

The bodies of Christ:

performances and agencies of Passion in Ouro Preto

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the enactments of the Passion of Christ that occur during the celebrations of Holy Week in Ouro Preto (Minas Gerais, Brazil). I follow the actors who perform the protagonist’s role and their different forms of rehearsal in more peripheral urban regions. Their conceptions of their practices – including how they distinguish a religious performance from a theatrical enactment – are explored through the idea of a *continuum* between the domains of ritual and theater identified by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. I discuss the limits of the notion of performance proposed by the two authors and argue that, from a heuristic point of view, its semantic scope remains insufficient to explore ethnographic settings in which other agencies transcend the actor-audience duality. The analysis of the actors who play the role of Christ reveals different agencies (and intentionalities) that intervene in their performances and emphasizes the importance of the body as a primary locus of action.

Keywords: Passion of Christ; Ouro Preto; ritual performance; theatre; agency; body.

Os corpos de Cristo:

performances e agências da Paixão em Ouro Preto

Resumo

Neste artigo, analiso as práticas de encenação da Paixão de Cristo que ocorrem durante as celebrações da Semana Santa em Ouro Preto (Minas Gerais). Acompanho as experiências de ensaio e atuação dos moradores que encarnam o papel do protagonista em regiões mais periféricas da cidade. As concepções sobre tais práticas e como eles diferenciam uma performance “religiosa” de uma “teatral” serão exploradas por meio do *continuum* que Victor Turner e Richard Schechner identificaram entre os domínios do ritual e do teatro. Discuto os limites heurísticos da noção de *performance* proposta por tais autores e argumento que sua amplitude semântica não impede que ela se revele insuficiente para dar conta de situações etnográficas nas quais outras agências transcendem a dualidade ator-público. A análise das atuações dos moradores no papel de Cristo revela as diferentes agências (e intencionalidades) que afetam tais performances e destaca a importância do corpo como locus privilegiado de ação.

Palavras-chave: Paixão de Cristo; Ouro Preto; performance ritual; teatro; agência; corpo.

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Introduction

During the festive celebration of Holy Week in Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais (Brazil), a series of processions that dramatically reconstitute the key moments of the history of the Passion and death of Christ are particularly important. The figure of Jesus Christ is represented in these processions by wooden baroque sculptures, which are objects of devotion. Some view such images as being especially valuable due to their age and origin in the Iberian Peninsula. They are protected by being kept in museums of sacred art. In my interviews and conversations with the residents during my fieldwork,¹ I often heard them speak of religious images and of their relevance for this particular celebration. They always emphasized that an ancient custom was being maintained, differently from what occurs in cities where actors represent Christ – such as a famous Brazilian performance that takes place in Nova Jerusalem, Pernambuco. One employee of the local baroque churches, for example, said to me: “here, Christ was always a piece of wood, an image. (...) In Ouro Preto, a religious theatrical performance has never been contemplated. (...) We have never had a live enactment of the Passion. It was always like this.” The local newspapers also reinforced the rejection of this type of enactment. In the *O Ouro Preto* newspaper archive, I came across declarations such as: “No live figures, modernization, observes Father Francisco Barroso. Ouro Preto always will be loyal to a tradition of more than two hundred years, and we will not change anything now.”²

As my research progressed, it became clear that the utilization of baroque images explicitly validated certain ideals of antiquity and originality, also associated with the imaginary surrounding Ouro Preto itself. From the 1930s on, the town became one of the main symbols of Brazil’s cultural heritage due to its colonial urban architecture.³ First classified as a ‘Monumental City’, later designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in the 1980s, it has been transformed into a national tourist attraction. In this town, the negative attitudes expressed by various inhabitants about live theatrical representations of Christ are based on the idea that such representations threaten to ‘modernize’ Holy Week. The adoption of living actors could therefore jeopardize the values associated with “The Passion of Christ *a la Mode*” – an expression referring to religious processions based on old ‘traditions’, such as those held in others historical cities of Minas Gerais, and that attract many local inhabitants and tourists.⁴

However, beyond the perimeter of the most famous and valued region in the municipality, within the

¹ The fieldwork trips took place between 2009 and 2013, with another return to the fieldwork site made in 2015. These stays varied in duration according to the phase of the research and the demand for new information – some involved short trips of around week, others longer periods of time, around 80 uninterrupted days. The research involved journeys to Ouro Preto at different moments of the year, but always including Holy Week.

² A phrase published in the newspaper *Ouro Preto*, number 76, on April 12, 1975, which was accompanied by a brief description of the principal activities to have influenced the religious celebration that particular year. This information can be consulted on the site: http://4.bp.blogspot.com/zRJ8KQqnIQI/UoWTeWeoQVI/AAAAAAAAABxU/vz9MgBivBN8/s1600/Página+1_.jpg

³ The city of Ouro Preto was elevated to ‘National Monument’ status in the 1930s by the former Service for National Historical and Artistic Patrimony (SPHAN) under the Getúlio Vargas government. During this period, modernist politicians and artists like Manuel Bandeira celebrated the preservation of Ouro Preto and other cities in the interior of Minas Gerais as objects of historical patrimony. Discussing the ostracism suffered by Ouro Preto after the transfer of the state capital to Belo Horizonte, a city created at the end of the nineteenth century, the Pernambucan poet affirmed: “Ouro Preto has not changed over the years, which explains its incomparable charm” (Bandeira 2009:59). He also authored a tourist book on the city, published in 1938 after being commissioned by Rodrigo Melo Franco de Andrade, then director of SPHAN.

⁴ The expressions cited here refer to the title as well as to an excerpt from the article published in the travel section of the Rio to Janeiro newspaper *O Globo* on February, 25 2010 (source: <http://oglobo.globo.com/boa-viagem/semana-santa-paixao-de-cristo-mineira-3048979>. Consulted May 2016).

areas considered most distant from the urban center, different groups of inhabitants enact the Via Sacra (also known as the Stations of the Cross) during Holy Week, taking on the roles of biblical characters, including the protagonist himself, Jesus Christ. In these zones of the city, where neither the effects of conservation policies for preserving patrimony nor the presence of tourists are readily evident, other ways of appropriating Holy Week and the period in which this festival takes place can be observed.

Interested in knowing more about the activities that are not included in most studies about the city and its status as a model of architectural heritage, I propose to analyze the practices of reenactment of the Christian narrative in Ouro Preto that do not have much tourist appeal. In order to examine the different meanings that can be deduced from this *other* form of representing Christ, I observed the actors who take on this role, how they rehearse and the ways in which they interact with their audience and/or theatrical directors, since these factors tend to affect the outcome of their performances. The analysis of the effects of their dramatic performances will thus allow us to understand the type of personal and bodily changes that the performers experience.

