Culture as a Moving Symbolic Border

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to propose the notion of culture as a symbolic moving border. Departing from both, Boesch's (1991) concept of culture as a symbolic field of action, and Herbst's (1995) co-genetic logic, I will discuss the dynamics of self-other relationships in terms of their potentiality as sources of movement in culture. A brief analysis of an empirical material is given in illustrative character of the ideas here exposed.

Keywords Culture · Symbolic action · I-Other relationships · Border

To Ernst E. Boesch (1916–2014)

My aim in this paper is to propose a notion of *culture as a symbolic moving border*. The term *notion* is taken here in its Latin sense of *notionis*, an idea about something. In this sense, notion implies a perspective by means of which something is addressed. Culture will be here approached from a metaphorical[1] perspective as a symbolic moving border continuously created and re-created in self-other relationships.

Culture as a Symbolic Field of Action

Regarding culture, I am departing from Boesch's (1991) conceptualization:

> Culture is a field of action, whose contents range from objects made and used by human beings to institutions, ideas and myths. Being an action field, culture

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[1] According to Leary (1990), metaphors "(…) are part of a group of comparison processes by which we use some parts of our knowledge to illuminate others" (p. 28). Ricoeur (1994) considers metaphor "a semantic event that takes place at the point where several semantic fields intersect" (p. 98).

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offers possibilities of, but by the same token stipulates conditions for, action; it circumscribes goals, which can be reached by certain means, but establishes limits, too, for correct, possible and also deviant action. The relationship between the different material as well as ideational contents of the cultural field of action is a systemic one; i.e., transformations in one part of the system can have an impact in any other part. As an action field, culture not only induces and controls action, but is also continuously transformed by it; therefore, culture is as much a process as a structure" (p. 29).

Boesch's (1991) concept of culture concerns a collective symbolic field (in the Lewinian sense), which, par excellence, channels the person's symbolic actions. Being a dynamic field, culture prevents some deviant actions, as well as allows others, configuring *zones of tolerance* to new actions in a particular time and place. In such a way, culture transforms people and also allows itself to be transformed by them. This provides its structural and processual character.

Culture is generated as an interactive social field, in which the self-other relationships act as modulators and are modulated by the experiences of the actional self:

"Indeed, I cannot build up my action space without coordinating it with the one of others (…) Thus, collective action space is not just an addition of individual ones, but a dynamic combination, and individual action space is not simply derived from own action experience but from interactional one" (Boesch, 1991, p. 30).

In this symbolic interactive dynamics, the relationships established by the self with its world always leads it to act in ways of a double structuring with regard to objects and events: they are always personally signified (subjectively structured), while also collectively shared in their meaning (objectively structured).

Action and object (this latter encompassing all things and events the self realises as belonging to its world) are phenomenally inseparable, although not fused: every action is directed to an object and each object acquires meaning due to the action directed to it (Boesch, 1991).

As far as every action implies a subject, and action and object are inseparable, then subject and object are also inseparable. To this extent, subject and object compose a phenomenological dyad in which each one defines the other, without, however, a fusion that would render them indistinguishable to the self as well as to a third person.

Elaborating now this perspective concerning the relationships between *self* and *other* (Simão, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2012), we can evenly say that the actions of a subject (the *self*) addressed to the *other person* are also symbolic, being this *other* an active symbolic object to the *self*.

The symbolic character of the *self's* actions addressed to the *other* person emerges both from the *self's* action directed to the other as well as from the subjective experience the *self* has of the *other's* action addressed to him/her.

Besides, as the *other* is also and simultaneously a *self* for him/herself, she/he likewise constructs, in return, his/her symbolism regarding the *self*.

In this way, during the interaction, the *self* and the *other* mutually construct themselves as symbolic objects. This construction can engender a myriad of tensional situations in the personal and collective symbolic world.

The relevance of the *self–other* relationships for understanding cultural emergence rests less on the matter or plot of their interaction than on the self and other's symbolic self-differentiation allowed by those relationships.

