

⁴⁰ Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures*, 2008). p.272.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Renne M. Silverman. *The Popular Avant-Garde*. Amsterdam. Rodopi. 2010

⁴³ Stuart Hall. “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular’”, *Critical Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. 2 London: Prentice Hall (1998). p.443.

means.⁴⁴ According to Denys Cuche, popular culture is based on practical and original values which give meaning to its existence, taking into account cultural conflicts. Cuche also points out two opposite theses that must be avoided in the unfolding of popular culture: one is a reductionist, which stated that popular culture is an unfinished product of the dominant culture, and the second one is that, coming from “the popular,” popular culture would be the only manifestations that are authentic and autonomous.⁴⁵

Finally, Holton N Parker argues that popular culture is something that one may not be able to define but certainly sees and recognizes. Taking from a Bourdieusian view, he points out that one way of seeing popular culture is to say that it consists of productions of those without cultural capital and access to the means of symbolic and cultural production and that require little of it for consumption and fruition. Finally, he argues for a definition "toward "popular culture, since it appears to be impossible to come up with a single definition of it. He approaches this definition by arguing that popular art is one that is unauthorized by the artworld – the artworld being defined as that which makes art into art (for instance, the artworld authorizes the Brillo Box to be art when manufactured by Andy Warhol). Whenever popular art gets to be authorized, it becomes simply “art.”⁴⁶ It is exactly that “unauthorized” artistic endeavors that become authorized, through the eyes and lenses of Barbara Wagner.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth de Jesus Fernandes. “O Bonde da Bahia: Culture Popular e Cultura de Massa [Bahia’s Bond: Popular Culture and Mass Culture”. *Enecult.* 1.3 (2010). 1-13.

⁴⁵ Denys Cuche. *A Noção de Cultura nas Ciências Sociais [The Notion of Culture in the Social Sciences]*. 2nd ed. Bauru. 2002

⁴⁶ Holt N Parker, “Toward a Definition of Popular Culture.” *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (2011): 147–70.

All of these descriptions, in some way, fit the definition of the people that form the repertoire of Wagner's work. She started her career photographing the "popular classes," in *Brasilia Teimosa*. In the past few years, her work has been geared towards looking at other artists and producers of culture, and the people she photographs, makes films, and creates with all come from the universe of "popular culture" discussed above. They are cultural producers from "the ground on which the transformations are worked," to re-cite Hall. They are not a homogenous group, or completely independent, nor totally authentic. They are not simply unfinished products of dominant culture either. What they have in common is that they produce their art in places that are unauthorized by the artworld.

Appropriation and Distinction

Barbara Wagner's work is a great avenue to discuss the theories of Pierre Bourdieu. The model of *Distinction* that has, since the 1980s, steadfast been part of studies of culture and cultural consumption. It intends to expose the social mechanisms that are behind the formation of taste and the desirable and of the rationalization of the process of aesthetic experience for individuals. Bourdieu argues that taste for cultural consumption is what makes the "classifying classifiable" in social relations, and it is the capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified objects or practices.⁴⁷ So, when culture is consumed, people are also classifying themselves and setting themselves apart from those who do not consume the same cultural

⁴⁷ Bourdieu. *Distinction*. 2015.

products. People are always looking for cultural products that will make them distinct – within the field we exist in – as each field has their own rules and marks of status.

This effect boils down to what Bourdieu argues to be symbolic violence. By “playing this game” of searching for distinction and thus status through cultural consumption, people who are subordinated contribute to their own subordination, while thinking they are on the path of ascending the social ladder by consuming that which represents a legitimate cultural practice to them. The consumption of art, then, becomes an eternal struggle for the exclusive that will inevitably leave most behind. Barbara Wagner’s work is particularly interesting to analyze in this scheme because it brings what Bourdieu would call lowbrow, and many would call popular aesthetic sensibilities, into the places that house “good taste.”

Nevertheless, a critique is needed in regards to how Bourdieu defines art that he deems legitimate, and popular art, which he calls lowbrow. Though Bourdieu shows that status and “the rules of the game,” change between people and different fields, he overlooks the importance of popular aesthetics, and even cultural appropriation, as a factor in the what he calls “legitimate art.”⁴⁸ Bourdieu proposes that “pure taste” or “pure aesthetics” are founded on the refusal of the impure taste of sensation – simple, primitive forms of pleasure that are reduced to the senses, what Immanuel Kant calls, “the taste of the tongue, the palate and the throat,” which Bourdieu confines to be the realm of popular culture.⁴⁹ Once again, that is the culture portrayed by Wagner.

⁴⁸ Bourdieu. *Distinction*. 2015. p.327.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p.330.

Bourdieu was writing *Distinction* in the 1960s with data taken in France. Updating his theory to more diverse and contemporary times, scholars show a trend by which people are able to show status by becoming cultural “omnivores,” or being able to partake and consume all sorts of cultural products – from erudite to popular culture, or highbrow to lowbrow. The more omnivore one is, the more status one can claim.⁵⁰ This is a trend that has been highly studied in the United States and other parts of the world, as an example of South Korea,⁵¹ and it seems to be the direction where studies of distinction are mounting to. Barbara Wagner’s success amongst the Brazilian intellectual elite may be an indication that the theory of omnivourness can also be applied in Brazil.

Scholars have pointed out that, “the modernist framing of Bourdieu’s aesthetics” – or, the way he categorized art--needs to be rethought in the context of contemporary aesthetic change. Mainly, they claim that while the Bourdieusian opposition between popular/lowbrow and “legitimate art”/highbrow in aesthetics is still relevant, the substance of highbrow aesthetic has changed, now favoring postmodern dimensions – the keenness for diversity included. It also favors what the scholars call “socially reflexive art” – art that is socially engaged, defined by comparison to socially detached art, like the abstract expressionism that was so imperative in the twentieth century.⁵² This is perhaps a consequence of the challenges that accrued over the classic

⁵⁰ Richard A Patterson & Roger M. Kern. “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore.” *American Sociological Association Review*. 61, no.5 (2001): 900-927.

⁵¹ Sang-Soo Lee, SeyByol Choi, and Myoung Jin-Lee, “Omnivorous Consumer or Omnivorous Producer? Patterns of Cultural Participation in Korea” 44, no. 1 (2015): pp. 117-142.

