

The butoh dance amidst the politics of fear

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Abstract

In this article we analyse the opposition between the fear of death and the fear of birth. The politics based on the fear of death implies the construction of a fiction presented and considered as a truth. This fictional truth is sewed within the bodies and generates a ghostly body. The ghost blocks the ongoing birth and therefore facilitates the extension of fear within the bodily tissues and towards the external space. Monsters appear as projection of forgotten body parts. Demons live at the edges of society, which reduces to a minimum the life of its subjects thanks to demoniacal threats. “Terrorist” is today’s word for demon. Continual birth is the last fight, waged by postmodern samurais that live and think the world as a butoh dance.

Keywords: Politics of fear – Birth – Dreambody – Terrorism – Butoh Dance

I. Hierarchy of fears

Faire ordre par la peur et faire hiérarchie par la mort.
Pascal Quignard, *Critique du jugement*

Searching for a human social organisation where fear does not prevail is, invariably, a pointless endeavour. Republican and democratic thinking is no exception to this rule. In his short story *Before the Law*, Kafka describes a scene in which a doorkeeper is confronted by a peasant who is willing to leave nature behind in order to live within the law. The doorkeeper of the law, when he realises that the peasant longs to step inside despite being prohibited from doing so, invites him to risk going in anyway. Even so, he gives prior warning of the presence, therein, of more doors watched over by even more imposing and threatening guards. Not even I, he assures the peasant, can bear to look at a third of them.

The origin of the law is inaccessible [1]. The guard manages to stop the peasant by using threatening speech, and, as the guard himself confesses, it is fear that keeps him in place. Law, by its absence, creates a hierarchy in humans, whose relationships are therefore woven with fear.

In Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, human beings gather to avert the possibility of a violent death. Not only the powerful can kill; a coalition of the weak can also put an end to the lives of those in power.

Death is a common threat to all. Humans understand, consequently, that they hold the advantage of being able to delegate their violent power to an institution that will therefore have the exclusive privilege of using such violence. According to Hobbes, it is the fear of death and its prevailing unpredictability in the natural state that compels human beings to join together in society. Our democratic institutions are heirs to the primacy given, in political theory, to the fear of death.

Those who represent the law, where essential justice is absent and inaccessible, always act according to a text that helps provide a fictional origin [2]. A Constitution, a Bible, a Declaration or a Magna Carta fills the void resulting from the lack of justice in the origin of political systems – they are nothing but violence crowned by fate, as Benjamin asserts somewhat crudely (1999, p. 31). This political fiction, in order to hold as political foundation, denies its own violent origins and covers up its own fictitious nature to present itself as the reality *nec plus ultra*. This fiction that Derrida (1994) sees in the foundations of law is not an artwork, but rather an armed god. When thinking critically about hierarchies, and the fear that helps congeal them together, it is imperative to understand which sacred value is the axiom for political institutions and the origins of law. Today, „to believe in life is the necessary condition for which power can dominate us [...] through fear“ (López Petit 2005, pp. 23, 90). The sanctity of life in biopolitics, as noted by Sloterdijk, Esposito or López Petit amongst others, is nothing more than a fable which conceals the centrality of death in political thought. There is a fear that precedes the fear of death, and recognising its primacy can but alter our political philosophy.

The mythological or sacred core, invoked by institutions to both justify their representatives' use of violence and unite their subjects into a terrified community, is presented as the real world. In the name of Life, or God, decisions are made as to who must die. However, the institutions' custom of invoking the truth, and the great lengths they go to in order to present their discourses as true, hides another fear that precedes the fear of death which underlies today's politics. „The real world fable is, from the beginning, a disguised representation of the fear of birth“ (Sloterdijk, 2006a, p. 84). To try and assimilate the fear of birth requires us, first, to look into what is concealed by the real world fable. Afterwards, we will consider the butoh dance, which acknowledges the axiomatic ontological prevalence of birth and, therefore, sees the primacy of the fear of death as political alienation.