Culture Happens in the Personal Edges of the Self and the Other

We can understand the self and the other as the differentiated and mutually defining parts of a system, in which the relationship between them is essential to the comprehension of every phenomenon with respect to each of them, culture here included.

Herbst's (1995) co-genetic logic gives us a way for understanding the simultaneously integrative and distinguishing role of the self-other relationship in a processual structure like that of culture.

According to Herbst's (1995) co-genetic logic, any structure is formed, from its very origin, by a primary process of differentiation of its future compounding relational parts. According to him:

> "When a distinction is made, a boundary comes into being together with the inside and the outside of a form. What is generated in this way is a triadic co-genetic unit consisting of the inside and outside and the distinction made that is represented by the boundary. At this stage, we have nothing more than a form in an empty space.
>
> In its most general form what has become generated in this way is a unit consisting of not less than three elements (…) In this case, the primary distinction that generates the form (the inside), together with the empty space (the outside) and the boundary separating and distinguishing inside and outside, is only one particular realization of the primary distinction (…)" (p. 67).

The triadic unit so formed has the following properties:

> "1. *It is Co-genetic*: The three elements that are generated come into being together.
>
> 2. *It is Nonseparable*: We cannot take the components apart (…) we cannot have them initially apart and then put them together" (…).
>
> 3. *It is Nonreducible*: There cannot be less than three components. If any one component (…) is taken away, then all three components disappear together".
> 4. *It is Contextual*: None of the components have individually definable characteristics. In fact, they have no intrinsic characteristics that belong to them. (…) the components are individually undefined, but each is definable in terms of the two others" (Herbst, 1995, pp. 67–68).

A derivation of Herbst's (1995) model of co-genetic logic can account for the tensional dynamics that generates culture as the relational border between the self and the other, the three forming a processual structure (Simão, 2012) (Fig. 1).
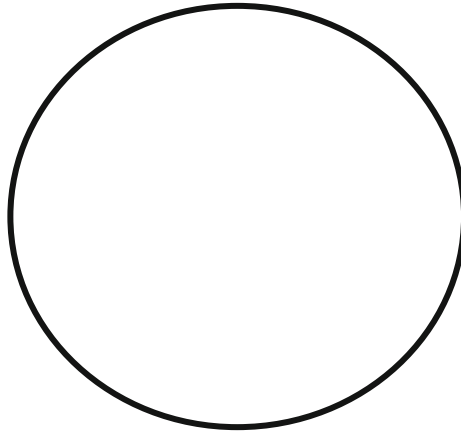
Fig. 1 The form of primary distinction (extracted from Herbst, 1995, p. 68)

Self, other and culture form a triadic co-genetic processual structure in which the relationship among them is engendered thanks to the persons' symbolic *inter-actions* in each particular and temporary socio-cultural milieu.

As represented in Fig. 2, culture co-emerges in the personal edges of the self and the other as the border of symbolic actions they address one another.

The self-other relationships happen in the personal edges of the self and the other. As far as they go on, those edges change - being enlarged or shortened.

Personal edges are here connoting the subtle and modulate symbolism encompassed in self-other relationships. The self and other never approach each other in all-or-nothing terms, as their relationship depends on mutual complicity and commitment, meaning their faith in the possibilities of the relationship itself (Rommetveit 1979a, Rommetveit 1979b).

The self's symbolic action, by selectively making distinctions from its experienced world, generates, at each moment and place of its life, diverse triadic units - like the one
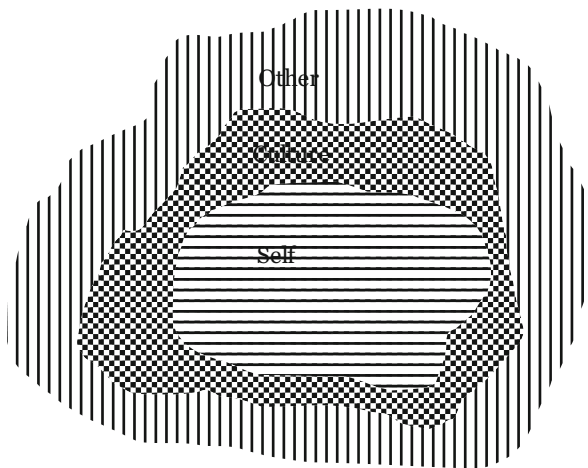
Fig. 2 The triadic processual structure of self – other – culture, in which culture emerges in the personal edges of self and other, as derivate from the co-genetic logic proposed by Herbst (1995), and adapted from Simão (2012)

