

Between sacred and profane

Irene Ballesteros Alcáin

University Complutense of Madrid, Spain

Abstract

This paper analyses how rituals and symbols have been used as an element in the performatic creation. Nowadays, old rituals have evolved, moving on from the sacred to the profane, and losing large part of their ancestral meaning. Globalisation and mass media have played an important role in this process, modifying the situation of the people who participates in the rites and depriving them from their old meaning to transform them in a mere spectacle. We propose two examples: Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" and Viennese Actionism, which takes elements from the latter. Alongside them we make a reference to other performatic manifestations that likewise make use of rituals and symbols to create a new and groundbreaking manifestation.

Keywords: Symbols, ritual, theatre, Artaud, Nitsch.

Entre lo sagrado y lo profano

Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo los rituales y símbolos se han utilizado como elemento en la creación performática. Hoy en día, los antiguos rituales han evolucionado, pasando de lo sagrado a lo profano, perdiendo gran parte de su significado ancestral. La globalización y los medios de comunicación han jugado un papel importante en este proceso, modificando la situación de las personas que participan en los ritos y privándolas de su antiguo significado para transformarlas en un mero espectáculo. Proponemos dos ejemplos: el "Teatro de la crueldad" de Antonin Artaud y el accionismo vienés, que toma elementos de este último. Junto a ellos hacemos referencia a otras manifestaciones performáticas que igualmente hacen uso de rituales y símbolos para crear una manifestación nueva y rompedora.

Palabras clave: Símbolos, ritual, teatro, Artaud, Nitsch.

Introduction

Ritual and symbols have, traditionally, taken an important part in society. They have also been really significant for art in all its fields. Rituals are an exhibition of faith, taking place in a particular space and with a particular time, order, sounds, and gestures. In rituals, the world stops during the time they take. They are used for the atonement of sins, but also as a way of transition of the individual through the different stages of life. Symbols are objects that contain a sacred and powerful meaning for the faithful. Through this paper, I will try to see how to use rituals and symbols in a performative environment in the context of a secularised and globalised society. With this objective in mind, I will present significant examples starting from Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, and following with Viennese Actionism and other manifestation of ritual in the performatic arts.

Rituals and secularisation: Artaud and the Viennese Actionism

The reasons why I started to investigate this topic are various. But, probably, the most important one is how the secularisation that has happened during the last decades, joined to globalisation, have transformed rituals and symbols in another form of product of consume. I, who come from a religious country and from a city in which religion and tradition are relevant, have noticed these effects in almost every field. From tourists who attend to those religious events as an exotic experience far away from any spiritual activity, to reality TV shows which transform into a contest the training to become a nun, we are living a moment in which there is a trivialization of the religious components, such as rituals and symbols, and transforming them in a product of consume used as a lure to attract the seeking of experience.

I started to realise the similarities between rituals and theatre, (and performatic arts in general), from the facts that the latter takes place in a particular space, and that the spectators are participating in an act that has nothing to do with daily life. Social dramas have a lot to do with rituals, and in particular, with “life-crisis” rituals (Turner, 1982, p. 24). In them there is “a dramatic structure, a plot, frequently involving an act of sacrifice or self-sacrifice, which energizes and gives motional colouring to the interdependent communicative codes which express in manifold way the meaning inherent in the dramatic leitmotiv” (Turner, 1982, p. 81). Also, there is the idea of using the light, the movement, and most importantly, the sound, as a way of disturbing and creating adizziness in the spectator, as a way of shocking him.

The main conceptual body is ritual and symbols: not by themselves, but how we perceive them in our society. We live in a secular world. In our nowadays cultures, religion has been put to a side in order to embrace a multicultural, globalised, and democratised world. Even though for Western countries the Jewish-Christian ethos was really present in the conformation of the social values, we just see them as a religious leftover (Rodríguez Fouz, 2012). Furthermore, we see them as a universal way of understanding the world. In this secular society, the non-religious rituals impose themselves to the religious ones, so the conventions and the earthly culture become the rituals in around which the society behaves.

