

## **Ritual and contemporary Catalan theater: the work of *La Fura dels Baus***

**Duri Long**  
**Georgia Institute of Technology**

### **Introduction**

One only has to witness a few hours of *La Mercè* in Barcelona to experience the inherent theatricality involved in traditional Catalan rituals. From the pyrotechnics and demonic costumes in the *correfoc* to the enormous papier-mâché masks in the *xambanga de gegants*, performance is central to many Catalan festivities. Although there is a well-developed body of literature discussing contemporary Catalan theater (George & London 1996; Feldman 2009) as well as literature discussing traditional Catalan rituals (Hernández 2005; Noyes 2003) there is little that explores more than a surface level relationship between these two genres of performance. This essay will investigate this connection by identifying key thematic and symbolic elements that are present in Catalan rituals and examining how these elements have influenced theater in the period following the end of Franco's regime. Focusing on elements such as non-verbal theatrical devices, motifs of teamwork and social union, and the use of theatrical catharsis, this essay will look at the work of Catalan theater company *La Fura dels Baus* in order to explore the presence of Catalan ritual in their work and investigate some of the possible implications of this presence on Catalan cultural identity.

### **Catalan Identity**

From a theatrical point of view – and from the narrow perspective allowed by this focus – the main concern in this area relates not exclusively to history or politics but to the notion of civic or cultural national consciousness. A useful synthesis in this general field is provided by McRoberts who argues that the element that binds together the national cultural unit is “a well-cultivated sense of historical memory rooted in struggles to maintain Catalonia's distinctiveness and autonomy in the face of external threats” (2001: 161).

#### *Civic vs. Ethnic Identity*

McRoberts presents several tenets of Catalan identity, which notably do not include being born in Catalonia or to Catalan parents. This is due to a very unique aspect of Catalan identity that, while challenged by a few individual groups, is largely supported by the existing literature and scholarship. McRoberts, Eldes, Brandes, Hughes, and numerous other scholars all present the idea of the Catalan as a civic and not ethnic identity. In McRoberts's words, “From the outset Catalan nationalists have tended to define the nation in terms, not of ethnicity or descent,

but of language and culture. Membership in the nation is open, in principle, to all who adopt the Catalan language and culture, whatever their origins” (2001: 2). Edles points out that even “the legal definition of Catalan according to the Statute of Autonomy of 1932, and reinstated in the Statute of Autonomy of 1979 (article 6), is notably inclusive rather than exclusive: a Catalan is anyone who has administrative residence in any municipality in Catalonia” (1998: 117).

This broad view of identity, as well as increasing immigration to Catalonia internationally and from other areas of Spain, has promoted a heterogeneous notion of nationality. This heterogeneity was evidenced in the controversial 2014 vote held for Catalan independence — all citizens living in Catalonia, including those of foreign descent, and all Catalan people living abroad were allowed to participate in the vote —, emphasizing the idea that Catalan identity is achieved culturally, not biologically (Minder: 2014).

This achieved sense of identity is especially important for the discussion at hand, because the idea that social participation in cultural activities is central to what it means to be Catalan places ritual and theater in an especially important position, as these activities provide a portal through which Catalan identity may be realised. It is interesting to note that the political definition of Catalan identity simply requires one to self-identify as Catalan (for example, in the 2014 vote), whereas the cultural definition requires a level of education and participation in Catalan culture. Theater can help to bridge the gap between these two definitions, facilitating participation in the culture and thus a means to achieve Catalan cultural identity.

### **Contemporary Catalan Theater**

In their book *Contemporary Catalan Theatre* (1996) David George and John London provide a comprehensive overview of the development of Catalan theater over the years. Contemporary Catalan theater began its initial development in the mid-1800s as a part of the *Renaixença* cultural movement, which restored Catalan as a widely used literary language. Work from this period “is often characterized by an emphasis on localism and picturesque rural environments”, as writers tended to reflect on the Middle Ages because it was the last time when Catalonia was a major European power (George and London, 1996: 11). The *Renaixença* gave way to *Modernisme* in the late 1800s, which was characterized by an “increasing identification with a Catalanism, which was born of a sense of frustration with Madrid and the centralized Spanish state” (George and London, 1996: 12). Following the *Modernisme* period in theater, there was the brief appearance of *Noucentisme* which was “closely associated with the development of Catalan political and cultural institutions”, and then political strife in Spain began to take its toll on the genre (George and London, 1996: 13). While not completely dying out, theatrical productions were limited and censored during and especially after the Spanish Civil War when Franco took power.

Starting in the 1960s and flourishing after Franco’s death, many theatrical groups such as *Els Joglars*, *Els Comediants*, and *La Fura dels Baus* began to set the stage for a new theatrical scene in Barcelona and Catalonia, one that continues

today. In this paper, I aim to focus on this new wave of Catalan theater that has sprung up since Franco's death, analyzing the use of ritual in the theater of post-dictatorship Catalonia.

In order to examine the presence of ritual in this new wave of theater, I will first provide some background on and identify key thematic elements in important ritualistic practices in Catalonia. This study will focus primarily on the traditional practices of the *gegants* and *capgrossos*, the *sardana*, the *castells*, and the *correfoc*, as these are four of the most prominent Catalan rituals and provide a good representation of Catalan ritual as a whole.

## Catalan Ritual

Though giants and dwarves are common to the Peninsula there is no doubting a distinctly Catalan dimension within their own constituency. Grau and Abellán describe *gegants* as “[v]ertical figures with human characteristics whose measurements considerably exceed those of individuals with normal dimensions, guided from within by a single person in order to participate in festivals and celebrations” (1997: 4). Also featured in these festivals are *capgrossos*, similarly outfitted with large papier-mâché heads that are typically worn by children (see figure 1).

Hernández provides a valuable overview of the history and significance of these personages in Catalan culture. Theories abound as to the origins of the *gegants* in pre-Christian times, ranging from the Greek Cyclops to the earth mother Gaia (2005: 60). Like many pagan rituals, these figures were later incorporated into the Catholic tradition, becoming a central element of the Catalan Corpus celebration (Hernández, 2005: 57, Noyes, 2011: 211). Today, *gegants* often portray important public figures, former kings and queens, and traditional local workers.

The *nans* and *capgrossos* add an element of humor to the more regal *gegants*. These characters are often used to clear and pump up the crowd before the *gegants* make their way down the street. In Hernández's words, “If the *gegants* exude power and inspire respect, the *capgrossos* are misshapen and comical, serving as the perfect contrapuntal figure to enliven and energize the festivals with a contemporary burlesque” (2005: 83). Often satirical, the *capgrossos* poke fun at public figures and pop icons.