represented in Fig. 2 - formed by the three elements that come into existence jointly and inseparably: the self, the other and the relationship between them at their personal edges. It is in the core of this third element – the relationship between self and other - that culture is engendered, through negotiations in face of the tensional difference realized by the self and the other as differences between them.

To such an extent, culture is not an independent entity outside the person; it co-emerges through the persons' symbolic actions addressed to others, in which the person's I-positions (Hermans et al. 1992) as otherness are also included.

Culture is Self-Perspectivated

The symbolic actions of both the self and the other are cognitive-affective and value based expressions that emerge from I-World experiences lived by them as selves for themselves.

Although in this understanding self, other and culture are definable only in terms of each one's relation to the other two, changes in the processual structure are primarily pushed by the self's symbolic actions addressed to the other (and, in return, by those the other addresses to the self, considering that the other is a self for him/herself).

In sum, even though the transformations that may happen always encompass the whole co-genetic structure, the process of changing is self-perspectivated and self-anchored (Valsiner, 2013), the personal elaboration of culture having precedence over the collective elaboration of it.

As Valsiner (1998) proposed,

"The collective culture entails communality shared meanings, social norms and everyday life practices, all united in a heterogeneous complex. On the basis of this complex, individual persons construct their personally idiosyncratic semiotic systems of symbols, practices and personal objects, all of which constitute personal culture. The relation between the collective and personal cultures is conceptualized as persons' active and constructive internalization-externalization process" (p30).

However,

"(…) no matter how deeply socially embedded the person is, and no matter that s/he develops on the basis of the social input, the final synthesizer is the person whose inherently socially rooted subjectivity is still, first and foremost, accessible only by him or her" (Valsiner, 2013, p. 221).

This precedence of personal (self and other) elaborations in cultural formation over the social modelling of persons is due to the fact that "each individual person carries within him or her the internalized version of the collective culture, which idiosyncrat-ically differs from it" (Valsiner, 1989, p. 48). This version, in its turn, guides people in their self-other interactions, allowing potentially different transformative actions in collective culture.

If, on one hand, collective culture displays norms for channelling people's actions according to social shared patterns, on the other it is engendered in human relations. In

such a way, it is "person-anchored - it extends from the person to the social space in-between persons" (Valsiner, 2013, p. 222).

In the terms here proposed, culture emerges from negotiations regarding this in-between persons, that is, negotiations that take place at the personal edges of the self and the other, which may unfold in a symbolic movement in their in-between.

The Personal Edges of the Self : Sources of Movement in Culture

Barriers and Frontiers

Differences between the self and the other, as realized by them in their relationship, are inherent to the developmental processes in social life, representing *barriers* and *frontiers* (Boesch, 1991) in their personal edges, generating tension, polarization and distancing (Werner 1957; Valsiner, 1998). They require negotiations at the personal edges of the self and the other, opening doors for cultural transformation.

From the core of those negotiations a new and temporary threefold unity of self-other-culture can emerge, as a provisional solution for that tension. In other words, a new and momentary symbolic field for actions, i.e., a cultural field, in Boesch's (1991) terms, can emerge.

When social relationships confront the self and the other with different world-views, ideas, norms, values, *barriers* and *frontiers* come up yielding conflictive or dilemmatic experiences in them.

