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Teaching Truth and Authenticity-
An East West Comparison

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Overview:

This instructional module makes a comparison between the concepts of truth and authenticity in Western and Eastern philosophy and culture.

As an introduction students will read two short essays, which can be found as Addendum One and Two. The first essay discusses truth in the Western context, both as experiential as well as conceptual truth. The second narrates an actual performance of a Chinese folklore play the author witnessed during a trip to China in 2007 in the city of Kunming in Yunnan province. This essay compares Eastern representation and conception of truth with the attempt to create immediacy in Western avant-garde performances, which by and large followed the aesthetic principles formulated by continental philosophers such as Nietzsche, Gadamer, Heidegger, and Adorno.

Definitions:

While the term Truth has no single definition, in the Western philosophical context it is often understood as being in agreement with reality and facts. My personal discourse on truth makes a distinction between experiential truth and conceptual truth.

Authenticity, in the Western context, is a judgment that compares an individual's actions with his or her intentions, often evidenced by one's sincerity and the depth of one's commitments. The term authenticity has become popular in Western existentialist philosophy in particular as a response to the increasing impossibility of evaluating one's truth by comparing it to outside circumstances or facts. In some ways authenticity has actually replaced the concept of truth.

As the analysis of the Chinese play demonstrates, in Eastern philosophy and art truth and authenticity are derived from its cultural and religious context. Therefore the very idea to give a definition of truth is misguided. True is what is in agreement with the ancestors and authentic is the very representation of this collective truth experience. In any instance such truth is a lived truth, always more experiential than it is conceptual.

Content of Class Lecture:

For over two thousand years, in the Western context, finding truth was the declared goal of philosophizing. My instruction will begin with an historical overview. We begin with an analysis of experiential truth in primal societies. Truth as an experience of the divine or sacred was still common among pre-Socratic Greeks. I will explain how and why in early Greek society Dionysian rituals were curtailed and replaced by a more

rational, calculated way to find truth. This process began with the early philosophers, but above all with the Pythagorean community and finally peaked in Aristotle's logic. Starting out as an experience in the moment, in this historical process, truth was to become a teachable concept as secure and rational as a simple mathematical equation. In a class discussion we will debate the pros and cons of both versions of truth.

More than two millennia later, Kant's critiques showed the logical limits of conceptual truth inquiry. With Kant's assertion that the universal truth beneath the surface of things can never be truly established Western philosophy was in turmoil.

After Kant the pursuit of universal truth seemed out of reach. Continuing the quest, however, Western philosophers constructed three distinct responses: Pragmatism, /Marxism and Existentialism. But especially in continental philosophy, another venue was indicated. Truth could also be found as the result of aesthetic experience. This was especially the work of the philosophers Hegel and Nietzsche. Following these two philosophers twentieth century continental philosophy transformed the search for truth into an experience again. Philosophers such as Heidegger and Gadamer only suggest this turn from logical truth finding to an aesthetic one without delivering a detailed body of work to substantiate it. Adorno, on the other hand, wholeheartedly embraced this direction. In his Aesthetics, which was largely practiced by the European avant-garde, Adorno proposed truth finding as the solitary result of aesthetic activities, while instantly warning against a dwelling in the truth as the beginning of a new ideology. In this critical analysis of ideology, Adorno's negative dialectic became the vehicle of artistic experimentation for theater groups in the context of the European Avant-garde.

In comparison I will show how in the Eastern context, the search for truth and authenticity never followed the Western example, defined by a logical pursuit of truth. The search for truth, in Eastern artworks and philosophy, was never disconnected from context and community. While Aristotle had singled out the human being as essentially different from nature because of his/her logical qualities, in Daoism, for instance, the human being is always depicted as part of its natural environment. I will use a folklore presentation I was able to observe last year during a trip to China as an example for Chinese theater becoming on one hand a vital part of the world theater scene, while on the other preserving a distinctly Chinese core of community values and contextual authenticity in the experience of art being imbedded in nature. Truth here was not seen as the result of logical deduction, nor of an individual's confrontation with the Sacred, but as the result of community experience in tune with an unbroken connection to a long line of ancestors and their collective tribal beliefs.