The way to secularisation was not continuous, and moved forward and backwards until it was settled. Hans Joas establishes three different waves of secularisation, being the last one between 1969 and 1973 (Joas, 2012, p. 192). Economic, social, and political changes made this secularisation almost unstoppable in Western countries. With this, the importance of symbols and rituals will rest on personal beliefs. Different religious rituals and symbols will start to coexist. The aim of secularisation from the State makes these symbols to remain as a memorial of past against present (Joas, 2012, p. 188). Religious festivals start to be kept as a fiesta, but the religious content moves backwards and is regarded as a tradition, both for the will of the people who still believes in these rituals, and for the sake of tourism. The phenomenon of globalisation is really important. From it, I will explain two factors that I consider the most determining: mass media and tourism.

Mass media have not only changed our vision of the world, but also how we face it. Television and internet have transformed the things we see and how we see them. We can have access to different cultural manifestations, and, in so many cases, we cohabit different socio-cultural places (Beck, 1998). The popularisation of media recorders like video cameras and smartphones has made it easier the disclosure of different cultural manifestations. Documentaries started this tendency that maybe now has reached its highest exponent, as anyone anywhere can share a video of a ritual, or a photo of a symbol may be spread with quite a superficial explanation. Catherine Bell stated that television flattened the dimension of the ritual, transforming it into a “mere spectacle” (1997, p. 243). This happens not only because the ritual “can be repeated endlessly or the participant multiplied without limit” (Bell, 1997, p.

243), but also because it takes away part of the scent, part of the soul of it. Situation in rituals is very important, you have to live it. The simulacra which the mass media produce reduce the ritual to something exotic, - even to the level of a film -, for you to consume and experiment. It can even be trivialised the ritual of the sacred. From the post-production work, to the programmes in which they transform into a reality show the path of becoming a nun, little by little the mass media rip away the sacred feeling to focus in the spectacle.

Tourism is other important factor. Modern tourism is massive, ordered, and focused in some aspects. The tourism industry tries to sell you authenticity, new experiences. In some countries, rituals and other sacred festivities are a reclaim for tourists. In these cases, it is shown one of the biggest paradoxes: the non-believers get mixed up with the believers. The packaging of sacred symbols and activities as attractions is just a reflection of the trying of some countries of "redefining their cultural heritage in ways that attempt to meet external demands" (Bell, 1997, p. 249). These sacred places, rituals, and symbols, are more or less known by the tourists. They just attend them to see the spectacle, but not moved by a religious feeling. This phenomenon, coming from a more globalised culture each decade and helped by mass media, make that little by little the religious feeling of the ritual disappear in favour of a secularised festival in which the sacred symbols just become a reminiscence of past times. As Bauman stated the "traditional metaphors have lost, (or are rapidly losing), a good part of its original cognitive capacity; and this is due to the fact that the phenomena they refer to occupy an increasingly reduced and marginal place in the contemporary experience" (2001, p. 159) But this problem is not original from the second half of the 20th century. Writers, philosophers and artists have faced this topic since the beginning of modernity. For that reason, we will look back to the period between wars into Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

Theatre of Cruelty was a movement in which the word was less important than the action, the sound, the movement, and the scenographical components. Through it, Artaud tried to make the audience feel the violence and convulsion of the period he lived in. This movement appeared after the First World War, when the horrors of this conflict were still alive and the political and social situation was leading to the Second World War. We have to understand this violence not only as a physical one, but as something that disturbs the mind and the soul. Artaud felt inspired by pagan cultures and Pre-Columbian religions. Artaud, who pointed out towards a civilisation that had lost its roots, opposed to a society based in concepts and not in "the earth". Therefore, he tried to transform himself in sort of a shaman who aimed to heal the society by, instead of treating the wounds, making them more visible. So, we can say that Artaud's work can be considered as a *rite de passage*. The use of decontextualized religious symbols, mostly Christian, in his theatrical and cinematographic work, was not understood during his period, but it acquires a new meaning now as a critique towards a cold and individualised society and a direct, visceral way to highlight the faults in our society.