*Gegants* and *capgrossos* have long served as political pieces, from the Catholic Church's use of *gegants* to promote religious characters to Franco's appropriation of the festival to display giant visages of himself (Hernández, 2005: 63). Today, however, the *gegants* are typically seen as an expression of Catalan identity, and they serve as a “festive symbol of the collective”, with the communal nature of the festivities making social participation a key element of the ritual (Hernández, 2005: 57).



Figure 1. Felip Vilardell, “Els Gegants de Lleida davant de la Paeria,”  
Photograph, *Wikimedia Commons*, 11 May 2013.

Collective participation is also crucial to the *sardana* (see figure 2), which Martí i Pérez defines as “...a collective dance in which an unlimited number of dancers hold hands with adjacent singers. The circle built by the *sardana* moves left and right, and the dancers raise and sink their arms according to the two musical sections that comprise the dance” (1994: 1). There are mixed accounts as to the exact origins of the *sardana*, but the modern version of the dance was popularized around 1850 (Martí i Pérez, 1994: 103).

Since then, the dance has become highly politicized and central to Catalan identity. Brandes has elaborated on the three core Catalan values that the *sardana* embodies, as identified by González: harmony, brotherhood, and democracy (1990: 30). The *sardana* distinguishes itself from other traditional dances by being open to anyone who knows the steps. Its circular nature also reinforces these ideas of community and mutual trust. As a result of these values and the promotional effort of Catalan institutions, the *sardana* has become a national symbol that is representative of Catalan culture.



Figure 2. bernatff, “sardanes al parc de l'escorxador,”  
Photograph, Flickr, 29 Sept. 2005.

*Castells* are also known for their teambuilding and inherently social nature. The construction of *castells*, or human towers, began almost 200 years ago in Valls, or modern day Tarragona (Noyes, 2011: 207). Today, *castells* are frequently built during Catalan festivals or demonstrations, starting with the creation of the base, or *pinya* (pinecone), and culminating with the climb of the *anxaneta* to the top of the tower (see figure 3). *Fer pinya*, or the creation of the base, which in its collective endeavor resembles this shape, is actually an idiom in Catalan that signifies working together to achieve a common goal. Noyes explains that, “a community makes a pinecone around a crisis or person in need, while its members remain distinct, sticky, and prickly” (2011: 209). *Castell* creation is characterized by four major pillars, enumerated in the traditional motto of *castellers*. Several of these pillars overlap with the tenets of Catalan cultural identity discussed earlier:

1. *Força* (Strength)
2. *Equilibri* (Balance)
3. *Valor* (Courage)
4. *Seny* (Common Sense)

One of the key aspects of *castell* creation is that of teamwork; in the words of the president of the Coordinating Committee for Colles Castells, Miquel Botella, “In order to feel like a winner, no one can be a loser...there are no individuals” (2010: “Los 'castells', Patrimonio De La Humanidad”). This setting of group identity allows members of diverse communities to come together as one, just like the *sardana*. Noyes notes, “If the *sardana* was made an emblem of Catalan tenacity from the *Renaixença* through the post-Franco tradition, the *castell*...became from the 1980s a sign of the nation’s power to renew itself” (2011: 207).



Figure 3. Eric Sala and Tània García, “3 de 10 amb folre i manilles carregat pels Castellers de Vilafranca a la diada de Sant Fèlix del 2006,” Photograph, *Wikimedia Commons*, 30 Aug. 2006.

In addition to her overview of *gegants* and *capgrossos*, Hernández also presents an in-depth exploration of the *correfoc* and its history, cultural significance, and contemporary relevance. The *correfoc* is a traditional Catalan ritual in which participants dress up as demonic figures and run through the streets lighting fireworks, accompanied by traditional *tambor* drums and other music (see figure 4).

The *correfoc* has origins in the pre-Christian celebrations of fertility cults, and, as in the case of the *gegants* and *capgrossos*, the tradition was later modified by the Catholic Church and incorporated into the annual Corpus festivities (Hernández, 2005: 100-101). *Correfocs* originally held a moralizing purpose, portraying Biblical battles between good and evil, but this was later overtaken by a more subversive aim, that of “satirically...taunt[ing]...established religious, social, and political powers” (Hernández, 2005: 103-104). Palomar discusses the subversive power of the *versots*, or verses, which have historically been used by the devils to indirectly comment on controversial issues (2002: 76). Outlawed during the Franco era, the *correfoc*, like many other Catalan traditions, enjoyed a post-dictatorship revival in an effort to rebuild lost Catalan cultural identity.

Fire, water, and demonic imagery are all central to the *correfoc*, as are the non-verbal and social aspects of the performance. Hernández emphasizes that the water thrown on the participants during the *correfoc* is practically necessary to cool the fire-runners down, but is also symbolically representative of fertility and life (2005: 126). In addition, the same commentator describes fire adeptly as a “paradoxical element that is at once provider and eradicator,” emphasizing the function of the



*correfoc* as a purifying ritual, generating necessary social and communal strength while eradicating instability via catharsis and release (2005: 99). Palomar corroborates this idea, describing fire as a symbol of both purification and renovation that “destroys the old in order to give way to a new period” (2002: 69).



Figure 4. Pacopac, “Correfoc a Massalfassar, la serp Na Miquela,” Photograph, *Wikimedia Commons*, 18 Feb. 2009.

## Ritual and Theater

It is necessary at this point to take a brief look at the presence of ritual in theater beyond the Catalan sphere in order to form a basis for our exploration of this relationship within Catalonia. To explore the connection between ritual and theater, I will focus on three main aspects: i) a definition of both terms and their difference; ii) the role of catharsis in the experience; iii) the contribution of ritual and theatre to the construction of cultural identity.

### *Ritual vs. Theater*

First, it is important to ask where we draw the line between ritual and theater? Dramatic theorist Richard Schechner spends an entire article distinguishing between the two, and his argument centers on “the degree to which the performance tends towards efficacy [ritual] or entertainment [theater]” (1974: 468). The critic emphasizes that ritual is both symbolic and actual, using the example of the *kaiko* of the Tsembaga people of New Guinea in which dance is not just a performance, but also a way of facilitating very real economic transactions and forming alliances (1974: 457). He notes, “this convergence of symbolic and actual event is missing from [a]esthetic theater” [theater for entertainment] (1974: 465). However, Schechner also emphasizes that the efficacy vs. entertainment binary is a continuum — “no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment” (1974: 468) —

categorizing a series of traits that correspond to efficacy and entertainment in performance (see table 1) (1974: 467).

Table 1

Efficacy vs. Entertainment

<b>Efficacy (ritual)</b>	<b>Entertainment (theater)</b>
results link to an absent Other	fun only for those here
abolishes time, symbolic time	emphasizes now
brings Other here	audience in the Other
performer possessed, in trance	performer knows what he's
audience participates	doing
audience believes	audience watches
criticism is forbidden	audience appreciates
collective creativity	criticism is encouraged
	individual creativity

In this paper, it is Schechner's definition and its traits that seem most appropriate for the exploration of the use of traditional rituals in contemporary Catalan performance.