Addendum One: A Short Essay on Truth

During the course of the twentieth century a number of voices proclaimed that philosophy was altogether dead. By and large philosophers withdrew to their ivory towers and tried desperately to hang on to their jobs. The last major philosophy invented as a continuation of the Western philosophical enterprise was Existentialism which I believe will become known as the dead end of Western philosophy. Aristotle with his famous syllogism about Socrates being a mortal man, known by any freshman of philosophical studies, had focused on death as the ultimate vehicle to prove absolute truth. From that point on Western philosophy, in sharp contrast to the earlier mother

goddess cultures it replaced, remained fixated on death rather than life. In existentialism this fixation was driven to the point of absurdity. In a desperate act, existentialism tried to rescue the idea of human freedom by referring to the human beings' ability to commit suicide. Born out of desperation, the realization of the absurd mind of its own futility created hero-monsters such as Caligula, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, and Stalin. In the absence of any truth other than the above mentioned ability to end your miserable life, the quest for power became absolute.

Life, however, goes on, and nature has a way to generate good people with good intentions in spite of absurd philosophies, in spite of decadent cultures and tyrannical or some times just stupid leaders. In spite of the prediction that there could be no more poetry after Auschwitz and that life would never be the same again after the tragedy of Hiroshima, flowers still bloom, children are born and poetry is written. People sing songs on top of bones and ashes. And that is good, otherwise human life would truly be doomed.

In *Compassionate Thinking*¹ I concluded that the deepest problem of Western culture, Western civilization, and particularly Western philosophy, is its utterly false evaluation of human emotions. The Greek master thinkers elevated logic above everything, making it divine and godlike. They considered human emotions as suspicious, pitiful creation of lower gods, drawing the human being ever closer to the animal world. To fit the emerging pattern of male domination women, who were seen as more emotional than men, were also assessed as less human. The male, in its ideal state an emotionless being, resembled the male god who dominated the sky. In the confluence of Greek and Judaic thinking the traditional Greek male god Zeus, a passionate, violent and thoroughly domineering God, stood little chance against the Hebrew God Yahweh, the cool law giver who only occasionally dispensed wrath against his erring children. But Yahweh's anger was always in the name of justice, not in capricious pursuit of his lust and desires.

It is certainly true that the young Christian founder Jesus tried to reintroduce emotional attachment by assuring his followers that their God was a loving father, not only a judging lord. But while the original message of the gospels was a deeply compassionate one, putting the transcending emotion of love above everything, under the influence of Greek philosophy and the prevailing dominator culture, the Christian West was buried in a mudslide of anti-compassionate male dominance that tended to place logic over love, power over care, and profit above humanity.

Throughout the chaotic, dark, and oppressive Middle Ages, during which the Holy Mother Church seemed the only institution to legitimately usurp power, not only artists, but also philosophers were considered the servants of the church. First you believe in the good message of salvation dispensed by the church - often for a good price, and then you may use your thinking mind. Artists were only permitted to produce pictures of the holy scenes depicted in the bible and philosophers were advised to prove the truth of the holy dogma. During the Crusades, both Muslim and Christian philosophers faced each other off in gigantic show debates in Catholic/Muslim Spain. Both sides were certain that they could convince the other side through logic of the correctness of their inherent truth.

After the church power waned – propelled by increasing secularization, the spirit of reformation, and a new trust in the powers of the human mind, philosophers found it

¹ Werner Krieglstein. *Compassionate Thinking*. Dubuque: Kendall Hunt, 2006.

more difficult than others to shake off the oppressive and stifling grip of the church. When the father of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes, decided to split the world in two halves, the thinking and the extended one, he graciously relinquished the mind to the church while rescuing the physical world for the use of science. The only absolute truth the French mathematician could produce was his own thinking self, and that, by his own admission, belonged to the Church. This fateful decision set scientific research into mind and consciousness back for many hundreds of years until Sigmund Freud finally wrestled the domain of the mind out of the grip of the Church making it finally available for scientific inquiry.

