

Analysis of Power Relations in Performance: Taking Rhythm 0 as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Abramovic's Rhythm 0 reveals many of Foucault's ideas about power, including how power is exercised and some of the characteristics of power. Through the analysis of the performance itself and the application and understanding of Foucault's point of view, the author will give more in-depth consideration to the generation of tensions of power itself and the transformation of the tensions of power.

Keywords: *exercise of power, characteristics of power, passive role, active role, transformation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1974, Marina Abramovic, a performance artist living in Soviet Russia, created one of the most controversial, engrossing, and dangerous works in art history, which she called Rhythm 0. The power theory proposed by French philosopher Michel Foucault at the same time can be used to explain some phenomenon reflected in Rhythm 0. Innovatively, Rhythm 0 integrates the role of the spectators into the whole performance, which makes the composition of the roles and the relationship between the roles in the performance more complicated. Foucault's power theory could be embodied by the network structure formed by the interaction between active and passive roles.

The purpose of Abramovic's performance is to test people's reactions to things outside the constraints of morality and system. However, some philosophical and sociological issues arising from this performance have also aroused extensive thinking and discussion among scholars. For example, Lília Simões, Maria Consuelo Passos use the relation "between performer and spectator to analyze Rhythm 0, which connects this performance with the experience in her childhood" [1]. And Totem refers to rules, and Taboos refer to behavior that violates rules. Prohibition cannot be separated from forbidden desires. Desires (Taboos) exist in the unconscious and are desirable, and human civilization is

created at the expense of such desires. In Rhythm 0, it is inevitable that audiences lose their inhibitions and act out Taboos, thus harming artists.

Starting from the three relationships embodied in Rhythm 0, this paper will analyze them with the power theory of Michel Foucault and considers the power tension embodied by all the characters in this performance. During the performance, between Abramovic and the spectators, the spectators were in the active position, while Abramovic was passive. There seemed to be an invisible power pushing the spectators' behavior to become extreme. At the end of the performance, the relationship between Abramovic and the spectators was reversed, with the wounded artist taking on a subjective role by expressing her own feelings of grief and the spectators fleeing in fear of reprisals. The power relationship is different from the one-way violence relationship. The first part of this paper will focus on the three tense relationships in Rhythm 0 and combine Foucault's power theory with studying how the roles influence each other. Power is a huge net in which each individual influence and transforms each other due to the deviation of knowledge structure. The second part of this paper will combine Foucault's theory of knowledge power structure with studying how the multiple roles in Rhythm 0 realize the interaction and transformation between active and passive in this power structure and the purpose of Abramovic's creation of this work.

2. EXERCISE OF POWER

2.1. *Power Everywhere: Three Tensions in Rhythm 0*

When considering Marina Abramovic's radical artistic performance, some scholars like Lília and Maria admit that Abramovic's use of her own body is unconventional, which can be regarded as criticism and innovation of traditional performance forms. In the article *The Performance Art of Marina Abramovic as a Transformational Experience* which Lília and Maria write, they state that "this kind of performance brings spectator to the stage and they can act whatever they want" [1]. Also, as they conclude, since the first work in which Abramovic established that observation by the spectator *House with sea view* (2002), this shows that Abramovic has not only created a precedent for actor spectator interaction but also continued to develop and innovate in this aspect to a deeper level. In *Rhythm 0*, the role of "Spectator" is added to make up for the lack of such a role in traditional performances. In traditional performances, the spectator can only sit under the stage and have no power over the performer's whole performance. So, this is really a breakthrough for traditional performance, so how to interact with a spectator or why Abramovic wanted to do this change.

Abramovic did these kinds of performances mainly because she wanted to express herself in her works better and to reach this aim, she would like to interact more with the spectator. Just as Alcázar, J. says, "For Abramovic, the relationship with the audience was fundamental. How she expressed herself in her works ended up involving the spectators through empathy, identification, voyeurism, or even a certain degree of sadism, when in some works, she injured herself or allowed herself to be injured by the public." [2] It is the mutual promotion of the senses of the performer and the spectators. There are three tensions between the artist and the spectators, and between the spectators themselves, due to their respective power. In *Rhythm 0*, the spectators, as part of the performer, are designed by Marina Abramovic into her performance. Firmly adhering to this way of interaction between the spectators and the performer is the characteristic of her performance. What should be the relationship between the spectators and the performer will be described below.