Complementary to this analysis, I will investigate the native modes of classifying and distinguishing religious reenactments from theatrical performances of the Passion of Christ. In the process of crosschecking native perceptions with a certain analytical framework, I suggest a counterpoint to the *continuum* that Victor Turner (1982) and Richard Schechner (1985) identified between the realms of ritual and theatre. These particular authors adopt an approach based on the anthropological use of the notion of performance – a term that refers to a large range of events and cultural practices and which emphasizes the corporeality of the performers involved. As I reflect on the analytical appropriateness (or not) of the notion of performance, I argue, based on my research in Ouro Preto, that different forms of agency may have an effect on the same body and transcend the actor-audience duality that marks the distinctions between ritual and theater in the works of Turner and Schechner. Finally, I will show that the performances of Christ in Ouro Preto confer centrality to their active and operating bodies, as protagonists of these reenactments. Their performances will also give us a glimpse of bodily composition that differs from the unitary conception of the human person and from the ideas associated with the Western modern ‘individual’ (Mauss 2003; Dumont 2000; Duarte & Giumbelli 1995).

Viewing Ouro Preto from its margins

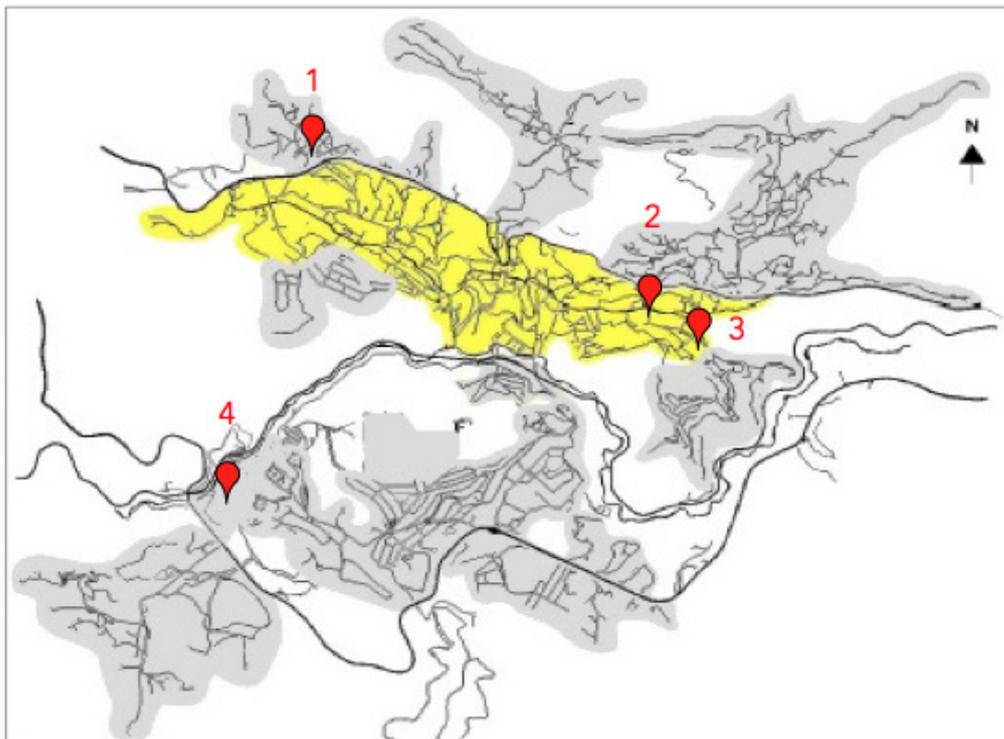
Map 1 –The Minas Gerais state (MG), its capital Belo Horizonte and the Ouro Preto location



source: <http://viagem.uol.com.br/guia/cidade/ouro-preto.jhtm>

I begin with a brief presentation of the contexts that provide the setting for the dramatizations of the Passion, examining the activities and tensions that underlie the theatrical performances by actors associated with three main groups. Two of these groups are involved in performing the Via Sacra in different locations: one in the neighborhood of São Cristóvão and the other in the regions of Padre Faria and Saramenha. The third group performs mainly in the Santa Efigênia neighborhood. Some of these neighborhoods (like Padre Faria and Santa Efigênia) date back to the period when Ouro Preto was founded, known then as Vila Rica, in the eighteenth century, and combine “African and Afro-Brazilian elements present in the local/regional imagination” (Lima Filho 2010: 210). Others, such as São Cristóvão and Saramenha, are more recent districts, dating from the 1950-60s and the development of local industries. Initially these areas were home to workers from these industries and later on they were affected by the growth of the Federal University of Ouro Preto, UFOP. Rather than focusing on the specificities of each neighborhood, however, I am interested in exploring the socialites they share. This will allow us to look at Ouro Preto from the perspective of its hills and boundaries, in contrast to the customary view from its historic center.

Map 2 – The urban area of Ouro Preto and its historical center highlighted. Each number corresponds to the starting point or location for the staging of the performances analysed: 1- São Cristóvão neighborhood; 2 - Santa Efigênia’s parish; 3 - Padre Faria neighborhood; 4 - Saramenha neighborhood.



source: (Salgado 2010:34)

The actors who will permit us, further on, to gain access to the pragmatics involved in the dramatic representation of Christ belong to groups of youths and adults who, beyond their individual singularities, share particular ways of living in the city. These experiences are important to our analysis insofar as they help explain the formation of the collectives involved in the representations of the Passion. In the São Cristóvão neighborhood, for example, the Via Sacra are staged every Good Friday, always during the early hours of the morning when the procession heads towards the Church of Nossa Senhora do Pilar. There, the story recounted in the dramatization connects with the history of the Congregation of the Virgin Mary

– a Catholic lay association composed primarily by inhabitants of the region. The association meets regularly to pray novenas and organize festivals dedicated to various saints, but also engages in charitable activities.⁵ Iris is a congregation member and has been responsible for organizing the Via Sacra for the last 20 years. According to her own account, during preparations for Holy Week the congregation members mobilize children, youths and adults from the neighborhood, including family members and people not belonging to the group, to make up the cast needed to reenact the Via Sacra. In total they typically muster up to one hundred people to perform the biblical roles.

In the rehearsals, which begin soon after the end of Carnival and the start of Lent, ‘youths’ – a notion that does not delimit a precise age group, but is widely employed in this context – visibly take on most of the roles. Different ways of relating to the religious content during the festival are observable among these young people. Some maintain a distance from the Church’s regular religious activities (including religious services) but recognize the Holy Week as a special moment and a mobilizing factor for wider participation – including the involvement of family members and friends in various activities typical of this period. A smaller number of young people attend prayer meetings, work as catechists in local churches, or belong to secular fraternities dedicated to specific saints where they interact with older members. This dynamic, which unites people with varying degrees of commitment to year-round religious activities, reproduces a wider logic operating among the participants of the Passion of Christ performances, both in the outlying neighborhoods of Ouro Preto and in the city as a whole.⁶

Nonetheless, those responsible for the dramatic performances in São Cristóvão told me that an important objective motivating their work was to involve young people in religious activities, thereby protecting them from certain ‘dangers’ – including the risks associated with drugs and criminality. This kind of talk, which depicts youths as an object of special attention for families and social institutions, is also found among local religious figures (Catholics and Evangelicals from diverse denominations) and tends to overlook the specific differences between neighborhoods, emphasizing above all the shared strategies for dealing with certain social problems that are especially entrenched in more peripheral urban regions.

