

## “Estrangement” or exoticism?

**When contemporary dance choreographers incorporate images of a TV series about Portuguese expressive practices.**

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### **Introduction**

Issues concerning national identity and expressive practices are resonating in some Portuguese contemporary dance choreographies. This study intends to clarify this resonance of identity formation and assertion through the analysis of three choreographies: *Fica no Singelo* [Keep it Clear] (2013) by Clara Andermatt, *A Viagem* [The Journey] (2012) by Filipa Francisco and *Os Serrenhos de Caldeirão, exercícios em antropologia ficcional* [The Caldeirão Highlanders, exercises in fictional anthropology] (2012) by Vera Mantero. More specifically, in two of these works, images of the TV series *Povo que canta* [the people who sing] are incorporated in the choreographic processes. This TV series on expressive culture in rural Portugal, was produced in the beginning of the 1970s by Michel Giacometti, the French ethnomusicologist and Alfredo Tropa<sup>1</sup>, the Portuguese filmmaker. How have those moving images been transposed to the present? This question is embedded in a bigger one: how can we work with Portuguese traditional culture in the 21st century? Indeed, as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argue, traditions are mostly invented. Besides symbolizing an expressive practice, which is dynamic in time and space, tradition is also a concept, built during the last two centuries, through discourses

about identity, negotiated between the state, social elite, practitioners and researchers.

This issue parallels debates between anthropologists and performance researchers. In an attempt to go beyond the dichotomy between popular and elite culture, some researchers confront ritual practice with contemporary artistic practice. During the international seminar *Performance, Art et Anthropologie*, organized at the Quai Branly museum (Pasqualino and Schneider, 2009), Pasqualino (2009) wonders how one could find the same quality of sound linked to the idea of death and spirit in ritual of possession in Cuba, in gypsy vocal music in Spain (Flamenco) and in the artistic works of avant-garde performers and painters in North Europe. In terms of procedural dynamics, Cazemajou (2010) analyses interactions between a yoga/dance teacher and her students, and she compares it with interactions between a shaman and the patients, in order to highlight the role of the speech and notions of attention and trust. The two examples referred above inspired me to explore a new approach, more attentive to the artistic intentions. What do the choreographers imagine and put on stage? By questioning how the choreographers deal with Portuguese traditional dance, I am also questioning my point of view on it.

I will begin by analyzing the three artistic works that I have mentioned earlier. I will present two tendencies of staging, from perception of traditional practices: by essentializing and by “organicizing”. These tendencies are linked to two different ways of considering embodied experience and its context.

Let us now consider the issue of Portuguese identity. From the contextualization of the TV series *Povo que canta*, and its confrontation with two of the dance pieces, I

will reflect on the point of view adopted by the choreographers, which would include discussions on exoticism, strangeness and estrangement. I will also address the question of authority which results from an alternative point of view staged by one of the choreographers, concerning the relation between authenticity and fictionality.

### **From folklorization to essentialization: body movement and its representation**

As Castelo-Branco and Branco (2003) consider in their book on the folkloric revitalization process in Portugal, and as Guilbert and Germain-Thomas (2015) state in an editorial of the Journal *Recherche en danse*, folklorization is an institutionalized process of transformation of popular practices to serve an ideology. This transformation process involves both decontextualization and recontextualization. Decontextualization consists in separating the expressive practices from their context and from the bodies which embody them, as if music and dance could be objectified as autonomous and transportable to other bodies and purposes, without changing the practice itself.

Recontextualization can follow different ways, such as the constitution of a national company with professional dancers<sup>2</sup>. Besides new bodies, it also means a new context. Through folklorization, Portuguese social dances are performed on stage and imply a clear distinction between audience and performers. Community practices are converted into a spectacle. Dance movements are stylized with technique and virtuosity. Body expressions are standardized, as if the group was a corps de ballet, rather than a gathering of individuals in a ball.

