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Transformation of Identity in the 'Bertso – Event':

Three Experiences of Crisis

Unlike in written literature, in oral improvisation an aestheticized message is transmitted and received "here and now". Bertsolarism –spontaneous oral improvisation in Basque – is evanescent, the moment of creation and reception of the artwork are the same, and this characteristic endows the discipline with a great transformative potential –like any other stage performance–: it has the power of making the participants transform into something. The "bertso – event" is by definition an "identity shaper", either causing psychological, affective or somatic transformations in the individual, or by reinforcing the feeling of belonging to a community. But for this process to happen, it is essential to provoke experiences of crisis among listeners, blurring the preset codes and guidelines, approaching ambiguity, and, ultimately, putting the participants in a "betwixt and between" state, until they reach a catharsis –and, finally, an identity transformation–. Paradoxically, bertso situations are usually very rigid. Both the bertsolari and the listeners are very clear about what they expect from each situation –be it a bertso – dinner, an open – air performance or a championship–, and that reduces the chances of provoking trance moments among the participants. However, there have been strong shock situations throughout the history of bertsolarism: some caused by the bertsolari itself, some caused by the public, and others caused by unforeseen circumstances. All of them have shaken the identity of the participants in some way. Three experiences of crisis will be analyzed below: the "whistle" of the listeners to Xalbador in the 1967 General Championship, the moment in which Uztapide was suddenly speechless at a 1972 performance, and the boycott of Jon Sarasua in the final phase of the 1991 Gipuzkoa Championship.