

**USE AND MISUSE OF CATHARTIC
IMPULSE:
DYSFUNCTIONAL DEMOCRACY**

This title can be imagined as having the form of an equation. Instead of the colon separating the left from the right side, we may put the mathematical symbol that determines (and is continuously determining) the causal nature of given phenomena. The thesis of this text lies precisely in an attempt to decode the nature and form of the connection between the left and right sides – between a possible articulation of the affective content of the cathartic impulse, and the matrix of a community’s political life. Are these two complementary? Or does their mutual influence lead to a short circuit? In what way are they mutually conditioned? Naturally, these questions cannot have immediate and putative answers. But even as hypotheses, they can be refuted or applied in further analysis.

As an operative force, the well-known mechanism of *catharsis* (cleansing, elimination, purification, purge, purgation of emotion, epuration...) can easily be used or misused, depending on the context of its appearance. A mediating question to ask would be whether this mechanism is set in motion spontaneously or if it is almost always assembled and constructed? What are the conditions in which it appears? Can it be elicited anywhere, at any moment? Can it be set in motion by anyone? In order for it to fulfill its purpose as an artistic practice, and thus have far reaching impact, it needs to be conceptually unobtrusive and inconspicuous. Conversely, with its improper use, any content aiming to

convince, to leave an impression or an imprint of authenticity, can be viciously exposed to ridicule or scorn. Worse, it can lose its credibility entirely.

In short, my thesis is that the use or misuse of the mechanism of catharsis (I dare say even affect itself as the power of performing) is directly tied to the functionality or dysfunctionality of a community, which in our case means a community with democratic aspirations.

It is not my goal to thematize catharsis in the Aristotelian framework. Leaving such questions for classical philologists and archeologists, I refer to the work done by Jacob Bernays (1857), Golden-Hardison (1968: 133-137), Else (1957), Leon Golden (1962), and Somville (1975: 55-92), or in French Dupont-Roc and Lallot (1980: 188-191).

I will assume that we are all familiar with the indisputable definition of tragedy as that which “represents men in action and does not use narrative, which through pity and fear effects relief (*katharsis*) to these and similar emotions” (Aristotle, 1965: 1449b).

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The “plasticity” of *pathèmata* – as Aristotle names *eleos* (pity), *phobos* (fear) and other similar emotions – provokes catharsis through synergy. The first two terms are obvious, and Aristotle does not think they require further explanation in the *Poetics*. They are self-evident, and have been ever since Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*, when pity and fear were bundled with “similar emotions.” However, before Plato, in *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias uses the example of poetry to illustrate *pathèmata*. Trembling there is produced by fear (*phrikè periphobos*), whereas pity causes tears (*eleos poludakrus*) and pain of grieving (*pathos philopenthès*).

Pity and fear are present in everyday life and it would certainly be inappropriate to claim that they can be simply and spontaneously eradicated, or even transformed into something else. This means that in a specially set up context, they do not so much change their content, but rather acquire another form of representation. They are dealt with at much more length in the *Politics*, where the concrete state of catharsis, now produced by a more specific and palpable relation of pity and fear, is connected to the listening of music. Yet, as Guilia Sissa notes in “*Plaisir et souci: le défi des drogues*” (2001), paradoxically, music functions in such a way that the daughters of memory, the Muses, do whatever is in their power to transport man from his mortal, painful state, full

of woe and captivity (necessitated by memory, that all too human condition), into oblivion, the drugged state of egoist nonchalance, un-attachment and insouciance (so enjoyed by the gods).