When I had the opportunity to observe the performances in these outlying regions of the city, I learnt about difficult family losses, such as the suffering of a black woman who played the role of Maria in the Via Sacra performed in São Cristóvão. According to Iris, coordinator of the group in question, this woman had an unparalleled ability to express the pain endured by the Virgin Mary as a mother wracked by the flagellation and death of her son, Jesus Christ, since she herself had suffered the same kind of experience. Three times. She lost her first son to a motorcycle accident. The second was killed by the police in his own home. The third, also murdered, was the victim of an ambush planned by her former daughter-in-law with another man. This extreme case, involving a relatively unknown Ouro Preto resident, provides an insight into the concerns expressed over the fate of young people and into the ethical values associated with family and neighborly relations, defended as principles that need to be cherished and ensured at all costs.

In Santa Efigênia parish, the performances held during Holy Week are linked to the Youth Ministry, another lay group that, as well as spreading a specific religious message, also focuses on the ‘social dimension,’ as members put it. In this other region of Ouro Preto, the group has produced the play known

⁵ The group assists neighbors and friends experiencing economic or health problems, as well as people living in situations of vulnerability. In previous years, some members had visited the local jail and asylum, taking food and cutting people’s hair and nails. More recently, they have provided coffee and cookies at Ouro Preto’s municipal funeral parlor, distributing a form of anonymous ‘charity’ to the families and other mourners. The food is left in situ and, immediately after the wake, the space is cleaned without those offering this assistance being observed.

⁶ As I was able to observe during my field research, the motivations for taking part are diverse: some people volunteer out of a clear religious identification, some are persuaded by friends and family, while others consider the festival to be an icon of local identity, part of Ouro Preto’s culture, without implying any adherence to Catholic religious practices. Some people criticize the position of the Church in general, including its effects on the practices of local priests, but see this moment as being ‘for everyone’ and not necessarily pertaining solely to the religious sphere.

as 'Auto da Paixão' (Passion of Christ) every year for the last decade.⁷ The young men and women from this group "come from all different hills of the city," explained Xicó, responsible for putting on the performance each year.

In 2012, Xicó was 28 years of age. His own personal history attests to an alternative path to the risks and violent acts that, as mentioned above, have had such an impact on the urban experience of some inhabitants. When I met him, Xicó was working in one of the sectors of the Department for Cultural Promotion in the municipal government. Himself a past member of the Youth Ministry, he became involved in staging religious plays while completing his undergraduate degree in performing arts at UFOP. This context, he said, had given him the kick start for forming a theatrical group:

During the same period, the coordinator [of the Santa Efigênia Youth Ministry] asked me to run a theater project with the kids, exploring the theme "We are who we can be, we are the dreams that we can dream." I had to create a scene based around this theme. So I said, okay, I'll use everything I've learned so far with this group of kids. So we put on a theatrical show and it was really good [...] Afterwards, the kids asked me when were we going to put on a performance again? When could we create another play? And then, one day as I walked past the front of Santa Efigênia Church with my brother, I said to him: Bro, this stairway is very beautiful, isn't it? As a musician himself, he is sensitive to this kind of thing and he replied: Yes, well... we can do something here. And so I said: *Let's do the Passion of Christ here. Let's put on our Holy Week right here.* (My emphasis)

The reference to 'our' Holy Week, as a new activity to be carried out on the site of the church in question, sheds light on the differences identifiable between this initiative and the 'traditional' celebrations cited earlier. As he narrates how the theatrical piece directed by himself became a reality, Xicó's discourse provides a glimpse into certain "effects derived from the place itself" (Bourdieu 2003) revealed in the social life of contemporary Ouro Preto.⁸ Simultaneously, the distinctions that impact urban space are accompanied by variations in the ways of dealing with the time of the festival itself, as well as its main theme (the Christian drama), as we shall see below.

The tensions between religion and theater

Having considered the social setting within which the different Holy Week performance groups are immersed, we can turn to examine how their activities are organized, as well as the motivations of those actors who perform the role of Christ and, moreover, the dilemmas associated with playing this specific character.

I should emphasize from the outset that we are dealing with concurrent performances centered around the same theme – the passion and the death of the Son of God made man – expressed through different modes of dramatization. Some of the groups cited are involved in reenacted Via Sacras, as participants in cortèges in which actors and spectators move as a group through certain streets of their own

⁷ The Auto is a theatrical genre of European origin, frequently oriented towards religious matters and occasions (such as Christmas and Easter) or towards themes considered to be noble. The genre became especially popular in the sixteenth century. It can be characterized as a narrative made up of verses and constructed in an allegorical mode. In France and England, the sacramental Autos were known as 'Miracles' or 'Mysteries.' In Colonial Brazil, religious figures like José de Anchieta utilized them for the purpose of catechism. See Teixeira 2005; Bordier 1998; Magaldi 1999.

⁸ As Bourdieu (2003) pointed out, the structures of social differentiation – based on the availability or scarcity of symbolic and financial capital, combined with other factors, such as ethnicity – produce specific conceptual and physical ways of coping with the symbolic displacements generated by the adoption of a social position located at the margin of any given 'center.' This does not mean that the inhabitants of a city region find themselves isolated within the areas where they live, but rather that they perceive – in specific ways and from distinct viewpoints determined by their social position – what it means to be a part of 'this' or 'that' space. This perception, in turn, affects the level of access that they possess to certain places.

neighborhoods, heading towards a specific church in the neighboring area.⁹ In this dramatic model, performers and the audience follow a pre-established sequence of ‘stations’ that scenically compose the story of the Passion in a progressive manner, beginning with Christ’s condemnation before Pontius Pilate and ending with his burial.¹⁰ The performances are typically guided by a narrator who announces each of the stages, thus providing a framework that orients the actions to be performed subsequently by the actors on the streets.

In the Via Sacra dramatization, temporal and spatial dimensions must be taken into account as concomitant factors. A clear opposition exists between the series of scenes composing the story and the movement through urban surroundings without any prior connection to the narrative and often very different from one another. A large number of the places through which the Via Sacra proceeds over the two to three kilometer course are not adapted to compose a theatrical setting. Consequently, the journey between each new space is accompanied by a search to redefine the environment concerned, investing it with new meaning. Moreover, their journey takes them through places not necessarily deemed ‘sacred’ by either the group or their audiences.¹¹

Faced with various external factors capable of distracting the spectators accompanying the Via Sacra, the actors immerse themselves in their roles to hold the attention of their followers, ensuring that the story moves forward dynamically despite the potential disruptions from the surrounding area. According to those involved in the drama, these outside factors can be overcome by approaching the dramatic performance in the right way. While for some people performing a simple role in the narrated story was perceived as an enjoyable pastime, mixing playfulness with respect during the actual moment of the procession, for others the exposure involved in playing certain roles meant assuming greater responsibility. This is especially true for those playing unique characters with a specific involvement in the Story of the Passion and who raise greater expectations among the spectators – the case, for instance, of Veronica (Pereira 2015). Along these lines, the highest level of responsibility is associated with the role of Christ.

According to Carlos, a civil engineer about fifty years old who works at UFOP and plays the role of Jesus in the Via Sacra staged in the Saramenha and Padre Faria regions, his performance is religious rather than artistic in nature. Having played the same role for some years without any expectation of a career in theatre or learning more about drama theory, he said of himself and his colleagues: “We don’t like to be called a theater group. Because we don’t do theater! No offense to anyone from other groups of course.”

