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## AESTHETICS OF THE INVISIBLE AND ANDROGYNY: THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SYMBOLIC UNIT OF BELONGING AS A REFLECTION FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION

### ESTÉTICA DO INVISÍVEL E ANDROGINIA: A DISSOLUÇÃO DA UNIDADE SIMBÓLICA DE PERTENCIMENTO COMO REFLEXÃO À EDUCAÇÃO FÍSICA

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#### RESUMO

O interesse pela realização do estudo parte da visibilidade que indivíduos não binários adquirem em diferentes espaços, inclusive em manifestações artísticas que convidam ao diálogo. Um exemplo é o evento “Mostra de Multilinguagens Corpos Visíveis: arte e diversidade”, que promoveu um debate público envolvendo a temática. A mesma comportou a exposição fotográfica “Estética do Invisível”, de onde selecionamos duas imagens, com o objetivo de interpretá-las, discutindo alguns sentidos atrelados às suas composições. Trata-se daquelas intituladas “Ensaio disfarce para o fim do mundo” e “Meu corpo criação”. O método é inspirado na antropologia da imagem. O mesmo exige que a interpretação supere o conteúdo das fotografias e considere aspectos ligados à sua produção e exibição. Os resultados apontam que ambas as imagens superaram o discurso autoritário, representando indivíduos que recusam se submeter aos processos identitários vigentes. Elas expressam um modo de sofrimento, que se traduz em sintoma pela dissolução da unidade simbólica de pertencimento. Os elementos que as constituem evocam noções de divindade, poder, resistência e transformação. Além de subjetividades cambiantes, as fotografias iluminam o despontar de um novo paradigma que desafia convenções e acarreta mudanças em diferentes campos, principalmente aos que atuam diretamente sobre o corpo.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação Física. Corpo andrógino. Fotografia.

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#### ABSTRACT

The interest in conducting this study stems from the visibility that non-binary individuals acquire in different spaces, including in artistic manifestations that invite one to dialogue. An example is the event “Visible Bodies Multilanguage Exhibition: Art and Diversity”, which promoted a public debate around the theme. It included a photographic exhibition entitled “Aesthetics of the Invisible”, from which we selected two images to be interpreted, discussing some senses linked to their compositions: “Ensaio disfarce para o fim do mundo” and “My Creation Body”, henceforth referred to as “Disguised Rehearsal for the End of the World” and “My Creation Body”, respectively. The method is inspired on the anthropology of image. It requires that interpretation goes beyond the content of the photographs to encompass aspects tied to their production and exhibition. Results show that both images overcome the authoritarian discourse, representing individuals who refuse to submit themselves to current identity processes. They express a mode of suffering that is translated into a symptom by the dissolution of the symbolic unit of belonging. The elements that constitute them evoke notions of divinity, power, resistance and transformation. In addition to changing subjectivities, the photographs illuminate the rise of a new paradigm that defies conventions and brings about changes in different fields, especially in those that act directly on the body.

**Keywords:** Physical Education. Androgynous body. Photograph.

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#### Introduction

To study the body implies, among other factors, to understand the meanings surrounding it in each culture. In this scenario, a noteworthy aspect concerns the mechanisms that work together to discipline it, such as the biological/social and male/female dichotomies present in different fields of knowledge<sup>1,2</sup>. An example can be seen in Physical Education itself, which, from its very beginning, is marked by mechanized and sexist methods<sup>3</sup>. Despite the countless transformations that have occurred in its dynamics, its new frames still preserve the normalizing and inflexible essence of yore. In this context, bodily practices are formulated in consonance with a utilitarian perspective, serving interests that are external to individuals. This usually goes unnoticed because the discourses that invite one to take part emerge as if they were natural, imposing health and beauty standards, as pointed out by Louro *et al.*<sup>4</sup>.