But let us leave aside issues of memory and forgetfulness, and remain with Aristotle for a moment. The painful experiences of *eleos* and *phobos* are described even earlier, in the *On Rhetoric* (2006: II, chap. 5). *Phobos* is defined as pain that produces disorder (*lupè tis kai tarakhè*), and *eleos* (II, chap. 8) as *lupè*, but a sort of mediated *phobos*: if you feel *phobos*, then you shiver for yourself, and if you feel *eleos*, then you feel (you actually empathize) for someone else or for something else. *Phobos* (phobic fear), then, is a subjective experience, whereas *eleos* is the fear that introduces an intersubjective experience, the end result of which is pity. *Eleos* and *phobos* can thus be described as symmetrical, and indeed were described so by Alexander Nehamas: “We fear that which makes us feel pity for others, and we pity others for what in us would create fear” (1992: 301). If we feel *phobos* (need we bring up contemporary forms of various phobias, from psychosomatic disorders that treat man’s relation to nature and surroundings, to various cultural phobias: homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia, even phobiaphobia), then we are dealing with a personal monstrous fear, difficult to convey, impregnable and entirely immutable, since impossible to transform into anything else (and even its reasons are difficult to impart to another, it is irrational, relativistic and resistant to reason). Aristotle is explicit that we feel fear when we are ourselves sufficiently vulnerable, receptive to pain and destruction: “[f]rom the definition it will follow that fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain” (*On Rhetoric*, II, ch. 5 1382b28-30). The connective tissue of *eleos* is necessary, firstly, to sustain our lives, and then, through relations with others and through caring for others, to acquire new experiences of community (from coupled living, as the first form of life with others, to more developed units of family, or community at large).

Thus, only together, within a specifically created context can pity and fear become the condition of appearance of catharsis. Catharsis here needs to produce a state which, opposite to a drug induced state, will not have oblivion (a radical denial of the other, one beyond my body) as its final outcome.

Rather, it seeks a new articulation of an active being together, of togetherness. This requires a way to mold, act on, articulate, firstly, the fear as phobia (here we must be very careful), and then fear as something shared with others (can we be fearful together?). However, binding oneself to another through fear and pity, as David Konstan reveals in his book entirely dedicated to an analysis of pity (2001: 60), necessarily presupposes the feeling of recognizing another who is not identifiable. *Eleos* supposes relative distance between the one who “pities” and one who is “pitied,” and is different to *sumphateia* that designates a feeling of coalescent belonging. Concluding the description of the state in which we become bound to other/s, Aristotle writes: “And [people feel pity] if they think certain individuals are among the good people of the world; for one who thinks no good person exists will think all worthy of suffering. And on the whole, [a person feels pity] when his state of mind is such that he remembers things like this happening to himself or his own or expects them to happen to himself or his own.” (*On Rhetoric*, 2006: 1386a). Only together, under specific conditions and through a “change of fortune [that] occurs without ‘reversal’ or ‘discovery’” (1946: 1452a37), do pity and fear in tragedy become the ground from which emerges catharsis. It is at this point that *katharsis*, in contrast to the feeling produced by drugs, induces a state, the end result of which will not be oblivion to the other, the one beyond my body; rather, it will designate a new articulation of the simulation of life in common, of joint agency in individual lives. When, after a meticulous analysis of Euripides’ Hecuba, Konstan says that “the audience feels *for* the characters, not *with* them” (*Ibid.*: 72), he renders explicit the paradoxical distance that occurs in recognizing a tragic situation that does not create a direct closeness to the other. There is no identification with the other, nor is there a declaration of belonging, but rather the act of recognition acquires a reflexivity. It is once again important to emphasize that this is not a process of identification, nor indeed of identity politics, which apart from affirmation of difference leaves behind an approximately equal trace of negation and refutation. Further, Konstan complements his analysis with the claim that the privilege of “feeling *for* the characters” (thus indicating the audience’s disposition) could historically have only been possible in Athenian democracy. The context and economic, political conditions of Periclean democracy are all too familiar to a classicist. The rest of us, however,

must take examples of contemporary performances (in the theater, but also other artistic mediums) that certain testimonies awaken catharsis, to establish contemporary forms of shaping, acting, recognition, and ultimately emulation that kindles a cathartic emotionality. Only then, on the literal plane of the body, or embodiment, can we reach this unifying mechanism of catharsis through which we can be aware of the presence of another body next to our own, experience its presence as other-extendedness that does not encroach on our own geometry, and with which we as individuals, in turn, do not disturb the geometry of neighbors.

An equally necessary condition is that *phobos* and *eleos* appear together. Otherwise – this also, indirectly yet equally, describes the dysfunctionality of democracy¹ – we are faced with events such as the one in 1993 (well before September 11th), described by Massumi as:

social histories of fear, with a special focus on the United States, where the tools of the organized fear trade seem to have undergone a particularly complex evolution adapting them to an ever-widening range of circumstances...