I explain this because even though some authors have dismissed the (direct or indirect) influence of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (Ursprung, 1991) on the Viennese Actionism due to lack of realism "in the sense of actually slaughtering live animals or endangering the health of the participants" (Ursprung, 1991, p. 146), I follow the idea of Gorsen of re-appropriation of the body and the symbol in the Viennese Actionism (as quoted in Ursprung, 1991). For instance, we have to take into account that Artaud did not only focus on theatre play-writing, but also in the new art of cinematography, with a film called *La coquille et le clergyman* ("The Seashell and the Clergyman") (1927). Also, there is something mystic about not seeing the action while it takes place: as we all know, part of the religious ritual is its obscure, mystic proceedings, which put a dense veil between the faithful and the religious leader. Anyway, the collective performance *Art and Revolution* in Vienna in 1968 can be seen as "the climax and end-point" (Ursprung, 1991) of this performance group, as after it all of its members followed different paths. Al-

though in this performance there is no use of animals or specific religious symbols, by the usage of excrement, blood, urine and other humane fluids as well as self-mutilation, they violated the “accepted cultural borderlines” (Ursprung, 1991). This action finalised the artists’ efforts of taking authorship and differentiate themselves in the elitist world of art.

As mentioned above, the group of Viennese Actionism parted separated ways after the implications of the *Art and Revolution* performance. Nitsch, even though he did not participate in the cited action, bought the castle in Prinzenhof where he started his six-day *Orgien Mysterien Theater*, which he had planned since the late 1950s. Up to our days, he still is working in its perfection. This annual gathering in his castle summons both followers of the artist and actors who play the different parts in the ritualistic sceneries staged. Nitsch himself does not participate actively, but acts as a shaman who directs all the action and the schedule. During the six days the performance lasts, actors and attendants live in a sort of commune with shared meals and tight timetables. The blood, slaughtered animals and bodies driven towards the physical and mental exhaustion defines the “blood orgy” (Richman, 2008, p. 75), accompanied with deafening music that this event represents. All five senses are stimulated to the point of exhaustion, and the horror of the visceral images neatly staged collide with the *fiesta* environment and fanfare music. Aesthetic is really important in Nitsch work as “aesthetic [...] is a concentration of experience which results in the experience of a total reality, even if, before and after the experience, we exist in and as different fragments of this totality” (Hegyí, 2008, p. 11). There is no word script, for the action, the smell and the well-studied ambient music must prevail over the word.

“The primal scream” (Romberg, 2008, p. 30) which involves Nitsch’s work comes from a culturally and architectonically devastated Europe after the Second World War. The inspiration the Viennese Actionism group took from “ancient mythology, Catholicism, iconoclasm, psychoanalysis, national identity, the trauma of “Austro-fascism” during the Second World War” (Ursprung, 1991, p. 138) has continued in Nitsch’s actions. The social changes which occurred after the war and the political repression in the continent during the first part of the second half of the century is vital to understand this artist’s production. Through the symbol of the crucifixion, the slaughtering of animals and the mimic of the Catholic processions in an undoubtedly sacrilegious way he does not only draw the complexities of modernity, and its need of a connection to the inner core of reality, but also the “ludicrous game between death and life” (Romberg, 2008, p. 31). The *Orgien Mysterien Theater* is, more than an initiation rite (Levy, 2008, p. 3), a *rite de passage*. It transforms all the participants, and gives them a “sort of redemption [...] about our sheer mortality” (Romberg, 2008, p. 31). Modernity involves risk as Beck said (1998) and the uncertainty of the future follows us in all the aspects of our life. This “redemption” through the ritual-like actions and the direct exposure to death allows the participants to make peace with the unsure future in contraposition with the immutability of nature using the Judaeo-Christian tradition in a decontextualised way.

The use of the ritual and the collective has been important in the distinction between the happenings and the performance from the United States and the European actionism. *L’art pour l’art* finds in the Viennese Actionism and Nitsch its antithesis (Ursprung, 1999, p. 145) the rough, raw, cruel festival elevated to the category of art through the epitome of the aesthetical planning. The before mentioned lack of verbal communication enhance the feeling and the sensory stimulus, and, this way, compounds a universal language.

