

The emergence of the Gaze: Mindfulness and Self-Cultivation Practices (Intertwining Theatre and Education)

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ABSTRACT

Amongst the motivating factors behind this paper it is important to point out the urgent necessity of transforming and expanding the notion of education in Brazil, and this paper is aimed at providing initial thoughts on this matter. In order to do so, education is not seen here in isolation but through its fundamental connection to art, mainly to theatre. Once related, these fields are able to enhance each other, but in order for this to happen a sort of hidden layer has to be valued and strengthened. This would take the form of the role played by mindfulness and self-cultivation: that of generating a vital layer in which ethics, perception and attention are bridged profoundly. However, the starting point for these processes cannot be overlooked, and as such this paper attempts to reflect upon a necessary attitude, a suspension of judgement, which allows us, again and again, to look at the emergence of the gaze.

Keywords: mindfulness, self-cultivation, Theatre and Education, The Gaze

Creating a Latent Space

On the afternoon of October 10, 2017, at 15:54, I sit down in front of my laptop, I look at the virtual white page, in silence. Before pressing any key, I try to discover the act of writing as an opportunity, the opportunity to look at phenomena, processes and questions in a particular way. Again I pass my eyes over what, generally, I call "I". A need arises, to go beyond the transmission of knowledge supposedly already constructed. I think it is important to take several steps backwards, to create conditions that allow me to be astonished or surprised by what I write, I am searching for a displacement that will put me in a denatured territory.

So, instead of directly addressing the relationship between theatre and education, I will begin by talking about orchids. To grow orchids it is necessary to know the species, their habitat of origin and natural needs. Orchids can be grown in vases, hanging plant pots of coconut fiber, wood, earth or stone. They can bloom once a year. Among the factors that influence their growth are water, natural or artificial light, ambient temperature, ventilation and fertilization, the latter involving nutrition as well as reproduction. This information is extremely useful for the cultivation of orchids, but it also masks other invisible processes that come into play.

The perception of the degree of humidity, the perception of the exact moment in which to change the container, knowing when the fertilizer needs to be changed, are some of those factors. There are also more delicate factors, such as the relationship between the plant and the gardener, the boundaries of which can seem to disappear in certain dynamics.

Numerous experiences, such as the cultivation of orchids, reveal multiple processes which occur simultaneously. In this way, complexities that emerge dynamically can be recognized. The thirst for knowledge reduces this complexity. Experiences and phenomena are reduced to something that looks like a model. I remember Thomas Kuhn alerting us about laboratory experiments. What the teacher usually does in laboratorial situations is to guide the students to see what she wants them to see. Many things go unacknowledged in a reaction between chemical substances, in a similar way to what occurs with orchid growth. Going back again and challenging my assumptions, it is possible to say that many things may be overlooked if I do not awaken my gaze.

Vision not only explores the sense of sight, it functions also as a catalyst that articulates touch, sensation, cognition, thought and action. However, the gaze is often seen as an agent of excavation that disturbs our sense of causality. It is not the process of reducing what is at first strange to the familiar. It can help to preserve the conditions for astonishment to occur. As such, the gaze can function as a scalpel that dissects the material and immaterial dimensions of experiences. The gaze acts as the materialization of theatre itself.

Thus, an almost inevitable question arises: can these considerations on the gaze be associated with the concept of *theatron*, as elaborated in Ancient Greece, that is, *theatron* as the place from which one perceives oneself? As we know, perceptual processes can be determined by a variety of psychological, social and cultural factors. Irrespective of the different and varied possibilities of answering this

question, the point that must be recognized and highlighted here is not the existence of the theatre, but the existence of many theatres, each of them permeated by a perceptual horizon, each of them moved by the desire and necessity of generating a certain type of experience.

Going back once more: What kind of theatre are we talking about? What notion of theatre are we referring to? In fact, the experience the Malayerba Group seeks to generate is different from the kind of experience the Yuyachkani group attempts to create, which is once again very different to the experiences that emerge from the works of Peter Brook, Bob Wilson, or Jan Fabre. What seems to allow a connection between these artists and groups is the idea of the theatre show. However, when examined more accurately, it is possible to recognize that the assumptions which permeate such artistic manifestations can contrast deeply.

Another step back. The concept of theatre is a construction. The use of the term theatre as a category becomes fragile, for example, when we encounter manifestations of different cultures, such as Japanese Noh, Balinese Topeng or Hindu Kathakali. The use of the term theatre in these cases is a consequence, mainly, of projections of European and American artists and critics who reduced what is foreign to what is known. In fact, if on the one hand those Asiatic manifestations are composed of elaborate aesthetic layers, on the other they serve specific functions which are, often, not artistic in the first place. As a result, such manifestations are not in tune, in many ways, with the assumptions that permeate Western artworks.

