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## RETHINKING MOURNING AND DEATH IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19: IMPACTS OF MINIMALIST MUSIC ON THE PRACTICE OF “QI GONG – LIU ZI JUE”<sup>1</sup>.

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1 A shortened version of this text was presented in 2022 at Bowling Green State University, Eighth International Conference on Music and Minimalism.

**Abstract:** The scope of this article is to analyze the consonance between minimalist music and *Qi Gong – Liu Zi Jue*, focusing on the use of these tools to overcome grief, an individual and social phenomenon of great suffering, intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. This work is based on a master's research developed within the Graduate Program in Contemporary Culture Studies (UFMT) entitled "Experiences of Mourning in Elderly Women in the Context of COVID-19: Artistic-Therapeutic Workshops as Facilitators in the Construction of Narratives", by Gisela de Oliveira Gusmão under the guidance of Dr. Rita de Cássia Domingues dos Santos, which consisted of an exploratory and descriptive study, with qualitative features. The methodology is based on the Narrative Research of Clandinin and Connelly (2015). We concluded, in that study, that the sensations originated from the symbolic universe derive from personal experiences, considering that each individual has a life story, and the experience of each one with the symbols would be both distinct and universal. It is inferred that the use of minimalist music and *Qi Gong – Liu Zi Jue*, in *Therapeutic Art Workshops* with women over 60 years of age, could help to facilitate overcoming grief, and that this interdisciplinary practice, in the fields of contemporary poetics and of psychology, tends to favor the biopsychosocial reorganization culminating in a type of updating of perception, allowing the revision of crystallized concepts.

**Keywords:** Mourning; Minimalist Music; *Qi Gong*; Narrative Research.

## INTRODUCTION

Changes in routine due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Coronavirus disease 2019), marked by intense demands for distancing,

2 *Qi Gong* (energy cultivation), therapeutic modality of ancient exercise considered one of the pillars of Traditional Chinese Medicine that aims to strengthen and correctly circulate QI (energy). (LIVRAMENTO et al., 2010, p. 75)

3 Six sounds for restoration (our translation).

point to the need for studies, within the scope of human and sociocultural relations, that seek to know their experiences and narratives. In these experiences of mourning for deaths or symbolic, and the whole context of death, one can observe the minimalist dynamics of repetition and contained expression, of the reduction of elements prioritizing essential questions.

This way, with the master's research "Grief Experiences in Elderly Women in the Context of COVID-19: Artistic-Therapeutic Workshops as Facilitators in the Construction of Narratives" by Gisela de Oliveira Gusmão, guided by Prof. Dr. Rita de Cássia Domingues dos Santos, the aim was to discover the benefits of minimalist music associated with *Qi Gong*<sup>2</sup>- *Liu Zi Jue*<sup>3</sup> as complementary therapies applied to bereaved women, over 60 years old. These practices took place in virtual meetings, called *Artistic-Therapeutic Ateliês* by the authors, considering the interdisciplinary question of the research line of contemporary poetics.

The aforementioned Workshops were taken as a facilitating strategy for the construction of the narratives of the participants, who composed the field texts, narratives, proposing to study their exact meanings, as well as their representations in the process of elaborating mourning for deaths and symbolic (losses related to significant changes).

The survey carried out in that research demonstrates that defining Minimalism was a very difficult task for theorists. As Sardo (2000) explains, the emergence of *minimal* expressiveness, with creations that enunciated concepts such as economy, cleanliness and dryness, created, from the beginning of the 20th century, an environment, at a certain historical moment, that welcomed several styles contrary to modernism and that, in the

middle of the 20th century, transited in the orbit of the Counterculture Movement.

From the 1960s onwards, contemporary world culture was in great turmoil, mainly promoted by the youth who, as a result of the two great world wars, were dissatisfied with traditional values and elitism in the artistic and political context. This discontent led young people at the time to experiment with a wide spectrum of alternative lifestyles that included drug experimentation, sexual emancipation, interest in non-Western philosophies, always aiming for freedom on all fronts, generating the *counterculture*. (SANTOS, 2019). In this fashion, the so-called “high culture” began to be disregarded, with the emergence of various artistic niches, which promoted the blurring of the boundaries between them, resulting in new stylistic combinations (MORGAN, 1991). We see the effects of the *counterculture* lasting until today, and this is one of the factors that provided fuel for the mixing and the syncretism in contemporary cultures.

As a factor of favoring interest in the East was the Beatles’ trip to India, and the dissemination in the West of eastern religions such as Buddhism and practices such as Yoga. In this context, full of alternative movements such as the *hippie movement*, Minimalism flourished. Minorities began to have a voice, as can be recalled the actions of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks in favor of people of color, in addition to the feminist movement that in the sixties was characterized by the search of women for the right over their own body. Minimalism, according to Santos (2019), goes beyond an artistic style and may have been, in fact, a collective state of emotion that was captured by the artists of the time, who were concerned with giving voice to the feeling of indignation in face to the chaos of wars, revolutions and epidemics, a reflection of a society motivated by ostentation and consumerism.

