



ENCRYPTING, INSCRIPTION AND INSPECTION IN ROMEO CASTELLUCCI'S "GO DOWN, MOSES"

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***Abstract:** Most productions of Romeo Castellucci's *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* are awesome variations of staging enigma. "Go Down, Moses" is no exception, relating as fragmentally and indirectly to the biblical hero mentioned in its title as Robert Wilson's legendary productions to Freud, Stalin and Einstein some fifty years ago. Although Castellucci finds the *Old Testament* one of the psychologically most profound books and *Exodus* one of the most beautiful stories ever written, his *mise-en-scène* does not draw a portrait of the prophet but focuses only on the figure of Moses' mother and the motive of losing a child. As a puzzling example of the theatre of images, "Go Down, Moses" lets us investigate the process of understanding theatre: that despite impressions and meanings ordinarily concretized and verbalized a posteriori we always perceive performance as a flow. My essay models the reception of "Go Down, Moses" while commenting on the process mentioned above.*

***Key words:** Romeo Castellucci, theatre of images, staging enigma, making meaning, the process of reception.*

Most productions of Romeo Castellucci's *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* are awesome variations of staging enigma. *Go Down, Moses*, premiered last October in Lausanne, is no exception, relating as fragmentally and indirectly to the biblical hero mentioned in its title as Robert Wilson's legendary productions to Freud, Stalin and Einstein some fifty years ago. Although Castellucci finds the *Old Testament* one of the psychologically most profound books and *Exodus* one of the most beautiful stories ever written (Cf. Castellucci 2015a), his *mise-en-scène* does not draw a portrait of the prophet but focuses only on the figure of Moses' mother and the motive of losing a child. As a puzzling example of the theatre of images, *Go Down, Moses* does not tell a story by means of words (dialogues), nor does it confront us with tableaux that we ourselves could put into words. Castellucci's theatre lays its foundations outside the concrete circumstances of all that can be directly seen and told: "I use images just to overcome them and get to that invisible image I am interested in" (Castellucci, 2015a).¹ His stunning

¹ "Ich setze Bilder ein, um sie zu überwinden, um zu jenem unsichtbaren Bild zu führen, das mich interessiert." (My translation)



stage constructions make the spectator shift between his/her proliferating associations and cognitive patterns implied by discursive logic, the principle of montage and the so-called puzzle dramaturgy. They let us investigate the process of understanding theatre: that despite impressions and meanings ordinarily concretized and verbalized *a posteriori* we always perceive performance as a flow. As a highly complex flow compared to the prevalent simplifications of subsequently conceived „sense and sensibility“. In case of Castellucci, this flow is not ongoing accumulation of something felt more and more confident but a continuous shift between certainty and uncertainty, the establishment of the meaning of an image in our mind and its annulment as well as its reestablishment. Although it cannot be fixed, it does not hinder significant moments of revelation. But we can also observe that uncertainty, indeterminacy and ambiguity detected during a performance often transform into certainty, evidence and lucidity in some critical response on productions of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, presumably as a result of an obsessive search for answers that starts instinctively as a reaction to the numerous questions emerging in the spectator. Therefore my essay models the reception of *Go Down, Moses* while commenting on the process mentioned above.

It is typical that I cannot tell what I hear and see when I take my seat in the auditorium and begin to follow the events already taking place on stage.¹ The “prologos” with the house lights on *de facto* asserts itself before *logos* i.e. speech and reason. There are no words to set the course and there is no obvious context to give meaning to the actors’ and actresses’ riddling movements. Repeating almost mechanical gestures, three women and four men are walking about in an empty space enclosed by white hangings and full of amplified as well as electronically modulated sounds of footfall and friction. We do not know where they are, what they do and why their clothes and hairstyle recall the 1970’s, but the way they use space, look around and outline things with their hands reminds us of visitors at an exhibition. Our suspicion is confirmed by an illustration stuck on a hanging in the rear when the house lights go down, showing Dürer’s famous graphics of a hare (*Feldhase*, 1502).² However, it does not let us fully identify the opening situation of *Go Down, Moses*, since a recurring action stays inextricable – and unnoticed by critics – during the slightly ceremonious movement and the occasionally tableauxque arrangement of the people on stage. They gather together from time to time and one of them seems to protrude or cut into another with his/her

¹ My description is based on the performance of *Go Down, Moses* I saw at the Wiener Festwochen in Theater an der Wien on 29. May 2015.