Essentialization has a similar process. It can be defined as a creative process of deconstruction and reconstruction from a presupposition: a repertoire of choreographic movements and musical sounds exist by itself. It is independent from a context or a body, and it represents a specific culture. It implies that this representation is not questionable, neither the authority which legitimizes its authenticity.

If we look at the three artistic works, two of them illustrate the idea of essentialization. For *A Viagem*, Francisco built an artistic device structured as a set of choreographic and musical sequences, which allowed the piece to be adapted to the repertoire of each folkloric group. She worked directly with each group and with a small professional team. She deconstructed choreographic and musical materials, and reconstructed it by using some music chords instead of a full melody. She isolated gestures from one choreography and combined it with others. She also incorporated on stage some moments from the backstage, like putting on the old costumes. It seemed that she included the current social function that the folkloric group carried out.

For *Fica no Singelo*, Andermatt worked with professional dancers and musicians and she made a partnership with an association that promotes social dances in the context of ballrooms<sup>3</sup>. The process of deconstruction and reconstruction mainly focused on the musical materials as Francisco did. The limit of the creation was conditioned by the necessary recognition of the origin of the music, from Portuguese audience or connoisseurs. With regards to choreographic materials, she staged the full choreographies—with minor changes—taught by revival dance teachers. For example, in a waltz with figures dictated by a caller, she separated the

couple, but the dancers still made the movements that corresponded to the choreographic figures. She also created a new call and a new figure for a better flow on stage. In another dance, she added the use of the horizontal plane of the ground. In fact, the choreographer once told me that she did not feel the need to change anything.

By juxtaposing the works of these two choreographers in their careers, one can say that both of them are working with very diverse bodies that are clearly not professional dancers, such as disabled and elderly people, musicians or cultural amateur groups. Therefore, the idea of essentialization may be quite limited, because it is based on an absolute distinction between body movement and the context itself. Nevertheless, we can say that the two choreographers look at the movement of the body in its diversity. By giving it new clothing through a contemporary dance filter, perception on Portuguese traditional practices is updated. The choreographers deconstruct and reconstruct inside recognizable limits, without stumbling over the question of authority.

### **From body movement to a “body as a whole”: organicizing by dancing**

The conception of the body, which sustains this idea of essentialization, emphasizes the biomechanical dimension: making movement with a body, by thinking along its potentiality and its constraint. In contrast, for Mantero’s and other parts of Andermatt’s work, one can recognize another body quality and shape. This body is inspired by *Povo que canta*, the TV series dedicated to Portuguese traditional music produced during the 1970s. The two choreographers highlight one repertoire cherished by Giacometti, the work songs, by performing a body who works and

produces sounds at the same time. Or is it a body that dances and sings? In fact, the lines between work movement and dance blur with these two works. In *Povo que canta*, we see and listen to different combinations of gestures and sounds. In collective and repetitive tasks, workers synchronize their bodily gestures with rhythmic voice patterns. When performed individually, tasks such as herding, singing or playing the flute kill time. While shepherding, voiced sounds and the cattle's bells might also organize space. By choosing the expression “body as a whole”, I invoke one aspect of the body we usually tend to forget—that is its social and ecological dimension and also a body in interaction with other bodies, in a specific context. Andermatt was inspired by Giacometti’s broadcasts, as I observed during my association with the choreographer during the production of this piece *Fica no Singelo*. Actually Andermatt took dramaturgic decisions based on recorded sequences. The selection of movie fragments is running as mnemonics to the choreographer and to the dancers, even if this is not obvious to the spectator. For example, the *procissão* (procession) is the first part of the piece. In this sequence, dancers and musicians are quite free to move around the stage. They have few spatial rules concerning their displacement and their relation with each other. The frame of their expressivity is a religious procession. Another example, *Leva leva* (carry up) is linked to the episode on fishing, where collective effort is made to lift the fishing net in a boat. The dancers have to make repetitive movements until they get really exhausted so that they have to rest on stage. They help themselves with one word that they sing. *Leva leva* is one of them, as the fishermen did. The inspiration also guides the intentionality behind abstract movements. Finally, during the creation, the choreographer was correcting the body posture and dynamics of the dancers, by looking for an organically moving body, which matches with sound expression and emotion.