### *Ritual, Theater, and Catharsis*

In his paper *Ritual and Catharsis*, Hong cites Nichols and Zax's definition of catharsis as "a process that relieves tension and anxiety by expressing emotions...that have been hidden, restrained or unconscious" (1992: 1). While the meaning of catharsis remains the same, different methods have been used to reach catharsis through theater. Aristotle first described catharsis as the purging of pity and fear via the dramatic plot structure of a play and the resulting audience identification with the protagonist (Hong, 1992: 1).<sup>1</sup>

In his manifesto *The Theater and its Double* (1958), Artaud approaches catharsis from a different perspective. As opposed to using Aristotle's traditional plot structure to reach catharsis, he employs a new concept: the theater of cruelty. Ritualistic elements (such as the blurred lines between audience and spectacle, the non-textual use of gesture, and symbolic violence) are central to Artaud's theater. Artaud spends two chapters of his book discussing ritualistic Oriental and Balinese theater, and emphasizes how the use of ritualistic elements to barrage the senses allows the audience to purge their unconscious desires in the safe environment of the theater.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Aristotle's *Poetics* (2007) for further reading; also Hong's chapter "Theatrical Catharsis", (1992: 15-24); also relevant is Augusto Boal's section "Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy" (2000: 1-48).

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that many other contemporary dramatists and performance groups such as Augusto Boal, The Living Theater, Performing Group, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, The Open



*Ritual, Theater, and the Formation of Cultural Identity*

Both Aristotle and Artaud discussed the use of catharsis as a means with which to create order in society. Hong notes that when employing the Aristotelian method, the spectator experiences “a renewed commitment to lawfulness” (1992: 1). In addition, Artaud makes it clear that he views theater as a means to release emotions and avoid social unrest, saying: “Whatever the conflicts that haunt the mind of a given period, I defy any spectator to whom such violent scenes will have transferred their blood...to give himself up, once outside the theater, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder” (1958: 82).

Catharsis, then, appears to have a socializing function and, as such, can have the impact of increasing allegiance to a larger whole or helping to form and define cultural identity. We see evidence of this in the contemporary theatrical scene in the writings of theorists like Nesteruk and Boal. In his article Nesteruk investigates how American minority theater uses ritual and catharsis in order to both perform and confirm group identity (2005: 43). Similarly, Boal (2000) draws on both Aristotelian and Artaudian theory to advocate social and political change through theater. However, Boal takes Artaud’s idea of preventing social unrest to the next level by arguing that theater is not only capable of but must necessarily be used to spur social change. In Boal’s opinion, while the theater may not be revolution, it is undoubtedly “a rehearsal of revolution” (2000: 155).

Having established the use of ritual in theater to create catharsis, and having seen that catharsis can be used as a means of preventing social unrest, promoting social unity, and redefining identity, I can now look at these elements within the context of Catalan ritual and theater.

*Catalan Ritual and Cultural Identity*

A number of the tenets of Catalan identity could be related to catharsis, but perhaps none more strongly than Hughes’s *rauxus*, or an “uncontrollable emotional outburst” (1992: 25-26). This “relief from *seny*” is present in all four of the Catalan rituals discussed earlier in this paper, and in this section I will look at these rituals in order in order to examine how their presence in theater could lead to a cathartic redefinition of what it means to be Catalan while still preserving the history and tradition of Catalan cultural identity (Hughes, 1992: 25-26).

Hernández discusses how the *correfoc* serves as a transformative and linking ritual, stating that:

Certain social analysts have noted that such groups have grown fastest in more industrial cities and have postulated that such areas, swollen with new immigrants from rural regions as well as particularly from African nations, have a more difficult time finding non-ideological yet engaging, pleasurable, and even transformative activities that can help to link disparate community elements into a more integrated, self-identified group. (2005: 105)

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Theater, and the *Happenings* of Allan Kaprow have been influenced by Artaud’s work and are valuable to look at for further background and examples of ritual and catharsis in theater.

She adds that the non-verbal, participatory nature of the *correfoc* creates an environment in which language barriers are broken down, social connections are made, and new communal identity is created.

The critic also discusses the use of the *correfoc* as a means of political resistance, stating, “confronting physical fear was an important part of the experience for people trying to break out of the habit of physical submission” (2005: 134). Noyes corroborates this sentiment in her online posting *Charivaris and Correfocs* (2002), noting the significance of the demonic imagery as a tool of political resistance after Franco’s death: “In a context of forced Mass attendance and a dictator who described himself as the Lord’s An[n]ointed...we wanted to be in hell”. The satirical *versots* discussed by Palomar also play into the idea of political subversion. Thus, the effect of the *correfoc* on cultural identity is two-fold: it helps to define an increasingly diverse idea of what it means to be Catalan while at the same time serving as a means of political resistance and preservation of Catalan cultural identity.

Similarly, Brandes discusses how Catalan identity is an achieved rather than ascribed status, and how this unique definition is reflected in the *sardana*. As discussed in the section on Catalan identity, “Biological ancestry does not make a person Catalan. Catalan identity...can be acquired through learning, and then internalized to the point of thorough identification” (1990: 34). This is similar to the nature of the *sardana*: a dance that anyone can participate in, given they have the necessary knowledge and education. This acquired, not biological, representation of cultural identity creates a unique environment for immigrants, allowing them not only to integrate into the society but also to assume the Catalan identity.

The *castells* also serve as a breeding ground for cultural unity. Erickson describes the experience of building a *castell* as “channeling individual desires into the needs of larger institutions” (2008: 215).<sup>3</sup> The critic describes his firsthand experience as a *casteller*, relating how each individual sacrifices personal safety and comfort in order to become a member of a larger body, that of the *castell*. He even goes so far as to directly speak to the issue of integrating immigrants into Catalan society via the *castell*, saying: “Human castles (*castells*) are the ritual activity with the highest concentration of new immigrant participation throughout the Catalan territories. They are performances of social integration” (2008: 175).