Canclini (2003) points out that the Counterculture Movement was the result of groups that shared a feeling of revulsion against rational, scientific and technocratic thinking. On the other hand, American society, after a significant migration of people from many regions of the planet, as a result of the two great wars, faced with many new cultural elements, especially from the East, as well as the rescue of African culture, incorporated them into its artistic productions and in their lifestyle.

In addition to being impregnated with the *ethos* of the Counterculture Movement’s cultural rebellion, musical Minimalism represented, in the second half of the 20th century, a critical reaction to the condition of humanity in a complex and uncontrolled society. Despite its ability to offer escape, its real power lay in asserting the value of clear structures and rigorously planned processes. (POLIN, 1989).

Alex Ross also sees in Minimalism a kind of silent criticism of contemporaneity. In his book: *‘‘O resto é ruído’’* (2009), this author cites a cultural study by Robert Fink on this movement:

(...) It is common for repetitive music to provide knowledge, an alert, a defense – or even a simple aesthetic emotion – in the face of the infinity of repetitive relationships that, in the modern capitalist society of consumption, we all face more and more (and more and more and more...). We repeat ourselves within our culture. Maybe we can repeat ourselves to get out of it. (FINK apud ROSS, 2009, p.536)

Fink persuasively argues that Minimalism reflects a postwar American society of consumers, media, and production, and from his perspective these post-industrial changes spawned a culture of repetition; in this sense, minimalist music is examined not for its economy of means, but for its high degree of repetition.

Minimalist music, despite its complexity

and scope of the term Minimalism, widely discussed by several theorists<sup>4</sup> such as Johnson (1994) as aesthetics, style or technique, was the music chosen for this work because it uses compositional practices, standardized repetition and reduction of the set of elements in the composition. Other characteristics of the minimalist compositional technique, highlighted by Johnson (1994) are the permanent formal structure, the uniform rhythmic texture of bright hue, elemental and clear harmonic set, the absence of melodic lines and the repetition of rhythmic patterns.

In relation to the widespread knowledge about musical minimalism, in 1974 minimalist music is unveiled to the general public with *Deutsche Grammophon* launching a set of three LPs with works by Steve Reich. After 1976, Reich began to make a difference in minimalism, writing longer melodies composed of smaller units. Like Glass, he represents a crossover phenomenon of replacing traditional serious and new music audiences with large audiences who also attend pop concerts, representing an elite convergence and mass appeal. Both refined and redefined the techniques of minimalism, while keeping the bridges open between *pop* and classical audience appeal. (POLIN, 1989)

Regarding Steve Reich's compositions, Cervo (2005) points to static harmony, the repetition of melodic elements, cyclic rhythms in the 'canonical technique' and the substitution of pauses for notes in the 'rhythmic construction process', elements that are presented in a formal structure continuous, demonstrating the undeniable influence of African and Oriental music.

In the case of the techniques described above, used by Steve Reich, in addition to the impersonal character and his conception of music as a process that develops by itself, according to Ramos (2008), music with such

4 For a more in-depth discussion on this, see chapter 3 of Rita Santos' book: ``Repensando a Terceira Fase Composicional de Gilberto Mendes`` .... (CRV, 2019).

characteristics can provoke a disconnection from these base emotions and the deepening into an unknown universe, something similar to a conscious hypnotic state. Cervo's (2005) analysis *apud* Azevedo (2007) of the aspects of pulse and rhythm in the piece *Piano Phase* (1967) by Steve Reich from the psychoanalytical point of view, points out that, through repetition, the listener is stimulated to work on his own temporality and interact actively as a subject. Some effects of this experience are explained in the quote below.

Without a center of reference, without a temporality that can be chronologically marked, the listener "hypnotized" by this music can no longer respond from a centralized and rationalized position, with an emptying, albeit momentary, of the self and the emergence of this listener as subject of the unconscious. (AZEVEDO, 2007, p. 209)

The methodological framework used for the study described in this text comes from Narrative Research, which can be defined as "a way of understanding the experience", and a collaborative process between the researcher and the participant, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2015). It can be described as a methodology that consists of collecting stories about a certain topic where the researcher will find information to understand the related phenomena.

Anyone who does narrative research is always confronted with the question whether the narrator is being truthful. This inevitably leads us to another question. Is there reality or is it also a construction? (RIESSMAN, 199, p.8 *apud* PAIVA, 2008, p.5)

According to Paiva (2008), since researchers cannot appropriate and experience the experience of the other, they apprehend the experience through ambiguous representations, demonstrated by speech, by text and by a set of subjective signs, being

necessary, in this case, rethink neutrality and objectivity.