According to the authors, although the attempt to fit into these models represents a dominant action today, there are people who refuse any form of identification. Rejecting what is culturally imposed on male and female, these individuals choose to reinvent their bodies and, sometimes, decide to stand on the border between both. This attitude leads us to understand why this mode of transparent subversion in the body is potentially capable of defying the dynamics that contextualizes bodily practices, as evidenced in studies involving high-performance sports<sup>5,6</sup> and the context of Physical Education classes. Among other aspects, they address the destabilization that transgender athletes cause in the modes of sports organization rooted in the heteronormative paradigm<sup>5,6</sup>. Considering bodily activities developed at school, exclusion and estrangement are just some of the difficulties faced by students who present a gender-deviant performance<sup>7</sup>.

In addition, and remarkably, there is an increasing number of people with this appearance deemed strange to the eyes that are faced with the impossibility of categorizing them within existing molds. Recently, a campaign promoted on social media invited non-binary people to post selfies in order to show the existence of individuals who do not identify with any of the genders<sup>8</sup>. From the perspective of Salish<sup>9</sup>, Louro<sup>10</sup>, Louro *et al.*<sup>4</sup>, Butler<sup>11</sup>, Butler<sup>12</sup>, such forms of “body reconstruction” can be understood, at least in part, through the Queer Theory. The queer body, as it is referred to by the authors, elicits contradictions inherent to the norms, putting the latter to the test and imposing challenges to conventions.

In this context, an emblematic case unfolded at Colégio Pedro II, a school located in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, in 2016. After a series of demonstrations by the students against a rule that differentiated uniforms for girls and boys, the institution decided to loosen it and allow them to choose the design that, among the official options, would best serve them<sup>13</sup>. The occurrence divided opinions and sparked controversy, so much so that many people who opposed to the decision showed intolerance. For Dunker<sup>14</sup>, this reaction is a consequence of the attempt to live among equals, which marks social life nowadays.

On the other hand, from a market perspective, adaptations happen more smoothly; in fashion, for instance, brands such as “Banditee” do not differentiate the fit of their clothes in order to target both genders. One of its slogans, by the way, is “soul has no gender”. In this context, there are professional models working toward breaking with gender identity, such as Erika Linder, Andrej Pejic, Elliott Sailors and Márcia Alvarado. The attempt to assimilate these modes of being has gained momentum in the cultural industry as well. Ruas and Rabot<sup>15</sup> highlight movies and cartoons such as “Knights of the Zodiac”, “Dragon Ball” and “Avatar”, which feature characters without a clearly defined gender.

In the arts, it is possible to find even more striking manifestations in the dialogue with this theme, as it is the case of the “Visible Bodies Multilanguage Exhibition: Art and Diversity”, held in June 2018, in the city of Rio de Janeiro<sup>16</sup>. It covered topics related to gender, sexual diversity, the fight against machismo and LGBTphobia, spanning racism and fatphobia. The activities included cinema, theater, fashion, music, performances, debates, sports and the photographic contest that selected pictures to compose an exhibition entitled “Aesthetics of the Invisible”.

It is precisely on a cutout of this exhibition that we will focus in this study. The objective is to interpret two photographs, specifically those entitled “Disguised Rehearsal for the End of the World” and “My Creation Body”, discussing some senses linked to their compositions. The choice for an artistic scope derives from its potential to dialogue with reality in such a way that we are invited to ponder new meanings. And these photographs were selected for the details that make them riveting and thought-provoking, as we will show below. The first one encourages discussions around gender, politics and religiosity, and would even have its exhibition censored. The second, in its turn, compellingly captured a

transgender person looking at themselves, showing a repulsiveness perhaps caused by the binary classification, which is evidenced by both cultural and biological aspects.

In the literature on the subject<sup>3,5-7</sup>, we perceive that the theme lacks an in-depth approach, for there is an evident long way to be walked toward overcoming the challenges imposed by these modes of being, which aim for visibility. Thus, providing some considerations on the photographs favors understandings around this phenomenon that puts the body on display.

## Methods

The method used to interpret the photographs is inspired on the anthropology of image, an expanding multidisciplinary and multimethodological strategy that allows grasping the meanings that emerge from reading a portrait<sup>17</sup>. This resource requires the researcher to comprehend the sociocultural relationships that are reified in the images. For this to be possible, one must be attentive to the conditions linked to their production, which demands, among other factors, the consideration of space, time and sociopolitical context.