Unlike the anesthetized artist, the spectators are active and have control over the artist's body in the prescribed time. In contrast, the artist loses self-consciousness and participates in the performance as a passive party or an object whose fate is unknown. In addition, because the composition of the role of "Spectator" is complex and unpredictable, their social background, educational level, and other factors led to their different psychological activities when they saw

the anesthetized artist and 72 objects. However, these people still caused serious harm to the artist in the end, indicating that there is also an active and passive relationship among the spectators, and the part of the spectators in charge can determine the final influence of the role of "Spectator" on the whole performance. Also, in *Rhythm 5*, she lost her consciousness to see whether the spectator will interact with her, just like Peggy Phelan states, "In *Rhythm 5*, for example, a doctor in the audience realized that her clothes were on fire and that she was no moving, and he pulled her out of the burning star." and even states that "her own individual consciousness was not necessary for the completion of the event itself." [3]. By making her body unconscious and achieving the effect of performance through interaction between the spectator and herself, she became an unconscious object, while the spectator became the subject. When these preparations are prepared well, what results will arise in this performance?

After the anesthesia, the artist's self-consciousness is restored when she is no longer a passive object. When she realizes the fact that the audience has caused her harm, her sorrowful look makes the audience run away for fear of reprisal. After seeing her sorrowful look, the audience would passively and subconsciously flee, reflecting the artist's active role. Lília and Maria hold the opinion that this result is just what Abramovic wanted. She just needed the experience that she proposed to bring the spectators into the work, such that they could transform her and be transformed by her. Because as Lília and Maria think, "These experiences not only related to the actions to which Abramovic's body was subjected or what the public proposed to do to her but also were moments at which new meanings were assigned and views came back as support that enabled her to pose the problem of her memories and emotions." [1] That is to say, the meaning of this performance has two aspects. The first is when the performance is on and when the performance ends. These all related a lot to the power theory of Foucault. One is the power's characteristic. He regards power as a kind of relationship and network, believes that power is non-subject and non-centralized, emphasizes the decentralization and diversity of power, and uses the micropower theory to deconstruct and supplement the macro power theory with the ruling power as the core. And the other is the way that how power operates. These active/passive relationships in *Rhythm 0* make the show mind-wracking, but what power makes the show so extreme still needs to be explored.

2.2. *Extreme Performance -- the Opposite of Power*

Foucault believes that power, when exercised, has a direct productive effect. The author agrees with this

view. In Rhythm 0, the behavior of the spectators becomes increasingly extreme, and it is the power that produces the embodiment of its own resistance. Before the performance of Rhythm 0, there is a guarantee that the spectators would not be held legally responsible for any of their actions. During the performance, Marina Abramovic, who will not react no matter what is done, made the spectators more daring to try the behaviors prohibited by the law. It should be noted that this is a process from light to heavy: at first, the spectators just kiss her, feed her a cake, but over time, the spectators' behavior becomes wilder, and they cut off the artist's clothes, with a knife cut her skin, to drink her blood, use a knife to pierce the wood between her legs, in the end, someone tries to rape her, someone with a loaded gun pointed at the artist's head – quite a horror performance.

In the daily life of these spectators, influences from various aspects, such as school education and legal constraints, have established a moral code in their hearts, which is the function of social power. However, this power also produces resistance to itself. The spectators' violence against Marina Abramovic is not simply because they enjoy the pleasure of violence, but more because they enjoy the usurpation of power. Lília and Maria hold the view that "her vulnerability provoked people into sadism, just like the vulnerability of a child who is subjected to punishment at the hands of its mother." [1] This means when the spectators turned to the exerciser of the power, at that time, the exerciser of power has no obstacles to the exercise. As they ensured that exercise could not resist, they did more outrageous things. Foucault's power theory also goes through "four stages, torture, punishment, discipline to the final prison. The evolution of these four stages is the way that the exercisers of power continue to hinder. Then the implementers of power continue to improve to control power." [4] When there is no resistance, the way to exercise power can be anyway. That is the reason why the performance finally turned to an extreme one.

