



Reflecting back

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Resumo

Este convite apresenta uma oportunidade de reunir vertentes mais antigas e mais recentes do trabalho sobre relações. A primeira remetia a uma noção analítica de estética para transmitir certos tipos de aparências persuasivas: a etnografia melanesista enfatizou o quanto importava que as relações assumissem uma forma adequada (reconhecer o apoio dos ancestrais por exemplo). A segunda é uma crítica recente às relações enquanto um conceito euro-americano explícito em um de seus contextos vernáculos, nomeadamente, o uso em inglês. Aqui, os tipos de interesses amerindianistas nos quais o dossiê desta revista se engaja – e conforme colhidos em certas traduções para o inglês –, me levam a localizar um efeito estético na penumbra das conotações e associações que munem as relações (em inglês) de uma aura ou atmosfera. O que antropólogas e antropólogos normalmente descartam quando constroem seus vocabulários analíticos se torna interessante.

Palavras-chave: Relações; Efeito Estético; Forma; Melanésia; Pensamento euro-americano

Abstract

This invitation presents an opportunity to bring together older and newer strands of work on relations. The first fell back on an analytical notion of aesthetics to convey certain kinds of persuasive appearances: Melanesian ethnography emphasized how much it mattered that relations took an appropriate form (recognizing the support of ancestors for example). The second is a recent critique of relations as an explicit Euro-American concept in one of its vernacular contexts, namely English usage. Here, the kinds of Amerindianist interests engaged by the special issue of this journal – and as gleaned from certain translations into English – lead me to locate an aesthetic effect in the penumbra of connotations and associations that endow relations (English-speaking) with an aura or mood. What anthropologists ordinarily dismiss when they construct their analytical vocabularies becomes interesting.

Keywords: Relations; Aesthetic Effect; Form; Melanesia; Euro-American Thought

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In placing relations at the heart of a Melanesian synthesis (Strathern, 1988), I was of course criticizing a pair of Euro-American concepts (individual, society) with another concept (relations) equally abstract. Looking back on the argument I am struck now by the methodological, or more appositely expositional, role that aesthetics played in it. Aesthetic effects emerged simultaneously as a register of certain local forms (of being, acting) and as a register of the expositional intentions of the anthropological writer. Perhaps this is a peculiarity of the concept: no ‘effect’ has been described if the writer fails to convey it, at least in part. From this vantage point I offer a few comments on the aesthetics of relations.

Amerindian and Melanesian reflections...

Melanesians do not name – have no term for – relations (Crook, 1997: 28), and the same has been remarked in an Amazonian context (Vanzolini, 2019: 10); the anthropologist infers them. Nonetheless, Melanesian sensibilities over appearances, events and happenings that take conventional and thus recognizable shape can become an analytical resource for demonstrating various ways in which people seemingly make relations known to one another. In my case (Strathern, 1988: 187), a plethora of further abstractions betrayed the technical clumsiness of describing what the anthropologist had to make apparent. Perhaps my appealing to an aesthetic register, drawing attention to the appropriateness of specific forms, was something like an attempt to open up to controlled equivocation (for which I then had no name!) the otherwise unremarked analytical terms that followed, such as exchange, gardening, creation, clan, and so forth, all with relations implied.

More generally, thinking about the forms that relations take offers a kind of internal translation for the anthropologist of what is already partially apprehended by other means, and will apply in myriad ways across shifting configurations (Di Giminiani and González Gálvez, 2018: 200-201; Lagrou, 2019: 26). Apropos the Peruvian Urarina, Walker lists several relations (my term) by which he recognizes a general refusal of equivalence in people’s dealings with one another, such as the convention of assuming the illegibility of others’ intentions or volatility in disputation: “My friend one day is my enemy the next” (2020: 154). He suggests that such “refusal” is grounded in an expanded notion of the common, what people feel grounds them, which embraces all manner of difference². Consonantly, Costa and Fausto (2019) argue that anthropologists should be wary of those relations they might recognize too easily. It matters, for instance, to which relational field one assimilates the interspecific relations of Amazonian pet-keeping, since this becomes a question of which conceptual company they (the relations) find themselves in. For Costa and Fausto, pet-keeping is no more a variety of domestication than pet-masters are proprietorial sovereigns. The forms introduced through such re-workings turn on judgements of conceptual appropriateness. How appropriateness is registered, whether in people’s sense of well-being, or in the persuasiveness of an analytical configuration, could be reckoned a response

² Conversely put, relating through difference does not have to employ measurements of similarity and dissimilarity.

of an aesthetic kind.

