Ceremonials of Gathering

Syncretizing Vogue and Voodoo

MARTIN JÖRG SCHÄFER

A lot of the pressing questions at stake in a theory of gathering and coming together also come up when pondering the buzzwords ›Vogue‹ and ›Voodoo‹, which refer to very different, perhaps even opposite cultural practices. However, they overlap in that they both refer to sub-cultural, semi-secret, and ephemeral communities of the disenfranchised. The people coming together in a Vogue-ball or a Voodoo-ritual do not necessarily share the same language and the same codes outside of Vogue or Voodoo: these practices basically bring them together as many rather than as individuals. The following line of thought will hint at some of the implicit aspects and their significance for a theory of gathering – or at least for a respective research program (cf. Peters 2013): at the ritualistic, celebratory and ›intoxicated‹ dimensions of gathering as well as at the common codes or ›languages‹ developed when coming together as many.[1] 21st century performance art has made use of Vogue (cf. Harrell 2009ff.) as well as Voodoo (cf. Kôkô 2003) and their respective histories. But these references cannot be disentangled from the evocations of the concepts of Vogue and Voodoo in the ›Western‹ pop-cultural imagination. Therefore, the latter serve as examples and starting points for the following considerations.

1 Together with Elise von Bernstorff, Ann-Sophie Demenz, Nadine Jessen, and Sibylle Peters, among others, I was part of the group preparing the *Vogue and Voodoo* panel at *The Art of Being Many*. The following thoughts are therefore not ›my own‹ but those of many: To a certain extent they retrace our discussions.

The very real cultural practices and techniques called voguing and Voodoo enjoy a good deal of pop-cultural notoriety but relative obscurity as far as the actual specifics are concerned: One could add a Vogue complex to what can be called its Voodoo complex (cf. Stengers 2011). Both, Vogue and Voodoo, are a staple of the images circulating through movies, TV shows, pulp novels, Facebook feeds, and brains. Vogue: a highly stylized queer ballroom dancing style from 1980s Harlem with rigid movements, striking one pose after another. It was popularized by the 1990 Madonna hit single and MTV video *Vogue*, by Jennie Livingston's award winning 1990 *Paris Is Burning* documentary and by Judith Butler's subsequent reading of it (cf. Butler 1993: 121-140; cf. Baker 2011). Voodoo: the name of East African religions (a lot of them older than Christianity) that come in many shapes and sizes, with various practices, gods, rituals. Since Voodoo is not one practice but many it has been easy to conceive it as a powerful, enchanting as well as threatening figure of Otherness as such – especially in its syncretized versions that emerged from American slave cultures: Haitian Voodoo, Louisiana Voodoo to name but a few (cf. Lademann-Priemer 2011). The power of the priestess or priest to let the participants of the ritual fall into trance has long fascinated the pop-cultural imagination (cf. McGee 2012). It is this image of collective trance that is important for an art of being many whereas the imagery of the Voodoo puppet or the zombie seems contrary to such an art: The puppet functions as the representative of a real person and can be tortured and manipulated at will. The zombie is apparently dead but either still follows commands or comes in the shape of a dangerous mindless mob.

What is of interest in Voodoo are the ambiguous images of trance and the states of intoxication that go along with it: How not to lose the ›many‹ in trance but to enable them? What is at stake in the notion of a communal ritual by which such a trance is achieved? What are the musical and rhythmical dimensions of trance and ritual? How do the substances that are consumed communally bring about this state? A point of departure for this line of inquiry is Susan Buck-Morss' powerful account of the 18th century origin of Haitian Voodoo in her 2009 book *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*: Buck-Morss does not describe this syncretized version of Voodoo as a religious tradition performed by the powerful in order to govern the weak. She rather conceives voodoo as the common point of reference of originally dispersed heterogeneous people traumatized by their enslavement and finding themselves together in a strange country. They may have been enemies before

being enslaved and shipped over the sea on a quite often fatal journey. And quite certainly a lot of them did not speak each other's language (cf. Buck-Morss 2009: 125-132). Buck-Morss argues that, rather than repeating old power structures, Haitian Voodoo, for a short period of time at least, was an emancipatory tool: It provided common symbols and a common point of reference for those formerly lacking one. Moreover, it provided the ground for acting together in the late 18th century Haitian Revolution (cf. Buck-Morss 2009: 129-148). In this context, ritual, rhythm and intoxication proved to be invaluable powers to the disenfranchised many.