⁵² Laurie Hanquinet, Hank Roose, and Mike Savage. “The Eyes of the Beholder: Aesthetic Preferences and the Remaking of Cultural Capital.” *Sociology* 4, no. 1 (2014): 111–32. p.111.

paradigm, that which had an emphasis on beauty and skill, by successive art movements that promoted experimentation, transgression, and conceptual forms. Thus, these scholars point out that one needs to think of Bourdieu beyond his modernist orientation.⁵³

Scholars who propose the omnivore theory also write precisely about a question hereby raised, which is: why do the elites consume lowbrow culture? The authors develop and test the idea that appreciation for “authentic” lowbrow culture presents an effective way for certain elites – and here, they make the point to note this does not work for all elites – to address feelings of authenticity-insecurity arising from “high status denigration” – meaning that high-status actors are often perceived, by themselves and others, as less authentic. They built on recent sociological research on the “search for authenticity” in contemporary society.⁵⁴

These scholars came into this conclusion noting how this “authenticity-by-appreciation” effect might be complementary to distinction-seeking as a motivation for elite cultural omnivorousness, drawing broader implications for when and why particular forms of culture are in demand. As examples of the elite’s tendency to partake in lowbrow culture, they point out to studies which include displaying of indigenous art and artifacts in elite’s homes, consumption of music genres associated with poor African American music, and consumption in “ethnic” restaurants. What was really key, however, was that they note that the elites they have studied consume lowbrow culture in a “rarified manner,” and many times in a way that was unrecognizable to the non-elites or those that actually belonged to such cultures.⁵⁵ It is quite clear

⁵³ Hanquinet, Roose, and Savage. “The Eyes of the Beholder. 2014

⁵⁴ Hahl Oliver, Ezra Zuckerman, and Minjae Kim, “Why Elites Love Authentic Lowbrow Culture”, 2017.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

that the way in which Wagner's displays of popular sensibilities is consumed – in art galleries and film festivals, is completely different from who it is consumed by the actual actors and those who partake in such cultures. These cultural products were not conceived with art galleries and film festivals in mind.

Tak Wing Chan and John Goldthrope find that, in general, individuals' cultural consumption increases –what they call becoming less univorous and more omnivorous “ as greater economic and cultural resources reduce constraints on and increase capacities for such consumption” and as higher status provides a greater motivation to consume.⁵⁶ An increase in the consumption of cultural differentiation was associated with rise in educational levels, which may reflect a link between the breadth of consumption patterns of the elite and their need for scale and synthesis in cultural knowledge. These were expressed in quasi-omnivorous and entertainment patterns that drew consumers away from more traditional highbrow consumption patterns.⁵⁷

There is yet another concept that may help in understanding both omnivourness and the tendency of high status agents consuming lowbrow culture. Scholars argue that aura of authenticity associated with lowbrow culture derives from the perception that low status producers achieve Bourdieusian concept of “artistic disinterestedness,” for they are not motivated by elite audiences and highbrow standards, as if popular art was not made for and with interest in money or success but to pursue intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards, and realizing an internal vision,

⁵⁶ Tak Wing Chan and John H Goldthrope, *Social Stratification of Cultural Consumption Across Three Domains: Music, Theater, Dance and Cinema, and the Visual Arts*. Stanford University Press, 2006. p.19

⁵⁷ Lopez-Sintas, Jordi, and Tally Katz-Gerro. “From Exclusive to Inclusive Elitists and Further: Twenty Years of Omnivorousness and Cultural Diversity in Arts Participation in the USA.” *Poetics* 33 (2015): 299–319.

what should convey greater authenticity. The authors also show this to be a reasoning fallacy, for one cannot generalize the pursuits of such diverse enterprise that is popular culture.⁵⁸

In *The Production of Belief*, Bourdieu argues that values typical for the field of the arts and aesthetics have a symbolic character, which means that economic value or interest is veiled and disavowed in favor of pure aesthetic intentions and disinterestedness as core categories in the artistic field.⁵⁹ Bourdieu argues that the anti-‘economic ’economy ’of pure art [...] has been founded on the obligatory recognition of the values of disinterestedness and on the negation of the ‘economy ’of the ‘commercialism ’and of ‘economic ’profit in the short term.⁶⁰ A consequence of this is that the most radical defenders of the autonomous stance in the field "make of temporal failure a sign of election and of success a sign of compromise with the time."⁶¹

Because of the high ideals associated with erudite art/highbrow, many people have been unwilling to recognize that aesthetics are dependent on very explicit sets of power relations. As mentioned, all of the theorization as to why lowbrow or popular culture is consumed by the elites yields a good explanation for Wagner’s success. She is able to capture pictures of what is the most symbolically recognized as popular in Brazil and turn it into distinct artwork through her connection and acceptance in the artworld, formal trainings, and her time in history. Moreover, the importance of the reception of artworks by its audience is recognized to be very important today in

⁵⁸ Hahl Oliver, Ezra Zuckerman, and Minjae Kim, “Why Elites Love Authentic Lowbrow Culture”, 2017.

⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *A Produção da Crença: Contribuição Para uma Economia dos Bens Simbólicos [The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods]*, 3rd ed. (Porto Alegre, RS: Zouk, 2001).

⁶⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Production of Belief*, 2001. p.142.

⁶¹ Ibid. p.144.

the understanding of the artistic processes as a whole. It is here proposed that Wagner is a strong propeller of this increasing trend.

Brazil cannibalizes the popular

Canclini said it is also helpful in order to think of “popular culture” as a categorical definition in places like Brazil, what he calls places of hybrid cultures. Latin American countries are hybrid cultures because there is a strong presence of native culture, European colonization, sometimes from different countries and the large African intake, and also from different populations. That, together with being placed in the periphery of the world, makes for the need to think of the intersection of different historic temporalities in one’s cultural analysis, as, for instance, one, “can find contemporary art being made where modernity has never been.”⁶² The adoption of popular/ethnic/indigenous motifs in Latin American art has often been part of national identity project in the twentieth century, as countries struggled to sheer away from European aesthetic dominance after centuries of colonization.⁶³

The movement that best defined artistic Brazilian identity and marked its history was the modernist movement of the 1920s, led by artists such as Tarsila do Amaral and her famous painting *Aboporu* (1928) (Image 17), Di Cavalcanti, and Oswald de Andrade. Some of their most pronounced features of the works displayed was a desire to rid Brazil of imported art, literature, ideas and ideology.⁶⁴ To those looking from the outside – journalists, foreign

⁶² Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures*, 2008. p. 38.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Oswald de Andrade, *Aurora*, 1977, <https://www.unicamp.br/~boaventu/page10c.htm>.

politicians and visitors from abroad – at that time, Brazil was leading the way forward, and this new style of art and artistic expression was slowly seeping into the cultural identity of the country.⁶⁵ All of these artists, after spending time studying in Europe, travelled around the country to the less explored places by the Brazilian elite, in order to learn about its culture and reproduce it in their art.

