

POETIC INSTINCT – Aesthetic Experience as a Vital Function

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the concept of poetic instinct, considering the urgent need to reformulate the relationship between humans and nature considering technological ubiquity and its affective side effects. We start by analyzing the current process of disaffection and the impact of our intellectual, social and technical development on our abilities of perception. We approach Yuasa Yasuo's body theory that develops a comprehension of the body based on four levels of consciousness. We get inspired by his theory to discuss the process of perception, analyzing how we can understand the aesthetic experience as a vital function.

Finally, we present the performance "Avocado Tree, we'll follow your act" and the installation "Preamar" to discuss two approaches of the poetic instinct in an artistic practice and discuss the role of technology on this proposed poetic reading of the survival instinct.

Keywords

Aesthetic Experience, Survival, Body, Breathing, Perception, Connectivity, Technology, Poetic Instinct

Introduction

The survival instinct is an intelligence that seeks self-preservation, that is, the maintenance of life. The survival instinct exists within an individual existence but it also manifests in a collective sense, aiming toward the maintenance of one's existence through the reproduction of the species. That's why in many species the life cycle is directly linked to the reproductive act, and the individual dies after reproduction. Survival also depends on the food that connects different living beings to a single ecosystem by transferring energy from one (dead) being to another living being. It is also through the need for food that different kinds of relationships and modes of interaction between beings arises, such as symbiosis, mutualism, parasitism, and predation, among others. In this way, the survival instinct is characterized by a paradox between the individual and the collective.

Each individual must be deeply connected with internal and external processes and needs in order to ascertain their survival instinct.

For us, humans, the instinct for survival becomes highly complex due to our intellectual development, which allows us to create cultural systems. These systems are organized by social rules, where the motivation of social actions is mixed with our instinct for survival, resulting in a new understanding of life and our existence. The body of research within which this paper is located, posits the necessity of humans to reconnect with other living beings. The very definition of the Anthropocene, the hypothesis that we live in a new geological age that admits that man-kind has become a force of great impact on the biosphere of planet Earth, shows how we need to reflect our existence.

The Anthropocene obtained purchase in popular and scientific discourse in the context of ubiquitous urgent efforts to find ways of talking about, theorizing, modeling, and managing a Big Thing called Globalization. Climate-change modeling is a powerful positive feedback loop provoking change-of-state in systems of political and ecological discourses. (Haraway, 2016, p.4)

Although there isn't scientific agreement, the beginning of the Anthropocene is mainly accepted as the beginning of the eighteenth century, with the advent of the industrial revolution, but its impact became more potent in the twentieth century with techno-scientific advances and the profound transformation of the relationship between human beings and other living beings, and our continuous attempts to interfere in geological phenomena. There is a fatalistic connotation that the actions of humanity would be leading the planet to a biosphere crisis that could even lead to the extinction of humanity. Despite the intention of environmental awareness, we believe that the term Anthropocene

reinforce our constant desire for controlling other living beings and the planet. Is it possible to discuss these matters without replicating this narrative? Could we be drawing a process of involution? How can we discuss the role of aesthetic and affective processes and techno-scientific development on this context? Our intellectual capacity led our survival instinct to a techno-scientific quest for immortality that impacts our sensitive capacity and our very notion of life and existence.

Our current understanding of the human instinct of survival is directly related to techno-scientific development and the desire for immortality and our necessity to overcome our bodies' limitations. This desire is described by Paula Sibilia (2015) as the Faustian vocation in which this inconsequential necessity overlaps with genuine understanding and respect of otherness so we can live together as a society. Baudrillard (2000) also addresses the quest for immortality which requires a break in the connection between the sexual act and reproduction. Thus, in the first instance, the sexual act is released from the reproductive act, with the creation of contraceptive methods, and in the second, the reproductive act is liberated from sex, with the development of biotechnology and cloning. There is, in this search for immortality pointed out by Baudrillard, an impact on life and the body, in this Faustian vocation pointed out by Sibilia, in wanting to overcome also the sensorial limitations of the body that impacts the gradual transformation of our sensitive capacity.

Maria Tereza Cruz (2000) addresses this transformation of sensitivity within the art context by relating this process of technological development to the constant promotion and emptiness of aesthetic experience. The philosopher relates the exacerbation of aesthetic productivity to the process of technical development in which machines are endowed with artificial sensory systems. The union of these two processes impacts the abstraction of "sensitivity" in a general process of disaffection.

