

MORALS, MEMORY, AND COGNITION

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***Abstract:** Human communication must be understood as a complex mosaic. Its constitution supposes the existence of many tribes causing the rising of multiple voices. Each tribe cultivates its own moral values and its own system of historical beliefs and its own cognitive frames. However, we live in a globalized world and this plurality of identities can cause a lot of misunderstandings when ciphered signs of a certain subculture are appropriated. In this article we intend to describe and to analyze a theatrical experience that exploited some of these signs extracted from the gay culture. Such symbols were adapted for general audiences causing a series of critics by some activists that pointed how moral aspects, memories and perceptions were misplaced when they were appropriated from their original context.*

***Keywords:** Codes, cognition, communication, theater, genre, gay, culture, subculture, urban tribes, morals and history.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND BASIC CONCEPTS

Much has been said about the role of morality in the constitution of signs. For instance, Ferry (2010), in his *salvationist theory*, demonstrates how each time translated its own values into philosophical worldviews. For him, Stoics saw in Nature a perfect cosmic intelligence that needed to be reproduced by humans. Medieval thinkers, in turn, were concerned with describing the ethical laws of men and those of the Bible to define good and evil deeds, while modern ones made reason the measure of all things. All these different insights into the meaning of philosophy had one sole purpose: *to save* men from the fear of their finitude and calm their spirits, prompted by doubts to which they will never find fully satisfactory answers.

It is clear, then, that all meaning is a historical product. Symbolic and behavioral values of each age delimit the rituals that accept or condemn acts and words in their respective times. In the case of a society marked by globalization, plurality, and polyphony, it is essential to show

how subcultures should also be considered in the decoding process, considering their historical trajectories and their symbolic systems. Thus, speaking of cultural expropriation becomes a broader phenomenon because we understand that culture is a mosaic of subcultures and, consequently, “subcultural expropriations” can also happen.

First of all, it must be clear how memory influences morality and, subsequently, cognition.

The processes of *acquisition* of morals create an internal representation of sensory stimulation stored in the memory. The nature of such representation depends on attention, repetition, and practice; depth of processing; organization; image formation; and type of underlying cognitive beliefs.

Thus, it must be understood that - in a multilayered structure, as is the case with postmodern society - we all need to adapt behavior to each stratum in which we live. There are, *prima face*, imperative codes, which are those we learn in the family, school, church, work. These would be conducts (behavioral and linguistic) that match the established and agreed order in a broad cultural sphere that encompasses multiple realities in itself.

The emergence of urban tribes, in this sense, engenders the hypothetical codes that are characterized by the formation of specific practices, which are validated only in airtight environments that settle within this fragmentation of cultures.

To be clear, prayer, for example, as a representation based on imperative codes of Brazilian Catholic culture, must be understood as an introspective, silent, and contemplative act. However, in a system of afro descendant religions, which are on the fringes of society and, therefore, exist as hypothetical codes, it manifests itself through powerful drumming, shouting, dancing, and trance.

Thus, history and the way memory shapes it will differentiate which conducts will be imperative codes and which will be hypothetical codes.

2. A CASE STUDY

Such prolegomena will serve as the basis for the discussion of an episode that happened to me in 2013. As a director of musical theater, my first authorial experience was the production of *We were gay* in Bahia. The intention of the creator Aninha Franco was to tell the story of homosexuality in a fun way, mixing Bahian music with Broadway know-how. To that end, I invited Jim Cooney, a renowned New York choreographer, to work with me. It was very interesting to see an American dancing and choreographing the “arrocha” and “samba de roda” with more sway than many Brazilians. Even though the choreographies had all the popular movements perfectly performed by the dancers’ bodies, the rigor of classical dance was there too, and from that mix came a sophisticated product.

Here is a first reflection on memory and cognition. Brazilianness could only be recognized by

Brazilians. “Samba” and “arrocha” are local phenomena, and the audience’s laughter in identifying such expressions worked as it became apparent from experience and memory that these were unlikely styles in musical theater. The sense of comedy that so seduced and amused the audience, therefore, was a product of estrangement to see a crossing of hypothetical codes (folk dances) and imperative codes (classical ballet) in the context of musical theater. At the same time that the bodies danced as if they were in a carnival block, there was a choreographic organization that caused familiarity, amazement and catharsis.