Penn<sup>18</sup> and Barthes<sup>19</sup> draw attention to the different levels related to the interpretive process, emphasizing the importance that cultural associations have concerning what is recorded. The first instance of signification is denotative; in it, the reader requests linguistic and anthropological knowledge. Another level is the connotative, at which the interpretation process demands culturally shared knowledge, with some readings being idiosyncratic. There is also the mythical form, which Penn<sup>18:324</sup> defines as “[...] the process by which a culture naturalizes, or renders invisible, its own norms and ideology”.

Thus, supported on the aforementioned authors, we developed our analytical course, starting with the selection of the photographs according to the objective of the study. As mentioned, they were taken from the exhibition “Aesthetics of the Invisible”, which, together with other attractions, composed the event “Visible Bodies Multilanguage Exhibition: Art and Diversity”. They cover issues related to gender or sexual diversity, including the issues and struggles of women and LGBTQI+ people, and met the requirement of free age classification. In addition to being exhibited at the event, the images served to advertise it, being exposed on wheatpaste posters around the city of Rio de Janeiro. A total of twenty photographs made up the sample. Fifteen were selected through the contest “Aesthetics of the Invisible”, and five came from a photo shoot external to the contest. Of those, eleven were related to the exposure of the androgynous body, and two were selected for interpretation, as specified.

The results were presented and discussed simultaneously, starting with the contextualization of aspects connected to the event. That is when we situated space, time and sociopolitical reality. Then, we interpreted the photographs, one at a time, which allowed for greater focus and depth in the reflection on the symbology present in their compositions. Thus, “Disguised Rehearsal for the End of the World” was the first photograph to be worked on, and “My Creation Body” was the second.

Bearing in mind that productions of this nature require the identification of the subjects that interpret, it is worth making it clear that we are teachers working in the Physical Education field at different institutions, which also explains our focus on the body. Another important factor to be taken into account is the limitation of the study, which lies precisely in the subjectivity inherent to photography and to the interpretive process. About the interpretive process, we stress that it was carefully carried out, since we relied on theoretical frameworks capable of leading one to the understanding of the phenomenon portrayed and to the symbology required for composition.

## Results and Discussion

The starting point is the presentation of some factors that contextualized the “Visible Bodies Multilanguage Exhibition: Art and Diversity”. With regard to space and time, the activities were thought of to take place all in Parque Madureira, located in the Madureira neighborhood, north of the city of Rio de Janeiro, between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of June, 2018, the LGBT pride month. The chosen location is a public leisure area with squares, bike path, amphitheater and spaces for sports. Madureira is a neighborhood far from downtown, but a reference for its surroundings, due to its shopping and transportation options, besides being a cradle of cultural manifestations, such as samba.

Although the site selected for the attractions is public, political decisions affected by religious values of Christian tradition prevented the event from happening in its entirety. This is because some attractions were censored by Mayor Marcelo Crivella, known for his conservatism and for being linked to an evangelical church, specifically as a pastor. He would oftentimes cause controversy by violating the constitutional principle of the secular state, and it was even common to see him resorting to a faith-based speech to justify controversial stances in the government. In a video posted on social media, the mayor stated that: “No performance, no exhibition will offend people’s religion. As long as I am mayor, we will respect people’s conscience and religion”. On the occasion, the statements targeted a play that was part of the event in question.

It is worth noting that his intransigence is no exception, since people who defend his ideas are not rare to find. Said censorship led the organizers to move the event to Fundação Progresso, a cultural center downtown that traditionally receives artistic manifestations of different natures. As one can perceive, the consolidation of the public dialogue on “sexual and gender diversity” and “fight against machismo and LGBTphobia” in the northern area of the city was made impossible.

