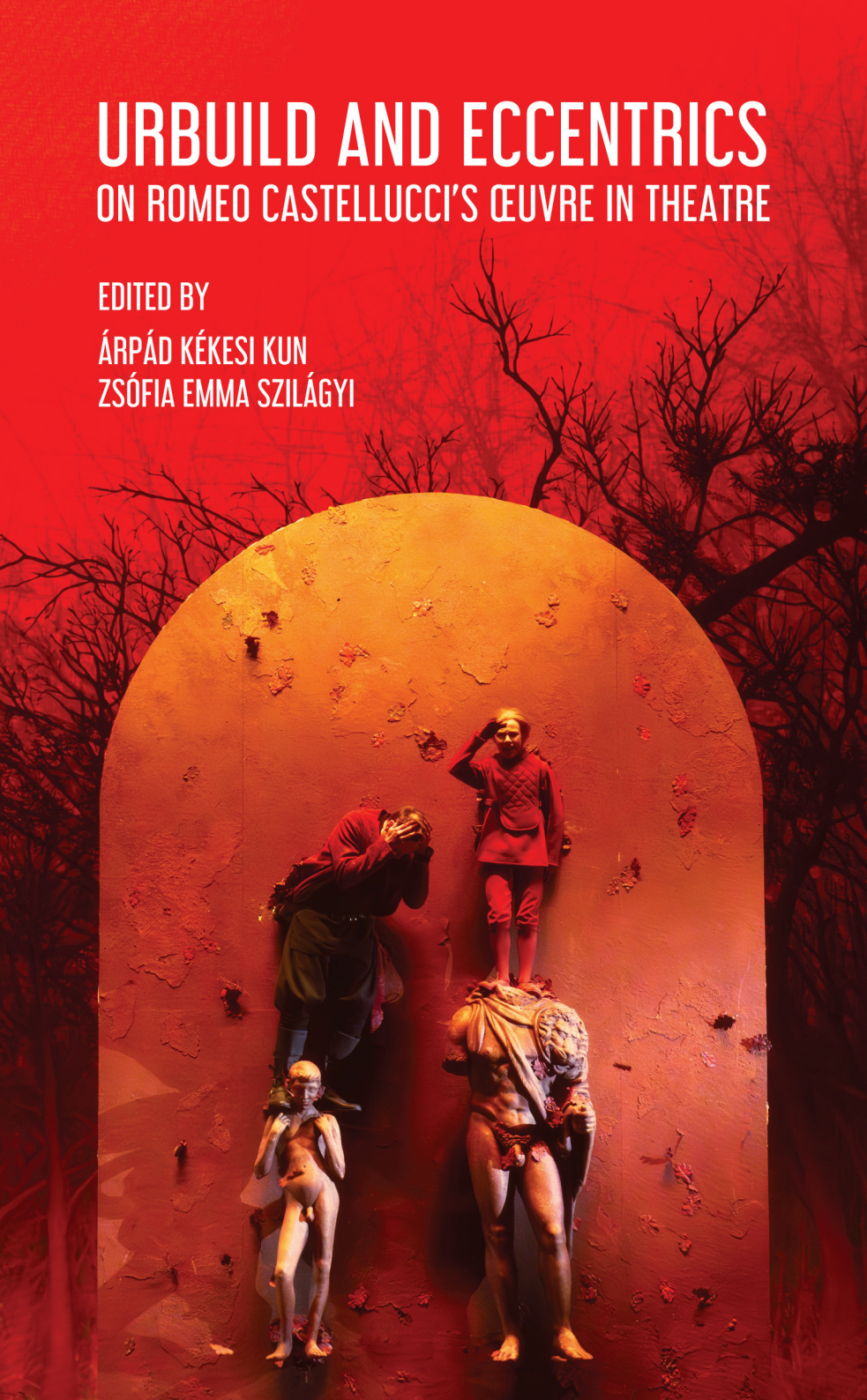
URBUILD AND ECCENTRICS

ON ROMEO CASTELLUCCI'S ŒUVRE IN THEATRE

EDITED BY
ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN
ZSÓFIA EMMA SZILÁGYI



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Preface: Worldmaking In Theatre

Nearly half a century has passed since Nelson Goodman's seminal book, *Ways of Worldmaking*, was first published in 1978. Since then, we have come to take as self-evident what certain philosophers, linguists and literary theorists had already proposed: that reality is not something given to us ready-made but something we construct – that reality does not lie before us in its pure objectivity, waiting to be known, but exists only within our own constructions. This insight, by now almost a commonplace, also transformed thinking about art, definitively rendering obsolete the millennia-old principle of *imitatio naturae* and locating the artist's task not in imitating reality or, conversely, denying it, but in constructing a reality – in creating a world. Every work of art creates a world that stands in multiple relations to the lifeworld and to various constructions of reality. Echoing this idea, whether consciously or not, Brigitte Salino wrote in *Le Monde* after seeing the Paris production of *Go Down, Moses* (2014) that "after the astonishing final scene, [the spectator] leaves with a question: where does this man [Romeo Castellucci] find the strength to reinvent the world again and again, like a Sisyphus condemned eternally to begin anew?" (quoted in Duplat 2014).

The book now in the reader's hands is devoted to one of the most remarkable theatrical worldmakers of our time, whose productions both evoke archaic patterns of human existence undivided by geographical, cultural or other boundaries and constitute compelling or unsettling, but invariably extraordinary, idiosyncratic worlds. The photograph on the cover of our book, taken from a production staged by Romeo Castellucci at La Scala in Milan in the spring of 2026, shows a father and son

in a scene in which the father resorts to physical violence. In Act III, Scene 4 of Debussy's *chef-d'œuvre*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Golaud persuades his son Yniold to spy on his new wife, Mélisande, and find out whether she is being unfaithful to him with Pelléas. Castellucci does not weave the major themes of his theatrical projects into his staging of the opera; nevertheless, both the work itself and this particular scene bring to the fore themes of archetypal resonance that recur throughout his theatre: the father–son relationship, violence and the presence of the child on stage. According to the libretto, the characters are "in front of the castle". The stage image, eccentric to the core, certainly suggests an outdoor setting, yet there is no trace of any castle; instead, what we seem to see is a large tomb slab, with two recumbent sculpted figures on top, of the kind found in churches and mausoleums above the earthly remains of bygone nobles. The slab is covered with fallen leaves, with dry leaves scattered beside it as well, while the background – dense with bare trees and thick undergrowth – glows red, so that the landscape around the man raging with jealousy and the terrified child seems almost to be aflame. In the libretto, Golaud lifts up the reluctant child so that, through the castle window, he may peer at what the opera's two title characters are doing together. On stage, the two richly dressed figures in red lie upon the slab, and when it rises and towers before us like a wall, the spectacle becomes startling. It is as though father and son were spying while standing on two tomb effigies in the cemetery of King Arkel's palace – climbing onto the shoulders and necks of scarcely decorous likenesses of long-dead ancestors, exposing the nakedness of the male body with all the frankness of ancient art – and doing so in a striking reversal: Golaud standing on the torso of a child, Yniold on that of a muscular warrior. It is hardly surprising that this association also brings to mind the famous phrase attributed to Bernard of Chartres, *nanos gigantum humeris insidentes* – "standing on the shoulders of giants" – while the arresting stage image itself intimates an *Urbild*: one generation bearing the next, which,

like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, strives to see farther. What irony that father and son, tormented by visions of adultery, should in this way be spying on a woman while literally seeing nothing. And how sublime that Castellucci, himself standing on the shoulders of such giants as Maeterlinck and Debussy, genuinely does see farther, allowing us, too, to glimpse the beautiful moment of eternal recurrence: the cyclical nature of time "in this museum of human life, [where] the statues depict figures contemplating their past and future movements" (Castellucci and Longchamp 2026).

The image from *Pelléas et Mélisande* discussed above bears the imprint of a theatrical worldmaker who has himself been inspired by numerous other worldmakers – above all visual artists, film directors and writers, from Mark Rothko through Ingmar Bergman to Friedrich Hölderlin – while in turn providing inspiration for a whole range of scholars across Europe, Asia and the Americas. The work of some of these scholars has gained greater visibility than that of others, largely because of linguistic barriers and the limited accessibility of certain publications, and it is this latter anomaly that the present collection seeks, in part, to redress. The idea for *Urbild and Eccentrics. On Romeo Castellucci's Œuvre in Theatre* originated at the Doctoral School of the University of Arts Târgu Mureș, where Cristina Modreanu, Magdolna Jákfalvi and Árpád Kékesi Kun have been engaged with the work of the Italian director for a decade and a half, while several of their students – including Imola Nagy and Zsolt Benedek – have also written about Castellucci's theatre in their PhD dissertations. One of the volume's explicit aims is to reach an international readership. In our view, Romanian and Hungarian scholars have produced a considerable body of important writing on individual works by Castellucci and on his theatrical thinking, work that deserves greater visibility rather than remaining confined, because of linguistic limitations, to the spheres of theatre research and higher education in the two countries. This is why the contributions collected in the volume have been translated into English. Most

were also revised for publication in English, and throughout the editorial process we have sought to take the needs of Anglophone readers into account.

Many of the contributors teach in humanities and arts programmes, training future theatre historians, critics, actors, dramaturgs, directors, set and costume designers, among others. The essays are therefore addressed not only to colleagues working in academia, but also to university students who – in both East and West – are only now becoming acquainted with Castellucci's theatre and who, because of their age or geographical circumstances, may not have had the opportunity to see his productions live. Fortunately, the director's work over the past twenty-five years is relatively well documented through television and video recordings, most of which are available online, allowing even those who have been unable to share in the live experience so essential to Castellucci's theatre to gain some sense of his work. The volume also seeks to provide guidance for these readers.

A distinctive feature of our volume is that it brings together different registers of discourse on Castellucci: criticism rooted in the immediate experience of performance and scholarly studies that seek to offer a broader perspective on individual works, uncover their interconnections and pursue analysis through a theoretical apparatus. The first chapter brings together contributions that establish the volume's theoretical frameworks. Through four concepts – epiphany, experience, presence and meaning – Árpád Kékesi Kun examines how a spectator willing to "go along with" a Castellucci production is continually compelled to relinquish their habitual modes of experience and thought. Ioana Petcu-Pădurean situates Castellucci's work within the framework of postdramatic theatre, constructing a context for it through, among other things, discussions of the work of Katie Mitchell and Jan Fabre. Drawing on two paradigmatic productions, Zsófia Emma Szilágyi describes the operation of the tragic gaze and introduces the concept of tragic sensibility, which is consistently bound up with

a particular mode of presenting violence and which, although difficult to verbalise in terms of meaning, cannot be regarded as merely a subjective emotional surplus. Cristina Modreanu proposes the term *poem-installation* to describe Castellucci's productions and also develops the concept of *emotional adhesion* to describe the way in which the spectator becomes affectively attached to the images created by the artist. Zsolt Benedek and István Fazakas contribute to a phenomenology of theatrical experience through an analysis of affectivity and catharsis, understanding the latter as a specifically theatrical mode of the phenomenological experience of the sublime. Finally, in discussing an extraordinary "dance performance" created without actors, Mirella Patureau shows how Castellucci's images are informed by an imaginative cruelty that recalls Artaud's radicalism.

After *Frames*, the second chapter turns to individual *Pictures*, beginning with the episodes of *Tragedia Endogonidia*, which Veronika Darida analyses, together with their antecedents and wide-ranging philosophical affiliations, as parts of the most ambitious theatrical experiment of the opening years of the twenty-first century. Árpád Kékesi Kun examines the Dante-inspired trilogy, which occupies a prominent place in Castellucci's œuvre, by asking what it means, at the very beginning of the third millennium, to live through hell, purgatory and paradise through the medium of theatre. In relation to *Inferno*, the first part of the trilogy, Zsolt Benedek discusses the architectonics of the sublime and argues that, through the experience of its own abyss, the identity of the spectator is placed on new foundations, while a kind of communal experience also comes into being among those who have shared in it. Péter Závada attempts a phenomenological reconstruction of the production *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* and seeks to determine whether the apprehension of essence, also known as eidetic reduction – a procedure employed by the positive sciences, phenomenology and, implicitly, the arts – can also take place in theatre. Imola Nagy undertakes a detailed analysis of how Castellucci's *Orphée et Eurydice* repre-

sents the liminal state in which Eurydice and her avatar Els exist. Two essays are devoted to *Go Down, Moses*: Árpád Kékesi Kun models the reception of the production and demonstrates how the spectator is compelled to oscillate between their proliferating associations and the cognitive patterns suggested by discursive logic, the principle of montage and so-called puzzle dramaturgy. Magdolna Jákfalvi, in turn, shows how Castellucci distances himself from the performative force of a reality constructed onstage – that is, from the performance-art tradition – drawing closer instead to the sensuous power of the visual and aural environment constructed there and using it to overwhelm us. Taking as her point of departure a performance of *Le Metope del Partenone* in an industrial hall at La Villette a few days after the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015, Mihaela Michailov relentlessly asks: who are those reduced to scattered fragments in a massacre; who are we who watch the disasters unfolding before us with fanatical devotion, as if hypnotised; and who are those who propel these disasters into a disordering reality that increasingly banalises its own evil? Analysing images from *Moses und Aron*, *La Passione* and *Salome*, Zsófia Emma Szilágyi focuses on the relationship between object and emotion through the concept of the objective correlative, drawing on the respective understandings of T. S. Eliot and Romeo Castellucci. Oana Stoica concludes that, despite its powerful images of violence, *Bros* places theatre itself under scrutiny, together with its function of representing reality; Oltița Cîntec, meanwhile, argues that although Castellucci paints with actors, sounds, images and dance within the proscenium frame, generates meanings and treats the stage box as a three-dimensional visual field, the stage of *Bros* becomes a place of terrible truths rather than delight. Hannah Gelesz closely examines the double bill *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* and *De temporum fine comoedia* and argues that the director opens the radically abstract yet intensely concrete micro-reality of Judith and Bluebeard onto the broadest and freest philosophical and theoretical understanding of the world, linking it to Carl Orff's oratorio and raising

the two works to a further aesthetic and interpretative level. In the final essay of the second chapter Árpád Kékesi Kun points out how the memory of Performance Art defines the dramaturgy of Castellucci's most recent work in Salzburg to date, the staging of Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*. The essay subjects what may perhaps already be described as one of the high points of Castellucci's oeuvre to a comprehensive analysis.

Although the twenty contributions collected in this volume – including the present preface – can hardly encompass Romeo Castellucci's extraordinarily prolific body of work in its entirety, they offer a broad perspective on the productions he has created over the past quarter-century and may enrich the substantial body of Castellucci scholarship with a number of insights that, until now, have remained largely inaccessible because of linguistic barriers.

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I.
The Frames

Árpád Kékesi Kun

Epiphany, Experience, Presence and Meaning in Romeo Castellucci's Theatre

Epiphany

According to Romeo Castellucci, "Theatre is an individual epiphany, so I have no control over the audience's reactions" (Laera 2009, 14). The term *epiphany*, derived from the Greek *epiphaneia* (ἐπιφάνεια), meaning 'appearance' or 'manifestation', has largely fallen out of everyday usage and is now associated primarily with the Feast of the Epiphany, i.e. Twelfth Night. Here, however, it is to be understood not in this sense but as 'revelation'. The Christian connotation carried by the term – revelation in the religious sense – plays no part in Castellucci's work, even though the aesthetic experience afforded by his theatre has been regarded as "synonymous with the sacramental (or, in Italian, the 'sanzio')" (Lichtenberg 2007). Castellucci's secular conception of epiphany resonates with the categorical assertion of Robert Wilson, the artist whose work is most closely akin to Castellucci's: "theatre that imposes an interpretation is aesthetic fascism" (Holmberg 1998, 62). This statement does not seek to eliminate the act of interpretation from the process by which theatre exerts its effects – an aim that would in any case be entirely illusory – but merely to transfer interpretation from theatre-makers to spectators: it presupposes a theatre that does not explain but, at most, suggests connections while simultaneously suspending them. The apodictic assertions "My productions take shape in the spectators' minds" (Wilson 1998, 47) and "[Castellucci: theatre is] like a flame. It's like a fire from the mind. So you can feel it with your body, not only with your brain" (Anon. 2025) entrust the

task of meaning-making entirely to the spectators – including the decision whether to undertake it at all – while defining the task of staging as the creation of visual and acoustic material capable of evoking a wealth of associations. Taken together, however, image and sound are "only a catalyst of the viewer's internal searching: a mere question, movement, displacement of thoughts" (Semenowicz 2016, 37). This internal search is a process whose outcome can neither be foreseen nor controlled. A fundamental hermeneutic premise holds that understanding cannot be willed: it either occurs or it does not; for Castellucci, moreover, not understanding – indeed, even refusing to understand – is a valid spectator response. Understanding demands effort from the spectator, who cannot settle into the comfort of passive reception; yet the work awaiting them is not merely – indeed, not primarily – intellectual. The antithesis of epiphany is 'recognition', a contrast that makes clear just how far removed Castellucci's theatre is both from Brecht's and from the work of the exponents of post-Brechtian theatre, which remains a powerful force, particularly in Europe. According to Castellucci, "theatre is not something that must be 'recognised': 'I-go-to-the-theatre-to-recognise-the-Shakespeare-studies-that-I-have-completed'. It is not (or should not) be like that. Theatre is rather a journey through the unknown, towards the unknown" (ibid., 38).

It is surely no coincidence that no play by Brecht has yet inspired Castellucci to create a production. The mechanism by which his theatre exerts its effects differs radically from that of his German predecessor: epiphany and recognition function differently, even though both directors make frequent use of demonstration. *The Street Scene*, which provides the basic model for Brecht's epic theatre, centres on an eyewitness – rather than a participant such as the driver or the injured party – recounting a traffic accident "in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident" (Brecht 1964, 121). In this instance, narration has a social function and serves a practical purpose that determines both what is recounted and

how. The demonstrator neither seeks to create an illusion nor attempts to induce the same experience in others; at most, they imitate actions, leaving the listeners to draw inferences about the characters. The epic stage scene modelled on the Street Scene is designed to eliminate illusion, restrict imitation and do no more than show certain events, thereby helping spectators form their own opinions. Throughout the performance, the stage remains a stage, while the actor remains a demonstrator, clearly distinct from the character presented. The elimination of illusion, demonstrative action and the absence of characterisation likewise inform Castellucci's productions, yet the difference is decisive: for Castellucci, the aim is not to elicit judgements from spectators and thereby shape their consciousness. Despite the discernible overlap in the devices they employ to support demonstration, Brecht's theatre and Castellucci's thus lead their spectators along entirely different paths.

For example, a spectator in Brecht's theatre would certainly not have been moved when they saw Hans Gaugler, playing the title role in the 1950 production of *Der Hofmeister* (*The Tutor*), bow before two superiors who wielded far greater social and economic power than the tutor yet paid him no attention whatsoever. The reason was that the gesture, repeated four times and deliberately exaggerated and stylised – that is, alienated – offered insight not into the tutor as a character but into the social relations at work, prompting spectators to reflect on those relations (Rouse 1984, 32–34). In other words, the gesture was transformed into *Gestus* so that the spectator might recognise the general pattern of social inequality crystallised within it: compelled self-abasement on one side, utter disregard and contempt on the other. By contrast, in Castellucci's work, demonstration arises from a distinctive installation aesthetic. When the spectator sees, behind a figure lying in a cruciform position in the foreground of the stage, an enormous photograph accompanied by a caption about a child with a hearing impairment who hears music for the first time with the aid of an audiometer (*Saint François d'Assise*, 2026), or sees entries

from the Atlas of Great Extinctions projected onto the back wall (*Requiem*, 2019), they are compelled immediately to seek a connection between what they see and the theme and defining features of the work being staged, as well as the events of the production in question – to relate these elements to the production as a whole. Yet the spectator does not merely recognise a connection intellectually; they experience it with their whole body. This is because what they see and hear is profoundly moving: the moment weighs heavily upon them and inevitably elicits a physical response. (As is well known, Brecht did not seek to banish emotion, but he certainly did not foreground it.) In the aforementioned black-and-white photograph shown in *Saint François d'Assise*, taken at the Institute for the Deaf-Mute in Straubing in 1956, we see a little boy in ecstasy: the awe concentrated in his closed eyes, open mouth and raised hand – and perhaps, deep within, the spectator can even hear the child sigh. The caption explains that the child is hearing music for the first time; what enchants him, however, is presumably not merely the music he hears but the very fact – the phenomenon – of hearing. The spectator, meanwhile, does not hear what the little boy hears, but does hear the music of Olivier Messiaen's extraordinary opera – at this moment, the singing of the invisible chorus, which gives voice to Jesus's words: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" – and, in doing so, lives through this magical moment as a kind of epiphany, a revelation akin to the child's own.

A similar mechanism is at work in *Requiem*: first, we are taken aback by the title Atlas of Great Extinctions when it appears as projected text before the second movement, the Kyrie, begins; then a growing sense of grief takes hold of us as we watch name after name pass before us in impassive succession – the names of extinct plants and animals, human tribes and languages, destroyed cities and works of art, and so forth, including several familiar from the recent past (Chernobyl, Palmyra, the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the roof struc-

ture of Notre-Dame); as time passes, the entries grow increasingly abstract, making hunger, thirst, beauty, music and even the present day itself disappear. We inevitably associate all this with the way the elderly woman vanished at the beginning of the production and with the way its images continually vanish by dissolving into one another; yet the effect does not remain at the level of consciousness. As a spectator, I *understand because* the staging enables me to *experience* disappearance so profoundly: just as Mozart disappeared and my own mother and grandmother disappeared – for we cannot help relating what we see to the events of our own lives – so this sublime moment itself is now disappearing, and one day I too shall disappear, as will the Earth and, eventually, our universe itself. This recognition belongs not to the realm of social consciousness but rather to that of existence itself; it strikes me with epiphanic force, leaving me profoundly shaken and moved.

The spectator's present centrality in Castellucci's theatre has a history of its own: even while working on *Tragedia Endogonidia* (2002–2004), he did not yet conceive of the spectator in these terms; it was only in the years that followed – around the time of the Dante trilogy (2008) – that "the thought about the viewer's new, bizarre role developed" (Semenowicz 2016, 159). The director describes this as a genuine "turnaround" or "revolution" in his thinking (ibid., 180). During the first quarter-century of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio's existence, Castellucci believed that everything was decided on stage, and he now regards the productions created during that period as didactic: in *Santa Sofia. Teatro Khmer* (1986), for example, "the viewer received the keys" and "everything was 'explained' in a way" (ibid.). By the 2010s, however, "what happens in the viewers' heads [became] more important than what an actor feels" (ibid.), and Castellucci maintains that "directing the viewer by various stage instruments is not present in [his] last works. There is no key, help, clue" (ibid.). The director is fond of enigmas, which abound in his work: in *Le Metope del Partenone* (2015), for example, an enigma is projected between each of its

six minutely constructed scenes. In the production, we witness the meticulously staged aftermath of six accidents and watch for minutes on end as six actors enact the process of dying, while a different medical team rushes to their aid each evening: real emergency doctors, using real equipment and following actual protocols – all to no avail. Each time, after a medical instrument emits the sound signalling death, we are presented with a question; the staging, however, offers no answers whatsoever. The importance Castellucci attaches to the enigma is evident from the fact that even the extras who applied to appear in *Faust. Fatto, non detto* (2026) were drawn into the production through an enigma on the website carrying the casting call. At the same time, each of the director's works may itself be regarded as an enigma: "unsolvable; the password it hides cannot be deciphered in an unequivocal manner" (ibid., 40). Each of his images follows a "precise logic" but "cannot be captured, described or explained unambiguously" (ibid.). The spectator's aim clearly cannot be to unravel this logic; at most, it can be to immerse themselves in their own experience. Like Robert Wilson's before them, Castellucci's productions constitute unique provocations to the phenomenology and hermeneutics of theatre spectatorship: by unleashing a torrent of images and sounds that elicits both delight and fear, they lead us to the limits of what can be "apprehended" at all.

Experience

Closely connected with the phenomenon of epiphany is Castellucci's view that "the art of our era is the art of the viewer" and "theatre is, above all, the viewer's individual experience" (Semenowicz 2016, 157 and 156). This is not a matter of adapting his theatre to the phenomena of the *Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Gerhard Schulze), but, on the contrary, of resisting them – a stance born of the director's aversion to communication. Since "spectacle, media, communication turned into an ideology that obscures all other domains of language, [and w]e

are all the time immersed in communication" (ibid., 16), Castellucci, through his theatre and the materiality he has made its ultimate reality, tries "to communicate as little as possible" (ibid., 115). Although he is frequently pressed to account for his productions, Castellucci maintains that theatre requires no explanation. He seeks to create a theatre whose effects – conceived in terms of epiphany – strike the spectator like a bolt of lightning: his images overwhelm us at first encounter and make no appeal to our intellect. In his productions, the goal is neither Brecht's preferred strategy of demonstration, discussed above, nor the fostering of emotional and intellectual involvement characteristic of the realist theatrical tradition associated with Stanislavski, but rather the kind of experience favoured by Artaud. If Castellucci's theatre has a "teleology" at all, it is to be found precisely in this experience.

Although the Rome episode of *Tragedia Endogonidia* (2003) has been described as opening with a torrent of random sounds and lights that "returns the spectator to the state preceding identification, that is, self-recognition through the image in the mirror" (Brousse 2015, 78), all Castellucci's productions can be said to invalidate the mirror metaphor so often invoked in relation to theatre (present in Shakespeare, although even there it is chiefly Hamlet who advances it), and to block both identification and self-recognition. Let us add at once that the identification at issue is with the fictional – with a fictional character or situation. Prioritising experience over intellectual understanding does not mean that we cannot reflect *afterwards* on those moments in Castellucci's works that place the spectator under immense somatic strain. Yet when the spectator is "compelled" to experience, with their whole body, the (literally) terrifying beauty of Castellucci's images and to understand it through that experience, it is not thought that presses to the fore. For the artist too, experience is at work primarily in bodily form, but it must be kept wholly distinct from the spectator's experience. For the artist, it is a process indispensable to creation yet antithetical to the customary theatrical process

of (textual) interpretation; when working with a literary text, Castellucci describes it as taking in a book through the skin – epidermally. "The world is what lies beyond our skin. To let a book pass through the skin means accepting that the world will enter us and be engraved deep within us. It is from there that I can create a complex structure, reconcile myself with it and then eliminate it" (Perrier 2022, 118).

The Dante trilogy (2008) provides paradigmatic examples of experience: in two scenes, its first part presents us with a succession of images and gestures of murderous love. Towards the middle of *Inferno*, we see people reaching for one another's hands, embracing and kissing, and lifting their child aloft; the image of lovers and families then gradually gives way to images of strangulation, of one person killing another. Towards the end of the production, we encounter something similar when we see the crowd caught in a vast cycle of movement: they embrace in pairs, then one person steps behind the other and draws a finger across the front of the other's neck as though slitting their throat. The "victim" falls to the ground, while the "killer" soon becomes a "victim" in turn, as someone else embraces them, steps behind them and repeats the same murderous gesture. Children, young people and the elderly embrace and kill one another in this way for a prolonged period, without pause. *Inferno* does not seek to bring a distant, exotic experience closer; quite the reverse, it renders what is close and familiar sufficiently remote for its pattern – existential rather than social – to become clearly discernible. Through its slow, beautiful tableaux of collective rather than individual action, the spectator experiences hell: the everyday hell familiar to us all, in which, as Oscar Wilde writes in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, "each man kills the thing he loves".

In *Orphée et Eurydice* (2014), we similarly experience the descent into Hades. Through projected captions appearing in measured succession, the production introduces us to the story of Els's life and of the cerebral haemorrhage she suffered, and then, via a live video feed, to Els herself, confined to bed with

locked-in syndrome. The audience sees Els lying in a hospital room wearing headphones; she, in turn, hears what we are hearing in the opera house at that very moment. This synchrony has an extraordinarily powerful effect: rather than identifying with a fictional figure (Eurydice) – rather than looking into the familiar theatrical mirror – we encounter one of our contemporaries (Els) in the here and now. Her fate moves us so deeply, and we relate it so closely to our own, that the "fear and pity" awakened within us leave us overcome by tragic emotion. If anyone knows what hell "means", Els does – and through our intense emotional involvement, we too experience it for ourselves.

In *Purgatorio*, violence is experienced with the sudden force of a lightning strike. The stage is empty, while the projected caption claims that music is playing; yet the sounds filtering in make it clear that an act of sexual violence is taking place offstage, and we are forced to confront a father sexually assaulting his son not only through our ears but also – more disturbingly – in our mind's eye, through the images projected before us by our memories and imagination. Although moments of violence occur in Castellucci's theatre, particularly in *Bros* (2021), and violence is a prominent theme in his productions, those productions do not set out to demonstrate it, even by resorting to exaggeration. Rather, they allow us to examine the consequences of the shift associated with postdramatic theatre, which may be described as "a transition from *represented pain* to *pain experienced in representation*" (Lehmann 2006, 166), although the form this shift assumes here differs fundamentally from its manifestations in the work of Jan Fabre, La Fura dels Baus, Kornél Mundruczó and others. In *Purgatorio*, the spectator can hardly escape this experience and cannot possibly remain indifferent. Nor can they remain indifferent in the Cesena version of *Paradiso*, where they must follow the path laid out for them through spaces of light and darkness so that, by experiencing the inner light, they may live through what Dante experiences at the end of his journey in the *Divina Commedia*:

although he cannot behold God, the divine light remains with him for ever.

In contrast to the photographs with which the media bombard us each day, the pure, simple images of Castellucci's theatre often prove profoundly moving. The fourth "episode" of *La Passione* (2016), for example, presents us with a bottle of sparkling wine and a pot of Greek yoghurt standing inside a lone refrigerator: a last supper superimposed upon Christ's own – the final meal of a patient who died at a hospice in Hamburg – thereby allowing us to experience in profane form what invariably remains remote within the sacred (cf. Szilágyi 2026, 294–295). Such resistance to the daily flood of images may also be understood as the political potential of Castellucci's theatre, which lies in the fact that in an age when "we live with a surplus of information, experiences and knowledge, [it] leads us into a different time, gives us that which is most important: access to experience" (Semenowicz 2016, 160). Experience, then – in the singular.

Presence (effects) and meaning (effects)

Perplexity is a recurrent experience for spectators in Castellucci's theatre, arising from the fact that, even when we perceive the overwhelming experiential force of what unfolds, our consciousness cannot immediately provide satisfactory answers to the questions that involuntarily well up within us: "what does it mean?" – that is, "what is it that I am seeing and hearing?" and "why?" We thus become uncertain as to the semiotic function of a given event, image, scene and so forth: we feel its "presence effect" but cannot arrive at any firm conclusion about its "meaning effect". This perplexity is compounded by the fact that the spectator – to put it simply – tends to watch theatre with their brain: instead of surrendering to the intense experience of a given event or immersing themselves deeply in a given image, they immediately ask what the event or image means; in doing so, they look past it and, bracketing the force of its pres-

ence, begin at once to search for its meaning. This mechanism of reception arises from what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls the "metaphysical attitude" and defines as "a process of progressive abandonment and forgetting of presence" (Gumbrecht 2004, xv). Where presence and meaning are concerned, *what is* and *what is not* are set against one another: the former refers to something "tangible" that "can have an immediate impact on human bodies", whereas the latter is something we attribute to a thing "if we form an idea of what this thing may be in relation to us" (ibid., xiii and xiv). Yet the two do not constitute a binary opposition: on the one hand, presence "[is] always already permeated with absence"; on the other, the phenomena of presence always take the form of presence *effects*, since "they are necessarily surrounded by, wrapped into, and perhaps even mediated by clouds and cushions of meaning" (ibid., 106). We always experience the simultaneity of presence effects and meaning effects "as a tension or as an oscillation", owing to the fact that "meaning will not bracket, will not make the presence effects disappear, and that the […] physical presence of things […] will not ultimately repress the meaning dimension" (ibid., 108). To live through the intensity of aesthetic experience and the oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects, we need *Gelassenheit* – a term borrowed from Martin Heidegger, understood as "both part of the disposition with which we should open ourselves to aesthetic experience and as the existential state to which aesthetic experience can take us"; the experience itself assumes the form of *epiphany*, referring to the feeling that "we cannot hold on to those presence effects" (ibid., 117 and 111).