Other questions arise from the notion of theatre beyond the field of performing arts: How to designate Sufi practices as dance? Or the original Tarantella as dance? Would it be appropriate to name spiritual practices from different cultures as performance art? These questions, rather than provoking controversy, seek to draw attention to the process of constructing the gaze, since they are considered here as a deep connection between theatre/performing arts and education.

Education. Another step back. What concept of education are we talking about? If we think of the terms *educare* or *educere*, which give rise to the word education, they point to processes that create conditions for experiences, perceptions and formulations to appear. However, in examining different educational contexts in Brazil, for example, educating is often presented as a means of standardization and control, as well as of transference of sanitized information, imposing repetitive obligations and tasks, exploring and encouraging the application of utilitarian thought. With rare exceptions, which usually occur in private schools accessible to few privileged people, other approaches to education, such as those elaborated by Paulo Freire, Anisio Teixeira, John Dewey, or Edgar Morin, among many others, largely remain in the realm of the unknown or irrelevant.

At this point a question emerges: If the concepts of theatre and education are social, cultural and political constructions, what path could be followed in order to turn the encounter between these two territories into a potentially transformative phenomenon? There are probably many ways. Here a possibility will be proposed, which takes the notion of "cultivation" as its central focus.

Self-Cultivation Practices: Attention, Perception, Ethics

From our orchids, cultivation can be considered as a process that not only has stages, but different layers that run through a construction of knowledge and which manifests itself in the processuality of a direct relationship between the plant and the cultivator. Thus, there is a sort of perceptual stoning that refines the contact between the cultivator and the plant, in this case, the orchid.

A new question arises: Could the lapidation of perceptual processes permeate both artistic/theatrical and educational practices? In order to reflect upon this question, I will examine, albeit briefly, some aspects related to what I have called perceptive lapidation, amongst them attention. In fact, it is possible to recognize the critical role played by attention in this case, and in this sense, some definitions of this aspect will guide that analysis. Therefore, first of all I will approach attention by referring to the notion of Flow as proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

Flow is a term he chose to define what hundreds of people had felt when they were absolutely immersed in what they were doing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). With the research of Csikszentmihalyi, it is possible to consider that flow can penetrate many human activities, from the private to the public sphere, from free time for sex to religious practices. In his studies, he reveals that flow emerges from autotelic activities. As Csikszentmihalyi explains, the term "autotelic" comes from the Greek words *auto* (related to self), and *telos* (objective, goal), and refers to an independent, self-sufficient activity: "the activity in that case is not executed with the expectation of benefiting from it in the future, but simply because doing so is rewarding" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 178).

In other words, the person who feels such flow in the action she performs will take that as her only goal, because she was totally absorbed by the action or by the event. However, for an activity to be autotelic, a large amount of attention - defined by Csikszentmihalyi as psychic energy - needs to be activated and put into practice.

In addition, according to Csikszentmihalyi's view of attention it is important to acknowledge its fundamental connection to the state of absorption, since, through it, human abilities or potentialities can expand. When we explore the attention contained in flow, new perceptions of reality can be experienced in that process, fostering creative findings on many levels, according to him.

Another point of focus relevant to attention relates to the idea of "Inventive cognition" (Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2003). Here, attention is understood as a competence that must be built. As we know, problems associated with attention occur in schools, clinics, work environments and in family contexts. The diagnosis of ADHD - Attention Deficit Disorder and Hyperactivity - is increasingly frequent. Its symptoms are: low performance in tasks, difficulty in following rules and developing long-term projects (this is associated with hyperactivity and impulsivity).

In this respect, inventive cognition's approach proposes an enhancement of the concept of attention, going beyond the act of taking care of the tasks and seeking information. The problem of attention is replaced, in this approach, by the problem of learning attention.

There are many contributions related to learning attention. Henri Bergson, for example, in pointing out the relation between attention and duration, which generates a kind of additional attention, recognizes a particular quality that differs from the attention explored in practical life (Bergson, 1934/1962). Attention in practical life is utilitarian and oriented to the ordinary activities of daily life whereas a characteristic of additional attention is an immersion in the duration. According to Bergson, this can be found, above all, in artistic as well as in philosophical practices (Bergson, 1934/1962).