In the case of *gegants* and *capgrossos*, the use of masks allows individual identities to be obscured in order to create a celebratory group environment. At the same time, the *capgrossos* especially serve as a means of social resistance through the use of parody and satire. *Gegants* and *capgrossos* also work with identity preservation in a somewhat different way than the *castells*, the *sardana* and the *correfoc*. Buxó and Tous speak of how these structures help to maintain Catalan identity because they preserve history and tradition via the representation of

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Erikson goes even further and relates *castell* building to Foucault’s model of governmentality (2008: 215).

historical figures. Buxó states that due to this historical significance, the *gegants* and *capgrossos* function “as a sign of the citizen’s identity” (2002: 57).<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, some elements of these rituals (representation of historical figures, satire, political resistance) work to preserve an existing cultural identity in the face of outside challenges, while at the same time other elements (the creation of anonymity, the non-verbal and participatory nature of the performances, the concept of teamwork, and the idea of a learned or achieved Catalan identity) provide a breeding ground for fomenting a new Catalan identity. Brandes, Hughes, McRoberts, and Edles argue that Catalan culture can be learned, and this section demonstrates that it can be learned through rituals. I will now explore how the elements of ritual manifest themselves in contemporary Catalan theater through a case study of Catalan theater company *La Fura dels Baus*, and as a result show how the use of Catalan ritual in theater can foster the learning of autochthonous character and affirmation of cultural identity.

### ***La Fura dels Baus* Background**

*La Fura dels Baus* are appropriate subjects for a case study of this type given their prominence both within Catalonia and internationally, their extensive use of ritual and spectacle, and their unique creative process. My analysis is informed by a personal interview conducted with three members of the company: Marcel Riu (business department), Mark Salas (projections department), and Adrià Cortadellas (communications department). I prepared a number of questions and met with them in the *La Fura dels Baus* headquarters in Barcelona. There, we discussed the presence of Catalan ritual in their performances, the influences that they draw upon as a company, and their relationship with the emergence of a new Catalan identity. I will reference this interview during the following sections in order to reinforce points and provide clarification.

### **History**

*La Fura dels Baus* as a company found their origins in the street theater of the 1970s, performing out of a cart that traveled around to various towns in Catalonia (Mauri, 2004: 11). Founded in 1979, they emerged during the post-Franco period of transition during which Catalonia was searching for a new identity. Since then, they have grown into one of the most renowned contemporary theater groups both within Catalonia and internationally.

### **Creative Process**

One of the most unique aspects of *La Fura dels Baus* as a company is their philosophy of collective creativity. The directorial team is composed of numerous members, yet never is a production conceived by just one of them (Mauri, 2004:

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<sup>4</sup> Self-translated. Original quotation: “como signo de identidad ciudadana”.

11). This concept of collectivism is also reflected in their performances, many of which portray massive groups of people collaborating in coordinated performance. Collective creativity not only has ties to ritualistic performance, but it also helps to create a space in which identity can be redefined, as discussed in the previous section.

## Style

The style of *La Fura dels Baus*, self-dubbed as the “Furian Language”, has been compared to many of the theatrical groups and theorists discussed earlier in this paper, from the environmental theater of Schechner and Kaprow’s *Happenings* to Artaud’s theater of cruelty.<sup>5</sup> As made clear by Salas, for the most part these similarities are not due to direct influence; that is, the directors of *La Fura dels Baus* did not purposely draw on previous dramatic theory, but instead relied on their own manner of self-expression. The similarities highlighted in this paper serve to tie *La Fura dels Baus* into a larger historical narrative of ritual in theater, not to imply that these theorists directly influenced the company.

That being said, *La Fura dels Baus* frequently blurs the line between theater and ritual, as can be seen when evaluating their performances using Schechner’s definition of ritual vs. theater. Certain aspects of ritual are incredibly present in the work of *La Fura dels Baus*, such as audience participation, collective creativity, and symbolic time. In addition, in light of my interview with members of the company, I would argue that when looking at Schechner’s dichotomy between “performer possessed, in a trance” and “performer knows what he is doing”, *La Fura dels Baus* would fall more at the former, ritualistic end of the spectrum. When asked about the company’s objectives, Salas made it clear that when the group formed, they did not have any clear goals or messages that they wanted to transmit; they did not even think of themselves as a company. They were just a group of men who joined together to express themselves, and their inspiration was primarily internal. Salas noted that this concept of the performer or director not having an objective and instead speaking from inside is a very ritualistic process, and Schechner’s performer dichotomy corroborates this. This element of ritual can be seen clearly in some of *La Fura dels Baus*’s first performances, such as *Accions*, *Suz/O/Suz*, and *Noun*, which are amongst the most ritualistic in nature. While their growing fame has naturally led to the development of some more clear objectives, *La Fura dels Baus* still remains a primarily expression-based group. Of course, as Schechner said, all performances are a combination of ritual and theater, and it is important to note that the company still retains elements of aesthetic theater, such as the encouragement of criticism and the entertainment (and in some cases, such as *Pepsíclosa* and *Symbiosis*, even commercial) value of performance.

One of the key stylistic aspects in the work of *La Fura dels Baus* is the use of non-verbal performance techniques. Very few of their performances use spoken

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<sup>5</sup> Schroeder compares *La Fura dels Baus* to Artaud (2003:1-2). Feldman likens them to Schechner’s environmental theater, Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty (1998: 457-458), *The Living Theater* and Kaprow’s *Happenings* (1998: 450).

dialogue in the traditional sense. Feldman describes how this form of theater came to be popularized in contemporary Catalonia and discusses how the censorship and ban on the Catalan language during Franco's era led to the emergence of theater with a focus on the non-verbal (1998: 452).

Non-traditional plot structures (and thus the symbolic use of time) are also prevalent in the majority of the performances. Even in their re-enactments of stories such as *Faust*, *Don Quixote*, and *The Divine Comedy*, the company breaks down the original plot structures and instead presents a collage of images and experiences that represent the key ideas of the work and, more importantly, evoke key emotions in the audience in the form of catharsis. This is very similar to Artaud's view of the theatrical ideal that classics of the dramatic canon need to be represented in a new way, separated from their antiquated language and plot structures, in order to communicate their messages and evoke emotional catharsis in a contemporary audience. In Artaud's words, "If...a contemporary public does not understand *Oedipus Rex*, I shall make bold to say that it is the fault of *Oedipus Rex*, and not that of the public" (1958: 74).

An additional element crucial to the style of *La Fura dels Baus* is audience participation. Most of their productions are performed in non-traditional theatrical spaces in which the audience is surrounded by the action and is made to feel like a participant, not an observer, via the bombardment of all five senses (even ones not seen in traditional theater, such as smell and taste in the production of *Degustación de Titus Andronicus*). The style is consistent with Boal's concept of the "spect-actor", and in productions like *Furamòbil*, the audience is both an active and necessary member to the realization of the production. Just as Schechner notes that in a ritual "[i]f only a few stay away, it is those who are absent who suffer; if many stay away, the congregation is in danger of schism or extinction", many of *La Fura dels Baus*'s performances would be un-performable without a participating audience (1974: 473).

