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### ***Murmullos del Páramo: rethinking Julio Estrada's opera through Zeami's theater Nô aesthetics***

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#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to rethink the characteristic elements in the opera *Murmullos del Páramo* of the Mexican composer Julio Estrada through Zeami's aesthetics. One of the opera's versions was performed in Tokyo in 2010. This opera was inspired by the study of sound in Juan Rulfo's<sup>1</sup> works that Estrada made in the 90's.

The aesthetics in Zeami's theater is an art of austere elements to impact the public with a fine drama. In *Murmullos* – whisperings / murmurs – Estrada searches for the core of music: the result is an austerity of sound. I want to show how these approaches join the same aesthetics.

This project will be developed into three parts:

- in the first part, I present Estrada's musical idea and his opera. He develops the concept of sound in his book *El Sonido en Rulfo: "el ruido ese"* (*The Sound in Rulfo: "that noise"*). He presents five ways of sound perception: speaking sound, environment sound, musical sound, time sound and loss sound. He explores these dimensions to create and structure his opera;
- in the second part, I present the Zeami's aesthetics through Aya Sekoguchi's recent work *L'empreinte de Zeami dans l'art japonais : La fleur et le néant* (*Zeami's mark in Japanese art: the flower and the nothingness*). Sekoguchi explores the Zeami's periods to analyze the evolution and the formation of the theater *nô* and his influence in Japanese art;
- in the last part, I analyze Estrada's approach through the concept of *ma* (starkness).

#### ***Murmullos del Páramo: conception and idea.***

Julio Estrada has a very prolific career as a "researcher musical-creator". He justifies the use of this term because of his compositional technique: the "free imagination". It means, for each musical idea, he develops a specific methodology to create the sound. He thinks the term "composer" is an archaic word connected to a school or an artistic movement.

In 1990, he wrote a book based in his own researches about the sound in several Juan Rulfo's novels. *El Sonido en Rulfo, el "ruido ese"* is the result of this analysis. This work allowed him to think about writing an opera, *Murmullos del Páramo* (*Whispers of the Páramo*) – inspired by Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo*. The story is about a man named Juan Preciado who travels to his recently death mother's hometown, Comala. Located in the Mexican

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<sup>1</sup> Mexican writer of the twentieth century.

western center state of Colima, Juan Preciado wanted to find his father, Pedro Páramo. This work has known many versions adapted to different cultures: for example: German, Spanish, obviously the Mexican one. Our work will be focused on the Japanese performance in Tokyo in 2010. The goal of this research is to describe and analyze Estrada's opera performance and consider this work in order to define his style or even to propose a theory for its stylistic work.

Our interest in researching about this version began after a lecture about the music of Japan by professor Rokurobyôue Fujita which took place in Paris in April 2016. After the lecture, we learned about the publication in French of the Aya Sekoguchi's book *L'empreinte de Zeami dans les arts japonais : la Fleur et le Néant*. In this book, Sekoguchi shows the influence of Zeami who was an actor, a playwright and a Japanese aesthician of *Theater Nô*. He lived in the fourteen century. After reading it, one of the concepts that attracted our attention was the term of *ma* and we quickly associated this concept with Estrada's opera. This word means "starkness".

We wondered if it was possible for us to answer, from a musicological position, this question: can we propose an analytical perspective through the Japanese concept of *ma* to analyze the opera? The purpose of this research is to rethink the characteristic elements in this opera through Zeami's aesthetics.

## Corpus of analysis

Our first approach to the artistic process of the opera was the reading of Julio Estrada's book *El Sonido en Rulfo: "el ruido ese"*. Rulfo describes, in his novels, Mexican landscapes and the environment in rural villages in the early twenty century. Estrada focused in these descriptions to imagine how to recreate that sound dimension. We quote Estrada:

At the beginning of my readings, I tried to capture the novel in a different way, putting my attention in allusions to rumors or to noises between the lines and then, in an extensive sense, sonorous and musical conceptions could be revealed through this approach. An overall review of very different materials between them allowed me to verify that most of the stories and the novels contain auditory narratives.<sup>2</sup>

He searched this particular perspective in the silence of the desert: the South America plain or "llano". He adds: "Sound, silence and time are local elements whose presence in the plain we perceive by the clever perceptive capacity of the author [...] The literary work of Rulfo reveals a sensory dimension, so that, by his texts could also see, touch, or smell."<sup>3</sup> He shows not only the importance of the descriptions of the traditions and customs of the people but the sounds' implications in Rulfo's literature. Summarizing his approach, Estrada categorized five sounds' perceptions:

1. Sonorities of speech, concerns the field of language, such as evocations of a dramatic and poetic character;
2. Sonorities of the environment, such as purely auditory descriptions of reality, which in Rulfo denote the qualities of an explorer of nature;
3. Sonorities of music, space of multiple evocations of instruments, songs, music, musicians or even forms of composing the literary text;

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<sup>2</sup> Julio Estrada, *El sonido en Rulfo: "el ruido ese"*, México, UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) – Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, [First edition 1990] 2008, pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

4. Sonorities of time, where the reading of Rulfo's texts is remarkable for his handling of the form and his conception of it with characteristics close to those of musical creativity;
5. Sonorities of loss, in which the play between the reality and fiction lead the writer to create environments made of murmurs, echoes, silence or fractures in the form.<sup>4</sup>

He explores these dimensions to create and structure his opera.

Our second approach was the documentary "The Murmurs of Julio Estrada", by Aurélie Semichon where the researcher musical-creator describes the elements related to the construction of the opera. In search of murmurs of the dead that pass through the artistic imagination, the documentary immerses us in the seemingly spontaneous creation of a dramatic and lucid world through testimonial interviews, lessons, rehearsals and concerts recorded from 2002 up until 2012 in Germany, France, Mexico and Japan. The documentary shows how the opera has been recreated in different countries and cultures.

This intercultural dimension needs to be explored but demands a comparative work that exceeds this work. We only focus our approach to the performance of the opera in Tokyo. The performance took place at the Spiral Hall in December in 2010. Gregorio García Karman, the electronic producer, describes this performance: "The spatial concept in this composition demands the installation a multi-channel loudspeaker dome above the audience. This dome is used for the real-time spatialization of instruments and voices as well as to project the sound of a 24 –channel tape, which is mixed live [...]"<sup>5</sup>. García Karman was responsible for the realization of the tape part, I mean, a 2-hour, 24 channel ProTools session at the Experimental studio of the SüdWestRundfunk (the Radio Television in Germany) working with Julio Estrada over a period of 6 weeks in 2006 and as a sound director of the opera in all aforementioned productions.

Our research proposal for the opera comes from the term of *ma* as we have mentioned before. Sekoguchi explains in her book the evolution of this term: from its definition in Japanese architecture, referring to space, to its use in music, referring to rhythm and the measure of time. Its first use was under the term of *ma-byōshi* (musical rhythm) in the treatise of *gagaku*. This term, imported from China, denotes equal cadences (*haku*). However, in the Nô Theater, it acquires a new meaning: Japanese music becomes indeterminate and, therefore, understood from a psycho-aesthetic dimension.

Akira Tamba defines *ma* in his book *Theory and Japanese Aesthetics* (1988). According to this author, *ma* together with the word *byōshi* loses its arithmetic meaning to designate "a non measurable free rhythm". *Ma* is defined as, and here we quote Sekoguchi, "a temporal distance between two cadences (first sense), or cadence itself (second sense)". Last one means the rhythm comprised in the execution itself, but not at the level of composition or musical structure. That *ma* is not equivalent to 'rhythm' in a general sense"<sup>6</sup>. This concept appeared in the martial arts in the seventeenth century.

*Ma*, in the martial arts is: "a decisive space for a victory or a defeat [...]"<sup>7</sup>. Sekoguchi expands this term by including eight definitions of *Kōjien*' dictionary as well as in *Iwanami*

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>5</sup> Gregorio García Karman, G. G. Karman's website, <http://info.ggkarman.de/node/100> (last accessed 12/17).

<sup>6</sup> Aya Sekoguchi, *L'empreinte de Zeami dans l'art japonais : La fleur et le néant*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2016, p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

*Kogo Jiten*'s dictionary in ancient language. We want to mention the last one: "fundamentally the *ma* is the interval that necessarily exists between two things that happen; the idea of pause arises"<sup>8</sup>. Augustin Berque, in his book *Vivre l'espace au Japon*, 1982 (*Living the space in Japan*), gives details of his definition:

they are ideas of necessity and succession, that is, of union and movement that give meaning. The *ma* is indeed a space full of meaning. Moreover, it functions in an analogous manner to symbols: at the same time that it separates, unites. Therefore, it is very difficult to define the *ma* [...].<sup>9</sup>

Another definition is provided by architect Isozaki Arata, who explains the term regarding *an Ma exhibition in NYC* in 1979: "*Ma* is an empty place where various phenomena appear, pass by and disappear [...] Thus, space was perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it; that is space was recognized only in its relation to time flow"<sup>10</sup>.