For Mantero, the inspiration from *Povo que canta* is explicit: film clips are projected on stage. Her performance alternates between two modes: conference and demonstration. For the conference mode, the choreographer/performer is the speaker. She is sitting on a chair with a desk in front and the screen behind her. Mantero acts as the “voice-on” of Giacometti, replacing the film’s voice-off by her live speech. Rather than providing information on the context of the practice which was filmed, she comments on her own creative process, her journey in the Caldeirão region, the mountainous part of southern Portugal, which is the theme of the piece<sup>4</sup>. For the demonstration mode, she is more active on stage. For instance, she manipulates a piece of cork and suggests verbal images of what she is doing. She reads a text of Antonin Artaud, who worked on the performative and musical dimension of the speech. She also introduces John Cage, who appears surprisingly and symbolically in that mountain. Daniel Tércio (2006) wrote that she is “choreographing the speech”. We can say that she shows to the audience her inspiration maps, the “imaginary” that she created from the films of Giacometti, her trips to south Portugal and the connection she makes with her artistic inspiration, such as the works of Antonin Artaud and John Cage.

In both cases, it seems that the “imaginary” is located in an idea of considering the body as a whole. The choreographers identify it in this traditional way of living depicted in the TV episodes, not in a repertoire of choreographic and musical elements. They present us an immersive way of moving, where the individual is not distinguishable from its surroundings, a kind of full organicity and interdependency. They are performing individuals who speak and work, who express themselves and move, and not ones who represent their identity.

## **For an alternative speech on Portuguese identity: the contribution of Giacometti**

Up to this point I have not considered the question of Portuguese identity. As a matter of fact, the processes referred above could apply to dances from different parts of the world. Actually, before *Fica no Singelo*, Andermatt worked in a similar way with Cape Verdean expressive practices and Francisco explained that her interest in Portuguese traditions came after a work she had made on traditional dance in Palestine. In a certain way, one can argue that the Portuguese identity issue is not a priority for those choreographers. Dance and music were selected and combined according aesthetic options and not author's nationality. I do not intend to define what is or isn't Portuguese identity, but I am interested in analyzing what Mantero and Andermatt look for in Giacometti's films. Firstly, I will contextualize these films so that I can analyze its perspective forty years after they were made. I will delve deeper into its affinity with exoticism and strangeness.

*Povo que canta*, the TV series, was produced in the last years of the dictatorship, in the 1970s. Giacometti had already recorded traditional music throughout the country and edited some vinyl records. The French ethnomusicologist was able to travel mainly due to his contact with the network of the members of the Portuguese Communist Party<sup>5</sup>, through his collaboration with the Portuguese composer Fernando Lopes-Graça. Giacometti recorded what was still existing, usually with what he called some hybridization (introduction of so-called modern elements in ritual or social practice), but he also had to retrace with the villagers what had been left in disuse. Actually, from the 1950s until the end of the



dictatorships in 1974, emigration affected social life since more than one million inhabitants abandoned the country for political and economic reasons, in addition to migration from inner country to main coast cities. At that time, rural traditions were exhibited through folkloric representations framed by the state propaganda<sup>6</sup>. The dictatorship created an image of rural traditions which supposedly represented the authentic Portuguese identity: happy and obedient peasants working for the nation, isolated from the negative and urban modernity. The images of *Povo que canta* were broadcasted and appeared as a contrast to the state propaganda.