From another point of view, we can also see the power being put upon these spectators by the government. Why the persecution of the spectator against Abramovic is deepening, rather than starting when the performance is determined to do anything, shows that there is an obstacle. This obstacle is a manifestation of the imposition of state power on these audiences, which confirms the existence of power, it also shows that the subject of power may be the object of power under other conditions. As Kevin Jon Heller concludes, "power relations are both intentional and non-subjective." [5] This means there are no subjects of power, and also, there are no objects of power because it is everywhere. We cannot simply distinguish the subject in possession of power from the object controlled by power. The power relationship is not simply expressed as the relationship between subjects and objects in this

model. Power should not be regarded as a privilege that some people may possess but a relationship network that is always in a state of tension and activity. As Kevin Jon Heller asks, "if there are no subjects then who exercised it, the answer is power itself is the real subject of history." [5] So when there are no obstacles, power will exercise itself to do more, and if there is resistance, the power will be limited to some extent. Although the spectators, as a role in the performance, have the power to commit violence against the artist, "power" is different from "violence" in Foucault's concept of power.

2.3. "Power" or "Violence"

In the performance of Rhythm 0, it can be directly seen that the spectators exert influence on the artist, including good influence and bad influence. This process is easily regarded as unilateral and coercive, which is the "violence" in Foucault's concept. According to Foucault, violence does not leave the victim a choice between submission or not; the victim is a walking dead, not a person capable of exerting influence. Power is a net, an interaction between active individuals, while violence acts unilaterally on passive objects or things. However, it should be noted that the spectators were able to do so on two premises: one is to get permission from the artist and the gallery, and the other is to actually test that the artist does not respond to what they are doing. In other words, all their actions need permission, which comes from the art exhibition hall, the artist, and their own inner desire. The role of the audience is both active and passive, so in Foucault's concept, their actions cannot be strictly called "violence".

However, after the performance of Rhythm 0, the audience is again subject to legal and moral constraints, and they flee for fear of retribution from Abramovic, which further illustrates the network structure of power, which intersects and connects with each other. In the article *Strategies of Examination and School Evaluation Carried out in Brazil: Thinking about Power Relations and Discipline from the Foucaultian Perspective* written by Linsmar Nascimento Lenartovicz and Aldo Sena de Oliveira Foucault's view is summarized. He believes that "teachers are the holders of power, while students are the people who are imposed with power. Teachers fully accept the effectiveness of education, but relatively, students can get nothing and should only obey the teacher's discipline." [6] This is also the exercise of power, but it does not involve violence, an invisible discipline.

In addition, there are many examples. For example, surveillance of people itself manifests power, but it does not use violence. This method is also used many times in Abramovic's performances. For example, the first work on surveillance, *House with sea view* (2002), and

later the famous gaze performance in 2010 in MOMA also reflects this. That is, there is no violence in the exercise of power. In the latter performance, this opening and closing of eyes is a symbolic movement in which Abramovic puts forward the idea that looking might control spaces and other people.

And words and speeches are also an embodiment of power, which does not contain violence. This is because the latter two are the effects of power on the soul rather than the body. Sometimes this effect is more effective than physical punishment and torture. In today's new media world, the dissemination of this power is simpler and more convenient. In the power theory of Foucault, it is worth noting that Marina Abramovic was living in the Soviet Union at the time and that the show took place in 1974. At the same time, Foucault's idea of power was born, but the prevailing ideology at that time was structuralist Marxism -- these seemingly incompatible things came together.

2.4. Rebellion -- a Product of Power

In structuralist Marxism, the word "power" is reserved only at the level of abstract class relations and structure, and power is only a matter of one class to another. "The machine, which is the starting point of the industrial revolution, supersedes the workman, who handles a single tool, by a mechanism operating with a number of similar tools, and set in motion by a single motive power, whatever the form of that power may be. Here we have the machine, but only as an elementary factor of production by machinery" [7], which turned the laborers into an objectified thing is capitalists and machines. This is a problem of class relations, and the power exists because of the conflicts between two classes. Foucault, however, in such an atmosphere, proposes that power is omnipresent, a vast network.

This is a clear rebellion against mainstream thinking. Since the 1990s, the history discipline has fallen into a "theoretical war". One side adopts the social and historical viewpoint, and the other uses the social constructivism method through post-structuralism. The battle of theory has produced controversial debates and differences, often reduced to simplified terms. The center of the debate is post-structuralism in the American history department represented by Foucault. Foucault intervenes in the prevailing Marxist view on the role of intellectuals in society and believes that the theory as a practice did not intend to "awaken consciousness" But to weaken and seize power; This is an activity with people fighting for power, not lighting outside a safe distance. Foucault calls power "an action-to-action model" [8], so he believes that power exists and operates anywhere. And he not only studies the character of the whole power, but he also studies the relationship and skills of power. He is particularly interested in studying the relationship and skills of

power, "in this relationship, some actions may constitute the field of other possible actions." [8] In other words, his focus is on the enthusiasm or productivity of power: how it produces action and response, how it creates subject and knowledge, and how it constructs the system of truth.