Revulsion at what escapes the supposed normality also affected the context of the photographs, since some would have their exhibition vetoed. Among them is the one shown in Figure 1, entitled “Disguised Rehearsal for the End World”, by Maíra Barillo, Renan Guedes and Yan Chi. It would also happen to be banned by age censorship. Organizing members of the event and people sensitive to the cause promoted demonstrations and managed to reverse the situation<sup>20</sup>. Here is the image:



**Figure 1.** Photograph by Maíra Barillo, Renan Guedes and Yan Chi, entitled “Disguised Rehearsal for the End of the World”

It is a photograph without caption, which allows for greater interpretive freedom. The setting is enigmatic, rich in symbols and thought-provoking colors. It is hard to establish any classifications as to gender, skin color, or even body shape. The mystery suggested by the dark shade of red, along with the shadows and what could be a horn, leads the imagination to a correlation with the devil. From a different perspective, the same picture, with the eyes covered by the golden mask, the slightly raised head, and the necklace wrapped around the clothes, resembles the figure of an Orisha, symbol of an African-rooted religiosity in Brazil.

According to Natividade and Oliveira<sup>21</sup>, these religions were established in the country in opposition to the Christian values that prevail here, which is why they are marginalized. Since then, it is common to see misguided discourses linking them to evil and the devil. The authors also state that the Orishas symbolize personality, regardless of male or female gender, so many entities are represented by an androgynous anthropomorphism, evidencing a flexibility connected to gender identity, which attracts to these religions many people who are not accepted in others. This leads us to ponder that the artistic tangle involving gender, the devil and Orishas is not a mere chance in the composition of this photograph. Such associations may have influenced the initial decision regarding the veto, which found no ground in the argument based on the age group classification.

When presenting an understanding of life between the walls of Brazilian gated communities, Dunker<sup>14</sup> confronts it with everyday life, allowing us to understand some of the mechanisms that regulate social behavior nowadays. Driven by a desire to live among equals, people behave oppressively, in an attempt to force others to submit to current identification processes. In this context, thoughts that differ from those of the majority cause discomfort and are fought against on the basis of a supposed need to reaffirm the group's identity.

The author<sup>12</sup> argues that this scenario gives rise to certain social pathologies. They stem from the suffering caused by the individual's exposure to excessive identification processes, so subversive attitudes take the shape of symptoms, which are expressions of suffering and of a desire for change. These are means to challenge the supposed universality of the models that invite one to identification. When proposing a typification about social pathologies, Dunker<sup>14</sup> embraces gender issues, which is made clear when he refers to those that:

[...] derive from the loss of the unity of the spirit and that presents itself as aspirations of identity – of gender, of style, of way of life. The symbol of this false unity is the wall. As if it established a new community, which rejects and replaces the previous one, experienced as unlikely or imposter. The new unit acquired between walls is composed in contrast to the anomie that is left outside of it. This self-segregating community needs therefore to deal with the effects of guilt that come back in the form of intolerance or what Freud called “narcissism of minor differences”<sup>14:56</sup>.

From this perspective, the being portrayed in the image, who is neither a man nor a woman, is a striking representation of the dissolution of the symbolic unit of belonging, being understood as the expression of a symptom. Furthermore, the attempt to veto the image translates a mode of intolerance of the current power, a consequence of the narcissism of minor differences. The individual photographed can still be associated with the figure of the transversal shaman, who, according to the author<sup>12</sup>, is capable of standing in between perspectives, fulfilling the role of bringing together disparate universes. “Transversal shamans are tricksters, playful masters, ambiguous from a moral point of view, bisexual, wandering from a territorial point of view”<sup>12:387</sup>.

In order to make it clear how the set of elements required to compose the photograph led us to the interpretations presented, we bring up the essence of its main elements. We start with anthropomorphism, which, according to Chevalier; Gheerbrant<sup>22</sup> is found at the:

[...] dawn of all cosmogony, as well as at the end of all eschatology. In the alpha as in the omega of the world and of the manifested being lies the fullness of the fundamental unity, where the opposites confound, whether they are still nothing more than potentiality, whether their reconciliation, their final integration, has been achieved. [...] The androgynous, sign of totality, therefore, appears at the end and beginning of times. In the eschatological view of salvation, the being is reintegrated into a plenitude in which the separation of the sexes is nullified [...]<sup>22:52</sup>.