It is worth emphasising that Gumbrecht uses the same term – epiphany – for aesthetic experience as Castellucci does for the experience of watching theatre, while the concepts developed by the German-born American literary theorist help us understand more clearly how the Italian director's works exert their effects. In Castellucci's theatre, presence effects are so powerful that they often block the meaning effects insis-

tently sought by the spectator; this does not, however, mean that the question of meaning effects cannot be raised in relation to any given event or image. It is simply that, in theatrical reception (and all the more so in Castellucci's theatre), there is little point in assigning a meaning to an event, image or any of its constituent elements. What is at issue is not so much the futility of assigning a *single* meaning as the futility of meaning attribution itself. In other words, it is mistaken to proceed according to the general formula of Cartesian thought (X=Y): to equate one thing unequivocally with another. For example, it is hardly productive to interpret the orange appearing at the very beginning of *Requiem* (2019) straight away as a symbol of fertility or, indeed, of the Fall and, through the meaning thus assigned to it, at once to "look past" the orange itself. Symbol dictionaries, of course, frequently treat the orange in precisely this way, arguing that in several works of Western painting and literature the orange in fact stands in for the apple, which, ever since Genesis (where, incidentally, only an unspecified "fruit" is mentioned), has been widely recognised as a symbol of the Fall. In aesthetic experience, however, such tortuous logic is hardly fruitful. If we construe something as a symbol, we attribute to it an underlying (non-present) meaning; in Castellucci's theatre, however, this "arbitrary" attribution of meaning leads nowhere. After all, if "the Old Testament rain of frogs, a representation of the Holy Trinity or the succession of the three monotheistic religions" (Perrier 2022, 84) can all be read into the three cars falling from above in the Paris episode of *Tragedia Endogonidia* – this time, clearly, in the absence of any conventional symbolic meaning, since cars do not feature in symbol dictionaries – interpretation becomes hopelessly open-ended, a mere accumulation of meanings. The orange's meaning effects will emerge not through the introduction of an extrinsic meaning, but only if we allow its presence effects to operate. More specifically, we must attend to the effects arising from the orange's thingness – its colour, form, imagined scent and so forth – in short, to sensory experience, to what de-

rives from the perceptual process, rather than relying solely on our brains when watching theatre. If we do so, we must notice that, at the very beginning of *Requiem*, as we watch an elderly woman literally disappear in her bed, the space surrounding the few pieces of furniture suggesting her room is pitch-black; the objects – the television, the rug and the bed – are angular in form; and the smoke from a lit "last" cigarette drifts through the air. It is in this context that the orange appears: the woman lifts it from the bedside table to her face and inhales its scent deeply. The presence effects are unambiguous: its orange colour, round form and pleasantly sweet scent (which evokes positive associations and may be linked to the joy of life) are what give rise to the prop's meaning effects. Thus, we may certainly speak of meaning effects in relation to the orange or any other stage element, image or event; yet we should not produce them in isolation from presence effects, and we should remain aware that these meaning effects do not necessarily point in a single direction – towards a determinate interpretation capable of being sustained throughout the production. If we are willing to yield to presence effects, they can override the meaning or meanings we may seek to impose and lead us somewhere entirely different. Even if we adhere to the aforementioned conception of the orange as a symbol of the Fall, we cannot ignore the fact that, at the beginning of *Requiem*, the elderly woman breathes in its scent with her eyes closed and a faint smile on her face, clearly taking pleasure in it. She does so in precisely the same way as Francis, the title character of Olivier Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise*, who repeats the same gesture in the final image ("Death and the New Life") of Castellucci's 2026 Salzburg production, covered in sweat, filthy and utterly exhausted. He stands in the gaping grave at the centre of a sea of black earth and inhales deeply, drawing in the scent of the orange given to him by the Angel. Both the unnamed elderly woman and Francis stand on the threshold of death, yet their gestures and facial expressions do not present death as an object of fear or terror. The orange therefore does not embody

the kind of death that, according to Christian mythology, is the dire consequence of original sin – the plucking of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge – and continues to afflict every human being as a curse to this day. Rather, it evokes notions of salvation, Paradise and the longed-for afterlife and is therefore predominantly positive in its associations. Thus, even if we associate the orange's appearance with impending death, this death – however dark the stage context surrounding it may be in both productions – cannot appear to us in sombre hues. As a result of the presence effects, the binary opposition between death and life, together with the opposing values attached to its two terms, is suspended; the spectator – if they are willing to "go along with" the performance, if they do not attempt to resist the force of presence – is compelled temporarily to relinquish their habitual modes of experience and thought. This is precisely what epiphany and experience mean for Castellucci – no more and no less. What remains with the spectator after the performance, however, depends entirely on individual factors.

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Ioana Petcu-Pădurean

Theatre at the Frontier. The Dialogue between the Arts in Contemporary Performance Forms

Introduction. Dwarfs on the shoulders of giants. The "new" poetics of theatre

Claude Régy observed that theatre appears where one least expects it.[1] If there is indeed truth in his words, we may say without reservation that this is the principle governing many contemporary productions. Gathered under the term *postdramatic theatre*,[2] which is preferred to *postmodern*,[3] performance forms

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[1] "Mais quelle importance que ce soit du théâtre ou pas. D'autres ont pensé au contraire que c'était peut-être l'essence du théâtre. Et si le théâtre n'était pas du tout où on l'attend?" (Régy 2016, 217–218)

[2] Hans-Thies Lehmann was the first to propose and theorise the concept of postdramatic theatre in his study *Postdramatisches Theater*, bringing together under this definition many of the new forms that had emerged onstage since 1960 and establishing a point of reference for practitioners of formally versatile, non-conventional theatre today (Robert Wilson, Peter Sellars, Richard Schechner, The Wooster Group, Needcompany and Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio are among the examples he frequently cites). Lehmann argues that *postdramatic* denotes not only the diachronic sense of what follows the era of drama but, above all, a break with classical dramatic forms and Aristotelian structures. It therefore identifies not merely a historical period but also a style, a new aesthetic.

[3] The term entered specialist discourse in the 1990s but gradually lost currency in theatre studies, being supplanted by the more specific expression *postdramatic theatre*. It continues to be used in relation to dramatic literature, where it generally identifies a mode of dramatic writing exemplified by Peter Handke, Heiner Müller, Frank Castorf,

of the greatest variety abandon the conventional stage, finding spaces either close to everyday life (squares, plazas and streets) or accessible to only a small audience (galleries, independent venues and private homes). Theatre thus emerges where it is least expected, not only in terms of location but also of context. As scholars have observed, the social and the political are two of the principal coordinates directly addressed by these new theatrical forms. Following the path opened by Brecht and Piscator, artists embrace activism and militancy, often in radical forms (Calixto Bieito, Peter Sellars, Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes). At times theatre assumes the form of a survey, with spectators themselves serving as subjects of study. For example, Ursula Martinez interviews a group of pensioners from Morecambe (Lancashire, England) in order to draw conclusions about their status, to define both a community and the distinct individuals within it, and ultimately to return to her own phobias and the obsessive questions that trouble her.

Martinez's 2005 production *O.A.P.* juxtaposes the interviews with a monologue in which the artist examines herself and interacts with others; the questions are thereby turned back towards the audience, broadening both the range of subjects examined and the body of revealing responses. Other performers articulate their political, sexual or religious orientations, and theatre ultimately becomes a vehicle through which their message gains visibility. The boundary between art and the gratuitous becomes increasingly difficult to discern, compelling critics to ask in all seriousness what retains artistic validity and what belongs to the ephemeral forms assumed by theatre in this age of diversity, schizoid expression and the frequently bizarre structures adopted by artistic works.

Among the words that recur in artists' interviews and lectures, *identity* and *authenticity* are the most frequent. The two are clearly interconnected, since the perpetual interrogation of identity – perhaps intensified by the individual's position

Rosalie Purvis, Sarah Kane, Rebecca Prichard, Arvind Gaur, Tom Stoppard, David Henry Hwang, Caryl Churchill and Sam Shepard.

in a multicultural context – also offers a path to originality. The search for the self, whether as a distinct personality or as part of a community, runs through contemporary artistic manifestos and produces unexpected and original results. One such alternative love story is told by Marina Abramović and Ulay, who set out from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China to meet halfway and say goodbye. Ulay began in the Gobi Desert and Abramović at the Yellow Sea. Each travelled at their own pace, according to their physical capacities, concentrating on particular states of mind and thoughts along the way. Beyond the significance of an initiatory journey ending in farewell, *The Great Wall Walk* also constituted a return – a solitary return to the self. Defying classification as a "pure" form, the action undertaken by Abramović and Ulay in 1988, which was to become famous, displays both elements of theatre (a scenario subject to chance, a situation and agents between whom a relationship is woven) and elements that place it beyond that category (there is neither a stage in the proper sense nor a theatrical convention, since the two do not set out to be actors or to play roles). It may therefore be considered theatre "*where one least expects it*", a mode of expression "at the frontier of theatre". Similarly, drawing elements from theatre and the visual arts, The Sydney Front presented a boldly titled production, *The Pornography of Performance*, in 1989. It sought to activate the inner senses and dismantle taboos that persisted in hypermodern society. As in an exhibition – a technique that would recur frequently, and partly for the same reasons, in Romeo Castellucci's work – spectators were invited to peer through narrow apertures in cylinders as though entering a camera obscura. The actors performed on the other side; shocking actions and excessive nudity were prominent. With no possibility of escape, the spectator no longer simply looked but became, involuntarily, a voyeur. The production's play with hidden pleasures and its exposure of subconscious "residues" offered possibilities for exploring the self and confronting the Other, whether the alter ego, the actor opposite or a neighbouring spectator. Once again, theatre

coexisted with other art forms and made use of every additional layer of meaning that this convergence afforded.

The relationship with the text likewise changes, and the solutions reached are highly inventive. When canonical authors are revisited, the original work may be excerpted and reshaped into a pretext (*Hamlet*, The Wooster Group[4]) or rewritten from the perspective of a secondary character (*Miss Julie*, directed by Katie Mitchell[5]). Viewed more broadly, these are exercises based on classical works that serve to reinvigorate authors already established in world literature and at the same time to "bring them down" from the stature of "giants", making them more accessible. Once lifted easily onto the giants' shoulders, the dwarfs are free to see farther and more keenly, untroubled by any fear of "heights".

Other scenarios are looser and more versatile still, being constructed with the audience's help. Partly adopting methods from improvisational theatre, productions that use this approach create a unique text and action for each performance. Every performance follows its own course and rhythm according to the audience's contribution. Following the forum-theatre model practised by Augusto Boal in the 1970s and 1980s – an activist theatre that rejected audience inertia and championed a theatre offering freedom – Jennifer S. Hartley staged *SOLD* (Theatre Versus Oppression, 2013), a production that engages its audience in addressing human trafficking. On the one hand, *SOLD* consists of a sequence of four monologues recounting experiences of trafficking and abuse; on the other, it becomes an educational act once it begins interacting directly with spectators through questions. The audience can alter the stories at will; Theatre Versus Oppression's aim is to raise awareness of the danger posed by a phenomenon that the authorities keep partly out of view. The project reached a wider audience because

[4] *Hamlet*, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte, The Wooster Group, The Public Theater, New York, 2007.

[5] *Fräulein Julie (Miss Julie)*, after August Strindberg, directed by Katie Mitchell and Leo Warner, 2010.

it did not remain confined to a single performance in Cardiff, where it was launched, but toured throughout Wales. Similarly, Cardboard Citizens – a British organisation founded by Adrian Jackson in 1991 – develops productions from scenarios adapted to each group with which it works, aiming to educate and rehabilitate people experiencing homelessness. Using the tools offered by theatre, Cardboard Citizens works in squats, support centres and even on the streets, seeking to raise public awareness of the plight of materially deprived people.

The diversity of contemporary theatre practice considerably expands the possible forms of mimesis, communication with the audience and engagement with the text, while the messages themselves generally remain universal.

The obsession with the visual. The hyper-screen

Beyond the many means of expression available to the contemporary artist, it is clear that the visual remains one of theatre's most important dimensions, and that its significance increases as contemporary society itself becomes subject to videology. Some characterise the twenty-first century in terms of the "hegemony of the visual" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, 32); others use the broader expression "visual culture", while the contemporary individual is described as *homo videns* (Sartori 2012). It is therefore evident, in almost every field and at every level of society, how much space the image occupies in our existence and how much power it can acquire. Terms such as *iconosphere* and *imagosphere* were coined by analogy with *logosphere*, which they have now superseded, while research into the imaginary and imagology has increased considerably. Barry Sandywell draws a suggestive parallel between *mythos* and *imago* in considering the displacement of *logos* in our century; in brief, "Logos is now retreating before the new mythos of the *image*" (Sandywell 2011, 4). Contemporary society consequently displays a marked interest in spectacle. Ocularcentrism re-establishes a connection with the Other, with difference, and makes this

encounter an object of analysis driven by both curiosity and fascination. Theatre is a privileged medium in which the eye can enter into relation with alterity, and in which unexpected functions and possibilities are explored.

On a global scale, directors have shifted theatrical language from verbal to non-verbal signs, among which visual elements predominate.[6] On the journey towards the self, the artist explores interiority through the image, which often exerts a fascinating power. It is clear that many artists' work bears the imprint of their training in the visual arts; among the best known are Marina Abramović, Ulay, Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, Einar Schleef and Chris Burden. Practitioners such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Meg Stuart and Pina Bausch, meanwhile, are choreographers who have approached dance theatre and forms of performance at the intersection of the arts in different ways.

The natural question concerns how connections can be forged between the image (painting, graphic art, video and so forth) and theatre. In certain cases, we suggest, the result approaches what Gilles Deleuze called the *movement-image*: "cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image. It does give us a section, but a section which is mobile, not an immobile section + abstract movement" (Deleuze 1997, 2). Writing about cinema, Deleuze gives the concept a broader scope, extending it to society, which, in his view, is governed by this principle.

Romeo Castellucci, in turn, employs the movement-image in theatre. The director has on several occasions expressed his preference for cinema,[7] yet he is not among those artists who

[6] In *Purgatorio*, Romeo Castellucci also uses text as image. A parallel text accompanying the stage action is projected onto a transparent screen superimposed upon the actors' performance. Rather than explaining what occurs onstage, the text is integrated into the overall framework and becomes part of the scenography.

[7] In an interview at Malta Festival Poznań in 2012, Castellucci spoke of his attraction to Sergei Parajanov, Ingmar Bergman and Andrei Tarkovsky. He nevertheless refuses ever to make a film.

engage extensively with film. His *Divina commedia* (2008), and *Inferno* in particular, unfolds as a succession of moving images. Retaining from Dante only a framework of ideas and symbols, the director of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio constructs a horizontally unfolding exhibition of moving images centred on suffering, which he has identified as the principal thread in Dante's text. In brief episodes addressing suffering, cruelty, mutilation and sacrifice, he continually reshapes the semantic field. In the vast "poem" he creates, the Italian director explores his theme's range of meanings as comprehensively as possible, while recognising that meaning remains fluid. He begins with physical suffering, strictly bound to the body and its capacity for endurance (the attack on the artist by dogs and Antoine Le Ménestrel's bare-handed ascent of the high wall of the Papal Palace in Avignon are salient examples), before tracing subtler inner effects: the artist's nostalgia and quiet anxieties permeate both the episode devoted to Andy Warhol and the static, unmistakably photographic scene in which a piano burns before a group of impassive people; the migration of individual suffering into the collective is explored in the section that might be called "Je t'aime. Où es-tu?"; suffering on a sacred plane, where good and evil coexist, is examined in sequences evoking Saint John. At its extreme, suffering slips into nightmare: the black veil writhing above the stage evokes the devil's wing, while the image that seems drawn from Hieronymus Bosch's paintings of the Apocalypse is inscribed upon the dark walls of the Papal Palace, whose illuminated windows make the building appear to be ablaze. Like a fragmented film whose rhythm is imposed by the sequence of its images, such moments produce states of terror. Hell is within us, whoever we may be; Hell is other people – this is what Castellucci conveys through an apparently abrupt yet essentially coherent chain of images.

If anything preoccupies Castellucci aesthetically – as the artist himself acknowledges, thereby placing his work within postdramatic poetics – it is the "representation of the unrep-

resentable". The Golden Lion he received at the 2013 Venice Biennale affirmed this aspiration in the words of Àlex Rigola:

> "For his capacity to create a new language for the stage that blends theatre, music and the plastic arts. For having created worlds that have achieved excellence in the representation of oneiric states, which is possibly the finest statement that can be made about the experience of the theatre. For having represented on stage something as impossible to represent as a nightmare".[8]

Moving images acquire meaning through the logic of their succession, including along the temporal axis. More astonishing still is the result when Castellucci transforms the stage into a kind of exhibition. In *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*, the scenario's simplicity is striking: the more restrained the action, the more varied the meanings and implications generated in reception. Located at the intersection of performance and exhibition, *On the Concept of the Face* is a double experiment, one strand interrogating what it means to train the gaze and the other addressing a spiritual dimension. Here the director opens a dialogue with theology and philosophy. Two figures appear in a minimally conceived setting representing a spacious flat, although its design evokes a sanatorium ward: a middle-class young man evidently caught up in daily concerns, and an elderly man suffering from incontinence. We witness a father–son relationship exposed in its most intimate moments: the elderly man experiences episodes of amnesia that reveal the degrading effects of senescence, and the son changes his nappy before leaving for work. At the connotative level, the relationship is reversed: the father becomes a child, while the son assumes the role of a father caring for the person beside him. Generational boundaries disappear, creating an inner

[8] Biennale Teatro 2013 – Cerimonia di consegna del Leone d'oro / Leone d'argento. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V67-gEED6dc, accessed 24 June 2026.

disequilibrium. The dramatic situation is doubled, however, by a vertical development of meaning: centrally positioned in the background on a colossal scale is Antonello da Messina's portrait of Jesus. A sign of pseudo-presence, this "character" keeps watch; more than that, his gaze remains directed at the spectator throughout the production's sixty minutes. Owing to the portrait's scale, no one in the auditorium can escape this devastating gaze. Castellucci makes the relationship between humiliation and incrimination the central stake of the production. Those who look towards the stage – the space of display – are condemned to endure what occurs there and may be judged for their helplessness, audacity or ignorance. *To look* is *to expose oneself*. Over the course of the production, Jesus's face appears to change; Castellucci explains, however, that nothing happens to the portrait and that only the spectator's state changes. In another episode in the same room, now with the elderly man lying motionless and hunched in bed in an explicit posture of humiliation, children throw stones at the gigantic figure of Christ. The connection with the biblical parable is readily apparent. The impact of the stones upon the painting is amplified, a strategy Castellucci frequently employs to exploit sound to maximum effect. A sonic space of varying rhythms and intensities thus emerges, ultimately forming a strange, brutal music. A tear is projected onto Jesus's face, followed by increasingly severe wounds that eventually cover the entire portrait. The sacred is annihilated or retreats into the darkness of being. In addition to exploiting the gaze in both directions – from auditorium to stage and from stage to auditorium – Castellucci returns to a theme that preoccupies him and recurs throughout postmodernism: the presence of absence. The Son of God is the present absence signified by the enormous painting, animated both by the marks inscribed upon the face as events unfold and by an optical illusion that makes the figure's expression appear to change from a protective smile to immeasurable sadness. Reality and pseudo-reality are the axes along which the artist works in his attempt to reopen the ques-

tion of art's meaning and even of the effects produced by theatrical structures.

Under Castellucci's piercing gaze, classical musical compositions become moving paintings in their turn. In *Requiem*,[9] Mozart's score forms both the nucleus and the membrane enveloping the theatrical construction. On the one hand, meditation on transience, death and the Last Judgement constitutes the production's semantic core. Every sign – the stage images, the message of each sequence and the projected words – converges and takes form within Mozart's composition. On the other, the Italian director introduces an overarching theme concerning the very conception of performance art. As a whole, *Requiem* can be understood as a vast canvas upon which moving images appear and disperse. It resembles a cinema screen, or a canvas upon which a painter continually superimposes new contours and strokes; the image changes unexpectedly within a fragmented narrative unified by the life–death cycle. The stage remains in a state of continuous transformation. The sense of ephemerality is likewise intensified by the sometimes imperceptible transitions between characters and episodes. Especially relevant to the stage's metamorphosis into an immense three-dimensional projection screen is the moment[10] when the chorus removes the set, revealing the black box. The white walls, which until then appeared fixed and solid, prove to be made from a material resembling a sheet of paper sprayed with colour and splattered with paint, as in conceptual art. The result is conceptual yet vibrant with the states conveyed by the soloists, chorus and music. The message is profoundly humanistic: art

[9] *Requiem*, music by W. A. Mozart, Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, 2019. Direction, set design, costumes and lighting: Romeo Castellucci; conductor: Raphaël Pichon.

[10] The moment marks the transition from the section entitled *Communio* to the production's final tableaux. In the last of these, the backdrop creates the impression of an abstract painting in shades of grey, symbolising both the disappearance and the return of the three figures – representing the three ages of life – as they carry in a baby, a sign that life is beginning anew.

perishes and is reborn as an essential expression of evanescent human existence.

In the past decade, Castellucci has drawn closer to opera, staging *Moses und Aron* by Arnold Schönberg,[11] thereby subtly introducing a political dimension alongside his pictorial preoccupation. The two-act composition develops concerns first explored in the play *Der biblische Weg* (*The Biblical Way*, 1926–27), written as Schönberg confronted the rising German anti-semitism threatening the Jewish population. The well-known declaration in which the composer unequivocally affirms his Jewish origins[12] becomes for Castellucci an occasion to reflect on the persistence of conflicts of identity throughout the history of artistic practice. Moreover, the opera, with its distinctly theatrical imprint, once again asks whether the performing, visual and musical arts can communicate values or moral principles to contemporary society. The stage is again the site of every possibility: flat images and frames unexpectedly acquire depth, while the floor and backdrop gradually become an immense canvas upon which soloists and chorus animate dynamic paintings. Everything metamorphoses as if in an alchemical process: the tape recorder becomes the divine Word and later pagan ritual garb; black paint becomes blood and sin; water becomes an agent of spiritual degradation. Beyond these theatrical acts of resemanticisation, however, the Austrian composer's work participates in a discourse on communication through art. The line that ends Act II – the last act completed by Schönberg – also gives voice to the director's own thought: "O Word, thou Word that I lack!" What do art and the artist lack if they are to disseminate their humanistic values throughout society? A powerful sense of disillusionment arises from the absence of a Word capable of persuading humanity as it moves ceaselessly

[11] *Moses und Aron*, music by Arnold Schönberg, Opéra Bastille, 2015. Direction, set design and costume design: Romeo Castellucci; conductor: Philippe Jordan.

[12] The well-known declaration is in fact an excerpt from a letter that Arnold Schönberg sent to the painter Wassily Kandinsky in 1923.

through a repetitive history – a history of heroism, disbelief and the incomprehensible. Following an inner logic of semantic mobility and the multiple meanings of the recurring words "invisible" and "unrepresentable" – signs both of the divine and of art – Romeo Castellucci abolishes the boundary between stage and audience. He incorporates the spectator into his meditation and his artistic credo.

Artaud's early twentieth-century vision of a theatre of light, image, movement and cries remains strikingly resonant.[13] The metaphors and visions scattered across the repeated formulations of *The Theatre and Its Double* are embodied in what we see today in the work of Jan Fabre, Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio and Pippo Delbono. Having practised performance since his student years at Antwerp's Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Fabre repeatedly returns to Artaudian theory, emphasising the meanings it acquires in the practice of Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory. Like Castellucci, Fabre continually asks what is real in art and what capacities and mechanisms make mimesis possible. Consistently producing shocking results that prompt some spectators to leave the auditorium, Fabre constructs a tightly integrated body of work permeated by a humanistic message. Whether working in sculpture, installation, performance, theatre or poetry, he is a dreamer in search of the essence that human beings conceal or ignore. The corollary of his ideas is the recovery of a simplicity abandoned in the process of civilisation, through which phobias and anxieties have become our mode of existence. This simplicity resides in the recovery of a triad of

[13] "Here too intervenes (besides the auditory language of sounds) the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried to the point of becoming signs, making a kind of alphabet out of these signs. Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theatre must organize it into veritable hieroglyphs, with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnections in relation to all organs and on all levels" (Artaud 1958, 90).

body, imagination and soul – elements suppressed in the contemporary age by politics, education, ethics and other forces. Fabre is an iconoclast who ventures deep into the empire of the visual, ceaselessly exploring and exploiting its manifold effects on the beholder. Entering sensitive zones such as the grotesque and the morbid, he expands the stage into an enormous canvas upon which forms perpetually metamorphose. Because his own perception of reality fuses senses, words and actions,[14] his productions present a complete convergence of the arts: a spherical whole.

Contrary to what one might assume, these productions – which might be described as aggregates of performances – are not fragmentary: the transitions among choreography, human sculpture, installation and acting are almost imperceptible. *L'Histoire des larmes*[15] is a Fabrian ars poetica. Its scenario escapes the conventional laws by which action follows a clear trajectory and characters form relationships with one another. The Grotowskian approach is recognisable: stripped of psychologisation, the actor is reduced to a body in motion and, now detached from the theories of the Wrocław Laboratory, becomes an integral part of the vast tableau that is continually remodelled. At times we seem to behold tableaux vivants, at others installations; Fabre composes stories and scenes through scenography and the actors' bodies, as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Lech Majewski have done in film. The production recalls the idea of poor theatre in its use of simple objects whose meanings change whenever they appear onstage. A ladder signifies ascent but also the possibility of falling; it is at once a crutch and a

[14] In an interview with Lydie Toran, the visual artist Jan Fabre stated: "Pour moi, chaque mot est presque comme une sculpture. Chaque mot a une grande importance. Je prends chaque mot dans ma bouche et je le goûte avant de l'écrire. Donc tout est très construit. C'est la même chose quand vous lisez mes textes : le rythme, le nombre de fois où tel mot revient... Je pourrais dire que je les conçois comme des installations" (Beauviche and Van den Dries 2013, 20).

[15] *L'Histoire des larmes*, Festival d'Avignon, 2005, directed by Jan Fabre, Troubleyn Company; music by Eric Sleichim.

wing, an absurd exercise in confronting death and a road to nowhere. The tear – the dominant symbol of the stage action around which the other signs gravitate – finds its equivalents by turns in despair, sadness, cries and generalised hysteria. In its first meaning, it is a bodily secretion, an emblem of shame and humiliation. Its lyrical counterpart is the raindrop. It also reveals what is most fragile in the human being. *L'Histoire des larmes* is also a journey through the human life cycle: in childhood one cries freely, whereas in adulthood the same state becomes a cause for self-censorship. Finally, the tear represents vulnerability.

Whereas in *L'Histoire des larmes* Fabre emphasises the overall tableau, creating an impression of consummate grandeur, *Je suis Sang*,[16] which likewise has the structure of a poem, builds its moving images out of the poem's body, alternating long shots with close-ups. Like tears, blood belongs to human physical and spiritual interiority, and the artist examines this sign in all its aspects, ranging from scenes of anatomical theatre to others inundated by a sea of blood. For Fabre, the stage is fundamentally a workshop. As the acts unfold, installations pass before the spectators. Objects are continually reconfigured into new systems, enormous frameworks and tableaux set against the sonic background of ritual compositions. At times slow like religious canticles and at others ardent like the unbridled music of Dionysian orgiastic celebration, these compositions are always performed live using conventional or improvised instruments, including enormous drums and glass vessels. The actors' voices – themselves treated as musical instruments – merge with this sonic background, which recalls the carnivalesque atmosphere of Goya's paintings.

A fantastical pageant in which the resources of theatre once again provide an apt vehicle for a personal vision, *Prepa-*

[16] *Je suis Sang*, Festival d'Avignon, 2005; text, scenography and choreography by Jan Fabre, Troubleyn Company.

ratio Mortis,[17] a 2005 dance solo and one-woman show, transforms the morbid image into a purely iconoclastic expression. Over the course of several dozen minutes, this meditation on death allows Fabre to address one of contemporary society's taboos: the corpse and embalming. Employing Baroque scenography – the performance takes place in a cathedral, on a catafalque positioned at the altar – the artist draws upon numerous Western symbols associated with passage into the afterlife and shifts the scene from reality into the oneiric. Composer and organist Bernard Foccroulle provides the organ music to which Annabelle Chambon dances. *Preparatio Mortis* is living sculpture and painting. At first, in a barely perceptible light, the enormous catafalque covered with flowers "comes alive" as the blanket of flowers gently rises and falls with the breath of the still-covered dancer. Then a hand emerges, and the dance sets the entire set in motion. Fabre speaks of death through life. The body is a symbol of perishability and decay, but also of the wonder of existence. The catafalque is uncovered so that Chambon can enter it – the body is absorbed into its hidden space. As though in an aquarium, the dancer appears to float behind the catafalque's misted glass; as in a magic trick, drawings appear on the glass, made either with paint or through the contact of a warm body with its fogged surface. The primal drawings and the forms traced by the performer evoke relics buried in the earth; *Preparatio Mortis* thus becomes an essay on human transience and on the devastating yet preserving action of time. Once again, the spectator is inducted into the cult of the visual through both the immense proportions assumed by the images before them and the uncommon, romantic aura these images convey.

Because iconoclasm belongs, as we can readily see, to the dominant empire of the visual, text is subject to the same rules. In *L'Histoire des larmes*, for example, the oversized letters SOS are formed on the wall of the Papal Palace in Avignon from

[17] *Preparatio Mortis*, directed by Jan Fabre, with Annabelle Chambon, Troubleyn Company, 2005.

handkerchiefs hung there; as the actors add further letters, these become Save Our Souls – another message on an impressive scale, indicating both its importance and its sender's despair. Violent lighting, chromatic contrasts and the expanses of colour that fill the stage are constants in Fabre's work. Intended to impress the retina, these visual elements find sonic counterparts in piercing notes, cries and driving rhythms.

We may therefore conclude, at this point, that the arts meet in a dialogue principally concerned with the colossal, the shocking, exhibitionism and the power of suggestion. In this dizzying interplay, whose primary basis is the emotional impact upon the beholder, the signs – light, sound, word and gesture – undergo a process of melting and solidification, giving rise to a new, hybrid body that would decompose if deprived of any one of its parts. At the level of reception, this entails a return to the principle of catharsis, which the new poetics achieves through a combination of the Aristotelian criterion of "fear" and a revolt of the senses.