Back to the creator of Rhythm 0, Abramovic herself. She had an unhappy childhood. Her parents fought in World War II, became national heroes in Yugoslavia, and took seats in the post-war Yugoslav government. According to Abramovic, "her mother subjected her to a military-style regime for a considerable period of time, and until she was 29, she did not leave the house after 10 p.m. This kind of almost cruel education makes the character of Abramovic become depressed and lonely." [9] This is exactly what determined her later artistic creation style -- wild, bold, insane, free. Communism is also vaguely visible in her work. In 1974, for Rhythm 5 in Yugoslavia, she used a large wooden five-pointed star and set it on fire during the performance. Although Abramovic herself rejects the use of the pentacle as a political metaphor, it is certainly a product of early educational influence. It can be said that the rebellion of Foucault and Abramovic is another evidence of the production of power in Foucault's theory of power. In short, each character in Rhythm 0 alternately presents active and passive, and the tension between active and passive confirms Foucault's theory of power. Another question worth exploring is how these relationships are cyclically transformed.

3. CHARACTERISTIC OF POWER

3.1. Fluid Power -- the Reversal of Active and Passive Roles

The active and passive relationships of roles are constantly transformed due to the dynamic and unstable power. The instability of power is manifested in the power relationship is a kind of limitation to the power owner, which comes from the resistance of the passive role. Foucault believes that power is dynamic and unstable. Active roles want to destroy the freedom of passive characters, and they want to replace power relationships with violent ones. However, as long as power relations exist, power produces resistance, and the passive roles have to accept an unpleasant demand or get involved in a conflict, so both sides pay the price. One of the most obvious conflicts in Rhythm 0 is when the artist wakes up from anesthesia and approaches the spectators, and the spectators flee for fear of reprisals. The process of the spectators' violence against the artist is the process of trying to transform the power relationship into a violent relationship. The artist wakes up and walks to the spectators sadly, which is the process of resistance. The spectators pay the price of losing the right to do whatever they want to the artist

and considerable psychological pressure, and the artist pays the price of being bruised all over her body.

Like the previous analysis of Foucault's discipline and punishment, power should be pluralistic and have no subject. It continues to play a role, but there has always been resistance. The four stages of power development, including the continuous downward movement of power executors, illustrate power mobility. At the same time, "due to the existence of resistance, the form and method of power are also changing." Neil Brenner also holds this view in his article Foucault's New Functionalism [10]. Passive roles can even become holders of power through resistance, which is still not absolute because power is a complex web.

3.2. Capillaries -- the Form of Power

As mentioned above, the power relationship is a complex network structure. The author thinks it is appropriate to use "capillaries" to compare this structure because ordinary fishing nets are regular in shape while capillaries are irregular. Before Foucault analyzed power, the general view in society was that there was only one form of power, which was the control of one party over the other. Power was based on violence and accepted by the ruling class after legitimization. Foucault rejects this view, arguing that power is everywhere, like a vast network. There are power relations between every class of society, between men and women, between family members, between teachers and students. As already mentioned, in Rhythm 0, there are power relationships between the different characters, as well as between the individuals who make up the role of "spectators." These individuals are formed in a network of power that intersects, connects, and attaches to each other. The active and passive status can be seen from each role. For example, In the performance of Abramovic, she seems to be in a passive role under anesthesia, but this is essentially her active choice. In addition, the spectators seem to take the initiative to abuse Abramovic, but this requires permission. It could even be said that the "spectator" is a passive role throughout.

Also, the people who decided to do this performance were Abramovic, as she describes herself. "At the time of calling on the public to participate, she also proposed anesthetic experience in which these people could, together with her, become involved in the performance moment." [9] As an artist, Abramovic creates this famous performance. The difference between an artist who can create art and an ordinary person who cannot is that an artist has knowledge.