In the next topic, we will present in more detail the objectives of this work and which paths we have taken, in addition to the procedures applied in the *Artistic-Therapeutic Workshops*, as well as the reflections arising from the analysis of the narratives produced in these meetings, which allowed us rich considerations.

## DEVELOPMENT

According to previous research, we found a lack of national and international literature on minimalist music applied to theoretical discussions and practical interventions in the field of psychology. With respect to studies related to *Qi Gong* associated with music, they were also insufficient, however we found a research carried out by Figueiredo (2000) regarding the modality “*Qi Gong dos Symbols*”.

*Qi Gong* is the art of manipulating vital energy, being *Qi* (vital breath, energy) and *Gong* (work, art). According to Chinese records dating back to 2700 BC, it already figured as one of the most important techniques used in Chinese medicine. It is possible that it developed in the beginning of civilization, when possibilities were discovered to work on breathing in order to capture energy. It was certainly developed based on Buddhist and Taoist philosophies, assuming that the oldest style was composed of slow and smooth gestures and movements, a form of meditative dance, with the purpose of stimulating energy, providing balance to the body and soul. mind (LIVRAMENTO et al., 2010).

Also known as “Six Sounds for Restoration”, this technique was created by Sun Simiao known as the King of Medicine, in the period of the Sui Dynasty in China, in the 6th century. This modality of *Qi Gong* aims to promote the

restoration of internal organs, contributing to their functional and structural efficiency; and, acting significantly on emotions (MINAZAKI, 2017).

The minimalist aesthetic was noted in the Chinese exercise of dynamic meditation known as *Qi Gong - Liu Zi Jue*, whose practice consists of only six postures, that is, breathing with light and smooth slow movements, accompanied by the emission of a sound correspondent.

In relation specifically to minimalist music, the authors Potter, Gann and Ap Siôn (2013) point out the following characteristics <sup>5</sup>in minimalist compositions:

- Harmonic ecstasy: a single chord; or few heights; or few chords; or a single scale. It usually implies a conventional diatonic scale or mode. It is natural to perceive this reductionism as a reaction to the massive serialist or aleatory works of the 50s and 60s;
- Repetition;
- Drones;
- Gradual processes: *additive process*; *phase-shifting*; *permutational process* (melodic progression gradually changed via systematic transformation that prevents exact repetition).
- Constant beat: usually associated with a repetitive figuration of eighth notes, suggestive of action or mechanized movement. But since minimalist composers can use drones (like La Monte Young or Niblock), it's best to say that minimalism is characterized by a lack of rhythmic differentiation.
- Static instrumentation: we cannot consider it as a permanent aesthetic goal of minimalist music. This may have been driven by the innovative and economic performance of minimalist music from

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<sup>5</sup> Minimalist compositions that have all the characteristics listed here are rare.

the early years in small ensembles (such as *The Theater of Eternal Music*, *Steve Reich and Musicians*, or *Philip Glass Ensemble*)

- Goal music: this was one of Steve Reich's main concerns for a while. In many cases the sound reverberation of minimalist music "creates" another music superimposed on the spectator's hearing.
- Pure tuning: Pure frequencies were explored by La Monte Young, Tony Conrad, that is, resonance of intervals outside the scale of 12 tones of the piano or other tempered instrument. It is not used much today, although Niblock, Terry Riley used it, and John Adams reintroduced the use of pure harmonics in his orchestral work *The Dharma and Gribou* (2003).
- Audible Structures: In most minimalist music the structure is on the surface and is easily audible <sup>6</sup>.

*Qi Gong* modality called *Liu Zi Jue* (six sounds for restoration) in overcoming grief and rebuilding life during the pandemic in active and independent elderly women. The specific objectives proposed to: understand the role of minimalist music in the context of contemporary poetics, and how it can impact the participants' cultural view of mourning and death; to analyze the minimalist aesthetic characteristics present in the body practice *Qi Gong - Liu Zi Jue*; to know the benefits of Artistic-Therapeutic Workshops as facilitators in the construction of narratives about bereavement.

This is an interdisciplinary study that proposed a bibliographical and documentary research, and a survey of narratives through the realization of 15 individual meetings, in virtual Artistic-Therapeutic Ateliers, with

<sup>6</sup> With the new vision of teleology proposed by Fink (2005), currently most theorists no longer consider minimalist music as having an anti-teleological character, as we can see by the absence of this characteristic in this list.