II. The real world fable

Monsters, demons and ghosts exist. They live inside us and, sometimes, they win.
Luka Rocco Magnotta, on one of his Facebook pages

The expression used by Sloterdijk points to a paradox at work in our political organisation. The „real world fable“ is not a harmless choice of words. In this expression, “world” is joined by two opposites, “fable” and “real”. What Sloterdijk emphasises is that the real world is a fable. Here, we allow the paradox to work freely, letting us fluctuate from fable and fiction to truth and

matter and vice versa. The aim of this oscillation is not to assert the rights of one side over the violence of the other, but to open up a space where opposites are related and that in Sloterdijk's expression can bear the imperfect name "world". To inhabit this paradox and take advantage of this oscillation, we will use the butoh dance as a guiding thread.

Ghosts

Kafka feared that the growing popularity of correspondence would finish off life within human bodies. Writing letters, he said, feeds the ghosts. Written words nourish the non-living body. The telephone, television, Internet and smartphones have recently brought about an exponential development of the ghost realm (Han 2014, pp. 81-86). Kafka's ghost has invaded the body space, and it speaks in the first person.

Both language and the ghost are planted in the ear of the newborn. This is where body orthopedics begins, according to the real world fable sewn together by the human collective. Quignard (2005a, p. 100) speaks of *phonocaust*, the process by which good and evil, by the hand of the right pronunciation, can take over the body's tissues. This system, according to the word used by Quignard, takes seed in the temporomandibular joint via the ear. Thus, the constitution of the political subject has begun [3]. Anonymous hunger has been indexed to the conceptual categories that govern the language community: gradually, the birth cry mutates into the voice of conscience. Quignard (2005a, p. 92) writes, bluntly, that „communication is the eclipse of the blood of being.“ Whilst we communicate, the political subject (to the system) grows within the body, a subject that literally grabs hold of tissue, therefore hindering the constant dialogue between the body and gravity. This paying heed to the relationship between an individual body and some kind of soil constitutes the story of the butoh dance. The individual whose existence is made of words is held up, above the ground, to his native community's sky of ideas. The individual places the other in front of him. The butoh dance roots otherness in the bones, deep inside one's own structure. Reading, writing, thinking, hearing and uttering words increases the volume of the linguistic bubble that vibrates at the expense of body life. „Ancient languages manufactured ghostly bodies“ (Quignard 2005b, p. 147), boneless bodies, bodies with no skeleton, bodies that never die, according to technological and theological hopes. Sloterdijk (2003b, p. 411), in his Critique of Cynical Reason, remarks upon the appearance of fictitious spaces inside bodies: he writes that „shadowy hollows of un-lived life unfailingly open up in bodies.“ These shadowy hollows are themselves only a threat when an illusion of wholeness grows therein, a linguistic identity that denies its material substrate. As law depends on a fictitious origin to work in society, language covers up its bodily origin with a linguistic narration, a personal myth.

Being entangled in our opinions, judgements, ideas, theories, aspirations, resentments, entangled in a story whose own origin is dissipated, makes it impossible for us to escape the world of ideas. No word can free us from the domain of language. No word can help keep our feet on the ground a little longer. Derrida (1997) expresses the defeat of speaking beings as follows: „we have to find

a word that keeps its silence. A need for the impossible[...]“. Fiction and fantasy turn dire when they are blinded by their own fictitious nature. The I of language negates that there could possibly be a body that goes beyond it. A word that manages to keep silence would be a word permeable to the silence and to the body that precede language. To be born means to leave anteriority and to enter a world we cannot name. To be born, against Derrida’s forecast, is to stay silent, even when screaming. Language postulates itself as the source and, therefore, all the discourses about the real world deny birth and its ontological humility.

There are no words which can do justice to that which language leaves out. The butoh dance invoked against the politics of fear does not raise new ideas. „Dance is birth“ (Quignard 2013), and birth is an ancient process. The butoh dance cannot be defined in words, categorised according to the separation of the arts proper of our philosophical systems. There is a butoh below all the arts. All artistic production starts with, as Jean-Luc Nancy says, the translation into one or another form of an intimate affectation by a common reality. The butoh we put forward here produces nothing, but it studies and multiplies affectation, the art of letting oneself being affected. So far we have spoken of how the ghost, like a dark bubble, lives in the body and grows in relation to the attention and time an individual dedicates to his linguistic existence. To chart the history of butoh and draw a map of the contemporary scene would exceed the space taken up by this article. We shall discuss butoh just as Rhizome Lee teaches it in his school in the Himalayas, inspired, mainly, by Tatsumi Hijikata. Rhizome Lee does not oppose the body to the ghost, although speaking is forbidden within the walls of his school. Inspired in turn by Arnold Mindell, he instead develops the *dreambody*. To introduce this concept, we will talk about another type of ghost.