Sekoguchi states that space and time are inseparable in *ma*. From a point of view of time, Sekoguchi<sup>11</sup> mentions Christine Buci-Glucksman<sup>12</sup> who defines *ma* as an interval, emptiness and space, the 'between' in a stronger sense. This term separates, assembles and installs a breath, a fluctuation and an incompleteness that generates this relation of time to the infinity, characteristic of Japan. Because the interval establishes both "a distance and a dynamic, a vacuum and a plurality of meanings"<sup>13</sup>.

According to the aesthetics of the Kabuki Theater, the *ma* is the art that allows expressing the internal conflict or the change of feeling of the character due to the flow of the subtle time. This is achieved by the 'hold breath' technique. The intuitive decision of the performer determines the duration of flowing time.

In the work directed by Shimonaka Hiroshi, in the *Kabuki jiten* of 1983, I quote: "*ma* is a technique that allows, through the flow of time, the treatment of the emotion or the breath of the spectator that the actor performs according to his experience to get the viewer in the representation"<sup>14</sup>.

According to Sekoguchi, the *ma* can be created depending on the place where the show will take place because the energy of the actors, the *ki*, the human emotional state, is generated in different ways according to the shape of the room, the height of the ceiling, the arrangement of the seats, etc. That is, the breath will not be the same in a small place as in a large place because the most important aspect is the connection with the audience. In conclusion, the *ma* depends on the space of the place.

## Analytical perspective

This polysemic term allows us to propose an aesthetics analysis, using the Estrada's categories.

- ▶ Sonorities of speech: the recorded voice of actors from Estrada's book *El sonido en Rulfo: "el ruido ese"*;

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Aya Sekoguchi's, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>12</sup> See Christine Buci-Glucksman, *L'esthétique du temps au Japon – Du zen au virtuel*, Paris, Galilée, 2001, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Aya Sekoguchi, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

- ▶ Sonorities of the environment: the recorded ambient sounds;
- ▶ Sonorities of music: double bass, voice of soprano, trombone, *sho* and percussions instruments;
- ▶ Sonorities of time: Rulfo's texts;
- ▶ Sonorities of loss: Reality and fiction.

We quote Julio Estrada: “[...] first you have Rulfo's text spoken by the actors. The recorded ambient sounds are the second layer. The third layer is the music. The fourth layer is the dramatic representation of the Butoh dancer.”<sup>15</sup>

The analysis' perspectives of the opera could be a psycho-aesthetic dimension from Japanese Arts. The aesthetics in Zeami's theater is an art of austere elements to impact the public with a fine drama. In Estrada's opera, he searches for the core of music: the result is an austerity of sound. Sekoguchi concludes that the *nô*, the *kabuki*, the *nihon-buyô* are arts of the nothing, where the nothingness functions especially as an external activity on the expression which is the form (*sô*). The absence of expression such as non-interpretation, *mine* or *kimari*, will be the external activity of nothingness.

In Estrada's performance, his intention is: “to leave the audience helpless (as a process) with only twelve speakers that surround it with the voices and the noises of the environment, and the voices of the actors; these are phantoms that are flying”<sup>16</sup>. This idea joins the art of allusion.

The ‘allusion’, which could be called expression by the absence of expression, means that meaning is as much if not more in what is not expressed.

The opera could be analyzed:

- From the point of view of silence: the “between”, described by Christine Buci-Glucksman;
- From the point of view of space: the layout of the stage, described by architect Isozaki Arata;
- From the point of view of the interaction between actors on stage and the audience, by Shimonaka Hiroshi;
- From the point of view of time, by Julio Estrada's analysis. He proposes three different times in *Pedro Páramo*:
  - The remote past
  - The recent past
  - The present

Our analysis would include, in a later work, not only the analysis of the performance in Tokyo, but a comparative analysis of the different versions. We think the key is how time is conceived in the different cultures. It's just an intuition.

## References

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<sup>15</sup> Aurélie Semichon, *The Murmurs of Julio Estrada*, TV UNAM and Aurélie Semichon (producers), 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5I15EqvgAvY>, from 7'22'' to 8'05'', short version subtitled in English (last accessed 12/17).

<sup>16</sup> Aurélie Semichon, *The Murmurs of Julio Estrada*, TV UNAM and Aurélie Semichon (producers), 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sWYBTUh5eE>, from 27'37'' to 28'07'', original and whole version in Spanish (last accessed 12/17).

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