² It is another example of the inspiration Castellucci receives from the fine arts. He states that “the most interesting experiences are often those that, from a formal point of view, assimilate more from the visual arts, and I believe that, all in all, the most creative energies are coming from there. There’s a whole mode of theatre tied to tradition; I don’t call that art, only bourgeois decoration.” (Castellucci, 2004, 25.) We were facing Antonello da Messina’s enlarged portrait of Christ during Castellucci’s *Sul concetto di volto nel Figlio di Dio* (On the Concept of the Face of God) some years ago and now we are facing the portrait of a rabbit.



arm bent squarely while we hear sounds of breakage and clashing. It lasts only for some seconds and everybody returns to his/her routine quickly. A scene from Castellucci's *Inferno* (staged at Festival d'Avignon in 2008) comes into my mind, with an old woman trying to bundle a basketball into her stomach, but it cannot resolve the enigma of this peculiar "internalization".

The prologue is followed by a scene of "technicalization" that confronts us with a single steel cylinder on the proscenium, rotating at a furious speed, while sounds like engines of airplanes fill the auditorium.¹ The image and the noise of the rotation become almost intolerable when wigs (long hair as scalps) descend from high above so that the cylinder can catch and spin them in a dizzying way. The piercing sound – as if a cutting disc would enter into metal – completes the sound of breakage heard before with the mechanism of cutting in my mind. The rather long scene of wild automatism forces me to allegorise as I vainly but involuntarily ask myself why it stands there and what it means in addition to its mighty effect. This effect, however, makes that "wilderness" or rather "desert" come into my mind that Castellucci mentions about Moses' story and relates to "our dysfunctional Information Age" (unser dysfunktionales Informationszeitalter) in an interview: "We have so much to see and hear that everything ends in indifference" (Castellucci, 2015b).² Although this scene has nothing to do with the prologue, it seems to be record of a status as astonishingly precise as Dürer's picture.

The third scene surprises us anew when it gives a hyperrealist but (due to a nylon curtain between the stage and the auditorium) slightly blurred image of a woman almost dying in a public toilet she has locked herself in. Since we have not heard a word yet, we feel tension bodily, raised by the appearance of blood, flowing from the woman's bosom, staining the whole place, and also by moments of unbearable spasm and of a failed attempt at asking for help by phone. These happenings stand in sharp contrast with the chitter-chatter of a restaurant infiltrating through the door, then with a choir resounding in the darkness that falls on the agonizing woman and with the two emoticons projected on the nylon: :-), :-|. Scenes have lacked logical correspondence so far, but the spiritual we hear matches the "atmosphere" of the prologue (recalling the US some fifty years ago) and emoticons support the interpretation of the second scene. However, the reference of the title still remains enigmatic beyond the particularity of the „Negro question" (Thomas Carlyle), implied by *Go Down, Moses*, the well-known

¹ Castellucci's *mises-en-scène* frequently include scenes that lack human presence and show machines working automatically. E.g. his "dust ballet" for Igor Stravinsky's music (*The Rite of Spring*, 2013) was built exclusively on a device that made several tons of bone powder dance on stage from high above. He lets machines become agents, equal partners of people and animals on stage, while their automatic working and unidentifiable nature (since we do not know what and why they exactly do) cause anxiety in the spectator.

² "Wir bekommen so viel zu sehen und zu hören, dass sich alles aufhebt in Indifferenz". (My translation)



spiritual that relates the biblical situation and the oppressed Israelites longing for redemption to the Afro-American community.