Film – more precisely, the use of cameras and cinematic technique – offers another means of reconsidering theatre's expressive potentials. The results can be highly sophisticated. The environment in which we live each day plainly creates the conditions in which we can expose ourselves and look at others with ease. The screen that enchanted audiences at the beginning of the twentieth century is today close at hand and readily accessible. Where once it projected fantastical stories (*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *Metropolis* and *Un chien andalou*) or enthralled audiences with images of celebrated beauties, today's screen, sometimes small enough to fit into a pocket or the palm of one's hand, invites us to become the protagonists of a film assembled from fragments of our private lives. "In less than half a century we have passed from the spectacle-screen to the communication-screen, from the one-screen to the all-screen", Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy observe in their study of global cinema (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2008, 8). The sphere of intimacy is ruptured, and our biographies may be narrated

online and in the media, in forms of varying ambition. Such practices are readily accessible because advanced technology surrounds and even invades us, while the "smart" screen has developed with surprising speed. As the authors already cited suggest, we can recognise the power of this accumulation:

> "This is the age of the global screen: screens everywhere and at all times, in shops and airports, restaurants and bars, underground stations, cars and aircraft; screens of every size, flat screens, outdoor screens and mobile mini-screens; wearable screens and screens for indoor projection; all-purpose screens on which anything can be seen. […] The century that is just beginning promises to be that of the omnipresent and multiform, planetary and multimedia screen" (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2008, 8).

The consequences are manifold, the most complex of which may concern the study of one's own image – a study that sometimes assumes theatrical, superficial, aberrant and schizoid forms.

What form might this global screen take in theatre? Venturing onto the risky terrain of supplementing the stage with cinematic language, Katie Mitchell succeeds in creating a stable bridge between the two media, both theatre and cinema benefiting from their juxtaposition. Working with 59 Productions, most often in collaboration with designer Leo Warner, the British director creates productions based upon this doubling of the image. There is the stage, sparsely furnished, upon which characters move in silence; and there is the screen, upon which a camera trained on those characters displays close-ups. The space is divided in two, and the spectator's attention must be distributed between them. In this hybrid form, Mitchell is specifically concerned with how human interiority may be rendered through images. She accordingly selects texts in which characters speak extensively, as in Virginia Woolf's novel *The*

Waves, which she staged at the National Theatre in London in 2006 and which is composed of monologues. The novel's characters continually narrate their own experience, allowing the reader to discern their thoughts through soliloquies. Through the close-up – the technique most frequently used in this kind of theatre – Mitchell seeks to render states of mind, thoughts and the entirety of inner turmoil. The hyper-screen confronts the audience, harnessing its attention and demonstrating that we are more impressed by the gigantic image than by the action unfolding beneath it. How is this eloquence of the image achieved? Given the complex means by which the production is realised, its relationship with the text is fundamentally transformed. The text is revised to meet new requirements, altered without hesitation and reduced to its most important lines. The performances are no longer governed by the text but by movement cues and details of facial expression, which are crucial to the filmed images. The director even asks the actors not to think about the lines spoken by the character in the novel but to attend mentally only to that character's principal features and formulate ideas and states of mind in response. The characters' lines – or what remains of them – are spoken by other actors at the edge of the stage. While remaining familiar with the text yet detached from it, and concentrating on how the projections are produced, the actors and director studied an extensive series of early twentieth-century portrait photographs as well as the cinematographic style of Andrei Tarkovsky, one of the filmmakers whose approach most closely resembles the techniques adopted by 59 Productions. Four planes ultimately emerge across which the audience's attention must be divided: the stage action, the projection screen, the text spoken from the wings and the music, generally performed live.

Where does the polyphonic convergence of these four planes lead? Supplemented by the effect of offstage voices and *mise en abyme*, the hyper-screen plays with illusion and becomes the principal means of opening a discussion of mimesis and illusion in art. An artificial territory emerges with-

in which the distance between reality and unreality becomes vividly apparent. Mitchell takes the experiment further in a 2011 installation at the V&A produced within the same 59 Productions project. It comprises five experimental films that use major directorial systems to analyse how truth is rendered in art. The question in fact has two dimensions, since it applies to both theatre and film. Projected upon the walls of the exhibition space, the films present Ophelia's speeches from Act IV, Scene 5 of *Hamlet* and her suicide successively in the manner of Stanislavski, Brecht, Brook, Artaud and Grotowski. Each system can be readily discerned in both the acting and the techniques of filming and editing. Stanislavskian realism and psychologisation emerge in the actress's verisimilar performance and the camera angles. Songs, departures from role and frontal, descriptive shots support the Brechtian version. Detail, in Mitchell's vision, defines Peter Brook's system. Distortion of the character's image and the unnatural inflections in the performer's voice create a strange atmosphere ideally suited to Artaud's theories, while the cries, movements, near-expressionist use of light and shadow, and foreshortened views lead spectators to recognise Grotowski's hallmark in the fragment devoted to him.

Cinema, at times almost invasive, is another medium recruited by theatre for its new aesthetic programmes. Katie Mitchell uses multimedia in her investigation of the "reality" of the stage, acting and directorial devices. Real-time close-up filming reveals details imperceptible to the audience at a distance; moreover, the multimedia effect heightens the impression of visual congestion and pervasive saturation.

New perspectives on old patterns. Tragedy between revival and dissolution

"This theatre is not about suspense or psychological examination. It's not about fantasy or storyline. It's not about beautiful, touching scenes. This theatre is about astonishment", Thomas

Crombez[18] writes of *Tragedia Endogonidia*.[19] That its director, Romeo Castellucci, accords primacy to the sovereign power of the image[20] is already well known, and many theorists, critics and artists acknowledge that this is precisely what draws them to his work. Simple matters are expressed through grandiose sets, amid an efflorescence of symbols. Yet beyond this overwhelming effect on the optic nerves, the artist continually devises new, personal modes of expression. Tragedy is better suited to his visions than any other genre precisely because it is the form traditionally associated with terrible events and shattering gestures. Its fundamental concepts are nevertheless remodelled. *Tragedia Endogonidia*, one of the most powerful theatrical essays on the subject, is an assemblage of contradictions and verbal correspondences that begins with its very title. From the premise "I know nothing about tragedy", Castellucci arrives at extraordinary results. He investigates, denies and reinvents it. The eleven episodes should be understood as staging an encounter between *tragos* – implying suffering, the impossibility of escaping the path of destiny and death – and *endogone*, which refers to microbiological organisms containing both male and female reproductive cells and therefore capable of self-reproduction. As in ancient tragedy, Castellucci's *Tragedia* speaks of death and rebirth, but this time through a pro-

[18] Wouter Hillaert and Thomas Crombez, *Cruelty in the Theatre of the Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio*, lecture delivered at the conference "Tragedy, the Tragic, and the Political", Leuven, 24 March 2005.

[19] *Tragedia Endogonidia*, directed by Romeo Castellucci; music by Scott Gibbons and Chiara Guidi; Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, 2002–2004.

[20] The way images are created in Romeo Castellucci's theatre recalls two categories defined by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy: the excess-image and the abundance-image. Characterised by their force of impact, both terms define the contemporary hyper-screen. The excess-image is further characterised by a baroque proliferation of continually resemanticised symbols, an escalation of extremes and a tendency towards the pathological and towards bodily or sexual excess. The abundance-image manifests itself in an accumulation of forms and a phobia of minimalism (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2008, 69–79).

longed process of metamorphosis in which the *telos* continually redefines itself through its own elements.

What, then, happens to the structures of tragedy across this series of eleven performances? Suffering (*talaipōria*) is the condition that emerges most powerfully from all the moving images witnessed by the spectator. A modern Medea kills her child and lives through an endless nightmare; images of martyrs (Christ and Saint Sebastian) recur continually. Here, however, suffering, directly connected with the tragic hero, acquires contemporary political connotations. Each episode takes place in a different city – the sequence is circular – beginning in Cesena, then moving through Avignon, Berlin, Brussels, Bergen, Paris, Rome, Strasbourg, London and Marseille before returning to Cesena. For the director, each city (each city-state – polis) also represents a history and its distinctive sociopolitical reference points; the tragic heroes therefore now include Mussolini, the Pope, Charles de Gaulle and pacifist activists. In fantastical tableaux, where large-scale objects abound and continually acquire new meanings from one appearance to the next, Castellucci explores the relationship between victim and executioner in his own distinctive way, generalising it as an enduring emblem of the human condition. The world is full of victims and executioners, and at times their positions can readily be reversed (Episode IV, Brussels). As in ancient tragedy, the victims frequently belong to the category of the stranger and its variants: the misfit, refugee, exile and so forth. These figures also recur in *Tragedia Endogonidia*, but the director adapts them to the contemporary context. In this contemporary reworking, the category of the stranger encompasses cross-dressed figures (Episode IV, Brussels) and African rebels (Episode VIII, Strasbourg), while the executioners take the form of terrorists (Episode III, Berlin), tyrants (Episode VII, Rome), armed forces (Episode VI, Paris) or fantastical figures – a kind of Erinyes inhabiting the subconscious of the "heroes" (Episode III, Berlin, and Episode V, Bergen). The victim undergoes a process of humiliation that evokes both the biblical

and the pagan meanings of the term, while the stage frequently becomes a sacrificial altar. The lamb (Episode VI, Paris) and the goat (Episode V, Bergen) point alternately to Christianity and to Dionysian celebrations. Using Brechtian devices, Castellucci explicitly tells the spectator that the sacrifice is artificial: red paint resembling blood is poured from a bottle onto the victim's neck or chest, while blows, stabbings and beheadings are mimed. The result is nevertheless contradictory, since the lugubrious atmosphere and bizarre soundscape create the impression of a completed act. The same intention to assault the eye recurs in every sequence. Captive within the production's vast theatrical apparatus, the beholder is compelled to look, while the most unsuspected recesses of their subconscious are exploited and stimulated. The sacrificial rite – echoes of René Girard's theory are visible in several scenes – likewise induces humiliation. Its emblems recur: ropes, weapons, constricting straps and belts, and balaclavas; its material is the human body, treated as a substance that can be endlessly remoulded like a plasticine figure. Surrounded by a nimbus of innocence, the victims await the blow; more than that, they seem born with this knowledge. The positions of those who humiliate and those who are humiliated, of spectators and actors, are interchangeable. The actors are prey to the audience's gaze, but they also accuse and provoke those who perform the act of looking – at times against ethical conventions – particularly when confronted with scenes of masturbation, extreme cruelty or infanticide.

The ontological question – "Who am I?" or "Who are you?" – is always on the characters' lips and finds its counterpart in the frequently repeated "Where are you?" Unlike the ancient texts, Castellucci offers no answer and, like Franz Rosenzweig, understands the art of tragedy as the art of silence. The sphinx appearing in Episode VI signifies the unanswered question and is a symbol of absurdity and tomb-like silence. Where Oedipus once answered in Sophocles' text, he is now transfixed in muteness. In this world from which logos is absent, the divine

and the profane coexist, while evil and sin are intrinsic to this phantasmagorical retrospective of life and death, within which they proliferate. Evoking the *mises-en-scène* of Tadeusz Kantor, the Italian artist introduces strange objects with no less strange functions, all of them emblems of death. These moving sculptures, mechanisms and robots usually serve as instruments of torture. Gigantic set pieces, such as the ram's head in Episode V, Bergen, seem drawn from dark dreams; an installation rotates letters at random like a slot-machine display, abolishing the alphabet and, by implication, language. The production trades on the spectator's bewilderment: three full-scale cars fall from the theatre ceiling (Episode VI, Paris), while a tank drives up a mound of earth (Episode VIII, Strasbourg). A figure wearing a crown of thorns enters a motor vehicle, and through this image the director transforms the ancient tragic principle of *deus ex machina* into a hallmark of his own style: *deus in machina*.

In its ancient sense, *theatron* – the place where something is shown, where something happens – is for Castellucci the appropriate space for display. Here unfolds a sensory epic in which the spectator is the central traveler, continually summoned by something that has always been part of them: the tragic spirit and the fascination with birth, death, the unknown and the strange. Travelling through space and time, the beholder moves from city to city as though entering different rooms of the vast European museum, where the history of the present is displayed using instruments two thousand years old.

Although Castellucci's conception is dominated by tragic[21] structures, Jan Fabre is not a devotee of the genre; when he turns to it, however, he arrives at original solutions. The Ant-

[21] Castellucci's œuvre is studded with titles that testify to the artist's unbounded affinity with tragedy: *Gilgamesh* (1990), *Amleto. La veemente esteriorità della morte di un mollusco* (1992), *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1994), *Orestea (una commedia organica?)* (1995), *Giulio Cesare* (1997), *Ophelia* (1997) and *Parsifal* (2011).

werp artist's œuvre follows a paradoxical course,[22] its avant-gardism nevertheless drawing upon the canvas of world art and literature. Medieval and Renaissance culture, together with the principles of Surrealism, sustain the vertiginous movement of his ideas; contrary to any superficial impression, the artist does not sever contact with the past but enters into dialogue with it, using it as both support and cipher in formulating his message. Hans-Thies Lehmann has written of the Belgian director's affinity with tragedy:

> "Fabre's work is essentially tragic – and modern tragedy borders of course on the grotesque, on satire, on the sinister. But whereas in traditional drama it used to matter what happened between bodies, in postdramatic theater it matters what happens to the body itself. Fabre simply lets us feel and think the body as metaphysics. He himself conceives of the human body as the setting of a tragic conflict" (Van den Dries 2005, 3).

Prometheus Landscape II (2011)[23] marks the artist's return to myth. The production brings together Aeschylus's tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, Fabre's poetry, Meyerholdian biomechanics and the entire extravagant arsenal to which Troubleyn has

[22] "Pour Fabre, la tradition est l'essence même du développement artistique. Elle pose les normes au sein d'une culture, mais c'est surtout par la voix de la tradition que s'exprime la maîtrise d'un style ou d'une période artistique spécifique. Il est bon d'engager le dialogue avec ces maîtres, non seulement pour en apprendre quelque chose en tant que nouvel étudiant en art, mais aussi pour les dépasser, afin que le combat mené contre le modèle du passé s'enrichisse d'une nouvelle étape dans ce processus de progrès constant de l'art." (Beauviche and Van den Dries 2013, 11)

[23] *Prometheus Landscape II*, directed by Jan Fabre, Montclair State University, New Jersey, 2011, with Katarina Bistrović-Darvaš, Annabelle Chambon, Cédric Charron, Vittoria Deferrari, Lawrence Goldhuber, Ivana Jozić, Katarzyna Makuch, Gilles Polet, Kasper Vandenberghe and Kurt Vandendriessche.

accustomed its audience. In this complex form, the stage once again becomes a workshop for constructing installations, a screen for moving images and a platform from which poetry can be shouted like slogans. *Prometheus Landscape II* brings the myth's characters back before the audience in propulsive choreography. By bridging a millennia-old past and the present, the production reinstates the Aristotelian principles of *eleos* and *phobos* (pity and fear), while delivering emphatic messages and amplifying the central themes of tragedy: "We need heroes now!" one of the actors exclaims. At its centre is a human sculpture of Prometheus in two forms. The first is the great hero, embodying physical and inner strength through his verticality: Kurt Vandendriessche hangs motionless from ropes above the stage for the production's entire eighty-minute duration. The other Prometheus, a product of the present, is a fat, naked man tied to a chair (Lawrence Goldhuber). He becomes the victim of public ridicule and abuse as the actors mock, spit at and strike him: the glory of the past gives way to the irony and buffoonery of the present. The landscapes featuring Prometheus – tableaux vivants or installations involving objects with unusual uses – all speak of suffering, which, in Fabre's vision, is equated with sadomasochism (the bizarrely attired Zeus, played by Cédric Charron, and Io, played by Annabelle Chambon, copulate onstage to a frenzied rhythm) and perversion (masturbation and bondage). Each character or group forms a statue or sculptural ensemble of indisputable beauty, poised precariously on the brink of the grotesque – a beauty that astonishes and terrifies. The choreography heightens this tension, and the production ultimately veers into a phantasmagoric Dionysian orgiastic ritual in which – as in an Artaudian scenario – the naked actors, in a trance, hurl themselves at one another in a dance of flames. Pandora also appears in this mythical "bestiary" and concludes the production with the following words, which contain Fabre's "moral":

"I am here to teach
This herd of men and women
That even in their darkest hour
They can choose
To become a victim
Or a hero" (Jowitt 2011)

By reinventing the grammar of the visual and shaping volumes from the actors' naked, tortured bodies, the director moves beyond the stage framework and into a "beyond" – a space in which ideas are born. Through this return to fundamental principles of ancient thought, concepts such as suffering, power and madness acquire broader meanings in *Prometheus Landscape II* as they are cast into new forms.

Consequently, this theatre at the intersection of the arts readily draws upon the tragic: its modes of expression, its metaphysics and the grandiose, emphatic framework that sustains it. The major tragic themes – power, the identity–alterity relation, vicissitude, sacrifice, *fatum* and freedom – find counterparts in the contemporary context, facilitating the artists' synthetic and visual thinking. The new myths are founded upon history's remnants and carry a distinct, powerful echo of the past. Systems of terror, social oppression and the divided self, lost in its own incomprehension, are so many faces through which the tragic reveals itself.

Conclusion

More significant today than the long-established convergence of theatre with other disciplines is the erosion of the boundary between stage and audience, at times to the point of its complete disappearance – especially when the spectator becomes a *spect-actor*. Terms such as fusion, fluidity, permeability and abstraction are not merely interrelated; they are integral to contemporary aesthetics and directorial styles. It is no coincidence that practitioners move between theatre and opera stages, exhi-

bition galleries and unconventional spaces. Almost any physical space can become a site of performance. Anchored in the contemporary social and political world, theatre – whether iconoclastic or taking the form of forum or investigative theatre – will always be capable of engaging the audience's concerns. What matters most, indeed, is the way theatrical creation, no longer enclosed by the fourth wall, flows out towards the audience: as a message, at times through interaction, but above all through the feeling that one is witnessing an exhibition about oneself, however cryptic or spectacular it may be. The trial of Orestes in Aeschylus's *Eumenides* is intended not only for Orestes, Athena and a few Erinyes, but also for the witnesses in the ancient amphitheatre. Today's conceptual artists summon us back to the amphitheatre of the twenty-first century.

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Zsófia Emma Szilágyi

Tragic Sensibility and the Tragic Gaze in Romeo Castellucci's Theatre

My study focuses on the sensory dimension of two productions directed by Romeo Castellucci – *Purgatorio* (Avignon, 2008), the middle part of his Dante-inspired trilogy, and *Bros* (Lugano, 2021), staged as an independent production[1] – and on the role this dimension plays in the process of perception and interpretation. I propose that these two paradigmatic examples of Castellucci's directorial work generate a sensation that may be termed tragic sensibility, one that is consistently bound up with a particular mode of presenting violence and that, although difficult to verbalise in terms of meaning, cannot be regarded as merely a subjective emotional surplus. In Romeo Castellucci's productions, reception is by no means merely a matter of deciphering semantic traces. Rather, it is a physiological and mental process – creating a reciprocal interplay between body and consciousness – that is often stimulated by tragic sensibility. The sensations elicited cannot be exhausted conceptually, yet they play a crucial role in understanding the productions. Approaching these works through tragic sensibility, my study seeks to explore how meaning is generated through bodily experience: how a sensory presence comes into being that is not a variant of understanding but its precondition.

[1] The analysis is based on the following recordings: *Purgatorio*, Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio – La Compagnie des Indes – Festival d'Avignon, 2008; *Bros*, Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio – La Compagnie des Indes – MC93-Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis à Bobigny, 2022.

Consciousness and sensation

Purgatorio turns the spectator's consciousness and body into the site of violence. In this radically restrained production – suffocatingly slow, pervaded by an oppressive atmosphere and operating through barely perceptible fluctuations – nothing identifiable anticipates the outbreak of violence almost forty minutes into the performance: neither scenically nor rhythmically is there any discernible escalation or deviation. What generates an oppressive feeling is simply the stage, separated from the auditorium by a gauze curtain; the suspiciously sterile set bathed in dim light; and the figures engaged in everyday activities within it: a middle-aged woman preparing food and a little boy sitting listlessly. The kitchen evokes the idea of home, while the presence of the woman and the boy together conjures the image of a family. Even if the spectator's consciousness does not prevent them from yielding to the oppressive atmosphere of the opening scene by attending to the body's signals, the little boy's question in these circumstances – "will he be home tonight?" – unquestionably directs them towards the most obvious interpretation. "This recognition involuntarily activates a mode of reception modelled on discursive thought, leading the spectator to interpret the opening scenes as preparations for dinner and the wait for the father's return" (Kékesi Kun 2026, 182).

The scene of the father's return home that evening initially appears to continue the daily routine we have been following, even as the spectator's suspicion begins to grow that something is amiss. The little boy is reading in the living room when the faint sound of an engine and a dog barking can be heard, and a beam of light filters in through the window. He stops reading, walks over to the window, draws back the curtain, looks out, then leaves with purposeful steps. The man enters the empty living room and, after calling out a greeting, is joined by the woman. They chat about his business trip and work; meanwhile, she offers him whisky, then leaves to warm up the

dinner. Their relationship appears intimate: they touch one another tenderly, maintaining almost continuous physical contact. The man sits for some time, takes a sip of his drink and appears visibly troubled. He glances at the papers he has left on the piano, then walks over, picks them up and begins to read them. At this point, a caption projected onto the gauze curtain informs us: "The Third Star will have another sip of whiskey" / "La Troisième Étoile boira encore un peu de whisky", whereupon the man takes another sip. "The Third Star will check his papers and then leave them on the sofa" / "La Troisième Étoile vérifiera ses dossiers puis les laissera sur le canapé", the next caption announces; the man then sits down on the sofa, continues reading the papers and leaves them there. "The Third Star will take off his jacket" / "La Troisième Étoile enlèvera sa veste", we read, and the man – whom, because of the relation between caption and action, we now take with certainty to be the Third Star – removes his jacket. The captions remain consistent throughout, as though anticipating what we are about to see. After the man finishes dinner, the woman clears the table, but as she is about to leave, he stops her. He draws her close and kisses her gently. The arrival of the husband they have been waiting for, together with the sight of the couple embracing affectionately, immediately supplies consciousness with a familiar scenario: the man has begun making sexual advances towards the woman. Yet this impression barely has time to form before, when the man asks where his hat is, the woman begins shaking her head emphatically; although he continues to caress her, she pleads through tears: "not tonight". He nevertheless continues to ask her affectionately, and when his third request again goes unanswered, the caption announces that he will go and look for it himself. This is precisely what he does, while the spectator, confronted with the intimacy and tenderness of their interaction, believes they understand the woman's reaction: a quiet protest against her beloved husband's leaving again, especially so soon. The man returns, somewhat surprisingly, holding a cowboy hat. He asks the woman to call

the boy; she leaves and does not appear again. As soon as the little boy enters the living room, an otherwise ordinary scene unfolds, oppressive in both its pacing and its visual composition: the child stands silently at a conspicuous distance from the man seated on the pouffe, who questions him at length about school. The man then puts on the hat, and a caption appears: "Now" / "Maintenant". Yet rather than bidding the child farewell – if, as we may suppose, he really is about to leave – the captions envision the First Star (that is, the little boy) showing his drawings and then laughing, dancing and listening to music together with the Second and Third Stars. In parallel with these captions, however, the man tells the little boy that they are going to play cowboys, as they did last time, then takes him by the hand and leads him towards the back of the stage. The sight of the pair walking upstairs is far from reassuring, and our foreboding is hardly pleasant. As soon as they reach the top and the door to the upstairs room closes behind them, the final word of the last caption appears on its own: "Music" / "La musique". Silence follows, then barely identifiable fragments of sound and small noises become audible. The earlier rhythm between caption and action is broken, and it gradually becomes clear that, unlike before, the caption will not be translated into action. Slowly, it becomes apparent that what we are hearing are sounds of pleading, crying and shouting, while visually nothing happens at all: the stage remains empty. And although we see nothing, we unmistakably suffer. Although it is difficult to isolate precisely what takes place within the spectator, we can nevertheless say that the unpleasant sensation generated by the situation precedes recognition. The process begins in the body and moves towards consciousness, after which the body responds to what has occurred in consciousness: first our stomach sends a signal to our brain, and then the realisation that violence is taking place becomes stomach-churning. The disturbance thus arises initially not at the conceptual level, since consciousness tenaciously maintains an interpretation it can tolerate; only as we contemplate the empty stage and listen

to the sounds does it become clear just how far sensation and interpretation diverge.

As we can see, the elements that prepare the spectator for the situation that eventually unfolds can only be captured conceptually with some difficulty. Yet because they are felt so strongly in the body, the possibility remains open for nearly forty minutes that the spectator may choose to stop watching. Once that decision has been deferred, however, the spectator is mercilessly left alone with the images of violence taking shape within them, and it is these images generated by their own imagination – bearing scarcely any relation to the events promised by the captions – that cause their suffering. The internal images of violence are generated under artificial conditions, yet their emergence is organic, because they are produced by the spectator's own "organism": the event itself unfolds through their immediate bodily and conscious perception. We are confronted with real, non-imitated violence, since it produces visceral sensations within the body. Moreover, the spectator is powerless to prevent what they hear from taking shape as internal images, so that their visceral sensations themselves become violent: they have no control over what occurs within their own body and consciousness, becoming defenceless and able only to endure it. What comes into operation is what Daniel M. Wegner discusses under the term "ironic process theory": "trying not to think about something induces a feature-negative operation of looking for distracters and a feature-positive monitor that looks for the unwanted thought" (Wegner 1994, 40). In other words, the more we try not to think about something, the more we think about it, and the more heightened the situation, the more concretely the unwanted image appears.

> "Under mental load, intentions to control the mind unleash a monitoring system that not only searches for the failure of mental control but then tends itself to create that failure. The search for thoughts or sensations pertinent to failed control is sometimes enough

> to invite them into consciousness and thus subvert the intended control with precisely counterintentional error" (Wegner 1994, 35).

Everything that, in the first half of *Purgatorio*, we attempted to organise into an intelligible pattern on the basis of our socio-cultural experience and intuition becomes unreadable, for it is only when the spectator becomes conscious of the fact of violence that they realise "how far astray their interpretation of the preceding events has led them" (Kékesi Kun 2026, 182). Only retrospectively, after the scene analysed above, does it likewise become clear how naturally consciousness, tending towards a story that can be understood within familiar parameters, fills in the missing elements, and how – precisely because of cultural and theatrical stereotypes – it lends an air of ease to what is in fact a violent process. The production itself, of course, prepares the ground for this, since "the apparent clarity of this protracted situation is [...] unsettled by numerous details, yet the production offers no interpretative framework for them, and the spectator is therefore unable to integrate them into the sequence of seemingly self-evident events" (ibid., 183). The production simultaneously satisfies consciousness's demand for meaning while allowing the body continually to perceive anomalies – impossible to specify and scarcely capable of being rendered meaningful – which, even if they do not overturn our understanding of the scenes, repeatedly unsettle the way we believe we understand them because we want to understand them. As a result, we experience a certain interpretative certainty and sensory uncertainty at the same time. And when we hear the sounds filtering onto the empty stage, our consciousness retrospectively connects with the unpleasant sensation that our body has been registering since the beginning of the performance through the "seemingly self-evident events".

One of these elements is the restraint, or complete withholding, of the emotions presented on stage, including suffer-

ing. Any representation of them would inevitably function as an explanation, while the meaning we believe we have found – a story capable of being organised into an intelligible whole – would reinforce the image of a family tragedy along familiar cultural and social patterns. Yet the behaviour of the unnamed little boy in *Purgatorio* remains inscrutable: at most, one can discern a certain dejection or indifference. His face remains impassive throughout, retaining the same melancholy, weary features marked by a kind of martyr-like composure – these features, however, scarcely invite any particular association. The boy's slow, reduced movements and immobile facial expression intensify the atmosphere as it unfolds, while the spectator perceives the almost mute figure primarily as an energetic presence. In *Purgatorio*, then, violence is perceptible only through sensory impressions and remains barely accessible to consciousness – indeed, it is invisible.

The visible and the invisible

At the beginning of *Bros*, the following inscription appears on a black satin curtain: "Pars Quale apparet sine parte quae non apparet nihil est", meaning: "The part that is visible is nothing without the part that is invisible." This sentence may also be understood as a key to Castellucci's productions. The most radical example was Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio's 1995 production *Buchettino* (based on Charles Perrault's tale *Le petit poucet* [*Little Tom Thumb*]), which sought to create a sensory experience through hearing, structuring the entire performance around the spectator's inner vision. The participants lay in individual beds in a dimly lit room, listening to a storyteller seated beneath a single light bulb, while the tale was accompanied by sounds coming from different directions around the room. Since almost nothing could be seen, the participants' attention was directed towards the words and sounds, and towards the internal images they generated in the imagination. The relationship between the invisible glimpsed within the visible and

the visible taking shape within the invisible is one of the fundamental concerns of Castellucci's productions. In *Purgatorio*, we encounter only barely perceptible traces of violence, while the violence itself remains incomplete; in *Bros*, however, the situation is reversed: we witness the violence, while its traces are unreadable. A peculiar situation thus arises, since we judge whether violence has occurred according to the schema of the visible as real and the invisible as unreal, rather than associating it with what is invisible yet perceptible. In *Purgatorio*, after leaving the room, the father staggers down the stairs, but is barely recognisable because he is wearing a flesh-coloured mask. He collapses in front of the piano, breathing somewhat heavily, removes the mask, and reveals a tormented face. He runs his hand across the piano lid, then opens it, turns his palm upwards and lets his head drop towards his chest. A soft piano note sounds: at this point, the scene catches up with the caption "La musique". The little boy staggers down the stairs, his clothes torn and bloodstained, a handkerchief in his hand. *Bros* brings the violence that runs through history, culture, theatre and the lifeworld into direct contact with our own immediate experience, without revealing anything of what has preceded it. The emphasis falls not on the cause or causes, but on repetition, on pattern: on the self-perpetuating nature of violence. In *Bros*, we see different events unfold on stage, yet they appear alike, accumulating not alongside but on top of one another. On stage, as always in Castellucci, time seems to stand still, implying the absence of forgetting, since forgetting presupposes time; and the impossibility of forgetting is bound up with the impossibility of consolation. The same is true in *Purgatorio*, even though there the little boy forgives. He finds no consolation; when he comes down the stairs, he merely says: "it's all over" / "tout est fini", yet the production has made it clear that only that particular situation, there and then, has come to an end.

Castellucci's productions, as we see in *Bros*, offer a repository of things drawn from different temporal strata, at times placing these strata in extreme tension with one another, as

in *Go Down, Moses* (2014), where humanity's present and prehistory are superimposed, creating a distinctive configuration through the paradox of remembering and forgetting. The figures in *Bros*, who become living recreations of paintings by Caravaggio, Goya, Cignaroli, David and Géricault, together with an old prophet, are the agents and/or victims of violent events stripped of all narration. The production confronts us with the fact that what binds us together as brothers is above all violence, which, regardless of time and place, permeates history, science, culture, human relationships and our entire being in a universal and species-specific manner, while its cause and source remain impossible to determine. If the fundamental question of *Purgatorio* is where guilt resides (Kékesi Kun 2026, 185), that of *Bros* is where it originates; yet neither question admits of an answer, however Castellucci may render violence visible on stage or within the spectator. Nor can the figures be divided into victims and perpetrators, since these roles are constantly in flux, as in *Bros*, or become uncertain and exchange places, as in *Purgatorio*. And the more unstoppable the flow of images and the shifting of roles appear, the more clearly it emerges that our only certainty – paradoxically, also our uncertainty – is that "a tragic concept of life, in which Man is innocent and guilty at the same time, ethos and daimon [...] shows 'the human enigma in its meagre essentiality'" (Astrié 2002, 8). The "essential contingency" inherent in the inseparability of innocence and guilt (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 183), the diversity arising from the simultaneous presence of unspeakable viciousness and heartbreaking generosity, "presents an unsolved problem" from a biological perspective (Wrangham 2019, 4). This problem, of course, is a problem only because, as Freud observes, human beings have formed a very different image of themselves. However,

> "human beings are not gentle creatures in need of love, at most able to defend themselves if attacked; on the contrary, they can count a powerful share of ag-

> gression among their instinctual endowments. Hence, their neighbour is not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to take out their aggression on him, to exploit his labour without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to take possession of his goods, to humiliate him and cause him pain, to torture and kill him. [...] Aggression was not created by property; it prevailed with almost no restriction in primitive times, when property was very scanty. [...] The tendency to aggression is an original, autonomous disposition in man" (Freud 2002, 48, 50, 58).