According to Boesch (1991):

"A *barrier* is an area that is difficult to overcome, and may need particular interposed actions for the passage; once the barrier crossed, however, the action can proceed more or less as before. A *frontier*, in contrast, marks the separation between two areas of behavior that requires an area-specific adaptation in the form and direction of action taken by the individual. The experience of resistance gives rise to the basic idea of an antagonistic potential of the external world, while a frontier creates a binary opposition between the 'here' and the 'beyond'. The 'here-area' is mostly transparent and well known; it thus provides security, but also often uneventfulness and boredom. The 'beyond area' is less transparent and less well known; it easily creates uncertainty and anxiety, but also curiosity and excitement - it partakes of the ambivalence of the "otherness-symbolism" (p. 113).

Much of the process of the self and the other's symbolic differentiation happens thanks to barriers and frontiers they place to one another.

When interacting, the self can face symbolic *barriers* and *frontiers* brought by the other's action according to the self's interpretation of those actions in the context in which they occur, which address the history of their relationship in a given cultural field

More particularly, symbolic frontiers can bring feelings of estrangement, surprise and non-sense to the self - the 'otherness-symbolism' referred by Boesch (1991) - as they create a gap between expectance and experience. This can be followed by reflexive actions by the self, trying to give meaning to that experience, or not.

In such a way, barriers and frontiers brought by the self and the other to one another require changes in their personal edges, meaning movements in culture.

Ambiguity and Amorphous Zones

The ambiguity encompassed by the simultaneously distinguishing and integrating character of a boundary is approached in the notion of symbolic border elaborated by Marsico (2011) and Marsico et al. (2013), from Varzi's mereotopology (Varzi 1997; Smith e Varzi, 2000).

In their approach to self-other relationships, "the "Other" (non-A) is the field closely linked with the "Self" (A) – by a border (…)" (Marsico's et al., 2013, p. 54, authors' emphasis). The border

> "(…) is both the place of demarcation and definition but in a way that is open to the negotiation of its demarked and defined content. The ambiguity of the border notion lies exactly in this twofold process of separation and unification. A border is a line that separates and unifies content areas at the same time" (p. 54).

As far as borders separate and unify areas, they hold an "intrinsic fluidity of the relations between different parts of the dynamic system" (p. 60). Thereof the border between the *self* and the *other*, the "in-between of inter objectivity", being a zone of ambiguity, an "amorphous zone", as proposed by Boesch (1997, p.80) (cf. Marsico et al., 2013, p. 63).

Ambiguous situations and amorphous zones arise from experiences that at some moment cannot fit (not ever consciously) the personal semantic field, originating a nebulous zone of non-sense. We can call these experiences *disquieting experiences* (Simão, 2003). They require the self to cross symbolic frontiers in order to re-arrive at some comfortable situation of fitness in meaning.

Disquieting Experiences

Disquieting experiences give rise to amorphous zones of meaning and ambiguous situations for the self. They belong to the phenomenological order of feelings regarding subjective experiences that touch the person affectively and pre-reflexively. As such, they are lived in the first person.

Disquieting experiences create instability, tension, perturbing or even hurting the person's expectancies about her '*understand-ability*' of herself and of her I-Other-World relationships, prodding her cognitively as well as affectively to feel, think and act in different directions from those she was doing until then; in such a way, the person may arrive to integrate the feelings aroused by them into her personal cognitive-affective base, which, in turn, will also change (Simão, 2003).

Stating that disquieting experiences prod the person to feel, think and act in different directions presupposes the relational distinction between "I" and "Me" (James, 1890; Mead, 1934) in which, as pointed out by Guidano (1991), "the acting and experiencing "I" is always one step ahead of the current appraisal of the situation, and the evaluating "Me" becomes a continuous process of reordering and reconstructing one's conscious sense of self"(p.7).

Realising that someone is having a disquieting experience depends on the cognitive-affective possibilities and willingness of the person who is having it to try to communicate it verbally, gesturally, corporally, pictorially, etc. to a second person. Nevertheless, the person who is living a disquieting experience can - pre-reflexively, unwillingly - give hints about it to others. In both cases, however, its accessibility to the other depends on the openness of that other to be touched by the hints and forms of communication of the first.

