

The theatre of cruelty aesthetics: does postmodern life have to be “beautiful” or morally good?

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Resumo: Pretendo reflectir sobre as implicações da relação entre os indivíduos e a sociedade, a partir da pergunta: Será que a vida pós-moderna em sociedade tem que ser bela ou moralmente boa? Para o efeito, apoio a minha perspectiva na obra de Franz Kafka, *Na Colónia Penal*, para representar um teatro social da estética da crueldade nas sociedades contemporâneas da pós-modernidade. A dimensão social da ética é uma espécie de prática de crueldade, assim como uma espécie de estética representando receitas da sociedade, que se confronta com as tendências contemporâneas das sociedades pós-modernas e se caracteriza pelo individualismo, narcisismo, consumo e espectáculo dos média. O teatro da crueldade funciona na punição dos condenados, para o qual existe essencialmente um trabalho de estética ou ética social higienista. A máquina insensível da Lei tem autoridade social e incorpora as falhas ou os erros punidos. Esta máquina continua a trabalhar (de forma invisível) nas nossas sociedades, onde as exigências sociais são as da ordem do Direito?

Palavras-chave: comportamento social, lei, padrão, pós-modernidade, sociedade.

1. Introduction

In his *Notebook 1914-16*, Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: “Ethics does not treat of the world; Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic” (Wittgenstein, 1979: 77). If Ethics is such condition of the world, we should live an ethical life. The problem is that we live (ethically or not) in individualistic and senseless post-modern societies, i.e., Occidental societies stigmatized, according to Peter Singer (2006: 53), by crises of social values and by the loss of sense of community. Nevertheless, there are authors, like Singer, who answer clearly “yes” to the question “Can we live an ethical life?” Singer

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explains what is to live ethically: “it is to reflect in a particular way about how we live and to try act accordingly with the conclusions of that reflection” (2006: 16). But, the question “How we should live?” is ancestral, everlasting; it was already discussed in Ancient Philosophy, namely in Plato’s *Republic*, therefore, it is not a contemporary concern of our post-modern epoch.

Returning to the above-quoted passage from Wittgenstein’s notebook, it means that Ethics has an undoubted purpose, a sort of condition sine qua non to live or to be in the world. I share Wittgenstein’s thesis, and also consider Ethics and Aesthetics as one, according to Wittgenstein’s remark in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1999: 6.421). Ethics and Aesthetics are one because there is something beautiful (at least in an aesthetical existence perspective) doing good things to other people. For Wittgenstein, “when a general ethical law of the form ‘*Thou shalt...*’ is set up, the first thought is: Suppose I do not do it?” (1979: 78). “It is clear”, he points out, “that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward”; so he argues that the question about the consequences of an action must be unimportant, because consequences are not actions or events. But, we should be responsible following or not the social rules. Can there be any ethics if there is no living being but myself in the world? To whom my life (i.e. my behavior, actions or attitudes) could be “beautiful” or morally good?

I introduce the literary work of Franz Kafka into these contemporary sociological problems because he wrote metaphorically about human condition. A sort of miserable and painful condition of all aware men face a inflexible destiny of death, loneliness, pain, suffering, misery, fear, angst and agony. These are the main worries or philosophical subjects of Kafka’s writings. *In toto*, there is an existentialist perspective of Kafka’s writings. This is the thesis of my paper, which is also corroborated by Alexandre Vialatte, Kafka’s first French translator, who labeled these worries or philosophical subjects as a “diabolic innocence” (Vialatte, 1998).

One of the great qualities of Kafka’s writings is the ability to explore these sensations, which are unconscious to the majority of people. These sensations are adverse, negative, and, therefore, they are also undesirable. But they belong to human nature; they characterize the anonymous and timeless human condition. Kafka’s stories transform these sensations in common places.

To understand Kafka is to understand his writings, because he starts from inside of himself. His biography is his bibliography, a fragmented bibliography composed by feelings, which *In the Penal Colony* is only one small part of the whole puzzle of tragic human condition. The cruelty, the prepotency and mortification or the absence of justice’s principles suffered by a condemned during his execution is similar to our real life.

In the Penal Colony is a small fantastic story, one of the few works published by Kafka in his lifetime. This story allows us to feel Kafka’s interest on those existentialists’ subjects, challenging our understanding of everyday problems like a fair trial or a reasonable and mechanical power over our human behavior or human moral alienation

2. The problem of cruelty aesthetics

The problem of cruelty aesthetics could be formulated through the following question: Why should we live ethically (taking an aesthetical existence) if we live in post-modern societies, where everything around us is spectacle and represents a sort of social theater of cruelty, selfish and apparent Aesthetics?