In the case of folkloric representation, the aesthetic criteria surpasses the expressive practice, that is to say, that the practice had to be changed in order to match the propaganda. The imaginary is expressed through an authority which is not questioned. Concerning Giacometti's films, the aesthetic criteria is applied to the form, to the way the expressive practices are filmed and edited. The images represent an alternative imaginary to the legitimized one. Indeed, Giacometti pretended to show something different from folklore. Apart from the musical consideration, he had a political point of view and he showed on TV the bad quality of life of the people in the countryside. With very beautiful and dignified films, he denounced the condition of life of rural Portugal during the 1970s. For instance, for each interview, he asked for the name, the place of birth and the school level. The last answer was almost always the same: people assumed their illiteracy. And he showed it repeatedly. This alternative imaginary highlights an erasure of the collective memory: not remembering the bad condition of life, which led to large emigration during the 20th century and marked the modern history of Portugal, and the identity of people within and outside the country.

## **A journey in Portugal: between exoticism and strangeness—a perspective**

Forty years later, the black and white images from *Povo que canta* are still powerful, attractive and current according to the political perspective of Giacometti. Indeed, the last emigration wave, which happened during the financial crisis (2010-2014), maintains the erasure. Emigration from Portugal has been treated as a necessary phenomenon since the prime minister came on TV and encouraged youth and unemployed people to go abroad.

The number of folkloric groups grew exponentially after the end of the dictatorship and nowadays they are still dynamic, mainly in touristic regions. The State is no longer the authority that defines the authenticity of expressive practice, but other institutions preserve its legacy. Folkloric dance is mostly used as synonymous to traditional dance in everyday speech and in academic papers. Inside these different representations, the choreographers built their own journey, and experienced one Portugal they did not know: Mantero went to the Caldeirão mountains to feel the desertification, Andermatt discovered contexts where traditional music and dance are still executed, and Francisco established direct contact with folkloric groups. Thus, we come upon the notion of exoticization of Portugal: an implicit journey to somewhere unknown, a travel in their own unknown country.

The idea of a journey, which is the translation for the dance piece *A Viagem*, is also the theme of the two credits of Giacometti. Isnart (2011) describes it in a review in the Journal *Cahiers d' Ethnomusicologie* as an "ethnomusicologist safari"

(p.301). Indeed, we look at a seemingly endless road that arrives to one single village: in a Volkswagen Transporter, which passes through a river or through a road on construction, and thereafter on a donkey and finally on foot.

As Segalen (1978) writes, "the starting point of the exotic experience is common to any perception: the identification of an object. It becomes exotic when the usual process of assimilation (of the other) or of accommodation (of ourselves) is blocked and the object remains different from the subject" (as cited in Todorov 1989, p.433). A lot of studies that have been made on exoticization began with a western perspective of another culture. We can mention Heller (2009), who compiles different definitions and uses of exoticism, or Decoret-Ahiha (2005) who focuses on the question of exoticism in dance. Something is exotic because it is considered different and new, positively surprising and attractive, and also limited to an emotional and embodied dimension. Indeed, some dimensions of another culture are not considered as exotic, such as knowledge, like yoga or Chinese medicine, or a repulsive dimension like cannibalism.

Todorov (1989) also deals with the question of exoticism. He explains that knowledge is incompatible with exoticism and that ignorance is irreconcilable with the praise of the other. He concludes that exoticism is a constitutive paradox: the praise of ignorance (p.356). This paradoxical praise is present in the speech of Mantero, who clearly assumes on stage her ignorance about the *Serrenhos*—the name for the people who live in the mountain, and the object of her artistic work. During the conference mode, she explains and embodies this impossible meeting with the others, while during the demonstration mode, she interacts with them.

Considering exoticism through the prism of geography, Staszak (2008) underlines the systematic change of context on a temporal or spatial level and evokes the journey as an illustration of the idea of distance contained in exoticism.

More than 40 years after its production, we could speak about temporal distance from images of Giacometti. In this case, the perception of the other is not so much by considering him as a foreigner, but as a stranger. We cannot speak about auto-exoticization, because we have to admit that the choreographers know the reality they are discovering. Even the notion of picturesque is not suitable. In an attempt to define exoticism and its limits, some authors suggest the notion of picturesque for an “exoticism of the nearer”, like Spain or Italy are for French travelers, compared with Polynesia (Moura cited in Heller, 2009, p.7). Even if it contains the idea of original and strange, it misses the notion of self-reference by constraining the aesthetic dimension of a representation.