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Highlighting the materiality of the body as the ultimate object of technologies of fear is understood as apparatuses of power aimed at carving into the flesh habits, predispositions, and associated emotions—in particular, hatred—conducive to setting social boundaries, to erecting and preserving hierarchies, to the perpetuation of domination (Massumi, 1993: 3-39).

Highlighting the technologies of fear disrupts the equilibrium of catharsis. After thirty years of technological, digitalized and an informationally overflowing period – all of which, paradoxically, also facilitate human life, the

1 The aim of the text is not to analyze key aspects of dysfunctionality of democracy, but rather to point out the fact that various artistic practices are in a certain way an expression of the level of democracy and can be seen as such in other spheres of life. Dysfunctionality, for example, is reflected in an increased and rampant corruption, in the passivation and lack of involvement in democratic processes, in apathy to action. The crisis is never simply economic, but influences the formation of collective emotional life, which banalized and hyperbolized by the media alters the cultural profile of a community.

satisfaction of basic appetites², the sphere of intimacy and the democratization of the particular (Plummer, 2003) – have resulted in making it quite difficult to articulate when fear being shared with another truly becomes a form of (mutual) pity. People come “together” in fear, creating well-known forms of cultural phobias. Any collective attempt that is not identificatory but ought to allow for (mutual) pity, is hastily turned into pathetic and momentary self-pity that does nothing to build community, becoming self-referential, autobiographical, even perversely narcissistic.

It is equally difficult to reach the other and the different through artistic expression, even though it is precisely artists who have a developed need to seek such an experience. “Men in action (or *praxeos*)” that we are (the referenced definition from the *Poetics*), we ought to act in such a way as to tremble in fear and empathize before an event that does not concern us personally. Here we are faced with a paradox, because in the moment of doing this, we ought to feel not *lupè* – pain, but *hèdonè* – pleasure (*tèn apo eleon kai phobon dia mimèseôs hèdonèn*, 53b12).

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Nor is it an accident that, precisely in the *Politics* (VIII), in that second step, pity and fear follow other emotional troubles (“possessives” or *enthousiastiki*, that is, various religious trans-states, 1341b34). In addition to their stimulative effect, depending on the predisposition of the one experiencing them, they can produce a sedative or an analgesic effect (*kathistamenous* 1342a10) in the form of a medical treatment and purification (*kai katharseôs*), which is then followed by a certain pleasure (*meth’hèdonès*). It follows from Aristotle’s writing that from destructive, pathological states of complete dissolution, disintegration and break down, pity and fear turn into an “innocent pleasure.”

In order for this to take place, it is necessary that pity and fear be mediated. In chapter XIV of the *Poetics*, when speaking of ways in which a tragic plot can unfold, Aristotle writes that it must be pragmatic (*en tois pragmasin* 53b13).

2 Let us remind how Plato in the Eight book of *Republics* (561d-e) describes “devotee of equality,” blinded by equality despite the existence of moral and immoral drives, as “manifold man stuffed with most excellent differences, and that like that city he is the fair and many-colored one whom many a man and woman would count fortunate in his life, as containing within himself the greatest number of patterns of constitutions and qualities.”

All who are present for the fabricated monstrosity (I once again insist that it is important to be a spectator, not a participant) experience trembling. Trembling is a literal physical state of the body. Given all the work put in by various psychoanalysts (particularly the line from Freud through Abraham, Melanie Klein, Maria Torok, to Richard Wollenheim, or other currents of psychoanalysis and psychotherapies), or the more recent development in neurosciences (from Paul Broca, James Papez to Francisca Varela and Lindquist's experiments), it became quite acceptable to thematize the tranquillizing effects of the strong emotions. However, I would still recall a sentence in the *Politics*, where Aristotle directly connects the use of catharsis with a medical model of homeopathic cleansing: "any experience that occurs violently in some souls is found in all, though with different degrees of intensity – for example pity and fear for some persons are very liable to this form of emotion, and under the influence of sacred music we see these people, when they use tunes that violently arouse the soul, being thrown into a state as if they had received medicinal treatment and taken a catharsis (purge)" (1342a). Inducing the "controlled shock" (Pigeaud, 1987), is beneficial to anyone because it releases the body of excess tension. Such individual relief, however, does not stop at emotional cleansing, but becomes the condition for the formation of the community.

