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The Art of Burle Marx, a mass choreography led by Bryn Walters at the Olympic Games Rio 2016

El Arte de Burle Marx, una coreografía de masas liderada por Bryn Walters en los Juegos Olímpicos de Río 2016

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Abstract

The artistic production entitled The Art of Burle Marx was led by Bryn Walters and his choreographic team. This artistic project was conceived to be staged in the closing ceremony of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro (Brasil). This mass choreography makes extensive use of video mapping to enhance the choreographic sequences, as is to be found throughout both the opening and closing Ceremonies. Bryn Walters created this artistic work by reinterpreting, with 480 performers and the use of video projections, the main geometric shapes for which the Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx is so well known. Through a careful analysis of the official video, using the Elan software, together with the consultation of ceremony programmes and interviews with the choreographers, the main moments of this mass choreography will be researched and highlighted, with the aim of tracing the recognizable characteristics of Burle Marx's work. It is possible to conclude that the choreographer Bryn Walter has achieved a successful reconstruction and dissemination of the work of the architect Burle Marx, thanks to a complex collaboration between different professionals, which enhanced the relationship between the performers and the video projections.

Keywords

Dance, closing ceremony, video mapping, artistic tribute.

Resumen

La producción artística titulada El Arte de Burle Marx fue liderada por Bryn Walters y su equipo coreográfico. Este proyecto artístico fue concebido para ser escenificado en la ceremonia de clausura de los Juegos Olímpicos de 2016 en Río de Janeiro (Brasil). Esta coreografía de las denominada 'de masas' hace un uso extensivo del video mapping para realizar la secuencia coreográfica, como se encuentra a lo largo de las ceremonias de apertura y clausura. Bryn Walters creó esta obra artística reinterpretando, con 480 intérpretes y el uso de proyecciones de vídeo, las principales formas geométricas por las que es tan conocido el paisajista brasileño Roberto Burle Marx. A través de un minucioso análisis del vídeo oficial, utilizando el software Elan, junto con la consulta de programas de ceremonia y entrevistas con los coreógrafos, se investigarán y destacarán los principales momentos de esta coreografía de masas, con el objetivo de rastrear las características reconocibles de la obra de Burle Marx. Es posible concluir que el coreógrafo Bryn Walters ha logrado una reconstrucción y difusión acertadas de la obra del arquitecto Burle Marx, gracias a una compleja colaboración entre distintos profesionales, que potenció la relación entre los intérpretes y las proyecciones de vídeo.

Palabras clave

Danza, ceremonia de clausura, video mapping, homenaje artístico.

Introducción

The Rio 2016 ceremonies followed the path traced by previous editions. While maintaining the body as the protagonist, over the years this spectacle has achieved a combination of human animation, pre-mounted images and giant projections [1]. Video projections, since their definitive entry into the Olympic ceremonies (OC) in Vancouver 2010, have offered the opportunity to create images to support the choreography on the big stage. Over time, this video content has increasingly enhanced set development, allowing for ideas and suggestions that have enriched the shows. An Olympic Ceremony is in fact a great live spectacle that has undergone significant aesthetic mutations over the years. In agreement with Goldberg, we can say that these changes are the consequence of the advent of new communication methods and technological developments [2]. For the Olympic closing ceremony (OCC) in 2016, the spectator was led to a living, sensorial experience. The theme, as set out in the media guide, was to cover Brazilian art in its various forms:

“We return to the past, to re-call how human talent has left its mark on the walls of caves. Back in the present, we celebrate artists who made the history of national culture by creating unforgettable works. Yesterday and today, things made by human hands transform dreams and talents into reality” (p. 7) [3].

The production of the show was by Marco Balich as executive producer, Abel Gomes as executive creative and Rosa Magalhães as creator and creative [4].

The choreographic project named The Art of Burle Marx was created by British mass choreographer Bryn Walters as a result of a collaboration between several professionals. Born in 1966 and raised in Cambridge, the London-based choreographer was part of the cast of the musical *Cats* and has extensive experience in this model of choreography. Ever since his first appearance at an Olympic ceremony, in Athens 2004, Walters has also choreographed many mass choreographies for other major sporting events: for example, the Commonwealth Games, the Mediterranean Games and the opening of the Juventus Stadium in Turin [5].

