Some notes on the work of Pina Bausch.

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Pina Bausch has been the subject of so much discussion that it seems quite impossible to add anything new. She started choreographing for the Dance Theatre of Wuppertal in 1973, more than 40 years ago, and it makes one wonder whether a good work of art is not, indeed, timeless. It is obvious that Bausch has not created from nothing: she comes from a tradition with roots in the German dance theatre of the early 20th century, which includes names such as Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman and Kurt Joss. However, Bausch has taken dance to a new dimension, challenging the idea of an strictly movement-based art. She has contributed to extending the limits of dance to such an extent that there is no identifiable essence holding the concept together any more.

Pina Bausch has been defined by Norbert Servos (1998) as a choreographer who brings reality onto the stage, a reality more truthful than any other in the way that it unmasks the processes of social constructions in which we are immersed. Servos (1998:39) points out that "whereas dance previously was regarded as the domain of 'attractive illusions', as a refuge for the self-satisfied technique or for the abstract treatment of existential themes, Bausch's works refer the onlooker directly back to reality". Servos believes Bausch unmasks "physical constrictions and restrictions" by presenting "authentic, subjective experience" (1998:39) of "people as they really are" (1998:40). The subtitle of one of his books on Bausch, The Art of Training a Goldfish (1984), stands as a metaphor for the process of civilisation and its effects on human nature. He explains what lies behind this metaphor:

> In one scene, a dancer tells of the tragic-comical process of training a goldfish to become a land animal, with the outcome that the creature, its environment having become alien to it, threatens to drown on water. The process of civilisation – it would seem – leaves people high and dry in exactly the same way: in a physical reality that is like a foreign element. (1998:45)

The image of someone striving to leave his own body behind is present in many of Bausch's pieces. In Rite of Spring, women move convulsively as if trying to free themselves from their own bodies; in Bluebeard the wife runs diagonally and leaps forwards as if attempting to flee from the encapsulation of her body, the sequence then being repeated by other men and women; in Café Muller a man repeatedly throws himself to the floor, contorting his torso as though his lungs were trying to escape through the pores. There is an energy of flight characteristic of Bausch's work, as if

dancers tried to evaporate from their bodies and leave behind their embodied fossilised memories. That feeling resonates with Elaine Scarry's description of the body in pain:

> The ceaseless, self-announcing signal of the body in pain, at once so empty and undifferentiated and so full of blaring adversity, contains not only the feeling 'my body hurts', but the feeling 'my body hurts me'. This part of the pain, like almost all others, is usually invisible to anyone outside the boundaries of the sufferer's body, though it sometimes becomes visible when a young child or an animal in the first moments of acute distress takes maddening flight, fleeing from its own body as though it were a part of the environment that could be left behind. (1985:47)

In Café Muller, two women in white nightshirts (one of them Pina Bausch herself, in a rare appearance as a dancer) have their eyes closed while moving their arms smoothly through the air in circular patterns. Their movements seem to be extremely personal, expressing a certain secrecy that only they know the meaning of. Their closed eyes avoid any contact with other people, the recognition that they might be watched; they protect themselves from the gaze of the other by blocking the sensory experience that asserts their self-objectification. They alienate themselves from the world and turn free in their internal world 'for-themselves'. In Bluebeard, the main male character undresses for a doll and shows his muscles as the proof of his masculinity. The doll is a being-in-itself, a thing that can never return his gaze and is therefore harmless. He is not embarrassed to show himself naked and to behave ridiculously in front of a doll. Whereas under the gaze of his wife he sees himself as a killer, for the doll he can assert himself any way he wants to. Sartre (1977) identifies two categories of things in the world, the thing-in-itself and the thing-for-itself. The first category consists of the objects with no power of reflection, while the second comprises things that have consciousness. Man is a being-for-himself when he is alone; however, when in contact with other men he becomes a thing-in-itself for the one who sees him. Therefore, man is an object to the other's gaze, which reflects back upon his own understanding of himself. "By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgement on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the other" (Sartre, 1977:222). "Shame is by nature recognition. I recognise that I am as the other sees me" (Sartre, 1977:222).

However, it is not only the play of inter-subjectivity among the performers that Bausch reveals and disrupts, but also the traditional safety of the audience behind the fourth wall. In traditional theatre and dance, the performers are the objects for the spectator's sensory consumption. Bausch challenges this idea by making the performers return the spectator's gaze. They address particular members of the audience, offer tea, bread and butter (Victor), invite them to dance (Come dance with me). The spectator is no longer safe in his voyeuristic position any more; at any moment someone might catch him looking through the keyhole.