Given the above mentioned features, disquieting experiences can never be fully communicated by the first person or fully grasped by a second person. In such a way they represent the frontiers of alterity in self-other relationships.

Disquieting experiences are inherent to human living, as they arise from the human potential condition of permanently looking and striving for coherence and stability, on one hand, while unceasingly realizing instability and difference, on the other.[2] This means that what we realize in our I-world relationships we do in terms of pairs of opposites, according to a symbolic imbalanced combinatory movement between and among opposites, (for instance, desired and non desired; or desired, non desired, allowed, not allowed, funny and not funny); some of these combinations are more plausible to the person at some moments and circumstances, some at others; thus the contextual character of disquieting experiences.

Disquieting experiences happen when the person feels herself not realizing the articulation of those antinomies, provoking her feelings of puzzlement, surprise, intriguing, discomfort, amusement, risking her expected personal level of stability and soothing in I-Other-World relationships, to which she strives for (action potential, Boesch, 1991). They are lived as something that subtly happens in unexpected, strange, puzzling, surprising, until the moment unexperienced ways, an alterity towards which the person is attracted. Therefore, they have a non-permanent and occasional character, they are transitional; if they were permanent, if they had an "always" character, they would not be disquieting at all.

Furthermore, in disquieting experiences, feelings are mostly related to values that are attached to subjective experiences. It happens when someone feels a gap between "what things should be" and "what they seem to be" in terms of "should values" and "is values" (Boesch, 1991).

In this process of subjective elaboration, verbal, corporeal, pictorial, sculptural, etc. ways of communicating it can emerge. When verbally communicated, they are usually referred to as good, bad, surprising, scaring, amusing, intriguing 'sensations' (in common sense use), and so on; usually, more than one of these connotations are referred to as simultaneously experienced by the person.

According to Human (2015):

"Novelty, by definition, must be unpredicted – it must not fall within the horizon of possibilities one was working with. When we are faced with novelty, we are forced to reread our history – we are forced to acknowledge the excess which we inevitably excluded from our reading of how we got to where we are, yet which clearly bore some weight on the events leading up to the present. In other words,

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[2] This aspect refers to the human potentiality of functioning in terms of polarities, oppositions and antinomies, which are essential for thinking and communicating (cf. Marková, 2003, p. 26).

novelty demands an examination of history so that we can explain how it arose; we need to make sense of this unpredicted phenomenon by examining the latencies in history we overlooked. In fact this is how I would define novelty: novelty is that which forces a rereading of the history of the system, a reading which is different from the one currently held and projected into the future. This is because a novel discovery disturbs us by the fact that it was not anticipated by the given history of that system but rather requires that one look at what was not thought of – the unknown, or unseen, discarded as the inconsequential excess of that system. This is not to deny the history of a system – systems are nothing but products of their history. Yet, what that history is and how it implicates the future of the system is made over in the face of novelty" (pp. 54–55).

Considering human development as a process of continuous structural transformation in multi linear trajectories and irreversible time allowing new forms of personal and personal-environmental momentary organization (cf. Valsiner, 1989, pp. 4–9), disquieting experiences emerge from, as well as allow, multi linear trajectories in the life time, that is, human development.

Culture as a Moving Symbolic Border

If we assume that culture is engendered as the symbolic border of self-other relationships, different possibilities of giving meaning to those relationships in face of disquieting experiences mean changes in that border, mean movement.

However, how can the amorphous experiential zones and ambiguous experiences change the edges of the self and other so that a new threefold co-genetic structure self-culture-other emerges in this process?

As we previously observed, the process of cultural change is self perspectivated and self-anchored (Valsiner, 2013).

When a person finds herself in an amorphous experiential and/or ambiguous situation in life, yielded by disquieting experiences, she usually tries to give meaning to that situation.