Ultimately not even Descartes' *cogito ergo* could deliver lasting truth. The philosopher Immanuel Kant boldly declared all human knowledge tainted with the pen of subjectivity. It is as if we were born with colored eyes of perception. Everything we perceive takes on the shades of our perception. Kant boldly declared that the thing itself can never be known. Gone was the certainty of the ancient philosophers. Gone was the security of Thomas Aquinas who believed that by reading the book of nature we could uncover the signature of God.

While philosophy, once the first and highest of all activities, after having forsaken its lofty goal lost its importance, science took on the challenge to find truth. Scientific truth, in the form of laws of nature, was not quite as absolute as philosophical truth, nevertheless held on to the universality of its major claims until the beginning of the twentieth century. But with the discovery of General Relativity, Quantum Theory and the Theory of Chaos, scientific truth step by step had lost its claim to general universality as well. General Relativity claimed that even time and space, for the classical mind the absolute backdrop for all events, were not absolute at all but deeply involved with the rest of our fragile and ever changing world. Until today, a good many people, even great scientist, often forget this outrageous claim and treat time and space as absolute as ever. The truth of Einstein's assertion, which today is empirically proven beyond any doubt, is as counter intuitive as it is unimaginable.

If one takes General Relativity serious it simply makes no sense to ask questions such as: What was before the Big Bang? and: Into what does space expand into when it grows larger, as it supposedly does? Quantum Theory on the other hand seemed to imply that the stuff that constitutes our very own world behaves in strange ways indeed. Discoveries in modern physics claim that those smallest particles like photons and electrons are no particles at all, but simple energy waves when not observed. But it came as a shock to all scientists, when it was finally possible to observe these unbelievably small building blocks of the natural world they appeared as little bullets and not at all as waves. The well known double slit experiment seemed to prove that these small constituents are particles when observed, but when not observed they exist as probability waves. Some influential scientists of the time came to the shocking conclusion that the whole world, built as it is on a startling contradiction, must ultimately be an illusion. Many took this as a verification of ancient Hindu philosophy, which claimed that the world we perceive is *maya* or illusion.

These relativistic realizations had a profound impact on the way we perceive everything. While the physics community settled the problem simply by accepting the contradiction, which became known as the wave/particle duality, the impact was much more consequential on the field of ethics and on social philosophy in general.

Both in the way truth was treated as an aesthetic experience and in the realization of the world as an illusion Eastern and Western thinking had made a giant step toward each other.

Addendum Two:

Dynamic Yunnan: Tradition, Truth, and Authenticity
in a Chinese Minority Folklore Show

All beings thrive for a reason
Ancestors tell me,
Earth is the body of the Creator
When I embrace the land with my body
I awake to the words of the ancestors.
Dynamic Yunnan

When as a young reporter in Germany I was assigned to review my first East Asian play, performed by Tenjou Sajiki and directed by Shuji Terayama. I remember being completely frustrated by my inability to understand the symbolic language in the play. Having participated for many years in the International Festival of Open Theater of Wroclaw, Poland, I had become accustomed to watching foreign plays in languages I often did not understand. Still, theatrical imagery generally seemed to be composed of universal themes and emotional signifiers that allowed me to understand the gist of a play. In the past I always had at least some understanding of a play's symbolism and significance.

This performance by Tenjou Sajiki was different. Gestures seemed to carry completely incomprehensible meanings. Colors and sounds failed to offer an interpretative pattern. On several occasions the stage filled with colorful umbrellas. Why so many umbrellas? Yes, they look pretty, but beyond that? I wondered if it perhaps rained a lot in Japan. Not until I had the chance, many years later, to travel extensively in Japan and China, did I realize that in East Asia people use umbrellas more often as a protection against the rays of the sun than as a shield against rain.

For me, this first encounter with a Japanese art piece took place during the Seventies. In those days, globalization was an unknown term and performing groups seldom traveled around the globe. Today the world has moved closer together. As a result, urban art shares certain similarities, whether you see a performance in New York, Berlin, Tokyo, or Beijing. Still I was pleasantly surprised, when on a recent trip to China I happened to witness a quite extraordinary piece of avant-garde theater, a piece worthy to be ranked among the world's best. This performance, however, did not take place in Beijing, Hong

Kong, or Shanghai but in the fairly remote, provincial capital Kunming, near the Burmese border, in Yunnan province.

