

**Yûgen and the artist's body in the contemporary world – a communicational process.**

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*Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the conception of yûgen (mystery and depth) as a communicational process and the possibility of its existence in the contemporary artistic thought. The theoretical framework is based on classical texts of Zeami and Zenchiku, interpreted by Western scholars (e.g.: Thornhill 1993,1997; Sieffert,1960; Komparu,1983); and the concept of “embodied mind” developed by new trends of neurophilosophy that, in the last ten years, have been criticizing Cartesian thought (e.g.:Johnson and Lakoff 1999, Sheets-Johnstone 1998, Haugeland 1998, Clark 1997). It points out that yûgen can be recognized in the contemporary world and has an important place in the discussion of the limits between body and environment, body and mind, light and darkness, consciousness and unconsciousness.*

According to Arthur Thornhill III, yûgen is not only a particular style of performance or “a graceful beauty most frequently denoted by the term in Zeami’s writings”. It can also be understood as “a mental attitude cultivated by the performer” as his son-in-law Komparu Zenchiku proposed. Based on the concept of embodied mind developed by the new trends of Cognitive Sciences (e.g: Churchland 1986, Dennett 1991, Damásio 1994, Varela 1991, Sheets-Johnstone 1998), I’ll argue that these two interpretations of yûgen can actually be understood as different levels of description of the same thing, and should be related to a deeper understanding of the artist’s body. Looking at yûgen as something that arises from

another kind of "substance or reality" outside the material relationship between the artist's body, the performance and the audience , it is a vague explanation and, in some sense, very similar to some theories of Western philosophy such as the Cartesian thought. We will see after different attempts to explain yûgen, that dualisms (e.g: reason/emotion, form/content, internal /external world, objectivity/subjectivity) are very common, even among Japanese studies.

Therefore, we propose another possibility, related to the understanding of the performance and the performer's body as a co-evolutive state of being alive.

### **The term and the roots of the concept**

Noh theater is called "the art of yûgen", but this term is not used exclusively for noh. The essence has been treated as "quite vague". It was generally used to mean grace and elegance. Nose (apud Thornhill) has explained that the first use of yûgen was in the buddhist doctrine, meaning difficult or obscure. But the conventional connotations of darkness are the opposite of *hsüan* (to represent the mysterious aspect of Tao, the nameless, the formless realm, antecedent to the differentiated world of light, and the primordial nature to which all things return). The poet Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114-1204) has pointed out that yûgen also meant the beauty of yoyô, charm or suggestiveness, the ideal of beauty for classical waka (31 poems syllable). It indicated a state of subtle (subtly ?)haunting beauty in the heart, form and sentiment of song-poems.

There are different explanations. The architect and noh actor Komparu Kunio (1983:12) has explained that yûgen was later refined to become *sabi*, the quiet (silence ?), the rustic beauty embodied in the fundamental aesthetic ideal of *haiku* poetry and to bring the term to the human body, Zeami wrote in the treatise *Kakyô: On Attaining the Stage of Yûgen*, that this concept is the simple, gentle state always emanated from an aristocrat, making one's language elegant: "even a single word one may utter(, it will) may be the yûgen of language".

Therefore, yûgen became understood after concrete experiences and not only as a vague and ethereal entity. Zeami began to talk about the yûgen of chant, the yûgen of dance, and finally, related to the acting techniques, the yûgen of the

three roles (old man, woman and warrior) and the *yûgen* of demons and the insane . The master also proposed a causal relationship between the (hana beauty) beauty of hana and *yûgen*, by saying that all the characters one portrays, whether of high or low birth, man or woman, monk, commoner, farmer, peasant, and so on; if they carried "a spray of blossoms", they would look equally beautiful.

In *noh*, what corresponds to the blossoms' spray is hana. And he argued that what gives the figure its quality is the mind, and the starting point for *yûgen* is the careful distinguishing by the mind of the principles of *yûgen*. So, *yûgen* is not limited to the good and beautiful.

As mentioned before, this concept has gradually (become narrower) (narrowed) (until it came to)(to come to ) symbolize the evocative beauty *yojô* of the female character. But despite (all of ?) Zeami's efforts to look at *yûgen* after concrete experiences, the idea of *yûgen* as a vague and ineffable experience has survived. A good example is the definition proposed by Komparu Kunio (1983:14): " *yûgen* is not something that can be apprehended intellectually, rather it exists subjectively for the audience, beyond the mere visual level". Remembering Michizô Toita, he completed the analysis by saying that *yûgen* is not observation, as observation is based on spatial perception. "Yûgen is somehow related to pure continuous time, in other words, *yûgen* basically does not exist objectively, but it is the subjective experience of the human being who knows it".