It is interesting to note that the words present in the title “Disguised Rehearsal for the End of the World” evoke the idea of terminality expressed in the quote. Exploring the imaginary relations established between the notions of androgyny, cosmogony and eschatology, we understand that, in addition to suggesting the end of a standard, the image on display points to the appearance of another; so much so that, when we consider the whole in its composition, we notice that the senses converge in the same direction, and it suffices to remember that the image suggests the denial of any standards.

Analyzing each element from the perspective of Chevalier; Gheerbrant<sup>22</sup>, we see that the eyes, dual in their nature, responsible for external perceptions, are covered. There is some sort of necklace, whose cosmic and psychic meaning suggests a reduction from the multiple to the singular, organizing possibly chaotic differences. The different shades of red that predominate all over the image symbolizes life and its mystery. The golden-hued horn can be associated with a crown; there even is conformity between some meanings related to both objects. They are: elevation, power and light. When it comes exclusively to the horn, the symbology turns to the idea of eminence, openness and initiation. There are ambivalent meanings as well, such as: union between virile power and fertility; defensive force linked to the notion of shield, and regressive force suggested by the imagery related to the devil – as already discussed. There are also active and passive principles, with the first representing the masculine, given its penetrating power, whereas the passive one is geared toward the feminine, given the lyre-like or receptacle-like shape. From this perspective, the golden color is associated with the idea of divinity, perfection, knowledge and renewal.

According to the Queer Theory, we are referring to post-identity individuals, constituted by changing subjectivities<sup>9-12</sup>. Said theory emerged as a consequence of a worn-out homosexual identity policy, as well as of the expansion and diversification of activist movements, causing some individuals to choose to continue fighting for equal rights, while others kept challenging “the male/female, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual dichotomies; whereas others are not content in crossing divisions but, instead, decide to live the ambiguity of the border itself”<sup>4:38</sup>.

The last definition present in the aforementioned statement reaches the representations under analysis, because androgyny is characterized precisely by ambiguity, which confounds the view traditionally used to establish classifications, meeting the idea of the Queer body, which “[...] does not care for definition, fixity or stability, but is transitive, multiple and averse to assimilation”<sup>9:19</sup>.

Queer is a mode of thinking and being that does not long for the center, nor wants it as reference; a mode of thinking and being that challenges the regulatory norms of society, that embraces the discomfort of ambiguity, of being “in-between places”, of the undecidable. Queer is a foreign body that teases and fascinates<sup>4:7</sup>.

Unlike the mystery present in “Disguised Rehearsal for the End of the World”, “My Creation Body”, by Vanessa Soares, is explicit in its opposition to the binary gender. Let us see her composition in Figure 2:



**Figure 2.** Photograph by Vanessa Soares, entitled “My Creation Body”

This picture deals with the perception of the transgender person about their own body. The image depicts an individual looking at themselves, and what is being put to the test is that which Butler<sup>12</sup> calls performativity, i.e., the enactment of gestures and the use of signs that culture and discourse designate as specific to the female and male genders. This is made explicit in the body expression and in the costume, which clash with what is taken as natural, showing the irreverence of a person who is in between places. For Chevalier and Gheerbrant<sup>22</sup>, the symbology related to the gaze concerns the revelation of inner issues; the caption even confirms this interpretation:

Black and white photographic image of the performance “mente e corpo” (“mind and body”) n.7853”, exhibited at cultural center Casa Vermelha in Florianópolis/SC. The transgender person’s gaze at themselves, by moving between a rejection and a recognition of their own body, is capable of exploring the borders, understandings and disagreements between deviant masculinities and femininities. The transgender body is an invented body. Not a body invented by biology, which made sacred two unique ways of inhabiting a body. But a body that is invented by the very person who experiences it, who goes against what society forbids, and who recognizes themselves in a body that is deemed artificial, but that composes a reality of their existence in an organic and, why not, natural manner. Florianópolis, SC<sup>22:74</sup>

According to Penn<sup>18</sup>, the text that comes with the images meets the purpose of preventing the ambiguity of senses that is inherent to imagery representations. The author also states that the different elements presented simultaneously in the photograph are signified from the interaction of the reader with the image, in a process that depends on previous knowledge about the represented objects. Thus, misunderstandings around masculinities and femininities become intelligible through the conflict in the relationship established with the biological and cultural aspects evident in the body. Observing the half-naked chest, for

instance, a rejection of the female gender is expressed. The breasts wrapped in bandages portray a common practice in transgender individuals who seek to create the appearance of a masculine chest. The costume is also complemented by jeans, a unisex option, exposing the waistband of a typically masculine underwear.