Conclusion

There are other examples of the use of sacred symbols and rituals in the performing arts. For example, the French artist Orlan and the depiction of herself as a sadomasochist Virgin Mary or nun, or the *Maha-*

bharata by Peter Brook which was not exempted of polemic and accusations of cultural appropriation. It is important to point out that this analysis have been made from a contemporary, secular, European point of view. It is difficult to stablish what is polemic or bold and what is outright disrespectful. In my opinion, this distinction should only apply to the individual and not the collective. Either way, the subject of how we perceive the decontextualisation of symbols and rituals is a topic that may be interesting in the longer run, as it opens several debates, both theoretically and in practice, about culture, religion, the objectification of faith, the aesthetical repercussions and how they can be used in the diverse art forms.

References

- Artaud, A. (1978). *El teatro y su doble*. Barcelona, España: Ed. Edhasa.
- Bauman, Z. (2001). *La modernidad y sus descontentos*. Madrid: Akal.
- Beck, U. (1998). *La sociedad del riesgo*. Madrid: Ed. Paidós.
- Bell, C. (1997). *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.
- Bell, C. (1992). *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.
- Bermel, A. (1997). *Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty*. London-New York: Ed. Bloomsbury.
- Cabañas, K.M. (2012). *Espectros de Artaud*. Madrid: Ed. Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía.
- Cazeneuve, J. (1971). *Sociología del rito*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Amorrortu.
- Dumoulié, C. (1996). *Nietzsche y Artaud. Por una ética de la crueldad*. México, Siglo XXI.
- Fernández Gonzalo, J. (2011). El devenir artaudiano. Lectura de Deleuze sobre Artaud. *A parte rei: revista de Filosofía* 75, 1-15.
- Goffman, E. (1970). *Ritual de la interacción*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Tiempo Contemporáneo.
- González Alcantud, J.A. (1989). *El exotismo en las vanguardias artístico-literarias*. Barcelona: Ed. Anthropos.
- Hughes-Freeland, F., Crain, M.M. (1998). *Recasting Ritual. Performance, Media, Identity*. London-New York: Ed. Routledge.
- Jones, A., Stephenson, A.(eds.)(1999). *Performing the body/Performing the test*. London-New York: Ed. Routledge.
- Juanes, J. (2005). Artaud y el teatro de la crueldad. *Assaig de teatre 48-49*, 189-206.
- Kemper, T.D. (2011). *Status, Power and Ritual Interaction: A Relational Reading of Durkheim, Goffman and Collins*. Burlington Vt.: Ed. Ashgate,
- Leach, E. (1978). *Cultura y comunicación. La lógica de la conexión de los símbolos*. México-Madrid: Ed. Siglo XXI.
- Leal Velasco, R. (2012). *Antonin Artaud, demente o visionario en Arte contemporáneo*. Diss. Universidad de Querétaro.
- Levy, A. (ed.). (2008). *Blood orgies. Hermann Nitsch in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania
- Mavridis, S. (2011). Roberto Arlt y el teatro de la crueldad: convergencias en la dramaturgia rioplatense. Diss. Universidad de Salamanca.
- Moore, S.F., Myerhoff, B.G. (eds.) (1997). *Secular Ritual*. Ed. Van Gorcum: Assen.
- Nichols, S. (1998). *Jung y el Tarot*. Barcelona: Ed. Kaidós.
- Pavis, P. (ed.)(1996). *The intercultural performance reader*. London-New York: Ed. Routledge.
- Sánchez de la Yncera, I., Rodríguez Fouz, M. (eds.)(2012). *Dialécticas de la Postsecularidad. Pluralismo y corrientes de secularización*. Barcelona: Ed. Anthropos.
- Sennet, R. (2011). *El declive del hombre público*. Barcelona: Ed. Anagrama.
- Solomon, D., Fan, R., Lo, R. (2012). *Ritual and the Moral Life. Reclaiming the Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: Ed. Springer.
- Turner, V. (1982). *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York:Ed. Performing Arts Journal Publications.
- Van Gennep, A. (1981). *Les rites de passage. Étude systématique des rites*. Paris: Ed. Picard.