

## *Uruguayan Carnival during the Last Dictatorship. The Evolution of a New Way of Resistance*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The paper proposes to trace the evolution of Uruguayan carnival from the viewpoint of left-wing movements, from its beginnings to its evolution as a tool to resist the military and dictatorial government that lasted from 1973 to 1985. In this period the conception of the carnival changed significantly, from being an evasion spectacle to a tool in the resistance movement. Special attention is given to the analysis of the consequences of censorship in Murga spectacles, as it contributed to the consolidation of the *tablado* as not only a space for collective entertainment but as a space for political and aesthetic resistance.

**Keywords:** carnival; dictatorship; resistance; *Murga*; theatre; Uruguay

### Evolution of the concept of Carnival from the left sector's viewpoint

Due to its condition as a festive and popular practice, carnival was initially regarded as a space of excess and leisure<sup>2</sup> from the standpoint of more critical left-wing sectors. Thus, carnival performances were criticized by progressive sectors in society which saw the *tablado* as simply a space for spectators to passively enjoy cheap, common jokes and accept misportrayed reality, rendering carnivals as the 'opium of the Uruguayan people'. This concept started to change in the 60's as a result of the sociopolitical crisis which provoked dialogue between the different cultural fields in order to denounce the situation. Hence, the *Murga* started to systematically incorporate popular features such as folk and protest songs, to set to music its lyrics in order to convey more progressive messages. But the definitive merging of politics and culture would take place in 1968, a pivotal year in Uruguayan politics, when Pacheco Areco assumes power after President Óscar Gestido's death and Emergency security

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<sup>2</sup> "Espacio de derroche, de holgazanería, del ocio, de la bohemia, de la falta de conciencia social" (Remedi 1996: 97).

measures (*Medidas prontas de seguridad*) are imposed under his mandate to quell social unrest along economic shocks. With the strengthening of repressive measures, the ‘upside down’ world of carnivalesque spectacles soon tense to become a space for political denunciation, thus transforming carnival into the ‘right side up world’<sup>3</sup>, where the political and social context could be confronted and the official discourses defied, because it presents a structure and a vision of the facts much more critical and objective with reality than the political reality itself. As stated by Dorothée Couitem:

A lo largo del siglo XX el carnaval uruguayo se fue alejando cada vez más de la definición bajtiniana del mundo al revés que se opone al orden, caracterizándose cada vez más por espectáculos que retoman elementos de la vida cotidiana sobre el tono crítico de la sátira y la ironía. Las normas y prohibiciones que rigen para la sociedad, rigen también para el carnaval y la permisividad no es mayor en los tablados que en otras partes del espacio público. Muchas veces, en los temas puestos en escena las jerarquías no se invierten y los tabúes subsisten (Chouitem 2011b: 200–201).

### Carnival during dictatorship. First period (1973–1980)

After five years, a coup d’état took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1973, and the civil-military dictatorship commenced. At this point, it is important to note that the new regime could not eliminate carnival spectacles, although other countries were successful in suppressing them. This fact shows the importance of this practice for Uruguayan culture. For this reason, Carnival was not abolished but it was subject to strict censorship. This is in accordance with Gustavo Remedi’s assertion:

Lejos de ser una institución “marginal”, “intersticial”, “espontánea”, “descontrolada”, el carnaval resulta ser una de las prácticas artísticas más reglamentadas, vigiladas, censuradas y penalizadas por un conjunto de brazos del aparato estatal. (Remedi 1996: 106)

Censorship was particularly stringent with companies which had a clear left-wing positioning, such as *Diablos Verdes* or *Araca la Cana*, while other companies were prohibited from participating in the contest all together, for example in the cases of *La Soberana* or *Las ranas*. As a result, Carnival acquired an even

<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the bakhtinian conception of carnival spectacles.

more subversive and oppositional perspective vis-à-vis the civil-military regime, as carnival companies criticized the growing and instituted censorship. Soon, the mere act of taking part of a carnival performance turned the public presence into a unifying act. As stated by Ginette Dubé:

Because carnival was one of the only spaces for crowds of people to get together and to criticize the regime, the tablado came to represent the exercise of democratic rights. In this way, carnival became a new “popular public sphere”, a new kind of people’s court-recreating the old tradition of “cabildos abiertos” (town hall meetings) and a place to revive and celebrate collective identity and democratic tradition. (Dubé 2000: 83–84)

The military regime soon became conscious that Carnival was gaining a new political strength, so censorship was made absolute by the regime, reinforced and strengthened throughout the period, affecting other cultural expressions of liberty. However, censorship was not exercised with the same strength throughout the period, nor was it restricted to carnival activities, but was present in all cultural expressions, such as music, literature or theatre.<sup>4</sup>

As previously stated, the censorship in the decades of 1970 and 1980 was an implacable presence in the Uruguayan carnival; although not limited to the authoritarian period, as there is evidence of censorship before the coup d’état. Nevertheless, censorship was mainly limited to the moral content of the representation, and not to its political content. Censorship was mostly concerned with issues of decency and good manners; banning, for example, any scatological references that could be considered offensive to the public. As asserted by Dorothée Chouitem:

La censure des productions carnavalesques fut donc bien antérieure à 1973 et de nature voire, surtout, d’intensité différente. Avant la fin des années 60, il ne s’agissait de contrôler que «les effets publics de la liberté», tels que les possibles atteintes aux bonnes mœurs car, ne l’oublions, pas le carnaval est avant tout un spectacle grand public de divertissement familial, et non de tenir en joug, allant de l’expurgation à la pure et simple interdiction, de toute création qui pourrait transgresser la *doxa* du moment. En effet, ces limitations ne touchaient encore que ce que l’on peut qualifier de transgressions à la morale et, plus particulièrement, les allusions sexuelles beaucoup trop explicites comme ce fut le cas su répertoire de la *murga* Araca La Cana. (Chouitem 2011 : 144)

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the censorship related to theatre in this period, see Mirza 2007, and for a brief overview of this phenomenon, see Mirza & Silveira 2013/2014.

With the imposition of a new military government, new regulations which censor carnival and public gatherings also took effect. These regulations were mostly concerned with the political content of liberal expressions, as well as social expressions which critique the regime. Government control, of course, included the different carnivalesque spheres and was exercised at different levels which can be systematically analyzed and addressed.

Firstly, censorship can be traced by analyzing lyrics. For this reason, the companies' owners had to show the written texts every year to pass censorship scrutiny. As stated previously, this procedure had already happened before the coup d'état, but the measures were tightened in order to control political messages. This is the most frequent mechanism of control over cultural manifestations under dictatorial regimes, as the censorship commission has the legal authority to suppress words (for example, *pueblo* or *libertad*), phrases, texts or even prohibit entire works. Often, lyrics were returned to the author to be entirely rewritten before being presented publically. As stated by Aldo Marchesi:

En la música y el carnaval los censores exigían ver los textos que iban a ser cantados y censuraban porciones o textos enteros. Además el gobierno exigía múltiples requisitos de tipo burocrático que apuntaban a trabar la realización de un espectáculo. La aceptación del espectáculo se realizaba a último momento, lo cual generaba una incertidumbre en los productores que habían invertido en la realización. (Marchesi 2009: 284–285)

Secondly, and more significant, the dictatorship provoked a change of stage. Before this period, carnival stages were mostly built in the streets; with the new regime, they were gradually relocated to sports clubs and closed arenas. This provokes a distancing between *Murga* and public, as the companies were isolated from public spaces. Thus the mechanisms of censorship act not only on the content of the performance, but importantly on the space of the performance as a form of control of the public. This mechanism is used to control people more than what is happening on stage. A spectacle which occurs in an enclosed space is easily controlled: entrance and exit gates are clearly marked; inside and outside spaces are delimited marking what happens *inside* the *tablado* and what happens *outside*, thus delimiting the borders of representation. The evident implication or significance of this delimitation is that everything that happens inside belonged to the 'party', while what happens outside was the 'real life', and has nothing to do with the performance. With this important shift of location, the borders between reality and fiction, between social life and carnivalesque representation are clearly drawn; carnival is no longer an open show and had

become a staged and enclosed representation inside the confines of a theatre, where the outside context did not enter.