His signature choreography for the Rio closing ceremony was made possible thanks to 480 volunteer performers of different ages, selected through auditions for their rhythmic, movement

and space management skills. No male or female roles were distinguished.

The design of the project and the costumes was entrusted to Rosa Magalhães, who is recognized as one of the most successful creative directors of Rio de Janeiro's Carnival. The original costumes were made with the help of the women of the Businesswomen's Association of Brazil.

Artistic Description

The segment we are going to analyze pays tribute to the great artist Roberto Burle Marx (São Paulo, 1909 – Rio de Janeiro, 1994), a Brazilian landscape architect, who in his career designed more than 2000 gardens, characterized by curvilinear forms and created works of art of all kinds such as hard landscaping, planting designs, gouache watercolours, sculpture and extensive mosaic pavements. The *Elan* programme through which a careful video analysis was performed is a tool designed to create text annotations for audio and video files. As there is no software created for the purpose of analyzing mass choreographies, *Elan* is one of those best suited to the annotation of the specific analysis. To this end, descriptors were identified, i.e. those characteristics that one wishes to search for and highlight within the choreography.

The Art of Burle Marx unveils a journey of human talent, between past and present, through the story of this artist. It lasts four minutes and 19 seconds and runs across the entire performance area of the stadium, commonly called FOP (field of play). The FOP had a very light grey cover that is indispensable for video projections and to define the performance area.

The choreography was realized with the help of a team of assistant choreographers: Claire Terri, Laura Guglielmetto, Renata Vieitas, Giselle Motta, Soraya Bastos, Juliana Gama, Marcello Vilar and Carolina Dias. Bryn Walters had already worked with some of them in previous ceremonies, creating a true team of experts. Their expertise lay in the knowledge of the design and choreography writing phase, in the use of Adobe illustrator software, and in the field management of hundreds of performers. The choreographic writing intersected with the design of the scenographic mode of video projections. Video mapping was definitively and massively introduced in the Vancouver Olympic ceremonies in 2010. Until 2008, projections had been an occasional resource as in Athens 2004, Beijing 2008

and in some images in Salt Lake City 2002 and Turin 2006 [6].

The Art of Burle Marx took place in the Maracanã Stadium on 21 August 2016, 16 days after the opening Ceremony, on a rainy evening with strong gusts of wind. Because the stadium is a competition venue, rehearsals never took place in this venue, and this created organizational complexities as well as high risks on the day of the live broadcast. That evening, as is the case with many competition sites, the bleachers were not completely full, but here probably for the torrential tropical rainstorm [7].

RIO 2016: Closing Olympic Summer Games

- THE ART OF BURLE MARX: Credits
- Rehearsals: 3 months
- Show: August 21th 2016
- Art director: Rosa Magalhães
- Production design: Rosa Magalhães
- Director: Bryn Walters
- Choreography: Bryn Walters
- Costumes: Production by Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Brazil (AMEBRAS)
- Music director: Alé Siqueira
- Music: Chovendo na Roseira, Tom Jobim
- Stage space: 105x 68 m.

Technical and dramaturgical commentary

Curvilinear brushstrokes of colour begin to give scenic form to the stage, colouring it as if it were a painter's canvas and drawing the path for the performers to enter. Following the rhythm of the musical piece, *Chovendo na Roseira*, music in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, a version by Tom Jobim himself, the performers move with composed steps and turns bringing the scene to life and performing a soft dance that leads them to organize themselves into small groupings. These groups gradually take on different shapes, creating a succession of images with the help of costumes and video projections. The green costumes represent typical Brazilian trees and plants, the yellow, red and purple ones are flowers, such as bougainvillea, succulents and cactus (figures 1a & 1b) (See Bryn Walter testimonial in section below).

It is possible to subdivide the choreography into 5 different moments, related to each other by transitions, in which the performers

move with compound steps, *chassés* and *pas de bourrée* turns and small combinations of arms and legs, which differ according to the type of costume worn.