In Pina Bausch's pieces, we often see a critique of the women's subjection to man (he is the subject, she is the other). In Café Muller, a female character with red wig, tight dress, high heels and black coat enters the stage in small galloping steps. She looks at everything, she seems concerned, but does nothing. A man and a woman throw themselves at chairs – she looks at them with a mixture of panic and apathy. She almost moves a chair, she almost touches the man; she does not help, she is helpless. It is as if on top of her high heels she lived in a world alien to the other character's world,

as if her nails were too long to enable skin contact, as if her wig was too heavy for her to keep her head up. She runs for the man and stands in front of him; he kisses her. She repeatedly follows the man, but he initiates the kissing, even though it is clear that she desires it, whereas he only leans mechanically forwards. She wants the kiss, but she waits to be kissed. "Whether a God or a man is concerned, the little girl learns that she will become all-powerful through deepest resignation: she takes delight in a masochism that promises supreme conquests" (de Beauvoir 1993:306). The masochistic passivity of woman is found in many of Bausch's works: she is the virgin who will be sacrificed in Rite of Spring; she is the one who is constantly thrown to the floor and who beats herself on the walls in Café Muller; she stands on chairs to be analysed by man as objects for consumption in Victor; she is condemned to death in Bluebeard.

However, can we actually consider man the dominant sex, rendering woman passive and holding her in a subservient position, in Bausch's works? The tension between the sexes is not one-sided in her pieces; she does not present women as desperate beings in search of their lost subjectivity in opposition to an always dominant and self-sufficient male subject. Men seem to be as lost as the women: both throw themselves at chairs in Café Muller; the character of Bluebeard is powerless, haunted by women's ghosts and disturbed by his own need for love. Simone de Beauvoir (1993) affirms man as an ever-intractable dominator, who is personally fulfilled by being the sovereign and is never willing to share his position with woman. It may have been historically important at the time Beauvoir was writing (in the 40s) to place men under such negative stigma. However, Bausch challenges the deterministic feminist view, placing both man and woman as beings trapped in their uncomfortable roles. He possesses the phallus, but he is ridiculously proud of it (as in Bluebeard's scene in which a group of men project their pelvis forwards with a mixture of embarrassment and duty). In Bausch's pieces, men is as trapped in his social role as women.

Silverman (1992) argues that the "exemplary" male and female subjectivities are the basis upon which our society's 'dominant fiction' operates. By 'dominant fiction' she means the "ideological system through which we live our relation to the symbolic order" (48) consisting of "the images and stories through which a society figures consensus; images and stories which cinema, fiction, popular culture, and other forms of representation presumably both draw upon and help to shape" (idem). Silverman suggests that the dominant fiction derives from the relation between the modes of production and the entrance of the subject into the symbolic order, acting both as external and internal forces for the formation of the ego. She borrows from Lacan's theories in arguing that the child is immersed in culture from even before birth, for the parents' expectations already trace the child's future insertion into this culture. For Lacan (1977), in absorbing the Law of Language the subject is castrated of its 'being' – this is the price of meaning. Therefore, the symbolic world of meaning is gained as the result of the subject's lack of being. The subject then strives to fill this gap by projecting an external object as his object of desire. Silverman posits that in our society the subject is expected to desire an object of the opposite sex. However, when the subject deviates from the norm and does not embrace the "exemplary" male/female subjectivity, he/she becomes a threat to the dominant fiction, and is therefore marginalised. Bausch presents the sexes as two distinct groups, and in both sides there are signs of the "loss of belief in the conventional premises of

masculinity" (Silverman 1992:51) and femininity. In Victor, one of the female characters dresses and undresses repeatedly, not knowing which of the two dresses suits her better (even though there is almost no difference between them). She laughs compulsively and walks in high heels from one side of the stage to the other, as if defying her position as an object of desire by exaggerating her exposure.

The subject's desire for the opposite sex asserts another ideology upon which our society's dominant fiction is based: the family. The family exemplifies the interrelationship between the modes of production and the development of the ego through its entrance into the symbolic order, because in desiring to form a family the subject is unconsciously reproducing and fortifying one of capitalism's most important institutions. Annette Kuhn (1978:57-58; cited in Silverman 1992:49) describes the role of the family in the capitalist mode of production:

> a sexual division of labor has a specific effectivity in capitalism (…) mapping itself into the spatial separation of the site of production of use of values (home and family) and that of production of exchange values (work-place) (…) The patriarchal relations implied in a social/sexual division of labor and in the appropriation of women's labor by men within the family are 'worked on' by the forces of capital and re-emerge at each conjuncture as particular forms of social relations.

In Victor, bride and groom lie on the floor while another performer moves their passive bodies mimicking the wedding ceremony; some time later an older couple sit on chairs and have the same argument they have already had countless times. Bausch challenges our collective belief in the family by signalling the decay of this institution and its inability to fulfil the ideal "eternal love" it aspires to. In Bausch's pieces habits normally taken for granted are alienated from reality and hung until they "start to look a little blue" (Caputo 1987:2).

Bausch plays with desires doomed to frustration, presenting the spectator with a mass of collective beliefs in which he is also immersed. Silverman (1992) has argued that in moments of historical trauma the dominant fiction's pillars are shaken. Bausch started choreographing at a time when Germany was recovering from its destruction and the great German dance tradition was almost forgotten. Her pieces expose the ideologies on which our society is based as collective open wounds waiting to heal. In lifting the veil of our culturally constructed bodies Bausch is actually showing "the gap which we ourselves are" (Merleau-Ponty 1968:201; cited in Garner 1994:31).

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