It is not hard to see that these stylistic elements are also central to the realization of many of the Catalan rituals described earlier. The *sardana*, *castells*, *gegants*, and the *correfoc* all revolve around the concept of non-verbal collective performance that lacks a traditional plot structure. I will discuss the relationship between these rituals and the theater of *La Fura dels Baus* in more detail in the next section.

### ***La Fura dels Baus*: Elements of Catalan Ritual**

Looking at an overview of the company's work from 1979 to the present, it becomes apparent that their performances contain both literal/visual elements and thematic/conceptual elements associated with the four Catalan rituals presented earlier in the paper. In this section I will revisit each ritual and present their manifestations in the theatrical work of *La Fura dels Baus*.

Before starting, it is important to note that the presence of elements of Catalan ritual in the work of *La Fura dels Baus* does not necessarily mean that they were attempting to replicate the rituals. While in certain cases, such as the performance at the Nanjing Youth Olympics (figures 18, 19) and the *Human Net*

(figure 20), *La Fura dels Baus* was directly inspired by Catalan rituals such as the *castell*, many of their other performances were more indirectly influenced by Catalan ritual (Riu). George and London put it well in their description of the performance *Suz/O/Suz*: “The work is a ritual with a neo-primitivist aesthetic. It is not, however, a copy of any precise ritual, but an attempt to discover relationships between primitive and urban tribes, between ritualistic ceremonies and spectacular events” (1996: 120). The presence of elements of Catalan ritual in their work reflects not only a desire to explore the relationship between ritual and theater in a uniquely Catalan way, but also a collective Catalan background that enters subconsciously into their performances.

### *Gegants and Capgrossos*

One of the most obvious manifestations of this traditional festivity is the company’s use of giant human figures. *Mediterráneo, mar olímpico*, performed at the opening ceremony for the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992, tells the story of Jason and the Argonauts’ voyage to the columns of Hercules at the end of the Mediterranean Sea (Ollé, 2004: 113). In this performance, Hercules is represented using a *gegant*-like figure (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Fundació Barcelona Olímpica, Hercules figure in *Mediterráneo, Mar Olímpico*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1992.

Another giant figure is present in *Pepsíclope*, a performance commissioned by Pepsi. In *Pepsíclope*, *La Fura dels Baus* staged a mass spectacle in which a massive lady discovered a new type of Pepsi soda can (see figure 6) (Ollé, 2004: 139).



Figure 6. Albert Ramis, Giant figure in *Pepsíclope*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1996.

*L'home del mil.lenni*, a performance commissioned by Vodafone to celebrate the new millennium, is also centered on the use of a giant figure. For this performance, the company conducted an online survey that asked people what characteristics they thought should describe the man of the new millennium. Then, in a large-scale demonstration in Barcelona's *Plaça Catalunya*, one hundred actors constructed a giant humanoid, and the results of the poll were projected onto him (see figure 7). This performance not only reflects the literal visual image of a *gegant*, but also utilizes important elements such as audience participation and collective teamwork that are emblematic of all four of the Catalan rituals presented in this paper. The human composition of the *gegant* even evokes the image of a *castell*, an idea that I will discuss more in depth later.





Figure 7. Patricio Simón, Giant figure in *L'home del mil.lenni*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1999.

For the opening of Valencia's first Biennale, *La Fura dels Baus* resurrected the same "man of men" from *L'home del mil.lenni* in a new context.



Figure 8. Tilde de Tullio, Giant figure in *La navaja en el ojo*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 2001.

Most recently, to celebrate the beginning of the Christmas season, *La Fura dels Baus* put on a three-act production with a focus on illumination. Figure 9 shows a giant human figure used during the performance.



Figure 9. La Fura dels Baus, Giant figure in *Turn on the Lights*, Photograph, La Fura dels Baus, La Fura dels Baus, 20 Nov. 2014.

In addition to the use of giant figures, *La Fura dels Baus*'s use of masks and face paint creates the same environment of anonymity that is present in the parade of *gegants* and in other Catalan rituals like the *correfoc*. For example, in *On the marble cliffs*, a re-interpretation of Ernst Jünger's novel which forecasted the totalitarian government and concentration camps to come as a result of Hitler's regime, *La Fura dels Baus* used face paint in order to make the prisoners "uniform and g[i]ve them an anonymous look" (see figure 10) (Ollé, 2004: 300).



Figure 10. Hans Jörg Michel, Prisoners in *On the marble cliffs*, Photograph, La Fura dels Baus, La Fura dels Baus, 2002.

In *La Atlántida*, a re-interpretation of the opera by Manuel de Falla, face paint colors were used to distinguish between the characters, just like the masks of the *gegants* and *capgrossos* (see figure 11).



Figure 11. Carlos Choin, Falla, Verdaguer, and Sert in *La Atlántida*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1996.

Inspired by Carl Off's musical composition of the same name, many of the actors in *Carmina Burana* also wear mask-like face paint (see figure 12).



Figure 12. La Fura dels Baus, Actors in face paint in *Carmina Burana*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 4 Aug. 2009.



## Sardana

While perhaps more subtle than the manifestations of the *gegants* in the work of *La Fura dels Baus*, the influence of the *sardana* is also present. As discussed earlier, the *sardana* is an inclusive dance, allowing any member schooled in the art to enter, just as Catalan identity allows immigrants or outsiders to achieve Catalan status via participation in cultural activities. Many of *La Fura dels Baus*'s performances echo this sentiment, especially those in which the company uses audience participation and group action to achieve the spectacle.

One such performance was *Furamòbil*, in which a machine was placed in the middle of the street and the audience was allowed to enter and interact with it (see figure 13). The audience collectively powered the machine and provided it with the energy to move. Ollé notes that the *Furamòbil* is "a monument to solidarity because it requires a collective effort to make this performance possible" (2004: 217). The *sardana* (as well as other rituals, especially the *castell*) both echo this sentiment.



Figure 13. Gol, Public interacting with *Furamòbil*,  
Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1999.

Another example was *Degustación de Titus Andrónicus* (*Tasting of Titus Andronicus*), in which the audience members ate a dinner during the play, thus experiencing the event with all five senses. During the performance, the stage and set pieces were both carried and moved throughout the audience (see figure 14), blurring the lines between actor and spectator and creating a communal and all-inclusive experience.