Fig. 1a. A drawing of a costume (image courtesy of Bryn Walters from personal archive)

In different parts of the choreography, we distinguish the 'gouaches', impressionist watercolours that Burle Marx created, which can be seen in two ways: as abstractions of interconnected, curvilinear shapes of various complementary colours, but also as designs for flower beds and borders in landscape design.

The first image that can be discerned is that created by sets of volunteers organized to represent a typical Burle Marx garden (figure 2). The choreographic project was reproduced by the choreographer in powerpoint a fundamental tool for planning the staging (figure 3). The stage area used is very large and the formation is maintained for several seconds, giving the audience time to observe every detail (figure 4).

Already, from these first moments, it is possible



Fig. 1b. Costume on stage (frame excerpted from Cameron Spencer/Getty Images).

to see how this choreography differs from those in which we admire synchronized movements typical of Olympic Ceremony, such as at Beijing 2008 when 2000 percussionists sang and played the Fou at the start of the Olympic Opening Ceremony.

The schematic and ordered formations give way instead, to images with irregular perimeters, typical of the patterns of the earth and nature.

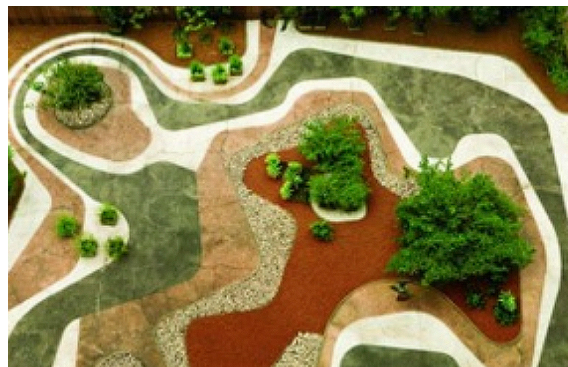


Fig. 2 A typical Burle Marx garden (frame excerpted from www.madmuseum.org)

However, the second image we are presented with is one in which the performers become part of a single form in which they all come together to create a large star-shaped flower. This is the only moment when the choreography takes place mainly in the center of the stage (figure 5 & figure 6).



Fig. 3. The Bryn Walters project in powerpoint (Image courtesy of Bryn Walters from personal archive)

Here, in Figure 6, the groups of dancers perform mass movements in synchrony and succession, forming optical effects and sharp contrasts that emphasize the formation and highlight all its aspects.

For each plant in costume, a sequence of movements was created that, with the osci-

llations and emergence of colours as the bodies rise and fall, could create the illusion of a kaleidoscope vision (Bryn Walters personal communication, March 8, 2023).

Something similar, but less colourful, appeared in the "Snowflake Ballet" at the Paralympic Opening Ceremony of the Sochi 2014 under the

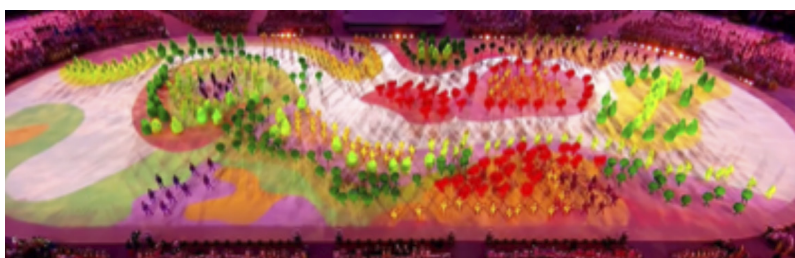


Fig. 4. This moment in the choreography of OCC (frame excerpted from www.madmuseum.org)



Fig. 5. The Bryn Walters project in powerpoint (image courtesy of Bryn Walters from personal archive)

choreographic direction of Bryn Walters. Groups of dancers were in fact organized in snowflake-shaped formations delimited and defined by video projections [8].

The development process of this choreography is slow and gradual, as is the round, harmonious musical rhythm of Jobim's piece. The movements in space are danced and are relatively slow as not all costumes allow for ample leg movement.