This kind (of ?) interpretation can be understood as a clear heritage of Renè Descartes' thought and the more recent notion of the philosophical *qualia* or subjective experience. It separates reason and emotion, visibility and non-visibility (invisibility ?). One must (take a) look at the history of thought to understand this kind of explanation and argue against this dualistic explanation which does not seem coherent with the statements of the Japanese thought.

### **Cartesian thought and the embodied mind.**

In his efforts to shake off his reliance on the analysis of the new Aristotelians and the special theological content gardenered by the Catholic church,

Descartes (Welton, 1999) introduced a reduction of truth as “(what)(something that) can be clearly apprehended by mind”. Mathematics became the language of truth about the world and this (is)(was ?) applied to the understanding of the human body. He studied the body for seven years before writing his famous *Meditations*. In this study, he gave a mechanical explanation to several functions previously attributed to the soul (motion, digestion, circulation etc). The body was reduced to what is extended in time and space, and therefore, to what is measurable. The nature of mind was completely different and independent of the body. It was a unique substance with no extension in space. The mind, as he understood it, was not primarily a stream of individual experiences but the ego, directly known because of the self-reflexive structure of consciousness that grasps what is given in its essential truth.

In Descartes' time (1596-1650), explained the contemporary philosopher Paul Churchland (1986:9), it was very hard to understand how something like pleasure, reason, consciousness or emotion could emerge from material things. “Now, the basic principle of division used by Descartes is no longer as plausible as it was in his days. It is now neither useful nor accurate to characterize ordinary matter as that-which-has-extension-in-space. Electrons, for example, are bits of matter, but our best current theories describe the electron as a point-particle with no extension whatever (it even lacks a determinant spatial position)”

In the *Treatises of Man*, Descartes' book on human physiology, he reduced various types of human experience to the mechanical interactions of the body, i.e. to physics. He demonstrated that the whole range of human passions and moods are nothing more than effects of the mechanical interactions of the fluids and parts of the body. According to Welton (op.cit.), it really invites the next step, that some have suggested that Descartes himself intended subversively, which is to reduce thinking itself to a body as the materialistic theories developed after the 50s in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, started subverting Cartesian thought. . The rise of phenomenology with Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty also collaborated with the philosophy of the mind, but didn't solve some problems. Husserl (1912), for

example, developed the notion of *leib* (lived-body) in opposition to *körper*, the physical body. Therefore, the dualism was no longer about body/mind but about body/body – the lived-body and the physical body. He didn't solve the Cartesian problem, but he re-inscribed it.

Martin Heidegger (1928) developed this phenomenology in a kind of ontology, searching for the idea of “being in the world”. The result was to replace the relationship of subjectivity and world by the question of “being in the world”. The notion of subjectivity was understood in a different way, as *dasein* or human existence (being there ??). As a consequence, Heidegger turns from the question of the body to the question of *embodiment* which means that we don't have a body, but rather that we are bodily. Sartre also concentrated on the structures of embodiment, but it was Merleau-Ponty (1945,1964) that illuminated the internal connection between body, action and perception. In place of Heidegger's notion of being, Merleau-Ponty introduced the notion of flesh. Flesh was understood as an intertwining of the structures and forces that interact without the dominance of one above all others or the agency of a controlling center.

Some of these interactions between body and world, mind and body, reason and emotion, were better clarified in a second moment, after the dialogues between Philosophy and Science, which means, outside the discourse realm. In 1999, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published an important research named *Philosophy in the Flesh, the embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. Some of the conclusions must be mentioned:

- 1- There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason apart from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement.
- 2- Human reason is a form of animal reason, inextricably tied to our bodies and the peculiarities of our brains. Our bodies, brains and interactions with our environments provide the mostly unconscious basis for our everyday metaphysics, that is, our sense of what is real.
- 3- Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies, especially our sensorimotor apparatus, which enables us to perceive, move and

manipulate, and the detailed structures of our brains, which have been shaped by both evolution and experience.

In the scientific field, this “embodied problem” has been discussed for the last twenty years. Just to mention one of the most (best ?) known approaches; we can remember Antonio and Hanna Damasio’s research in the neurology field. They conceptualize the self as a collection of images about the most invariable aspects of our organism and its interactions (see 1998). This includes certain aspects of the body structure and the body operation, including a repertoire of motions, by using the whole body and its various parts; and also defining traits (kinships to certain persons, activities, places; typical motor and sensory patterns of response).