3. Conceptual framing

The conceptual framing of the previous problem presupposes a confrontation between 1) the ethical naturalism and 2) the ethical conventionalism and the moral relativism. *Ad primum*, a perspective already pursued by Plato and Aristotle, it is argued that there are good values or moral actions *per se*, i.e., we can live ethically by ourselves due to the (good or bad) human nature or essence. *Ad secundum*, a perspective radically opposed to the former, it justifies the diversity or the subjectivity of ways of life.

The moral relativism as a cultural relativity could be justified through these ways of life or a given “form of life”, according to Wittgenstein’s terminology. “Form of life” implies another important concept to Wittgenstein, the one of “language-game”, i.e. the idea that to speak a language is part of an activity guided by rules, in a form of life. “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1996: §§ 19, 23). If a form of life is a language-game, then countless language-games exist, countless forms of life also exist.

The ethical conventionalism and the moral relativism justify ethical differences between human beings and deny the existence of a unique moral code with universal and timeless value to human condition.

4. The prescription: ethical conventionalism and moral relativism

In the Penal Colony represents a trilogy: language, technique and power, three vertices of those societies and cultures settled in principles of Order and Progress. This story is like a stage where the cruelty aesthetics of life is represented. Speaking of “cruelty aesthetics” seems contradictory, because Aesthetics, by rule, does not represent, promote or suggest any unpleasant and painful feeling, or, at least, it should not. On the contrary, Aesthetics is an exercise of beauty production. So, it should be pleasant to our senses; it should stimulate positive sensations and feelings.

However, the cruelty aesthetics of *In the Penal Colony* comes from something that is external to the Aesthetics itself, i.e., from an ethical dimension, which is the legitimacy of cruelty (even in an aesthetical dimension). For this reason, I sustain a theoretical path to the prescription of the cruelty aesthetics and ethics over Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*. I mean the prescription of the Law on the body. The penalty execution machine writes the sentence on the body of the condemned till a bloodless death body. The machine executes the Law with authority, i.e. a given law as an outcome of an ethical conventionalism and moral relativism. The machine embodies the mistake or crime of the condemned on his own body.

This is a kind of supreme and ironic manifestation of the relation crime-punishment. A relation well explored in the *Crime and Punishment*, the Dostoevsky's *magnum opus*.

The prescription is the order of the Law. The condemned pays his crime with the appropriated punishment: the prescription of the Law, forgotten or neglected by the condemned, is written on his body through his spilled blood until the last drop. Ironically, the prescription recorded forever on the body of the condemned would be pedagogically useless in future actions.

The machine allows the inscription taking form on the body of the condemned. According to the officer's description, the machine has two kinds of needles arranged in multiple patterns. Each long needle has a short one beside it. "The long needle does the writing, and the short needle sprays a jet of water to wash away the blood and keep the inscription clear" (Kafka, 2005: 147). During this process, the ethical prescription is written on the body. The calligraphy is hard to read and it needs to be studied closely. The point of the officer is that the script can't be a simple one, because it is not supposed to kill a man straight off, but only after an interval of, on average, twelve hours (Kafka, 2005: 149). The machine keeps on writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours.

If it is difficult, for someone, to decipher the script with the eyes, it would not be difficult for the condemned, as he will decipher it with his pains and wounds. At the end of this complex task, when the harrow has pierced the prisoner quite through and casts him into the pit, the "judgment has been fulfilled" and the condemned can be buried (Kafka, 2005: 150).

As we can read in Kafka's story, it was undeniable the injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution (Kafka, 2005: 151). The explorer that had been invited to attend the execution (he could be anyone not familiar with this ritual) seemed to express a view against this kind of Justice. But the condemned would die with the prescription (that he forgot) on his body.

5. The aesthetics of the rule and punishing

What does it mean to follow a social rule? What may happen if one does not follow a given rule? There would be consequences for whom? In Kafka's story, the Law is shown aesthetically in the draft of the machine all over the body of the condemned. The performance of the machine is aesthetic, considering three aspects:

1. The prescription of the Law transcribed into alphabetic signs (i.e. into text) or into ideographic signs (i.e. into draws and images).
2. The passage of the verbal formulation of Law into a physical imprint, i.e. into a peculiar support: the proper body of the condemned, the one who made a rule deviation action considering the established Law.
3. A sort of idyllic death: a final pedagogical dimension that takes the condemned to die with the Law written on his body.

Ad primum, taking into account the Zen Buddhism, the creation of signs with the brush full of ink requires asceticism from the painter or writer, i.e. a sort of inner emptying. It is like the fulfillment of an aesthetical state of empty. This empty should be understood positively as an opportunity to fulfill something with something else. So, we shouldn't understand the empty as a simple absence or blank.