Morality is not detached from this phenomenon, as it is a determining factor for aesthetic acceptance. If it is understood as a criterion of value judgments, the success of an artistic enterprise depends on the perception of this order. In general, the audience accepted to see the Bahian actors performing that choreography that belonged to them, but it was intrigued to learn that an American was behind the mathematics of movements. In this sense, one observes how politics of the “place of speech” can be oppressive, as defined by Orterlado (2017):

“The “place of speech” is a term that often appears in conversations between feminist, black, or LGBT movement activists and in internet debates. The concept represents the search for the end of mediation: the person who suffers prejudice speaks for themselves as the protagonist of the very struggle and movement. It is a mechanism that emerged as a counterpoint to the silencing of the voice of social minorities by privileged groups in spaces for public debate. It is used by groups that historically have less room to talk. So, blacks have the place of speech - that is, legitimacy - to talk about racism, women about feminism, transsexuals about transphobia, and so on. In practice, the concept can help people understand how what we say and how we say it mark power relations and even unintentionally reproduces racism, machismo, lgbt-phobia, and class and religious prejudice.”

First of all, I must warn the reader that our belief is that certain mechanisms must be triggered to include voices that have been ignored. In this sense, the “place of speech” has great relevance in correcting directions. However, in militarism that adopts the radical stance, the place of speech becomes a dangerous space of oppression.

Such a concept is oppressive because it reduces diversity in debate and establishes that only a few subjects can practice certain speech acts: those who have been victimized. By way of example, a foreigner could not choreograph Bahian dances, even if he had the competence to do so, because this would morally imply a form of oppression of the American Empire’s supremacy over Brazilian choreographers, more specifically, Bahian ones. This perception is a fallacy, mainly if we think that there are great Bahian choreographers doing important works, even in the USA. This is the case of Marcelo Galvão, who made a successful season at the Cape Cod Center¹. The truth was adopted, because the cognitive tendency is always to imitate the models that settled in the memory.

Such an anti-imperialist stance is a marked behavior of the twentieth century, which makes no sense in a multipolar world of the 21st century, where China, Europe, and some Middle Eastern

1 <http://www.aloalobahia.com/notas/dancarino-e-coreografo-baiano-marcelo-galvao-se-presenta-to-united-states>

powers share the attention and the zones of influence with the USA. However, this paradigm shift has not yet been assimilated by neither by memory or morality so that the perception of facts remained true to anachronistic contexts, formulating discourses that are repeated, edited, and selected.

A priori, the musical would tell the story of Alice Kate, a *crossdresser* who joined her friends and decided to spend a gay weekend in New York. In the middle of the Atlantic, the engines failed, and Alice Kate promised San Sebastian that if she survived, she would get in a closet and would never leave it. Years later, and now San Sebastian decides that it is time to let Alice Kate be “happy” (i.e., “gay”).

The following is an excerpt from one of the songs, which opened the play:

*“In the last century, 400 fags rented
A 747 Boeing and to New York they flew.*

*The flight attendants were ours.
The pilots were ours too
And the legend goes, even the autopilot
camped it up and got along.*

*When flying over the blue waters of the Atlantic,
the engines failed.*

*Some cried and many shouted:
AAAAAEEEE!
Nobody listened to anyone
It was all despair: Gurls, I lost a hundred.
The lady with the scythe laughed and said:
“It’s time for you to kick the bucket, too.”²*

Gradually, the narrative was lost in the dramaturgy and the text became entangled in a professorial, almost pamphleteering tone. As a director, I intervened, asking to have some scenes included. One of them had come from an intimate experience that I had shared with the creative team.

When I was a kid on the streets of New York, I passed by the Stonewall Bar and always saw tourists with rainbow flags. Years later, I understood the meaning of that building, I was stunned and confused by a series of dichotomic feelings. This outrage from bygone days inspired the incorporation of the Greenwich Village’s gay riot story to the show.