This research is developed upon this background. What is the role of art and aesthetic experience in the survival instinct? If art implies a necessary process of affection in the refinement of the survival instinct, how can we address the disaffection process? This research acknowledges that the survival instinct can be directly related to aesthetic experience as a vital process that implies the possibility of connectivity present in affective and relational experience.

In this paper, we'll analyze vital functions and

the body to comprehend the individual aspect of the poetic instinct. For this intent, we'll discuss how the poetic instinct is reflected in corporeal consciousness and in the understanding of the aesthetic experience in vital functions.

Survival Instinct, Culture and Vital Functions

If the survival instinct is an intelligence that leads beings to certain actions, we should notice that there are several ways of understanding this process in the context of humanity and its intellectual and cultural development. In a scientific approach, Darwin relates instinct to the actions of the pups, but also with the collective instinct.

An action, which we ourselves should require experience to enable us to perform, when performed by an animal, more especially a very young one, without any experience, and when performed by many individuals in the same way, without their knowing for what purpose it is performed, is usually said to be instinctive (Darwin, 1859, author translation)

Instinct can also be understood as an inherited intelligence, as a memory that is passed on through generations of the same species. In the context of humanity, it is common sense that instinct is related to a primitive intelligence. It is understood as a natural, bodily, animal, wild intelligence that humans possess before acquiring complex socio-cultural knowledge. Hence, the question of the human instinct for survival is somehow transformed when it acquires this degree of complexity.

Hannah Arendt (2007) also addresses vital instincts and functions within the human existence. Arendt separates human activities into three categories Labor, Work, and Actions. Labor are activities of the biological process such as spontaneous growth and metabolism. These are activities that sustain the survival of the individual, understood as vital functions. Work are the activities in which humans relate to other living things and things. Actions concerns the activities that occur between human beings, language, discourse, society and political activities in the condition of human plurality. We notice that the activities included in Labor do not represent the voluntary action of the human being. These are functions that occur within our body in an autonomous way with a reduced degree of consciousness. There is, in the thought of Hannah Arendt, a level of separation between activities influenced by the living being and

the body, such as Labor and the activities impacted by culture in Action and Work.

In this respect, we sense an affinity between Arendt's theorization and Suely Rolnik's (2015) thoughts the production of subjectivities. Rolnik discusses two types of experience. The cognitive experience is structured in language and cultural repertoire and the attribution of meanings. The second is the "out-of-the-subject" experience that is based on the affections and percepts of the living body. This is the difference between the subjective experience of the subject and the subjective experience as a living being. The psychologist points out the process of loss of connection with this "body knowledge". This loss of connectivity causes the malaise of individuals in contemporary society, because we base our experiences only on our cognitive ability and we discard our body knowledge.

It is fundamental to understand the dichotomy present in the understanding of biological and cultural existence, since our understanding of the survival instinct tends to consider only the biological needs as vital functions. However, if we are trying to understand aesthetic experience as a vital function, we must consider how it may be present in the two spheres of human existence. The aesthetic experience can occur in our contact with cultural production, but it also conforms the general production of affects and perceptions. In this sense, we understand that there is an organic-biological-animal instinct and there is another social-rational-cultural instinct. We do not think there is a clear line between these two instincts, but we claim that there is another instinct in this mix, that is a poetic-aesthetical instinct.

We do not believe that the aesthetic dimension of the survival instinct is exclusive to us, humans. Our research started from the concept of *sensibilia* (Deleuze, Guatarri, 2010, p.217), which deals with the contamination between organic and aesthetic functions based on the need for emergence of sensitive qualities for the survival of various species, such as the João-de-Barro bird that needs to "sculpt" its house. For them, the emergence of these sensitive qualities arises especially at the moment of the establishment of the territory-house.

Although we recognize how this sensitive quality is inherent to the existence and survival of living beings in general, we focus on understanding how it occurs in the human instinct of survival. Additionally, if this sensitive emergence occurs especially in the formation of the territory-house, we understand that this construction

begins in the individual experience of consciousness of our own body as our first house. Therefore, in this article, we elaborate upon the poetic instinct from the understanding of our body, as we can see next.