‘Phantom limb’ is the term used for the absent body part which can still provoke physical sensations in amputees. A hand, a foot, an arm, or a leg, which no longer exists, can still feel painful or ticklish, itchy, hot or cold. Could we extend, as in the autobiography of the eccentric psychomagician Alejandro Jodorowsky (2001, p. 402), the idea of a phantom limb to a phantom or ghostly body? If it is possible to have sensations in hands that do not exist, how can we know that the sensations present in the area of my hand have anything to do with the conventional hand? The ghostly body feels without regarding a real and objective reality. For him, the body, as allopathic medicine considers it, does not matter. Arnold Mindell’s *dreambody* (1982) consists of this flux of sensations, a combination of images, whether they are visual, auditory, pertaining to taste or smell, fantastical or linguistic in nature. Mental image and physical sensations are two sides of the same coin. For Rhizome Lee, we always inhabit the *dreambody*, with its physical sensations and imagination. These sensations resonate and change constantly. To be able to dance butoh, training the body is unnecessary: it is rather a question of developing and refining sensitivity, and the ability to grasp sensorial fantasies. The ‘real and objective body’ is something external to our experienced reality. The actual body belongs to the political power that took it over using the real world fable. The ‘body’ is never born, as sensations and memories are. The verb ‘to be born’ does not lead us to language, since being born means to emerge into an unspeakable world. Nor does it lead us to the body. Body and language simultaneously oppose

and suppose each other. There is no language without body, nor bodies without language. Both of them are gripped tight by political power, especially when they are fighting against each other. The dreambody is supported neither by words, nor by the palpable body. It rests on a nascent movement that shall not be explored in these pages.

Arnold Mindell's patients find no agreement between the ghost who says I, woven of words, opinions and values, and the dreambody knitted of sensations and fantasies. The real objective body, so to speak, appears as a battlefield between two antagonistic phantoms, a ghost of words and facts and a dreambody made of sensations and images. If a ghost were to dominate the dreambody completely, he would sign his own demise. A dreambody who exorcised the ghost entirely would not be able to communicate in conventional reality. Deleuze thought it was necessary to hold onto small doses of subjectivity. The presence of fear evidences that the ghost is winning over the dreambody, be it more tangible than the truth of language. The butoh dance, as practiced by Rhizome Lee and experienced by people who relate it with a long exposure to silence and proprioception (*improprioception* would be a more accurate concept, as the sensation does not belong to anybody), allows the dreambody to expand and branch out into a common and indescribable world, and therefore the tight grip of fear is loosened.

Monsters

The scene is typical. It is nightfall. A child is tucked into his blankets. His parents kiss him goodnight on the forehead, they turn off the light and shut the door after leaving the room. The child has his eyes wide open, his gaze fixed on the closet door. He hears noises, perhaps a voice, he might even glimpse some movements in the shadows. He reveals his fear by screaming or crying for help. His father runs back, entering the room, ready to face the teddy bears. The child is pale, sitting on the corner of the bed, clutching his blanket, beads of cold sweat running down his neck. There's a monster in the closet, he says. Ready to attack, the father opens the closet door. He rummages around between the clothes and toys. There is no monster in the closet. He goes back to the child, kissing him again on the forehead, and tells him not to worry, and to sleep tight. He closes the door after leaving the room, but not before turning on the nightlight on the bedside table.

The monster is a fiction: there is nothing in the closet. The monster fantasy has real effects on the child's body in the same way that political fiction configures the bodies of its subjects (Foucault 1975). The monster does not exist, but still the child does not sleep. His heart rate, his rapid breathing and sweating, these very real and measurable physiological processes, are imprisoned there by the fictitious monster. Dismissing the monster as make-believe does not help calm the child down, but nor does it let us honour his imagination and his ability to participate in the world. The child's reality is neither the monster nor the visual proof offered by his father, anchored there in his objective and communicable reality. The child's reality is in his imagination, interlaced with physiological processes, both of which, together, constitute what could be called his dreambody. The real world that the father invokes suffocates the child's dreambody, an ever-nascent reality. The conventional world of language triumphs over the unique experiences that confer meaning to

existence.