To turn the Bahian play into a truly international music product, we would pay tribute to Judy Garland, whose memorial was one of the causes for the commotion that would culminate in the confrontation between gay and New York police, starting a race for gender rights.

² Music by Adrian Steinway (a.k.a. Adriano Chan) and Lyrics by Aninha Franco and Adrian Steinway.

As tradition has it, gay people were united in Stonewall that night to mourn the death of that Hollywood actress who advocated the LGBT cause. Police stormed the memorial and, as one of the songs written by Geronimo Santana said for the musical under review, “went all out.” Given this context, we decided to pay tribute to transgender people. We included a scene that was performed by an actor who acted as a drag queen, voicing over *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

For us (the creative team and the production team), despite the gay theme, the goal was to make an entertainment musical for the general public. Our goals clashed with the reading by the Bahian gay community, which criticized the lack of representativeness of other segments of the movement, such as lesbians, such as transsexuals, cross-dressers, etc. Drag-queens could not be a metonym of these other groups, if the project really wanted to fulfill its role of extolling diversity. These denominations are too specific, and for an individual who does not live the reality of the LGBT community, they are difficult to understand. In defense of the team, I can tell you that the plan was to make a trilogy for these other communities. However, the project was not yet structured. What was supposed to be a tribute, became an insult. Why did this happen?

Certainly, because the codified signs of the gay community were condensed³ and the nuances of diversity were sacrificed to meet status quo demands. From the standpoint of the universal audience, no violations were made. So much so, that the show sold out the Modulo theater in Salvador and the União Cultural theater for almost six months. From an activist’s stand point, the project excluded part of the honored group and the “cultural appropriation of the gay subculture” was another violence practiced in the name of heteronormative didactics. Only now I manage to understand the criticism and even agree with its content.

It is relevant to note the difference between drag-queens, cross-dressers, transvestites, and transsexuals⁴:

Drag-queens are men who dress like women in caricatures to perform artistic performances, which include singing and dancing, usually at parties and nightclubs.

Cross-dresser is someone who likes to wear occasional clothes of the opposite gender, usually on specific occasions.

Transvestite is a term typically from Latin American countries, Spain, and Portugal. It is a female gender identity. The concept of transvestite still causes divergence. However, for most of the LGBT community, the transvestite, while investing in women’s clothes and hormones, like transgender women do, has no discomfort with their genitals, and generally has no need for sex reassignment surgery.

Finally, transsexual derives from the classification “transsexualism, sexual identity disorder”, described in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems

3 It is understood by condensation the reunion of several signs into just one in a process of language economics. In this case, the different types of transgenders were summarized to the figure of the drag queen.

4 <http://especiais.correiobraziliense.com.br/transsexual-travesti-drag-queen-qual-e-a-diferenca>. Accessed on 09/21/2019.

(ICD-10), published by the World Health Organization (WHO) and which has not been updated since 1989. According to WHO, transsexualism is “a desire to live and be accepted as a person of the opposite sex. This desire is usually accompanied by a feeling of malaise or maladaptation with reference to one’s own anatomical sex, and the desire to undergo surgery or hormonal treatment to make one’s body as fit as possible to the desired gender.”

Another important aspect to continue our analysis would be the transcription of one of the criticisms made by Luiz Mott in his blog:

Beautiful and fun-joking musical signed by Ana Franco, Adrian Steinway, Jim Cooney, and Geronimo, presented at Teatro Modulo, Salvador. “We Were Gay” is set in the 20th century and tells the crazy story of a promise made by gay Alice Kate to San Sebastian in dire straits. In a text full of humor, the montage addresses themes such as sexual, behavioral and expression freedom.” It is the first Bahian play in partnership with Broadway.

The boys are handsome, good dancers, sing well. The sound and scenery have to be greatly improved. The text presents several problems, such as encouraging the audience to sing homophobic chorus - reinforcing in the collective unconscious the hideous prejudice of the last century when only men and women could be loved. Instead of mentioning Caio Fernando de Abreu as an icon of the tupiniquim gay, it would be more correct to honor Mario de Andrade, a.k.a. “Miss São Paulo”. Aninha only aims at Catholic homophobia, without citing Judaism and the Evangelicals as coryphaei of intolerance. In the list of gay luminaries, she omits the foremost of all, Michelangelo!