Thirdly, censorship had been regulated by the regime in a way that the *Murguistas*<sup>5</sup> must follow the script to the very detail, leaving no place for improvisation. Companies are forced to follow the script of a text approved by the censorship commission. As a result, the carnival loses the sense of improvisation and freshness, and is transformed into a more rigid spectacle, with a form which is closer to that of a traditional theatrical play.

On a fourth level, it is important to emphasize the follow up of the *Murga* from one *tablado* to another. As far as we can see, censorship did not end with simply screening the text of the play beforehand. The plays were also now to be attended by censors who were in charge of ensuring the *Murga* was performed exactly as it was written in the script, and in some cases they could cancel the representation if it was different from the one that was censored. This demonstrates a change in the perception of carnival, because the censorship committee became aware of carnival's spectacularity. In other words, the control of the play cannot be limited to the written text, because in that case only a half of the works would be censored. For this reason, it was necessary that people in charge of the control went to the *tablados* so they could confirm that the changes made in the written text were also captured in the performance. Hence, dancing, gestures, diction, intonation and scenography had an extremely important role in the show, which encouraged its enrichment from the point of view of its theatricality.

In relation to the fourth level of censorship, the fifth is the persecution of the *Murguistas*. Some of them were persecuted just for their affiliation with the group for each have their own political contestations. The most famous case of ideological persecution in relation to the *Murga* censorship is the arrest, imprisonment and exile (in Switzerland) of José Alanís, director and writer of the *Murga La Soberana*.

Last but not least in the levels of censorship is self-censorship. In the most part of the cases, the five previous levels did not change deeply the texts and its performances, because self-censorship worked in both conscious and unconscious way in writers. For this reason, we can state that this is the most relentless form of censorship, because the conditioning of censorship was established before the text was in the censor's hands. As asserted by Mabel Moraña,

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<sup>5</sup> *Murga* actors, most of them males.

La autocensura se revelará así no ya solamente como un sistema autorre restrictivo y autoactivo, de normatividad reguladora, sino como un conjunto de reglas que pasan a ser constitutivas del proceso de producción de los textos. (Moraña 1988: 26)

Hence, we can see that self-censorship is the evidence of how deeply the totalitarian regimes' repressive measures penetrate. Indeed, one may not be able to fully understand the creative process of an author in dictatorship without having in mind this important contextual element. For this reason, it is an underlying mechanism, but whose presence is absolute in the artistic works of these periods.

In conclusion, it is important to note that despite these six levels of cultural repression, some messages could still go through the barriers of censorship and reach the spectators, whose receptive attitude to catch those messages influenced their interpretation. Moreover, some spectators understood messages wherein there was nothing to interpret, because the carnival atmosphere stimulated double meanings and interpretations. Therefore, we can assert that carnival is subversive *per se*, because, although the intention of the writer was not to send covered messages, the fact of being immersed in a group of people in a closed space sharing a show was a revolutionary act, and the dictatorial government could not act against it.

### Carnival during dictatorship. Second period (1980–1985)

In relation to the role of censorship during the dictatorship, it is important to establish a turning point in the regime in the year 1980. This was the momentous even in which a plebiscite was celebrated in order to give constitutional support to the military government. In this plebiscite for a new constitutional project, the "No" won 57.2% of the votes. Since then, the regime started to deteriorate, so censorship gradually debilitated and the direct political content increased in carnival plays. This gradual loosening of censorship was seen in other cultural manifestations, such as *canto popular*<sup>6</sup> and traditional theatre. However, the carnival erected as the standard of the political struggle of the moment. As evidenced in Gustavo Remedi's assertion:

alrededor de 1980 las murgas se transformaron en una forma por excelencia de cuestionamiento de la experiencia social o de ruptura con el orden social y