<sup>7</sup> Sampling technique known as Snowball Sampling that uses selected participants to invite new participants from their networks, like a snowball that grows as it rolls downhill. (VINUTO, 2014)

*the presence of the researcher, which were not recorded, with duration of approximately 50 minutes each, offered to four women aged over 60, independent, with no history of mental disorders, and presenting symptoms compatible with mourning. The participants were chosen according to the aforementioned criteria and because they were available, following the "snowball" system, and the survey was carried out through the collection of narratives, observing the aspects revealed through the autobiographical narrative: temporality; spatiality (spaces covered); and social context (sociability).*

The methodology used was the Narrative Research, which according to Clandinin and Connelly (2015), starts from the continuous and interactive experience to the redefinition of narratives through Dewey's concept of three-dimensional metaphor, encompassing temporality; the individual and the social; and place (space). The researchers move in this investigative context, creating with the collaborators, a new history of this experience, resulting from the expression of their subjectivities.

Data collection for this research it was carried out in a weekly meeting of 50 minutes, virtual, starting with the musical and bodily experiences already mentioned, followed by the dialogues. In the next stage, the organization and analysis of the narratives, the final and written evaluation of the research text were carried out, which took place through the analysis and interpretation of the verbal and bodily substrates that emerged during the process of producing the narratives, observing new forms of making symbols created by the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the systemic and circular processes of interaction and fusion

with their environment, corroborating for the transformation of thinking about death.

The 15 Artistic-Therapeutic Workshops were held and the narratives produced in these meetings, in addition to the mourning experienced previously, pointed to the experience of current mourning, due to death and symbolic, and the participants attributed their participation in the research to the fact that they faced them with less suffering compared to previous experiences, as well as interpreted them with a new look. The sensation described by the research participants is that they feel deeply relaxed when practicing *Qi Gong Liu Zi Jue*, accompanied by the composition by Steve Reich, entitled “*Six Marimbas*” (1986), in its Gamelan version. You can listen to this work through the QR CODE below.



They described as important for relaxation, and the feeling of ‘not thinking about anything’, the background element that supports all the incessant movement that develops in music, the systematic process of repetition, with metallic timbres that resemble bells, and the melody transiting at different times through the various instruments that make up the gamelan.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In moments of great emotional confrontation, the subject is challenged by

8 For more information on this subject, I suggest the article by Maria Julia Kòvacs “Education for death. Journal Psychology, Science and Profession. Brasília, v. 25, no. 3, p. 484-497, 2005.

ambiguous feelings, since for the living, the perception of death is like an interruption of life, as something that ends. Therefore, the circumstances of suffering were heightened by the pandemic, considering that the elderly, when adopting social distancing, for safety reasons, usually neglected routine health monitoring, having also been exposed to great emotional challenges, which can result in bereavement miscellaneous, such as: apprehension about the future aggravated by fear of death and loss of loved ones; desire to die, result of loneliness, the feeling of loss of security and hope; autonomy and freedom to come and go.

The narratives created during the *Artistic-Therapeutic Workshops* brought expressions of some forms of mourning. Anticipated and symbolic mourning was observed in all participants, referring to aging, possible losses and death itself in the pandemic, in addition to unauthorized mourning, considering the ban on funeral rituals following health protocols. In addition, each of the participants, presented here by codenames, brought specific issues, such as ‘*Primavera*’, which faced the illness of the cats, who died during the process, in addition to the impasse of having to change residence and still not knowing exactly where they would go is she your sister; *Mary* narrated that she had been the victim of a scam that put her in a debt situation, in addition to having lost a family member and a close friend; *Patrícia* said that her son was diagnosed with leukemia and was on the verge of losing her job; *Rebeca Vitória*, had to separate from a very important family member, followed by the death of that person. As a result, it underwent significant changes.

Other types of grief were identified, such as inhibited grief, when the person postpones grief, sometimes for a long period, and masked grief, when the person tries to

convey an image that he is fine. These types of mourning were observed in the narratives of *Rebeca Vitória* and *Patrícia*. *Patrícia* says that she sought psychological counseling due to symptoms compatible with anxiety attacks and panic attacks during the pandemic, which may indicate an exaggerated state of mourning. (PEREIRA, 2014)

The dialogue between the multiple elements gathered in this work enriched our reflections on the importance of minimalist music as a facilitator in the process of integration of the human being as an entity, spirit, body and society, and provided elements that provided a rich reflection with the participants, about grief and death, as well as the review of these concepts. In addition, it allowed considering reality and the subject as inseparable elements, enabling a holistic study of human

expressions, becoming a learning experience for the participants and the researcher. It was noted that the methods used contributed to the softening of unconscious defenses, and therefore, talking about oneself, one's sufferings in the face of mourning and the theme of death becomes less distressing.

This survey brought excellent results, but also many questions, which suggests the need to deepen the strategy called *Artistic-Therapeutic Workshops*, combined with the Narrative Research methodology. We believe that the experiences of mourning when narrated, as well as the perception that people may have about death, expressed by Narrative Research, can stimulate reflections by bereaved people and professionals in related areas, also promoting this methodology.

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