The Stage of Mars: Representations of the First World War and its Social Effects on Portuguese Dramaturgy

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Abstract

The theme of the First World War and its effects on European arts and literature is a theme that has already been widely explored, most notably in the theatrical field. Taking as its starting point a set of plays written both during the early stages of the war and in the postwar period, this article examines the evolution of attitudes towards the conflict in the dramaturgy produced in Portugal, paying particular attention to two main areas of influence: the traumatic nature of the conflict and the specificities of the national historical context.

Keywords

Great War, Theatre, Culture, Perceptions, Discourses

Resumo

O tema da Primeira Grande Guerra e dos seus efeitos foi por toda a Europa amplamente explorado na arte e na literatura, tendo tido significativa expressão na área do teatro. Partindo de um conjunto de peças escritas na fase inicial da guerra e no pós-guerra, este artigo tem como principal objectivo propor uma leitura da evolução das atitudes face ao conflito na dramaturgia em Portugal. Esta leitura contempla duas ordens de razões: a natureza traumática da conflagração e as especificidades do contexto histórico nacional.

Palavras-chave

Grande Guerra, Teatro, Cultura, Percepções, Discursos

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Introduction

The Great War has a “unique place” in the cultural history of Europe (Winter, 1994: 28). The great commotion caused by the unprecedented and brutal nature of the events that took place between 1914 and 1918 meant that culture would remain the “hostage” of war themes both during the conflict and in the years that followed it, as has been stressed by recent historiography (Ferro, 1999: 295). There were multiple representations of the war and its effects to be noted in all the arts throughout Europe: theatre, cinema, photography, prose and poetry, music and the visual arts. Partly generated by the great need for self-expression caused by the phenomena of war, this stream of words, sounds and images was, on the other hand, further enhanced by the expansion of the cultural industries and by the technological advances made during this period, as, for example, those taking place in the areas of cinema and photography.

However, the heterogeneity of this cultural production did not derive only from the wide range of available resources: it was based on the diversity of contents as well. This production had its roots in an enlarged participation, and included not only the work of artists, writers and intellectuals, but also of people from the civilian world who were occasionally involved in the arts world, and of many ex-soldiers, who contributed with their “aesthetics of direct experience” (Winter, 1995: 2). The unprecedented scale of this intellectual and artistic mobilization was one of the distinctive features of this cultural production, in which highly diverse creative impulses tended to intersect.

In spite of the belated and rather limited participation of Portuguese troops in the conflict, albeit with non-negligible effects (Samara, 1998: 89), this artistic mobilization was also to be noted in Portugal, where several fado songs, memoirs, poems and other texts inspired were written that were inspired by the war, including theatrical plays. As in other European countries, such as England and France, where the theme of the war had already been flourishing on stages since 1914, theatre was one of the media used in Portugal for representing war and its consequences. Between the first year of the conflict (1914) and the beginning of the dictatorial regime (1933), a considerable number of plays were written on the theme of the conflict and its effects, a subject that has not merited the full attention of theatre historians. In his work Três Espelhos, Luiz Francisco Rebello lists a large number of plays that were inspired by the Great War, although he does not attribute great importance