For these modernists, “the operation that provides the access to the universal passes through the affirmation of Brazilianism.”⁶⁶ In 1928, Oswald de Andrade released the *Anthropophagic Manifest*, its main argument being that Brazil's history of "cannibalizing" other cultures is its greatest strength, while playing on the modernists' primitivist interest in cannibalism as an alleged tribal rite that actually took place in Brazil. According to de Andrade, “the anthropophagic intestine, on one hand, destroys, through swallow, imported cultural elements, and on the other hand, assures its maintenance in our reality, through a process of transformation and absorption of certain alien elements.”⁶⁷ It is this anthropophagic intestine that is then valued by the cultural project defended by this Brazilian movement.

Though Wager’s work differs immensely in virtually every aspect from the works of the Brazilian modernists, through continuous contact with Brazilians from different cultures, her work can also be construed as anthropophagic. The modernists traveled Brazil to get to know indigenous communities in the Amazon and acquaintanced traditional settlements of runaway slaves in order showcased their aesthetic sensibilities. Wagner wanders through the peripheries

⁶⁵ George Oliven, “Culture and Modernity in Brazil”, 2001.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p.6.

⁶⁷ Oswald de Andrade, *Aurora*, 1977, <https://www.unicamp.br/~boaventu/page10c.htm>.

of urban centers, and recognizes cultures that are marginalized economically and symbolically, learning and creating with their hybrid cultures.

On decolonizing aesthetics

There has been a strong push for decolonizing the arts and artistic spaces in the past few decades. Decolonial art denounces the legacies and contradictions of coloniality. The term, one must note, has about come to a hype in recent times. The use of the word decolonial, as opposed to the most commonly known post-colonial, is due to the idea proposed by scholar Anibal Quijano, which states that cultural colonization is a process which continues after a country is out of colonial state rule.⁶⁸ Decolonial art pursues pluralist, decentered visions and multiple perspectives. It also contends that cultures are inherently hybrid.

In this view, popular culture is a stage of dispute and conflict in domination and power relations, and it is also important grounds for the fight of people and communities who utilize their ancestry, mother tongues, traditions, memories, mythologies, celebration, and above all, their imagination, as forms of resistance to processes of domination and colonization, economic and ideological. Thus, constituting a strategy of social survival.⁶⁹ The link between decolonial and popular culture is that in popular culture, the protagonists/political agents are often, as Canclini

⁶⁸ Luciana Ballestrin. "America Latina e o Giro Decolonial [The Decolonial Turn and Latin America]." *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Políticas* 11 (2013): 89–117

⁶⁹ Pedro Rodolfo Jungers Abib, "Culturas Populares, Educação e Decolonização [Popular Cultures, Education and Decolonization]." *Educação Em Questão* 57, no. 54 (2019): pp. 1-20.

states, “building from” a state of domination.⁷⁰ Wagner’s work is certainly aware of these perspectives and tackles into this potency.

With this awareness, decolonial art is framed from the consciousness that the modern/colonial project has implied not only control of the economy, the political, and knowledge, but also control over the senses and perception.⁷¹ By “art”, Walter Mignolo refers to, “the skill to create something with words, sounds, colors, digital media, moving images,” and by “aesthetics,” he means the philosophy that made sense of certain creative activities.⁷² This scholarship aims to begin by decolonizing the language of aesthetics to aestheSis – a Greek concept, which broadly describes the senses “–an unelaborated elementary awareness of stimulation, a sensation of touch.” According to Mignolo:

“ Decolonial aestheSis refers in general to any and every thinking and doing that is geared toward undoing a particular kind of aesthesis, of senses, that is the sensibility of the colonized subject. What decolonial artists want is not to create beautiful objects, installations, music, multimedia or whatever the possibilities are, but to create in order to decolonize sensibilities, to transform colonial aestheTics into decolonial aestheSis. In that regard, aestheTics is the image that reflects in the mirror of imperial/colonial aesthetics in the Kantian tradition. Once you delink, you begin to create a world in which decolonial aestheSis has delinked from aesthetics.”

Decolonial scholars propose that decolonial art makes one, “de-learn what has been learned about the senses.”⁷³ Whereas Kant’s aesthetic emphasizes sensing the beautiful and the sublime, and his work established European standards, which were then projected in art

⁷⁰ Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures*, 2008.

⁷¹ Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vasquez. “The Decolonial AestheSis Dossier.” *Social Text* 1. no.2 (2013)

⁷² Rúben Gaztambide-Fernandez. “Decolonial Options and Artistic/AestheSic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo.” *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 3, no1 (2014): 196-212.

⁷³ Fernandez, “Decolonial Options and Artistic/AestheSic Entanglements,” 2014. p.200.

universally, decolonial art disrupts it, bringing a shock in understanding. Mignolo suggests that Kant's theorization of aesthetics was the cognitive process that allowed the colonization of aesthesis, a process that led to the devaluing of any sensory experience conceptualized outside of European aesthetic categories.⁷⁴

Wagner destabilizes what society has as images of the people she depicts, portraying them in far from a passive or negative light. She also brings visibility to people and issues that might be relegated to invisibility. Moreover, even though it is counterintuitive in the way Bourdieu expresses his views on popular culture, it is exactly that which brings Barbara Wagner distinction. It is this intersection of progressive politics, art made with political intent by progressive artists, and what happens in the field of the art which is interesting to deconstruct in order to understand artistic political avowals by artists and what their impact can be.

⁷⁴ Fernandez, "Decolonial Options and Artistic/Aesthetic Entanglements", 2014.