According to Freud, aggression can be kept in check not by a moral safety net, but by emotional bonds capable of counteracting destructive instincts. Civilization, then, seeks not to eliminate aggression but to turn it inwards, producing the super-ego, which functions as conscience in order

> "to exercise the same severe aggression against the ego that the latter would have liked to direct towards other individuals. The tension between the stern super-ego and the ego that is subject to it is what we call a 'sense of guilt'; this manifests itself as a need for punishment. In this way civilization overcomes the dangerous aggressivity of the individual, by weakening him, disarming him and setting up an internal authority to watch over him, like a garrison in a conquered town" (Freud 2002, 60–61).

The claims of those who posit an essentialist conception of violence, together with Freud's account of the super-ego, may also be mapped onto certain scenes in *Bros*. In the production's final image, a child unexpectedly appears in an ankle-length white garment and begins to lift the edge of the black satin sheet bearing the inscription "De Pullo et Ovo" (The Chicken

and the Egg), all the while looking straight ahead towards the audience, though his face is as expressionless as that of the little boy in *Purgatorio*. The child's appearance is far from reassuring: what we have already seen in *Bros* immediately generates tension. A uniformed man holds out a baton to the child, who glances at it and accepts it. When he looks towards the uniformed men standing in formation, they begin to move backwards and leave the stage; the child turns back towards the audience and, without taking his eyes off us – his gaze impossible to determine as either threatening or complicit – slowly begins to retreat as well. Finally, he turns around and disappears among the uniformed men filing out, his small white-clad figure completely swallowed by the darkness. The scene itself contains no violence, nor is there any visible coercive force acting upon the child. The uniformed men in formation do not so much as glance at him, keeping their eyes fixed throughout on the rear of the stage, towards which they will all eventually move. The child, then, is not given the baton: it is merely offered to him; he yields to the gesture, takes it of his own accord and disappears with it into the crowd. Once this is realised, the inscription sewn onto the black sheet, "The Chicken and the Egg", comes to resemble not a question but a statement: something whose pull – almost as though it were a genetic endowment – is as unbearable and inescapable as it is invisible.

There is another scene in *Bros* that can be approached through Freud, in which a figure appears who – if the spectator chooses to associate it with this force – represents the invisible force just described: an idol-like, elongated wooden puppet. (It is also possible, however, that what we see is merely an ironic image, an ominous imago of the kind we naively tend to cast as the source of every ill and the origin of everything negative.) The puppet rises on a plinth in a strong spotlight among the uniformed men standing at the centre of the stage with their backs to the audience. The members of the "army" arranged in formation before it slowly raise their arms in unison, then sink onto one knee. With their right hands they remove their

hats, then stand and replace them. At this point the puppet's mouth opens and a droning sound is heard, intermittently broken as the mouth closes and opens again, with brief pauses in between. When the puppet's mouth remains agape and its head tilts forward, the droning becomes continuous, while the uniformed men begin to imitate the puppet's arm movements; they then draw their weapons, raise them into the air, hold the position, lower their arms and put their pistols away. Although no concrete act of violence occurs, the perception of the bodies as a mass, their coordinated movements and the appearance of weapons generate a sense of danger. The same is true in *Bérénice* (Paris, 2024), where the performers playing Roman men repeatedly arrange themselves into formations in silence, with perfectly measured slowness or, conversely, carefully composed dynamism and emotional detachment, and perform a strange choreography with an element resembling an idol – an antique bust of a kind that had already appeared in *La vita nuova* (2018).

Gaze and action

After the little boy in *Purgatorio* staggers down the stairs, he approaches the man, places a hand on his shoulder and strokes him. The man averts his gaze, but the boy sits on his lap, cups the man's face in his hands, presses his forehead against his and tells him not to worry, that it is over. When he embraces him and music really does begin to play, this moment is indeed "more shocking than what precedes it", not only because the victim's forgiveness of the perpetrator "completely overturns our ordinary sense of justice" (Kékesi Kun 2026, 185), but also because the spectator may take the little boy's words of forgiveness as addressed to themselves. After all, at a certain point the spectator was unable to restrain their imagination, and through their act of looking they themselves created the image that could make the scene so profoundly disturbing. According to Castellucci,

> "real disasters are not a tragedy, because tragedy belongs to the realm of theatre, rather than the real world. [...] there are no tragic events as such. There is only a perception of the tragic, which is able to transform an event into a tragedy [...]. The viewer's gaze thus lies at the root of experience of the tragic: '[RC:] With time, this gaze was reduced to an object and became the act of reading facts, a book, a historical event. All outlooks on the world, mediated and broadcast by the media, disintegrate the communal concept of tragedy. They reduce what used to be a common experience in tragedy to a private show. For this reason the mediated visions are indifferent and digested without pathos. The suffering triggered by an image is further aroused by the fiction of theatre. It imparts to it the truth of the tragedy. This kind of gaze encompasses and magnifies everything; it replaces the event itself, does not know indifference or moderation, because – and this is the scandal – it opens up to the aesthetic problem'" (Semenowicz 2016, 142; the source of the internal quotation is Castellucci 2008, 17).

Our profound disturbance, then, is elicited by a deeply theatrical moment in which our gaze simultaneously shapes and prefigures the tragedy: the rape of a little boy by his father. We truly see this, rather than merely look at it; that is, we experience it rather than contemplate it as an object. Castellucci – albeit implicitly – develops further George Steiner's distinction between tragedy and catastrophe (Steiner 1980, 8), explicitly associating the concept of tragedy with theatre and treating it as an aesthetic category. We, in turn, may develop Castellucci's notion of the "perception of the tragic" by linking the experience of tragedy to the tragic sensibility that constitutes the precondition for our gaze to transform something into tragedy. In this sense, an event becomes a tragedy only if someone is capable of experiencing its tragic character. The tragic does not

reside in the event but in the spectator: in their gaze. Castellucci repeatedly speaks of a tragedy "where one finds inexplicably himself into the performance", of a gaze that "re-launches and creates the object that is looked at", and makes clear that "the core of the tragic look is inside the spectator, since he is not looking for any object outside himself" (Castellucci 2002, 1). The tragic gaze (or outlook), in turn, differs fundamentally from the mediatised, indifference-producing gaze imposed upon us by the age of mass media; through it, theatre restores the truth of the image, arousing our compassion – or, in Aristotle's terms, our pity – at the sight of suffering.

In Castellucci's theatre, looking acquires a creative force, and its straightforward opposition to action becomes questionable. Through drastic images – whether generated on stage or within the spectator – Castellucci problematises looking as an act of remaining outside, the spectator's presumed right, as subject, to look upon an object; this problem becomes inseparable from the dramaturgy of his productions. At the beginning of *Giulio Cesare* (Prato, 1997), the audience sees in real time, by means of an endoscopic camera, the functioning of the speech organs of the actor who delivers Flavius and Marullus's dialogue alone. In *Inferno* (Avignon, 2008), we watch small children playing inside an enclosed glass cube, entirely unaware of the spectators' presence. In *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (Essen, 2011), we observe an elderly man who repeatedly soils his nappy, while in *The Magic Flute* (Brussels, 2018) we encounter the stories of non-professional performers living with congenital conditions or the lasting bodily effects of accidents. The scene in *Bros* in which one uniformed man passively watches another beat a naked body for an extended period with a baton, before they exchange roles and the other in turn watches him beat it, effectively erases the boundary between looking and acting: they, like us, become perpetrators and victims at once ("innocent and guilty, ethos and daimon"). The violence unfolds under a crossfire of gazes, as the onstage spectators and perpetrators exchange roles, alternately

watching and acting. The spectator seated in the auditorium not only senses both the beating and being beaten, but experiences them fully. Although the baton, raised into the air and then brought down, never actually touches the body that convulses repeatedly beneath its blows, the invisible distance between baton and body disappears in the imagination, because each stroke is accompanied by a thunderclap that turns every blow into the spectator's own sensory experience. *Bros* does not incite direct action or intervention; by pushing the spectators' senses to their limits, it does not encourage them voluntarily to bring the action to an end, as they might in a performance piece. Rather, it creates a situation in which the bone-shaking, lightning-like crash accompanying each downward stroke of the baton acts upon the spectator's senses as though they themselves were undergoing what either body – the one inflicting the blows or the one receiving them – undergoes.

Violence and sensation

Although Castellucci's theatre is fundamentally a theatre of images, as Robert Wilson's was, in light of the foregoing it can only partly be regarded as a theatre of the visible, since – through powerful energetic and motor stimulation – it compels the spectator to see inwardly: to "perform" actions that are either not illustrated on stage at all or are illustrated only partially.

In *Il Combattimento* (Brussels, 2000), directed by Castellucci and based on Monteverdi's madrigal *The Combat of Tancredi and Clorinda*,

> "the enigmatic quality of what slowly unfolds creates mounting tension in the spectator, so that anxiety becomes a sustained emotional state, arising from the fact that it is never possible to determine unequivocally what is happening on stage: what is being done with the various machines, tubes and animals, and why.

> The heightened attention produced in this way results in the uncertain identification and continual weighing of what is seen, without allowing either simple correspondences or a logical explanation to be reached" (Kékesi Kun 2000, 14).

It is similarly enigmatic how the enormous photographs periodically brought onto the stage in *Bros* are to be connected with the events unfolding around them. One photograph, for example, depicts a hamadryas baboon; in front of it lies a uniformed man inside a black plastic bag, while his companions form a semicircle around him. One of them holds up a golden hoop – a familiar object from Castellucci's productions – in front of the photograph, then, accompanied by a dull pop and a flash of light, appears to enact the taking of a photograph. The moment evokes the familiar image of a group of hunters being photographed as they pose with a slaughtered animal, the resulting picture subsequently displayed across various media. Yet the scene is far from illustrating such a moment directly: the photograph is taken in the spectator's imagination, and the act of photographing occurs through their own associative process.

The experiences generated in this way are as inexplicable – because they communicate nothing – as they are physically and emotionally disturbing, and for this very reason often provoke a visceral aversion. In *Bros*, mechanically repeated violence is thematised as an experience that permeates the history of humankind at the cellular level. Violence, however, does not remain merely a theme, and its representation exposes fundamental questions concerning the role of theatre. Just as Castellucci's theatre – as noted above – is not a theatre of direct action, neither is it one of social critique. The images and actions in *Bros* evoke the most oppressive police states, yet they have as little to do with an artistic dissection of the social-psychological and anthropological components of a dictatorial order as does the striking but little-known film whose wordlessness gives it an enigmatic quality similar to that of *Bros*, and which

must surely have made such a strong impression on Castellucci that the production might almost have borne the annotation – modelled on *Purgatorio*'s acknowledgement of its Dantean inspiration – "librement inspiré par *Libera Me* d'Alain Cavalier (1993)." Like Artaud's, Castellucci's is a wounding theatre, though in Castellucci's case too this has nothing to do with physical violence. Yet the process that releases the spectator from the constraints of their social, cultural, theatrical and other experiences is saturated with unpleasant sensations; moreover, it operates through the gaze, wounding us at our most sensitive point, since vision is what fundamentally connects us not only to theatre but also to the world. And, as with Artaud, theatre is above all "activity: 'a dangerous and terrible act'" (Kékesi Kun 2007, 201; the source of the internal quotation is Artaud 2004, 1544). Artaud and the manifestos of the Theatre of Cruelty

> "articulate the conception and demand that this theatre should exert an effect like that of lived reality. In Artaud's words: 'I have [...] said »cruelty« just as I might have said »life«'" (P. Müller 2021, 23; the source of the internal quotation is Artaud 2024, 117).

Artaud does not seek to deploy the means of representation; he wishes to ground theatre in pure presence – presence without the "re" – while still remaining within theatre, a position that creates a paradox. Castellucci's theatre, by contrast, does not renounce imitation, although it does not imitate in the sense in which the term is conventionally used in relation to realism. Castellucci's theatre is not realist theatre, yet its relation to reality is by no means incidental, and it might best be characterised as a theatre of simulacra or images. In its most widespread interpretation, the 'simulacrum' (Greek: eidōlon; εἴδωλον) is opposed to the original as a real existent, since it reproduces its form as a deceptive imitation (Döderlein 1858, 102–103), and thus does not merely resemble the original but substitutes for its presence. In Castellucci's theatre, imitation

operates through such simulacra and seeks to make the unrepresentable present, in contrast to contemporary media, which obsessively strive to render even the most hidden things visually accessible. "Theatre must show the unrepresentable," Castellucci says, "as Greek theatre did. Today we are immersed in an endless flow of images, but this is like the desert through which Moses wandered – a two-dimensional current that would exist without us and merely produces 'white noise'" (Duplat 2014). Whereas Artaud longs for lived reality to impinge upon theatre, Castellucci seeks to transform the effects of life into theatrical reality. This is why, in *Bros*, the baton never touches the convulsing body, and why the blood appears as merely a red liquid, just as the white paint that is likewise spilled appears simply as white.

> "Of course, the blood must be entirely fake. [...] Fake blood intensifies the memory of real blood. If fake blood appears on stage, it means that it is my blood – mine, the spectator's; if, by contrast, the actor's real blood is shed, then it is the blood of that actor, the truth of their blood. Only fake blood is capable of making tragic violence visible, a violence that is artificial, never real. Real violence belongs to the spectacle of the world, to the order of spectacle unfolding in the world. Fake blood is true tragic violence: artificial violence created under laboratory conditions. The only place where violence can become real is the theatre, and this violence necessarily manifests itself through fake blood" (Perrier 2022, 94).

Bros generates torment, suffering and pain in a distinctive way: we watch how the body responds to an event, how matter reacts to physical impact. If the body is doused with red or white liquid, it runs over the skin and leaves a trace. If water hits it, it becomes wet; if struck, it convulses; if a piece of fabric placed over the face clings like a film to the mouth and nose

under a continuous stream of water, the body begins to gasp for air – and none of these reactions even needs to be imitated, since they bring the effects of life closer without imitation.

In this way, what becomes significant is not the actor's or performer's simulated or real pain, but the spectator's own pain as something that can be bodily recalled: through pain effects, the performance automatically summons memories of pain from within our bodies. These effects are organised into stage images whose significance may not be immediately apparent, such as the smile that appears in *Bros*. In one scene, as the naked body of a man writhes in the white paint poured over him, it traces an abstract pattern on the black board on which he lies. One of the uniformed men then uses a sponge to wipe two eyes and a mouth into the resulting image, producing a smile, "☺". The image, however, produces no cheerful effect whatsoever; on the contrary, it has an unsettling force. Although in *Bros* faces, movements and so forth convey no emotion, the production nevertheless continually sets emotions in motion within us. Cheerfulness, too, could be an emotion elicited within us, but the sight of a smiley alone proves insufficient to produce it, since the stage context that might evoke and reinforce humour is absent. Nor is it possible to disregard the fact that this smile is the distorted imprint of a body that has been beaten for nearly ten minutes, and is in itself devoid of meaning. It belongs to no one and nothing, yet operates viscerally. In discussing the smile and its disturbing quality in relation to Francis Bacon's smiles, Deleuze invokes Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat. In Carroll's novel, we read that

> "this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. 'Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!'" (Carroll 1998, 93–94).

According to Deleuze, Bacon

> "has painted smiles that are among the most beautiful in painting, and which fulfill the strangest function, namely, that of securing the disappearance of the body. [...] There is already a disquieting and disappearing smile [...] and the face is dismantled in favor of this smile, as if there were an acid eating away at the body [...] Bacon suggests that this smile is 'hysterical'. An abominable smile, an abjection of a smile" (Deleuze 2003, 28).

Following Deleuze, we should emphasise not only the meaninglessness of the smile but also its uncanny quality. In his much-cited essay, Freud characterises the uncanny (German: *das Unheimliche*) as

> "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar. [...] But [...] not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening. [...] Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny" (Freud 2003, 124–125).

According to Freud, this feeling is most readily evoked by lifelike dolls, automata, doubles or Doppelgängers, involuntary repetitions, the return of the dead and the appearance of ghosts. The concept of *das Unheimliche* can thus be related to the anxious atmosphere produced in *Purgatorio* by its sterile set, the idea of the family and the subdued emotional register. The smile mentioned in connection with *Bros* (together with the world of the production as a whole) clearly parallels the "slightly smiling face" emoji, which has by now acquired passive-aggressive connotations; the spectator therefore need not be familiar with Bacon's paintings or with Deleuze's observations on them for the smile to exert its effect. It functions

as a grimace, and we sense it almost continuously behind the scenes of *Bros*, in which violence repeatedly appears as utterly meaningless – literally without reason – purposeless and often strikingly banal. At one point in the production, a photograph brought on by the uniformed men shows a swan's foot being blasted for a full minute by a jet of water from a hose. The swan is a waterbird, its foot is adapted to water, and in any case we see it only in a photograph, so the jet can no more harm the foot than it can damage the photograph itself, which is made of a material that does not absorb water. (This futile scene of a "water test" can be linked to the scene in *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* in which children pelt a gigantic portrait of Christ with hand grenades – to no effect.) A similar moment occurs when the masculine energies permeating *Bros* are suddenly disrupted by a female portrait brought onto a stage that has by then become a strongly homosexual field of force. (In discussing *Bros*, Castellucci himself uses the adjective "homosexual", referring to the homogeneity of every orientation unfolding in the production, even though the visible events carry no homoerotic charge whatsoever. See Castellucci 2023, 10:35.) Violence, of course, has no gender – one of the photographs shows an ancient sculptural torso with a black void gaping at the groin in place of a phallus – and the production itself is not concerned with gender or sexuality. Nor does the moment described above affect us cognitively; its effect is primarily energetic. A kind of energy not previously present enters the stage, and the uniformed men respond with a hitherto unseen awkwardness, attempting to scatter offstage in ridiculous movements.

Castellucci's theatre, which operates not through the representation of violence but through its sensation, may be understood in terms of Deleuze's phrase "the violence of sensation", which is closely bound up with the sensation of violence. "In the end, the maximum violence will be found in the seated or crouching Figures, which are subjected to neither torture nor brutality, to which nothing visible happens, and yet which

manifest the power of the paint all the more," Deleuze writes of Francis Bacon's paintings (Deleuze 2003, 38–39). The prolonged beating scene in *Bros* discussed above does, albeit in an unconventional way, offer a representation of violence. Yet the beating, pushed beyond the threshold of endurance, passes over into the production of a sensation of violence, because the physical discomfort caused by what we see and hear redirects attention away from the stage. The pain experienced in the spectator's own body shifts attention from the body being beaten on stage to the sensations arising within their own body.

> "The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliche). The former is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system, the levels through which it passes, the domains it traverses" (Deleuze 2003, 39).

The scenes of *Purgatorio* and *Bros*, whether or not they refer visually or acoustically to the violence taking place, transmit violent energies and in this way produce bodily involvement. They do not present suffering to us, but violence as violence. Moreover, the force manifested in the movement of bodies – the convulsion – is itself a bodily yet invisible reaction, since it is accompanied by no decodable, and hence interpretable, movement: only energy and sensation. Towards the end of *Purgatorio*, we see a cowboy-hatted figure resembling the man (the father) collapsed on the ground and convulsing, followed by a young man wearing clothes similar to the boy's, writhing in the same place with still greater violence. *Bros*, meanwhile, accumulates bodies flailing helplessly on the ground, often without any perceptible cause. By theatricalising convulsion, Castellucci makes an invisible force visible, as though the contorted figures of Francis Bacon had come to life in the anonymous bodies of his performers.

As Deleuze writes of the movement frozen into immobility in Bacon's portraits:

> "Now it is inside the body that something is happening; the body is the source of movement. This is no longer the problem of the place, but rather of the event. If there is an effort, and an intense effort, it is in no way an extraordinary effort, as if it were a matter of undertaking something above and beyond the strength of the body and directed toward a separate object. The body exerts itself in a very precise manner, or waits to escape from itself in a very precise manner. It is not I who attempt to escape from my body, it is the body that attempts to escape from itself by means of .... in short, a spasm: the body as plexus, and its effort or waiting for a spasm" (Deleuze 2003, 15).

Towards the end of *Purgatorio*, in the cowboy-hatted man's convulsions and the young man's violent jerking, the word "dance" offers no interpretative foothold: what we see cannot be decoded, yet it exerts a powerful effect through its energy and sensation. The man's movement differs from that of the young man. The older body appears to be driven by a neurological disorder, the younger perhaps by childhood experiences, relationships and memories, both moving towards a state of physical depletion. The man's movements are awkward and fragmented, his fingers splayed, his facial expression strained – as though he had lost bodily coordination. His movement most closely resembles the motor dysfunction associated with ataxia. He picks his hat up from the floor with difficulty, fumbling for it several times, and even placing it on his head requires visible effort. When his movements become seizure-like, the young man approaches him, restrains him and then bears down on him with his full body weight, yet the shaking body does not settle beneath him. The man slowly wriggles free and extricates himself from beneath the young man, who remains on the floor before suddenly beginning to move: at first with small jerks, then by thrashing about with increasing intensity. His movement is similarly impossible to decode, yet

differs from the man's in its energy and effect. He jerks more violently and aggressively, flings his limbs about, repeatedly hurls himself against the floor and strikes himself hard in the face, head and chest several times, almost tearing his own body apart. Watching the scene is itself distressing for the spectator, even though neither figure is shown to be suffering and their emotional states remain inscrutable. It is not, then, an emotion expressed by the actor that passes to the spectator, who for that very reason is unable to experience empathy; rather, what becomes unbearable is the sensation generated within them as spectator and projected by them into the image. This sensation is almost inescapable – we become as powerless before it as the figures we see are before the force that sets their bodies in motion – and it is precisely in this that its violence resides.

The ending of *Purgatorio* can be related to the penultimate scene of *Bros*, in which all but one of the uniformed men leave the stage. The figure left alone suddenly collapses to the floor and, lying on his back, begins to shake violently – convulsing on the wet stage as though an electric current were passing through him. After a short while, the uniformed men begin to drift back in. For some time they stand scattered across the space, watching the solitary body writhe; then, one by one, as if pushed over or shot, they fall to the ground and begin to convulse involuntarily as well. The scene lasts for five minutes, with shorter and longer pauses, before the spasmodic movements cease almost simultaneously and the scraping, dull thuds of the boots give way to piano music and singing. Exhausted and drenched, the uniformed men lie on their backs, their chests rising and falling as they draw deep breaths. The force that compels them into this strange movement is invisible. They do not throw themselves to the ground voluntarily; rather, they fall as though struck by bullets, their bodies collapsing helplessly. The spectator, of course, knows what can be known about the production: that the locally recruited uniformed men – performers dressed as police officers – receive instructions through earpieces for every action they perform on stage, so

there is indeed a force setting them in motion. What matters, however, is the invisibility of this force, since it points to the question of blind obedience to the invisible and of the willingness to submit to it – a spectacle that, viewed in the context of this scene and the broader framework of the production, is at once ridiculous and unsettling.

In relation to *Purgatorio* and *Bros*, the question arises: what can be considered violent? Where does violence begin, and how does the production lead us from its smallest manifestation to its greatest – from the invisible, viscerally felt form to the visible, verbally articulable one? And how can the smallest element that already exerts violence at the level of sensation be perceived at all? At what point does something tip over into violence – before the eye can see it, yet once the body has already begun to register it? The 2024 Paris production of *Bérénice* may also be brought into this discussion, even though it contains no events that could conventionally be described as violent. Indeed, its stage imagery is explicitly pleasing to the eye: opalescent, playing with shades of pink and blue and evoking the world of dreams, an effect reinforced by the tulle covering that separates stage from auditorium, as well as by the beauty of the male bodies that appear from time to time. The bodies of the actors playing Titus and Antiochus (Cheikh Kébé and Giovanni Armando Romano), however, present a sensory contradiction: their model-like beauty appears unreal, their forms exaggerated and surreal, producing an indefinably violent impression. In one scene in *Bros*, the uniformed men crowd tightly together at the centre of the stage, almost merging into a single mass as they jostle and swarm, making small jumps in complete silence with their backs to the audience. In the dim light, only an occasional hand flashes out of the darkness, or a baton or pistol holster catches the light, while all that can be heard is the sound of bodies colliding and the soles of boots striking the floor. It is impossible to determine whether they are embracing or restraining one another, patting or beating one another – whether what we are witnessing is a display

of comradely exuberance or some form of mutual struggle for dominance. Viewed from the outside, the scene is at once banal, almost ridiculous, and frightening. Although no identifiable act of violence takes place that could be precisely captured in words, the collective spatial behaviour of the mass generates a sense of danger.

The sensation of violence and the violence of sensation can come into operation involuntarily because memory effects deriving from different sources are always activated within the spectator. Although this directs us towards individual modes of reception and is therefore difficult to generalise or analyse, we can nevertheless state with some confidence that the scenes of *Purgatorio* and *Bros* bring to life our highly familiar and concrete individual, cultural, social and media-shaped memories of violence – yet in a manner that resists specification. What is bodily encoded, unrecognisable, unidentifiable and impossible to verbalise nonetheless evokes the sensation of violence more powerfully than anything else. Knowing the visual-art inspirations of Castellucci's theatre, we may attempt to identify some work of art in the image of the uniformed men writhing on stage like fish washed ashore; yet even if the spectator is temporarily reassured by recognising such pictorial intertextuality, sooner or later, whether they wish it or not, they are left alone with themselves and with their own internal images.

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Cristina Modreanu

Stage Poems Unfolding. Romeo Castellucci and the Art of Theatrical Installation

The images that Romeo Castellucci arranges along the non-epic trajectory of his performances possess the density and logic of dreams. Those who witness their unfolding in real time often experience the sensation of participating in a form of collective hypnosis, emerging from it as though they had dreamt the same dream as hundreds of fellow spectators.

I propose the term *poem-installation* to describe his productions in which stage images are organised not according to narrative progression but according to the logic of poetic association and installation art. I will also develop the concept of *emotional adhesion* to describe something quite precise, namely the way in which the spectator becomes affectively attached to images created by this artist that resist both narrative explanation and logical interpretation, an attachment that persists even after the end of the performance. My contribution is simply to add one more layer to the critical vocabulary developed to describe how Romeo Castellucci's images work on the spectator's consciousness over time.

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The productions of Romeo Castellucci and Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio reject the conventions of traditional narrative logic; nevertheless, they are structured according to a written script that serves as the basis for discussions at the rehearsal table concerning the sequence of actions, scenes, and images prior to their realisation on stage. What emerges is a different mode of narrativity, one generated through affect and through the spectator's direct sensory engagement with the experience offered by the artists. "The first level of involvement in a performance is the cortical one; it takes place in the cerebral cortex", Romeo Castellucci explains in one of the conversations included in the volume *The Theatre of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio* (Castellucci et al. 2007, 258).

A defining feature of Castellucci's theatrical practice is his conception of dramaturgy, which he articulates through two distinct yet interrelated dimensions: *the dramaturgy of design* – conceived on paper – and *the dramaturgy of rhythm* – realised on stage. In the first phase, the production takes shape on paper as a succession of drawn images, silhouettes, and objects arranged within a visual composition, reflecting the profound influence of Castellucci's training in the visual arts. The practical means of translating these compositions into material form are then explored collaboratively, particularly with the technical team, whose task is to devise solutions capable of producing the theatrical magic envisaged in Castellucci's initial conception.

The second phase unfolds in the rehearsal space and on stage, once performers have been identified who can embody the figures imagined in the original design as faithfully as possible. At this point, attention shifts to what Castellucci terms the "dramaturgy of rhythm, of the pulse of time" (ibid., 213), a dimension that can only be apprehended through direct experience in rehearsal. This stage frequently entails significant revisions to the dramaturgy of design initially established on paper. As Castellucci observes, "For us, dramaturgy is the management of figures, time, and rhythm" (ibid.).

Another perspective, articulated by Chiara Guidi – an active member of the company since its founding – is encapsulated in the concept of a "dramaturgy of emotions", a dramaturgy that, in her words, "works upon the nerves" (ibid., 217). In this sense, the ideal response sought by the creators is one of complete *emotional adhesion* to a production that offers neither a narrative nor a logical framework.

The creative process employed by the Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio – founded in 1981 by Romeo Castellucci, his sister Claudia Castellucci, and his wife, Chiara Guidi, before the three artists pursued independent paths from 2006 onwards – runs counter to the procedures typically associated with conventional theatre practice. Within this framework, rehearsals are kept to a minimum, since the production is already largely complete – at least in the sense of being fully conceived – by the time rehearsals begin.

The process unfolds through a series of stages: the gathering of ideas; their organisation into a mental structure; the construction of a form of montage whose sequence is committed to paper; its testing in rehearsal; a second phase of montage; and, finally, its verification before an audience.

Romeo Castellucci emphasises a fundamental distinction between the way a performance appears in its initial conception and the way it ultimately materialises in practice: "There is the need to go ahead with the ideas from which so much comes, the requirement to not betray the idea, and also the inevitable clash with reality. In short, it's the world of conception against that of reality. In the middle, there are the rehearsals" (ibid., 237).

Elaborating on this notion and understanding rehearsals as the means through which ideas acquire a body, Chiara Guidi argues that "it's not a clash with the real, with what happens, but with the reality of that idea" (ibid.).

Actors constitute an essential component of this process of translating ideas into stage form; however, both their presence and their function are understood from a perspective markedly different from that of conventional theatre. Actors and per-

formers – who are not necessarily professionally trained – are chosen on the basis of their corporeal qualities, which must correspond as closely as possible to the figures and concepts articulated within the creators' initial montage. In Castellucci's view, performers function less as interpreters of characters than as found presences whose material existence already embodies the conceptual form assigned to them.

Because the visual dimension of these performances is paramount, multiple actions often unfold simultaneously within the spectator's field of vision, leaving spectators free to decide for themselves where to direct their attention. The visual power of these creations is evident even in professional video recordings of the performances; yet such recordings inevitably restrict viewers to the camera's framing, whereas the live experience multiplies perspectives, generating as many angles of vision as there are spectators. As the director succinctly puts it, "The spectator's brain is a selective movie camera" (ibid., 256).

The active role assigned to the spectator within the theatrical experiences offered by Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio is far from accidental; it forms part of a broader strategy designed to heighten the awareness of the production's "witnesses". Romeo Castellucci has repeatedly expressed his confidence in a new kind of audience – an audience accustomed to contemporary artistic events and visually "trained" through the proliferation of galleries that have secured contemporary art a prominent place in cultural life. Owing to its singularity, the theatre practised by the company belongs less to the sphere of traditional theatre than to that of events in the visual arts: as a non-standardised encounter between an artistic perspective and an audience, it rejects repetition and resists incorporation into a fixed repertoire.