My main scold is against the faerie ideology and queer bias of the text: okay that in the future, in the rainbow utopia, we will all be just human beings, with no black, gay identity statement - but in a country and a time when 1 LGBT is killed every 26 hours, you cannot repeat this alienated speech. Especially because a huge closet occupies the center of the stage and the discussion of how to come out gay guides the entire show. In the end, a closeted, married, egodistonic, sad gay man comes out of the closet with a huge plume on his head. Simplistic and fake solution, since 99% of closeted gays upon outing do not necessarily become drag queens. Much discomfort and discouragement to the many closeted gay men and their wives in the audience, who will continue in their closets, in fear of the false association of being gay with transformism. Nothing against the elegant and trans but each jack to his trade. I missed the costumes of Indian, worker, black dude, S&M, cowboy of the Village People / Macho Man troupe. There is still time to correct such misconceptions. As it stands, a B+. Oh! Lesbians deserved at least some mention, especially because at the time many already called themselves “gay,” and were in the Stonewall revolt.

Let us therefore make an analysis of the criticism thinking about memory, morals, and cognition.

To rescue the ideas about the role of art in memory and in cognition:

In the 50's, 60's and 70's, effervescent artistic production was used as a form of mass awareness. Gradually, academic debates took over the stage and canvas, and good art became a stronghold of the intellectual elite. As we are talking about dramatic manifestations, it is worth remembering the words of Adorno (2003) about Berthold Brecht's work:

Weil die Gesellschaft des Dreißigjährigen Krieges nicht die funktionale des modernen ist, kann dort auch poetisch kein geschlossener Funktionszusammenhang stipuliert werden, in dem Leben und Tod der privaten Individuen ohne weiteres durchsichtig würden aufs ökonomische Gesetz. (2003: 420)

[Because the society of the thirty years war was not the functional society of the modern age, we cannot even poetically stipulate a closed functional context in which the lives and deaths of private individuals directly reveal economic laws.]

In a text by the German playwright himself, transcribed below, we will see that art would have the duty to evoke in the individual the sense of collectivity, breaking barriers of the social roles. For his aesthetics, Brecht (2009) understands that the sense of community and society is fundamental in the great social transformations as shown in the following excerpt:

*When the dominators will speak
the dominated will speak as well.
Who dares to say never?
On whom depends the continuation of this domination?
On whom does its destruction depend?
Equally on us.
The fallen should rise!
The lost ones should fight!
Those who recognizes the situation, how can they shut up?
The today losers will be tomorrow winners.
And the "today" will be born from the "never".*

In response to the engaged movements, in the 1980s, a number of artists proposed the resumption of ideas of WILDE (2010), for whom art should be useless. We can resume the preface fragment of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first published in London in 1890:

"No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.

No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.

*From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician.
From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.*

All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.

When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself.

*We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it.
The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.*

All art is quite useless."

When two postures clash, it is normal for them to coexist for a while. While Luiz Mott saw in the theater a transformative space; the *We Were Gay* show's creative team chose to make an entertainment show, a cultural product. These two perceptions of the phenomenon of the arts are antagonistic, but they reside concomitantly in the memorial framework of every western man.

In a plural world, it is necessary to adjust stances and morals that are no longer continuous to become contiguous. That is, they cease to be one thing, to become various things that complement each other. Thus, a blockbuster movie cannot be required to have the aesthetic qualities and experimentalism of an art movie; likewise, one cannot demand from a copyrighted authorial movie the hallucinating rhythm of a Hollywood work. Memory alters perception and creates the contexts in which moral values can exist.

In short, the evocation of discourses that are residual in the memory are founding elements of our reading of new world events.

To see morals as a historical product in cognition:

One of the aspects that bother Luiz Mott most in his criticism of the show *We Were Gay*, is that no one goes out of a heteronormative marriage to become a drag queen or any kind of transgender. He wanted to see gay masculinity translated on stage to match his activism by rescuing icons like the *The Village People* group. For him, this would translate into maintaining a preconception, stipulated by current morals, that stigmatizes gays as effeminate beings.