Ad secundum, the mentioned passage also presupposes the transformation of the criminal body (full of vice, faults and deviances) to an aesthetical body, with lines, letters, words, draws. Let us take into account one of the most striking episodes of the height of rationality in ancient Greece: the death of Socrates. This episode is described by Plato in his dialogue named *Crito* (Plato, 2002). Crito, the interlocutor and friend of Socrates, recommends the escape, but Socrates admits that it is irrational according to the laws of Athens and accepts the consequences. Aware of his situation, Socrates waits for death as a human condition face the Law, considering:

- a) We must always accept the laws of the State;
- b) We should respect our compromises;
- c) We shouldn't prejudice the Polis.

From these three principles, Socrates takes the conclusion that he must accept death instead of run away. But, what is the sense of Socrates' behavior? It is the sense of ethical principles that must remain over any eventual personal benefit of his escape.

Ad tertium, an idyllic death demands an useless learning to the condemned's life, because he dies with the lesson. An idyllic death reminds us the importance of the *arête*, i.e. it's role, it's pedagogical ideal and cultural practice for the individual education. At this point, the classical culture and it's historical and referential legacy would allows an useful parallel with our contemporary western societies, taking into account the death of Socrates, representing a pedagogical ideal of the *aretê*.

In Kafka's writing, there is no option to the *askêsis*, but there is some option to the *aretê* in death. In his turn, Latin tradition preserves the proverbial words of Ovid (1989: III, 136), who said *nemo ante mortem beatus* ("Nobody is happy before death"). What we have to do is to follow the sense and the practice of justice. How? The *Rhetoric* of Aristotle gives us a kind of taxonomy about the subject of Justice, including all the possible situations and motives to practice justice. "Every action must be due to one or other of seven causes: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reasoning, anger, or appetite" (1998: 1369a). The practice of (in) justice is one of the main issues explored by Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*. At the beginning of this story, the officer says, with a certain air of admiration, "It's a remarkable piece of apparatus" (Kafka, 2005: 140). This exclamation shows the prodigious machine of the Law, which "works all by itself". But the accuracy of a machine goes wrong and against our expectation sometimes, including this particular machine (symbol of Justice).

With such enthusiasm, the officer describes the machine as if it was an organic been. According to the officer, the sentence does not sound severe. But this seems a contradiction, because the punishment is an apparatus of cruelty. In his own words: "Whatever

commandment the prisoner has disobeyed is written upon his body by the Harrow". The prisoner was condemned to death for disobedience and insulting behavior to a superior and his execution is witnessed as an exhibition or a show. So, the prisoner will have written on his body: "Honor thy superiors!" (Kafka, 2005: 144).

The problem is that the prisoner does not know the sentence that has been passed on him. The officer says that "there would be no point in telling him [the sentence]. He'll learn it on his body." (Kafka, 2005: 145). The prisoner doesn't know either that he has been sentenced; he has had no chance of putting up a defense or just defending himself.

The officer argues how the matter stands, saying that he have been appointed judge in the Penal Colony and that he knows more about the machine than anyone. He points out: "My guiding principle is this: Guilty is never to be doubted." (Kafka, 2005: 145).

What does it mean to say that guilty is never to be doubted? How does one know that? The officer says that the explanation of the case is simple and based in a report of a captain an hour ago. The officer wrote down his statement and appended the sentence to it. "Then I had the man put in chains. That was all quite simple. If I had first called the man before me and interrogated him, things would have got into a confused tangle." (Kafka, 2005: 146).

Nevertheless, everybody has self-awareness; therefore, they should be responsible for their acts and actions. Let us remember the Dostoevsky's classic scene from *Crime and Punishment*, where Raskolnikoff thought on his criminal actions and compared himself to Napoleon: "I asked myself one day this question—what if Napoleon, for instance, had happened to be in my place, and (...) instead of all those picturesque and monumental things, there had simply been some ridiculous old hag, a pawnbroker, who had to be murdered too to get money from her trunk (for his career, you understand). Well, would he have brought himself to that if there had been no other means?" (Dostoevsky, 2003: V, iv).

The crime is the result of a chance. If Napoleon were in Raskolnikoff's shoes, for example, before committing a murder and without other resource, maybe he would do the same and he would commit the crime.