The above-mentioned reference is suggested by the fifth scene, the only one in which we hear speech, but before that the image of a dustbin begins to dawn with sounds of crickets and cars passing by. While this nocturne is shattered by the stir of a black bag on top of the garbage and a baby's crying coming from it, the situation is made obvious by an account projected on the nylon curtain, describing the discovery of a lost child and most likely deriving from a police constable. The short scene with the dustbin is followed by an interrogation at a police station recalling present-day Italy. We catch sight of the woman again, now clad in a rug, exhausted and with matted hair while a detective strains at the question: where she hid her new-born baby. Regarding the projected account just before, this questioning confuses the chronology of events but the principle of montage lets us reconstruct a nativity story together with the former two scenes. First the woman does not say a word then she puts her hand under the rug to stain her face with blood from her thighs. So she identifies with her own blood and does not want obsessively to clear it away, even if the policeman chides her, finding her action embarrassing and regarding blood as simple filth, like the son of *Sul concetto* regards his father's faeces. (The same actor plays the son and the detective by the way.) Later the woman finds her tongue but instead of answering the questions she talks about boredom and indifference felt even by animals, reflected in their eyes. Then she describes the people who live like slaves though they lack nothing at all. Her vague fragments of sentences – as if uttered by a clairvoyant – remind us of Castellucci's "record of a status", his description of our contemporary existential situation, and cease the opposition of man and beast. None other than the detective shows boredom and indifference when he condemns the woman to be a mad fantast in the name of reality and normality, then loses his attention and sinks into his pile of documents. Which behavior is more beastlike, the woman's losing her child or the policeman's turning his tendentious attentiveness into utter insensitivity? Ambiguity is increasing when the woman mentions Moses to be followed by the people and we realize that it was Moses who was born in the toilet and then moving in the garbage bag. Although the woman mentions slavery and a new covenant with God, her speech and gestures are latter-day. She does not wear archaic clothes and nothing suggests her living in a different age. Yet thousands of years seem to separate her from the policeman as she talks about that particular Moses (not a new one) and the Nile with a basket though we saw a black bag on top of a dustbin formerly. But the woman does not relate the biblical situation to something else (to her and to us, "the people"), like *Go Down, Moses*, the spiritual, but she lives and recounts it, confusing us about all we see and hear. Nothing is unequivocal: both the detective and the woman would like to save the child, that is why the former wants to find him as soon as possible and the latter has acted as she did. The chances are against their understanding each other, the situation or even the same words, since the difference of their "worldmaking" transforms the realities they live



into “Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen”.¹ As the detective turns away, Dürer’s *Feldhase* turns up to affirm the challenge of the opposition (man-beast) mentioned above. The woman unfolds the picture, caresses it and talks to it as if the mere image of the animal with boredom and indifference in its eyes was more attentive than the man. Then she huddles up, covers her head with the rug and her monologue becomes “interior” when the projection on the nylon cites someone who has lost her baby and will feel his breathing and tiny gestures no more. Sounds of a piano enchant these moments that incorporate feelings and knowledge: the grief of physical disengagement from a child and the knowledge of its necessity deepen all former ambiguities and disclose extraordinary psychological sensibility.

The sixth scene can be interpreted as a result of the fifth one since we see the woman, dressed in white night-robe, laid on an exam table and pushed into a CT scanner. Hospital as our familiar hell is a recurring visual context in Castellucci’s productions that becomes rather disturbing now with its beep sounds mixed into a soprano aria and followed by loud thumps reminiscent of a machine gun when the CT is switched on. Then it becomes frightening to see how this appliance gives its place to another one: the furiously rotating cylinder that sucks in a wig again. The machine is displaced by the most powerful image of the production in no time and the spectator hardly believes his/her eyes when he/she catches sight of the interior of a grotto with cavemen in front a starry sky glittering through the opening. The change is staggering from the sterile, desolate hospital to the cave resplendent in clay brown and bluish colors that shows the opposite of the first scene. The stage gives a naturalistic image of primeval conditions completely different from the way certain films (e.g. *La guerre du feu*, *Ao*, *le dernier Néandertal*) take us back in time since the figures’ sluggish movement, the slightly foggy nature of the image (caused by the nylon curtain) and Scott Gibbon’s sound space sieging ecstatic heights confront us with sheer mystery. We see a slowly unfolding vision in which naked people with still monkey heads resembling Craig’s übermarionettes do “not compete with Life” but clothe themselves “with a death-like Beauty while exhaling a living spirit” (Craig, 1908, 2-12). A man hangs up and skins something while others, even a woman with a baby among them, gather around him, and begin to eat from the flesh. Then the woman realizes that the baby on her arm is dead and we feel sorrow as well as mourning in the way she puts the small body on a rock and we also feel pity and an intent not to disturb her in the way the others stare at them before leaving her alone. Finally the woman scoops a hole with her hands, puts the baby in it, scatters some soil and lays a stone on it. The scene is rather enigmatic since we cannot identify what is skinned and eaten at the beginning. The small flesh can be an already dead baby, in which case the tension of insensitivity (that we project into

¹ Cf. „[...] the German concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen* coined by Ernst Bloch in the 1930s can only be transferred into English by splitting its meaning into several English terms. [...] On the most general level the concept refers to temporal inconsistency that is contrasted to an orderly and balanced relationship between events or states of reality.” (Giesen, 2004, 27-28)



cannibalism) and deep feelings (that we see in grieving the death of a child) imbues the scene. It is not an illustration of a transition, i.e. it is not the expansion of a moment in which cruelty is replaced by humanity but rather in which inhuman and humane behavior exist together. But the small flesh can belong to an animal; let's say to a hare that has turned up during the evening. In that case and in relation to Dürer's picture it makes us comment on the relationship of art and nature. It will only become meaningless if the flesh belonged neither to a baby, nor to a hare but represented some basic commodity of nutrition.