The Mind-Body Dichotomy

The dichotomy between biological and cultural being is close to the mind and body dichotomy established by the *cogito*. Throughout this text, we pointed out some of the impact of the intellectual development, and cultural and scientific knowledge on the gradual transformation on the human survival instinct. By remembering the disaffection process pointed out by Cruz, we can also recall the dual subjectivity theory and the disconnection from the "body-knowledge" described by Suely Rolnik. However, our intellectual capacity that supports the structuring of our cognitive ability should not be seen as prejudicial and harmful for our existence. Rather, we should recognize how the poetic instinct can reconcile our cognitive and sensory abilities. In order to accomplish this, we get inspired by reading the body theory of Yasuo Yuasa (1987), a Japanese philosopher who presented a western view of the Japanese thinking by showing parallels in an in-depth study of Eastern and Western philosophies

Yuasa's body theory divides the body into four circuits that present a gradual decrease of the level of consciousness and awareness. The first circuit is the sensory-motor, which is responsible for the perception and the process of transformation of sensorial information into action. This circuit is associated with the field of everyday experiences. The second is the circuit of *coenesthesis*, responsible for the sensory impressions within the body and the visceral organs. The perception of this circuit is already a bit vague and it is less evident when the body is healthy. These two circuits form the conscious cortex of the body.

The emotional-instinctive circuit is responsible for the neural processes where the nervous system turns a stimulus into an emotional response. The last one is called the "unconscious quasi-body", which has no equivalent in western culture because it is based on the meridian system of Chinese acupuncture. This circuit incorporates a flow of energetic activity of psycho-physiological nature. This flow cannot be perceived in ordinary circumstances. It's somehow difficult to understand Yuasa's theory as a scientific knowledge in our traditional occidental comprehension, because the

oriental culture blends medical science with a spiritual understanding of the body.

The flow of *ki* energy can permeate through several bodies and expand the connection and understanding between individuals beyond what we understand as a direct interaction. In Yuasa theory, *ki* energy flows in abundance among living beings and is essential for the overall balance and survival of the ecosystem. Yuasa proposes a method of *self-cultivation* through conscious breathing to access this energy and increase our capacity to perceive the fourth circuit. For him, the breathing is the only function that can simultaneously be conscious and unconscious/autonomous. Therefore, to breath consciously is a way of achieving a greater body awareness and increase an environmental connection.

Yuasa emphasizes the importance of conscientious breathing in spiritual practices of meditation, but also in practices of artistic performances. We understand that an aesthetic experience is a way of reaching this level of consciousness to manage the *ki* energy through this conscious breathing exercise. Yuasa proposes a method to connect with other living beings by practicing body consciousness and aesthetic experiences. It is important to emphasize the proximity between the intention of *self-preservation* present in the survival instinct and the intention of *self-cultivation* in the method proposed by Yuasa. Thus, Yuasa's theory allows an approach for the paradox of individual versus collective on our quest for a poetic instinct.

After studying Yuasa's theory and understanding the relevance of breathing in it, we asked how this could help us in our research of the poetic instinct. We tried to comprehend if it would be possible to analyze the relationship between the aesthetic experience and perception as a process similar to the breath analysis made by Yuasa. Breathing is a channel to sense the unconscious layers of energy that passes through all beings. Although breathing is an autonomous body function, it can be performed with awareness by turning your attention to inhalation and exhalation. We wonder if the same could be true to the general process of perception. That is, the body is uninterruptedly connected to our sensory system, which makes us live through our perceptions. However, we can also turn our attention and channel our focus to what we would be perceiving in a particular moment in an attempt to sharpen our senses. Thus, aesthetic experience transforms the objects of perception into aesthetic objects through contemplation,

imagination, fable, and creation.

To understand this phenomenon of perception and aesthetic experience, we must again turn to the question of cultural repertoire. Dufrenne (2008) points out two levels of perception. The *aesthetic perception* is similar to the "body knowledge" of Rolnik, because it belongs to the perception processes that are previous to the cultural repertoire. Dufrenne invokes this "alienation of the object" where the individual must detach himself from the cultural repertoire in order to experience otherness. On the other hand, *ordinary perception* would develop as we perceive the object intellectually. It is the perception processes that have access to representation, something that we understand as the cognitive experience pointed out by Rolnik.