The feeling of The art of Burle Marx is that of attending a theatrical dance performance, rather than a mass choreography in an Olympic stadium. It is a theatre of mass movements, as in the "Ballo Excelsior", the "Gran ballo italiano", whose premiere took place at Teatro Alla Scala in Milan on 11 January 1881, a show in which the choreographer, Manzotti, created paintings depicting the Italy of progress and experimented with a new way of organizing space on stage [9].

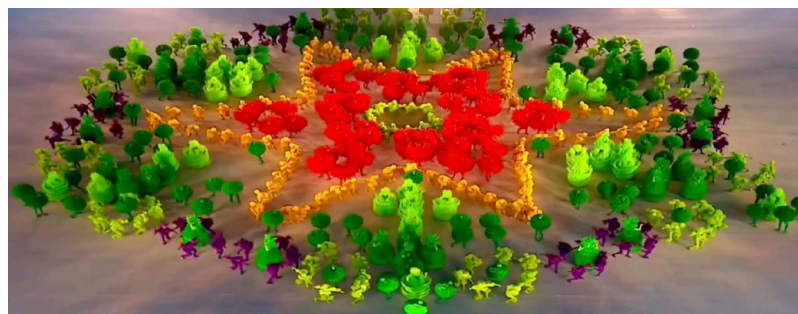


Fig. 6 The large star-shaped flower (frame excerpted from www.olympics.com)

In the Maracanã stadium theatre, the moving bodies also carry a narrative, that of the Brazilian art of Burle Marx, into which the audience will be transported for the duration of the choreography. Thus, the Copacabana Promenade is recogniza-

ble, created from crescent-shaped formations that, connected together, form the lines of the mosaic that Burle Marx created for the pavement of the Rio waterfront (figures 7, 8 & 9).



Fig. 7. The Copacabana Promenade (frame excerpted from www.creativeboom.com)

Even if only for a few seconds, this arrangement takes us back to Los Angeles 1984. In "That's Entertainment" hundreds of dancers, in an orderly formation, dance to the music that made the United States famous in the 1980s, helping to make that Olympic Ceremony grandiose.

From this moment on, the choreography takes us back to the atmospheres of Burle Marx's gardens, with the last frame, with the play of colours of the video projections that lap the performers and envelop them, highlighting the movements

of the dancing groups. The volunteers remain on stage for several more minutes, acting as a connecting bridge to the next segment, that of the extinguishing of the cauldron.

Images of this choreography were transmitted by cameras from great distances as well as from close range. The point of view was always the same, that of the authorities' box, with the television camera placed on the bleachers, with no bird's-eye view, probably also because of the bad weather that hit Rio on that night.

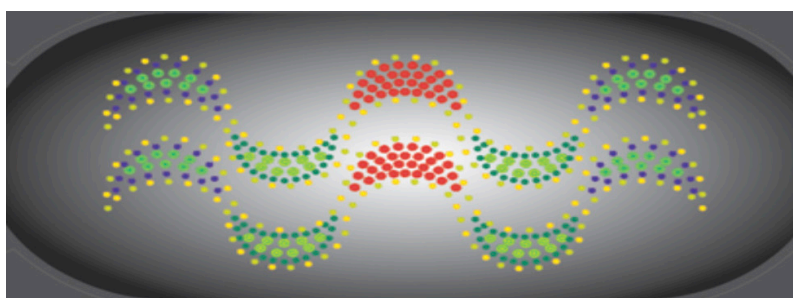


Fig. 10. The Bryn Walters project in powerpoint (image courtesy of Bryn Walters from personal archive)



Fig. 11 The image of Avenida Atlantica (frame excerpted from www.olympics.com)

Conclusion

It can be said that Bryn Walters and his team have created a live performance with a strong visual and communicative impact, following an atypical choreographic structure, far removed from the more traditional mass organizations. However, the use of mass choreography has always been an important means of communication to express emotions and to enhance national identity. Symbols can be found in every single image, for example, in the «HOLA» inscription in the Olympic Opening Ceremony of Barcelona 1992 or in the entire Olympic Wings segment in the Olympic Opening Ceremony of Rio itself. The communication of Olympic symbolism with the use of the mass can be found in the inscription 100 in the Atlanta '96 Olympic

Opening Ceremony, with the dove of peace in the Turin 2006 Olympic Opening Ceremony or in the formation of the five circles in the Sochi 2014 Olympic Opening Ceremony.

