Arts and Nature

Interpreting Butoh dance

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According to Social Identity Theory, the self can categorize, classify and name itself in relation to other categories such as Nationality, Race, Economic wealth, Social status, etc. and form its identity (Stel, 2008). In modern societies, such categories are ordered according to a hierarchical set of values consistent with the priorities of our current historical circumstance. A person is higher on the pyramid when he/she scores better in the different categories according to the ruling set of values that affect them. In capitalism, wealth is considered an important category to determine the person's social rank. According to Bourdieau's Theory of Capital, wealth or capital can be social, cultural or economic. Arts, for example, belongs in the cultural capital, while income belongs in the economic capital, and the number and depth of friendships would belong in the social one. Despite in the past, categories such as Religion pertaining to the cultural capital, would easily provide their holder access to the other two, today economic capital has taken priority. Thus, social and cultural capitals are commonly considered in terms of their exchange value as measured by economic capital. The more powerful the friends people have, the more chances of providing economic capital they represent. And the more knowledge someone has, the more possibilities of accessing better paid jobs. But what if someone rejects such instrumentalization? Can Artistic expression transcend these categories or at least remain independent from the referred instrumentalization of cultural or social capital, when conceived as a need of human beings or, as some scholars argue, of animals too (Rogers & Kaplan, 2007), by connecting people through what is common to all living creatures: the body, the natural environment, the feelings and/or instincts?

Despite the seemingly fundamental connection between Arts and Nature as it has been vastly studied by anthropologists, today such connection appears to be exclusively associated with specific artistic expressions such as land art, or indigenous art (Ruperti, Vesco, & Negri, 2017). The modernist ideology that perpetrates the belief that Mankind is the ruler of Nature, is reflected in virtually every area of human activity including art expressions. Although the industrial revolution has been considered the icon of anthropocentric modern thought, Christianity, the western creed, did not cause any dissonance regarding our position in nature (Arenas, 2016). The bible clearly establishes that it is God's command to give humankind the right to rule over nature, over every sort of life existing in our planet. Modernity contributed to this idea by conceiving man's actions as capable of creating a new faith: no longer was god the center of interest, but humanity. However, by doing so, modern society increasingly started to disconnect from its own basic source, habitat and constitutive reality: nature. A whole set of values came to place and to replace the old ones: science over mythology, abstraction over earthliness, efficiency over tradition, individuality over community, ambition over humbleness, appearance over honesty, sophisticated systematization over rudimentary mechanisms, parceled study over holistic understanding, materiality over or versus spirituality, among others. Following the new scale of values, indigenous Art belonged to the rudimentary "past" of humanity; a past that was to be overcome by the new modern paradigm. Other labels such as "Land" Art came to indicate the specificity of those art expressions that were in connection with nature, in the same fashion as the term "organic" came to denote that such foods were NOT produced using chemicals, as if it had always been the normal way to produce food in agriculture.

Modernity shaped people's basic relations with each other and with nature, which was mainly seen as an object for economical profit, and of secondary or none importance were its recreational, aesthetical, or spiritual meanings. Nature's symbolic meaning changed radically from a religious orientation directed at strengthening the community values to a scientific orientation directed at increasing material wealth. The increasing gap between Society and Nature was explained by Marx in terms of *alienation* and the *metabolic rift*. Modernity, although originated in the Western countries namely Europe and USA, reached virtually every region in the planet, and Asia was not the exception. Modernity came to Japan after Commodore Perry from the USA arrived at the coast of Japan in 1853 and threatened to use force against Japan if they didn't accept to trade with them. Japan had seen the example of China who suffered the Opium wars by the hands of the British and decided to open and modernize, thus ending their 2 centuries-long seclusion started in 1633. In Japan, modernity came to coexist with traditional values in a way that is considered as unique and a source of great interest by Japanologists. A sophisticated division of labor was implemented (Becker, 2008) affecting all fields of society, such as Art. Japanese Art, called「芸術」in Japanese, was originally understood as ancestral techniques that combined religious, aesthetic and scientific/technical meanings.

The link with nature was constitutive of the Art itself, because its process of production was as important as its actual result. In Japanese, the word「道」was used after every discipline. Modern Art, on the other hand, focused on the aesthetical element, and abstract ideas were privileged over realistic depictions of reality. The resulting work was privileged over the process. Artists were not expected to be connected with nature to create their works as in traditional Japan and were usually unaware of -and disconnected from- the natural origins of their Art tools, materials, and even the food that sustained their living. In the sophisticated modern division of labor, artists are either struggling to sell their artwork by pleasing their potential buyers' aesthetical appetite or spoiled by a luxurious life-style that surrounds them with all sorts of "commodities" when their art is in "high-demand" as determined by their current society, usually the Economic Capital rich.