Thus, a straight connection with the body is fundamental to reflect upon the poetic instinct because it is from the perception of ourselves and the other that we develop our instinct for survival through interaction with other beings. The poetic instinct addresses the awareness of sensorial processes looking for a straight connection with nature through aesthetic experiences. The instinct for survival guides our acts for food and reproduction through interaction with other beings and the environment. In this way, the affective and perceptual processes established in these interactions reveals why aesthetic experience is a vital function. It's through this poetic instinct that we can reconnect with other living beings and the balance of the planet. We understand this connection floats between the practice of corporal consciousness proposed by Yuasa and the aesthetic exercise of alterity proposed by Dufrenne. In the following topic, we will present two artistic works that establish relations with the concept of poetic instinct developed in this text.

Poetic instinct and artistic practice

We analyzed how aesthetic experience approaches the instinct for survival and vital functions. The survival instinct lies in the paradox between the individual and the collective, since it has a greater goal of preserving life through the protection of the individual and the spawn. In this sense, the survival instinct shifts between altruism and selfishness or between "to-myself" and the "for-everyone" (Morin, 2011).

For this reason, this paradox between the individual and the collective is one of the main points in the formulation of the poetic instinct. The poetic instinct

was elaborated after the performance “Abacateiro Acataremos seu Ato”¹ (Castro, 2016). This performance was based on the song “Refazenda”, composed by Gilberto Gil², which addresses the relation established with avocado trees, which provides their fruits for food. The song also addresses the perception of the cycles and temporality of nature. The performance began months before the public event when a dog brought an avocado seed to the artist and she decided to grow it up. She germinated that seed and kept the seedling alive for three months taking care of it daily. On the day of the event, the artist sang the song for the avocado while an interactive system collected data from her voice and from the plant to generate a visualization of the sensorial exchange. After singing to the seedling, she went to the outer side of the room and planted another avocado sprout in the garden.



Figure 1 “Abacateiro Acataremos o teu Ato” (2013). Performance by Barbara Castro in 2016

The performance began with the vital activity of other living beings – the dog eating the avocado. Here, the gesture of collecting the seed for cultivation does not refer to the instinct for survival, but it refers to the poetic instinct for the formation of affective connections with other living beings. Then, there was the accompanying and facilitation of the process of plant nutrition, as it involves the management of water and sunlight

1. Performance done in Hiperorgânicos 3 – OpenLab in Federal University in Rio de Janeiro in 2013. A video of the performance can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/barbaracastro/abacateiro>

2. Gilberto Gil, Brazilian composer and singer, 1942-alive.

for its growth. Yuasa’s body theory also mentions the importance of bodily vital activities, such as food preparation, as a meditative practice. The author does not include the cultivation of plants as one of these practices, but we believe that it fits into his thinking, since these are activities linked to survival that require a physical involvement into the action. In this way, this performance also addressed vital activities that link the relationship among several living beings and activate this vital flow into the aesthetic experience.

In the performance, Barbara sang to the avocado tree while a Kinect camera was filming the artist and the avocado seedling. The captured image was translated to a data visualization that used their silhouette as a guide path for a particle system. The movement of the particles was influenced by the artist’s voice and the size of the particles reacted to live data collected from the plant, such as humidity, galvanic response and a light sensor close to the plant. The whole system was coded by the artist using one Arduino with Plantronic³ and Processing.

The performance was not conceived in terms of vital functions, but it was created seeking the affective exchange that pervades and relates each of these functions. This performance addressed the poetic instinct, as it has several agents, moments, and aesthetic objects. The human being, the dog, the plant, and the machine contribute in different ways to the realization of a lasting aesthetic proposition that culminates in the performance, continues from then on in the sensitive exchanges that remain in the cultivation of that avocado tree until today and in the new fruits that the “Mother-Avocado-Tree” continues offering for the dog and all other beings that live around it. Therefore, this performance addresses this poetic instinct that comprises an experience of the cyclical temporality of nature, the vital functions and needs of each living being, and the affective exchange between them.

The machine and the data visualization occurred only at the moment of the performance to give visibility to this invisible exchange of affection. It discussed the connectivity and the language of this experience. By using sensors to transform the performer’s voice and the galvanic response of the plant into numbers in the same binary language, we could reflect on how technology can contribute poetically to this relationship

3. Plantronic is an electronic shield for Arduino created by Guto Nóbrega and the Nucleum of Arts and New Organisms (NANO) to collect live data from plants. See more at www.nano.eba.ufrj.br

between humans and nature, in this case the plant. In such way, the performance addressed the poetics of the paradox of the individual and the collective present in the survival instinct.