Giving meaning is a reflexive activity of the self that encompasses an imbalance between *experience* and *explanation*, giving rise to an interpretative contextual understanding. As Guidano (1991) stated,

"(…) any understanding is always the result of interpretation (…) Such an interpretation is the emerging product of the process of mutual regulation continuously alternating between *experiencing* and *explaining*, through which ongoing patterns of activity (immediate experiencing) become subject to distinctions and references, bringing about a reordering (explanation) which is able to change the very experiencing of patterns themselves (…) Hence, rather than representing a "given" reality according to a logic of external correspondence, knowing is the continuous construction and reconstruction of reality capable of making consistent the ongoing experience of the ordering individual" (p.5).

This process is affective-emotionally laden, as "the immediate and irrefutable perception of the world is affective-emotional", characterizing its "embedded

immediacy". But in its dimension of "explaining", it also involves the "abstracted distancing". It is through the reflexivity of explanation that "immediate and tacit perception of the self and world (*a priori* first-order experiences)" are reordered in "propositions distributed within conceptual networks", making "possible new dimensions of experience, such as "true-false", "subjective-objective", etc. (*a posteriori* second order experiences)" (Guidano, 1991, pp. 6–7) .

As stated earlier in this article, self-other relationships are more important as opportunities for self-other differentiation, here touching ethical aspects, than for generating information about any other subject matter.

Ambiguity and non-sense experiences that arise from the I's disquieting experiences, as lived by the self in its personal edges, can appeal for the self to re-signify them according to its affective-cognitive basis constructed up until that moment. This will also mean, in a bi-directional movement, changes in that basis, to which the idiosyncratic versions of the collective culture belong as personal culture (Valsiner, 1998).

Simultaneously, at the communicative level, ambiguity and non-sense experiences lived by the self in its personal edges can lead to symbolic barriers and frontiers posed by the self to the other, appealing for mutual explanation, especially when they are committed to the ongoing relationship.

In such a way, ambiguity and non-sense experiences demand self-differentiation through self-articulation of meanings and explanation to the other, which implies changes in the personal edges. However, changes in personal edges imply - co-genetically - changes in self-other borders from where culture is engendered.

Conclusion: Culture and Beyondness

The human personal endeavour of elaborating antinomies, giving sense to them in face of disquieting experiences, requires *flexibility, plasticity* and *malleability* by the Self for crossing symbolic barriers and frontiers (Boesch, 1991).

I understand *flexibility* as one's ability to symbolically move in a field of meanings, in face of new and different, or changing requirements, allowing to feel oneself more fitted in with that field.

Flexibility requires *plasticity* as one's possibility of undergoing subjective differentiation in face of disquieting experiences, while keeping one's affective-cognitive wholeness as a system .[3]

At the conscious level, plasticity involves *malleability* as the will to symbolically act and move in face of disquieting experiences.

As far as self, other and culture form a triadic co-genetic processual structure, flexibility and plasticity of the self and other at their personal edges can allow movements (process) in the structure as a whole, differentiating (Werner 1957) it, prodding it beyond the present .[4]

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[3] These understandings keep similarities with some accounts of plasticity and flexibility by contemporary evolutionary biologists and ecologists aiming to account for the living beings' diversity that increases complexity and gives place for novelty (see, for instance, Pfennig et al. (2010); Bergmüller and Taborsky (2010); Lövdén et al. (2010) A Theoretical Framework for the Study of Adult Cognitive Plasticity. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(4), 659–676.

[4] In respect to this, see also De Luca Piccione and Freda, this issue.

Beyondness comes from the possibility opened by flexibility and plasticity at the personal edges to anticipate and promote cultural allowances, which are fuzzy or unsuspected until then.

Beyondness implies one's flee across the borders of our sight, to somewhere that, however, we intuit is there.