The Damasio couple has proposed that “the core components of the concept of self concern body structure (i.e., viscera, musculoskeletal frame) and the fundamentals of one’s identity (i.e., usual activities, preferences, physical and human relationships, etc).”

They asked an important question about how the current image of an entity, on the one hand, and a set of images of the organism’s state, on the other, both of which exist as momentary neural activation patterns, generate subjectivity. Their answer is that:

- 1- The brain creates some kind of description of the disturbance of the state of the organism that resulted from the brain’s responses to the presence of an image
- 2- The description generates an image of the process of disturbance.
- 3- The image of the disturbed self is displayed together or in rapid interpolation with the image that triggered the disturbance .

To perform these tasks, the brain must possess neural structures that support the image of an object, neural structures that support the images of the self, and neural structures that support neither and yet are reciprocally interconnected with both.

This is a (the ?) view from within. Looking at the theories developed by

Andy Clark (director of the Philosophy/Neuroscience/Psychology Program at Washington University); it's possible to deeply understand the relationship between mind and what he called "the rest of the world" (see 1997). His proposition is to study extended brain-body-world systems as integrated dynamic wholes. What gets internally represented will be determined by a complex balancing act that coopts both bodily and environmental factors into the problem-solving routine. This problem solving-routine can be, for example, a movement pattern. Some processes are visible, (some of them invisible)(others are not ?). Some of them are conscious and most are (unconscious)(not ?). Some of them exist with a definite form and some only as a possibility, as a quality of sensation in a very low level of description and not really as an existent visible form.

### **The formless yûgen**

Coming back to the proposition of the embodied yûgen, some of the propositions studied by Churchland, Damasio, Clark, Lakoff and Johnson, can be identified as an exploration of the same subject: the ontological problem of the mind-body.

Yûgen is the compound of two Chinese graphs: *Yu* means hazy, dim dark, deep, quiet, faint or distant. It can be found in words such as *yûshû* (deep contemplation), *yûhei* (confinement) and *yûkon* (spirits of dead). And *Gen* means dark with a mood of mystery, subtle, profound, dark, and it is also a name for the other world. It is seen in the words *gen'ô* (immeasurable depth), *genshu* (subtle beauty), and *genri* (profound mystery or esoteric truth). Yûgen, the combination of these two characters, expresses profundity and evanescence detached from reality, and indicates a mystical state in which beauty is but a premise, something of an unknowable nature.

Taniyama Shigeru notes that the second character *gen* (hsüan) predominates and thus the expression is strongly influenced by Taoism . Lao Tzu (apud Thornhill) pointed out that hsüan represents the dark, the nameless, the formless realm antecedent to the differentiated world of light. It is the primordial nature to which all things return.

In the most poetic of (the late)(his later ?) works, Zeami talked about the Nine

Levels (Kyui), imagery of light and darkness to represent profundity. While Zeami states that the highest six levels all function within the realm of *yûgen*; he does not present a revised definition of the term, as Thornhill has explained (44) and that's why he remembered Zenchiku, son-in-law of Zeami.

Zenchiku was born in 1405 and he was the head of the Emai-za, the oldest of the Yamato sarugaku troupes. Zenchiku left 23 extant treatises, and even if he (was)(were) not considered such a talented performer, he was an important theoretician. Zenchiku's view on *yûgen* in performance is more radical than Zeami's.

At the conclusion of *Yûgen Sanrin*, Zenchiku wrote that in terms of the learning path represented by the "six circles and one dewdrop", he considered the first three circles to be the foundation of *yûgen*.

In a general sense, the first three circles are the Circle of Longevity (*jurin*), the Circle of Height (*shurin*) and the Circle of Abiding (*jûrin*). They represent: (1) a state of tranquility on stage before movement begins (primarily a visual effect), (2) the arising of sound and feeling from a ground of formlessness, and (3) the mental ease associated with the smooth flow of (individuality in) (individually ?) differentiated movements. These formal qualities of body, speech and mind are the basis of *yûgen* in performance and the perfection and tranquility they embody are represented by the (circle's symbol)(symbol of the circle). In the fourth configuration [the Circle of Forms (*zôrin*)], the circle symbolizes a mirror in which forms of *monomane* - specifically the three Roles - are reflected. Thus *yûgen* is the underlying essence of *monomane*, a direct reversal of Zeami's skin-flesh-bone theory, in which *yûgen* is the surface beauty supported by the underlying foundation of *monomane* skills.

In summary, Thornhill explained that the traditional *yûgen* discourse is based upon a progression of three discreet (distinct ?) stages: (1) the conventional clarity of differentiating consciousness, (2) semantic/imagistic obscurity, and (3) penetration, leading to non-duality.