The Art of Burle Marx thus represents a uniqueness, as the choreographer's action was not only to highlight national identity by taking inspiration from artistic works, but to redesign and reinterpret them with a new form of art. One can appreciate in the analysis made the study that led to the evolution of the images starting from the original figure, passing through the choreographer's drawing and ending on the Olympic stage. Burle Marx's artistic work was thus redesigned by the choreographer with this visual and narrative art form, bringing the theme

of memory to the fore. In fact, this project of rewriting the geometries of the Brazilian landscape architect left a mark on the spectator's perception and memory.

The amplification of these moving images will remain in the history of mass choreography thanks to the voice of the commentator, the memory of the performers, the choreographic notation of Bryn Walters and the video images that will fix them in time. Through a transmission of culture and corporeity, a great interdisciplinary product was undoubtedly created for a major event such as the Olympic Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games.

Testimonials

Here is the testimony of the choreographer and two of his main assistants:

Bryn Walters: choreographer and live action director

After doing extensive research on the works of Burle Marx, in addition to his gardens, I identified other works of his that could be reproduced with hundreds of performers. I redrew this artist's designs several times on the computer so that they would be useful in the choreographic environment, and that they would be legible in space. There were many elements that I had to consider, the proportions between one colour and another, and that the video projections reproduced the traced design exactly, filling the spaces not occupied by the performers, who in turn had to have the space to move freely. In my design I wanted the lines created during the movements to be sinuous like all the works of Burle Marx. We thought of characterizing the movements of each performer, not only by the type of costume, but also by imagining "what it would be like if that plant could dance".

An element that increased the complexity of the work was that we did not have the stage at our disposal before the Ceremony and therefore had to calculate everything through careful planning of the elements to be coordinated: choreography, lighting and projections. The preparation, therefore, had to be extremely accurate and precise, with careful positioning of the cast in space by the choreography team. The direction thus allowed these elements – music, dance and projections – to come together at the very moment of the live performance, without the per-



Fig. 12. Bryn Walters at the stadium in a moment of preparation with the artist Mariene de Castro (image courtesy of Bryn Walters from personal archive)

formers ever dancing at the same time as the video projections.

The more we interact with scenic elements, the more the development of mass choreography requires precise studies and calculations. Art, therefore, meets the need for mathematical precision and practical, creative answers to accompany the unique needs and circumstances of an Olympic Ceremony.



Fig. 13. Laura Guglielmetto (image courtesy of Laura Guglielmetto from personal archive)

Laura Guglielmetto: choreographer

The creation process was complex and at the same time interesting, as each individual plant/costume had a different movement variation from the basic choreography, due to the different movement possibilities provided by the costume. This Olympic Closing Ceremony was one of the first with such a complex video mapping and, as the dress rehearsal did not take place in the stadium, it was a real challenge to coordinate the choreography with the projections without dedicated rehearsals. The choreo team did an outstanding job and we could only see the results of the connection between performers and video mapping on the day of the ceremony. **Re-**

nata Vieitas: choreographer

Being part of Bryn Walters' team in my home country was a unique experience for me and participating in the creative process has innovated



Fig. 14. Renata Vieitas (Image courtesy of Renata Vieitas from personal archive)

my way of creating dance. I worked in synergy with seven other choreographers each of whom brought their own expertise for this project. Our different styles allowed the creation of an original choreography.

What was amazing was that the movements in this choreography were truly advanced and that even the volunteers selected by Bryn Walters, were able to flesh out the work like real professionals.

As we built the choreography in the workshops, we were fed by images of Burle Marx's projects, visits to the "Aterro do Flamengo", the texture and colours of the plants and flowers in his garden.

Imagining and trying to understand how a 'Lantana' flower or a small cactus might move to this song by Jobim, which is a classic of Brazilian music, was a real challenge.

This segment flooded the audience with beauty and colour and a passion that we will all remember for the rest of our lives.

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