Research Methodology

The analysis that follows falls into what is today to be the legacy of a Marxist conceptual analysis, for it is concerned with the structures of social inequality maintained in place, as well as matters of structure and capital exchange in the formation of taste and propagation of an aesthetic effort. This study is concerned with the relationship of art and the state of society. It uses as in its main thesis, the theory devised by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu – *Distinction* – which aims at exposing the mechanisms of social inequality behind the arguments of taste. Bourdieu is a Marxist thinker with penchants of post-structuralism, for he deconstructs the nature of image and the symbolic. So, this work also delves into the nature of structuralism and the symbolisms put forth by Barbara Wagner, which shape the very meaning of popular art. Moreover, some formal understanding of Wagner's work is also important.

For this thesis, the major works of Barbara Wagner were considered and analyzed. Her first major Work, *Brasilia Teimosa*, served in order to illustrate how her art works and appropriation of popular culture became her narrative and repertoire. After that, specific works were shown in order to demonstrate the paradox through Wagner's work can be seen, in both appropriating and creating distinction to itself, thus maintaining a structure of social inequality, but also decolonizing sensibilities by making positively visible people and aesthetics are often disregarded by mainstream society and the intellectual elites. The analysis that follows focuses on three identified patterns:

1. Expanding the notion of “popular”: Here, there is an analysis on how Wagner expands on the idea of what can be conceived as popular culture in Brazil. These also expose the contradictions between the intention of the artist and the consequence of a work in the world. These come up in the pieces done by Wagner that depict Neo-Pentecostal Evangelic groups: *Believers and Truthsayers* (2014, series of 16 photographs) and *Holy Tremor* (2017, 19-minute film).
2. Appropriation and distinction in popular classe aesthetics: Many of her works can be described in this category, as she investigates the aesthetics people from ascending social classes in their daily lives or their artistic endeavors. Works that will be discussed are: *In Search of the 5th Element* (2017, series of 52 photographs); *Bye Bye Germany! A Life Melody* (2017, 20-minute film); and *Wedding of the Century* (2008, series of 22 photographs).
3. Deconstruction of colonized dominant aesthetic sensibilities: The work here is chosen to exemplify how Barbara Wagner deconstructs challenges and subverts dominant aesthetic sensibilities. This will be *Shining Star* (2008-2010, series of 22 photographs); and *Cinéma Cassino*, (2013, 2-channel video installation, 20-minute film)

Findings

The making of the “new popular”

As previously mentioned, the crafting of an idea of a popular art is an ongoing process. One needs to be careful with generalizations, all the while understanding that measurement parameters for analysis are very important, so as abstract things can be studied and understood. Here, the importance of thinking of this notion is that signifiers of “the popular” are central to the idea of Wagner’s work, and for the understanding that she is also be dialectally responsible for crafting the meaning of the popular culture in Brazil, by laying out its symbols and patterns that thus creating a narrative about what encompasses this concept.

Until recently, the idea of “the popular” was tied to tradition and things that have existed for a long time, only involving things such as traditional parades, festivities, “folk” music styles.⁷⁵ Wagner has portrayed traditional dancing parades done in works such as *The Cortege* (Image 18), and *Set to Go* (2015), a video installation that depicts another typical carnivalesque dance of northeast Brazil: Frevo (Image 19). These two typical dances are easily decoded as popular culture. However, in the twentieth century, great rural exodus has brought the great majority of the population to urban centers, where many cultures meet, and new forms, sometimes defined as more ‘cosmopolitan’ forms of creative existence emerge.

In at least four different works, Wagner captures images of musicians and artists from the urban periphery, and that compose popular peripheric musical scenes in a more contemporary way, from Recife and other parts of Brazil. These popular culture actors, from scenes such as

⁷⁵ Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures*, 2008.

Brazilian funk, brega-funk, brega music, and swingueira, are taking over musical local scene with very innovative technological apparatus and surviving thorough opening up different kinds of markets from the mainstream music industry. They are groups in a situation of socio-economic subordination that covered a shared identity by creating new “acts of social survival.”

All of these groups and music forms aforementioned are recognizable as “popular” culture in the Brazilian context, in both what is considered popular with tradition, as well as the most popular in the sense of spread out through the people and these more contemporary meaning. However, Wagner went further off the script of what is accepted as popular culture created together with Evangelical Gospel Church music groups. Her first work with the church groups is *Believers and Truthsayers* (2014), a series of 16 photographs which Wagner argues it “is a series that seeks to investigate the phenomenon of the growth of evangelical churches in Brazil (which rose from a 5%, in the seventies, to a 22% today) and the close relationship between evangelism and what became known as the ‘new middle-class’ of the country.”⁷⁶ (Image 20).

These are pictures of church attenders and priests, both in the altar of small churches from an inner town in Pernambuco, or on the streets the churches where located. The pictures gain a very performative and even exotic look in Wagner’s photos, which are displayed far from their reality. This become explicit in the clothing choices (Image 21), and decoration (image 22), which can be read as kitsch, for its degree of artifice, exaggeration and naiveté.⁷⁷ One image that stands out in highlighting the consumerism aspect of the popular classes is an picture that shows a lady

⁷⁶ “Crentes e Pregadores / Believers and Truthsayers,” Bárbara Wagner, accessed July 10, 2021, <https://barbarawagner.com.br/Crentes-e-Pregadores-Believers-and-Truthsayers>.

⁷⁷ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” *Queer as camp*. 2020, 25-28.

starring at the camera inside her local church, plastic chairs disposed and cheap fabric covers parts of the room, but behind her, new and boxed domestic items lie on a table (Image 23).