Depraz, Varela and Vermersch (2002; 2003) also contribute in an original way to the study of attention based on the concept of "becoming-conscious", which is seen as an act of making explicit, clear and intuitive something that we already bring with us in a pre-reflective, opaque and affective mode. The intention is to examine the human experience in its processual activity, as practice, highlighting its mutable and fluid quality. The inspiration for Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, in turn, is the method of *epoché* - understood as suspension of judgment - formulated by Edmund Husserl and developed by Merleau-Ponty. This method includes the suspension of the attitude of making judgments about the world. By proposing this as a concrete method, the authors elaborated a phenomenological practice that involves three gestures or acts: suspension, redirection and letting go. The suspension of the cognitive attitude of judgment may emerge from a special event, which interrupts the habitual cognitive flow. One of the most interesting examples they presented is the notion of aesthetic surprise. Art can, in their view, mobilize and develop, in learning, an attentive attitude that is both concentrated and open. It concerns the learning of sensitivity.

At this point, it will be useful to refer to my direct experience with three actors who worked between 2004 and 2006 in Paris with the English director Peter Brook. These experiences, partially accounted for in *The Kinetics of the Invisible* (Bonfitto, 2009, 2016), reveal a deep relationship between perception, intentionality and attention. In tune with the practices of suspension of judgement pointed out by Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, Brook, along with his actors, explored what we could call "theatrical *epoché*".

A first aspect is noteworthy. Usually similarity is the logic governing the formation of theater groups around the world. In Brook's case, the logic was that of intensification of otherness, that is, he chose to aggregate highly diverse perceptions and sensibilities. Among the implications that emerge from that decision, it can be pointed out that, by working with actors from different cultures, he created a situation in which they had to seek deeper levels of connection with one another for some possible relationship to emerge. It was not possible for them to use their own clichés, or their own jokes, during improvisations, for instance. As a consequence of this process characterised by difference, creative frictions were explored from a kind of attention that was produced from intentions with 's' – *intensions* – rather than intentions. *Intensions* are not guided by goals that are established *a priori*, but by a state of 'present continuous' (Dennett: 2008, 20-27)¹. Here, attention is oriented to the present moment as a generative device that I term "sparks of life."

If we consider the three cases mentioned above, some important observations can be made. In all of them attention is considered as a fundamental aspect of perceptual stoning or lapidation. The notions of fluidity, inventive cognition and theatrical *epoché* distill perceptual processes through transformative practices at various levels. But in order to capture the specificity involved in these processes it is necessary to recognize that perception and attention are part of a triad, which is completed by the inclusion of ethics as an aspect of equal importance to the previous ones. Here these aspects are seen as inseparable.

In other words, for the lapidation of certain perceptual processes to take place, it is necessary to explore a certain kind of attention which can be activated only if a specific attitude is generated in the participants of such processes. This attitude involves searching for experiences that bring not only an accumulation of information, or applicable techniques, but, at the same time, also a perceptual enhancement, a personal transformation of these participants.

The notion of self-cultivation proposed in this paper emerges from the triad referred to above, in which perceptual lapidation, attention and ethics are deeply interrelated.

At this point another loop must be performed in this spiralized reflection. How can cultivation practices function as a connection between art/theater and education? Self-cultivation practices should not be viewed in isolation, but as procedures related to the broad field of creative processes, a fact which produces an important implication, already indicated by Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Morin, among others: the arts in general and the performing arts in particular can enhance the horizon of educational practices since the arts can strengthen educational practices as creative practices, rather than being limited to a transmission of information, and can stimulate the exploration of perceptual experiences that lead to personal and ethical transformations in all those involved.

Cherishing a Hidden Layer

This reflection is an invitation to explore self-cultivation practices. Fluidity, inventive cognition and *epoché* or suspension of judgment are seen here as generators of perceptual expansion that emerge from the exploration of attention on different levels, processes which can lead, in turn, to a personal transformation of the participants of these practices. When explored in artistic fields, in this case theatre, they can deeply enhance the educational horizon provided that they are supported by practices of self-cultivation.

Self-cultivation is perceived here through practices that are activated by the triad composed of three interrelated aspects: perceptual lapidation – attention – ethics. As such, practices of self-cultivation are proposed here as practices of mindfulness, since such practices intend to develop awareness and consciousness in a way that encompasses perceptual expansion and personal transformation. Self-cultivation is an opening up towards difference, towards otherness and towards collective consciousness.

A further question concludes this reflection. Can mindfulness, as explored through practices of self-cultivation, provide a clearer perception of aspects that seem to weaken the human condition, such as ethical and political degeneration, the impoverishment of education and the devaluation of the arts?

Notes

1. The notion of intension is examined by Daniel C. Dennett in *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness*.

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