In Complement: A Brief Illustration

In his *Ideas for a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology*, Dilthey (1894) says:

> "When I feel sad, this feeling of sadness is not my object, but rather I am conscious of this state; it is there-for-me in the way that the state is conscious. I have a reflexive awareness of it. These perceptions of inner states are remembered. Since they often recur in the same connections with the external and internal conditions from which they issue, each of us gains familiarity with his states, his passions, his strivings"(p. 169).

Still according to him, "(…) we can never observe the free play of our representations, nor fix our attention on the act of thinking itself" (Dilthey, 1894, p. 170).
Although, the

> "possibility of apprehending inner states within certain limits exists (…) this apprehension is made more difficult by the inherent instability of everything psychic; for what is psychic is always in process. A second difficulty lies in the fact that perceptions belong to single individuals" (Dilthey, 1894, p. 170).

However, Dilthey (1894) encourages us to methodologically cope with the urgency of scientifically studying the psychic life by taking advantage of multiple sources: the access to one's own processes given by memory, the inference from analogy to other's processes (here anticipating the issue of otherness) and the products of psychic life, about which he says:

> "The use of objective products of psychic life provides a very important supplement to all these methods for studying processes. In language, myth, literature, and art, and generally in all historical achievements, we witness psychic life that has become objective: the products of active forces of a psychic nature and stable configurations formed from psychic elements and their laws" (p. 171).

It is in this spirit that I will take advantage of some excerpts of a letter written by the painter Van Gogh (1853–1890) [5] to his brother Theo, aiming to illustrate the intricate

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[5] Vincent Van Gogh is one of the most known, celebrated, dearest and studied painters of Western Culture. He was born in the Brabant village of Zundert on 30 March 1853. In August 1880 he decides to become an artist, probably on his brother Theo's advice. Together with the painter Gaugin, Theo may have been one of the closest persons to Van Gogh, giving him personal and financial support throughout his whole life. In 27 July 1890, after several mental breakdowns, Van Gogh committed suicide. A detailed biography of Van Gogh and other historical-cultural sources about him can be accessed at http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters.html and http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en

and lasting ways in which personal edges can change in the elaboration of non-sense experiences, allowing further changes in the symbolic field of action at both personal and collective levels, that is, movement in culture.

The pertinence of taking this material for an illustrative analysis of this article's proposal is highlighted by Komatsu (2010):

> "Our daily conversation can be interpreted as a site for accomplishing relationships with others that reflectively clarify our self in relation to them. First, although the effect of each conversational episode on our long-term relationships is rather small, the microstructure of daily conversation is important for maintaining or changing ongoing interpersonal relationships" (p. 210).

The following excerpts were extracted from a letter written by Van Gogh to his brother Theo on November 1885, by the time Van Gogh moved from Neuen to Antwerp:

> (1) "My dear Theo,
>
> Wanted to write to you with a few more impressions of Antwerp. This morning I went for a really good walk in the pouring rain, an expedition with the object of fetching my things from the customs office. The different entrepôts and hangars on the wharves are very fine. I've already walked in all directions around these docks and wharves several times. It's a strange contrast, particularly when one comes from the sand and the heath and the tranquillity of a country village and hasn't been in anything but quiet surroundings for a long time. It's an incomprehensible confusion. (2) One of De Goncourt's sayings was 'Japonaiserie forever'. Well, these docks are one huge Japonaiserie, fantastic, singular, strange — at least, one can see them like that. I'd like to walk with you there to find out whether we look at things the same way. (3) One could do anything there, townscapes — figures of the most diverse character — the ships as the central subject with water and sky in delicate grey — but above all — Japonaiseries. I mean, the figures there are always in motion, one sees them in the most peculiar settings, everything fantastic, and interesting contrasts keep appearing of their own accord. (…) Another contrast — people passing along a very narrow street between formidably tall houses. Warehouses and stores. But down at street level, alehouses for all nations with the corresponding male and female individuals. Shops selling food, sailors' clothes, colourful and bustling. (…)(4) Today I got my things and tools — which I was eagerly awaiting. And so I have my studio in order. (…)My studio's quite tolerable, mainly because I've pinned a set of Japanese prints on the walls that I find very diverting. You know, those little female figures in gardens or on the shore, horsemen, flowers, gnarled thorn branches (…)"] (Van Gogh, 1885, letter 545, http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let545/print.html).