Nevertheless, as it was previously mentioned, it was Wagner's musical documentary *Holy Tremor* (Image 24), that caused the most controversy surrounding her choice of including Neo-Pentecostal Evangelic groups in her narrative of popular culture. De Barros comments that once *Holy Tremor* was out, commentaries were split, some observing that she was giving stage to a conservative and reactionary group (the movie was released right after Brazil suffered a coup d'état that was largely supported by the Evangelical and Neo-Pentecostal church, in 2016), and others arguing that it was awkward the way in which Evangelicals to be depicted, so out of context.⁷⁸

Holy Tremor was shown in a film festival in 2017, the *Janela Internacional de Cinema*, known to attract Recife's intellectual elite, and many saw in it an attempt at playing into the fascination with the "other," as the movie played through many laughs and shrieks.⁷⁹ According to Barbara Bergamaschi, who wrote a piece on the occurrence of this film session, this was due to the formal proceedings of the film, which has impeccable cinematic qualities of editing, framing, image and sound, and ended up yielding the sensation that those depicted were "exotic beings put into a showcase as 'objects of study' to a public which watches everything as a 'curiosity office.'⁸⁰

In both works in which Wagner working with Neo-Pentecostal church groups, the construction of the scenarios of and of the performances are reminiscent of the low cost decoration

⁷⁸ De Barros. "The Evangelics in Brazilian Visual Production," 2019.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Bergamaschi, "A Day for the Hunted, One for the Hunter, 2017.

of small church altars. They have fake flowers, cheap materials and mismatching patterns (Image 25). This exposes the socially marked taste of their attendants, and may be in the service of reinforcing the position of supposed good taste of the spectator of arts and intellectual elites, or to fan their ‘camp fascination.’

Notwithstanding, Wagner replied to these arguments by saying that independently from being a religious practice, this type of Gospel is understood as popular artistic production, which is what she researches in her own production. She emphasizes, for instance, that both brega-funk and Gospel are independent genres that grew at the margins of the market, mobilizing an enormous number of youth all over the country, and she did not wish to have an hierarchical relation to them because evangelicals are more removed from the intellectual elites than musical genres that can be more easily absorbed.⁸¹

It is impossible to separate the places where *Holy Tremor* and *Believers and Truthsayers* were made from the memory of colonial violence, for the places the workers were made still grow the sugar cane plantations that gave birth to the region as it exists today, and poverty is still stricken. However, the town of Palmares, where *Holy Tremor* was shot, is became known today as a hub for Neo-Pentecostal evangelical music, and, according to Wagner, the movie was made in an attempt to listen and observe the growth of the evangelical church in the country, in “a region economically marked by the presence of a deteriorating sugar cane industry, socially marked by the division of slaves and masters and culturally marked by the subjugation of Afro and

⁸¹ De Barros. “The Evangelics in Brazilian Visual Production,” 2019.

indigenous rituals and beliefs in domain of the Catholic Church.”⁸² She says that the film takes on a hybrid character of documentary performance, and thus creates a web of relations generating new senses and observing, articulating its historical, political, cultural and social implications and thus a symptom of a historical specific time.⁸³ (Image 26).

The idea of a popular art and culture is not set in stone. It is an ever-changing process for both producers and consumers of it. This is important, for instance, in government policy for the arts. As an example, the state of Pernambuco, where Barbara Wagner lives, has an annual open call for cultural project of which one of the lines, amongst “theater,” “literature,” “dance,” and others, is “popular culture.” By expanding on the idea of what popular culture can be, one also influences who will benefit from this policy. At the same time, it is a risk to make connections between cultures and modes of aestheticism, for these are embedded in social and racial hierarchies.

Appropriation and distinction in popular classes aesthetics

The work of Barbara Wagner is also very pertinent in order to discuss Bourdieu’s theory of distinction because it addresses the very issues of taste, tastes as they are tied to social class, and distribution of capital. These are all ideas of utmost importance to Bourdieu, the vision he structures all of social relations, and his theory by which social inequality is perpetuated through the consumption of art and culture. Wagner is addressing the production of those with little

⁸² “Crentes e Pregadores / Believers and Truthsayers,” Bárbara Wagner’s website.

⁸³ Ibid.

cultural capital, and who make cultural products that require little cultural capital for its fruition/understanding. Nevertheless, there is a spin on this theory, because Wagner's public and consumers are those with who are high in cultural capital, who consume popular culture aesthetics through Wagner's work.

According to James O Young, almost all artists engage in some sort of appropriation, "in that they borrow ideas, motifs, plots, technical devices, and so forth from other artists and their artworks."⁸⁴ In the contemporary art, appropriation is often self-conscious as artists borrow or appropriate from previous works, in a manner often described as "postmodern." Wagner certainly engages in this borrowing, and often, the product of her art is the presentation of other artists, such as even in the case of *Holy Tremor*.

As an academic concept, appropriation puts the arts/culture at check for questions over authenticity, which have taken over culture, the legitimacy, and aura of the art world. According to scholars, the expansion of cultural reproduction, or mass production, heightens, rather than obsoletes, the debate about authenticity of art.⁸⁵ It differs from an exchange because it implies an inherent power imbalance. Moreover, it gets further complicated with globalization and mass access to cultural products, and the collapse between production and consumption.⁸⁶

The research of what is the aesthetics popular culture, and the social codes developed around it, took Wagner beyond what one finds in Brazil. In her work *Bye Bye Germany! A Life*

⁸⁴ James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁸⁵ Andrew B Triggs "Veblen, Bourdieu, and Conspicuous Consumption." *Journal of Economic Issues*. 35, no. 1 (2001): 99-115

⁸⁶ Mahbub Rifat and Shoily K. "The Place of Pierre Bourdieu's Theory in (Popular) Cultural Studies." *BRAC University Journal* 6, no. 1 (2016): 1-9.

Melody (2017), she tackled German popular (and pop) music, called *schlager*, widely popular among working class Germans, in a 20 minute long musical documentary. The film tracks a day in the life of a couple of singers from Munich, who became known for covers of the most prominent voices of distinct eras of *schlager* music. Wagner says that: “combining the conventions of direct cinema and musical, the film approaches the rebirth of an industry that, in the public image, is often associated to a collective day-dreaming of foreign lands, simple texts with nationalist imaginary, or heavy duty sentimentalism.”⁸⁷ (Image 27).