Dynamic Yunnan was astounding. Our tour leader had instructed us to expect a folklore show about several minority groups living in the Yunnan area. For the evening of the play I was in the company of a history and language instructor at my college near Chicago, a Chinese native. An ethno-musicologist, also part of our group, was looking forward to hearing some original tunes performed on classic Chinese instruments. From the information we received we all expected a more or less authentic presentation of Chinese minority dances, rituals and customs, packaged and staged for tourist consumption. What I saw, however, was a production that reminded me of the best performances by the likes of Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and the Living Theater. Even Artaud's aesthetics and elements of the Theater of Cruelty could be found throughout the play while Stanislavski's search for "truth right underneath the skin" was always present.

The first hint that I was not going to see a traditional folklore show came before the play even began. As the audience still gathered I observed a man moving about on stage (it was hard to make out whether he was a stage hand or an actor). The man was building a small tower of bricks in front of the scene off to the left. He added a few bricks and rearranged some others. I asked myself: "Was this a last minute correction or was it already part of the play?" As the show began, the importance of this activity soon became evident. Much like the famous Living Theater in *Antigone* for instance or in the legendary *Paradise Now*, the frame of the art work was cracked open by extending its arm into the real world. For the Living Theater this was accomplished by showing the actors, at times still chewing their evening meal, entering the naked stage and preparing themselves and the stage for the sacredness of the performance. While classical Aristotelian art is characterized by establishing a fourth wall that separates the audience from the play, avant-garde art took much of its raw power from breaking down that separation, opening up its boundaries to the real world, and inviting the audience to take part in the act. In *Dynamic Yunnan*, the construction of the tower was a visualization indicating the reality of aesthetic work in relation to the blue collar work of building buildings. After the last scene concluded on stage, the construction of the tower continued on, signifying a reality beyond the aesthetic boundaries of the play.

Grotowski's influence was evident here as well. From Grotowski, the world famous theater prophet from Poland, the avant-garde had learned that each play was more than a consumer piece. Rather, the performance was a sacred act intended to establish authentic truth in the here and now, right in front of the audience, involving them in the sacred communion. In *Dynamic Yunnan* the use of ritualistic imagery and the rhythmic drum-beat conveyed an atmosphere of sacrifice and devotion remotely reminiscent of a Native American Powwow. The dramatic themes, while composed from ethnic stories and motifs, dealt with the great universal questions of birth, death and creation. Sex, love, conflict and war were presented as universal themes of the human spirit.

This brings us to the use of content as raw material in building a new story, like one builds a mosaic, kaleidoscopic composition, using found objects, or torn pieces of an ancient veil. In Charles Marovitz's *Hamlet*, for instance, the director had ripped apart Shakespeare's timeless piece into little sound bites, and as if the wind had blown through the script, put it together in a new and irreverent way. The widely celebrated result was a thirty minutes miniature *Hamlet*, like a pop postcard of a once famous hero. What is offered here as new art is in many ways a disrespectful caricature of the original master piece.

After the show, my colleague (the expert in Chinese culture and history) expressed dismay about the lack of respect this production displayed in dealing with some respected objects and revered symbols. Likewise, the ethno musicologist complained about the lack of authenticity in the use of instruments and songs. The criticism of these experts reminded me of a story I had read in a multi-cultural American textbook. In *Counseling the Culturally Different*, the authors tell the story of a Caucasian female schoolteacher in Oklahoma who had planned an "ethnic minority appreciation day" for her sixth-grade class.² The class had a large number of Native American students; therefore, part of the day was devoted to a unit on Native American heritage. A Native American student had designed a bonnet and dress in her tribe's tradition. Her fellow students expressed appreciation and admiration for her costume and tribal dance demonstration. However, the teacher remained silent. Several days later the student received a low grade for her participation in the activities. The teacher praised the student's dance technique and beautiful costume, but stated critically that the costume was not typical for her tribe, that her dance was not traditional, and that this assignment was graded on "authenticity, not fantasy."