The father's closet is more real than the child's monster, and so education and hierarchy begin to make sense. We know that civilisation is a voyage starting at irrational fear, and ending in Ikea. Civilisation and culture exclude incommunicable, solipsistic, or dream-like realities. In Leviathan, Sloterdijk (2006b, p. 211) argues that humans look at monsters with their backs turned on everybody else. The relationship between bodies is always mediated by the structures of power and their real world fable. Monsters and gods have real effects in the reality we share, and to fight them convinced of just one unique reality is a strategy invariably doomed to fail. The denial of fantasies and monsters in the name of a conventional reality puts us in a hierarchical world where relationships are based on fear. It is the fear of death which pushes us to institutionalise the idea of a common world. The configuration of a common world, governed by a single monster, multiplies fear. What is born is not subject to the corroboration based on established criteria. In order to subordinate death in relation to birth, as chronology insists – to die you have to be born in the first place - we should renounce our belief in a single and scientifically demonstrable reality. We have to dance with the monsters, just as children do.

Demons

I intend to hear the demons that dwell in my belly.
Akaji Maro, butoh choreographer

By drawing from Tibetan Buddhism, butoh turns certain viewpoints on their head, which can challenge our preconceptions about reality. We say, in rational and democratic countries, that what does not last is an illusion, that ephemeral and evanescent are illusory, that dreams are just that, dreams. The solid, the durable, the hard; these are closer to reality. When we say 'fact', we hit the table or a wall. In Buddhism, reality is change. Therefore, the feeling of hardness, solidity and permanence are illusions much deeper than what appears to disappear immediately. The ephemeral, the subtle, the evanescent; butterflies prove that there is something. Dreams are the quintessence of reality (Wangyal Rinpoche 1998). The durable and the solid further add, to this proof, the illusion of a possible objective knowledge of the world. This illusion of an objective world is the space where human beings reach agreements and conventions, and gradually these fictions become hegemonic reality, presenting themselves as the only valuable reality. The real world fable does not allow for the monsters perceived by children and other sensitive souls. The world of talking ghosts closes itself to physical sensations and it tends to deny the experienced body, encouraging a purely linguistic existence, and a numbed and anesthetised body image. The denial of the child's carnal fantasy is a breeding ground for demons. A demon is born when a monster gets pushed to the underworld. The ghost, i.e. the political subject, gains strength in the denying of monsters, and the rebuttal of sensory experiences.

A concept proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy helps us continue investigating the birth space, passing through the positivity of facts. Nancy speaks of *areality* (2006, pp. 87-88). The unreal is contrary to reality and they are mutually determined, like body and language. The areal happens in the

margins of reality, just as the dreambody happens in the periphery of that duality of body and language. *Areality* regards areas, spaces and volumes. It is composed of distances, areas, fields, depths, rhythms, flows, twists, expansions and contractions. The *areal* brings us to the experience of change within the body itself. The child's breathing, heart rate, his clammy hands, his clenched muscles: these phenomena are experienced directly and are real, yet transient. These physical phenomena are the roots of the monster. To prevail over the monster and let the night follow its usual course, opening the closet door is pointless. We need to explore the body space where the monster digs in its claws.

The demon is the monster whose roots cannot be conceived within ourselves. Ghosts inhabit our bodies, monsters can still live in our bedroom closets, but demons dwell in the antipodes of our world. Society is a monster that needs to create demons in order to exist. What is left of the bodies stuck between an overbearing fear of the monster, and the panic induced by the demons that live in the shadow of the very Leviathan that claims to protect them? Akaji Maro, from the Dairakudakan butoh dance company, located the demons' abode in his belly. By doing so, by conceiving and perceiving the abode of the absolute other as within one's own guts, Maro and butoh practitioners debilitate all politics of isolation, distrust, and fear. The greatest danger is within.