Schlager music also occurs in a market economy that sheers from the sensibilities of those with economic capital in Germany, and it is considered lowbrow. At the same time, it is one of the most popular genres of the country, and this exploration is what interested Wagner. The music contains simple and repetitive lyrics, which are extremely sentimentalist, and so is the art direction of Wagner’s film, which in other words, is kitsch (Image 28). According to Clement Greenberg, kitsch is a “vicarious experience and faked sensations,”⁸⁸ that would fit quite well with the description of *schlager* and the aesthetical components of *Bye Bye Germany! A Life Melody*. For Umberto Eco, kitsch consumption departs from an emotional effect, rather than disinterested contemplation. Moreover it transforms what was ugly yesterday into today’s object of aesthetic pleasure.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ “Bye Bye Deutschland! Eine Lebensmelodie/Bye Bye Germany! A Life Melody,” Bárbara Wagner, accessed July 10, 2021, <https://barbarawagner.com.br/Bye-Bye-Deutschland-Eine-Lebensmelodie-Bye-bye-Germany-A-Life-Melody>.

⁸⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *The Partisan Review*, 1939.

⁸⁹ Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness* (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, 2007).

In her work *The Wedding of the Century* (2008), a series of 15 photographs, Wagner went into Guangzhou – China, a place with a then recent economic boom, in order to photograph the wedding dreams of a newly ascended middle class. The same themes of artifice, exaggeration, repetition and sentimentalism are observed in these pictures, such as the picture where the couple poses with a fake beach background (Image 29). Here, it is clear that the narrative of her work reveals the tastes of the ascending middle classes as also kitsch and tacky. This goes in agreement with *Distinction*, in which Bourdieu is adamant in demonstrating how the classes that are recent in acquiring economic capital recur to status seeking expressions that end up excessive and overdone.⁹⁰ (Image 30).

The Wedding of the Century is one of Wagner's earliest works, created right after the success of *Brasilia Teimosa*. It is helpful to look at it in order to compose a narrative of exploration for these popular themes in Wagner's work, and to look at the type of aesthetics has been involved in the repertoire of this so called "new middle classes." It is also important to keep in mind that although Wagner may not intent to fan into this kitsch aestheticism, her public may as well be consuming her work with this lure.⁹¹

Furthermore, in terms of appropriation, Wagner's work *In Search of the 5th Element* (2017), a series of 52 photographs turned into wallpaper for a cultural center, may be the most challenging. For this work, Wagner accompanies the open call of a recording studio company in the periphery of São Paulo, which is looking for the next MC talent. Youth from all over Brazil

⁹⁰ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 2005.

⁹¹ De Barros. "The Evangelics in Brazilian Visual Production," 2019.

come to audition. Wagner, having befriended the owner of the recording studio and situating herself in the waiting room, takes the portraits of those who wait for their turn (Image 31).

Wagner uses a blank screen to photograph the youth that arrive, so their portrait is really about themselves and what they bring in their bodies, with no background noise. At the end of her time there, Wagner literally makes a mosaic with the faces of those searching for the dream of becoming the next MC in the funk scene of São Paulo (Image 32). This work was commissioned and exhibited at the Moreira Salles Institute (IMS), in São Paulo, a private institute and an important cultural center for the arts in Brazil's biggest city.

The youngsters depicted in the work *In Search of the 5th Element* are mostly poor, non-white, and who were looking for a chance to be the next hit artist. In this work, they are singled out "popular bodies" literally become resource and material for a White middle class artist, to be portrayed in an authorized art space which these bodies will probably never attend. These are artists in their popular/unauthorized world, but their art will most likely never be authorized by art world (Image 33). Only their popular bodies, through the eyes of Barbara Wagner, will. This way, Wagner is facilitating a dynamic by which distinction is created not through the creation and consumption of highbrow artistic endeavors – she is reverting it, so that one can feel distinct by consuming the images of popular bodies and their aesthetics.

The research of Laurie Hanquinet, Hank Roose, and Mike Savage showed that some elite actors consume lowbrow art and culture to counter for their feelings of authenticity-insecurity arising from "high status denigration."⁹² Hahl Oliver, Ezra Zuckerman, and Minjae Kim showed

⁹² Hanquinet, Roose, and Savage. "The Eyes of the Beholder. 2014

that high status actors perceived popular art and culture more authentic for its “artistic disinterestedness,” and that this is a fallacy.⁹³ Bourdieu shows that the choices of cultural consumption and personal taste are, in good part, a product the social class of an individual.⁹⁴ All of this means that there are a lot to deconstruct and understand the intellectual elite’s consumption of popular culture, its appropriation, and the consequences this entails.

Moreover, the problematic part of high class consumption of aesthetics that are considered camp/kitsch, is that it denotes that there is juxtaposition to it, and that is the art that is to be taken seriously, as camp/kitsch “turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement.”⁹⁵ It begs the question as to why exaggeration and colorfulness is equated in contrast to ideas of classic beauty and “seriousness.” It is disingenuous to think it is a natural to equate clean whiteness with beauty, taste, and classical ideals, and to see color as alien, sensual, and kitschy. This is one of the fictions propelled by colonization.

Wagner does recognize that all manner of representation is problematic, and she does delve into the complexity of representation in what she is doing.⁹⁶ The potency of her work is in the approximation and exchange. She seems genuinely interested in the people she portrays, and not in violation of any agreement. She does exactly what people trying to avoid cultural appropriation are told to do – creates relationships and partnerships with her subjects, does

⁹³ Hahl Oliver, Ezra Zuckerman, and Minjae Kim, “Why Elites Love Authentic Lowbrow Culture”, 2017.

⁹⁴ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 2015.

⁹⁵ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 2020.

⁹⁶ “The Venice Questionnaire: Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin De Burca,” ArtReview, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://artreview.com/2019-venice-questionnaire-barbara-wagner-benjamin-de-burca-brazil/>.

everything with their consent, immerses herself in their universe, has everything written in contracts and compensates people for their work.

However, the portrayed bodies in her work are implicated in desires and expectations in marginalized universes and colonial histories. The narrative that she creates facilitates a dynamic by which distinction and symbolic violence keeps forth through the images of popular bodies. It becomes explicit that challenging established artistic canons and paradigms is not the same thing as dismantling the structures of inequality ingrained in them.

On decolonizing aesthetics and the distribution of the sensible.

When thinking of the possibilities of decolonial art, scholars take into consideration contemporary rupture and collapse of the dichotomies of primitive-modern/high art-low art/erudite-popular/hegemonic-subaltern, which in a sense, are also a repertoire of contemporary art.⁹⁷ Decolonial art, however, deals and exposes the contradictions of coloniality and its legacy in the awareness of social relations. This can take many forms, and one of them is to disrupt dominant sensibilities to distribute different types of subjectivities.