The French philosopher Michel Foucault pointed out how much harm we do to living things by freezing their development in concepts and in language.³ As this story emphasizes, this is especially true for living traditions once anthropologists or other academic disciplines catalogue them. The feedback loop created by such a system and by a teacher who reinforces the "academic truth" is remarkably powerful and, at times, nothing short of genocidal. The very title *Dynamic Yunnan* indicates this awareness and announces boldly that their minority traditions are not frozen in time but living works in process.

Every authentic piece of art recasts the ancient quest for truth. Academic truth, in short, is the known truth while authentic truth is experienced truth, which on rare occasions might rise to the level of a lived experience of oneness with the creator or with creation. "Earth is the body of the Creator" says a line in *Dynamic Yunnan*.⁴ To encounter this living truth in Western civilization we have to go back more than two and half thousand years to a time when in Greek history the mystery cults such as the worshipping of Dionysius and the Eleusinian mysteries were slowly replaced by the logical search for truth as expressed in philosophy. The philosopher Pythagoras became the first prophet of this new breed of

² Wing Derald and David Sue, *Counseling the Culturally Different, Theory and Practice*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1990.) p. 4.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (New York, Random house 1972)

⁴ <http://www.dynamicyunan.com/en/intro.htm>

philosophical truth seekers. He was followed by such dialectical masters as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and then by a long line of Christian philosophers. While primal truth of oneness with the godhead was still experienced in those ancient cults and mysteries, the spread of the enlightenment denounced such experiences and replaced them with conceptual truth and logical analysis. This new truth was no longer experiential but the result of intellectual deduction and logical argumentation.

There were, of course, exceptions. Plato's attempt to capture truth as a memory of the soul in its root was experiential. But by posing the resulting truth as universal and absolute, the same for everyone, Plato initiated the transition to deductive truth. Within Judeo Christian history, even the feeble attempt of Jesus to revive experiential truth by naming himself the truth and the way could not stop the institutionalization of truth and its dualistic separation from the nature of things. Thus, a powerful blow against finding truth in the living moment came from monotheistic religions, expressly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Even though this process took almost a thousand years, toward the end of the Middle Ages it was nearly fully institutionalized. Thomas Aquinas, who spent his life trying to formulate deductive truth arguments, fell into mystical silence toward the end of his life. Did he come to the realization that the living God cannot be reached by deductive argument?

After the merging of Platonic dualism with Christian monotheism, the living truth was residing and glorified in a distant realm called heaven while this world was condemned as the work of Satan. In this earthly world truth was held hostage inside intimidating stone cathedrals. As a result truth increasingly became a distant abstraction. A deistic watchmaker God ultimately presided over a mechanical world, powerless to exert any influence at all. The fiery breath of the Dionysian god had been replaced by an artificial device, a *deus ex machina*, a mere theatrical trick, to solve dramatic problems and promise salvation.

Into this theatrical and aesthetic wasteland, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche tossed an incendiary spark. First he proclaimed the obvious, something that any sensitive observer could have known, the message that God was dead. Like a wanderer in the desert, Nietzsche's Zarathustra combs the darkness with his lantern to find a spark of hope, a sign of the living god. In his search Nietzsche goes back to the pre-Platonic Greeks to light the fire.

Nietzsche failed to realize that more was needed than a mere return to past practices. He did not notice (or perhaps he did and this is why he despaired) that the Dionysian union, performed by an isolated subject in the context of an utterly alienated society must necessarily remain empty, a solipsistic practice of one's own loneliness. In the context of an atomistic, super-individualized society, such as Western Europe and the United States, the practice of Artaud's theater of cruelty, the production of artistic identity in the experience of the Now can reveal the dark center of one's own soul as a dangerous and suicidal abyss. Walter Benjamin knew and experienced this, and the Living Theater experimented with it in the production rehearsals for *The Brig*.⁵ In this play, which

⁵ See Kenneth Brown: *The Brig* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968) and Werner Kriegelstein: *The Dice Playing God*. (New York: University Press of America, 1991)

represented a reenactment of American marine practices, a punch in the prisoner/actor's stomach was supposed to induce a momentary mystical experience. The Living Theater quickly realized that without the context of a lived community such practical exercise of mystical oneness is dangerous play.