From the extract (1), we can see that, walking towards the docks to fetch his things from the customs, Van Gogh experienced feelings of amazement and amusing puzzlement, a disquieting experience of "incomprehensible confusion". Talking with one of

his closest other (Theo), Van Gogh makes explicit how he could, in that moment, imbalance experience and explanation, in face of an ambiguous experience through an antinomy: the "strange contrast" of that place with the "heath and the tranquillity of the former country village" he was immersed in prior to his arrival to the cosmopolitan Antwerp.[6]

Extract (2) puts in evidence that Van Gogh also elaborated that experience by re-contextualizing it according to a meaning which had previously emerged from a self-other interaction (with De Goncourt). The De Goncourt's sayings 'Japonaiserie for ever'" emerges, then, as some other's previous symbolic action that can give an integrative meaning to the experience: "Well, these docks are one huge Japonaiserie, fantastic, singular, strange — at least, one can see them like that" .

This elaboration demanded an abstracting distance from the concreteness of the lived experience, both enlarging and re-anchoring the meaning of his friend's saying; "Japonaiserie forever" is now not only forever, but also everywhere. As far as Van Gogh makes this symbolic movement, he changes his personal edges in a self-other (De Goncourt) relationship, which implies changing the collective meaning of Japonaiserie.

Extract (3) shows us the painter's idiosyncratic appropriation of the world as "actually a painter". "One could do anything there, townscapes— figures of the most diverse character — the ships as the central subject with water and sky in delicate grey — but above all — Japonaiseries". Moreover, in this appropriation, his friend's saying assumes the character of a "type", a categorical character, which belongs to the dimension of the 'general', the 'collective'.[7]

From extract (4) we see that, at the same time, Van Gogh rearranged his atelier - apparently not so pleasing to him yet - with those Japanese paintings he liked so much. This new arrangement put him closer to those paintings by transforming - at the same time - his most intimate place of creation, his atelier.

Later, when he moved to Paris, he collected, together with Theo, Japanese woodcuts, that served as a source of inspiration to him.[8]

Later (1887), he will express himself through his *Japonaiserie: les pruniers en fleurs (d'après Hiroshighe)*, known in English language as The Bridge in the Rain - after Hiroshige [9] .

Like other Van Gogh canvas, designs, etc., these paintings would have their own trajectory, being nowadays part of the permanent exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.[10]

Also, in July 1888, Van Gogh wrote to Theo telling him that he had introduced Bernard and Anquetin to Japanese graphic art, and this was a major influence on the new style that Anquetin and Bernard developed, Cloisonnism (Cf. Van Gogh, 1888, letter 587).

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[6] About the "ever cosmopolitan character" of Antwerp, see, for instance the milestone work of Giucciardini (1567).
[7] Regarding the relationship between disquieting experience and tradition, in the hermeneutic sense, see Simão (2015).
[8] Information available at http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/vincents-life-and-work/van-goghs-life-18531890/from-dark-to-light).
[9] Picture available at http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0114V19620.
[10] See, for instance, Van Gogh's *The Bridge in the Rain - after Hiroshige* at http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0114V1962; also his *the Courtesan (after Eisen)* at http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0116V1962).

In sum, we can understand Van Gogh's Japonaiseries as new expressions that unfolded from changes in his personal edges, meaning self-differentiation, which have touched - and keep touching - others in their personal edges. Both the self and the other's movements at their personal edges move culture as a symbolic border.

"The real world is what the will possesses in reflexive awareness when it meets resistance or when the hand feels pressure. This reflexive awareness of the will is as much of this real world as of itself. Both self and the real world are therefore given in the totality of psychic life. Each exists in relation to the other, and is equally immediate and true" (Dilthey, 1882, p. 493–4).

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