Jacques Rancière notes that after the failure of the twentieth century art to bring about social change and the denouncing of modernist paradigms, there is once again an affirmation on the vocation of art to respond to forms of economic, state and ideological domination in the artistic field, and is through forms that diverge and are often contradictory. The will to re-politicize

⁹⁷ Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures*, 2008.

aesthetics is being manifested in the most diverse manners. One of them, is the distribution and disposition of bodies, and bringing to visibility what mainstream society tries to conceal.⁹⁸ Barbara Wagner's work then becomes a common expression of the of the potency of creation in the sensible cartography of contemporary Brazil. Virtually all of her works put into evidence bodies that are non-confirming to dominant Western ideals, such as *Brasilia Teimosa*, *Masters of Ceremony*, *Swinguerra*, and *Believers and Truthsayers*.

In order for decolonial art to be able to exist today, there must be taken into account the complexity of cultures and the multiplicity of developing logics in heterogeneous places. It must be noted that Barbara Wagner works in the periphery (of the periphery of the periphery) of the world, and another way of approaching her work is look at how she is also destabilizing colonized sensibilities. Although, her breaking of aesthetical paradigms may not dismantle a structure of inequality perpetration, her work may undermine the belief in the ideas of an 'universal 'aesthetic, which is one of the fictions of Western civilization and modern aesthetics.

Because of this de-centering that takes place through her work, one can also analyze it through the lens of a decolonial art and endeavor. Decolonial art pursues pluralist, decentered visions and multiple perspectives. It also contends that cultures are inherently hybrid. Wagner's work is rich in all of these evaluations. One particularly interesting work, which sheers away from the commercial and shiny aesthetics Wagner's work is the series of 22 photos named *Shining*

⁹⁸Jacques Rancière. "A Estética como Política [Aesthetics as Politics]". *Revista Devires*, 7(2), 14-36. (2010).

Star,⁹⁹ where Wagner shows a universe of precarious ostentation with groups of Maracatu dancers (Image 34).

Along with *Shining Star*, Wagner accompanied three different aggregations from the town of Nazaré da Mata, about 70 kilometers from the capital Recife. This is quite different than much of her works. It keeps the flash, but it takes away the glamour. The photographs look austere, and even amateurish. All of those portrayed in this series are men, and are also “caboclos”, which means they are Afro and indigenous miscegenated descendants that live in the sugar cane region of the northeast Brazil.

For this work, she spent three years following the dancers’ rehearsals, where the dancers use regular clothes and are just amongst themselves and away from their presentations, where they shine with massive colorful costumes and are usually accompanied by a public. She argues she wanted to photograph them when they were on the ground or were still and was interested in the non-masked, non-illuminated and not moving, always at night, of a time that is usually lively, performative and adorned. The resulting group of images were all taken in specific moments of their party - that of before and after the music is played.¹⁰⁰ (Image 35).

Wagner says that, “the traditional culture of the northeast of Brazil is represented by the Maracatu: since popular Afro-Brazilian performance have been displayed by all sort of mass media, their image has turned into the leitmotiv, adorning the information related to tourism in the

⁹⁹ *Shining Star*, or in Portuguese - Estrela Brilhante, is the name of one of the Maracatu aggregations Wagner photographed for this work

¹⁰⁰ Edgar Homem. *Instituto Santander no Brasil Apresenta: Estrela Brilhante*. 2010.

region. The masters of Maracatu are on flyers, posters and guides with their typical colored clothes and hats, dark glasses and flowers in the mouth.”¹⁰¹ The approach on the subject is thus made through a denial of canons of representation, showing the performers without mask, movements or markings, depicting aspects of their practice that show how a tradition needs to adjust itself in order to survive along with a dynamic urban culture and changing times and aesthetic categories.¹⁰²

Wagner notes that, at first, *Shining Star* was not well received because it looked unprofessional, with the flash right onto the people’s faces. The men depicted were usually drunk, sweaty, and visually not well presented (Image 36). However, she says she was interested in researching how young people get into this old tradition of Maracatu and wanted to photograph these people without their fancy costumes and big audiences, next to the sugar cane plantations they spend the year with. She says she is not after the beautiful or the desirable - it is the tension she is after.¹⁰³ This very well may be the decolonizing of sensibilities proposed by Mignolo and the school of the Latin American decolonial turn.

It is this place that shocks aesthetic sensibilities that perhaps enables one to awaken a sense of aesthesis in the work of Wagner. In this series, she creates the representation of anonymous characters who are pieces of a remote tradition of Brazilian hybridism, mixing court gestures and Afro-Brazilian rituals, labor chants turned into carnival beats, drumming, Candomblé deities, indigenous beliefs and Catholic saints. Wagner maintains herself as attentive to the notion of

¹⁰¹ Homem. *Instituto Santander no Brasil Apresenta: Estrelha Brilhante*. 2010.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Eduardo Pascoal de Sousa. “Ancoragem e Circulação Crítica na Reconstituição do Espaço Público em Terremoto Santo [Anchorage and Critical Circulation in the Re-Elaboration of Public Space in Holy Tremor]. *Rumores*. 25(13). (2019). 82-103.

collectivity and the enactments of groups in this festive and subversive face of Brazil and these marginalized universes.

Wagner has addressed the issue of coloniality with works out of Brazil as well. In the 2013, she and Benjamin de Burca created a video installation in La Réunion, a French overseas department in an island of the Indian Ocean. The work is called *Cinéma Cassino*. She says that installation concerned “the expression of bodies in movement, the piece frames cultural manifestations historically linked to anti-colonial resistance alongside contemporary trends aligned with a consumer-based industry embraced by emerging economies today.”¹⁰⁴ The 20-minute video was an installation that involved popular dancers from La Réunion (Image 37).

According to the artist, “in the installation, seemingly opposed expressions are paired on a synchronized, two-channel projection. While Maloya and Segá [dances] represent cultural heritage as mainstay product open to exploitation, a novel industry of taste epitomized by genres such as Dance-hall, Hip-hop, Zouk, Ragga-love and Coupé-décalé promises success and visibility for a new generation of Reunionnese.”¹⁰⁵ This type of art work, on one hand, may be a tool in decolonizing the art and its canons, and on the other, decolonizing the aesthetic perception that subjectively links attractiveness to the European standard of art, allowing the subaltern to create its own aesthetic principles, emanated from its local history and its hybridisms.