III. The fear of birth

Survivors

For a long time now we have not been paying a price for our survival but rather creating surplus value for a
suicide machine.
Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*

The construction of an ideal image of ourselves, both individually and collectively, entails wastage. Societies that are founded upon a fiction of a being-in-common create a real world fable, a narrative that allows them to justify and cover up the violent practices via which they are kept alive. Simultaneously, they inject a linguistic identity into bodies, an identity that grows if not at the expense of life itself, but certainly at the expense of creativity. Rousseau objected to the incongruity of Hobbes's approach with the following metaphor: because he fears the coyote, man creates a lion. To synthesise the two classical approaches of political philosophy, Sloterdijk (2006b, p. 221) notes that „while the chimera of the contract brings together false and distorted individuals in an imaginary link, the ghost of the organism links actual individuals in a distorted, grotesquely simplified, togetherness“. Today we survive in the worst of all worlds where falsified individuals share a falsified totality.

The deified life that serves us as a supreme value was emptied of any vertical requirement. „The politics of fear that reigns in the world inexorably pushes the desire to live towards a mere survival instinct“ (Lopez Petit 2005, p. 108). The life that justifies the contemporary deployment

of domination is not a kingdom to conquer, as Nietzsche wanted, nor is it something you sense, but rather something you possess. „Life,” writes Roberto Esposito in *Communitas*, “is sacrificed to self-preservation” (2003, p. 43). Birth indicates a movement that leaves without escaping (Quignard 2013, p. 73) where the word ‘life’ goes back to itself. In the name of life we prevent its expansion, we condemn it to be mere life, little more than a word (Esposito 2006, p. 71). Survival, which Nietzsche described as the lowest expression of the will of power, is the minimal requirement for the ghost to continue unravelling the political system and its real world fable. Politics is the art of keeping the dreambody to a minimum, so that the true fiction of the political system can, thanks to the talking ghost, occupy as much space as possible within existence.

In the name of life, we prevent birth from continuing and worlds from expanding. If birth is the name of being, as Nancy claims (2006, p. 115), any discourse where being and political power are unified works directly against birth. The power and the fiction invoked in its foundation - its being - always aim to stabilise the world (Lopez Petit 1994). However, the world exists only in a nascent state. The practice of stillness and listening in the butoh dance, Hijikata’s „I want to fall but I cannot“, are focused on perceiving a survival strength that is not personal, but anonymous. This dialogue with gravity puts our inners in a common world that needs no institution.

Terrorists

Bodies are brought together by the construction of a myth that helps strengthen the collective, minimising the need for expansion through fear. Flaubert said long ago that all you need to create a community is to falsify its history and find an enemy. The more demonic the foe, the more united the people will be.

Monsters are family matters; at most they can mobilise a village. To create a society you need demons. Only the demon allows the creation of power structures based on language and representation. The demonic enemy must be close enough for everyday life to make sense, and yet far enough away to make necessary the establishment of a political power to deal with it. So the witch pacts with the devil, the opposite of religion, but she might be your daughter. Communists are the enemy of democracy, but they might be your neighbours. The terrorist is both an enemy of civilisation and a part of multiculturalism; they get on the same bus. The demon is a fine substance: fear of the demon must justify small daily sacrifices, and at the same time it should lead to the construction of enormous power structures. The demon must generate enough micro-fears in everyday life so that the development of macro-political power is necessary.

Contemporary demonology has coined the term “terrorism”. The concept is so airy that it is difficult to handle, when it is not simply criminalised. There is something about terrorism that denies the possibility of thought and the legitimacy of the other. „Terrorism is the explanation of the other under the terms of its exterminativity” (Sloterdijk, 2006b, p. 88). The definition Sloterdijk offers obliges us to reconsider all our ideas; it compels us to consider the democratic generation of terrorism. „This confirms that the statehood of weapons, far from being the antidote to terrorist practices, produces its systematisation because there cannot be any symmetry between attack

and defence since terror is inherent to the weapon itself. Attacks of extermination, whether of people or things, is something proposed a priori“ to the existence of the air forces (Sloterdijk 2006b, pp. 107-108). Sloterdijk speaks of a state-established atmoterrorism. Helplessness and fear among populations grow as people cling to their worldviews. As the worm coils beneath the yoke of fear, bodies shrink beneath the yoke of terror. With existence reduced to a minimum, and life degraded to mere survival, society’s fictitious discourse has free space to colonise bodies. The more numb the sensation, the fatter the ghosts. All discursive effort is pointless or perhaps even counterproductive here, because it would feed the ghosts on which terror thrives.