That said, relations already particularized by their context or usage are one thing; is there a place for an aesthetic response to relation(s)³ as an abstraction or generic, as the term is also deployed in English? I had not thought of the question earlier, but conceivably the Melanesian pairing of interrelated entities (symmetrically or otherwise) that figures the necessity of relating (Strathern, 1988: 188; Moutu, 2013: 202) could be imagined this way. More to the point, consider Lagrou's (2019) recent rendering of Amerindian relational aesthetics as it is woven, by the Huni Kuin, into design and song. From this she abstracts a more general condition of relating, the "in betweenness" of all beings, which activates the ever multiplying potential for a being to embody an other (being) that would otherwise embody it⁴. For the Mapuche, Giminiani and González Gálvez (2018: 200) delineate "an ideal type of relation" that they understand as "incomplete or unfinished objectivation", while for living beings "to be in a relation" is in Paumari terms "to be captured" (Bonilla, 2016: 126). Then, of course, Vanzolini (2019: 105) reminds us of Viveiros de Castro's (2004) perception that in Amazonian worlds a common form of relation is the figure translated as "brother-in-law" or "cross-cousin", which, in Vilaça's words, contains within itself "the principle of difference between the related terms" (2019: 147). While embodiment of difference may be true of affinity in general, the specificity of the brother-in-law seems of particular aesthetic moment in the original (anthropological) account. It brings everything together in a single image – and generates an ethnographic/analytical counterpart.

What springs out as a counterpart to brother-in-law is brother, for "brotherhood is [...] the general [Western] form of the relation" (Viveiros de Castro, 2004: 18)⁵. And then the world turns on its axis, since the latter kinds of brothers are presumed to be similar, minimally insofar as their commonality is bound by their same relation to a third party. Embedded in the Euro-Christian vernacular as it is, does drawing on such a term (brother) for an anthropological concept (relation) also create an aesthetic effect?

... and ...

Comparisons with Euro-American usage run through this handful of Amerindianist

3 It is an expositional awkwardness in English that the plural form of relation also refers to relations in general and thus to a singular concept.

4 As in, see by being seen, ingest by being ingested. Given her reference to 'self-becoming by means of other-becoming' (Lagrou, 2019: 37; see González Gálvez; Di Giminiani and Bacchiddu [2019: 7] – compare the elder-younger brother pair reported by Moutu [2013]) – what she calls 'in betweenness' seems to refer to an ever-becoming state of being. This is to be distinguished from the 'betweenness' that renders 'the relation as a link between two self-contained units' (Di Giminiani and González Gálvez, 2018: 202), which is its dominant usage in English (see Strathern, 2020).

5 The real-time sequence by which Viveiros de Castro (2004: 16-17) arrived at the "appropriateness" of an equivocal translation of brother-in-law as brother is rehearsed in Vilaça's (2019) afterword to a special issue on theorizing relations in indigenous South America (see González Gálvez, Di Giminiani, and Bacchiddu, 2019). The comments of one of the journal's readers make me realize the extent to which these formulations about "brothers (in-law)" depend terminologically, if not conceptually, on possibilities in English as opposed to Portuguese.





accounts. Needless to say, the issue is the language of description. But what do we do with the fact that Euro-Americans do indeed have a name or term for relation(s)⁶ and, more generally, with the fact that analytical usage is characterized by abstraction? What conceptual call is there, in the course of writing or comprehension, for aesthetic effects then?

In the absence of specific local terms, describing one's interlocutors' sense of the appropriateness of certain forms of existence can give a shape to or bring to a point anthropological formulations otherwise diffused through the familiarity of theoretical consensus or everyday language. – Relation as brother-in-law: one has to stop and think. – Conversely, in the presence of a concept whose terms are already shaped and pointed by being named (say), the anthropologist might be surprised by aesthetic effects elsewhere. This is not to say that an abstract concept cannot have form (and I give an instance below), but rather to suggest that there might be some mileage in considering much that scholars ordinarily regard as a detraction from the denotative force of agreed-upon terms. I refer to the vernacular penumbra of connotation, to values, colourings and such like, whether they cling to certain expressions or shift and change with this or that situation. So in the case of the Euro-American “brother” for “relation” we might say that the brotherly figure belongs to a whole company of images, not only figuring a common basis to relations but also (for example) giving an aura of positive affect to the notion of similarity. Connotations are always arguable away and easily dismissed from formal discourse. Given that, it may take something like the demonstration of an aesthetic effect – rendering a vernacular aesthetic of analytical interest – to bring them (the connotations) to the fore in the shaping work that they do.