<sup>6</sup> Protest song with folklorical influence.

simbólico que la regía, en una forma de reunión y articulación –real e imaginaria- de los sectores populares, y de expresión y canalización de ideas, valores, tareas y objetivos correspondientes a otro proyecto de país. (Remedi 1996: 120)

This means that by establishing a critical position against the military regime, the *Murga* became more than a space or a spectacle of the people but a symbol of liberty where both the actors and spectators maintained the resistance to the government, creating a framework of images known by both parts which allowed to establish an alternative discourse which protected the self identity of Uruguayan nation, confronted to the new concept of national identity proposed by the military. As stated by Gustavo Remedi:

En el contexto de particular de la censura y la represión impuesta por la dictadura a la cultura nacional, y ante el avance de los medios masivos de comunicación (canalizando fundamentalmente la cultura estadounidense), algunas murgas –no todas-, junto a otras prácticas culturales, jugaron un papel de memoria o almacén de reserva de los referentes culturales e históricos desplazados por esos dos fenómenos; de institución congregadora y articuladora de los diferentes sectores sociales –de sus experiencias sociales, visiones de mundo, intereses y sensibilidades.

La murga no se restringió, por lo tanto, a ser un *locus amenus*, una instancia excepcional, inofensiva y pasajera, en la que volcar quejas y protestas, en la que hacer bromas y comentarios inocuos, sino que se convirtió en una forma de convocatoria; una manera de hacer posible la reunión real e imaginaria del pueblo-nación opuesto a la dictadura: de representar el hito de la continuidad histórica y espacial del proyecto democrático nacional-popular; así como de promover y negociar una imagen de sociedad y de Estado alternativos. (Remedi 1996: 77–78)

In other words, in Uruguayan carnival spectacles during the last dictatorship it can be found a new way of communicating dissent, with its own criteria, in the middle of a stifling regime full of rules and prohibitions. As asserted by Dorothèe Chouitem:

Une nouvelle forme de communication re-sémantisée voit le jour: applaudir, crier, reprendre en coeur d'innocentes paroles pourtant lourdes de signification, fruit de la connivence, se transforme en une communion non pas religieuse ni purement festive mais politique. (Chouitem 2010 : 7)

This situation lasted five more years, ending in 1985, with the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of a new democratic period. During this lustrum, the *Murga* continued to be an example of resistance, so its left-wing ideological inclination was strengthened, even though there were also pro-government *Murgas*. At this point, it would be interesting to think if censorship was able to undermine the importance of this kind of performances. The answer lies in Elizabeth Alfaro's words, saying:

en la nueva coyuntura que se abre en 1985, la dimensión adquirida por el carnaval evidenciaba el rotundo fracaso del régimen en sus propósitos de manipulación de la fiesta. Si se había apuntado a minimizarla y a neutralizarla, el resultado obtenido fue el inverso: lo que se consiguió fue potenciar su proyección porque, pese a la represión y la censura, el carnaval en general y la murga en particular habían logrado preservar ciertos espacios de oposición antidictatorial que se tornaron decisivos en el contexto de la transición. (Alfaro 2013/2014: 29–30)

It can be stated, therefore, that censorship did not work the way it was expected, especially after 1980, when it started to be undermined by a great amount of cultural, social and political expressions against the military regime. We finish this section with Marchesi's words related to this last period of dictatorship:

Aunque existieron en algunos casos cortos encarcelamientos de algunos agentes culturales, el margen de acción de la dictadura estuvo muy limitado. Dichas limitaciones también marcaron la ineficacia de la censura. Esta, no pudo contener el desarrollo de nuevas expresiones culturales, y en los últimos años terminó, paradójicamente, impulsándolo. En una crónica de aquellos años, Leo Masliah cuenta que cuando la dictadura prohibía un espectáculo o a un artista, se aseguraba su éxito posterior. (Marchesi 2009: 386)