During the period of rehearsals for the Via Sacra, he says, before memorizing their lines and stage directions, the group always sets aside a moment for prayer – which may last up to an hour (a practice in

9 I refer here to two groups: one that performs in the São Cristóvão neighborhood, and the other in Saramenha and Padre Faria. The presentations in the latter two neighborhoods, which are some distance from one another, take place on different days. In Padre Faria, the Via Sacra that I accompanied took place on Wednesday evening of Holy Week. In Saramenha, the event takes place on Good Friday during the day.

10 According to Catholic tradition, and as can be observed in diverse native documents and in the paintings decorating the interior of various Catholic churches, the Via Sacra (or Stations of the Cross) unfolds as follows: First station: Jesus is condemned to death; Second: Jesus carries the cross on his back; Third: Jesus falls down for the first time; Fourth: Jesus meets his mother; Fifth: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross; Sixth: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus; Seventh: Jesus falls for the second time; Eighth: Jesus meets the women from Jerusalem; Ninth: Jesus falls for the third time; Tenth: Jesus is stripped of his clothes; Eleventh: Jesus is nailed to the cross; Twelfth: Jesus dies on the cross; Thirteenth: Jesus is taken down from the cross; Fourteenth: Jesus is laid to rest in the tomb.

11 Many of Ouro Preto’s Evangelical churches are located outside the central region, meaning that some of them may be situated along the routes taken by the Via Sacra. The time when I accompanied one group in Padre Faria area, the cortège passed in front of the Quadrangular Gospel Church. On the night of the performance, in 2012, when we reached that point of the path, some of the participants (especially those who are youngest) made a point of praying aloud, as though they were responding to the sound of the religious service unfolding inside the Church. For more information on religious disputes in Minas Gerais, see Gracino Júnior 2008. For information about other contexts involving Christian inter-religious disputes that have processions and acoustic expressions as one of their major components, see Tamimi Arab 2015.

tune with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement with which the group identifies).¹² In fact, it was during one of the group's prayer meetings that his name was put forward as actor for the role, a proposal that he accepted. In this way, the dramatic performance is translated into a religious, rather than artistic, instrument.

If we turn our attention to another collective, such as the Santa Efigênia youth group, we discover that the role-playing experience there is understood quite differently. Firstly, the dramatization takes the form not of a Via Sacra but an Auto (a Mystery Play, as explained in an earlier footnote) performed in a fixed location – frequently in front of the church from which the parish derives its name, or on its steps – which becomes the theatrical setting for the performance. In this form of presentation, the spectators remain in one particular spot, while the play's characters move on and off stage as they tell the story. The use of the vicinity of the baroque church as a setting also transforms the Auto into an activity connected to religious space, readily identifiable from its material form and visible symbols. The church building reinforces the meaning of the drama performed in front of it, and vice-versa.

The differences between the groups do not end there, however. Carlos (who plays the role of Christ in the aforementioned Via Sacra) sees his performance as the outcome of a religious dynamic – which includes the practice of collective prayer before rehearsals. In the case of the Auto, the performance tends to follow a different course. During my conversations with Xicó, the director of the latter group, he explained that various teenagers involved with the Holy Week production no longer participated in the Youth Ministry, although it remained a gateway for those wanting to become involved in the drama group's activities. Xicó did not consider himself to be an active member of the church either, despite his family's Catholic background. He saw his acting as simply the work of a professional in the performing arts: "The work I do with the group is based around theater itself. The aesthetic approach is theatrical in inspiration," he claimed.

One of the central characteristics of this kind of work can be perceived in the way through which the Auto is produced, year after year. Rather than sticking to a fixed script (like the speeches pronounced by the Via Sacra characters and narrators), the production of the Auto play makes use of

collective creation. In my case, for example, everything I know about the Bible I've learnt from them. I knew very little. There's a guy who has been to the seminary, he's no longer there today, but he knows a lot [...] We also work heavily with improvisation. The text is very much a creation of the group [...] So it really emerges from a process of creation. It is theater, I don't do it as though it were the Via Sacra! Of course some parts are more religious, sure. But this is our [theatrical] path.

His approach to the Auto, open to the intervention of the participating actors, points to the domain recognized as theatre production. Furthermore, the activity results from preparing (potential) actors in a kind of experimental laboratory involving exercises in improvisation, which not only train the young people in acting skills but also afford the director a parameter for choosing who should play which part.¹³

On the other hand, the stimulus given to creativity and the adaptation of the Passion of Christ leads, at some level, to the secularization of an activity pursued within a wider ritual setting deeply imbued

¹² The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) movement began in the USA in the 1960s, which became more prominent in Brazil in the 1990s and after. In Ouro Preto, the presence of this particular strand of Catholicism is still limited compared to the public presence and influence of the Third Orders and the lay fraternities lay organizations, which tend to adopt other devotional practices and forms of meeting. On the prayer practices characteristic of the Brazilian CCR, see Pereira 2009.

¹³ This procedure, which stands out as one of the trademarks of Xicó's work in Ouro Preto, is similar to the dynamic observable in other places, such as Congonhas, another historical town in Minas Gerais state. According to Júnia Pereira (2009), a scenic arts researcher who had previously performed in the Auto produced in Congonhas, there has been a gradual professionalization of the Passion of Christ over recent decades. As the performance began to be directed by theater professionals – and no longer by local residents mobilized by the festive and religious context of Holy Week – "the figures acquired greater psychological depth and richness of character than before," generating a dramatic 'humanization' of the characters themselves (Pereira 2009:70).

with religious meaning. Depending on the style of representation adopted, whether specific characters are involved or the Christian story, audience reaction often takes the form of criticism – especially from inhabitants, lay church members and some priests who deal everyday with the story reenacted in the Auto. The negative reaction of the public, depending on how they respond to the improvisations of the actors, stems, Xicó argues, from the fact that “people don’t understand that it is a theatrical piece” -- despite all the artistic techniques and aims involved in the work.

The dissonance observed between the group’s proposal and the response of spectators seems to reflect problems linked to theatre and stage activity itself. In the Ouro Preto context, dramatic representation, as one of the forms of producing a copy – “the art of becoming something else, of becoming Other” (Taussig 1993: 36) – highlights the problem of duplicating something that, due to its sacred nature, should not be diluted in the domain of things, people and profane spacetime. As Duvignaud (1973:86) suggests, the problematic aspects involved in the representation of a “a sacred scene in flesh and bone” are that it makes use of common people, who are transformed into “playing the role of a divine being.” The author describes this procedure as a form of “*new incarnation*, [which] renders present and carnal that which should remain secret” (ibid).

In this sense, the enactment of the Christian story seems to respond to the problem of never being understood solely as pure fiction, since it is connected to a type of account (Biblical) “that does not want us to forget our reality during some hours, (...) but rather to overlook it; we should incorporate its world into our own life, feeling ourselves to be members of its universal-historical structure,” as Auerbach (2013:12) suggested in his study of mimesis and the representation of reality in western literature, including the Bible.