Far from wanting to deconstruct the criticism, our role here is limited to showing how memory modulates morals and conditions the cognition. In this sense, there are several analyzes from the historiographical point of view on transsexuality, which is the script of the LGBT groups agenda; to analyze the inconsistencies between speech acts and ideology in the criticism of Luiz Mott, who is our object of study at this point of our reflections.

It is common sense since modernity that we live only in imaged universes created by us from our interpretations of the social conventions we receive and that these images are influenced by our repertoires.

We are interested in evoking how we use memory and morals to evoke and build such conceptual castles. Morals should be understood as a set of value-conduct symbols that shape our worldview and stipulate what is right and what is wrong.

First, it must be established that the preconception is rooted in every human being in the same society. When it is criticized that it is offensive to think of gays as effeminate; an attempt is made to include this group in the status quo morals. But this is fantasy. Such a displacement, by the way, violates the very emphasis of diversity that LGBT movements want so much to defend.

The biggest proof that we select memory to try to fit in with morals is the first transsexual, Lili Elbe. The Dane was born in the body of a man. She married a woman and achieved success as a painter. Upon discovering herself a woman, she dissolved the marriage and even abandoned her craft as an artist because she believed it was a remnant of her existence outside her body. She was the first transsexual to perform the sex change operation. The first case of transsexual was a married man who left everything to become a woman. Other similar cases followed, the most notorious case is Caitlyn Jenner's, who had won the 1976 Montreal Olympics and who was Kim Kardashian's stepfather on the reality show. *Keeping up with the Kardashians* before her transition.

It is obvious that Mott knew Lili Elbe's story. Even the choice of the name Alice would have been inspired by this character. Caitlyn Jenner's case happened after the review. But even in speeches that try to break the dominant morals, it still manifests itself.

3. THE DANCE OF MEANINGS

Let's start with a question: What is a name? Is it the name that makes the thing, as mystics and self-help books preach? Or is it the thing that makes the name? Who comes first: the fact or the perception of the fact? These questions of world perception (which were so much discussed by philosophers) now take shape in our discussion. Since the 1990s, the concern with being politically correct has always been allied with the question of one's own identity. If one understands that the word makes the perception of the world; then the word makes the very world that the individual knows. In recent years, the radicalization of this movement has raised a number of criticisms. Excesses were committed in the name of a "more humanized" vocabulary while intolerance remained unchanged and waves of aggression and violence continued to occur to less privileged segments.

As it turns out, the subcultures created sub-readings about the cultural clippings of languages, expanding the diversity of meanings. Aristotle (1959) can be used to better understand this process.

From the Aristotelian point of view, the emotional appeal (Pathos) can be achieved through three processes:

- by a metaphor or a narration (hook);
- by passion moved by the interlocutor in the speech performance;
- by personal anecdote.

The first procedure is what interests us, and it is the only one we will use throughout this text. Every argument is narrative. Who tells the best story wins the discussion. The choice of facts, the way in which their causes and effects are linked, the narrator's point of view, and the degree of affective involvement of the author are resources we use to build the evidence for our arguments. Unlike what many writing teachers teach, argumentative dissertation is only effective if it links facts to opinions, which must be manipulated, narrated, exposed. But the big problem is that the choices are delimited by cultural possibilities, given the symbolic nature⁵ of human signs. Thus, the choice in postmodern times must operate on two strategic levels: from

the standpoint of the universal audience (mastery of the grammar standard), and from the point of view of the segments (mastery of localized linguistic use). Studies from a synchronic perspective of language demand even more from their scholars than a mere description of procedures.

The role of narrative, therefore, in our most prosaic conversations or in our academic and nonacademic texts - the aim of which is always to convince someone of some idea - is fundamental. To this end, narrations must use social constructions impregnated with the terms that we use.

4. FOR AN ARCHEOLOGY OF WORDS

If the arguments are indeed based on narrativity, it must be remembered that the words that constitute them also are. The terms are endowed with a story of their own that shape and are shaped by culture.