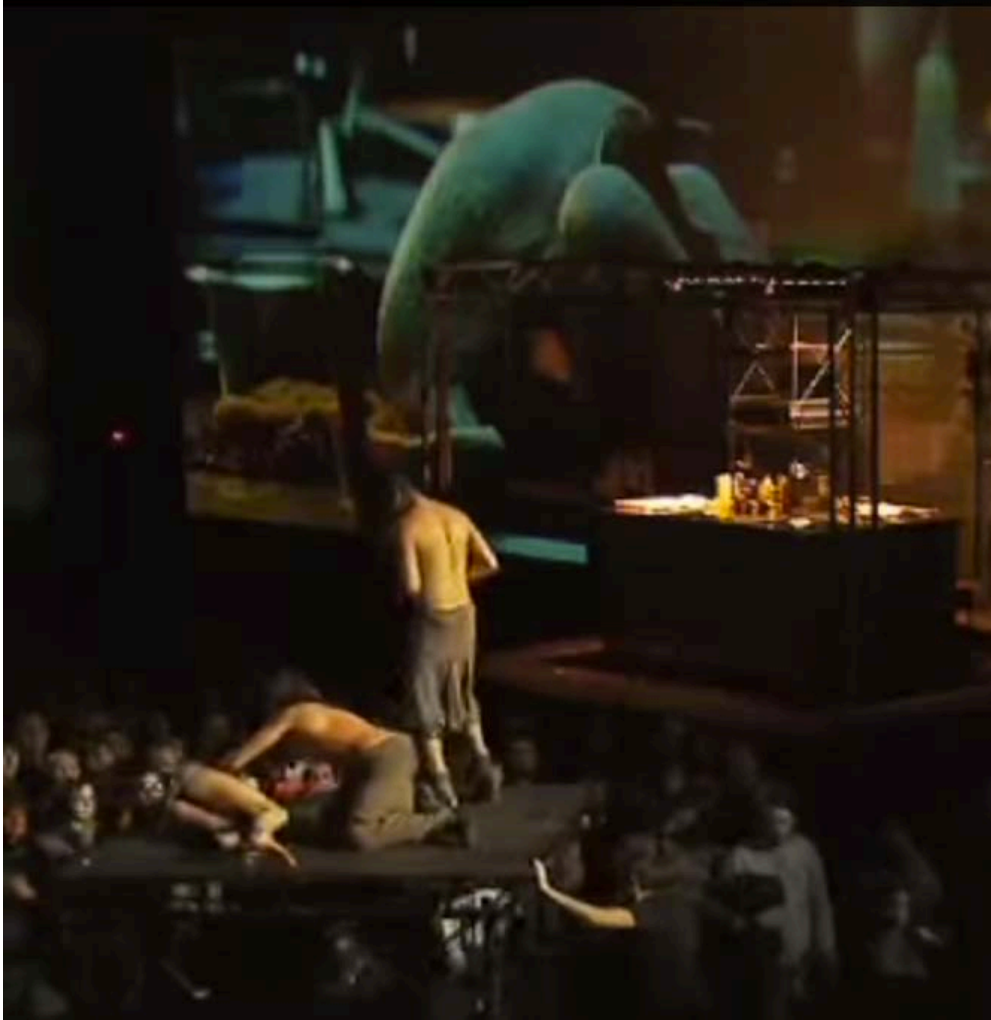


Figure 14. Actor moving through audience in *Degustación de Titus Andrónicus*, La Fura dels Baus, 2010, Author's screenshot.

Marketed as “the first smartshow in history”, in *M.U.R.S.*, audience members also played a part in the performance, using a special app downloaded on their smartphones to traverse and participate in the show (see figures 15, 16). While the performance is a commentary on how technology distances us from real emotion, the same technology also serves to unite a diverse group of people in active performance, just like the *sardana* (“M.U.R.S.”).

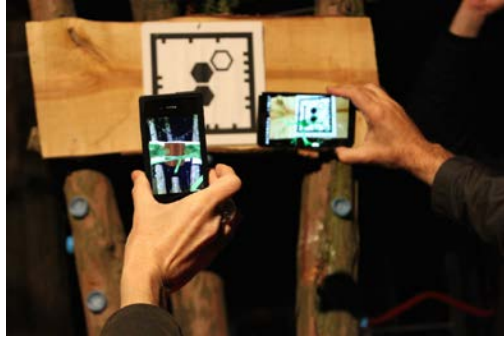


Figure 15. Julia Losada, Audience members with phones in *M.U.R.S.*.  
Photograph. *La Fura dels Baus*. La Fura dels Baus, 30 June 2014. Web. 30 Nov. 2014.



Figure 16. Josep Aznar, Audience members participating in *M.U.R.S.*,  
Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 30 June 201.

Beyond group presentation, the choreographed element of the *sardana* is also present. The company draws heavily on dance as a performance element, and most notable are performances where collective and group dance is a key element. For example, in *Mediterráneo*, *mar olímpico*, the dancers collectively formed the ocean, moving in unison to create the illusion of waves (see figure 17).



Figure 17. Darius Koehli, Human ocean in *Mediterráneo*, *mar olímpico*,  
Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1992.

## Castells

Collective construction is a theme throughout the work. Sometimes this construction takes the shape of a *castell* or similar structure, and other times it is entirely foreign, but it always represents the same tenets as *castell*-building: *força* (strength), *equilibri* (balance), *valor* (courage), *seny* (common sense), and, of course, teamwork.

The influence of the *castell* was perhaps most obvious in the Opening Ceremony of the Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing. In this dance/acrobatic-centered piece, the actors formed a structure that floated suspended in the air, resembling a *castell* (figures 18, 19; see figure 3 for comparison). The actors proceeded to perform a choreographed piece in which the *castell* morphed into other tower-like shapes. In my interview with him, Riu used this performance as an example of how *La Fura dels Baus* sometimes deliberately draws from Catalan ritual. However, he also noted that subconscious inspiration is equally as important. In Salas's words "We are what we have learned," and the directors' Catalan background both directly and indirectly manifests itself in their theater.



Figure 18. Choreographed human formation in the Opening Ceremony of the Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing, La Fura dels Baus, 2014, Author's screenshot.





Figure 19. Human tower in the Opening Ceremony of the Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing, La Fura dels Baus, 2014, Author's screenshot.

In another example of collective construction, at their performance at the *La Mercè* festival in Barcelona, *La Fura dels Baus* created what they call the *Human Net*, or a tower of suspended actors that dance in choreographed movements in the air (see figure 20). While the representation of a *castell* is not as literal as in the Nanjing Olympic performances, the idea of a human construction achieved via strength, teamwork, and unity is still very present. In my interview with them, Riu and Salas both compared the *Human Net* to the *castell* due to the aspects of collective teamwork needed to achieve the final goal. Cortadellas also compared the *Human Net* to the *sardana*. If the circle in the *sardana* does not shut, the dance does not make sense. In the same way, if there is a person missing from the *Human Net*, it will not work (Cortadellas).



Figure 20. Unknown, Human net, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 2014.

In a still more abstract representation of the concept of collective construction present in the making of the *castell*, actors in *La Atlántida* worked together to build

and transform the set (made of large white cardboard boxes) as part of the performance (see figure 21).



Figure 21. Carlos Choin, Actors and large box in *La Atlántida*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1996.