The category of coloniality and the decolonial proposition have opened the possibilities of repairing silenced stories and repressed subjectivities. They also work in exposing artistic

¹⁰⁴ “Cinéma Casino,” Bárbara Wagner, accessed July 10, 2021, <https://barbarawagner.com.br/Cinema-Casino>.

¹⁰⁵ “Cinéma Casino,” Bárbara Wagner, accessed July 10, 2021, <https://barbarawagner.com.br/Cinema-Casino>.

languages and knowledges obfuscated by the idea of universality defined by modern rationality. Eurocentrism is not a perspective exclusive to Europeans, but experienced by the conjunction of people who were educated under its hegemony, and who come to naturalize its process.¹⁰⁶

In the systems in place today, through which virtually everyone takes part on – capitalism, patriarchy, amongst others, few are the bodies which have a place of speech, though everyone has a voice. The fight to include these in the artistic languages is one of historical reparation and understanding that these have a lot to say. There is the need to orchestrate relationships whereby everyone has a place to be, and perhaps there is the need for intermediation of art and artists which do have established their voices. This is complex and multi-layered issue with no single answer. No artist has entire control of what their work can incite.

¹⁰⁶ Ballestrin. “America Latina e o Giro Decolonial,” 2013.

Final Considerations

The analysis presented in this thesis took the work of Barbara Wagner as case in order to point to the appropriation of popular culture in contemporary art. It reviews the questions that arise from this tendency, such as why lowbrow/popular culture is being consumed by high status actors, what are the mechanisms through which this happens, and most importantly, what are the consequences of such endeavor. The results of this exploration expose a paradox by which structures of inequality were maintained by *distinction*, at the same time that colonized sensibilities were challenged and visibility of subaltern bodies were enhanced.

Moreover, this article proposes that Barbara Wagner is able to absorb popular culture anthropophagically. She cannibalizes the popular in order to create something new. With that, she contributes to the making of a Brazilian identity that is more plural and diverse.

Through the process of analyzing Wagner's work and her relationship with popular culture, three themes stuck out. One of them is the expansion on the meaning of popular culture, which she permits to englobe to newfangled forms of art expressions. She treats as popular culture artistic manifestations that are long considered as such, like Maracatu, as well as urban marginalized cultures, and even artistic creations of religious endeavors that are quite distant from the tastes of her public and consumers. Adding these expressions to her repertoire, she is dialectally responsible crafting the meaning of popular culture as a whole.

Moreover, by showcasing aesthetics and bodies who have been invisibilized for their subaltern status, there is also a redistribution of sensibilities which may be a tool in order to decolonize the ways the world is perceived. In juxtaposition to the aesthetical coloniality and its

pretensions of universality, in Wagner's work, there is the search for legitimation of other experiences of aesthetical expression. She tensions notions of attractiveness, denies canons of representation, and tries to create art collaboratively, rather than exposing her solely her point of view.

Lastly, Wagner's work contributes to an understanding of how the appropriation of popular culture also paves the way into *distinction*. It offers the view that by appropriating popular culture, and transforming it into a distinct taste for the actors with high capital, Wagner's work contributes in maintaining a structure of social inequality and symbolic violence. Her public, instead of consuming highbrow or erudite art, take on finding distinction in consuming popular sensibilities through Wagner's work. Hence, the paradox is exposed.

Lista de Imagens



Image 1 – Photography from the series *Masters of Ceremony* by Barbara Wagner, 2016.



Image 2 – Still from the film *Swinguerra*, by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2019.



Image 3. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.



Image 4. Display of Maracatu during carnival in Tracunhém, Pernambuco – Brazil.



Image 5. Photograph from the series *Shining Start* by Barbara Wagner, 2008-2010.



Image 6. Photograph from the series *The Courtag* by Barbara Wagner, 2013.



Image 7. Photography from the series *Masters of Ceremony* by Barbara Wagner, 2016.



Image 8. Aerial view of Brasilia Teimosa, Recife – Brazil.



Image 9. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.



Image 10. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.



Image 11. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.



Image 12. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.



Image 13. Photograph of Barbara Wagner's work *Brasilia Teimosa* on display at MASP – Museum of Museum of Art of São Paulo Assis Chateaubriandm. São Paulo, Brazil, 2019.



Image 14. Photograph from the series *Brasilia Teimosa* by Barbara Wagner, 2007-2008.



Image 15. Photograph from the series *Masters of Ceremony* by Barbara Wagner, 2016.



Image 16. Still from the film *Holy Tremor* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.



Image 17. *Aboporu*, 1928, by Tarsila do Amaral. 85cm v. 72cm, oil on canvas.



Image 18. Photograph from the series *The Courtage* by Barbara Wagner, 2013.



Image 19. Still from the film *Set to Go*, by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2015.



Image 20. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.



Image 21. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.



Image 22. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.



Image 23. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.



Image 24. Still from the film *Holy Tremor* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.



Image 25. Photograph from the series *Believers and Truthsayers* by Barbara Wagner, 2014.



Image 26. Still from the film *Holy Tremor* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.



Image 27. Still from the film *Bye Bye Deutschland!/Eine Lebensmelodie* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.



Image 28. Still from the film *Bye Bye Deutschland!/Eine Lebensmelodie* by Barbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2017.



Image 29. Photograph from the series *The Wedding of the Century* by Barbara Wagner, 2008.



Image 30. Photograph from the series *The Wedding of the Century* by Barbara Wagner, 2008.



Image 31. Photography from the series *In Search of the 5th Element*, by Barbara Wagner, 2017.



Image 32. Exhibition of the series *In Search of the 5th Element*, by Barbara Wagner, 2017.



Image 33. Photography from the series *In Search of the 5th Element*, by Barbara Wagner, 2017.



Image 34. Picture from the series *Shining Star* by Barbara Wagner, 2008-2010.



Image 35. Photograph from the series *Shining Star*, by Barbara Wagner, 2008.



Image 36. Photograph from the series *Shining Star*, by Barbara Wagner, 2008.



Image 38. Still from the video installation *Cinéma Cassino*, by Barbara Wagner, 2013.

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