In comparison with the individualistic isolation that predominates in Western countries, the whole tradition of the Asian world, especially in its art works, has preserved the role of community. As *Dynamic Yunnan* exemplifies, the play, even while embracing global aspects of the avant-garde, is committed to the community of minority players and to their ancestors, who are present at every step of the way. As the line in the play says: "Ancestors tell me, Earth is the body of the Creator, When I embrace the land with my body I awake to the words of the ancestors." As the performance becomes ritualized in the drum beats and colorful decor, the slow moving action and the graceful artistry, ancestors wake up and assist in the sacred celebration. In the ritualized experience of the numinous Now, which the Living Theater called "the trip," the mind of the actor can "take flight and soar into that other space where time is not, nor relation, nor anything, but sheer existence, undefined and undefinable, seemingly absolute."⁶

The body of the prisoner is totally captive. The soul of the prisoner is potentially totally free. The trip between these two points is the crucial experience of the play.

For the Living Theater, the actor potentially experienced the original oneness of mind and body in the violent blow to the stomach. Mind and body, felt by the ego as independent from each other, suffer from their separation. Suffering, the Living Theater believed, melds a human being and the soul. The physical action of *The Brig* is real, physical, here-and-now. The spirit, according to Malina, needs force to fuse again with the athletic body. Malina asked the actors about the trip. They said: "The space traversed is infinite." and "You can't think further than the next white line."⁷

The Trip assures a reality beyond the limits of the body by revealing physicality as potentially spiritual, a carrier of existential content beyond words and thoughts. This is purely Artaudian metaphysics. For the Living Theater it was a solitary experience. For the actors in *Dynamic Yunnan* it is the lived experience of their ancestors, extending the Now moment into the past.

Religious anthropologists such as Ninian Smart⁸ have observed that the truth experience resulting from such an encounter depends strongly on the expectation and ritual circumstances. Contrary to Plato's ideological assertion the exodus out of Plato's "dark cave" can be a trip into bliss or a fall into the dark void. To avoid existential terror the Living Theater discovered the community of their group, which they demonstrated in their later plays such as *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Now*.

While for the Avant-garde in Western countries the discovery of community was a novelty, for acting groups in Asia this is a heritage readily

⁶ Brown, p.. 89.

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Cross-Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*. Upper Saddle River, NY: Prentice Hall, 1995.

available. In most instances, especially among the minority groups in China, community is alive and not yet destroyed by individualism and globalization.

In their performance the Living Theater discovered the Dionysian spark that falls on fertile ground only when consumed in communion with others. For Dynamic Yunnan the communion with a long line of ancestors was perhaps never in question. "When I embrace the land with my body I awake to the words of the ancestors," so goes the other line from *Dynamic Yunnan* and "Earth is the body of the Creator."

In the West we have to go far back, even farther than the Greeks, to discover such connection to each other and to the faith of the ancestors. The ancient Hebrews, while Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, tried to reestablish a connection to their ancestors by worshipping the Golden Calf. This was perhaps not so much an expression of material money worship as it mostly is portrait, but a reunification of the tribe with the spirituality of their ancestors who revered the strength and the power of the bull as sacred. A jealous god successfully prevented that attempt and put Western civilization on the path to solitary individualism.

When the Western mind realizes, how thoroughly broken the line to the truth of our ancestors has become, how far one would have to reach back into prehistoric times to undo the ills of several thousand years of monotheistic domination, the response may well be utter desperation. Watching a piece such as *Dynamic Yunnan* inspires this artist not to lose hope. Perhaps in a global world we can combine our histories and reconnect with our human ancestors where ever they are. If one culture cannot find its roots because its primal truth has been lost in the intellectual rubble of the ages, maybe it can borrow from another to become whole again. This, however, cannot happen in an atmosphere of exploitation and oppression, of self righteousness and dogmatism, but only in a culture of mutual understanding and respect.