With vernacular English usage of relations as my Euro-American example, I turn to some of the connotations of similarity. First, though, a shape for abstraction.

... Euro-American ones

An imaginative endeavour to give visual shape to conceptual relations is presented through the diagram (Holbraad, 2020). While Holbraad draws attention to numerous modulations of relations, visualization is exemplary of an aesthetic response, in this case to concepts manifest as abstractions. The concept is worked through another abstract configuration, or rather the configuration of an abstract form. Diagram gives abstraction a shape⁷.

Holbraad explicitly addresses anthropology's ongoing need for conceptual invention: anthropological sensibility is above all “a kind of intellectual aesthetic” (2020: 4) that gives ethnographic phenomena particular conceptual shapes, and with transfiguring consequences. I would comment on how diagrams achieve this effect through singling out different elements, such as those that compose a relation, which can then be depicted as moving with respect to

6 And the name is meant to be identifying; see Vanzolini's (2019: 113-115) critical discussion apropos personal names.

7 Importantly in his account, insofar as the search is for conceptual relations ‘that the analyst has to imagine in order to describe (...) phenomena’ (Holbraad, 2020: 21, emphasis omitted), abstraction is not – as he puts it – away from life but moving towards it.

one another. Thus he shows how anthropological understandings of Mauss's gift (specifically of the relationships entailed in reciprocity) metamorphose away from a concept of things passing between persons to one of persons magnifying themselves with respect to one another. In effect, persons and things change their ideational positions, demonstrated through diagrams imagined as a series that sequentially rearranges the "betweenness" of these elements. This rearrangement of elements suggests that in the abstract relation can be aestheticized as a working model with parts.

I leave this imaginative space in order to turn to non-visual modes of apprehension as they work in the English vernacular, and of sensibilities that are rather a matter of mood or affect. It is obvious that relations will pick up numerous ever-changing connotations from the particular circumstances of usage. At the same time values or attributes may attach to the very concept itself, creating a default mood so to speak, which can compromise more neutral usage⁸. Thus relations are commonly taken as benign or interesting before they are malign or of no interest.

A cluster of such attributes helps shape a positive aura surrounding relations themselves, English-speaking. In serving to bring entities together⁹, they offer a sense of closeness, of sameness or similarity, of commonality or comparability. These attributes may be further personified with respect to interpersonal relations¹⁰, evoking expectations of amiability, sociability, fellowship or company. If this is beginning to sound altogether too friendly, recall Viveiros de Castro's (2015 [2002]: 110) observation that seeing 'the world radiate out from a socially positive intimacy to a socially negative distance' corresponds to a Western ego-centric model of social life 'where the prototype of the relation is self-identity', the inmost point. Relation with oneself founds every relation with another, notably in the case of the friend (after Aristotle) as an other self, "an other but an other as a 'moment' of the self" (2015: 185). In Western philosophy, this figure of the friend has been elucidated as a foundational otherness intrinsic to conceptualization and thought as such. In common English parlance, friendship carries a certain tenor of sociability, especially that promoted by a "society of similar" or the "equivalence of individuals" (Walker, 2020: 149). Friendship is of interest in this context insofar as just such a tenor often seems to jump onto the back of relations.

"[F]riendship is the chief joy of human life", and the esteem and affection of one's friends constitutes the "chief part of human happiness", chimed David Hume and Adam Smith in the

8 This is particularly so in interpersonal relations. In ordinary English, antagonistic relations between people may be imagined as an absence of relation, while attending to relations may be thought to be "sentimental" or "soft". What follows comes from a longer work (Strathern, 2020), where the here unexplored interdigitation of interpersonal and epistemic relations is discussed more fully.

9 I follow the vernacular emphasis on relations as first and foremost between discrete entities, criticized and by-passed in scholarly usage as Di Giminiani and González Gálvez (2018: 202) point out (see note 3). The amiable tenor of "sociability" (see below) is among the reasons anthropologists have sought out the less laden term "sociality" for more general purposes.