There are lexemes that undergo true transformations of meaning. This is the case with jargon and slang. These types of expressions serve two purposes:

- language economy;
- strengthening of identity processes.

If it is through language that one promotes inclusion, it is also through it that one performs the exclusion. For instance, any New Yorker, hearing the verb 'to schlep', will understand it as

5 Symbolic: social construction of values and meanings.

carrying something. It is an appropriation of the Yiddish culture, the foundation for the cultural identity of the Capital of the World. Lexical choices reveal much more than mere aesthetic tastes. It has a diachronic perspective. At the same time, such a lexical choice forges a kind of wall in which only equals recognize each other. Nevertheless, a Californian may have difficulty understanding a New Yorker with its different expressions imported from Jewish culture. Consequently, a boundary is delimited that excludes those who are not local.

This does not happen geographically only, but also sociologically. For an unaware American native-speaker, the expression *Party and Play* can mean partying and playing. For a member of the gay community, the PNP acronym refers to sex using additives. It is interesting to see that in the United Kingdom the use of the terminology *Chemsex* for that same concept was chosen. In these two ways of expressing oneself, we can see a variety of narrative aspects. While the American form sounds naive and tries to dispel the reprehensible practice by using childish terms, the materialization of the England's expression promotes, in the enunciation, a certain sense of violence. The most interesting thing to note is that coding, while uniting community members, sets them apart from others who do not speak their dialect.

What can be seen in this linguistic example is how globalization is becoming non-globalized because the search for identity causes universalization to be deconstructed. By deglobalization is meant the process in which local identities try to reaffirm themselves through coded expressions to reassert their existence in a wide world, in a vast world.

Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the narrative of the words themselves and to respect what Professor Antonio Suarez Abreu⁶ proposes as an embodiment of the Latencies Theories. Experiences with the world and with language make the terms create an affinity or an aversion to each other. Like every evolving being, living languages also incorporate and rule out probabilities of linguistic use from phenomena experienced by the societies that use them.

In a society marked by globalization and deglobalization, terms assume a variety of narratives for themselves. There is the use of terms from the global, universal point of view. But there is, also, compartmentalized and shared use in specific situations.

In the case at hand, it is necessary to question whether there was appropriation of subcultures in the show. An important piece of information should be exposed: 75% of the creative team was either gay or lesbian. Therefore, strictly speaking, there were bases to defend the "place of speech". However, as the show was intended for the general audience, this aspect was totally ignored. A new category was then inaugurated to talk about the appropriation of subculture that I would call a "place of listening". The classification of discourse as gay or heteronormative is no longer in the discourse itself, but in the relationship between the subjects of the interaction. The audience to which the text is intended will also be used as a criterion to validate or invalidate it. This is complicated because in all communication, signs are resignified and encrypted, and what dialogues with one group does not necessarily dialogue with another. The diversity of discourse, therefore, becomes overwhelmed by its own plural nature.

⁶ An idea disclosed during Professor Antonio Suarez Abreu's class in his GEPELIC study groups in May 2018.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Since the show was premiered in 2013, much has changed. Six years away, I allow myself to make a critical analysis of everything that has happened. At the time, reading the criticisms of activists like Luiz Mott's, I understood what was criticized, but I couldn't understand the broader aspect of the criticism. Now, I understand and agree with some statements of the time.

Imperative and hypothetical codes will always be in tension in the discourses of postmodernity. Especially when the agenda involves the pluralism of the way we exist in a world where rules are liquid.

The urgent need to assert a plural identity in the process of globalization gives the false impression that everything seems to be normalized. At the time, the identity appeals seemed to me mere radicalisms and screams of teenagers who still did not know exactly what they wanted. I was wrong. With the accentuation of the deglobalization promoted by groups that call themselves neoliberals, but do not know the liberal rules of the market in the least; the intolerant voice rose again, and it was clear that the struggle for acceptance of diversity and plurality is still far from over. Globalization never really materialized as I believed it had.

We have to find the balance so that the passions do not get out of hand through the catharsis that the speeches offer us. We must be able to distinguish the past from the present, but without ignoring the history that constitutes us, that oppresses us and that elevates us.

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