Samurai

Tatsumi Hijikata, the creator of *butoh*, would invite his students to transform their solar plexus into terrorists (Fraleigh 2010, p. 66). Terror that falls from the sky, whether atomic bombs, rockets, missiles, or laws passed by the skyscrapers that house the banks, is nothing but a multiple of individual shadows, these spaces of un-lived life we deliver to the speaking ghosts. Fixed fictions live at the expense of dreambodies. Transforming his solar plexus into a terrorist, Hijikata attacks the very roots of the injustices and terror exercised by human communities over singularities. Subjects live hanging from the sky, barely touching the ground. Touching the ground, Carlotta Ikeda said, would be an absolute movement. „The body must landfall,“ writes Nancy in *Corpus* (2000, p. 11). Hijikata perceived the problem at its root, and proposed an understanding of the theatrical scene as a sacrificial table where the individual rips himself apart, blowing himself up with dynamite. By sacrificing their individuality on the stage, the *butohists*, who Sondra Fraleigh (2010, pp. 34-36) called postmodern samurai, allow the emergence of a common reality incompatible with the communication of information. The *butohist* opens his body to a nascent *areality*, surrendering to invisible gravity (Amagatsu, 2000) and from there dive into a subconscious realm of dreams and fantasies.

To dance *butoh*, Kazuo Ohno (2004, p. 215) simply invites his students not to fear their fears. Get inside the closet, meet the monster, offer your hand to the dead and dance with the ghosts. Sooner or later, as says the most recognised *butohist* (Ohno 2004, p. 236), you will find your demons and you will spit the built-up mucus out off your guts. The *butoh* dance, which Ohno learned in the womb of his mother, understands that birth precedes death. No-one can talk about death having experienced it. No-one can speak of birth without having that experience. Both ways out, death and birth, index thinking to darkness. The difference between speculation and experience should guide our curiosity when asking about the world. Today, through the prism of fear of death, technological society seizes the birth process. In the name of life, fear is imposed on birth. Dancing with ghosts, fantasies, fears, demons, and monsters, outcasts the political power from the dreambody, from the experienced areal body. The fact we are born heading towards the ground undermines the fear of death that hangs from the sky where fictitious communities dwell.

IV. The lightness of the human being

La peur est dans les hommes comme la pesanteur est dans les pierres.
Pascal Quignard, *L'origine de la danse*

According to Quignard, fear is intrinsic to humanity just as heaviness is to stones. Butoh does not propose an unfolding of language, and in fact Hijikata rejected democracy, considering it a bounced cheque. Butoh seeks to dissolve into gravity, into the relationship with the ground, and into the sensations arising from the inner listening of a common world. Gravity is perceived when awareness is projected towards the bones. Conscious weight can be translated as lightness. When he shares his world with stones, the butohist reduces humanity into a tale, a fable. Rhizome Lee defines butoh as a fight to the death against human judgement, waged in our own body. Humanity is a state where birth has been detained. There is much more than humanity in our singular bodies. We should then take this human thing and its verbiage lightly. We should rather favour that which, deep within us, holds the savageness, the heaviness, the stupidity, and the stubbornness of the animal. This animal which, in order to give birth, seeks secrecy and darkness.

Footnotes

[1] For a detailed analysis of Kafka's story, see Derrida's text (1985 , pp. 87-139) where the French philosopher states that the law is a forbidden place. See also López Petit (1994 , pp. 175-178) for the relationship between expectation and the kidnapping of life.

[2] See two texts by Derrida, *Otobiographies* (1984) and *Force de loi* (1994).

[3] In that matter, Quignard coincides with Sloterdijk (2003a, pp. 479-483) when he locates the early constitution of ego in the ear rather than in the mirror as Lacan wanted. For Sloterdijk, this event occurs before birth, in the womb.

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