The need for reconnection of Arts and Nature is one of the key elements of Butoh dance. Originated in Japan in 1959, it has been called the dance of darkness, disease, death and alienation. This association made Butoh the subject of moral criticism that eventually, through a particularly unorthodox performance, led to the exile of its creator Hijikata from the Association for Contemporary Performing Arts (Moore, 2006). Although this association was focused on avant-garde art expressions, ballet and jazz were part of what Nietzsche would call the instauration of values. "Beauty" understood in those terms, reached a Japan that had suffered nothing but the atomic bomb by the very same "developed world" that now claimed to know a universal value of the concept (Nanako, 2013). In Dance, Ballet was characteristically idealizing men and women according to these cannons of beauty. Hyperkinetic jumps with legs crossed, standing on the tip of the feet, among many other complicated postures specifically named under sophisticated french terms, took ballet dancers many years of practice to master and eventually achieve a kind of beauty that had little to do with the natural positions of the human body. Daisuke Yoshimoto, one of Japan's oldest and most active Butoh dancer and choreographer frequently utilizes Ballet to create contrast with the earthly Butoh movements that bring the dancers closer to the ground with a range of motion that express a totally different aesthetical paradigm. Butoh can be seen as a claim to regain the Japanese basic cultural elements that were to be sacrificed, censored, marginalized by the western hegemonic powers: A decolonizing stand. For example, the Shinto belief of gods governing all areas of nature: the river, the mountains, the sun, even the rice (Ruperti et al., 2017) made humans appear like creatures who were to submit to these much greater forces. "There is no place in which a god does not reside, even in the wild waves eight hundred folds or in the wild mountains bosom" (Nakamura 1964, 350; cited in Kalland, Asquith 1997, 2). The sense of belonging to nature as opposed to ruling over it, is characteristic of Butoh's motifs.

Butoh performers consider that it is not the will of subjects what creates the movement, but a sort of instinctual need to connect with the surroundings and specially with their own self-perception (Kasai & Parsons, 2003). "The dancer is danced" with no intervention of his will. The distinctive slow pace of movements stimulate the awareness of the body's life and of time, another concept that was to be deconstructed from its modern interpretation. Without will power, morality becomes another distinctive aspect, because unlike ballet dance performances, the subjects are not considered morally responsible of their own acts and fate. The mind does not interfere with the body's movement and the animal aspect of humans is regained. The dancers experience a great range of emotions without focusing on an external image of themselves (ibid). The internal nature of the dancer/s takes the central interest in a context that is facilitated by the minimalistic environmental elements placed on the stage in a theatrical fashion. In Butoh, Kasai explained (Kasai & Parsons, 2003), dancers spend time developing their ability to see peripherally, which allows the dancers to lower their eyelids slightly, thus relaxing their eyes and diffusing their focus. The point of this is not to achieve a certain appearance, but to be able to perceive differently, more open to his/her surroundings by diffusing the extent to which s/he is 'focusing' on the external world. The result is that the dancer achieves a more equal distribution between outer and inner perception.

Butoh had been rejected in Japan in early 60's but some years it became accepted in order to regain national identity. Hijikata, who never left Japan, and Ohno, who gained great popularity in Europe, became the founders of an avant-garde type of Japanese dance, that was now to make the government proud. Some scholars, however, too easily try to connect Butoh with Zen Buddhism and other "Japanese" or "Eastern" elements. According to Daisuke Yoshimoto, Butoh goes to the core of human nature, from which the basic energy arises. Just like Hijikata, who developed his art in a state of poorness, Yoshimoto also faced a lack of resources to live a more comfortable life. Their dependence on the audience appreciation or association with recognized figures such as Mishima Yukio for the former and the

Grotowski Institute for the latter, sheds light on the structural incompatibility of true artistic expressions and the support they receive from the current capitalist system. The categorization by some scholars of "soft power" to refer to the power of Arts and culture, in opposition to the "hard power" of military or economic threats, may be contributing to a costly misunderstanding of the cultural nature of threats or of the very idea of power.

Art is in a privileged position to create symbols that can connect people of totally different cultural backgrounds, creating bridges of communication. In the current system, artists are forced to exchange their Art for food. This reality not only is discouraging people to initiate an artistic career, but it contributes to reinforce an empty relation with the material world, which cannot be devoid of meaning both to humans and animals alike. Science left alone, associates with "technological developments" that end up in the garbage bin a few months after being released. Rather than economic growth, it is garbage growth the natural consequence of this empty relation with the material world. The expectation of artists to be true or authentic may suggest the view that what is considered as true Arts is that which does not originate for the purpose of achieving something else such as economic wealth: but its only purpose is to manifest; to express or evoke the artist's feelings or images. Considering that the possibility to express feelings is inherent to human beings, which explains why people developed language in the first place, why are artist excluded from receiving the basic elements for survival? Probably because it is in the nature of Arts not to be for material survival. According to Rogers & Kaplan (2007), "Doing something for pleasure, rather than for survival, is part of how we define the act of creating art". Art is a special language because it speaks to -and it is spoken by- those that can feel it. Not for survival nor self-defense but after survival is possible and self-defense is not necessary. If Art is to be appreciated as pertaining to a more sophisticated level of society for not having to deal with survival, and because it is capable of creating the meanings our society so much needs, are we not capable of at least providing artists with the basic elements to preserve their dignity and their Art?

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