The “strangeness” perspective appears as the most interesting notion to define the way Mantero and Andermatt look at the films of Giacometti. Indeed, they both have selected the same “stranger” sound and “stranger” situation extracts of *Povo que canta*: a very old woman singing while handling a water mill for irrigation, vocal sounds made by young women with cattle in the mountain, vocals sounds coordinated to lift a fishing net or the incantation for the souls. This strangeness has to be contextualized by comparison with a standard. For those cases, the standard could be the tonal system which covers the music produced currently in Portugal. Moreover, we can think that the situations which are depicted do not exist anymore. That’s why we can look at them with more curiosity or affinity than consternation. Is this perspective of strangeness enough to define it as a manifestation of exoticism? If we come back to Segalen’s quote, we can conclude that there is no separation

between the object and the subject, because Andermatt and Mantero embody this strangeness. Actually, it seems that exoticism may be the affective experience of an artistic performance reception by an audience. Decoret-Ahiha (2005) noticed that even today critics have difficulty speaking about non-western dances, because of a lack of codes and references, “which reduce to a show of a strange foreigner” (p.158). Could it be the praise of ignorance, mentioned by Todorov?

If we look into Mantero’s career, Lepecki (1997) states that she has a specific way of questioning and dancing “non speakable issues”. He defines it as an “estrangement” (p.53) by referring to a Freudian use of the word *unheimlich*, which translates to an unsettling sensation that comes from an uncanny familiarity.

### **Estrangement, distancing and nearness: questioning the authority**

I will highlight now only the work of Mantero in its relationship with Giacometti’s TV séries. I will show how both share this estrangement with their audience, with different times, and in that way, how they force the audience to question itself.

In Mantero’s performance structure, we find a dynamic movement of distancing and nearness, with the *Serrenhos* people. She uses distance in her conference mode, like anthropologists do when they speak about a culture. She highlights the pseudo-neutral function of a voice-off in a documentary. As Piault (2000) shows, the voice-off tool was and is still used to contextualize the images and to give some distance from them. Nevertheless, the neutrality has been contested, because it prevents the possibility of hearing people talk, as if they did not have anything interesting to say, creating therefore an imbalance of power. It corresponds to an absolute distance between those who watch and those who participate in the documentary. Conversely,

Mantero comes nearer in the demonstration mode. She interacts directly with the *Serrenhos* in the projected films, for example, she sings for the cork man she met in the mountain. Due to the staging, she can annihilate the temporal distance between audio-visual images and the performance, and can thus interact with the past. She comes even nearer when, after her performance, she asks the audience to sing for her, while she is making a dance improvisation.

The filmic analysis of Giacometti and Tropa's production reveals the same interchange between distancing and nearness. Indeed, they used different types of frames. One fixed camera made wide shots of the landscape or of the musical expressive practice. A handheld camera made medium shots and was usually placed close to the musicians, as if the spectator was one of them. Some frames included a highlighted border with naturalistic details, as if we were looking at a timeless painting. Other frames included the images of the shooting itself, with the local audience around the camera, looking at the musicians. Here the spectator can witness the production of the film and it reduces the temporal and spatial distance between filming and watching.

Even in the use of a voice-off, we can notice the same interchange, between "neutral" ethnologist comments and a more political speech, which begins usually like "We, the Portuguese People,...". This interchange makes us think that we are all Portuguese and, at the same time, that we are so different from those Portuguese people. An uncanny familiarity emerges from this dynamic interchange between distancing and nearness. It makes us question rather than agree on what is Portuguese identity.

This questioning tool is also linked to the way we deal with authority. Indeed, one of the aspects which distinguishes the essentialized body from the organic one is the representation of what is Portuguese identity. Francisco and Andermatt accepted the discourse about Portuguese tradition and reproduced the repertoire of sounds and movements which were authenticated and legitimized, which were either the folkloric representation or the images of Giacometti.