Another factor that helps us to think about the survival of life, that is, to understand how the interrelationship among the various living beings contributes to the survival of the whole, is the notion of scale. For this intent, we need to understand that an organism is a system, just like the planet is made up of several beings, formations and geological forces that contribute in many ways to the maintenance of life as a whole. Analogously, our bodies are composed of several microorganisms, flows and vital channels that collaborate to keep them alive.

These issues were addressed in “Preamar”⁴, presented by Barbara Castro in 2014. The “Preamar” installation consisted of an overlapping of two projections of a red tide of body data. The artist collected data on her and her mother’s blood pressure for 24 hours. The word “Preamar” in Portuguese sounds like pre-love (or love even before birth) and means high tide. The mother-daughter relationship is a way of thinking about the survival instinct through the reproduction and protection of the child. By alternating between choreographed and opposing movements, the two projections allow a glimpse of the process of (in)dependence established between mother and daughter and the dynamicity of fluid changes in the blood-affection relationship.

The heart data was used to create a data visualization that refers to the flow of a sea of blood. To generate the visualization, an algorithm maps the systole and diastole values to the height of a red oscillating wave. This data is also used to control a reverberation effect of the sentence “Amar é a maré”, which means “To love is the tide”, but it also sounds like “The Tide is to love”, because of the phonetics when sequential linking of the words love and tide in Portuguese.



Figure 2 Preamar, Barbara Castro (2014)

In this way, the “Preamar” installation related to the unstable nature of the emotions and their manifestation in the body through the metaphor of the tide as a manifestation of incessant, fluid, dynamic movement. The installation approached the body through the sea, and the sea that inhabits us. The tide also relates especially to the female body and how it is influenced by cycle of the moon, which is related to the periodicity of the menstrual cycle, which brings the woman’s existence closer to a blood cycle. Besides the connection between the emotions, the heart, and the blood, “Preamar” avoided the separation between mind and body.

“Preamar” was created from the understanding of the fluid and living nature of our existence, much alike of the Earth organism. As in the Avocado tree performance, we were talking about the affections established when experiencing the cycles of nature. Heart beat and circulation seem to be these poetic engines for a broad view of instinct and for a relationship with the planet.

We see in these two works how this aesthetic perception and the movement of contemplation of the body, living beings, environment, nature, and cycles are part of the process of artistic creation that guides the poetic instinct.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we discussed how aesthetic experience can be considered a vital function in the proposition of a poetic instinct. We discussed how two artistic projects used digital media to deal with this poetic instinct. We believe that aesthetic experience is fundamental in creating significant connections and affection with nature.

Despite the process of disaffection due to the

4. A video can be seen at: http://barbaracastro.com.br/qd_gallery/preamar/

aesthetic exacerbation and the increase of the techno-sensorial apparatus pointed out by Cruz, we believe that computational art has its role in this redesign of the poetic instinct because it may help us to imagine and to give visibility to different sensory processes beyond ours.

In addition, we must also consider the banalization of the term connectivity and the apparent superficiality related to the use of technologies as a tool for creating and maintaining social relations. However, we believe that technological ubiquity gives us the opportunity to experience the lack of empathy and affection with such intensity that allows us to problematize this question and to propose a poetic perception and interpretation of real connectivity.

Finally, if connectivity is the dissident issue of the paradox of the individual and the collective, we believe that artistic practice allows reaching the notion of survival by developing a poetic instinct by conscious sensorial experience with nature. The art process originates from the anguish and urgency of creation in an extremely personal, solitary, and intimate experience, but it also seeks to access and affect others.

Thus, even when dealing with very individual experiences, such as the relationship with the mother, the act of playing with a dog, or the habit of cultivating plants in her garden, artworks can intensify and multiply affective processes. Art can establish new relationships and aesthetic experiences with observers who get in touch with the artwork and it can raise awareness in new aesthetic experiences out of the legitimated environment of art. We hope that the poetic instinct can awaken the value of aesthetic experience and the contemplation and appreciation of nature, while also playing a conciliatory role in the ambivalence between the individual and collective experience.

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In her professional career, Barbara participated as a data visualization designer in the Energy Database for Inter-American Development Bank and as a motion designer for TV-Globo. Recently, Barbara has founded the studio Ambos&& with Luiz Ludwig. Ambos&& is a creative studio that develops exhibitions and interactive projects for cultural institutions. Ambos&& has exhibited works in Museu do Amanhã, Oi Futuro and Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil.

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