Spectators remain free to return to these works, yet they cannot passively await them at home; they must seek them out wherever they next appear, or else be content to encounter them only once, preserving the uniqueness of that experience. More radically still, Romeo Castellucci maintains that "the future of theatre belongs to the spectator" (ibid., 259).

Words are not entirely absent from Romeo Castellucci's performances, yet their use is notably restrained and circumspect. This suggests either a certain distrust of language or, perhaps, a desire to recalibrate its role within the broader framework of the theatrical event. As the artist explains:

> "We use language homeopathically. [...] The point is that we use words exactly as we use objects, on the same level. We appropriate things and words not because we believe in things or in words, but because they have been appropriated homeopathically, like toxins. Thus, when one works in this way, employing all the elements of creation, of the world – words and things alike – it becomes inevitable to create a great illusion on stage" (ibid., 225).

Although their productions largely reject the dramatic text, they nevertheless make use of the human voice at the level of its sonic qualities, combining it with processed sounds and with the music of Scott Gibbons. Gibbons employs specialised software and a technique familiar mainly to specialists: granular sound synthesis based on photographic images.

The company's productions are characterised by a series of recurring images and themes, readily identifiable both in *Tragedia Endogonidia* – created while the company still functioned in its original collective form – and in the trilogy based on the *Divine Comedy*, presented at the 2008 Avignon Festival and credited solely to Romeo Castellucci. These recurring motifs include a majestic white horse; ordinary people dressed in brightly coloured clothing; children – dressed either in white or black, at times masked and at others costumed as fictional characters; and wrecked automobiles with twisted metal frames (which, in *Inferno*, are pushed onto the stage, whereas in *Tragedia Endogonidia* they fall "from the sky", one after another). Equally characteristic is the juxtaposition on stage of human performers and live animals, adults and children – including

very young children – as well as conventionally proportioned bodies alongside those marked by congenital or acquired physical differences (including extremely thin or obese individuals and performers with visible physical impairments or malformations).

Another defining feature is the manipulation of sound to the point of distortion, developed in collaboration with Scott Gibbons, whose musical compositions and sonic environments are integral to the company's performances.

What does Inferno *look like?*

The opening scene of *Inferno* features the director himself, Romeo Castellucci, walking onto the vast stage of the Cour d'Honneur of the Palais des Papes and declaring, "My name is Romeo Castellucci." He then puts on a protective suit of the kind typically worn by dog trainers, while several furious dogs, barely restrained by their handlers, enter the stage. If their barking – reverberating throughout the open-air courtyard – already sends a chill through the audience, the moment when three of the dogs are released and lunge at Castellucci, sinking their teeth into his protective clothing and pulling him violently in different directions, is profoundly unsettling.

This is followed by an extended sequence of suspense in which a climber ascends the façade of the palace using nothing but the irregularities of its centuries-old stonework. Compelled to watch the monumental structure for several uninterrupted minutes, anxiously following the climber as he carefully feels his way along corners, window ledges, and projecting stones before coming to rest upon one of the illuminated openings like a crucified Christ suspended in mid-air, the spectator becomes increasingly aware of the building itself while witnessing Castellucci's theatrical meditation on Dante's monumental poem.

Theatre frequently employs sophisticated combinations of light and sound, yet the manner in which these elements are orchestrated in *Inferno* to animate the palace itself – to make

it appear inhabited and haunted by unseen spirits – represents an exceptional synthesis of technical precision and imaginative power. While a child innocently bounces a ball on the stage erected within the courtyard, every impact of the ball against the wooden floor makes the palace wall behind it seem to convulse with the sounds of shattering glass, crumbling masonry, and desperate voices, as lights race through the interior rooms, flashing past the windows as though fearful of being seen.

It is difficult to determine which image leaves the most lasting impression: the carpet of human bodies formed as performers enter and gradually lie down across the stage; the echoing sound of horses' hooves reverberating beneath the audience seating and throughout the courtyard, culminating in the appearance of a majestic white horse that is subsequently splashed with red droplets erupting from the stage itself, as though the stage were a living body that had suddenly begun to bleed; performers launched through the air by catapult or leaping into the void; television sets positioned on the ledges of the palace's highest windows before crashing to the stage below; or the uncanny appearance of Andy Warhol emerging from the twisted wreckage of a car crash.

For me, as a witness to the performance, the concept of a "dramaturgy of emotion" acquired its most tangible form when a large white sheet was raised from the front row of the audience and passed from hand to hand until it completely covered the spectators. For approximately two minutes, I experienced an intense sense of solidarity with everyone around me beneath the shared fabric. The gesture suggested that we are all confined within the same inferno, haunted by a shared sense of guilt and burdened by comparable transgressions. Looking into one another's eyes, we became acutely aware of a collective truth: hell resides not only in others but also in the way our own guilt is reflected in their gaze.

A comparable form of solidarity – a solidarity grounded in shared shame – emerges among the spectators of *Purgatorio*. Although the production possesses a discernible narrative,

it resists conventional retelling. Its seemingly realistic opening proves deliberately deceptive. Within the few scenes set inside an expansive domestic interior – first in the kitchen, then in the child's bedroom, and finally in the living room – a mother and her son move like puppets manipulated by invisible external forces, while an undefined tension gradually builds. Several ordinary family routines unfold in real time: setting and clearing the table, taking medication for a headache, playing on the carpet. Throughout these actions, only a handful of lines are exchanged, fragments of a larger dramatic framework that remains inaccessible to the audience. One of these lines – the child's unanswered question, "Is he coming home tonight?" – anticipates the arrival of a figure who appears to promise an explanation. That expectation is fulfilled by the father's entrance.

The "mystery", however, proves to be one that is tragically familiar, almost banal in the terrifying normality of its recurrence: the father's sexual abuse of his child. The scene itself is represented exclusively through sound. The rape remains invisible, yet every auditory detail is heard by the audience over the course of several harrowing minutes, making the violence all the more unbearable. It is the director's immediate transition from this scene into a oneiric dimension, however, that most fully reveals the extraordinary scope of Romeo Castellucci's theatrical imagination.

The realistic set disappears,[1] replaced downstage by what resembles a gigantic lens or translucent membrane. The child presses his hands against its surface and remains at its base, his fragile silhouette projected onto the illuminated plane. Behind this screen, enormous flowers slowly drift across the stage for several minutes, their vivid colours rendering them simultaneously beautiful and menacing, like carnivorous plants. A wild

[1] When I watched a recording of this production several years later, I realised that, when writing about it, I had forgotten a striking moment: the transformation of the boy's toy into a huge, menacing robot made from parts of the set. This is a testament to the spectator's power to make their own selections.

jungle gradually emerges behind this porthole-like structure, which evokes a threshold leading into a mysterious and perilous realm – a world detached from empirical reality, where symbolic inversions become possible.

From this space eventually emerges a figure resembling the father, still wearing the cowboy hat that identified him during the ritualised assault. Yet this paternal figure is strikingly diminished in scale. As he approaches, it becomes apparent that he walks with considerable difficulty, his body seemingly burdened by a severe mobility impairment. He ultimately collapses and appears to suffer an epileptic seizure before his son, whose projected silhouette now exceeds that of the father in size. This symbolic reversal is characteristic of Castellucci's theatrical language. As noted earlier, he does not hesitate to place bodily distortion and physical difference at the centre of the stage, transforming them into unexpected theatrical signs. Here, the father's physical diminishment becomes the visible counterpart of his moral degradation, while the abused child's enlarged, upright, and slender silhouette comes to embody an inner integrity.

Romeo Castellucci added the installation *Paradiso* to these two productions – distinct from one another yet belonging to the same recognisable theatrical universe – offering the spectator a three-minute "visit" to the extraordinary space of the Église des Célestins. In an oneiric atmosphere created by sunlight reflected in the thin layer of water covering the floor and by mist rising above it, the circular lens from *Purgatorio* once again appears before the spectator, alongside the burning piano from *Inferno*. Behind the lens, black wings intermittently emerge, identical to those descending the walls of the Palais des Papes in one of the scenes from *Inferno*, while the cries of birds gradually intensify, becoming almost human.

Paradiso is a fleeting state, a tremor of the spirit that has already passed through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* and now aspires to merge with the light. It is an intense, unforgettable moment

– a lingering trace of the disquiet that has taken hold of the spectator's fevered spirit.

Hey Girl! *An image can carry the weight of an archive*

Like a dream state, *Hey Girl!* (created in 2006 in Cesena and presented at the Avignon Festival in 2007) draws the spectator in through its internal rhythms. At first, we resist them, but they gradually take hold, seeming even to alter the rhythm of our heartbeats. The impeccable stage composition and the technical precision of every detail – from sound and lighting to the stage mechanisms and materials that reshape reality in accordance with Prospero's words, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" – translate a profoundly unsettling message into a succession of images and symbols that together constitute a form of stage poetry or *poem-installation*. Captivated by its formal beauty and caught within its spell, we should not lose sight of the fact that the production speaks of becoming: of the process through which we come to know ourselves and, ultimately, become who we are. Such a symbolic birth is one that each of us is called upon to experience – although some are denied it altogether. It is a process of becoming that we most often undergo unconsciously, yet one that is punctuated by a series of small personal miracles, by revelations that mark the gradual awakening to our own existence. The simplicity with which these signs – each equivalent to a small personal miracle – are woven into this theatrical installation is one of the defining qualities of Romeo Castellucci's artistic practice.

This particular production traces the becoming of a woman. Emerging as though from a placenta, separating herself from the body of her childhood in a scene suggestive of the world's beginning, the young girl on the threshold of womanhood performs a series of gestures necessary to this transition. She first looks at herself in a mirror, as if to convince herself of her own existence through the simple act of self-contemplation. She then beats a drum rhythmically, announcing her own

arrival into the world, before dressing and slowly approaching a sword. She lifts first a tube of lipstick and then a bottle of perfume, wielding them like weapons, while the gestures with which she handles them become increasingly charged with danger. Using the lipstick, she sets the sword ablaze; with the perfume, she extinguishes the flame. She wipes the sword with a cloth, upon which the heat brands a cross. Placed upon the girl's – now the woman's – back, the cloth transforms her into a Joan of Arc. With a single gesture and a brief line – "I hate these medieval symbols" – she abandons the burden of the myth almost as soon as it has been invoked, reminding us of it only for an instant before casting it aside.

The actress's sensual movements and the deliberate slowness with which she traverses the stage demand an almost painful degree of attention from the spectator, a level of concentration akin to that required for reading a poem. There is time to reflect upon what one sees, much as one would in an art exhibition; the spectator is invited to contemplate and, through contemplation, is given the opportunity to absorb the metaphor and gradually decipher its meaning.

The metaphors continue to unfold. A group of men enters the stage and strikes the woman, newly arrived in the world, with pillows. She weeps, but then rises and confronts them. From among the men, she leads out another woman, helping her retrace the stages she herself has already traversed. The white woman and the Black woman share the same process of becoming, the same confrontation with machismo and with social prejudice – evoked discreetly through a simple gesture that implicates us all. Yet the Black woman carries an additional history: that of slavery, suggested in turn by the chains placed upon her by one of the men.

When the Black woman takes the oversized replica of the head of the white woman and places it upon her own, this single gesture condenses an entire body of scholarship devoted to the effects of racism on the social imaginary. It evokes the complex historical dynamics through which Black men sought social

recognition by entering relationships with white women – relationships frequently regarded as dishonourable within Black communities themselves. Centuries of fraught relationships – between Black and white, between women and men, between individuals and the society that judges them – are condensed here into a sequence of images whose political significance is both explicit and profoundly economical. We can see how an image can carry the weight of an entire archive.

The scene in which a coloured laser beam, accompanied by a shrill, violent sound, strikes the white woman's temple while words flow one into another on the screen behind her, offers a powerful metaphor for education as violation. It is an endless torture that assaults the individual and irrevocably transforms her. An elaborate image, yet one of extreme simplicity, like a haiku.

The double gaze into the mirror then produces another shock. At what seems to be a predetermined signal, the circular mirrors suspended from above shatter simultaneously, their fragments covering the stage and transforming it into dangerous terrain. The male gaze is thus destroyed and loses its power. The women put on their high-heeled shoes, take up their swords, and set out courageously towards a struggle that will prove anything but easy. An educated, self-assured woman who fully inhabits her femininity becomes not only a more complex figure but also a threatening presence within the patriarchal order.

The performance unfolds in an atmosphere suggestive of the beginning of the world, suspended outside historical time, within a metaphorical environment created through the use of new technologies that transform light and sound into an electric field charged with symbols. What takes shape on stage is not merely a *poem-installation* about the transformation of a girl into a woman, but also a feminist poem of unmistakable political force – an indirect commentary, remarkable for its subtlety and intelligence, on the condition of women.

The Four Seasons Restaurant

A historic New York landmark, the Four Seasons Restaurant on East 52nd Street became, over more than fifty years, less a place to dine than a destination to visit. Its interior was adorned with celebrated paintings and sculptures, as well as Picasso's stage curtain for *Le Tricorne*, created for the Ballets Russes' 1919 production. For an artist, "exhibiting" at the Four Seasons Restaurant – where works by painters such as Jackson Pollock and Ronnie Landfield had been displayed over the years on loan from prominent collectors – was almost equivalent to exhibiting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Or, to transpose the comparison into the realm of theatre, it was akin to having one's work presented at the Avignon Festival. Yet there was one American artist, Mark Rothko, who, after being commissioned to paint a series of canvases specifically for the walls of the celebrated restaurant, returned the cheque and kept the paintings he had already completed because the atmosphere of cultivated exclusivity surrounding the restaurant struck him as profoundly hypocritical. Apparently, even when he had accepted the commission, Rothko had intended to create paintings capable of destroying the appetite of those who frequented the establishment.

This story deserves to be told because Romeo Castellucci's production, significantly entitled *The Four Seasons Restaurant* in Rothko's memory, embraces a similar artistic principle. It is deliberately conceived in such a way that it might well destroy the theatrical appetite of spectators deeply attached to conventional and predictable forms. It constitutes an explicit act of resistance to theatrical idolatry, undertaken in the name of those images that govern our existence.

The audience gains an initial sense of what is to come as a succession of young women enter the stage one by one and, with deliberate composure, cut off the tips of their tongues with a pair of scissors. At the end of this episode of self-inflicted tor-

ture, a dog enters and calmly devours the bloodied fragments of tongue scattered across the floor.

To demonstrate, even to devoted admirers of classical theatre, how devoid of substance the declamatory conventions of text-centred theatre have become – conventions in which words are laboriously accompanied by rhetorical poses that compel the body into artificial gestures while excluding movements arising organically from within, in harmony with the actor's speech – Castellucci employs passages from *The Death of Empedocles* by Friedrich Hölderlin. Ten young women dressed in maidservants' uniforms with pale blue aprons perform the text, accompanying their lines with expansive gestures and deliberately directing their gazes towards the distant horizon. Hölderlin's text is emptied of semantic weight, becoming little more than a vehicle propelling the production towards its second part.

Once they have completed their tirades, the women leave the stage one after another, naked, "born" from a symbolic womb formed by the bodies of the others. In direct continuity with the production's "preface" – a text projected onto the curtain describing NASA research into black holes – the second part leads the spectator, through a succession of hallucinatory images, towards a black hole recreated on stage through theatrical means.

The choice of a text devoted to the philosopher Empedocles is, of course, far from accidental. The Greek philosopher is generally regarded as the originator of the cosmogonic theory founded upon the four classical elements – earth, water, air, and fire – to which some traditions add a fifth element, the quintessence that encompasses and transcends the other four. Conceived in some philosophical systems as substances and in others as sensory experiences, these fundamental elements underpin the various theories through which humanity has sought to imagine and interpret the cosmos. Castellucci's production attempts to connect the mystical terrain of these ancient cosmologies with the discoveries of contemporary re-

searchers, whose investigations are driven by pragmatic concerns, through a succession of images that propel the spectator into an imaginative visual dimension capable of awakening dormant faculties of perception buried deep within us, beyond any direct relation to what we know or believe about the surrounding world.

Continuing his exploration of the spectator's subconscious, the director once again seeks – as in several of his earlier works (*Tragedia Endogonidia*, *Purgatorio*, *Hey Girl!*) – to produce an effect of *emotional adhesion* to a stage construct lacking both narrative and logical context. We experience both anxiety and curiosity when, after the first part of the production, the curtain unexpectedly slides upstage, briefly revealing the body of a dead horse, before returning to its original position, leaving us uncertain whether we truly saw what appeared before us or merely imagined it. Then hell seems to erupt with deafening violence: a black storm, like a volcano threatening to engulf everything in its path. We abandon any attempt at rational association and surrender ourselves to the sensation of the end of the world, until that sensation itself is transformed into aesthetic pleasure. Black holes undoubtedly possess a beauty of their own.

The visual apocalypse imagined by the director culminates in the image of a possible paradise. The face of a virgin appears in the background; the naked young women raise their arms towards her; and above the stage a simple text is repeatedly projected, like a prayer:

> "Do not abandon me!"
> "Do not abandon me!"
> "Do not abandon me!"

By bringing such a production to the 2012 Avignon Festival – where *The Four Seasons Restaurant* premiered in the summer of 2012 – and to the Foreign Affairs festival at the Berliner Festspiele in the autumn of the same year, Romeo Castellucci may well have "destroyed the appetite" of those accustomed to

consuming traditional theatre. At the same time, however, he succeeded – once again – in satisfying the appetite of an ever-growing community of spectators who have become devoted to his work precisely because it has allowed them to discover a profoundly sensory, albeit sometimes uncomfortable, dimension of spectatorship capable of generating moments of genuine revelation.

From the very beginning of their collaboration, Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio – Romeo Castellucci, Claudia Castellucci, and Chiara Guidi – did not make theatre in the conventional sense of the term.[2] They did not create productions for a particular audience, for they were not attached to a permanent theatre, nor did they contribute to an institutional repertoire. Instead, after months of research and artistic experimentation, they presented their creations almost exclusively on the international festival circuit, where they were initially received with reservations and then sought after with remarkable enthusiasm.

After their artistic paths diverged, each continued to develop a distinct body of work. As for Romeo Castellucci, he remains perhaps the most enigmatic voice in the contemporary European theatrical landscape. His work crosses the boundaries between theatre and the other arts without hesitation – or, more accurately, simply blows them apart.

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[2] The reception of Romeo Castellucci's work in Romania underwent a significant transformation: from the rejection that marked his first encounter with Romanian audiences, through *Hey Girl!* at the National Theatre Festival in 2010, to a far more open and inquisitive reception following the presentation of the installation *Julius Caesar* at the International Shakespeare Festival in Craiova in 2016.

Zsolt Benedek and István Fazakas

Catharsis and the Sublime: The Utopia of the Theatrical State

This essay contributes to a phenomenology of theatrical experience through an analysis of affectivity and catharsis. We argue that one of the defining characteristics of theatrical experience lies in its capacity to open onto depths of affectivity that are at once terrifying and alluring, and that constitute the wild, utopian and corporeal foundations of our communal existence. We contend that theatrical performance, insofar as it is capable of suspending political institutions, becomes the site of the drama of foundation. To demonstrate this, we must first move beyond hermeneutic interpretations of theatre and human experience and lay the groundwork for a phenomenological analysis, drawing primarily, in our case, on the work of Marc Richir. We then ask what happens to affectivity when it surges forth unbound by any form of symbolic fixation. We propose theatrical catharsis as a possible answer to this question and, in this sense, understand catharsis as a specifically theatrical mode of the phenomenological experience of the sublime. Our theoretical claims ultimately take concrete form through an analysis of Romeo Castellucci's production of *Orphée et Eurydice*.

Introduction: Hermeneutics and phenomenology in theatrical experience

After more than a century of semiotic and semiological research, there can scarcely be any doubt that human beings live fundamentally amid a dense web of signs (see Assmann 2015); that, in Baudelaire's words, "man passes through forests of symbols"; or indeed that the human relationship to signs, meanings and symbols constitutes both the fundamental mate-

rial and the content of our anthropological self-understanding. Seen in this light, the Aristotelian human being as *zōon logon echon*[1] appears as a *symbolic animal* – an *animal of the symbolic* (see Richir 1988, 275–285). To possess language is to dwell in the world through signs and symbols. Like a spider, the human being spins a web of signs and meanings that captures the nameless, cosmic vibrations of the world, fashions from meanings a world of its own[2] in which it recognises itself and others, and even constitutes its own identity through stories woven from signs and meanings.[3] We grow up "entangled" in stories (Schapp 2012), fall in love, form new friendships or break off old ones, remember through stories and weave plans within them. The corpus of our foundational narratives also determines the symbolic space traditionally known as culture. Our myths, novels and dramas comprise a repertoire of plots – or, in Ricoeur's terminology, *intrigues* – through which we are able to endow the still "mute [...] experience" (Ricoeur 1984, xi)[4] with meaning, integrating it into the unified whole of our life-history and, in certain cases, even our history.

Yet, like the fabric of the law,[5] "a cloth woven of stories told" (Ricoeur 1988, 246) also frays here and there. If we fol-

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[1] Strictly speaking, Aristotle states only that "man alone of the animals possesses speech (λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζώων)" (Aristotle 1989, I.2, 1253a9–10).

[2] Here we might also recall several important Heideggerian theses. In Heidegger's sense, the worldhood of the world (see Heidegger 1962, § 18, 114–122) is constituted by the mutual referentiality of contexts of meaning – by significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*). The world as a horizon of sense and a context of meaning can be traced to Dasein's *world-forming* mode of being (see Heidegger 1995).

[3] See theories of narrative identity and László Tengelyi's phenomenological analysis of them (Tengelyi 2004).

[4] See Husserl's observation: "Its beginning is the pure – and, so to speak, still dumb – psychological experience, which now must be made to utter its own sense with no adulteration" (Husserl 1982, 38–39).

[5] "I looked up from under the evening / at the gear wheels of the skies – / from glistening threads of chance / the loom of the past was weaving

low Ricoeur in holding that life itself is nothing other than the fabric woven from these stories, the question naturally arises: what exactly does this "fraying" mean?

When László Tengelyi writes of a destinal event,[6] he shows that, in those moments when we may speak of living experience, our pre-formed – or deliberately fashioned – strategy of narrative construction in fact runs aground: the order of the narrated story is disrupted and overridden by the pervasive force of the moment. At the moment of the destinal event, our hermeneutic endeavours are thus involuntarily suspended – placed, so to speak, in *epoché* – and we come into contact with the extralinguistic flesh of reality, with its wild *essences*.[7] Signs and meanings dissolve into the mute and anonymous flow of sense-formation, losing their symbolic power. In Nietzschean terms, we might also say that we are suddenly transported from Apollonian semblance – within which we *interpret* ourselves as persons, as personae and thus ultimately as masks – into a situation in which we *partake of* the fundamentally Dionysian nature of existence. *Life*, then, does not fray in its primordial – wild and nameless – state, as though it opened onto some form of cosmic death or a mass of lifeless matter, but only as

law, / and again I looked up at the sky / from under the vapours of my dreams / and I saw that the fabric of the law / was always bursting apart somewhere" (József 1966, 22).

[6] "[...] the expression of a *radical turn* or *destinal event* in life-history designates a *sense formation* which *starts by itself, takes place without any control*, as if it happened *'underground,' creating*, simultaneously, *a new beginning* in life-history" (Tengelyi 2004, 117).

[7] The "wild essence" (*essence sauvage*) is a Merleau-Pontian concept also employed by Richir and Tengelyi. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, and especially in the working notes, Merleau-Ponty, drawing on Heidegger, emphasises the verbal sense of the word *Wesen* (see Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 152, and especially 226 and 253). *Wesen* is a form of being that occurs "before" the crystallisation of the poles of subject and object and the coagulation of experience into "essences". In this respect, *Wesen* – understood verbally as a mode of being – can be related to the wild Being that Merleau-Ponty regards as ontologically primary (ibid., 250) and that, according to the plan for the book, can be associated with the flesh of the world (ibid., 10).

the *principium individuationis*[8] constituted, in the light of the hermeneutic tradition, by the symbolically fixed institution of signs, meanings and stories. Here the multiplicity of symbolically fixed beings dissolves into a kind of boundlessly surging primordial experience.

It is perhaps no coincidence that, when seeking to describe experiences of this kind, we often turn to Greek tragedy and its attendant conceptual framework. What drives ancient tragedy if not precisely a destinal event in Tengelyi's sense? Yet the dramatic texts of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ibsen and Beckett are likewise organised around destinal events – or indeed around their *failure to occur*. The written material of drama can therefore often be understood as a narrative formed around a particular destinal event.

[8] Within Nietzsche's conceptual framework, the *principium individuationis* is a product of the world of appearance – whether this world of appearance takes the form of space and time as forms of representation, Apollonian radiance or what Schopenhauer had already described as the veil of Maya. Within the phenomenological framework employed here, however, the character of appearance as semblance does not yet provide a sufficient answer to the question of individuation. For a detailed discussion, see Richir 1981, 148–276. In the present essay, we proceed from the premise that individuation takes place as a function of the symbolic order. The question of symbolic institution became central to Richir's phenomenology from the late 1980s onwards. Alongside the wild phenomenological field, symbolic institution designates an order of symbolic bindings, fixations and foundations that are not phenomenological in origin but correspond much more closely to what structuralists describe as structure. These are global structures that encode thought, action and even affectivity. *Language*, for example, is such an institution: it determines how we think about certain questions. So too is the prevailing *social order*, which pervades our actions at every level. Such social institutions – traditions and religion, for instance – also exert considerable influence on how we cultivate our affectivity, on what we are "permitted" to feel or what it is "good" to feel, and on what has no place in life with others. The symbolic order is the global institution of all these determinations (see Richir 1988). See also the work of Richir's colleague and friend Cornelius Castoriadis on the imaginary institution of society (Castoriadis 1975).

It is important to recognise, however, that if we speak of *drama* not only within the confines of literature – that is, as a *poem* – but in its original sense, as a sequence of specific actions[9] taking place within the mediality of theatrical performance, whether or not based on a written text, then drama is not exhausted by the narrative recounting of such a destinal event. Rather, through its own eventfulness, it can become the medium of a destinal event, functioning, as it were, as the *Leib* of the theatrical performance. The relationship between the drama enacted in performance – understood in this medial sense – and the written text of the dramatic poem can, at best, be described in the terms used by Romeo Castellucci:

> "The text, the context that wrapped up – by forgetting it – the body, can only fall down now as an old and worn-out bathrobe, no longer held up and left in a low, nonpretentious dimension: a rag on the floor. It is an old story, but it is necessary to repeat it" (Castellucci 2007, 39).

In this light, our concern here is not with theatrical performance insofar as it *narrates* a destinal event, or its failure to occur, by representing a dramatic poem, but with theatrical performance as a cultural formation possessing a distinctive phenomenality: one that provides a site for a dramatic event, a place where a dramatic act may *be played out*. Accordingly, rather than the hermeneutics of the dramatic poem, the pre-

[9] See "[...] some of the Dorians in the Peloponnesus claim to be the originators of tragedy. As proof of their contentions, they cite the technical terms they use for these art forms; for they say that they call the towns around their city *komai*, but the Athenians call their towns *demoi*. By this they argue that the root of the name 'comedian' is not derived from *komazein* [the word for 'reveling'] but from *komai* [their word for the towns] that the comic artists visited in their wanderings after they had been driven in disgrace from the city. In support of their claim to be the originators of 'drama,' they point out that the word for 'doing' is *dran* in their dialect, whereas Athenians use the word *prattein* for this concept" (Aristotle 1968, 7; III.1448a–b).

sent essay is concerned with *the phenomenology of theatrical experience*, in which drama appears primarily as event and act.

The ruin of representation[10] *and the shores of affectivity*

We argue that theatre is the site at which the aforementioned dimensions – the symbolic order and wild experience – come into tension with one another, and where this tension appears in its eventfulness,[11] whether we are speaking of dramatic theatre, postdramatic theatre or even performance. Seen in this light, the phenomenon of theatre cannot be understood through the traditionally accepted metaphor of the mirror: theatre is not a *location for the representation* of something else – life, for instance – or, in Husserl's terminology, a reproductive presentation (*Ver-gegenwärtigung*),[12] but the *scene* of a distinctive experience of life.

Accordingly, even in a dramatic production, actors are not *images* of stage figures. Rather, by lending their bodies to the figures appearing on stage – just as, according to Merleau-

[10] This is how Emmanuel Lévinas characterises phenomenology in an essay bearing the same title (Lévinas 2006, 173–189).

[11] Hans-Dieter Gondek and László Tengelyi define the conception of the phenomenon in new French phenomenology precisely as an event. In this sense, the phenomenon is no longer a function of a meaning-bestowing act of consciousness, nor the correlate of the projections of ecstatic Dasein, but "an *event* [...] in which something *new breaks into consciousness*" (German: "ein *Ereignis* [...], in dem etwas *Neues ins Bewusstsein* einbricht"; Gondek and Tengelyi 2011, 39).

[12] In one of the manuscripts on phantasy published in *Husserliana* XXIII (No. 18b), Husserl describes theatrical experience not through a phenomenology of image consciousness but through the concept of "perceptive" phantasy, in which the events taking place on stage are not "images" of something else but occur within the element of phantasy (Husserl 1980, 498–513). Richir repeatedly returns to this text to demonstrate the originary character of phantasy as opposed to imagination and to emphasise that the actor does not produce an *image* of the character they play but *embodies* that character through the *Phantasieleib* (see for example, Richir 2015, 115–116). In the present essay, the dimension of phantasy is less central to our concerns; we shall return, however, to the question of embodiment.

Ponty, the painter lends their body to the world so that it may become a painting (see Merleau-Ponty 1964, 16) – they transform the space of the theatrical event, whether a production or a performance, into a site of flesh and blood in which a dramatic figure takes on flesh.[13] In the conception advanced here, the concept of the stage figure is detached from its identification with the *dramatis persona* and phenomenalised instead in terms of a function fulfilled within a production or performance. Thus, when Marina Abramović creates the transitional space[14] of her performance *Rhythm 0* (1974) – placing objects in a museum space and issuing instructions that allow the participants to treat her as an object – she enters a role, that of a *human being treated as an object*, and gives her body over to it. To play a "role", then, is not primarily an "art" (*ars*, *Kunst*, *technē*), but a form of living activity performed with a specific intentionality within an exceptional situation: the transitional space created by the production or performance. To quote Castellucci once again: "The actor cannot be an 'artist': it is horrible to be so faithful. It is a word that does not mean anything. The actor,

[13] See also Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the actor's body (Merleau-Ponty 1988, 558–563).

[14] The concept of transitional space is used here in the Winnicottian sense. According to Winnicott, transitional space is not merely the space of separation formed between infant and mother but subsequently also becomes the space of cultural experience. Preceding the separation of subject and object, transitional space is the potential space of play, in which sense-formation operates freely. A phenomenological interpretation of Winnicott can be found in Richir, who understands transitional space as a dimension preceding the fixation of the distinction between imagination and reality, as the space of free phantasy, and explicitly relates it to Husserl's analyses of theatre (for a fuller discussion, see, for example, Richir 2004, 497–527). In brief, we might say that, by suspending the opposition between reality and imagination, a performance or theatrical production opens the transitional space of originary phantasy, in which play – as free sense-formation – can occur as an event. The concepts of phantasy and play should not, however, mislead us: playing with phantasies can often be exceedingly dangerous, since the players lend them their own bodies.

but only as body, is *a priori* the very body of theater" (Castellucci 2007, 44).