Similarly, in *MTM*, a performance focused on criticizing how political forces use the mass media to manipulate the public, the actors continuously deconstructed and reconstructed a fluid set using cardboard boxes, in yet another example of collective construction (see figure 22). In this image they are building a monolith “as a symbol of power” (Ollé 2004: 129).



Figure 22. Darius Koehli, Construction of pyramid in *MTM*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1994, Web, 30 Nov. 2014.

Also in *MTM*, words are displayed using projections including *amor* (love), *martiri* (martyrdom), *fe* (faith), *catástrofe* (disaster), *igualtat* (equality), and, most relevantly, *força* (strength), one of the key pillars of *castell* creation (Figure 23).



Figure 23. Gol, Força projection in *MTM*,  
Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1994.

### *Correfoc*

From the use of pyrotechnics and water and fire imagery to the depiction of the battle between good and evil in works such as *Faust* and *La Atlántida*, elements of the *correfoc* might well be the most present of all of the rituals in the work of *La Fura dels Baus*. Recalling Hernández's description of water as a dual symbol of eradicator and provider, one can see *La Fura dels Baus*'s use of fire as a type of purifying ritual. The majority of their performances utilize fire or pyrotechnics in some form; below are just a few examples.

During *La Atlántida*, "the chorus' text appeared as in karaoke, projected on a screen" (Ollé, 2004: 167). Figure 24 shows the flames devouring the text, symbolic of "the fire of the Pyrenees, one of the passages in Verdaguer's poem" (Ollé, 2004: 167). Here, fire appears in its destructive form.



Figure 24. José Enrique Chacón, Fire devouring text in *La Atlántida*,  
Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1996.

In *Noun*, a performance centered on the relationship between man and machine, fire was used in the scene depicting execution of the foreman, the “last link between man and machine” (see figure 25) (Ollé, 2004: 101). Once again, fire is symbolic of destruction.



Figure 25. Darius Koehli, Foreman's body in *Noun*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1990.

A very similar image also appears in *The Fantastic Symphony* over a decade later, a theatrical re-interpretation of the orchestral piece by Berlioz (see figure 26). This scene did not portray an execution, but rather a moment in which Berlioz “has to decide which of all the women who assault him in the night is his true love” (Ollé, 2004: 333). Fire here could be seen in the transformative sense, as the body of the woman is being transported.



Figure 26. Riccardo Gallini, Transport of the clones in *The Fantastic Symphony*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 2002.

The performance of *L'home del mil.lenni*, like many other *La Fura dels Baus* performances, culminated in a display of fireworks, reminiscent of the pyrotechnics used in the *correfoc* (see figure 27).



Figure 27. Josep Masip, Fireworks and giant figure in *L'home del mil.lenni*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1999.



In the *correfoc*, water is used to cool down the fire-runners during the parade, but also serves as a symbol of purification, fertility, and life (Hernández, 2005: 126). We see these same concepts manifested in various *La Fura dels Baus* performances. For example, *F@ust 3.0* is one of *La Fura dels Baus*'s many reinterpretations of the Faustian myth in which Faust sells his soul to the devil in exchange for material pleasures. In the scene depicted in Figure 28, called the "Margarita Mix", there is a fusion of a number of different images, including that of a man in the shower. This image evokes the idea of water as a purifying and cleansing element.



Figure 28. Ros Ribas, "Margarita Mix" scene in *F@ust 3.0*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1998, Web, 30 Nov. 2014.

In addition, the visual of actors submerged in tanks of water appeared for the first time in *Suz/O/Suz* (see figure 29), and has since become a theme in *La Fura dels Baus* performances (Ollé, 2004: 59). Just as in the *correfoc*, water serves as a symbol of "purification and gestation" for *La Fura dels Baus* (Ollé, 2004: 61).



Figure 29. Gol, Actors submerged in tank in *Suz/O/Suz*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1985.

The use of tanks is also visible in *La navaja en el ojo* (see figure 30). This performance staged the seven deadly sins, and the scene in Figure 30 depicts two giant syringes raised above the crowd, portraying the sin of sloth (Ollé, 2004: 269). The water from the syringe poured down onto the audience, and this juxtaposition of sin and cleansing is similar to that which is present in the *correfoc*.



Figure 30. Tilde de Tullio, Actor in syringe in *La navaja en el ojo*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 2001.

Figure 31 is an image of buckets of water used in *Suz/O/Suz*. Ollé describes this moment as “a celebration of the birth of new individuals,” connecting to the idea of water as a symbol of fertility (2004: 62).





Figure 31. Katsu Miyauchi, Buckets in *Suz/O/Suz*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1985.

*Symbiosis* was a performance conceived to present the new Mercedes Class A car to the public, and also incorporates water as a symbolic element. The performance was split into four parts that “corresponded to the four elements of nature: air, fire, earth and water” (Ollé, 2004: 185). In Figure 32, we see the element of water, again in a purifying, shower-like sense.



Figure 32. Daimler Chrysler AG, Actors and water in *Symbiosis*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1997, Web, 30 Nov. 2014.

In *Tier Mon*, actors were lifted “over the heads of the audience, and then plac[ed]...in a pool of water” (see figure 33) (Ollé, 2004: 85). A dunking in water is usually associated with baptism and new life, yet this is a violent scene that reminds of us torture, a juxtaposition of destruction and purification that is reminiscent of the *correfoc*.



Figure 33. Lutzen, André, Actors being dunked into pool of water in *Tier Mon*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1988.

Many of *La Fura dels Baus*'s performances also show fire and water side by side, just like the juxtaposition of the two elements in the *correfoc*. One example of this can be seen in the television reproduction of *Suz/O/Suz*, a show that focused on exploring human nature. *Ulele*, an episode of the television program *El ojo de cristal* (TVE) reproduced different elements of *Suz/O/Suz* in non-theatrical settings (Ollé, 2004: 66). Figure 34 depicts a re-interpretation of part of *Suz/O/Suz* in the delta of the Ebro River, and in it one can see the direct juxtaposition of fire and water, just as in the *correfoc*.