In the case under study here, the criticisms made of the theatrical productions staged by Xicó’s group have forced the director to recognize the difficulties involved in getting the audience to accept their Auto, primarily due to its association with the religious and ritual time of Holy Week. In his own words:

The fact that it involves the Passion of Christ makes it even more complicated [to deal with the general public]! Wow, Holy Week! – Here in Ouro Preto there’s a lot of that... It’s a cultural thing: ‘Ah, they’re messing with Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ!’ So, I can’t mess with that. So I experiment with the narrators instead, or with Judas...

Seen within this context, it is interesting to note the singularity of the figure of Christ in relation to others, like Judas, his antagonist. Compared to the ‘saint of saints,’ of which all of the rest are emulations (Jolles 1976: 41), the latter figure – just like those who accompany the death of Jesus and his later resurrection – appear in an inferior position in terms of sacredness and, therefore, in terms of the interdictions surrounding them. Precisely for this reason, Judas and the other apostles can be treated with more freedom than the main protagonist. This in turn reveals the existence of specific guidelines orienting the working methods concerning the central character of the drama. Let’s examine this topic in more detail.

Thinking through performance and agency

In working with the human depiction of the figure of Jesus, Xicó interacts with young people who live out this role in diverse manners. Some of these experiences, though, end up complicating – if not inverting – the separation that Xicó identifies between a theatrical activity like his own, and a religious and devotional activity like the *Via Sacra*.

One of the actors directed by Xicó was Daniel, a young man from Ouro Preto who was then a 19 year-old student enrolled on a technical course in mining. Daniel had performed the role of Christ for the past three years. He had been a member of the Youth Ministry before joining the theater group, where he also begun

to participate in physical exercises and other forms of preparation for the public presentation of the Auto. During this training process, he was chosen by the director – “It wasn’t me who asked to play the role,” he remarked – because of his evident talent for acting. Nevertheless, Daniel expressed no desire to pursue an artistic career. His perception of the activity was inspired by the following line of reasoning: “In terms of life generally, theater itself is very good because it allows us to develop skills. It helps you become calmer when speaking in public.” This apparent lack of commitment to the theatrical profession took on another nuance, however, when it came to representing the most important character of the Auto. He said the following about his performance:

Look, it was a really great training experience, it really was. *The first time*, the first year I was involved, it was a bit strange. I didn’t feel much... and indeed, as a result, *I didn’t feel very comfortable in the role*. The second year I tried to read more, I even read the Gospel, to learn about the story told in the Bible, to get a better idea of the role and not just ‘say what he said.’ So, *as I dug deeper*, I tried to get to know more, to look at those images and so on [like the paintings and effigies of saints on display in the city’s churches) and *it ended up being a formative experience for me*. A personal training, in fact, a religious training, a human training. (my emphasis)

Daniel’s account provides an insight into some of the consequences of performing the role of Jesus during Holy Week. First of all, we can note that his training in drama techniques – combined with his personal skill, attested by the director who chose him from the pool of available actors – was not enough to prevent him from feeling uncomfortable during his first experience of playing the role. In compensation, his performance the following year was preceded and complemented by a search for greater knowledge and understanding of the character/divinity in question. During this process, alongside the acting itself, Daniel claimed that he had gone through a kind of ‘training’ on multiple levels – personal, religious and human.

As we can observe, theater, recognized and produced as such, lead this young man to develop an interest in Christ and fostered a deepening of his religiosity – albeit unintentionally – which to a certain extent can be likened to the kind of involvement expressed by participants of the Via Sacra performances. Although, as we saw earlier, ‘religion’ and ‘theater’ are interpreted as opposing activities from a native viewpoint, closer observation of the acting experiences involved reveals a similarity in the outcomes generated by the pragmatics of rehearsal and performance in both domains. Whether arriving via a theatrical or religious path, the actors recognize that they were affected by the role performed. In this sense, the *continuum* that Victor Turner (1982) and Richard Schechner (1985) identified between ritual and theater can be observed in the context analyzed here, but only insofar as this fact is recognized as a specific aspect of these activities – rather than an innate characteristic of these types of cultural expression. What can be highlighted as a common element, in this case, are the effects associated with the performances in question.

A polysemic term, *performance* can be defined as a form of artistic expression typical of the second half of the twentieth century: experimental, reflexive and transitory, which does not necessarily aim to produce a final product, an autonomous work of art, and focuses on the creative act directed towards the body of the artist herself (including body art) and her actions within a given environment, interacting with a specific kind of audience (Goldberg 2007). In complementary form, the expression *performance* began to be applied in the 1960s counterculture movement in the United States to denominate an alternative to classical drama based on a written script, favoring instead a so-called environmental theater and experimental theater – a topic that Richard Schechner (2012) explores directly in his work.

In his exploration of the anthropology and theories developed by Victor Turner, Schechner (2012: 38) connects *performance* to the notions of liminality, social drama, ritual and *communitas* that marked the career of the anthropologist. Turner, for his part, found himself to be living through a singular moment in his career, as he noted a progressive “conceptual metamorphosis” that reflected a “definite incorporation

of the western world and of an ample comparative perspective as particular concerns of this author,” as Cavalcanti (2013:413) observes.¹⁴ In this particular context, the anthropologist relies on the range of meanings that can be linked to a ritual and to its associated symbols – and, notwithstanding, to the term *performance* itself – in order to comprehend the phenomenon as a type of action: “To perform,” Turner wrote (1982:91), “is thus to complete a more or less involved process rather than to do a single deed or act.” An activity that, far from being self-complete, is connected to other meanings that influence the act in question.

Schechner (1985) also makes use of this acceptance to understand performance as a “restored type of behavior,” a kind of double action.¹⁵ Hence, when Daniel, the young Christ figure who we have been following, tells us that he passed through a period of ‘training’ and that his acting experience was accompanied by a wide range of meanings that directly affected him, we can observe that the activity in question closely resembles the more anthropological use of the expression.

Still on the notion of performance, Turner wrote:

Schechner’s ‘performance’ is a fairly precise labelling of the items in the modern potpourri of liminoid genres – but it indicates by its very breadth and tolerance of discrepant forms that a level of public reflexivity has been reached totally congruent with the advanced stages of a given social form. (Turner 1979:497)

The association between performance and the notion of ‘liminoid’ is a common point to the interpretations made by Turner and Schechner of these particular terms and is worth highlighting. Based on the model of successive stages (separation, margin or *limen*, and reintegration) that Arnold Van Gennep (2011) identified in rites of passage, Turner perceives that liminal situations, those that encompass experiences lived out on the margins, can be characterized by the inclusion of certain ‘agents’ – whether these are people, groups, ritual artifacts, or so on – occupying social positions involving instability and ambiguity, betwixt and between, suspending their previously defined roles (Turner 1967). However, in contrast to the ‘traditional’ African environments that served as the focus of Turner’s ethnographies for various decades, and where public rituals typically involve the participation of villagers, with important social effects for their continuity as a group (Turner 1996), ‘liminoid’ processes can be more commonly attributed to post-industrial, capitalist societies where participation in an artistic or ritualistic process does not involve the same degree of control or sanction. In the modern societies, the types of cultural expression and social dramatization that produce liminal situations, such as the theatre (classical or experimental), can be especially influenced by the individual choices of performers and of the wider public, enabling them to be readily assimilated into leisure and entertainment (Turner 1982).¹⁶

Turner and Schechner also agreed that the kind of relationship established between performers and their audiences is an essential element in distinguishing theatre from ritual, despite the various points held in common. This observation deserves our attention. While the former stated: “Ritual, unlike theatre, does not distinguish between audience and performers” (Turner 1982:112), the latter added: “Theater comes

14 The analysis made by Cavalcanti (2013) of the main field research and central notions shaping Turner’s career shows that the analytical depth attained by the latter was not merely the result of his meeting with Schechner in 1977. In fact, it had already been foreshadowed in publications such as *The Ritual Process*, published in 1969, and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, in 1974. In these works, Turner began to use concepts previously linked to his dense ethnographic work among the Ndembu, employing them now to reflect on (new and old) political and religious movements, as well as counterculture movements among Euro-American societies.