The description of theatre as the scene of a distinctive experience of life – rather than of representation – ranks among the most important endeavours and achievements of contemporary theatre studies. Erika Fischer-Lichte, for example, describes with exceptional precision what may be understood as a rupture in the symbolic order, one that makes room for a kind of pure experience. Fischer-Lichte calls the moment of this rupture the "perceptual shift" [*Umspringen*] between

> "[...] the order of representation and the order of presence. A theatrical element is perceived in its phenomenal being and physically affects the audience. Consequently, the process of constituting a fictive world is brusquely interrupted. In its place we find the 'fusion' of perceiving subject and perceived object. The spectator submits to a stream of associations which may lead to further auto-biographical reflection. When the perception shifts once more to the order of representation, the causal chain of understanding and constituting the character cohesively is broken. The spectators will have to resume wherever their memory allows them to. The attempt to generate meaning hermeneutically proves a Sisyphean task. The shifts leave the perceiving subjects in a state of instability. The aesthetic experience here is largely characterized by the experience of destabilization, which suspends the perceiving subjects betwixt and between two perceptual orders. A permanent stabilization lies beyond their control. [...] The aesthetic experience is shaped more by the experience of the liminality, instability, and elusiveness that pervades the entire event than by the attempts at understanding" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 157).

As a consequence of the suspension of hermeneutic processes, the spectator is plunged into the very midst of the experience they are undergoing, unable to master what is taking place either practically or even symbolically. The moment a production or performance touches us – whether through identification with a figure, a stage image, a gesture made by an actor who remains anonymous or an act performed by a performance artist – we can no longer remain within a relation of objectification and fixation to whatever, or *a fortiori* whoever, touches us. In place of signs and meanings, affectivity "responds": from this point onwards, we no longer "read" the performance text but resonate affectively with the impulses emanating from the performance.[15]

It would be a mistake, however, naively to regard this resonance as some harmless, harmonious accord.[16] For affectivity also possesses a wild and disturbing dimension, one that Plato

[15] We conceive of this resonance in terms of Eugène Minkowski's concept of *retentissement*, or "reverberation". Minkowski, one of the central historical figures of French phenomenological psychopathology, maintains that one of the fundamental characteristics of life is that, while remaining distinct from its environment, it nevertheless unfolds in harmony – or indeed in dissonance – with it. The distinctive feature of reverberation is precisely that it permeates everything irrespective of the boundaries between inside and outside, yet without individual beings losing their individuality (see Minkowski 1999). This dimension of affectivity is not confined to theatre or, indeed, even to aesthetic experience: when we respond affectively to someone's presence, as it were, "from the gut", perhaps even in spite of ourselves, we are likewise dealing with a phenomenon of resonance.

[16] Philip Auslander draws attention to this when, in his analysis of holy theatre and catharsis, he contrasts the views of Copeau and Brook with Artaud's. According to Auslander, the writings of Copeau and Brook reveal an optimistic view of affectivity, in which affective resonance creates harmonious coexistence and concord. As Auslander observes, "a pessimist might argue that the universals uncovered by a holy theatre would very likely be the ugly, divisive aspects of the psyche" (Auslander 1997, 19). The duality of affectivity observed here – its attractive and repulsive character – will be a central theme of our analyses of the sublime.

– long before Freud[17] – described in connection with desires staged in dreams. Plato speaks here of desires

> "[...] those which are awake when the reasoning and human and ruling power is asleep [see the suspension of hermeneutic processes – Zs. B. and I. F.]; then the wild beast within us, gorged with meat or drink, starts up and having shaken off sleep, goes forth to satisfy his desires; and there is no conceivable folly or crime – not excepting incest or any other unnatural union, or parricide, or the eating of forbidden food – which at such a time, when he has parted company with all shame and sense, a man may not be ready to commit" (Plato 1888, 571 c–d).

Theatre – if we regard it as Artaud proposes – is nothing other than such a "dream-space", in which, with the reasoning part suspended, affectivity moves freely within the distinctive phenomenalisation of a production or performance. Here, of course, the dream refers to a particular mode of appearing in which experiences are at least as real as those of waking life. Artaud goes so far as to regard the eruption of this wild dimension of affectivity as theatre's ownmost possibility:

> "The theater cannot become itself again – that is, it cannot constitute a means of true illusion – until it provides the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his fantasies, his utopian sense of life and of things, even his cannibalism, pour out on a level that is not counterfeit and illusory but internal" (Artaud 1976, 244).

[17] As is well known, Freud regards dreams as wish-fulfilments: "a dream is a fulfilment of a wish" (see Freud 2010, 147–158).

Plato's and Artaud's reflections attest that affectivity liberated from the culture of the symbolic order resembles, above all and for the most part, not the sounding of a harmonious accord but rather an inarticulate howl. A howl that wells up in the flesh-and-blood body in which the self has always already dwelt. Like an infant, in whom the almost cosmic dimension of affectivity is modulated into a first cry at the moment of birth, the spectator experiences themselves and their own body as the "site" of a primordial experience that may be understood as the transcendental reminiscence of a wild innocence preceding the distinction between sin and virtue. The affective "howl" welling up from the transcendental past of consciousness[18] casts the self back into a wild dimension in which "wildness", "nightmares" and a "utopian conception of life" still pass into one another in an almost indistinguishable fashion.

Although, within his theatrical ideal, Artaud could envisage this mode of experience primarily outside European culture – for example, in the rituals of Balinese dancers or of "primitive" cultures more generally – his conception has inspired, from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day, numerous productions that have employed the dramatic poem not for purposes of representation but to generate the theatrical present – as Richard Schechner did with Euripides' *The Bacchae* in *Dionysus in 69*. Within such a configuration, the symbolic order embodied in the dramatic poem is less an

[18] Drawing on Schelling and Lévinas, Richir introduces the concept of the transcendental past in order to describe a past that was never present yet nevertheless affects the present. Insofar as the present is posited as present only as a function of consciousness – that is, as a mode of temporalisation presupposing the transcendental instance of the self-positing ego – the "transcendental past of consciousness" refers to an affective experience in which there was as yet no consciousness, but there was already life. Associated with this transcendental past is the concept of transcendental reminiscence (*réminiscence*), which in the present context is best understood as a lingering sensation devoid of any memory-image. To take an example closer to everyday experience, we might think of those memories of dreams that remain with us on waking, even though we no longer know exactly what we dreamt.

instrument of repression than a means of creating the transitional space in which "wild experience" – that is, the dramatic act – can occur without trauma. Naturally – as already noted – using a dramatic poem as a point of departure is not an indispensable precondition of a production. Yet we can begin to speak of a production, rather than a contingent experience of everyday life, only once a symbolically fixed framework is in place, whether provided by a dramatic poem, an instruction (as in *Rhythm 0*)[19] or a concept (as in Castellucci's *Divine Comedy* trilogy).[20] This symbolically instituting narrative framework constitutes the production's transitional space and separates it from everyday reality.

In this light, theatrical "wildness" is neither an end in itself nor "tyrannical" in the Platonic sense; rather – at its best – it resembles the experience of tribal ritual while nevertheless differing from it in many respects,[21] and has something to contribute to the experience of our own essentiality.[22] From this perspective, we can understand how, in the theatre, affective touch can be the touch of Apollo's lyre – a cultural gesture – and yet a manifestation of Dionysian nature – unbridled life, *physis*.

[19] Abramović creates the transitional space of the performance *Rhythm 0* through the following "instructions for use": "Instructions. There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. Performance. I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility."

[20] For a fuller discussion, see Zsolt Benedek's essay "The Architectonics of the Sublime in Romeo Castellucci's *Inferno*" in the present volume.

[21] See "While the liminal experience in ritual may transform the participants' social status and alter their publicly recognized identity, no comparable effect seems to exist for the aesthetic experience of artistic performances" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 176).

[22] Romeo Castellucci writes in a similar vein about Schubert's music: "How can this singer know my innermost being better than me? What is the origin of this music that so deeply affects my own origin? And where do my tears come from, stripped of content and so far from the sentimentality that I detest?" (Castellucci 2013). Here tears flow in their primordial state, purged of sentimentality, as emotion, or even passion, dissolves into affectivity in its originary state, prior to any form of symbolic cultivation.

> "Dionysian art too wants to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we should seek this joy not in phenomena but behind phenomena. We should recognize how everything which comes into being must be prepared for a painful demise, we are forced to peer into the terrors of individual existence without turning to stone: a metaphysical consolation tears us momentarily out of the bustle of changing shapes. For a few short moments we really are the original essence itself and feel its unbridled craving for existence and joy in existence; the struggle, the agony, the annihilation of phenomena now seem necessary to us, in the context of the excess of countless forms of existence which crowd and push their way into life, of the overwhelming fertility of the world-will; we are pierced by the raging thorn of these agonies in the same moment as we have become one as it were with the immeasurable original joy in existence and as we sense the indestructibility and eternity of this pleasure in Dionysian rapture. In spite of fear and compassion, we are the fortunate living beings, not as individuals, but as a single living being, with whose joy in creation we are fused" (Nietzsche 2000, 91).

The Nietzschean passage also indicates that the manifestation of wild affectivity in the theatre is not expressed for its own sake, stripped of all context, but within the promise of "metaphysical consolation"; that is, it is accompanied by a form of reflection, however involuntary and non-conceptual. Although, in Nietzsche's writing, such a conjunction of the words "metaphysics" and "consolation" may sound at the very least ironic and – we fear – perhaps even high-flown (as though, in the absence of fundamental human experience, only a kind of simulacrum serving as a prosthesis remained possible), it is nevertheless readily apparent that the experience of the Dionysian principle in theatre offers something more – difficult

though it is to define – than the drunken frenzy of passions devoid of any symbolic façade.

In the present essay, we understand this surplus as the *utopian surplus of freedom*, where freedom denotes an experience akin to that described in traditional theories of catharsis. Since Nietzsche himself, following Aristotle, understands metaphysical consolation as the experience of "fear" and "pity", it is important to establish that the experience of freedom is posited at the level of affectivity rather than conceptuality, and that it involves the paradoxical conjunction of two opposing poles – much as the choral ode in *Antigone* articulates the fundamental experience of human existence ("πολλὰ τὰ δεινά, κοὐδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει").[23] That is, an experience in which the wondrous (attractive) and the terrible (repellent) are felt simultaneously, without either excluding the other. What is at stake in the present essay, then, is conceiving the possibility that human beings might relate freely to that wild surplus of affectivity which they have always already borne within themselves and which is both terrifying and attractive.

Catharsis and the sublime

The crucial question, however, is whether the possibility outlined above can be *conceived* at all, quite apart, for the moment, from whether it can be realised. Do we not thereby succumb to the hubris of romanticising wild affectivity (Nietzsche–Schopenhauer), or simply of idolising sheer violence (Artaud) – in short, to an aesthetic cult of barbarism? The cases of the previously mentioned *Dionysus in 69* – when spectators, misunderstanding the artists' intentions, began sexually harassing the actors – and Abramović's performance *Rhythm 0* – when the participants accepted and then abused the power offered to them by the performer, inflicting harm on her body – clearly

[23] In a frequently cited passage from *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger renders *deinotaton* as *das Unheimlichste des Unheimlichen*. *Das Unheimlichste* means "the uncanniest" (see Heidegger 2000, 112–126).

demonstrate that an attempt to erase the symbolic boundaries governing everyday life can easily culminate in violent frenzy and the violation of another person's being. In an instant, an event intended as art may be transformed from the *site* of a cultural gesture into the *location* of an act of oppression and prostitution. If the wild surplus of affectivity transforms the space of cultural play into the battlefield of anarchy, the revolutionary promise of freedom may, at a stroke, be realised through the machinery of terror set in motion by revolt.[24] Instead of experiencing the sublime feeling of anticipated liberation, we may thus find ourselves in bondage, ruled by tyrannical instincts.

When Plato seeks to banish tragedy and comedy from his republic, he does so precisely because they function as a genuine culture of human affectivity – that is, as its cultivation in the literal sense – and because "bad" poetry exerts an influence upon us.

> "And the same may be said of lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action – in all of them poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue" (Plato 1888, 606d).

And *a fortiori*, if poetry opens onto a dimension of wild affectivity that is at once terrible and wondrous, does it not follow from this gesture that freedom is lost in a form of transcendental hypnosis?

In *La naissance des dieux* (*The Birth of the Gods*), Richir introduces the concept of transcendental hypnosis precisely in

[24] Richir analyses the events of the French Revolution in terms of this movement (see Richir 1991 and Richir 2014). We believe that, precisely by suspending the symbolic order and unleashing affectivity, the theatrical gesture always carries within it the possibility of revolution in some form.

connection with Plato's analyses of the *tyrannos* in the *Republic* (Richir 1995, 114), invoking the hypnotic frenzy of affectivity that Plato describes in relation to dreams and that we have already quoted above. This hypnosis is present in us all; yet, unlike Plato, Richir argues that the "magic" of Greek theatre consists precisely in staging it and thereby creating, as it were, a "hypnosis of hypnosis", a kind of *mise en abîme* of hypnosis that opens up the possibility of momentarily awakening from it (ibid., 134–135).

This moment is precisely the moment of catharsis, in which the symbolic order that gives form to transcendental hypnosis is suspended for an almost atemporal instant, thereby opening new paths for affectivity, passions and emotions. According to Richir:

> "Tragedy opens up the possibility of a genuine phenomenology of affectivity […] which, through tragic *catharsis*, 'short-circuits' the coding of affectivity in foundational terms and, by virtue of its extraordinary subtlety, suspends all philosophical and psychological theorisation – theorisation that in fact effects a more or less explicit and impoverishing reduction of affectivity" (ibid., 6).

In this respect, catharsis functions as a kind of tragic *epoché*, opening onto the originary dimension of affectivity in a more elemental manner than the *epoché* of philosophical phenomenology. Within Richir's architectonics, such a suspension of the symbolic order corresponds to the sublime.[25]

[25] In Greek tragedy, this sublime is inseparable from a fundamentally political dimension: "And the meaning of the tragic sublime undoubtedly lies in passing through the death of the old mythical-mythological corpus, by means of the 'magic' of theatre and poetry, in order to reach what lies *beyond* it (*l'au-delà*) – what is, once again, the symbolic instituting agency (*l'instituant symbolique*), but is brought back into play by the founding of the city-state" (Richir 1995, 148; authors' translation – Zs. B. and I. F.).

Richir's interpretation of the sublime is particularly complex and assumes several forms over the course of his work.[26] For present purposes, we shall address only a few of its central ideas. First, what Richir regards as most important in Kant's account of the sublime is the moment at which the imagination encounters something literally unimaginable to it and begins to schematise it. In this process, the imagination schematises not merely without a concept, but also in the absence of the calm gaze of the understanding that plays a central role in the beautiful. Indeed, whereas in judging the beautiful, imagination and understanding generate a subjective purposiveness of the mental faculties "by their concord", in the case of the sublime imagination and reason do so "by their conflict" (Kant 2007, 87; § 27). In this conflict, the imagination, deprived of every point of support, plunges, as it schematises the infinite that it cannot imagine, into what might be called a bottomless abyss, from which only supersensible reason can draw it back:

> "The mind feels itself set in motion in the representation of the sublime in nature; whereas in the aesthetic judgement upon what is beautiful therein it is in restful contemplation. This movement, especially in its inception, may be compared with a shaking, i.e. with a rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction produced

[26] The idea of the sublime became central to Richir's œuvre in the second half of the 1980s. In the 1980s and 1990s, besides suspending symbolic identity and symbolic institutions, the sublime confronts us with the boundlessness of the wild phenomenological field (*apeiron*), within which ipseity nevertheless does not dissolve, since a transcendent symbolic instituting agency – which, according to Richir, often corresponds to God in the tradition – preserves ipseity within the enigma of its own singular facticity. In Richir's later works on the sublime and the self, this idea appears within a new conceptual constellation resulting from the development of the phenomenology of phantasy. This new conceptual constellation shifts the emphasis within the phenomenology of the sublime in several respects. Nevertheless, we believe that the neuralgic point of the problem, though not unchanged, remains fundamentally the same across these transformations.

> by one and the same object. This excess for the imagination (towards which it is driven in the apprehension of the intuition) is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself; yet again for the rational idea of the supersensible it is not excessive, but conformable to law, and directed to eliciting such an effort on the part of the imagination: and so in turn as much a source of attraction as it was repellent to mere sensibility" (ibid., 88).

In one of Richir's earliest interpretations of the sublime, the unimaginable boundlessness corresponds to the wild phenomenological field, reason to the order of symbolic institution, and the imagination's schematisation to those formations of sense through which (human) experience is possible for us at all (Richir 1988, 91–142). The imminent interruption of schematisation amounts to the experience of a symbolic death, which does not, however, entail the complete extinction of ipseity. For despite the momentary disappearance of concrete symbolic institutions, the transcendent symbolic instituting agency preserves ipseity within the enigma of its own secret and of the institution of facticity – and does so without any concrete content (see also Richir 1993). From this perspective, Richir's account of the sublime displays striking affinities with Nietzsche's interpretation of tragedy:[27] like Dionysian art in Nietzsche, the experience of the sublime affords a glimpse into "the terror of individual existence"; this terror becomes bearable because the symbolic order corresponding to the transcendence of reason – the starry heavens, for example – makes that very terror attractive once again.

Attraction and repulsion can be related to the previously discussed duality inherent in the freedom of affectivity: the en-

[27] On one occasion, Richir himself invokes Nietzsche's "Dionysian" conception alongside Kant's aesthetics (see Richir 1987, 28), although the sublime is not yet fully distinguished from the beautiful here. We can nevertheless say that the Dionysian points to what Richir would later describe as an encounter with phenomenological boundlessness (*apeiron*).

counter with the boundless reveals the duality of wild frenzy and innocence, of sinful inclinations and a utopian conception of life. What distinguishes tragic catharsis as a mode of the sublime, however, is that it also re-enacts the gesture of symbolic foundation. From this perspective, Richir's general observation concerning the political gesture of symbolic foundation is particularly apposite:

> "When he [the founder of the state] founds and inaugurates a new order, he also destroys something of the old order, causes it to waver at its foundations, and exposes those who follow him in pursuit of a new social order to the concomitant threat of dissolution. At the 'moment' of institution, this dissolution consists in the dissolution of all existing symbolic points of reference, including, at the deepest level, the affective coordinates of our sense of life and death and of the division between Good and Evil. This 'moment' is therefore also that of the encounter with the formless, in which the 'moment' of the sublime is played out, together with its 'pathos', which is in fact the sublime *Stimmung* (affective tonality) – not a passion, which would already be 'pathological', but one of the anonymous roots of affectivity. As Kant clearly showed in the third *Critique*, this 'play' in turn brings two 'moments' into relation: repulsion, in which the terror of the formless emerges, and attraction, in which one's entire being, together with its *Stimmung* – that is, here, the whole of one's affectivity – *undergoes and works through the experience of traversing* the first moment of repulsion. This traversal is, in one sense, a passage through death: the disappearance of one's symbolic identity and an encounter with one's symbolic being as an *enigma* that is not itself subject to death" (Richir 1996, 32–33).

Although tragic foundation bears a particular resemblance to the gesture of political foundation, it is precisely by *staging* this gesture that it can re-enact the gesture of foundation as such through a kind of *mise en abîme*. Theatrical performance thus harbours the possibility of opening a political space in which symbolic foundation itself becomes the theme and is suspended in the moment of the sublime. At such moments, affectivity is briefly released from the constraints of the existing symbolic order, and symbolic existence thereby appears as a secret – one that impels us time and again to endow it with meaning and enables new fixations of sense. From this perspective, and despite the fact that the political dimension does not always appear thematically or centrally in any given theatrical performance, theatre remains, to some extent, the perpetual heir to tragedy.

We therefore contend that, through catharsis, affectivity is purified above all of the symbolic fixations that hold it captive and alienate it. For one of the most enigmatic and originary features of the relationship between affectivity and the imagination that fixes it symbolically is precisely that simulacra can indeed become sites where real affects are experienced – Othello's jealousy or Ajax's murderous frenzy, for example – and that affective movements produce the simulacra within which they can exist – as in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, whose Shen Te must create Shui Ta, both for herself and for others, in order to withstand the aggression of the external world.[28] Moreover, one of the fundamental properties of simulacra is that they conceal their character as simulacra. Staging a simulacrum as a simulacrum thus opens up the possibility of liberating affectivity. In this context, we can understand Richir's claim that "tragic 'truth' has a cathartic effect because it stirs the depths of our 'being': by placing primordial stories within

[28] This idea appears in several forms within Richir's phenomenology. One of its most important analyses can be found in the first chapter of *Phantasia, imagination, affectivité*.

simulacra, it confronts us with ourselves" (Richir 1995, 134). In Romeo Castellucci's words:

> "It is when a house is burning that one can see its structure, the reason for its standing. It is then a matter of turning the 'as if' of theater, its fictional essence, into an ambivalent or amphibio-logical dimension. Putting the – burning – mirror in front of the mirror, making it resonate in order to test its sincerity. Theater is, therefore, placed in the pathetic position of feigning itself, but this should not be confused with the analytical experiments of 'theater within the theater' that were probably a reflection of the frequent tautologies of visual arts in the 1970s. This feigning itself is, instead, a declaration of irony, a mocking of theater, pretending to be innocent, like good old Socrates, in order to strike the final blow, freeing the field from the question" (Castellucci 2007, 38).

This line of argument may appear to revise, to some extent, the mirror metaphor rejected above, since our confrontation with ourselves is often conceived through that metaphor. On such an account, catharsis would be nothing other than a tectonic movement at the level of the affects, one that demolishes the edifice of symbolic institutions, much as Dionysus reduces Pentheus' palace to ruins in Euripides' *Bacchae*, thereby leaving Pentheus defenceless, exposed and naked, like a newborn infant. Indeed, tragic myths – and the dramatic poems fashioned from them – possess such a dimension, in which the wild affectivity earlier termed barbaric appears. Yet if we were to understand catharsis through the mirror metaphor, we would have to say that tragedy also binds the spectator to this image and identifies them with it, effectively designating it as true in opposition to the falsity of the system of symbolic institutions.[29]

[29] One example of such an approach is Zlatka Angelova Stankova's essay "On Catharsis and Tragedy", in which she discusses catharsis in terms

In doing so, we would reduce theatrical performance to the mere illustration of the dramatic text and overlook the surplus inherent in the flesh-and-blood nature of staging. In reality, however, when we speak with Richir of magic, we are referring to an intersubjective process, an *act* taking place between spectator and actor that also possesses a reflexive dimension – albeit at the level of affect rather than understanding – rather than to a mirror *image* that would be merely an objectifying surface, an illusory copy – representation or simulacrum – of an original. As already noted, the actor – insofar as the term is understood in the sense of an agent, one who performs an action – remains, despite playing a role, a flesh-and-blood other who is present on stage in their own body (*Leibkörper*).

If we conceived of theatre as a mirror, we would inevitably – like the participants in *Rhythm 0* – forget the actor's irreducibly human, non-objectifiable being and discover in their eyes our own narcissistic reflection rather than the living gaze of another human being. In the catharsis experienced in theatre, then, the question is rather how a particular gaze can awaken us from an illusion – Apollonian, narrative or mythological – and how the radically human (δεινός) can be glimpsed in the other: that is, how the simulacrum of the other, fixed by narrative in the symbolic or by the image in the imaginary, can be bracketed to make way for an elemental encounter. Put differently, the question is how everyday time-consciousness, which most often inhabits the temporality of a particular institution, is suspended, and how, within the transitional space created by

of a regression to the Lacanian mirror stage: "The primary catharsis of/with/through/in tragedy as an introverted, inverse journey to our psyche is only possible if we leave the images of the Ego. It consists of understanding the endless chaos of the universe as well as the experience that the myth in which we live is always an incomplete and corrupted one and the only thing that we can do is to pass once again through Lacan's 'mirror stage' and to choose our next Ego image anew" (Stankova 2006, 28).

a production or performance, an exchange of gazes[30] can bring about a genuine encounter with another human being – the experience of pure presence. The stake of the theatrical sublime is thus nothing other than to establish and purify the possibility of such an exchange of gazes.

It is important to add, however, that because this encounter does not occur under contingent circumstances but within the context of the poetics of the production or performance – that is, within its symbolically instituted transitional space – the overflow of affectivity generated by the encounter enters retrospectively, as it were, into a relation of interference with the social, moral and mythological order evoked by the work: in other words, with the symbolic and imaginary institutions that constitute narrative identity. Herein lies theatre's most fundamental political dimension: when an exchange of gazes occurs between actor or performer and spectator, it does so within the framework of the production's or performance's rules of play. Indeed, this exchange of gazes reveals what is truly at stake in the play and renders visible the fabric of institutionalised reality. When, for example, Marina Abramović finally moves after six hours of immobility in *Rhythm 0* and steps outside the situation she has offered – namely, that she may be used as an object for the duration of the performance – the affectivity of the moment reveals what the social game that consigns a human being to objecthood – in other words, to the role of victim – *really means*. The performance's fictional framework – the transitional space of play – which the artist offers as a game enters, as it were, into interference or resonance with the more fundamental reality of corporeality. This interference ensures either the cathartic effect or its failure to occur, depending on whether an exchange of gazes can take place.[31]

[30] In keeping with phenomenological analyses, the gaze here refers primarily not to the eye but to something invisible yet radically corporeal.

[31] This is exemplified by *Rhythm 0*: when the artist stepped out of the game and began behaving as a person again, the audience literally fled

A further distinctive feature of theatrical experience is that this exchange of gazes is generally not a dyadic relation but a communal experience.[32] The exchange occurs not only between actor and spectator, but also between actor and actor, and even between spectator and spectator; it is precisely this non-dyadic intersubjective encounter that constitutes the community anew as a community, without dissolving individuality. As part of the community, I recognise myself and others anew in the theatrical exchange of gazes. In this sense, the *ideal production* may be described as a kind of utopia which, although it remains purely virtual, is nevertheless not entirely without effect upon reality. Such an *embodied* utopia is what Richir calls the utopia of the social:

> "In other words, the utopia of the social is what constitutes both its 'flesh' and its 'vitality' – what in German might be called its *Leiblichkeit*, which is localised nowhere yet courses everywhere, gathering and distinguishing the 'bodies' (*Leibkörper*) of the various 'individuals' within a non-fusional unity and a non-dispersed plurality […]" (Richir 2014, 75–76).

The utopian conception of life already invoked by Artaud may be understood as this mode of functioning of a corporeal community. A glimpse into it, however, can hardly be compared to the serene contemplation characteristic of the beautiful. Here, the exchange of gazes opens momentarily onto the boundlessness of the communal body, or, as Castellucci writes:

from her gaze. See "Marina Abramović on Rhythm 0 (1974)", 01:45, https://vimeo.com/71952791, accessed 1 April 2026.

[32] One can, of course, imagine a production performed by a single actor for a single spectator, but even in this case the actor and spectator are present rather as representatives of the community.

> "A body that dares the boldness of a rough communion with your body of spectator is seen and felt. In my opinion, this is all the carnal power of theater, the peculiarity of its training violence. Whether one wants it or not. As an extreme act. The body-figure is thrown at high velocity into the very hard atmosphere of the gaze: as a hammer into the thickness of a glass. In this velocity details escape, because one aims directly at the nucleus of the thing, in a vibrant vertiginous perspective" (Castellucci 2007, 42).

In light of the interpretation of the sublime presented in this study, however, it is important to add that, within the boundlessness of these vibrating, vertiginous vistas, the gaze does not dissolve completely and irreversibly; rather, it ceases only for an atemporal moment, so that it may re-emerge from the flesh as recognition. In phenomenological terms, the dizzying immeasurability of the boundless *Leib* glimmering behind the *Körper*, together with the vibrant frenzy of affectivity, shatters the gaze in order to purify it of the previously fixed configurations of sense that distort recognition.

Instead of a conclusion: Orphée et Eurydice

The Brussels version of *Orphée et Eurydice*, directed by Romeo Castellucci,[33] in which the leading role is played by Els, who has locked-in syndrome, offers an exemplary demonstration of how the destabilisation and refoundation of the institutions described above operate in theatrical practice, and of what the experience of the boundless *Leib* entails. In this production, the director juxtaposes the tragic myth of love adapted by Gluck with an actual life story – that of Els and her family – which resonates at numerous points with the narrative of the myth. The production simultaneously constitutes within the specta-

[33] A detailed account of the events of the production lies beyond the scope of the present essay. See Semenowicz 2016, 195–198.

tor's phantasy both the narrative of Gluck's opera as performed by the singers, which grounds the production's transitional space and its phantasy dimension, and Els's personal life story, which appears before the spectator in its facticity, first in the form of projected text and then through a live video feed – a real-time broadcast of the daily journey undertaken by Els's husband, Daniel. The latter is a human life story that, besides being a social concern – since responsibility for keeping the patient alive devolves upon the – is also one to which it is impossible to relate at the level of socially accepted symbolic institutions:

> "The story of Els without the story of Orpheus is a story of human suffering which can often be seen on TV or read about in newspapers and which leaves us indifferent" (Romeo Castellucci cited by Semenowicz 2016, 200).

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, however, lends this difficult-to-approach life story a mythic and aesthetic framework through which it can become intelligible and thus capable of being culturally instituted. The live music heard collectively in the auditorium and the image juxtaposed with it, likewise transmitted live, place the spectator in a situation in which neither can be detached from the other; the hermeneutic trajectories of the two stories become chiastically intertwined.[34] The awareness that Els is also hearing the music being performed at that very moment creates a space of play in which the spectator is no longer merely a spectator but – like Els – a *participant* in a production that ruptures the division between stage and auditorium. The production touches both the spectator and Els; in the simultaneity of the music, they coexist, their bod-

[34] See "Thanks to this reduction of the mythological plot, the stories of Els and Eurydice are fully compatible. They are not identical, but converge at many points, which was emphasised in the juxtaposition of libretto and on-screen text" (Semenowicz 2016, 199).

ies resonating simultaneously with the music and thereby with the production's unlocalisable *Leib*.[35] The spectator also enters into resonance with Daniel's fate, experiencing the length of the journey he makes day after day – or at least part of it – and the hospital's strange atmosphere. Yet all this is experienced within a space instituted by the opera's music and text, not merely as documentary material,[36] but as an aesthetic experience. This experiential quality, together with the recognition that the spectator is participating in an event unfolding in the present – namely, one that holds out the prospect that Els and Daniel will meet within the framework of the production – heightens the spectator's sense of personal involvement to such a degree that they become unable to *interpret* the production and instead *respond* with their own body – through excitement, disgust, pain and so forth – to what is happening rather than to the story, and do so in the most deeply personal manner.

At the moment when the camera – and with it Daniel – reaches Els, coinciding in the opera with Orpheus's arrival at Eurydice, an overflow of affectivity arises – of the kind described above in connection with the exchange of gazes – that renders any schematisation in concepts or images impossible for the spectator. The spectator undergoes an experience so radically new that, as in a destinal event, they feel lost within it. Yet in this state of disorientation, they are momentarily afforded the possibility not of apprehending the other human being as either the subject of a narrative of suffering or a mythical figure – Eurydice – but of perceiving her presence in its

[35] See "We wait impatiently for the meeting, but are also anxious about this confrontation. When it finally takes place, Els's long gaze makes us anxious, tense, embarrassed, ashamed, because we have the impression of being voyeurs, of intruding on someone's privacy; it is the manifestation of our fear of the loss of someone close, of helplessness related to it and, at the same time, of sharing Els's plight" (ibid., 201).