### Carnival unchained (since 1985)

After the dictatorial period, carnival theatre could be developed without censorship, but it preserved the political strength that had earned during the authoritarian regime. And although, there were companies which defended the traditional parties'<sup>7</sup> point of view, most of them opted for a leftist profile, related to the coalition party *Frente Amplio's* ideology. This made that the differ-

<sup>7</sup> In Uruguay, there are two traditional parties: the National or White Party (*Partido Blanco* or *Partido Nacional*) and the Red Party (*Partido Colorado*).

ence between the two types of *Murga* born during the dictatorship was more noticeable. These two kinds of *Murga* are the *Murga-Murga* and the *Murga-Pueblo*<sup>8</sup>. The first one is related to the *Murgas* from La Unión (a Montevidean neighborhood) which will was to continue offering the public shows following the most traditional conception of *Murga*. These performances take precedence from the original form of the genre, more than the public understanding of the lyrics. The *Murgas-Pueblo*, on the other hand, are related to the *Murgas* from La Teja (another Montevidean neighborhood), which had developed a new way to conceive the *Murga*. This new way is born from the necessity of a change in the way the *murguistas* sang during the dictatorship, because they needed to be understood by the public, since they knew that they could give political messages in their performances. Hence, it could be confirmed that the most important feature in *Murgas-Murga* is the tradition and to be respectful with the origins of the genre while in the *Murgas-Pueblo*, the most important characteristic is the political commitment.

Another important thing to note is the change of government in Uruguay in 2005 wherein the left-wing party won the elections. This victory subtly changed the conception of some *Murgas*, because the companies which were in the opposition became supporters of the government and vice versa. Nevertheless, the essence of *Murgas* did not change, because their spirit is to be anti-establishment and controversial, no matter which party exercises the power.

## Conclusion

As a way to conclude this paper, it can be confirmed that, despite the forceful censorship, the importance of Uruguayan carnival theatre was not undermined,

<sup>8</sup> “Como es obvio, las distintas visiones sobre la forma de libertad que abría el tablado, encubrían otras definiciones que también marcaron a fuego las alternativas carnavaleras de entonces. Como indicio de ello, la postura más tradicional de “la Unión” se conformó con recuperar para el género su proverbial veta crítica, plasmada en el comentario humorístico de la actualidad. En contraste, en “la Teja” resurgió con particular vigor la radicalización política e ideológica insinuada antes del golpe de estado. Así lo testimonia el perfil contestatario de algunos títulos tradicionalmente identificados con la izquierda, como Diablos Verdes y Araca la Cana, o de otros nacidos en estos años bajo esa misma impronta, como La Reina de la Teja y Falta y Resto. En este sentido, al margen del primer premio oficial que se llevó el sólido espectáculo de Saltimbanquis en el memorable carnaval de 1984, los aplausos y ovaciones que aclamaron noche a noche la actuación de las cuatro murgas “compañeras” en todos los tablados de Montevideo, dan cuenta de una suerte de desproscripción de hecho de la izquierda, verificada en el inesperado espacio de la fiesta” (Alfaro 2013/2014: 28–29).

but also gained the status of a space where the reality of the moment was questioned, and this characteristic is still present nowadays. And although military control had important consequences in the essence of this dramatic genre, the *Murga* improved its spectacularity in order to compensate for the scarcities that the censorship left in the texts.

And as a final conclusion from this paper that does not only concern the Uruguayan *Murga*, but could be extrapolated from others forms of art created during a time of repression, it could be asserted that censorship did not succeed in hindering the carnivals from conveying messages of liberty, freedom, unity against the dictatorship, because it can only be restricted to the work (not even the artist), while the spectator is free to make his or her own interpretation and to decode the non-verbal language. Therefore, the speaker could have his or her message censored, but the intention could never be censored, considering that the suitable frame for the transmission of ideas of dissatisfaction and resistance is created even with the presence of censorship. Creation can be censored with thousands of mechanisms, but you could never control the interpretations that these works could have.

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