And although it is clear that it is music that offers cleansing and relief, or that states of purity are induced through religious fervor, the process by which fear and pity shape and convert painful states into pleasure and relief through *mimesis* is still problematic. We know that Plato thought that the *mimesis* of tragedy could be the cause of corruption and impurity (*phthora* and *miasma*) in the audience, and it is possible that Aristotle is attempting to answer this criticism in the *Poetics* by determining the nature of *mimesis* and separating it from the ethics of art. In this place, however, Plato and Aristotle are speaking in different registers. Ethical training (teaching correct behavior) happens on a different level, and when it comes to catharsis, it was never the case that the participants of a performance are "purified," but rather that the "emotional troubles, i.e. pathèmata," pity and fear, are thus "purified."

First of all, the parallel between life and the plot or storyline of a tragedy is not at all linear, nor does it end with analogy. We are not in training to recognize tragedy in real life, and more importantly, we certainly ought not experience

any pleasure when witness to real life tragic events. Only the tragic subject that is well portrayed, by gifted artists, in such a way that it resembles reality without being real, ought to evoke or fan the flames of cathartic feelings. If we follow Aristotle, *mimesis* precisely offers a guarantee that we are not dealing with reality because “there is not the same kind of correctness in poetry as in politics, or indeed any other art (*On Rhetoric* II, ch. 5, 1460b13-15). In his text *Katharsis*, Jonathan Lear writes:

The constraints of the poet (i.e. artist) differ considerably from the constraints of the politician. The politician is constrained to legislate an education in which youths will be trained to react to real life events; in particular to feel the right amount of pity and fear in response to genuinely pitiable and fearful events. The tragedian is constrained to evoke pity and fear through *mimesis* of such events, but he is also constrained to provide a *katharsis* of those very emotions (*Phronesis*, 1988, vol. XXXIII/3: 319).

178 The fact is that contemporary performative arts – using the body as medium – are directly tied, through their materiality and their particularity, to the medical understanding of *katharsis* as purification or enemas. Thus the supposition is that the artist has fulfilled one of the required conditions. The question of *mimesis*, however, remains open: in performances, it initially has conceptual support that influences the shaping of their content. The example that presents itself by virtue of its media exposure, the performance “Marina Abramović – 512 Hours,” illustrates the means the artist uses to produce different affective states. A significant portion of the audience feels that their very own presence at her performances is similar to *katharsis*, although in a detailed description of what they felt, they cite entirely unconnected elements with the previous analysis of the purification of emotions. Why is this so, and what makes the affective states of the contemporary Marina Abramović different to – using Aristotelian language – “the intensity of [spiritual] movement” of the audience of a Periclean Athenian tragedy?

In a world obsessed with the meanings of the already established cultural-theoretical vocabulary, Brian Massumi, leaning on Spinoza, Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari (1980: 181), follows literally and interprets the primacy of the corporal writing of various intensities or “intensity of spiritual movement,” calling the process the primacy of affect, and thus inscribing himself among

authors of the theory of affect³. “Intensity is asocial but not pre-social – it includes social elements, although it mingles them with elements that belong to different levels of functioning, combining them following different logic” (Massumi 1995: 91). Therefore, continues Massumi, despite the fact that affect and emotions are often considered partially synonymous, it is easy to spot the difference in the logic of their behavior and in the pattern of their appearance. While emotions are thought through and take place in the soul, affect is directly manifested by the body. A genealogy of affect is difficult to formulate without contradiction, and one of the mechanisms of catharsis is, above all, the overlap of conditions in which affects relate to emulation as an artistic ability. Thus, following the logic of action, but also the pattern of appearance of catharsis in the performance “Marina Abramović – 512 Hours,” we can say that despite the fact that it is truly corporal inscription “of the feeling that is very strong in some souls, yet present in all if to different degrees,” there is a notable difference from the classical approach to catharsis and the conditions of its appearance.

“Marina Abramović: 512 Hours”⁴ is the title of the performance that took place from 11 June to 25 August, 2014, at the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park.