[36] This is despite the fact that the live transmission and the preceding captions take scrupulous care to remain at the level of objective documentation, presenting only the facts of this life-history and refraining from interpreting it in any way.

momentary immediacy and feeling with her, without any institutionalisation or schematisation:

> "This 'enchanted' time is the intangible shell of the figure, so that its armed communication comes from another place: from a mute body, without existence; that is, from a body that has only one story, only one war to tell: *the optical war of Surfaces*. But all this is only one attempt, among the many possible ones, to try to understand why a figure – a body that returns – becomes on stage the very hypostasis of the fable. What happens? Why does the fable appear to me stronger than art? For what, then? Just to see someone standing on a stage? [...] But this is truly the incredible fact. Probably a diabolical act. The distorting, inverted grafting of theater. The reactive effect of iconoclasm that is taken away and, perhaps, imposes this exact radical and second creation that is the curse, because it *dares to create from nothing*. It is as if the 'as if' suddenly were eclipsed, provoking the mute implosion of the *in illo tempore* (in that time), therefore determining that theological emptiness that strongly presupposes a creator" (Castellucci 2007, 40–41).

This collapse of time, brought about through the exchange of gazes, has irreversible consequences for the institutions through which the spectator has hitherto schematised fates "similar" to Els's; at the same time, Els's story becomes an integral part of the hermeneutics of the Orpheus myth. The kind of love beyond death that the myth – and the opera to which it gave rise – fixed in their respective forms is itself placed on a new foundation:

> "The myth is not only a metaphysical fairy tale about an attempt to snatch the beloved from death here, but becomes real suffering. [...] The superimposition of

> the mythological structure on the social one brings the myth up to date, not in the sense of making it contemporary, but of making it real" (ibid., 199–200).

Through the effect of the encounter, the spectator participating in the production is placed in a situation that makes it impossible for them fully to maintain their previous identity – an identity that excluded stories similar to Els's. Provided that the experience of the production is not traumatic for them – that no powerfully fixed image in their phantasy holds their imagination tyrannically captive – they find themselves, for a moment, in a space and time held open by the imagination, beyond the historical time that can be narrated and imagined in terms of life stories, social norms and stereotypes about social groups: they enter the time and space of pure presence. Put differently, purified of their own symbolic institutions through fear and pity and the fellow feeling to which these give rise, they undergo the sublimity of cathartic experience. As a result of this experience, the institutions through which they schematise the myth, people with locked-in syndrome, Els and Daniel as persons, and even the concepts of love and fate are simultaneously refounded within their phantasy, in accordance with the account given above: they undergo a certain shift in identity.

A further important point is that, if the spectator truly succeeds in entering the space and time of catharsis, they do not do so alone. This crossing occurs simultaneously with that of the other spectators undergoing catharsis at the same moment: the affective experience of fellow feeling described above thus generates a shared resonance which, although induced by the phenomena discussed above, also in a certain sense exceeds them. We have already conceptualised this phenomenon through the notion of the boundless *Leib*. Through the collectively experienced catharsis, an anonymous community is founded within the production's transitional space, a community for which the symbolic institutions operative outside that space are placed in

epoché – as, indeed, are even the institutions of the production itself at the moment of catharsis – and which is constituted solely by the experience of simultaneous presence. In this respect, at the moment of catharsis, the production's transitional space functions as a political space that neither questions nor attacks any existing political order at the conceptual level, but instead creates an atemporal, anonymous communal place that grounds every political institution without itself being an institution. If it becomes institutionalised, it turns into its own simulacrum and ceases to be itself. Herein lies the utopia of the theatrical state.

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Mirella Patureau

From Bachelor Machines To Bone Dust: The Actor Between Mechanisation and Pulverisation

In winter 2014, towards the close of the Festival d'Automne à Paris, Romeo Castellucci's production of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* unsettled audiences. Erudite critics recalled the scandal surrounding the 1913 Paris premiere, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky. This time, however, the shock was of a different order. It was not the sensuality of the score or the unleashing of exposed bodies that proved troubling, but rather… their absence. Castellucci proposed a dance performance without dancers, featuring forty computer-controlled machines and several tonnes of animal bone dust. At first sight, such a vision might seem deliberately provocative: in an increasingly mechanised world, dominated by screens and digital circuitry and flirting with the virtual, theatre – or live performance – still appears to offer a final refuge, founded upon living presence and customarily celebrating an encounter between actor and spectator. Castellucci relocates this encounter to another terrain: that of a foretold catastrophe in which machines take possession of the planet and remain alone onstage. The images are magnificent and bizarre, informed by an imaginative cruelty that recalls Artaud's radicalism. Beauty, the Italian director remarks somewhere, must take us by surprise – but can this still be considered surprising?

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Among robots and mannequins

We need not look far back in time: "mechanical theatres" flourished in Europe during the 1920s, as witnessed by the experiments undertaken at the Bauhaus and the *Triadic Ballet*. The impetus came, of course, from Edward Gordon Craig. The first appearance of the *Übermarionette* advocated by this visionary director seems to have occurred in a 1909 production of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Le Roi Bombance* [King Guzzle], staged by Aurélien-Marie Lugné-Poe. It was also Marinetti who employed this modern myth in his play *Electric Dolls*, in which the Robot appears as the characters' Double. If the marionette embodies an ontological interrogation, betraying a fundamental human anxiety, the robot is its counterpart in the age of industrial civilisation. According to Giovanni Lista, the leading European specialist in Italian Futurism, "mechanical theatre" represented an epiphenomenon of the machine's pervasive presence as the protagonist of modern civilisation. The marionette, as a manifestation of the consciousness of the Double, is one of humanity's oldest mythical images. The mythology of the machine, by contrast, is much more recent. Michel Carrouges identified one of the earliest figurations of this machine in the image of the "bachelor machine", which recurs in various forms from Alfred Jarry and Franz Kafka to Marcel Duchamp (see Carrouges 1976).

Human beings dream of becoming machines, aspiring to attain the perfection and power of the mechanised body. Following Carrouges, we may observe that all mechanised humans are bachelors: the dissociation of the ego that produced the phantasm of the mechanised Double is punished by the condition of celibacy – that is, by the loss of the right to participate in life and erotic communion. Italian Futurism sought new myths capable of legitimising industrial society. Shortly after launching the Futurist Manifesto in 1909, Marinetti published his novel *Mafarka the Futurist*, centred on a hero who, without the aid of a woman, gives birth to a winged son whom he

constructs single-handedly, piece by piece. The narrative ends with the birth of this mechanical, anthropomorphic creature, which takes flight towards the heavens to dethrone the Sun. Marinetti thus establishes the legend of the Futurist superman, a solar figure destined to emerge from industrial civilisation; yet the creation of a humanity of supermen presupposes an act of bachelor creation.

The First World War had intervened, and by 1927 the myth of the robotisation of the human being had become a source of profound anxiety in a play by Ruggero Vasari (1898–1968) with the unequivocal title *The Anguish of the Machines*, first performed in Paris by the Art et Action group: an experimental and avant-garde theatre group founded by Louise Lara and Édouard Autant, father of the filmmaker Claude Autant-Lara (see Corvin, 1990). The play is set in the Kingdom of Machines, on an unspecified planet – probably Earth – inhabited by a mechanised humanity composed of robots and the "condemned to machines", that is, robotised human beings. Vital energy is supplied by a power station connected to a brain-machine that organises life across the entire planet. This is a community of bachelor machines, for the women have been sent to another planet. The text inevitably recalls the famous dystopia *R.U.R.* by the Czech writer Karel Čapek, with which Vasari was thoroughly familiar, having seen it in Berlin in 1923 or in Theodore Komisarjevsky's Paris production in 1925. In Vasari, however, there is a jarring contrast between the verbal and the visual: between a text whose lyricism recalls Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Futurist scenography of the Kingdom of Machines in which the stage action unfolds. Giovanni Lista proposes a historical explanation: the influence of the International Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques, held in Vienna in 1924, in which Oskar Schlemmer, Alexandra Exter and El Lissitzky participated and of which Vasari could hardly have been unaware (see Lista 1979). The final version of the text nevertheless calls for electrical apparatuses with illuminated discs, sparkling antennae and intermittently flashing

signals, while the brain-machine and its moving mechanism buzz ominously…

The cybernetic rite of spring

Within the same sombre mechanical atmosphere, Romeo Castellucci's *The Rite of Spring* succeeds in quite literally reducing an ancestral myth to dust while simultaneously restoring its shattering contemporary force. We all have in mind the Russian composer's insistent, rhythmic music; the ancient pagan rituals surrounding the sacrifice of a virgin at the advent of spring to restore fertility to the earth, the life-giving deity. To this we may add a lineage of legendary choreographic interpretations, from Vaslav Nijinsky to Maurice Béjart and Pina Bausch.

Although Castellucci retains no trace of pagan Russia, the violence persists on another plane. We find ourselves fully within an aesthetics of disappearance: this is a *Rite of Spring* without human presence, featuring only forty machines suspended from rails high above the stage, their red lights glimmering as they release a fine rain of dust – a bodiless kinetic ballet, a play of forms and rhythms controlled by sophisticated machinery. On a plastic curtain drawn across the stage, we read that the material used is ash obtained from the bones of seventy-five slaughtered cattle, meticulously cleaned. This entire ballet of dust, bathed in filtered light as though at the beginning or end of the world, is digitally programmed with rigorous precision to the staccato rhythm and crescendo of Stravinsky's music. It is complemented by a soundtrack by Scott Gibbons: a strange interference that plunges us into infinity and allows us to hear the rustling of atoms, the hidden life of matter captured by a computer. This spectral dimension recalls the biblical adage: from dust we came and to dust we shall return. The plastic curtain withdraws, and several figures in white overalls, as if engaged in nuclear decontamination, enter and clear the accumulated ash from the stage. Evoking either a nuclear ca-

tastrophe or the Holocaust, this spectral *Rite of Spring*, far from provoking scandal, proved profoundly unsettling.

In an interview published in the festival programme, Castellucci explains that he wanted to make the dust dance … to make it explode, to atomise the dancers. Yet the dance remains. Movements, pirouettes and the most traditional figures are embodied in waves of settling dust. This dust is ash and, as Castellucci emphasises, it is death. Asked whether theatre can exist without human presence, Castellucci replies: "I believe it can. Yet I do not believe that this marks the end of the human being onstage, because even if all we have is this dust, it represents the actor. Actor and spectator are the two minimal elements, the framework within which theatre takes place. Even if the actor is not present in flesh and blood, even if reduced to dust, to geometrical forms or to animals, the actor nevertheless remains the Actor with a capital A."

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II.
The Pictures

Veronika Darida

Recreating Tragedy
Reflections on *Tragedia Endogonidia*

In *The Death of Tragedy*, published in 1961, George Steiner speaks of the disappearance of the tragic sensibility, of the tragic voice falling silent. This change, however, did not begin in the twentieth century, but as early as the seventeenth, at the moment of God's silence, or of His withdrawal from humankind, for "tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie" (Steiner 1961, 353). At the same time, Steiner himself acknowledges that tragedy may merely have changed its classical style and conventions. For him, as a spectator, this was confirmed by a cathartic scene in a performance of *Mutter Courage*, in which, in the mother's gesture of a silent scream – as performed by Helene Weigel – he recognised Cassandra's scream, which had foretold the fall of the House of Atreus. Thus the book's epilogue does not, after all, bury tragedy once and for all, but asserts instead: "Finally, there should be present to our mind the possibility – though I judge it remote – that the tragic theatre may have before it a new life and future" (ibid., 354).

Twenty-first-century theatre seems to bear out this latter claim, since any number of examples might be cited of the reinterpretation of classical Greek drama: from Robert Wilson's *Oedipus Rex*, transformed into a theatre of images, to Milo Rau's politically committed *Orestes in Mosul*; from Wajdi Mouawad's dramaturgy, which recasts Greek drama in contemporary terms – as in *Scorched*, also staged in Hungary – to Phia Ménard's *Trilogy – Maison Mère* was also seen at Trafó,

House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest. We might equally mention András Jeles's production of *The Bacchae*, based on László Melis's opera, or Josef Nadj's choreography *Omma* – the ancient Greek word means "eye" or "sight". The closing scene of the latter, with eight African dancers, seems to carry forward the final question of Steiner's book: "Is it not, I wonder, in some comparable rite of defiance and honour to the dead that tragedy began, three thousand years ago, on the plains of Argos?" (ibid., 355).

In the present study, however, the focus is not the resurgence of the tragic in contemporary theatre, but a single masterpiece and its immediate antecedents: Romeo Castellucci and Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio's eleven-episode performance cycle *Tragedia Endogonidia*, first presented more than twenty years ago, between 2002 and 2004, and still, to this day, the most radical theatrical rethinking of the idea of tragedy. The memory of these episodes, each performed only once, is preserved in a video version (*memoria di video*), directed by Cristiano Carloni and Stefano Franceschetti (*Tragedia Endogonidia*). At the same time, the fact that this completed series nevertheless resists closure is signalled by Castellucci's presentation, both alongside and after the tragedy cycle, of sixteen short scenes under the title *Crescite*, developed from the individual episodes and shown in various cities; to this day, elements drawn from the cycle continue to reappear in many of his productions. The 2006 work *The Cryonic Chants* further develops the sonic world of the performance cycle (Pintér-Németh 2023), while the precursor to *Bros*, presented in 2021 and also shown in Hungary, can be found in the Brussels episode of *Tragedia Endogonidia*. This movement of return, however, is not repetition or representation, but in each case a new, differentiated mode of approach, one that testifies to the continuous, haunting challenge posed by the idea of tragedy in Castellucci's theatre – even after the dissolution of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio in 2006 – and to his unending contestation of, and struggle with, that idea.

Antecedents

Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, founded in 1981 by Romeo Castellucci, Claudia Castellucci, Chiara Guidi and Paolo Guidi, chose its name as a gesture in its own right. According to Romeo Castellucci, who had trained in the visual arts, one of the greatest painters of the Italian Renaissance conceals, behind the perfect outward form of his works, the inner, agonising struggle for form itself. It is worth noting that, more than a century earlier, Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), likewise evoked one of Raphael's Vatican paintings: *The Transfiguration*, which presents both the Apollonian world of dream and beauty and its necessary ground, Dionysian intoxication and suffering. While the lower half of the painting reflects "eternal primordial pain", "with the possessed boy, the despairing bearers, the helpless, terrified disciples" (Nietzsche 1909, 39), the upper part discloses a visionary, "new world of appearances": "a radiant floating in purest bliss and painless Contemplation beaming from wide-open eyes" (ibid.). In a similar way, the Apollonian and Dionysian worlds appear in every production by Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio as inseparable from one another.

With regard to the early years, it is important to stress that the company, formed by a group of friends, immediately distanced itself from the professional, institutional theatre milieu and pursued free experimentation at its base, an estate in Cesena. This voluntary withdrawal enabled them to undertake research across a wide range of fields, encompassing not only theatre but also the visual arts, music, philosophy, theology and medicine – especially virology, bacteriology and immunology. Their work was defined throughout by a consistent critique of representation; for this reason, their theatre may be described as a theatre of iconoclasm.

Their first productions were performances for children, since already at this stage their interest centred on childhood experience and on the "infantile" theatre of children – *infans*

meaning childlike, babbling, non-speaking, mute – which they would continue to regard as a model in later years. Live animals, too, appeared in their productions from an early stage: first, two snakes and a lamb in *Alla bellezza tanto antica* in 1988; then lambs, goats and monkeys in *La discesa di Inanna* in 1989. Animals are also present in their later, better-known productions: dogs and an owl in *Gilgamesh* (1990), while in *Oresteia* (1995) monkeys form the chorus of the Eumenides. Alongside live animals, the stage elements that symbolise animals are also significant: the children's chorus dressed as white rabbits in *Oresteia* – an allusion to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – or the battering ram in *Giulio Cesare* (1997), which in the first act appears horizontally, breaking through the curtain, while at the beginning of the second act it is suspended vertically, as if it were a sacrificial animal. This battering ram was also exhibited as an installation at the Avignon Festival. Horses, too, recur frequently: they first appear in the projected sequences of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1999), as the innocent victims of war, brutally slaughtered.

Among the productions preceding the tragedy cycle, it is worth singling out those in which several important motifs of *Tragedia Endogonidia* already appear. These include *Gilgamesh*, first presented in 1990, *Hamlet* (*Amleto*) in 1992, *Oresteia* in 1995, and *Giulio Cesare* in 1997. In terms of the reinterpretation of Greek tragedy, the most important of these is *Oresteia*, which, in its parenthetical subtitle – *(Una commedia organica?)* – decisively breaks away from the original work and defines itself as a comedy, a genre relegated to the background in Aristotle's *Poetics*. At the same time, this production, which condenses Aeschylus's trilogy – *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides* – into a single work, is a genuine tragedy, one that presents a state prior to classical Greek tragedy: a kind of primal tragedy. Or rather, a barbaric tragedy, which lays bare the violence of the beginning, anarchy and chaos. Its aim, moreover – again in opposition to Aristotelian theory – is by no means the purification brought about by fear and pity.

According to Castellucci, "catharsis" is merely Aristotle's invention, and has nothing to do with the original, unsettling, elemental effect produced by tragedy at the moment of its birth. *Oresteia* is not a theatre of logos, but of spectacle (*opsis*), where beauty and ugliness are inseparable and equally shocking in their force. The dominant colour of the stage images is white, just as white is tragedy's primordial sacrificial victim, the flayed goat. The rabbit that appears in the production is also white, as if it had stepped out of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to become the rabbits' chorus leader here. The images, at once archaic and fairy-tale-like, are interwoven with references to twentieth-century visual art: above all, they evoke the paintings of Francis Bacon. To borrow the conceptual vocabulary of Gilles Deleuze's monograph on Bacon, we see bodies without organs (*corps sans organes*) or Figures subjected to an electroshock effect (Deleuze 1981), enacting the history of suffering endured by Antonin Artaud in various psychiatric institutions. In this new, organic *Oresteia*, the worlds of Aeschylus, Carroll and Artaud form an indeterminate mixture, and the spectator cannot escape the spell of an otherness that is at once enthralling and terrifying.

The most decisive antecedent of *Tragedia Endogonidia*, however, is not this, but the 1999 production *Genesi. From the Museum of Sleep*. Here theatre becomes a museum: a space severed from the living experience of works, alien to life and closed in upon itself. At the same time, the museum is also a repository of images, and thus the three episodes of *Genesi – In the Beginning*, *Auschwitz* and *Cain and Abel* – are self-evidently a theatre of images. All three parts take as their theme the failure of creation. According to Castellucci, the problem of art is not creation, but re-creation, in which the artist creates not out of nothing, but out of chaos. This is borne out by his own working method as a director: first, he spends a long time taking notes and making sketches; then various lines of development emerge from these, which the artist need only follow.

The material begins to organise itself, giving rise to unexpected constellations.

The most "scandalous" part of *Genesi* – if scandal is understood in János Pilinszky's sense, according to whom "Everything that happened here is a scandal insofar as it could happen, and, without exception, sacred insofar as it happened" (Pilinszky n.d.) – is the *Auschwitz* episode. Its position between the other two points, as it were, to the invisible centre or blind spot of the production. In a number of statements, Castellucci addresses the question of this choice of title, which raises numerous questions and provokes strong emotions and vehement reactions:

> "Ce centre porte le titre d'un camp de concentration. C'est avec effroi que j'ai choisi d'utiliser et de cohabiter avec ce mot « Auschwitz » est un mot quotidien. J'ai voulu « pétrir » ce mot pour en assumer l'horreur. Auschwitz est la conséquence extrême, et non imaginable, de la Genèse de l'homme." (Castellucci and Castellucci 2001, 128)[1]

The staging, however, avoids any direct depiction or illustrative visual element. The director places the child performers – his own children – in an empty space, amid a blinding whiteness, where, dressed in white, they play with dreamlike slowness. This play leads into the realm of the fairy tale, into Alice's Wonderland, where one of the children is dressed as a white rabbit, while on a mirror placed in the background the word DREAM can be read in mirror writing. While we watch a tea ceremony conducted by children, the cacophonous soundtrack of Artaud's final radio play, *To Have Done with the Judgement of*

[1] "This centre bears the title of a concentration camp. It was with dread that I chose to use this word and to live with it. 'Auschwitz' is an everyday word. I wanted to 'knead' this word in order to assume its horror. Auschwitz is the extreme and unimaginable consequence of the Genesis of man."

God, is heard in the background. At the very end of the scene, the children stand beneath a white shower head, their figures turning into shadows in the blinding whiteness, while from Artaud's sentences – "You are raving M. Artaud. You are mad. – I am not raving. I am not mad" (Artaud 1947) – only the negation remains, echoing without cease: "I am not".

The *Auschwitz* episode unfolds in a "non-place", as if dispensing with intelligible language – neither Artaud's speech nor the children's cries are intelligible – for, as Castellucci emphasises, childhood is *in-fanzia*, and thus lies outside language. It is above all a scene of silence – of God's silence and absence – which presents the events not from the perspective of historical facts, but from that of their ineradicable consequences: as an epiphany of dead children.

Perhaps these few recalled images alone make clear that the major productions preceding *Tragedia Endogonidia* are all narratives of origins and endings. They are post-Auschwitz reinterpretations of the foundational narratives that shape culture – the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Bible, Greek drama, Shakespeare's plays – and they simultaneously thematise the Nietzschean idea of the death of God and the death of tragedy. Behind these productions lies the same challenge: theatre must begin again. According to Castellucci, only by passing through – by transgressing – the foundational works of our culture can a new beginning become possible; for this reason, all his productions become a theatre of the unimaginable and the unrepresentable.

The iconoclasm that characterises the productions of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio entails not only the destruction of the defining primal images – the archetypes – of tradition, but also the summoning forth of the phantoms behind those images. The aim is not total destruction or abolition, but rather the return of images to the sphere of conscious thought and reflection. The programmatic text *The Iconoclasm of the Stage and the Return of the Body* formulates this duality with precision. It is here that Castellucci's artistic credo is articulated most concretely: "Theatre, and any art form that does not come to terms

with its own factual possibility of not being there, does not interest me" (Castellucci 2007, 37). In this light, the primary aim of the productions is to set fire – on a kind of spiritual pyre – to the vast, unthinking archive of tradition. This work of abolition also extends to the stage figures, who, as if undermined from within, become heralds of their own disappearance. For according to Castellucci, the stage figure can survive the destructive fury raging within it only by burning itself up. The essential form of the actor is therefore the image of a burning figure: an image that represents both self-immolation and burnt offering. Its model is provided by Alberto Giacometti's ethereally slender, almost brittle sculptures, which evoke prisoners just released from the camps, those living dead who blaze in the flame of resurrection, as Jean-Paul Sartre had earlier put it in his fine essay on Giacometti (Sartre 1949).

It is also important to stress that Castellucci's manifesto calls for the destruction of institutionalised theatre as well, in order to recover the original theatre. The actor's primary task is therefore to return to the site of the beginning, and to do so as the return of the body. This entails the rejection of acting techniques and methods, and the discovery of "bare life". On this coming – and at the same time archaic – stage, there is only presence; from this derives the sensuous power of theatre understood as a community of bodies. At the same time, the actor's body resembles the animal body, which is incapable of pretence. The actor strives to abolish the boundary between the human and the animal: "For me, the being of the actor on the stage is a eunuch and violent being, questioning as the muzzle of a dog in the precise synchrony of an iconoclastic suffering" (Castellucci 2007, 44).

The marginal notes entitled *Disjecta Membra*, published as an appendix to *The Iconoclasm of the Stage and the Return of the Body*, also deserve attention, since here Castellucci makes important observations on tragedy that anticipate the later project of *Tragedia Endogonidia*. "Polemics with Attic tragedy", he writes, before immediately adding: "However, the tragic fact

attracts me tremendously. Prepare a battle plan against tragedy. It is the only – worthy – enemy you should have" (ibid., 45).

Tragedia Endogonidia (2002–2004)

Tragedia Endogonidia is the most ambitious theatrical experiment of the opening years of the twenty-first century. The title of the production – in keeping with Artaud's idea that the new theatre must unite poetry and science – derives from microbiology, the adjective meaning "endogenous, developing from within itself". *Tragedia Endogonidia* is an organic tragedy, self-generating and self-engendering. From the outset, Castellucci conceived of a tragedy cycle that would take shape over several years, in a series of individual productions realised in various European cities. In the end, the eleven episodes were linked to ten cities: Cesena, Avignon, Berlin, Brussels, Bergen, Marseille, Rome, Paris, Strasbourg, London and Cesena. As the list shows, the place of beginning and of ending is the same: the cycle began and concluded at the company's base in Cesena.

The tragedy cycle *Tragedia Endogonidia* is strongly bound up with Nietzsche's thought. In examining the origin of tragedy, Castellucci often emphasises that Western theatre was born from the recognition that God is dead. The non-existence of God grounds the existence of tragedy; in other words, tragedy is the consequence of a metaphysical crisis. For this reason, it is marked from the outset at least as much by destruction as by creation. One might even say that the history of tragedy is the realisation of decreation. At the same time, this process refuses to come to an end. As the destruction of the past, tragedy also discloses new possibilities; the origin of the future is contained within it. The central motif of the new tragedy is therefore no longer the confrontation with the silence of death and the silence of the tragic hero – as Franz Rosenzweig writes in *The Star of Redemption* with reference to the hero of Greek tragedy

– but the creation of a new, shared language, and the formation of a community that does not yet exist.

One of the most distinctive innovations of *Tragedia Endogonidia* is the abandonment of the Chorus as a character. The designation of the individual productions as "episodes" (*episodio*) also points to the absence of a staged Chorus: in Greek tragedy, the *epeisodion* denoted the dialogic section between two choral odes. This does not mean, however, that the Chorus is entirely absent; rather, it is displaced into the audience constituted by actors and spectators. According to Castellucci, as he explains in conversation with Bruno Tackels, one of the most important challenges of contemporary tragedy is the creation, through a shared theatrical language, of a "coming" community (Tackels 2005, 82). The individual episodes are linked to particular cities so that the questions raised at each specific site may possess genuine community-forming force. For the same reason, the individual productions cannot be repeated in their entirety elsewhere or at another time. What comes into being is a unique project that entails a new risk on each occasion. Castellucci maintains, however (Perrier 2014, 57–109), that authentic artistic creation is a journey into the unknown, into the opacity of form. Risk-taking is the natural condition of art. Without risk, everything becomes self-serving, decorative. Every authentic work of art carries danger within it, threatening both its maker and its recipient. As spectators, we may feel that the work looks provocatively back at us, and that because of this we are seized by an inexplicable shame – the feeling of being laid bare – or by a strange uncertainty, a sense of defencelessness. The work is threatening insofar as it touches us in our innermost being; Castellucci likens this to the state of an animal driven from its lair. In art, the authentic experience of ugliness and of beauty alike entails exposure. We must confront an unknown, give a name to that which as yet has none. The aesthetic experience of art is an encounter with another reality, one that makes us realise that the language of the previous reality has already lost its meaning. Art interrupts and

suspends the reality that had prevailed until then, and thereby becomes – in Castellucci's phrase – a "super-real" experience.

The eleven episodes of *Tragedia Endogonidia* may in fact be understood as different phases of a single tragedy – unfinishable and resistant to closure – phases that, in their very differences, nonetheless refer to one another. A progressive process of transformation can be observed between the individual episodes. Taken together, they do not form a unified and closed whole, but neither are they a collection of fragments independent of one another. According to Castellucci, each episode is like a meteor which, in passing, gently touches the surface of the world, yet leaves no trace (Castellucci et al. 2007, 31).

Each episode of *Tragedia Endogonidia* was preceded by a long period of exploration and preparation. These phases, which most closely resemble workshop practice or a theatrical laboratory, are documented in the correspondence among the members of the company (Castellucci et al. 2007). Particularly important are the letters written by Romeo and Chiara Castellucci to the production's composer, Scott Gibbons, in which a new aesthetics of sound takes shape; Chiara Guidi would later summarise her research on voice and sound in a book (Guidi 2017). This research into sound draws on Artaud's writings – see "An Affective Athleticism" – where he discusses the "affective musculature" of actors (Artaud 1958, 136) and its conscious use. Accordingly, emotions are located in the body and can be activated through breathing. Since the spectator identifies with the performance "breath by breath", the actor, through conscious control of breathing, is able to produce the desired emotional effect in the spectator. Artaud's aim, however, extends beyond mere practice, since "to know the points of localisation in the body is thus to reforge the magical chain" (ibid., 140). The primary condition for a return to ancient, sacred theatre is therefore the rediscovery of breath and the body.

The preparation of *Tragedia Endogonidia* likewise begins with reflection on sound and breathing. The creators imagine a sound that is almost no more than a fragment, a whisper, a

mere breath, and that reaches us as if it were the first sound. In this conception, the dominance of articulated sound – of speech – disappears, and we return to the origin of sound, to the birth of sound. One might add that, with this radical gesture, the creators already place the production, still only in its planning stage, outside the Western theatrical tradition. The same is true of all the other traditionally accepted elements of classical tragedy – plot, characters, language, mode of thought, scenography, music – among which music, ranked last by Aristotle, becomes the most essential. In this, they align themselves with Nietzsche, for whom tragedy is born from music – as the original title of his book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, also attests – while the decline of tragedy is caused by the disappearance of musicality, that is, by the Socratic dialectic that emerges in the dramas of Euripides. For this reason, the rebirth of tragedy can once again be expected only from music – from Wagner's music drama, according to Nietzsche – which is capable of creating a new audience, one that no longer seeks harmony, but musical dissonance. The sound experiments and sonic spaces of *Tragedia Endogonidia* follow this direction by placing sounds, rather than speech, at the centre. The transformation of musical space also implies a transformation of time. The time of the new tragedy is characterised not by closure or condensation, but by timelessness, or by a state outside time; the space of tragedy, meanwhile, becomes a vast, disorienting space that allows for the appearance of the actor's body, for the nakedness of flesh. The new tragedy lays claim to space through the bare body's occupation of empty space.

But how far can tragedy be dismantled? Is there any element absolutely necessary to its conception and realisation? The individual episodes of *Tragedia Endogonidia* approach this question from several directions and offer several kinds of answer. According to the first answer, presented by the first episode, Cesena, the principal theme of tragedy is violent death. Death, however, is not the consequence of a tragic reversal occurring within a well-constructed plot, but the point

of departure itself. The victim and the act of sacrifice stand at the beginning of every tragedy, yet the victim presented on stage remains nameless. On Castellucci's stage, the conditions of tragedy are anonymity, nocturnal darkness and the deprivation of words. It is as if we were seeing a melancholy prophecy of something that has already happened and has continued to unfold ever since. This prophecy speaks to us in an unknown, undecipherable language: the language of gestures and images. As an unforgettable vision, it sets before us the monumental ruin that remains of ancient tragedy.

Beyond the human...

Romeo Castellucci is one of those directors who make deliberate use of philosophical references, regarding philosophical texts as essential sources of inspiration. In relation to *Tragedia Endogonidia*, we have already seen the evident connection with the theories of tragedy developed by Nietzsche and Rosenzweig. One further philosopher, however, must also be mentioned: Giorgio Agamben, one of the most influential Italian thinkers of our time.