As far as ritual, rhythm, and intoxication are concerned, the media of Voodoo overlap with the imagery of Vogue evoked by *Paris Is Burning*. Vogue contests are also communal gatherings and largely ceremonial: They follow a script. There is music, there is rhythm, substances are consumed on the side. Vogue contests are celebrations and there is a festive mood they bring about. But above all the 1980s ballroom scene was famous for creating a space, a community, and an identity for a group of people who had been marginalized in multiple fashions. The people who gathered were predominantly non-straight, non-white, and not well off at all. They were excluded from mainstream culture via sexism, racism, and classism. And at the same time, they came together to celebrate themselves by appropriating, mimicking and mocking mainstream identities. On the catwalk, they contested prizes in various categories such as »Realness«, »Runway«, »Butch Queen Vogue Femme Figure Performance«, and many more. People divided themselves into so called ›houses‹. These houses did not only run against each other but their members also took care of each other on the outside: in everyday life (cf. Baker 2011). The shared participation in a musical, rhythmical and intoxicated celebration provided a common point of reference.

In this intersection between Vogue and Voodoo, there are several important implications for the phenomenon of gathering as many. First of all, with regard to the ceremonial dimension of gathering: Every assembly contains elements of ritual such as dress codes, seating arrangements and customary gestures that constitute and transgress thresholds. Who is to sit where with whom and why? What are these implicit rituals? Who has the authority to apply or change them? Who is speaking in whose name and why? How to challenge that authority? To what extent are the modes and rhythms of coming together determined by these rituals? How many are there and how are they established? Who is included, who is excluded, and why and how? Both

Vogue and Voodoo (the latter at least in its Susan Buck-Morss' version) exhibit what can be called (playing on a famous phrase by Frits Staal) an ›inventedness‹ of ritual (cf. Staal 1979): The ritual does not necessarily have to mean anything in itself but it is employed to produce meaning, to establish codes, to examine practices.

Secondly, Vogue and Voodoo both stand for a festive mood that goes along with it. It does not seem quite possible to pinpoint whether this mood is brought about by states of intoxication (»Rausch« in German) or whether such states of intoxication produce a celebratory atmosphere. The buzzwords Vogue and Voodoo conjure up the trance-like states that are sometimes experienced when coming together as many. How do these states come about? What do they do to you and me and to friends and strangers? By what rituals are they produced and/or abused? How and by whom can and should these states be manipulated? How can they be remanipulated and reappropriated by those who take part? How do they allow themselves to be sabotaged by staying sober?

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, and as already stated above, both practices, Vogue as well as Buck-Morss' version of Voodoo, historically aim at constituting sub-cultural, semi-secret, and ephemeral communities of the disenfranchised who do not necessarily share the same language and codes outside of these practices. The new Haitian rituals and the Harlem ballroom competitions both re-appropriated materials that did not come with an inherent emancipatory power: an old multifaceted religion, the pages of late capitalist Vogue magazines. But out of these materials, they tinkered and manufactured something that provided a common point of reference for a group of disenfranchised human beings. No longer were they the atomized few that had fallen or were torn out of the categories that gave them access to what was considered ›human‹ in a respective context. But the rituals and scripts of Vogue and Voodoo created something else: a common context. The power to stand up to the slaveholders in the case of Haitian Voodoo, the power to stand together as well as to stand up for oneself in the case of Harlem Vogue.

Buck-Morss calls this a common »language« (Buck-Morss 2009: 132), but that expression does not quite grasp what this common point of reference is all about: There are signs and there are symbols, and there are definitely certain codes and scripts governing the respective ritualistic dimension of Vogue and Voodoo. But there is also music, there is also rhythm, and there

are intoxicating substances involved as well. All of these create a certain atmosphere; all of these contribute to the general mood of any assembly, not just those relying on music, rhythm, and intoxicants: something that affects the respective singular body in a singular fashion and possibly transforms it into a trance-like state. Part of this trance is the implicit knowledge that all the others are affected as well, albeit in their singular fashions. Intoxication and trance turn the ones out of themselves. They bind ›us‹ together with entranced others who are beyond and beside themselves as well. In states of trance and intoxication ›we‹ are not united by a common point of reference, but rather by a common dislocation (cf. Nancy 1991, 1-42). ›We‹ are ›many‹ in that we already experience being many in one single self. And by that shared experience of dislocation we are bound together. Especially when our dislocations join forces in a mutual exchange and flow.