If the method (strategy that point to what to do) is the order of the actions in the execution of the condemned, the technique is the specific instrumentation; it constitutes each stage of a complex process defined by the method and described by the officer of the Colony. The officer does not hide his passion for the machine of justice. The apparatus belongs to the spectacle of the execution. However, there are several ethical and political problems around this spectacle: The nature of the technique as a source of concern and worries or as a source of social progress; the origin of the technique from a natural human necessity or from a capricious will of men over a superhuman and supernatural creation called "Justice"; the well-being or discomfort given by the technique to our post-modern societies; the deviant/normal use justifying potential discomfort; the apparatus of the machine described by the officer as a social frustration, individualism and moral alienation.

The technique is omnipresent in our contemporary stile of life. Post-modern societies seek civilizational progress, considering technique has a saver function (Spengler, 1993:

13). But the technique (*technikon*, *technê*) is just the ability to do something following certain rules and to transform a given natural reality into an artificial reality. The technique used in the Penal Colony has a final goal for life. As Martin Heidegger said: “The *technê* is part of the *pro-duce*, of the *poiesis*; it is something of *poietic*”; it is the possibility of knowledge, and knowledge gives us openings, that’s why it is also unveiling (Heidegger, s/d: 18). This is the perspective of technique as “pro-vocation” (the essence of the technique as a domain of the unveiling of truth). According to Heidegger, the unveiling guides the modern technique and it is a pro-vocation by which Nature is intimidated to give something.

The machine supplies the Penal Colony’s demands of principles of Justice, but it also produces human necessities, i.e., improvements of the whole system (Ortega y Gasset, 2009: 31-33). One problem raised up by Kafka’s story is the conscience of human condition. This conscience distinguishes and judges men and their life: on one side, those who have conscience; on the other side, those who are not aware of Justice and live the impulses of the instant without the sense of community. According to Nietzsche, men have pride of their humanity when they compare themselves to others animals, but they envy the happiness of animals (Nietzsche, 1976: 105).

Nowadays, we have an extraordinary development of technology and, therefore, the societies are in complete and permanent transformation, because they are the most immediate product of the globalization phenomenon. Does the instrumental (new ways of communicating and interacting) and qualitative (new ways of knowing and living) transformations mean a better life for men? That is, do we live better? Do we have more knowledge? Do we personally relate more with others? Are we less isolated? Are we more free and autonomous? Have we a society more democratic, reasonable and humane?

The post-modern societies are characterized by the triumph of the spectacle, by the “fast culture” and by the “fast thinking” or “ready-to-think”. These societies are specialists in the manufacture of consent and consensus, as had already warned in 1922 Walter Lippmann (2004: 134-5). So, the above-quoted passage of Nietzsche’s critique about modernity remains useful to understand the tyranny of our contemporaneity. According to Nietzsche, people are already starting to think with the watch in the hand while having lunch and the eye in the stock exchange journal (Nietzsche, 1998: 228-9).

The expression “society of the spectacle” follows the Situationism of the 1960’s, i.e. the sense defined by Guy Debord in 1967 with his book *The Society of the Spectacle*. I mean the sense thought by Debord, the idea of the whole life of societies advertised as an accumulation of spectacles, inversions of life by which the truth is represented as the false (Debord, 1971: 19). According to Debord: “Le spectacle dans la société correspond à une fabrication concrète de l’aliénation” (Debord, 1971: 32).

The deviation of western societies face historical legacies has been increasing, since Nietzsche, showing the emerging sense of Nietzsche’s critical philosophy and values. Indeed, I agree with the position of Anthony Giddens, for instance, that it is possible a systematic knowledge of human action or the trends of social development (Giddens, 2005: 33).

6. Concluding remarks

Undoubtedly there are many interpretations of Kafka's writings. The search for the meanings of his longer and shorter stories (the very core of his work) seems endless. Thus, we must read and re-read Kafka trying to find any useful meaning to our own life. After reading a book, the final reflection always raises the question about what the moral to be drawn from its history or story. In the case of Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, as it happens with all narratives, moral interpretation is subjective and can be exaggerated.

The machine writes a kind of trial; it includes the Law on the body of the condemned. Only the sacrifice of the body keeps the sanity of the Law. The law is always a post-facio to the body, wrote Jean-François Lyotard respecting Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* (1992: 166).

In the Penal Colony offers a disturbing and figurative reflection about the relationship between, on the one hand, men and machine and, on the other hand, men and Justice. Kafka's view about these relationships is negative. So, do we live better with all technologic progress around Justice and awareness of life? I don't think so; we live in an inhuman way, i.e. with moral alienation and according to an individualistic way of live proper of the post-modern societies.

Along this paper, I have expressed a critical point of view over the individualism post-modern and the associate moral alienation and unawareness of life. Does post-modern life has to be "beautiful" or morally good? Not necessarily. Life has to be, at least, awareness about all adversities of human condition.

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