15 Schechner (1985) also refers to two dimensions derived from every performance, namely: *transformation* and *transportation*. The former relates to the consequences of the performance, its effects on performers and/or the wider audience, while the latter is associated with the sensorial and intellectual shifts produced by the performative act, which may also be reflected in the actor and the spectators. Rubens Alves da Silva (2005) argues that Schechner’s ‘restored behavior’ points to a model of action/performance realized through a process of rehearsals and research. Pursuing this line of thought, Silva suggests that this way of understanding performance can also be compared to the body techniques described by Marcel Mauss.

16 Moreover, in contrast to the liminal, liminoid forms “occur on the margin of central processes of social production (in this sense they are less ‘serious’); and can be considered to be more creative (and even subversive)” (Dawsey 2009:372).

into existence when a *separation* occurs between audience and performers” (Schechner cited in Turner, *ibid*). The framework in which these authors analyze these activities is influenced, therefore, by the type of relationship forged between two central terms – the senders and receivers of a message, for example – both of which are conceived within their settings of action.

Returning to the Daniel’s account of the effects arising from his performance in Ouro Preto, however, we can observe that he attests to a presence – unnamed – that accompanies him when he acts out the scenes that form part of Christ’s story. This presence, as we can perceive in his discourse, extends beyond his own acting self and likewise beyond the public with whom he interacts:

We don’t leave there the same person. And so, during the play, we feel various things as we see that... well, we sense that there is something greater, you know? By playing that particular role *at that moment, I am not alone in playing Christ*, you know? I have... I feel that in doing this I have power over a lot of people. The ‘power’ I’m talking about is like this: it means touching people, being able to move them, deliver a word, a message. So, *I feel I’m not alone when doing this*. So when I decided to get involved, we have to prepare ourselves spiritually, you know? Because it’s a big thing. It’s a real responsibility. It’s not just any role, that’s for sure. (my emphasis)

When he plays the role of the holy figure, Daniel finds himself in an ambiguous position in which the activity that he performs as an actor engenders effects (on himself and on the audience) that escape his control – that is, they reveal the possibility of a force that exceeds his person without, though, nullifying him. It is “not just any role” because it involves a responsibility and a degree of emotional involvement of the actor and of those around him. Furthermore, when Daniel states that he was not alone at the moment of playing the role, he highlights the intervention of a new term in the actor-audience relationship, one that cannot be subsumed in either of these two poles.

When we compare Daniel’s narrative with that of Carlos, the Via Sacra performer discussed earlier, we can observe that the third agency in question, which simultaneously exceeds and interacts with the actor and audience, concerns the key figure from the story. When I asked what had been the most remarkable moment during his performance of Christ, Carlos replied:

I had done the first fall [corresponding to the third Station of the Cross], I was carrying the cross like this [on his back]... So then a woman arrived, looked at me...She was really looking at Jesus, but she looked at me and asked for forgiveness, because her husband had died there, he’d been run over by a car on that very spot. Her son also had a drug problem, and she opened her mouth to cry. As I looked at her, in my heart I could only think: Oh Lord, I am not Jesus! So then Nice [a friend] said: Pick it up! Pick up the ball and pass it on! So, I ended up acting as an intermediary. I picked up her prayer and said: take it, Jesus! And [she] cried, and cried, and cried!

Exploring the connections between the accounts and experiences of these two Ouro Preto performers, we can infer that, on one hand, Christ is like a divine prototype who – within a specific ritual setting – is imitated by an actor who ends up personifying one of his performed copies. In other words, the latter offers the former his own body within an artistic-religious setting that reconstitutes Christ’s (mythic) story in the present. Simultaneously, though, this living copy, due to the performer’s capacity to look like the socially conceived and recognized image of the sacred *persona*, becomes a physical and visual medium between the audience and Christ – thereby allowing spectators and devotees to interact with a particular modality of Christ’s presence and agency.

By agency, I mean the specific sense attributed to this notion by a particular strand of the anthropological literature, connecting authors as diverse as Alfred Gell and Talal Asad. According to the first of these authors, ‘actions’ imply the idea of an *intention*, which necessarily presupposes the existence

(real or abducted) of some kind of agent (Gell 1998: 16-17). In contrast to 'actions,' which at some level infer a human actor, 'happenings' are associated with events devoid of any intentionality, like the laws of nature, for instance. Gell adds that an agent is one who causes an action, constituting its source, and not necessarily what realizes the action at a physical level. Analyzing the agency of 'works of art' or 'art objects' – which are defined by their position within a relational field, rather than by any particular intrinsic, material or aesthetic trait – the author argues that they can 'act,' but not in a self-sufficient manner, since they are continuously immersed in different forms of human intentionality.

Asad, on the other hand, employs the notion of agency to analyze the ideas of pain and suffering operating in other historical contexts, including early Christianity. For him, agency is a complex term whose meanings emerge from semantic and institutional networks that define and sustain particular modes of connecting people, things, and so on (Asad 2003:78). Although he addresses a very different topic to the one discussed by Gell, the author reinforces the idea that agency is deduced from an intention. Furthermore, he emphasizes that agency does not necessarily coincide with an individual biological body, nor with the consciousness supposedly possessed by it (ibid.:74). Corporations and institutions can also be thought of as agents, though they lack subjectivity. At the same time, Asad deconstructs the idealized opposition between agency and passivity (or passion, to use his own term) by citing what occurs in crimes of passion, for example. In such cases, it is frequently argued that the person did not use their reason – a key factor in the (western) definition of individuality – to calculate the perpetrated act, as though they had been replaced by an external force, unrelated to their intention (ibid:75).

Another aspect mentioned by Asad concerning the notion of agency allows us to return to Carlos's narrative about his performance in the Via Sacra. He observes that agency may signify 'representation' in the sense that the actions of a particular agent are taken to be carried out not by himself but by whom he represents. Such reasoning can influence political theories as well as representational theater. According to the author: "The actor's agency consists not in the actions of the role she performs but in her ability to *disempower* one self for the sake of another. Her action is solely her own" (ibid).