Moods and atmospheres like these do not just happen in particular practices, which are, in the cases of Vogue and Voodoo, much fantasized about. At times, the assembly can even transform into a leisurely festive gathering. And this festive mode is to some extent, at least, related to states of shared intoxication. Such states can certainly be brought about by drugs but also by a lot of other means: by oxygen, by ambiance, by hormones, coffee, cigarettes, sugar, drinks and by all kinds of stimulants. Or, for that matter, by their very lack: e.g. by gathering in an enclosed room with far too little fresh air for a long time. But intoxication cuts both ways: It can be ›fun‹, it can lead ›us‹ to a higher plane, but its dislocating forces can also run dry and lead ›us‹ nowhere. They can also ruin ›us‹ through addiction. Intoxication can empower and perhaps even ›unite‹ the many. Intoxication might also drain their energy and isolate them from each other. But this festive mode is also always in danger of tilting over into a pervasive foul or even dangerous mood. When do the members of the festive, intoxicated crowd start turning against each other? When do they start turning against the ones they perceive and create as ›others‹? Intoxication can let the crowds rise against an oppressive power (as in the case of Haitian Voodoo). However, intoxication can also bring the many together as the new bully in town. And intoxication can always be employed by the authorities to police and subdue the many: to provide bread and circus for some and to criminalize the others. In some confrontations, the representatives of the authorities have themselves seemed as if on drugs (cf. the contributions of Orgy Punk, Vassilis Tsianos and Margarita Tsomou in this volume).

All this does not mean that the states of intoxication and trance induced by Vogue and Voodoo do not make any use of language, of signs and of symbols. On the contrary, both do employ cultural techniques of sampling and appropriation. The signs and symbols of traditional power structures are evoked but redeployed: The Haitian Voodoo Buck-Morss dreams up aims at a democratic structure while sampling its rituals out of the elements of religions that have been as oppressive as other religions. The early voguers imitate (and transform) the models of wealth and beauty found on the pages of Vogue Magazine. States of trance and intoxication that coincide with, on the one hand, religion and, on the other hand, consumerism are turned into other modes of trance and intoxication. The signs may largely remain unchanged. But now they are used differently and by different people.

Vogue and Voodoo present very different options as far as the respective states of trance go. One might conceive them as each other's flip sides. On the one hand, Vogue can lead to a state of enhanced self-presentation: ›You‹ have to present yourself on the catwalk. The idea commonly associated with Voodoo, on the other hand, is to lose oneself or to transcend the very idea of the self: e.g. to become invincible in a bulletproof body and to thus fight the oppressors. Losing oneself boosts another: an intoxicated self. Therefore, the self-loss associated with Voodoo is never too far away from the self-enhancement associated with Vogue. When voguing, ›you‹ have to present yourself on the catwalk: to the crowd and to the judges, in front of your own house and in front of the opposing houses battling for the same trophy. ›You‹ have to stand up for yourself on the runway used by the other voguers who run in the very same category. However, it is the dynamics of the gathering and of all the people ›you‹ have to present yourself in front of that gives you this sort of power. ›You‹ stand up for yourself because they want you to stand up for yourself. ›You‹ stand up for yourself because they need you to. The assembly is giving ›you‹ the very self to stand up for. Which leads to the question where this self was to begin with: This self seems a product of gathering in a state of trance and intoxication in the first place.

Instead of letting the self grow bigger, other practices aim at letting the self vanish: The pop-cultural imagery of Voodoo is associated, at best, with falling unconscious, with speaking in tongues, and with entering another realm – all as part of an allegedly exotic ritual. Your trance is not your own, ›you‹ are someone else. ›You‹ are remote controlled: by the substances, by the rhythm, by the music. This other self has been transferred onto ›you‹ by

a ritual: by a ritual that produced a connection with others where there formerly was none; by a ritual that brings you together with others who (like you) are strangers to themselves now. But they are together with you: ready to bond, ready to achieve a common goal. The Western cinematic imagination has more often than not pictured this as the logic of the angry mob empowered by the dark forces of Mother Nature and unleashed against the pillars of rational civilization. But there is nothing in the structure of this self-loss that necessarily implies this image. The logic at stake seems rather one of inclusion than of exclusion. Just as in Vogue, the new self is a self received through sharing one's own self-loss with others. One loses one's alleged individuality but losing oneself individually would make very little sense. In the Susan Buck-Morss version of Voodoo it is an image of a togetherness that (despite all of Buck-Morss's aspirations to a ›universal history‹) emerges from the rhythm of self-loss. But (just as in Vogue) this self-loss begs the question what kind of self there actually had been to lose in the beginning.

From this point of view, neither Vogue nor Voodoo allow for a neat division between individual and collective experience. Both are rhythmical, musical and intoxicated practices interweaving the self and the others because the others already are part of the self. Drugged or sober, frenetically dancing or transfixed: This interweaving marks the basic dynamics of togetherness. One cannot escape it even when alone. It is enhanced when coming together in an assembly. And it is taken to a peak when this assembly starts celebrating: celebrating itself and all the others who want to join in. While presenting ›us‹ to, keeping ›ourselves‹ from, or losing ›ourselves‹ in a celebratory gathering ›we‹ might invent alternative ceremonies for an ›art of being many‹ as well as other states of trance to go along with it.

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