3 “There seems to be a growing feeling within media and literary and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information and image-based late-capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered... The problem is that there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect,” writes Massumi in the paper “The Autonomy of Affect,” that could serve as a manifest of affect theory (1995: 88). A series of texts and books base their arguments on the connection of the materiality of the body and the experimental repetition of affects, establishing the difference between emotions, affects and feelings, invoking the experimental psychological studies, as well as studies in cognitive science and neuroscience. The title “Affect Theory” is alternately attributed to Silvan Tompkins, but also to Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, and has thus also been adopted in both *queer* theory and in various streams following Deleuze-Guattari. See: E. Kosowsky Sedgwick (2003); E. Shouse (2005); C. Papoulias, F. Callard (2010); M. Gregg, G.-J. Seigworth (2010); ali i djela koja ih kritiziraju: R. Leys (2011); T. Cronan (2014).

4 Information on the performance, as well the audience’s impressions can be found on the following web pages: <http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/marina-midnight-serpentine-diaries> and <http://512hours.tumblr.com/>. There is also the possibility of online shopping: <http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/shop/hands-energy-receivers-2014> (accessed 11 August, 2014).

According to its advertisement, offered “nothing.” Literally, during the 512 hours Marina Abramović shared herself with the world, there were no scenario. In other words, what she was sharing with the world, with the audience, was HERSELF:

“Marina Abramović will perform from 10am to 6pm, 6 days a week. Creating the simplest of environments in the Gallery spaces, Abramović’s only materials will be herself, the audience and a selection of common objects that she will use in a constantly changing sequence of events. On arrival, visitors will both literally and metaphorically leave their baggage behind in order to enter the exhibition: bags, jackets, electronic equipment, watches and cameras may not accompany them. The public will become the performing body, participating in the delivery of an unprecedented moment in the history of performance art.” Let us ignore the hyperbole and verbiage used in any advertisement. Again, it is not my intention to judge an event in advance. Bringing this lecture to a close, I would simply call to mind that in 1974, that is, forty years prior, Marina Abramović performed a piece entitled “Rhytm 0.” “To test the limits of the relationship between performer and audience, Abramović developed one of her most challenging (and best-known) performances. She assigned a passive role to herself, with the public being the force which would act on her. Abramović placed on a table 72 objects that people were allowed to use (a sign informed them) in any way that they chose. Some of these were objects that could give pleasure, while others could be wielded to inflict pain, or to harm her. Among them were a rose, a feather, honey, a whip, olive oil, scissors, a scalpel, a gun and a single bullet. For six hours the artist allowed the audience members to manipulate her body and actions. Initially, members of the audience reacted with caution and modesty, but as time passed (and the artist remained passive) people began to act more aggressively.” As Abramović described it later: “What I learned was that... if you leave it up to the audience, they can kill you.” ... “I felt really violated: they cut up my clothes, stuck rose thorns in my stomach, one person aimed the gun at my head, and another took it away. It created an aggressive atmosphere. After exactly 6 hours, as planned, I stood up and started walking toward the audience. Everyone ran away, to escape an actual confrontation.” The choice made for the Serpentine event was different: the audience now encounters a fabricated atmosphere of silence and air of meditation in a sterilized space in which “peace,” curated by

Marina Abramović and her collaborators, is exchanged, the visitors are led by the hand and given directions how to move through the space. There is no room for incidents or dissatisfaction of those who wish to use rose thorns or knife to harm the artist. All the while, the visitors who are less than impressed with the performance can express their disappointment in brief, underwhelmed notes, ironically, lacking any wrath.

What is it that calls into question the classical catharsis of this performance, and why could one say that the synergy of fear and pity is lacking? Without denying many visitors' impressions, it is nevertheless obvious that the cathartic inflation is a product of the time in which they live. In describing his own, crisis-ridden time, Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, noticed that "the crisis is based precisely on the fact that the old dies away and the new cannot be born: in this 'interregnum' there appear myriad morbid phenomena (*ifenomeni morbosi*)" (1977: 137). The question precisely is what morbid phenomena appear in times of crisis, in 'interregnum' between the old and new, in the gap between two stable states? In medical vocabulary, the word "*morbosità*" represents a pathological state that describes excessive attachment and lack of balanced behavior of certain individuals. This is a phenomenon in which there is an increased intensity of feeling or various emotional contents, entirely warping or wrongly interpreting a certain event or fact. Morbidity is an entirely blind state of intensification of affect, leading to an overabundance of pathos (from which we call these various emotional states *pathèmata*), or more specifically, to the absence of one of the two essential elements of catharsis (either fear or pity).

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