Adopting this perspective, we can grasp the complexity of the position experienced by Carlos when performing the role of Christ. While interacting with a given audience, he took on the position not only of the agent – who bodily and verbally expresses himself to certain spectators – but also of the patient, since his connection to the dramatic role resulted from neither a personal intention nor any inner desire. It was actually in a prayer meeting organized by the Via Sacra group that his name was put forward, not by a specific member, but through divine will: as Carlos says, it was God who "filled their hearts" with the certainty that he could play the part of Jesus. Nonetheless, he stated that "it was not easy" to take on such a *persona* because he did not want "to stand out" or feed his ego. That is to say, his action was not presumed to reflect his own intentions, but those of another agent. For this reason, Carlos defended the idea that the group's dramatic activity should not be classified as 'theatre.' He identifies the latter artistic activity as a field that channels individual desires and projects, while he (like his group) offers instead to adopt the position of an 'intermediary' – placing himself between the woman who seems to visualize, in his own outer appearance, the image of Christ and God himself. This explains his own inner appeal to God: "Oh Lord, I am not Jesus!"

Given this complex framework of interactions, the notion of performance originally used by Schechner, and subsequently developed by Turner,¹⁷ would appear a useful and interesting analytical tool

¹⁷ In his later texts, Turner imbues the term with other meanings, clearly expanding the themes and theories of interest, as exemplified in his texts on the Anthropology of Performance (1995) and the Anthropology of Experience (1986). In the latter work, we can note the depiction of performance as one of the stages involved in the production of an experience, *Erlebnis*, connected to the expression (as an externalization) of processes involving the formulation of a lived experience (internalized). For more details concerning this project, see Dawsey (2005). For a more wide-ranging analysis of the author's work, see Cavalcanti (2012) for instance.

for understanding the transformations engendered by the immersion in liminal states within different cultural realities. From a heuristic viewpoint, however, its semantic scope remains insufficient to explore ethnographic settings in which other agencies appear that traverse and transcend the actor-audience duality.

Performance, in this sense, is best taken as a starting point, rather than end point, of an anthropological study. Observing the performances and narratives of Carlos and Daniel, it is clear that we are dealing with at least three simultaneous ways of establishing complementary relationships over the course of their plays. As mentioned earlier, we can identify: i) the actor-audience interaction; ii) the relationship between the spectators and the enacted divinity, who also performs, albeit via the abduction of actor and audience; and finally iii) the connection established between the actors themselves and the sacred figure, whose actions are deemed to be oblivious to the performers' subjective control. This *other* must be considered, therefore, in the specific net of relations motivated by him and the drama of his own Passion. The performances are based on a triangular relationship model.¹⁸

In exploring the performances of the Ouro Preto Christs, I argue that we need to move beyond the earlier formulation of the term (performance) and include other factors that intervene in the particular context in question, acting with and through the related subjects. The divine prototype-figure is revealed as a key factor in social activity that needs to be analyzed in conjunction with the other agents. Indeed, as an operative term in the performative situation exemplified by the Carlos's experience, it must be included among the correlated sources of intentionality in play. Likewise, we also need to respond to the challenge of thinking about how different agencies express themselves in – and make use of – the body of the actor/medium, establishing distinct relationships 'within' one and the same person.

On bodies and personhood

In the process of imitating Christ, the bodies of the performers are presented not only as an expression of their individualities, but also as potential loci of agency that reflect different intentionalities (Asad 2003). In the accounts described here, we have seen that it is the physical presence of a person – their external composition, visual appearance and physical gestures as a copy of the divine figure – that serves as a base for their interaction with the audience and with Christ. At the same time, it is within their body that the person finds a place to talk to Jesus – “in my heart,” as Carlos said.

The multiplicity of vectors acting with and on a performer's body emerge as an outcome not only of the performative situation itself, the moment of public presentation, but also of the preparatory process that encompasses it and shapes its outcomes (especially from the audience's viewpoint). As he told me, when the time comes to prepare his theatre group for Holy Week, Xicó focuses primarily on how each young person will experience and express the relationship developed with his or her respective character. When addressing a young actor like Daniel, he would say: “Are you going to play Jesus Christ? How is Jesus Christ in your head? Now he has to *show it in the body*. I sometimes even joke, saying things like: the actor doesn't speak, the actor does!” (my emphasis).

In this ritual milieu, a form of communication is enabled through the mimicking of the Christian Passion, as the result of a set of relationships that interpose themselves for a certain duration and that intensify their effects on the corporeality of the performers. In enacting a character like Jesus, on the way to

¹⁸ In this sense, the acting performed by the Ouro Preto Christs contains various elements observable in other ritual and ethnographic realities beyond the Christian. Patricia Birman (2005: 409), reviewing the literature on trance in Afro-Brazilian religions and its relations to the definition of sexual and gender roles, emphasized the fact that various studies mentioned a social dynamic organized around “triangular relations between humans and ‘non-humans,’” delimiting these as: the person who enters into trance, his or her closest affective partner and the divinity itself.

his death on the cross, the physical and visual constitution of the actor playing the role should accentuate his human condition and the depth of the pain to which he was subjected. Expressing the suffering associated with the figure by means of the actor's own body thus becomes one of the tacit objectives common to dramatizations of the Passion.

Figure 1 – Walerson, soon after completing his performance as Christ, already wearing his own clothing. Good Friday, Ouro Preto, 2015. (Author's archive)



In this sense, if we examine the relations established with a given body, including the relations of the actor with himself and with the agencies that influence his performance, we can obtain a clearer understanding of the specificity of the scenario under analysis. To explore the various forms through which (Christ's) suffering is expressed by the Ouro Preto actors, I cite one further account of the experience of performing the role of Jesus. The actor concerned was a young man named Walerson, around 30 years of age, 1.83 meters in height, who works in a coffee shop in the city. He took on the protagonist's role in the Via Sacra performed in the São Cristóvão neighborhood.

Walerson told me that his involvement with the Via Sacra began almost a decade ago, since when it has become one of the principal events of his year, dividing his attention with another major festive celebration in Ouro Preto: "I love Carnival. When the carnival period arrives, I'm busy at the samba school. [...] Once Carnival is over, I know that rehearsals have already begun [to play the part of Christ]. So then things start to change." One of the things that changes, beyond the layers of meaning which each of these ritual contexts brings to bear, is the way of adapting his body. As part of his everyday routine, as he alternates between work and leisure, he typically sets aside some time for physical exercise. This routine alters, though, as the moment for transforming into Christ approaches: "Some time ago, I started going to the gym. But after Carnival is over, I stop going until Holy Week. [...] When this period arrives I stop for a while to avoid being too fit... at least so that my aesthetic appearance is harmonious."

The idea of 'harmony' evoked in his comment allows us to pick out at least two aspects correlated to his participation in the Via Sacra. His bodily image needs to be in tune with the appearance presumed to correspond to Christ's persona. Equally important, though, the performance spans a specific moment of the narrative relating to the character within the setting of the ritualized time of Holy Week. 'Harmony' thus refers as much to the physical image of Christ (who will be scourged and crucified in the sequence that makes up the ritual performance) as to the specific moment when this image is brought to life and springs into action through the performers. "Today, because it is Good Friday... It weighs more heavily on us, doesn't it? Because today is the day [...]. This really affects us all." Given that the epicenter of the Story of the Passion is the subjection of God's Son made flesh to men, who whip him and condemn him to crucifixion, the scenes of violence become the focus of considerable (prior) attention among the performers and (subsequent) repercussion between them and their audience – who may include their close relatives. According to Walerson:

My mother watched the performance one year but after never wanted to watch again, because she becomes very nervous [...] That year even my father wanted to leave. In the middle of the Via Sacra, he wanted to leave because of the whiplashes.