When presenting clothing-related meanings, Chevalier; Gheerbrant<sup>22</sup> argue that this is another form of inner revelation, since it allows the expression of individuality and the feeling of belonging to a certain society. It is precisely for this reason that, in addition to the gaze, the garments define the essence of “My Creation Body”, which strikingly represents the individual who emerges queer. Escaping the standard imposed on the basis of biological and cultural differences, the subversive individual puts the current model to the test, exposing that no order is fully effective.

The image reflects what Butler<sup>12:72</sup> affirms categorically, that is, “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well”. This idea reinforces the disregard for the norms as a mark of post-identity bodies. Their changing subjectivities work as some sort of showcase, demonstrating that transformations go beyond gender and defy other standards, especially concerning the body. The refusal to submit to excessive processes of identity determination is suggested in the image, which also conveys a desire to “reconstruct it” and “re-signify” it.

It is precisely this idea related to the possibility of architecting the body that generates intolerance and prejudice and that defies conventions, as we initially illustrated when referring to the presence of these individuals in different spaces, such as in bodily practices, in schools, in fashion, in the cultural industry and in the arts, whose potential facilitates the understanding of the subjectivities that permeate these dissonant bodies. As we have seen, both photographs strongly represented the bodies that disturb the eyes of those who observe them and, at the same time, of those who build them subversively.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that both photographs were adamant about the authoritarian discourse. The essence portrayed denotes the opposite of other photographic practices that celebrate the submission of individuals to order and discipline. In the portraits of the peasant society of Béarn, in the southwest of France, analyzed by Bourdieu and Bourdieu<sup>23</sup>, for instance, there was a concern on the part of the peasants about controlling what could be recorded, including, and mainly, clothing types and body posture, which should comply with the conventions established for each occasion. Both the photographs of the peasants and the portraits that composed the “Visible Bodies Multilanguage Exhibition: Art and Diversity” reflect the values that each group desired to share at the time of the recording. The difference lies in overcoming fixity and hierarchization, and this is what the latter propose to do.

## Conclusions

The process of interpreting the photographs allowed bringing to the fore that, regardless of the socially imposed control, there are modes of being that escape the supposed normality, aiming for visibility and respect. What is represented in both images is the dissolution of the symbolic unit of belonging, a form of symptom that manifests itself in individuals who suffer from exposure to current excessive identification processes.

The set observed in “Disguised Rehearsal for the End of the World” sharpened our imagination, teasing our eyes with its enigmatic scenario, which was gradually unveiled. While interpreting it, we were led to dialogue with gender, religiosity and power issues; besides, the collection of information about the possible veto of the image allowed us to understand the origin of the intolerance that affects people who expose fragilities inherent to



the norms. The meanings tied to the composition of the photograph contributed to an understanding that connects an identity undefinition to the imagery related to the devil and the Orishas.

With respect to the interpretation of “My Creation Body”, the elements that constituted it evoked notions of transformation and resistance, because both composition and caption evidence a refusal of the heteronormativities discussed by the Queer Theory. An expression of suffering was also suggested through the gaze that rejects the binary gender. The notion of a body to be built fosters the emergence of a new paradigm that defies conventions and brings about changes, which goes beyond the matter of gender and affects different fields of knowledge, especially those that act directly on the body.

The study shed light on comprehensions about the body that emerges queer, and served as a warning about the demands that have been arising from them. Further investigations that bring new perspectives are necessary so that we broaden discussions in the field of bodily practices.

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