In the context of performance, these stages can become (1)the mastery of external technique, and/or "strong"roles, (2) the depiction of graceful beauty, and/or

vexation and weakness, and (3) inner mastery, the style of "penetration". Symbolically, the progression is from brightness to darkness to inner brilliance.

### **Yûgen in the twentieth Century**

To discuss yûgen in the contemporary world, Thornhill cited Yuasa Yasuo and the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarô (1870-1945), but noticed that one important difference appeared when they talked about the light consciousness and the dark consciousness. The former is the discriminating mind of everyday awareness that forms the basis of the higher cognitive faculties, a traditional focus of western philosophy. In this context, darkness conotes the undeveloped, instinctual aspect of man; in Freudian psychology, this is the focus of repressed animal instinct and mental illness. However, according to Nishida, human ego consciousness based upon subject-object awareness is supported by an invisible bottom layer. Even if there seems to be a similarity between the dark consciousness and yûgen, there is an important difference. Yûgen begins with the contemplation of the external, rather than the internal reality: the dialectical energy experienced between light and darkness in the empirical world becomes the energy that propels the observing self inward, before it (perhaps is this necessary??) reemerges to fuse with the objective realm. The Yûgen effect depends on the invisible implicit in the dynamics of the visible.

If we look at yûgen after the "embodied approach", proposed by contemporary scientists and philosophers (e.g.: Johnson and Lakoff 1999, Sheets-Johnstone 1998, Haugeland 1998, Clark 1997, Churchland 1986, Dennett 1991, Damásio 1994, Varela 1991), we will identify different levels of description of the same matter: the body. The graceful beauty, the evanescence and the mysterious aspect of yûgen can be understood as a communication process. This process is organized after the relationship among body/mind/environment, understood as a dynamic system. It (didn't)(does not ?) come exclusively from the outside or from the inside. It is organized in a co-evolutive sense, which means, without a hierarchical sense. As Damasio explained (1994, 1996, 2000), even to create an

internalyzed image we need a complex sort of arrangement between body/world. We have a proto-self that has the stability to be identified as an organism and another kind of self (central self) that changes all the time by interacting with the environment.

The embodied-mind hypothesis radically undercuts the perception/conception distinction. According to the embodied mind approach; it is conceivable that the same neural system engaged in perception (or in bodily movement) plays a central role in the emerging of our conceptions about the world. That is, the very mechanisms responsible for perception, movements, and object manipulation could be responsible for conceptualization and reasoning. Indeed, explained Lakoff and Johnson (1999:38), “in recent neural modeling research, models of perceptual mechanism and motor schemas can actually do conceptual work in language learning and in reasoning”.

When Zeami studied *yûgen* as “an aesthetical result of the performance and the actor’s work” and Zenchiku talked about *yûgen* as “a mental attitude cultivated by the performer”; they (are)(were?) describing the same state of the body after different levels of analysis. The understanding of the embodied *yûgen* evolves (into /)the visible body movement, the relationship between the actor and the audience, the internal images of the performer’s body, and so on. It is a complex communication process that emerged from this system, organized after the body/mind/world continuum.

In the contemporary world, this can be identified as a kind of dramaturgy of the performance. Since the 80s, the word dramaturgy (see Van Kherkoven 1997) has been used in the dancing field inspired by the early roots of the term . It is not a written text, but a kind of cultural text “written at the performance and in the actor’s body”. In this sense, we think about *yûgen* as a dramaturgical state or, more specifically, as a body state that can be identified not only in the noh theatre or in the waka poetry, but also in different media even in the contemporary world.

In the late 50s, the butoh creator Hijikata Tatsumi discussed a state of darkness and formless existence named butoh-sei, or the state of crisis that

could be identified not only in the dancing body, but everywhere. There are some scholars that have analysed butoh as the dark side of the aristocratic (?) noh, because in butoh, death was no longer the “face without expression with a mask” as it was described by Roland Barthes in the famous “L’Impere des Signes”. In butoh, death appeared in the zombies’ bodies, as in a kind of inside-out revolution with new phantoms reborn from the dark. Maybe this is just a very western way of explaining something actually much more complex. But what seems curious is to perceive that probably yûgen and butoh-sei are concepts with more similarities than we can notice at first sight. Implemented in different periods of time, in different bodies and places; they bring back to humankind (humankind) new possibilities of existence. In this sense, these two concepts can be also understood as perfect excuses to exercise some of the important questions of all-time, being considered as part of the same evolutive branch of thought.

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