In contrast, Mantero assumes another position. She inserts in the title of her work the adjective *ficcional* (fictional): “exercises in fictional anthropology”. Throughout the performance, she manipulates the facts and gives inaccurate information to the audience. For instance, she picks the sounds of the fishing men who lift the net in a boat and puts them in the mountain, which was the theme of her work. Because she cannot show the images of a boat in the middle of the sea, she explains that images have been lost. She shows images of women with cattle in a mountain, but she does not say that this mountain is in another region of Portugal. She even quotes a Brazilian anthropologist, who studied Amerindian people in Brazil, while referring to the Portuguese context. One cannot say that she refuses the authority of the cited authors, because she assumes her use of fictionality. In fact, she is on stage. She embodies the authority and the audience has to believe in her, like a tacit contract between actors and the audience, or like a ritual which implies trust and belief to ensure the efficiency. Thus, Mantero asks the audience to question our belief in her. We can argue that she also questions indirectly our belief in what we read or listen to, like Giacometti did 40 years earlier, when he proposed a critical and alternative perspective on inland Portugal. While giving inaccurate information, Mantero explains her true sources, so that the audience can understand it. But, of course, it depends on the knowledge that the audience has about this topic.

As Decoret-Ahiha (2005) highlights: “the language of dance presupposes a shared competence between actants and viewers from which the meaning flows and innovations are perceived” (as quoted in Kaeppler, 1985, p.158). In this case, the meaning has also to flow with knowledge of Portugal’s anthropology.

### **Thoughts on how to study Portuguese traditional dance**

With this analysis, I became aware that the way I consider a dancing body has consequences on how I approach an expressive practice and its relation with the context.

The main topic points to the question of perspective on the practice. The way Mantero and Giacometti alternate between distancing and nearness is interesting when applied to anthropological methods. The question of authority arises as a central issue since the plurality of perspectives can disrupt or enrich my reading. For critical analysis, each frame of a performance may be useful, because it contributes to illustrate the complexity of the creative process. In each frame, one can detect the traces of the construction of meaning in temporal and spatial axes, from the composition of a piece to the critic’s review. During this time, numerous perspectives cross the artistic object and change it. Due to the detour of artistic production, I was able to introduce different perspectives on Portuguese expressive practice which has helped me build my research. I could also go beyond the speech on representation and focus more on the analysis of the dance practice and the process of staging. Indeed, during this analysis, I felt some limitations in the way identity and alterity were coupled in some books on expressive practice or on exoticism. It seems that the *a priori* identity of a choreographer or a dance can be more important than what the choreographer actually composes or who executes it.



Postcolonial issues emerge quickly when an occidental choreographer works on non-western culture, as if he does not have the legitimacy to do it. In this case, this question does not apply, because the nationality of the choreographers is the same as the expressive practice they work with. However, we could imagine, like Mantero suggests with the quote of a Brazilian anthropologist, that the images of Giacometti were filmed in another part of the world.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The TV series did not reach all the countries because of the Carnation Revolution which ended the Portuguese dictatorship (1926-1974).

<sup>2</sup> Luísa Roubaud published many articles about the Portuguese company Verde Gaio, such as "Verde Gaio. Uma política do corpo no Estado Novo" in Castelo-Branco & Branco, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Created in 1998, PédeXumbo association is a unique institution funded by the Ministry of Culture to promote dance and music as a social practice. I was cultural producer in that association and took part in this creative process as an "anthropology consultant".

<sup>4</sup> Devir, a local art organization, had commissioned a performance on desertification of the mountainous part of the Algarve region.

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<sup>5</sup> The Portuguese Communist Party was a clandestine organization subject to fierce repression during the Portuguese dictatorship.

<sup>6</sup> For example, already at the end of the 1930s, the state propaganda had organized a national contest between villages to elect “the most Portuguese village of Portugal”. The contest included the representation of local expressive practices, which served as a basis for identification and systematization of so-called regional music and dance repertoires.