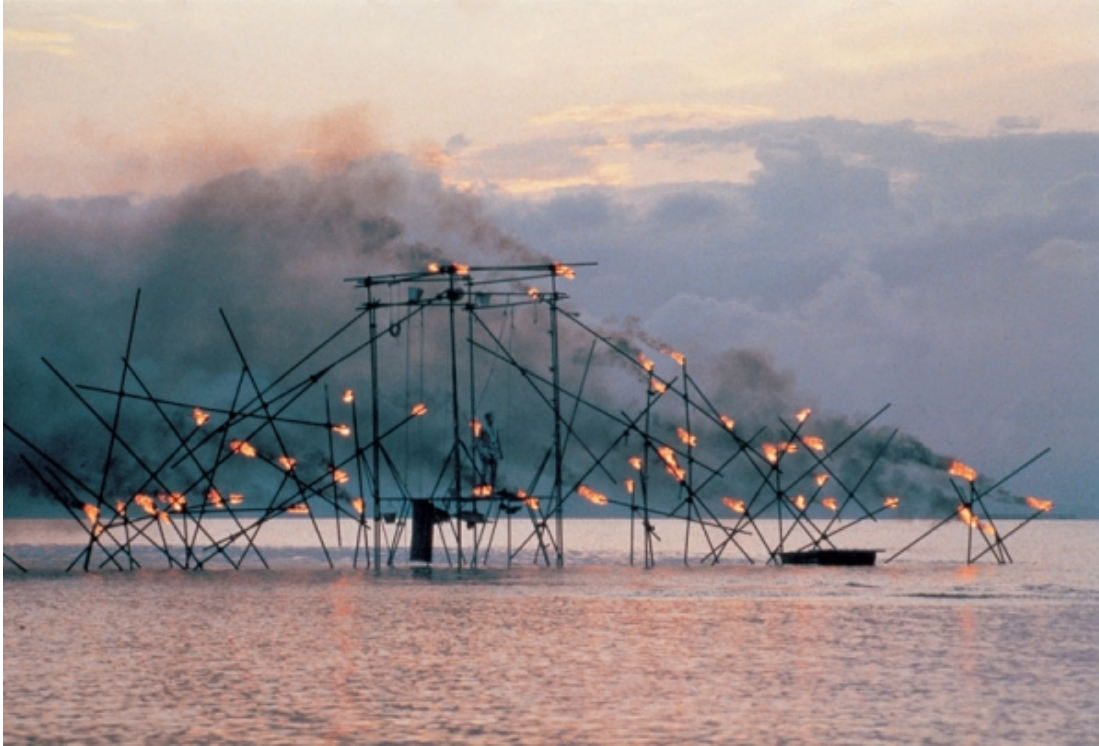


Figure 34. José Luis Prieto, Fire and water in television version of *Suz/O/Suz*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1985.

A similar juxtaposition of fire/water is also visible in the opening ceremony for the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992 (see figure 35).



Figure 35. Fundació Barcelona Olímpica, Panoramic shot of *Mediterráneo, Mar Olímpico*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1992.

In the opening scenes of the *correfoc*, or *principi*, there are often depictions of a battle between good and evil (Hernández, 2005: 121). These two opposing forces are also a theme in the works of *La Fura dels Baus*. For example, angelic figures and the opposing forces of good and evil are present throughout *La Atlántida* (see figures 36, 37).



Figure 36. Carlos Choin, Angels and man in glass box *La Atlántida*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus.



Figure 37. Carlos Choin, Three angels in *La Atlántida*, Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1996.

*La Fura dels Baus*'s re-interpretation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in 2002 is also full of references to the good/evil duality, largely because the original piece is centered on such themes. Here, and in their many re-interpretations of Goethe's *Faust*, *La Fura dels Baus* explores the relationship between good and evil through new visions of classics. The scene in Figure 38 is of "the angel that anticipates the descent to hell" (Ollé, 2004: 321).





Figure 38. Tilde de Tullio, Angel in *La divina comedia*,  
Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 2002.

Figure 39 is a similar image of an angel in one of *La Fura dels Baus*'s re-interpretations of *Faust*, a narrative that also centers on the opposition of good and evil.



Figure 39. Ros Ribas, Flying angel in *F@ust 3.0*,  
Photograph, *La Fura dels Baus*, La Fura dels Baus, 1998.

## Conclusion and Remarks

Drawing connections between the theater of *La Fura dels Baus* and Catalan rituals has not been without its difficulties. It is easy to draw quick comparisons, but not as easy to prove that the connections are actually valid, or whether the influence of Catalan ritual was direct or more subconscious. By identifying key aesthetic and thematic traits that are unique to Catalan ritual, and then methodologically demonstrating that these same traits also appear in the work of *La Fura dels Baus* during over 30 years of performance, I have shown that there is a clear connection between the two. Both figurative elements, such as the use of teamwork and collective participation, as well as literal elements, like fire/water imagery and the use of giant human figures, are present.

However, that does not mean that this connection is necessarily intentional. While some performances, like the *Human Net* or the Opening Ceremony for the Olympic Youth games in Nanjing, were directly influenced by Catalan ritual as acknowledged by members of the company, other performances had a more subconscious influence (Salas, Riu). This is likely a result of what Salas pointed out in our interview—"We are what we have learned." The directors of *La Fura dels Baus*, as Catalonians, have grown up as learners of the Catalan culture, and as such this culture is transmitted via their performances. This is an interesting concept to look at in relation to the learned nature of Catalan cultural identity, for it suggests that those who have achieved identity are then enabled to transmit this identity to others, both consciously and subconsciously. This is an almost ritualistic process in

and of itself, serving as a rite of initiation into Catalanism and transferring knowledge from generation to generation.

In our interview, Salas emphasized that *La Fura dels Baus* is an apolitical group that does not intend to engage with questions of Catalan identity nor form a new definition of what it means to be Catalan. While the group's Catalan culture and identity certainly shows in many of their performances, this is cultural expression that does not attempt to "hacer bandera" (wave the flag)—in other words, it does not attempt to claim anything political (Salas).

On the basis of this information and my research on ritual, catharsis, and cultural identity, I argue that while *La Fura dels Baus* does not directly engage with questions of Catalan identity, the company does create a theatrical space in which identity can be defined. Through the use of audience participation and the inclusion of ritualistic elements that lead to catharsis, the borders between individuals are broken down and the possibility of finding a new identity emerges. *La Fura dels Baus* differs from artists like Boal in that they are not directly trying to speak to political issues or steer the audience in a particular direction, but they are similar in that the use of ritual and cathartic release creates a venue in which social change and the reformation of identity can occur.

I believe that such an approach is of considerable value in contemporary Catalonia, where people are still trying to define Catalan identity, especially in relation to issues such as the Catalan struggle for independence from Spain, growing immigration rates, and the increasing pressure of globalization. *La Fura dels Baus* uses elements of Catalan ritual in their performances, and while the exact implications of these ritualistic aspects on Catalan identity are unknown, they do provide a space for cathartic release, the dissolution of boundaries, and the joining together of a heterogeneous group.

While *La Fura dels Baus* is only one theatrical company, their work has been hugely influential in the Catalan contemporary theater scene (Salas, George and London, 1996: 118). Future research and case studies could be done to identify elements of Catalan ritual in the work of other contemporary Catalan theater groups such as *Els Comediants* or *Els Joglars*.

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