After the burial the woman stands still for a long time facing the wall of the cave, then she collapses and a man slowly lays over her while their shadows follow them on the wall. The naked bodies wave on each other protractedly so that we can project deep feelings into their copulating movements. Their slow making love is the man's reaction to secure the future and a tender consolation at the same time. Then the man stands up and turns to the "wailing wall" to express his feelings posteriorly and the woman comes forward to strike on the nylon curtain several times to leave her muddy handprint on it. Every strike sounds like thundering and makes the others come back to watch the woman for long while she paints SOS on the curtain at the climax of the atmospheric resounding. It would be foolish to ask what writing as a form of communication has got to do with this cave scene. Various lettering and inscriptions in Castellucci's productions – like inferno in *Inferno* or you are (not) my shepherd in *Sul concetto* – are signals rather than signs with a well-defined communicative function. The woman's action signals an intense desire of leaving trace in time or escaping from the captivity of time and recalls the latest research according to which "persons who made hand stencils" in the Upper Paleolithic caves "were predominantly females" (Snow, 2013, 746). The unbearable suffering of losing a child expressed formerly responds to the questions "where does longing for redemption come from" and "where does art come from" implied by the woman's action. At the same time it makes the problems of "who should be saved" and "who is behind the nylon" even more complicated.

The cave scene shows the opposite of the opening scene: supposing the people view an exhibition, the latter shows worshipping art as a "golden calf" while the former shows the birth of art as a vital necessity. These scenes can be linked on account of "internalization" as well since longing for redemption derives from the consciousness of death in the cave scene. Supposing we see a human baby in the skinned creature, "internalization" happens physically first when all members of the community eat up the dead child. Then it happens in a figurative sense when torment caused by the subconscious nature of emotional relationship turns into art and we become witnesses of a special Freudian sublimation. The prologue seems to deal with the "internalization" of art, i.e. the transformation of all that perceived into corporeality, into a part of our physical being. The finale shows an inverse process, the manifestation of our most innate emotions. The former highlights reception that ideally provides new



experience and crashes all accustomed and conventional in us while the latter stresses creation by frantic suffering condensed in handprints. The cave scene completes Castellucci's "theatre essay" on the principles of art and belief so that Freud's idea of culture and religion will come to our mind even if the production does not recall his writings on Moses.

When the mourning woman disappears in the darkness we wonder at the CT scanner in the middle of the cave. The other woman (Moses' mother) gets off the machine, then looks around as if she had got into a strange world and instinctively approaches the baby's grave, the letters on the nylon and the place where the cave man and his mate were making love. She lies on the ground and embraces the thin air while the outlines of the CT's black tunnel shine like eclipse of the sun. Solar eclipse as a kind of black hole is a recurring image in Castellucci's productions evoked by the vision of the machine now, grasping us like scalps by the rotating cylinder. It is rather eerie to face the parallels of these two images in this regard and to see the era of technology and digital communication get opposed to prehistory shown not as a fictitious state of the unmediated but as an explosion of mediality. SOS among the handprints shows us writing not separated from corporeality but as an outlash of physical experience. The body is not excluded from communication but expands the simplest sign with elemental force similarly to Castellucci's productions in which the body of the actor/actress as well as the body of the spectator form the basis for communication. At the same time prehistory does not feature in *Go Down, Moses* as an epoch in history but as an "Urbild" similar to the "golden age" of Castellucci's *Orfeo ed Euridice / Orphée et Eurydice* (Vienna/Brussels, 2014) with a lush, green forest bathing in moonlight and a naked nymph in the finale. Although we get back in time from the present to the archaic period, the cave scene represents "the id" itself at the depth of the CT according to the topography of the soul – to the mother's soul who has lost her child and to the cave woman's soul – in which we behold the archetype of a cry for salvation condensed in art.

While Scott Gibbons' sound space evokes the music of the spheres with a song of angels in beautiful chorales, our diverse emotions, associations and thoughts take shape and we understand that the mythical, ahistorical images of *Go Down, Moses* do not serve as sheer criticism of our civilization, technology and culture but ask the basic questions of our life. They let us meditate on the human condition and the role of art within it. Separated from the bulk of contemporary theatre by thousands of years, *Go Down, Moses* leads us to depths that we catch sight only in the most demanding situations of our life. When I saw it in Vienna, the production was given so cold reception that I cannot wonder. Why should the audience like it?



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