3.3. Knowledge -- the Symbiont of Power

Since power spreads in all directions of the existence of society like a big net, knowledge, as an important part of society, cannot get rid of the influence of power. Knowledge and power are symbiotes. Without power, there is no knowledge, and without knowledge, there is no power. Two centuries ago, The English philosopher Francis Bacon linked knowledge to power in his famous proposition "knowledge is power". Bacon's "power" refers to the relationship between man and nature, while Foucault's "power" refers to the relationship between man and man. According to Foucault, knowledge is power, and those who know are also those who have power. Scholars of endangered languages, for example, may not be entirely correct in their research. Still, because they are all people with knowledge of endangered languages, they hold the subject's power, and their opinions can only be considered correct. Just like Courtney Handman states in his article, "this situation is difficult to avoid." [11]

The creator of Rhythm 0, Abramovich, was trained in art education at a very early age and had rich experience in the behavior of the artistic performance, which is what other ordinary people who cannot create Rhythm 0 do not have. In addition, Abramovic's courage to perform at her own expense (possibly related to her early experience of military-style management) can also be seen as the knowledge she has while others do not. Abramovic's knowledge determined her control of Rhythm 0. We can see these in Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic, done by Janet A. Kaplan in Art Journal. "When she was young, her parents divorced, and just as the details have been talked above, she suffered a lot." [12] But still, she had a great education experience. When she was young, "she graduated from Belgrade Academy of fine arts and received Soviet art education. Later, she studied at Zagreb Academy of art." [13] All of the active and passive power relations in Rhythm 0 lead to questions about the purpose of this piece of Abramovic's performance.

3.4. Truth -- the Promoter of Power and Knowledge

As a result of the development of science over the centuries, there have been many "truths" to which mankind has been subjected, and "truth", as a form of knowledge, is undoubtedly also a form of power. Truth is respected and feared. Truth, as a power, governs everything and is likewise governed by everything. Truth allows intellectuals to say the right thing and do the right thing. However, intellectuals are not angels, the intelligentsia is not heaven, there is no truth beyond the network structure, and all the development of knowledge is related to power activities. Foucault

explains that “the truth speeches of society, through their language, behavior, and values, are relations constituted of power and, therefore, imprison the subjects.” [14] As Foucault said here, intellectuals give us the speech of truth in various ways, which itself is a way of operation of power. Foucault challenged this by presenting this theory to the public, indicating that resistance to power will not stop.

Therefore, the previous debate on Marxism is also to find a way to break through this power constraint. Here, power refers to discipline and punishment through supervision, speech, and many other ways. In fact, the essence is to change our body or soul through power. So Abramovic, here as an artist with knowledge, added the role of “spectator” to her Rhythm 0, which is her rebellion against traditional artistic performance forms and is the expression of power. To “test the limits of the connection between the spectators and the performer”, in other words, to “seek the truth”, Abramovic adopted this extreme form of performance, which is the embodiment of the impact of the knowledge on power. After the performance, the conclusion “What I learned was that ... if you leave it up to the audience, they can kill you” [3] reflects the power structure’s reaction to knowledge. Abramovic’s test of humanity is successful, and Foucault’s theory of power is fully embodied in this performance.

4. CONCLUSION

Rhythm 0, the masterpiece presented by Abramovic, once staged in 1974, has been causing many art critics and scholars to discuss. Many theories have been used to analyze the various aspects of Rhythm 0, each of which provides valuable ideas and insights for people to understand Rhythm 0 more comprehensively. The power theory of French philosopher Michel Foucault, also produced in the 1970s, explains several tensions embodied in Rhythm 0, explaining how the active and passive role’s influence and transform each other in the power structure. The difference between Foucault’s theory of power and the traditional view of power can be reflected through the interchangeable and mutually influencing power relations in Rhythm 0. In contrast, the traditional view of power is unilateral and irreversible. The power relationship in Rhythm 0 seems to be shown by the relationship of violence, but its essence is still a power relationship. In Foucault’s theory of power, power and violence are different, and the former is relative, the latter is absolute. Power is productive. Rhythm 0 reflects that power produces resistance against itself. Power has the function of restriction and prohibition and has the function of production and creation. Power is a capillary network. At every intersection, the power subject is influencing and being influenced by other power subjects, and in this process, they transform into each other. Knowledge is the

fundamental cause. Knowledge and power are symbiotic. Foucault’s theory of power provides a new perspective for the study of Rhythm 0. However, the study of the mental activities of the roles in Rhythm 0 is beyond Foucault’s theory of power, under which all the roles seem to be objects, without mental activities or feelings. For artistic works containing tension between various roles, Foucault’s theory of power can be applied to analyze the active and passive relationship between these roles and the transformation process, which has reference significance and value for analyzing and creating similar works of art.

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