We rehearse... On the Monday [at the start of Holy Week] I don't feel it so much, because the whips are made of EVA.¹⁹ So the boys beat and whip you, but it doesn't hurt much. But today [Good Friday], I don't know if it was the constant whipping or because I was nervous, but it hurt much more. They struck with a lot of force. It's no coincidence that when I finished the Via Sacra performance... I can still feel it, my back is still hurting. And the cross today felt really heavy, because on the way down it slips, and we end up walking a bit further. It became heavier too. We walk a little further... but everything depends on the circumstances. That's the thing. Today everything was more painful. The crown [of thorns] was so tight that it even started giving me a headache. [...] I don't know... but it's because, really, today I felt the pain. I felt some things that are part of this path.

¹⁹ EVA (ethylene vinyl acetate) is a synthetic, malleable material produced in diverse colors that can be used as a substitute for the cords and strips of leather typically used as whips.

The material objects that enter in contact with his body – needed to produce the wounds that characterize the depiction of Christ’s flagellation – play a fundamental role in the specific makeup of this body of Jesus. Although the whiplashes, the cross and the crown of thorns are all artifacts produced for the purpose of dramatization, ‘their’ actions (Gell 1998) result in effects that are not fictional but felt for real by the actor. As Walerson remarks, the aches and pains experienced in his body are taken to be “part of the path,” which may refer to: i) the path of the enacted Via Sacra with its sequence of different scenes; ii) the path involving the production of the flagellated body that defines the figure lived in flesh and blood; and iii) his own personal trajectory, deeply affected by the experience of this religious performance – something that, as he told me in interview, he regards as a form of ‘penitence’ practiced in that specific moment. In sum, pain does not remain a merely subjective experience, but reveals itself to be an operative factor in the establishment of social relations, as well as comprising a form of sacrifice cultivated by this type of actor (Mauss & Hubert 2005; Asad 2003:81).

Having explored this point, we can return to the observations made earlier about the other actors playing the role of Christ, which enabled us to identify different agencies (and intentionalities) in their performances and which conceived their bodies as the primary locus of action. In studying this artistic and religious context we gain access to a kind of performative pragmatics, as well as particular understandings of the activity that show how the people in the spotlight – the men/copies that mimic and are thus able to expand, through the physical performance, the body of Christ – do not present themselves as self-contained units. In this ritual setting, rather, they reveal a way of bringing together acting bodies and interactions that foreground the action of diverse agents, capable of affecting the performer internally (their subjectivity) or externally (their visual and material makeup), depending on each case.

Based on this reasoning, I argue that an anthropological analysis that proposes to explore performance of any kind needs to consider the agents in question, without falling into the trap of thinking of them as corresponding to the physical and anatomical structure idealized as an individual in modern western ideology (Mauss 2003; Dumont 2000; Duarte & Giumbelli 1995). By adopting this approach, I suggest, we can consider the different intentionalities that conform to and confront each other in the same body, or in various bodies, thus guiding their ways of acting in a particular setting. Indeed, by evoking the idea of a trap or a pitfall, we can think about the constitution of these bodies of Christ in a way similar to how Gell analyzes the trap as a specific type of artifact.

According to the author (Gell 2001: 184-185), to be effective a trap must be adapted to its prey and, in the process of being made, it therefore ends up containing the knowledge that the hunter possesses of the intended victim. Hence “the trap embodies a scenario, that is the dramatic nexus that binds these two protagonists together, and which aligns them in time and space” (ibid). Similarly, within the performative context of the outlying regions of Ouro Preto, a relationship is established in which the actors, for a variety of reasons, work to attract the attention – gaze and imagination – of those making up their audience. From an external viewpoint, the activity can be deemed a success when the local Christs are able to captivate the spectators, both emotionally and intellectually, as well as through their body language, provoking them to respond in some form to the story being re-enacted. As I described above, the actors are also able to identify an agent that remains external to them but that, simultaneously, acts from within – from the inside out. A performance may thus result from the use of an actor’s physicality in a mimetic activity, not only as a means to catch the attention of those outside and around him, but also, perhaps, in order to have his heart captured by the divine hunter. In this sense, the performers can be compared to ‘art objects’ – which, as Gell (1998:07) emphasizes, may include live human beings in the catalogue of things capable of assuming this status – insofar as they reflect intentionalities not contained within themselves. They are agents and patients of diverse and concomitant actions.

A last-but-not-least scene

I began this article by discussing the marginal social position occupied, in the native imaginary of Ouro Preto and other sites of Minas Gerais, by living actors in comparison to religious images dating from the eighteenth century during Holy Week. The latter are objects of popular devotion protected by local museums. At the end of my analysis, I turned to idea of the ‘trap’ discussed by Gell (2001) as a way to analytically comprehend works of art, where different intentionalities can bind together. Could it be that in travelling from one margin to the other, in the (dis)continuum of these religious and theatrical performances, we come back to the same place? Or, in the end, are these two types of performers (human beings and art objects) in complete opposition? We can answer no to both questions.

In order to produce what they consider to be a good performance, the actors are stimulated to interact with their neighborhood areas and with the wider social dynamics in which religious images continue to be important. The young Daniel from the Auto production, for example, made use of devotional imagery – among various other sources of inspiration – to compose his own figure of Christ: “I searched for photos, primarily from the churches here in Ouro Preto: baroque images, some picture frames, some paintings.” Walerson, the last local Christ we met, also spoke of a similar procedure, searching for inspiration among the specific aesthetic forms possessed by the effigies of baroque saints: “The images from here are very realistic,” he observed. Hence, the actors can find inspiration in these images, borrowing their visual characteristics, like in a game of mirrors.

But the relations between images and actors do not play out in one direction only. Walerson himself, between laughs, confesses that in one of the Via Sacra performances, the instant following his crucifi(c)tion was marked by an unexpected happening. After taking him down from the cross, his colleagues placed him on an open bier and carried him inside the church where the Via Sacra normally finishes (and where minutes later he would finally be able to breath normally and drop out of his role). Just before this moment, though, while he was still keeping his eyes closed and his body inert as far as possible, like a corpse or the carved image of Dead Christ used in Holy Week, he noticed that the men carrying the bier had decided of their own accord, and without warning him, to imitate a procession with religious images. At the end of such processions, the image is deposited before the main altar where a long line of devotees forms to pray, touch and kiss the object embodying the saint’s persona. As an actor who could not leave his role – since the story being performed had yet to conclude – he remained there, in the place of the religious image, until someone from outside the group exclaimed: “This is not the image! This is not the image of Christ!” An actor had stolen his spot and there, on the margins of the celebrations that normally occur in the center of the city, had enacted another (living) Christ, an acting double.

In sum, this mimicking activity is, over the course of a performance, a mode of producing alterity that combines materialities, agencies and diverse embodiments within ritual time. During the religious festivities, the improvisation and creativity demonstrated by the actors are revealed as instruments that not only reproduce *the same*: they also generate new arrangements of the sacrality associated with the central figure of the performances, extending its effects and symmetrically contributing to disseminate their influence back onto the divine prototype.

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