10 Leaving aside English idiosyncracies with respect to kin relations. I hardly need add that this kind of sentimentalization of relations can generate highly exclusionary senses of belonging.





mid-eighteenth century (Rasmussen, 2017: 5). This pair of Enlightenment philosophers each considered the other his best friend¹¹. I have written elsewhere on the conviviality and agreeableness that Hume in particular breathed into his theorization of relations, which turned on how ideas come together through association. This was at a time when men congregated in associations of all kinds on the self-acknowledged basis of common interest and like-mindedness, not least as a ground for engaging in disputation. One notorious moment of divergence between Hume and Smith turns out to be as apposite and informative today as then (see Weston, 2018).

What was at issue, and I follow Rasmussen's (2017: 90-91) account, was the concept of "sympathy" in the then expansive sense of fellow feeling as a fundamental human capacity. They agreed on its importance. In being affected by the manner in which another appears cheerful or downcast, Hume compared sympathy conveying feelings between people to vibrating strings conveying motion from one to another, an emotional contagion. By contrast, Smith argued that one cannot enter into other people's feelings without imaginatively placing oneself in their shoes, thereby being projected into an appreciation of their circumstances and perceiving what one-self would feel¹². Hume's insistence¹³, that whether sympathy is agreeable or disagreeable must depend on the kind of sentiment in question, elicited a clarification from Smith. Irrespective of the nature of what is conveyed, he avowed, "we can take pleasure in the *harmony* of sentiments" (my emphasis); mutual sympathy is intrinsically pleasing in that "we naturally enjoy the feeling of sentimental concord" (Rasmussen's glosses of Smith, 2017: 111-110). In other words it was the way feelings chime with one another, the relation itself, that was agreeable. "Relation" is my interpolation here. Nonetheless, when his thoughts were elsewhere, Hume could also have talked of "the love of relations" (his phrase) as a matter of harmony. Insofar as people "associate together", evincing the sympathy "which always arises betwixt similar characters", and remark on the "resemblance betwixt themselves and others", the resemblance "operates after the manner of a relation, by producing a connexion of ideas" (Hume 2000 [1739-40]: 229)¹⁴.

In the pursuit of their argument, and in the way they draw on the English vernacular, the philosophers are creating an appreciation of relations through what I would call an aesthetic mood. The reiteration of what is similar and in concordance in terms of how pleasant company is and of the friendliness of close association between co-evals produces a scatter of effects. Relations of

11 In correspondence they singularly addressed each other "My dearest friend", an epithet neither of them used with other correspondents (Rasmussen, 2017: 4). I am grateful to Kath Weston for mentioning this book.

12 Walker (2020: 149) notes that a specific feature of the society of similars lies in the way "each individual (...) can imagine him-or herself in the condition of every other individual"; we may take this as an aspect of the more general condition of Euro-Christian brotherhood, in that brothers occupy the same point of view on an exterior world (Viveiros de Castro, 2004: 18) or, as Vilaça (2019: 147) puts it, each sees the other's sister as a sister.

13 Smith regarded himself as having improved on Hume's account of sympathy; Hume subsequently entered into correspondence with Smith on the topic.

14 And the connection may be further invested with feeling. Thus he continues: "And as (...) a love or affection arises from the resemblance, we may learn that a sympathy with others is agreeable only by giving emotion to the spirits, since an easy sympathy and correspondent emotions are alone common to [the terms for / sense of] *relation, acquaintance, and resemblance*" (Hume 2000 [1739-40]: 229, original italics).

affect and the affect of relations ricochet off each other. Present day English-speakers may not go so far as to say, in Smith's language, that it is delightful and agreeable, but they would find most appropriate the concord implied in referring to entities being brought together, whether similar at the outset or rendered similar – comparable – in conjunction. Concord. A premise of similarity: a vernacular description of relations, no less. Any tension between abstract formulation and specific usage falls away, if only momentarily. In its place is the conviction of (a persuasive) form.

Back

Turning to these historical formulations, just as an ethnographer might be informed by past events (for example, Fausto and Heckenberger, 2007), is of course offered today with intervening conceptual inventions in mind. I remark the obvious. Both Amerindian and Melanesian anthropology have benefited from alternative currents in Euro-American thinking that have refused the premise of similarity. Yet, with respect to anthropology's analytical languages, there still remains a significant dimension to the business of criticism. For those who speak and write in English do not altogether easily escape the tenacious connotations that the notion of relation, scurrying here and there in the interweaving of diverse arguments and theories, carries on its back.

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