The *Auschwitz* episode of *Genesi* had already revealed its close relation to Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series and, within it, to the volume *Remnants of Auschwitz*, in connection with the question of "bare life". This is also an important theme in *Tragedia Endogonidia*: for instance, the violence staged in the torture and interrogation scene of the Brussels episode offers a clear example of the Muselmann as an extreme figure of both "homo sacer" and "bare life". Here, however, our concern is not with how, after Auschwitz, numerous practices of destroying human life continue to persist, nor with the way in which biopolitics continues to operate as a determining political paradigm. Instead, we examine how theatre is capable of presenting the question of linguistic experience (*experimentum linguae*), which is also central to Agamben's thought. In Agamben, linguistic experience is always linked to the inves-

tigation of the pre-linguistic, "non-speaking" (*in-fans*) condition; consequently, its most authentic mode of approach is the investigation of childhood, as one of his early books, *Infanzia e storia* (*Infancy and History*), demonstrates.

The child's "infantile" world – prior to speech and outside language – and the idea of a "coming" childhood appear at many points in *Tragedia Endogonidia*. One example is the beginning of the Brussels episode, where we see a young child on stage – a girl of about one year old – in a stark, empty space. Behind her, in the background, a robot appears: Hans, or more precisely a head resembling an abstract mannequin, whose square eyes and mouth occasionally begin to move as it repeats the letters of the Dutch alphabet in a monotonous machine voice. The child, who represents the pre-speech (*infans*) condition, hears the sounds of the alphabet mediated by a robot; the basis of human speech thus reaches her through a non-human channel. At the same time, this sequence of images does not merely depict the encounter between the human and the non-human – the alien, the other – but also illustrates the condition outside language. It should be added that the encounter between the child and the robot was an unpredictable stage event, in which the only thing that could be planned in advance was that, if the little girl became frightened or began to cry, the curtain would immediately be lowered. The most beautiful theatrical formulation of the coming childhood, however, appears at the end of the Berlin episode, in the cemetery scene: as a strange image of resurrection, in which a dead child leads us into a world beyond existence, whose figures – the raven holding cheese in its beak and the yeti-like creatures – are at once fairy-tale-like and uncannily alien. The role of the symbolic animals here is above all to allow us to rediscover the power of the imagination and a world articulated in images, beyond or before language. At the same time, this mystical stage image points to the connection between the child's world – and, by extension, the human world – and the animal world. It is no exaggeration to claim that Castellucci's theatre explores the

open realm in which the animal is at home, and into which it leads us. As the director puts it in conversation: "An animal leads us into the 'open', into a non-narrative dimension, into a dimension of real danger" (Castellucci et al. 2007, 47). In this quotation we may detect a direct reference to Agamben's *L'Aperto* (*The Open: Man and Animal*), a book that can also be read as a polemic with Heidegger, for whom the animal is "poor in world" (*weltarm*), in contrast to the worldless (*weltlos*) stone and the world-forming (*weltbildend)* human being. This Heideggerian thesis, especially the part concerning the animal, has provoked numerous debates. Agamben sharply departs from his former teacher when he writes that Heidegger was perhaps "the last to believe that the anthropological machine, which each time decides upon and recomposes the conflict between man and animal, between the open and the not-open, could still produce history and destiny for people" (Agamben 2004, 139). For Agamben, however, it is precisely this "anthropological machine" that must be dismantled, and the first decisive step in doing so is the abolition of the distinction between the human and the animal. Yet in order to render inoperative the machine that determines our conception of the human, we must expose the "central emptiness or hiatus" that separates the human from the animal within the human itself. This, however, entails risk, since it requires us "to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man" (ibid., 165).

In *Tragedia Endogonidia*, we frequently encounter animal figures. To cite only a few examples: a battering ram appears in the Bergen episode; a chimpanzee – whose status, as a real animal or a human being in costume, remains undecidable for a long time – in the Rome episode; and a horse in the Paris and Cesena episodes. In the Avignon performance, the first rows of seats are occupied by rabbit puppets: they are the first spectators. The motif of the goat, meanwhile – alluding, of course, to the original meaning of *tragoidia*, the goat song – is present throughout, but most memorably in the Avignon

episode, where it is a goat who invites the spectators into the stage space. As Castellucci writes in *The Iconoclasm of the Stage and the Return of the Body*: "The animal onstage is perfectly at ease because it is not perfectible" (Castellucci 2007, 41). It is no accident that the circus is a constant point of reference for Castellucci; in this connection, he remarks: "at the circus, I compare the human entrance with the animal ones, and I am struck by the exactitude of the latter's" (ibid., 39). Yet it is not only the animal's movement and behaviour that are perfect, but also its facial expression, for the animal's face, its unwavering, searching gaze, is like a primordial mask.

Furthermore, the animal reveals and makes visible the origin of theatre, its founding moment: for the actor merely substitutes for the sacrificial animal on the altar of the stage. In light of all this, it is hardly surprising that Castellucci speaks not of the appearance of animals on stage, but of their return. The power of theatre derives from their presence, while the actor's body is merely the site on which the animal is made manifest. This is why we read in his enigmatic marginal notes, *Disjecta Membra*: "The monkey is riding me"; "In the dog I save myself" (ibid., 45).

At the same time, animal presence raises anew the question of language and voice. Animal sounds lie outside the domain of human speech, and so the ancient goat song (*tragoidia*) too is heard as an unintelligible, mysterious voice. How, then, can we describe the linguistic experience gained in listening to it?

From the perspective of animal voice, Agamben's text *The End of Thought* (*La fine del pensiero*), which appeared as the epilogue to *Language and Death*, may prove illuminating. In it, in the course of describing a walk in the forest, the author evokes the auditory experience offered by the manifold animal sounds encountered there. Where does human speech stand in relation to this richness of sound? Can we speak at all of a specifically human voice? Certainly not in the same pure and distinct sense as in the case of animals. The human being is the only speaking and thinking creature, yet speech and thought,

at least according to Agamben's thesis, serve precisely to conceal its peculiar voicelessness. Human thought seeks the voice in language or, more precisely, the *atopos* of the voice. Thus language takes the place of voice: language becomes the voice of the human being. At the same time, the description of the forest walk also shows that it is through listening, through silence, that the human being comes closest to the animal world.

The final Cesena episode of *Tragedia Endogonidia* likewise presents a forest path, but this time at night, as the flight of a persecuted child. The little boy is accompanied, from behind the trees, by mysterious animal gazes – the watchful eyes of roe deer and stags – yet even these cannot protect him from the danger posed by human beings. The hunt for the child ends tragically: his pursuers catch up with him and brutally murder him. It is worth noting that, according to an earlier plan for the piece, the beaten and desecrated child would have been transformed into an animal: a gentle and wise elephant (Semenowicz 2016, 177). According to Castellucci, two meanings may be attributed to the child's "becoming-animal" (*devenir animal*): the loss of language, or the renunciation of human language, entails, on the one hand, a rejection of the world of adults and, on the other, transforms the *conditio humana* into an animal mode of being. In the final version, however, the child's sacrifice likewise points to the human being's kinship with the animal, since in theatre the animal was the first victim. Primal tragedy, as an original rite, is a sacrifice offered to the gods; only in modern tragedy – after the departure or death of the gods – did the human being take the place of the sacrificial animal.

Beyond tragedy

Castellucci allows for the possibility that, just as the image of the human being is mutable, so the human being too may be only a transitory phenomenon in the history of the world, one that may one day disappear "like a face in the sand erased

on the shore" (Agamben 2022, 16). With the human being, tragedy too will disappear; but there will be nothing tragic in this either: what lies beyond the human will also lie beyond tragedy. Where does this process begin, or where did it begin? According to *Tragedia Endogonidia*, we are already within this slow collapse, which is also the beginning of something else, something new. This transitional state is perhaps most beautifully presented in the penultimate episode, Marseille, in its unforgettable closing image. In this nearly ten-minute scene, we see only a play of light on the empty stage: first flashes of light, which take on window- or door-like forms, then what seems to be a curtain of light descending before the stage, so that we watch the light projections through its haze. Then a rain of light floods the stage, which becomes suffused with colour. It is first painted in orange-red light, like a Mark Rothko painting, and then in blues and purples. Meanwhile, the silence that had prevailed until then is replaced by pulsating music, as white, gold and blue bands of light cut across the stage space, before we contemplate the colour transformations of a geometric form – a rectangle. The red form glows and radiates white from within, as if moving towards us, while its high voltage seems almost to blow the stage apart. Finally, the image breaks, and in the porous light flooding the empty space, the black silhouette of an unknown figure unexpectedly appears.

What might we add to all this? Perhaps only the closing lines of Giorgio Agamben's *When the House Burns Down*, a text written during the Covid pandemic – in the period of a shared tragedy experienced by all – which could also serve as a motto for many other Castellucci productions and which perhaps evokes a "coming" age beyond tragedy: "Perhaps it is only beginning with this ruin that something else can one day slowly or suddenly appear – not, to be sure, a god, but neither another human – a new animal, perhaps, an otherwise living soul..." (ibid., 17).

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Árpád Kékesi Kun

Transcendentalism in Theatre. On Romeo Castellucci's *Divine Comedy*

Although Romeo Castellucci had already been recognised as a major figure on the European alternative theatre scene since the mid-1990s – and although the company he founded in 1981, Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio received the Europe Prize Theatrical Realities in 2000 – it was above all the trilogy he staged in 2008 at the invitation of the Festival d'Avignon that placed him among the most significant contemporary theatre artists. The Dante-inspired *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, which *Le Monde* named the best performance of the decade 2000–2010 and one of its ten most important cultural events, also contributed significantly to Castellucci's receiving the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement in 2013. Yet something can be said of Castellucci that can scarcely be said of leading artists in general – and still less of those working in alternative theatre circles: that he frequently furnishes the tabloid press with material, as it is particularly fond of raising moral questions in connection with his productions. Admittedly, these questions are usually posed at the level of whether it is permissible, for instance, to turn a young woman lying in a persistent vegetative state into a participant in a theatrical performance by means of a live video link, as in the 2014 Vienna and Brussels stagings of *Orfeo ed Euridice / Orphée et Eurydice*; to put a dozen small children on public display for several minutes, enclosed in a huge glass cube, as in the Avignon *Inferno*; or to have teenagers throw grenades at an enlarged portrait of

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Christ, as in the 2010 production of *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*. At the Paris stop of this latter production, radical Christian groups disrupted the performance and launched a series of demonstrations, news of which accompanied the production throughout its tour of numerous major cities. The aversion that provoked such vehement reactions is, of course, generated not by the procedures of staging, nor by the deconstruction of Aristotelian theatre, but by the appearance on stage of people with impairments – ordinary performers rather than actors – by the frequent use of Christian symbols, and by explicit references to elements of ecclesiastical ritual. Castellucci's works place considerable strain on the spectator, and the director has explicitly identified this heightened demand as one of his aims. More specifically, he has stated that he always takes the spectator's body into account. Corporeality therefore comes to the fore in his work neither as a phenomenon reducible to eroticism nor solely in relation to the actor's physicality – even though he collaborated on the trilogy with a choreographer as distinguished as Cindy van Acker. He also regards theatre as an act of individual epiphany (Laera 2009, 14). For him, lived experience, rather than either empathic identification or alienation, is the cardinal factor in the process by which theatre exerts its effects; for this reason, among the pioneers of twentieth-century theatre, he may be regarded not as a follower of Stanislavski or Brecht, but of Artaud – something he also indicated in connection with his production of *Oedipus the King*, staged at the Schaubühne in Berlin in March 2015 (Pearson 2015). This paper centres on the *Divina Commedia* not merely because it occupies a privileged place among the director's works, but above all because it offers an extraordinary opportunity to examine, within the framework of theatre studies rather than journalism, the questions that follow from the foregoing. What does it mean, at the very beginning of the third millennium, to live through hell, purgatory and paradise through the medium of theatre? What, beyond superficialities and appearances, is meant by the ethical problematic embed-

ded in Castellucci's works? In what does the sacredness of the performances consist, beyond their obvious references? And if the point of departure is Dante's work, regarded as the Gothic cathedral of medieval literature, what does the production convey of the complexity of *The Divine Comedy* – of the afterlife, the supersensible, the transcendental? How, indeed, does it represent boundary-crossing itself?

Just as Castellucci's productions of the 1990s, based on classic works, are not organised according to the logic of narrative, so too the parts of the Avignon trilogy are not structured in this way. They are likewise characterised by the suspension of plot and of the causality of events, by states that appear unchanging, by repetitive actions and by extended silences and pauses; their enigmatic quality is further intensified by the fact that language scarcely provides a framework within which the events might be interpreted, and even when the word occasionally becomes emphatic – as in *Purgatorio* – it does not offer orientation, but rather lures the spectator into a trap. By eliminating the coordinate system of history and culture, Castellucci's productions place even texts burdened with the many memories of alterity into a "mythic" stage universe whose components – space and the elements – reinforce the sense of timelessness and archetypality. This alone is capable of unsettling reception, since it does not fulfil the expectations that follow from the convention of literary theatre. The titles of the trilogy, too, refer to a familiar text – Dante's major work – and the spectator, approaching the performance from the tradition of literary theatre, expects this text to appear within it, whether acoustically or visually. In other words, the spectator expects the performance to be organised along the lines of the text: the events of Dante's cantos, and the themes, motifs and images that appear there. Yet experience leads elsewhere. (Indeed, rereading *The Divine Comedy* in the light of Castellucci's trilogy may itself prove a singular experience, since one may realise that, although the performances may have seemed, while one was watching them, to have no connection with Dante's work,

there are in fact ample points of contact. Yet the possible images and motifs do not appear on stage in the same order, context or configuration as they do in the cantos, and this is precisely what makes intelligible the phrase applied to the trilogy – a phrase almost amounting to a generic designation: *librement inspirée de La Divine Comédie de Dante*.) The confusion is only intensified by the fact that the parts of the trilogy use different sites, representational procedures and forms, offer different points of orientation, and even activate modes of reception associated with different art forms. *Inferno*, staged in the vast courtyard of the Palais des Papes in Avignon – in its sacred space – condenses an hour and a half of events into the framework of an open-air performance which, by placing the crowd at its centre, appeals strongly to the spectator's "participation". The hour-long sequence of events in *Purgatorio*, performed in an enclosed proscenium-stage setting, concentrates on the family and creates, in terms of time and action, the impression of conventional theatre, only to shatter the resulting sense of familiarity and comfort with all the greater force. The installation of *Paradiso*, in turn, surprises us with two versions: in its Avignon form, it compels contemplation before a church interior stripped of human presence; in its Cesena version – with a similar emphasis on the visual arts – it focuses our gaze on a single individual and prompts us to traverse a distinctive path.

At the beginning of *Inferno*, a man steps before the audience and, making clear that "Je m'appelle Romeo Castellucci", puts on protective clothing. Meanwhile, seven German shepherds are chained to the front of the stage; three are then set upon him, and for several minutes the dogs tug at the body that has fallen to the ground. When a whistle is heard, the three dogs run off, the others are led away, Castellucci gets down on all fours, and a dogskin is draped over his back. This four-minute opening sequence raises a difficult question: how are we to interpret what we see and hear, and how are we to relate the two? And since this is the *Divina Commedia*, how are we to read the performance text in conjunction with a familiar

underlying literary text? When the spectator first encounters this opening sequence, the intensity of the experience almost blocks any attempt to read the two in conjunction: the scene with the dogs strikes like a bolt of lightning, and one need not be sitting in the front row in Avignon – seeing it on a recording is enough to make one's stomach contract, quicken one's heartbeat and fix one's gaze on the spectacle. This intense experiential dimension is an essential feature of the scene, but it is not the sole source of its effect. This is because it generates a multiplicity of possible meanings, even if, at first, the questions that involuntarily surge up – "what does it mean?", "what is this?" and "why?" – leave us at a loss.

For those familiar enough with Dante's work to recall its opening, it is not impossible to assign meaning to this opening sequence on the basis of the literary text. When Dante, "midway in our life's journey", loses his way in the dark wood – "I went astray / from the straight road" (Dante 2003, 16) – the first beings he encounters are three wild animals: a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf drive him back from the hillside, already gilded by sunlight, which he is just about to climb. From the notes, without which Dante is difficult to read, we learn that these three wild animals are symbols of envy, wrath and lust – three of the seven deadly sins – and that it is they who force Dante back "into the sunless wood" (ibid., 18). In the performance, three German shepherds rush at Castellucci from among seven wildly barking dogs. The opening sequence may therefore be understood as a stage transfiguration – rather than an illustration – of Dante's opening: a prologue that reinterprets Canto Primo. Since, however, it is by no means certain that every spectator has read Dante, or, if they have, that they come to the performance with fresh memories of the work, and since not a single line of the first canto is spoken, we are not necessarily able to establish a connection with *The Divine Comedy* – that is, we are unable to construct the literary meaning.

If I cannot assign meaning to the opening sequence on the basis of the literary text, I may try to do so on the basis of my

earlier experiences – which can become determining factors in the present act of reception – for instance by recalling similar performances. (In Castellucci's production *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (2010), for example, we see an old man naked except for a single nappy, who defecates three times, his faeces running down his leg with a stench that fills the auditorium. At the beginning of the performance, the old man enters leaning on two assistants dressed in black, who seat him on a snow-white sofa. If I have not seen other productions by Castellucci, I am inclined to see the old man as a pathetic old wreck: not as an actor, but as a performer who lays bare before us his bodily frailty, and I find it difficult to free myself from the feeling of pity. If, however, I have seen other Castellucci productions, and have seen the old man in them too, then I know that he is an actor who has worked with Castellucci several times before, and the "truth" of the present experience is overwritten by the awareness of "falsity" derived from earlier experience. In that case, my attention is directed rather to the extraordinary play with the boundary between theatre and reality.) In the case of the opening of *Inferno*, however, this is difficult to do, so extreme is the experience to which we are subjected. Or rather, we may indeed have experienced something similar before – a director coming out and making an announcement, for instance about a last-minute replacement – but not as part of the performance itself. Here the director enters, but not beforehand, not by way of prefatory announcement; rather, he enters as an element of the performance itself – although, of course, we cannot be certain of this for a few moments, only once he begins to put on the protective clothing – and makes an announcement. The director's appearance is thus wholly unusual, as is the announcement itself, since it states nothing other than that he is Romeo Castellucci. This announcement sounds, on the one hand, banal and, on the other, presumptuous, since it places the "I" at the centre: the director himself, at the Festival d'Avignon, in the courtyard of the Palais des Papes – the largest Gothic structure and a near-contemporary

of Dante's masterpiece – in a performance inspired by one of the great works of Italian literature. Yet, for all its air of a grand gesture, and viewed in the light of what follows, the announcement may also be understood as a straightforward statement of fact. From this point on, it becomes clear that the *Inferno* we are watching is the director's own hell. As a literary text, the *Divina Commedia* is Dante's universe; as a performance, it is not: it belongs to Romeo Castellucci. If understood in this way – as a statement of fact and an anticipation of a particular world – the declaration becomes, in effect, an announcement that Castellucci is assuming Dante's place. Castellucci takes Dante's place – not his role – and asks the same questions as his great predecessor did seven hundred years earlier: what is hell, what is purgatory, what is paradise? And how can they be made present, whether through language or through theatre? Castellucci, then, does not stage Dante – in the sense of conventional theatrical semiosis – but takes his place and "rewrites" the journey through the afterlife by means of his own theatrical language. At the same time, he signals that his relation to *The Divine Comedy* is not textual, but rather pretextual. On the one hand, *The Divine Comedy* becomes the pretext of the performance, the pre-existing text on which its stage-writing is based; on the other, Castellucci's production does not operate at the level of the text. While *The Divine Comedy* consists of words alone, the performance unfolds almost entirely without them; nor, however, does it translate the words of the literary text into images: what we see here is not what the word conjures there.

The production does not seek to evoke a space and time existing outside itself – hell and the fourteenth century – but brings *The Divine Comedy* into the present. There are no fictional characters, no fictional time and no fictional space; the performance begins like a work of performance art. What we see, here and now, is Castellucci himself, together with dogs – not actors in dog costumes – that rush at him and bite him. Yet the event does not become unique and unrepeatable in the

manner aspired to by performance art. The episode with the dogs is dangerous, but it does not entail irreversible consequences – permanent injuries – and can therefore be repeated; indeed, it was repeated many times, since *Inferno* toured and was also performed indoors. What begins, then, is a theatrical performance that can be reproduced on any given occasion, yet is haunted by the presence of performance art. It may also call to mind Joseph Beuys's celebrated coyote action, in which, in 1974, he spent several days living with a coyote – the totem animal of Native Americans – in a New York gallery, an event whose risks Erika Fischer-Lichte discusses in detail, despite the coyote's proverbial cowardice (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 101–107). Pursuing this opposition between courage and cowardice, we may observe that at the beginning of *Inferno*, too, we see an artist who takes everything upon himself and exposes himself to being bitten. In his action – fittingly enough, in *Inferno* – we sense an almost superhuman willingness to go through hell, even as we see him put on protective clothing. Yet the bites he receives are not feigned, and the danger has not been neutralised. This duality is especially important (see Read 2010, 249): on the one hand, the theatricality – the "falsity" – of the scene, since the dogs are trained; on the other, its truth, since he really is Romeo Castellucci, and the dogs really do sink their teeth into him. (Castellucci's productions, moreover, frequently operate through the inseparable duality of truth and falsity. As noted above, in *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*, an old man defecates three times and is cleaned by his son twice. It is almost as though Henri Bergson's famous essay on *Laughter* were being illustrated in a characteristically Castelluccian manner: we would laugh because the pitiable incident is repeated, yet at the same time it calls forth personal experiences that are anything but conducive to laughter. We project our dying forebears and our future selves onto the old man, and glimpse in him what freezes the smile on our faces. The sight of the faeces is repellent, but we suspect that it is not real; the smell is nauseating, but we recognise it as ammonia.

We see an aged, worn-out body in all its nakedness, yet what preoccupies us is how the effect of the old man repeatedly defecating into the nappy is achieved. On the third occasion, we think we hear the "cartridge" pop, yet as the excrement bubbles out, it appears real. All this unsettles the process of reception, and nothing resolves the disturbance. After all, "to see the 'real' in the work of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio is in fact an effect of the success of their theatrical pretending" Ridout 2006, 177).

Our disorientation at the beginning of *Inferno* is intensified by the absence, apart from Castellucci's announcement, of speech that might orient us within the experience. I do not know why he exposes himself to the dogs' bites, why he takes all this upon himself. Does he blame himself, wish to punish himself for something? Is this an act of penance? After all, it resembles self-flagellation: it is his own body that undergoes the suffering. There is no answer; I merely *see* Castellucci's body jerk as the animals tug at it, *feel* it tense in absolute concentration, and *hear* him pant as soon as the dogs release him. The scene makes intense demands on my perception, while blocking the model of (either sympathetic or cathartic) identification (see Jauss 1982, 172–181). Although Castellucci's appearance before the audience is an extraordinarily powerful act that invites identification, I do not identify with him; indeed, I do not even empathise with him. The scene does not stir my emotions: it affects me neither emotionally nor cognitively, but at the level of motor response and energy. My stomach contracts as soon as the first dog rushes at him, and my body instinctively recoils: I do not feel with him, but move with him. I have no idea what the attack means, or what Castellucci's body "signifies", but *I see, hear and feel* this body – that is, I experience it not as a sign – and this body sets me in motion. This is because it touches me: when Castellucci stands facing the audience, stepping as close to them as the stage permits and looking into the spectators' eyes, he touches them. Not literally, nor in the sense of illusionistic theatre. He does not enter among us or reach out towards us, yet his gaze, fixed

upon us, creates a sense of proximity despite the far from intimate spatial arrangement, and possesses the force of touch. In theatre, touch is generally understood metaphorically: if a performance touches us, it does so emotionally or intellectually. Here, however, the literal and the metaphorical collapse into one another, as Castellucci's appearance before the audience makes demands on us bodily, even though it does not physically involve us. Erika Fischer-Lichte observes that theatre is marked by a tension between seeing and touching, arising from "the fact that theatre represents a public medium while physical contact belongs to the sphere of intimacy" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 60). Castellucci's appearance before the audience unsettles this distinction, and later shatters it altogether when an enormous white sheet is drawn over the spectators' heads; they themselves hold it aloft and, smiling, repeatedly touch it. They can see through it, but only "through a glass, darkly", and it allows associations with life and death in equal measure. After all, two thousand people are breathing beneath it as though enclosed in an amniotic sac, while the earlier images of mortality may equally call to mind a burial shroud beneath which we shall all eventually lie. The oppositions that orient us and thereby sustain our "being-in-the-world", though they are often false – spectators and performers, intimate and public, life and death, individual and community – are blown apart, producing a pleasurable disorientation of the "I don't know what this is, but it is wonderful" kind.

Castellucci's appearance before the audience, as the beginning of the performance, is of course also linked to its ending, when we see Andy Warhol – or, more precisely, a figure wearing an Andy Warhol mask – shut himself inside a wrecked car lying in a pool of blood. The distinction is important: at the beginning we see Castellucci himself, whereas at the end we see someone who looks like Warhol, who, one might say, passes himself off as Warhol. Yet at both the beginning and the end we see an artist: Castellucci and Warhol, confronting hell and thereby framing the events of *Inferno*. And although

Warhol takes us far from any literary reference, we should remind ourselves that in *The Divine Comedy*, too, Dante is accompanied by a fellow artist: Virgil, who can, of course, be connected with Warhol only in terms of function. For the director of *Inferno*, Warhol represents the artist who first sought hell no longer in the depths of existence, but on the surface of things (see Laera 2009, 8). In Castellucci's *Inferno*, what we see is the hell of everyday life: hell not as a physical place, but as a mental state familiar to us all because we have all experienced it in our daily lives. And it is through this hell, understood in precisely this sense, that Warhol guides Castellucci. (This is the Warhol whose work is most often discussed in terms of its challenge to classical art's concepts of originality and uniqueness. The concert grand piano that burns in one scene of *Inferno* may be read as a symbol of that classical conception of art. It stands in a pool of water and is set alight; the leaping flames are reflected in the water, and we hear its strings snap as Arvo Pärt's minimalist composition *Spiegel im Spiegel* begins to play. If the foregoing line of reasoning seems over-elaborate, it is because we are probing the meaning of one of the performance's boldest and most beautiful images; unable to locate that meaning in the image itself, we construct a context for it from the associations surrounding Warhol within the performance. Yet the image affects me not through conscious interpretation, but through the involuntary shudder that seizes me when I see the piano burst into flames within seconds: I experience it as profoundly tragic.)

Since Beuys and Warhol have already been mentioned, it should also be noted that Castellucci's trilogy contains numerous other references to the visual arts, ranging from Jannis Kounellis and the Viennese Actionists to Edward Hopper. In the light of these references, Castellucci's *Divina Commedia* – and, as part of it, his own appearance before the audience – may also be understood as an homage to the neo-avant-garde. As the director observes: "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). At the same time, the opening of *Inferno* forms one of two structural pillars, its counterpart appearing at the end of the performance, when seven television sets emerge in the Gothic windows of the Palais des Papes, each screen bearing a single letter. Read together, they spell *étoiles*, the French equivalent of *stelle*, the final word of each of the three parts of Dante's work. Thus we arrive at the "stars": the word glows on the screens as the linguistic signifier of the firmament, while above them, with almost banal literalness, its countless referents shine in the Avignon night sky. Four of the screens then crash to the ground, leaving on the remaining three only what is left of *étoiles*: *toi*. At the beginning of the performance, *je* ("I"); at the end, *toi* ("you"): first he, then we, since from Castellucci's perspective – from the stage – we are the "you". Between these two pillars, these two boundary points, he and we pass through hell together. This implies the affirmation of a community, memorably constituted by the act of drawing the sheet over the audience; at the same time, it passes the ball to the spectators – fittingly, since a basketball, alongside the dogskin, is one of the most important props in *Inferno* – by leaving them to confront the questions of what it means, what it is and why it is there. The answers to these questions, however, become secondary to the bodily experience of the hell familiar to us all, conveyed through the recurrent images of "murderous love".

The dogskin and the basketball are excellent examples of the tension between semioticity and thingness being brought into play. At the close of the opening sequence, Castellucci, panting on all fours, has a dogskin draped over his back. Shortly afterwards, a bare-chested man removes it from him, ties it around his own body, climbs effortlessly up the façade of the palace, and throws it down to a bespectacled boy, who likewise puts it on. The dogskin reappears later, until, at the end, Warhol

drapes it over himself before climbing into the wrecked car. This, too, is precisely the kind of element whose meaning the spectator is inclined to pursue by asking what it is, why it is there and, ultimately, what it means. We search for its meaning both in itself and in its relations to other elements, but find nothing that would permit a definitive interpretation. Although nothing in the performance explicitly reinforces the association, the dogskin may nevertheless evoke an initiation rite: a liminal experience – not one we have undergone ourselves, but one available to us as cultural knowledge – in which the initiate or participant "becomes a dog himself". Yet we cannot entirely dismiss the thought that what we have witnessed is a dog show of the kind seen at demonstrations and competitions: an event whose extraordinary character here derives from its transposition into a theatrical context, just as, in Duchamp's *Fountain*, an ordinary urinal was transferred from a lavatory into what Arthur C. Danto termed the artworld. The extraordinary character of the event arises from the tension generated by the ordinariness – one might even say the profane nature – of the dogskin, or indeed the basketball, within the context of a performance held amid the ancient walls of the Palais des Papes in Avignon. Both become important props whose significance we sense, although we cannot determine their meaning. We perceive them not in terms of their semioticity, even though for a time we apprehend them as signs and hunt for their meaning, but in their thingness, just as we do the piano, the dogs and Castellucci himself. We perceive none of them as substitutes for classical art, the seven deadly sins or Dante. When literary or symbolic meaning becomes problematic, we often revert to thingness, whose force can then no longer be ignored, and it is often at the level of feeling that the thing registers in consciousness. In other words, feeling itself becomes meaning, thereby bearing out Erika Fischer-Lichte's claim that meaning can be equated with a state of consciousness (see 2008, 151). We generally conceive of meaning as an idea, on the model of the linguistic signified: as something that can be

precisely delimited and named. Yet meaning cannot be equated with linguistic meaning, because in many cases the process of perception itself becomes the process of meaning-making, far removed from any form of intellectual distillation.

Purgatorio further develops *Inferno*'s motif of sin by similarly foregrounding the sudden eruption of violence, much as the preceding part did through movements that began as embraces and ended in stylised strangulations and throat-cuttings, performed slowly, collectively and with an almost disturbing beauty. Castellucci's *Purgatorio* is nevertheless even more unbearable than *Inferno*, since, within a setting that appears to be one of home and family, we are forced to listen for long minutes to the sounds of a child being beaten and raped, while contemplating an empty living room and the words *La musique* projected onto a translucent curtain stretched across the front of the stage. The shock produced by the scene, however, is the result not so much of perception as of cognition: the spectator is suddenly forced to acknowledge the fact of the violence – even though they do not see it and only hear it taking place – and, moreover, to recognise how far astray their interpretation of the preceding events has led them. The process of reception and reflection upon it thus once again become crucial from the moment when, following the conventions of theatrical naturalism, the spectator recognises the richly detailed, illusionistic spaces as a kitchen, a child's bedroom and a living room, and interprets the man, woman and child who appear within them as father, mother and son. This recognition involuntarily activates a mode of reception modelled on discursive thought, leading the spectator to interpret the opening scenes as preparations for dinner and the wait for the father's return. (Of course, in Castellucci's productions, naturalistic spaces function as "traps of reception": their apparent concreteness is ultimately subjected to radical suspension, causing the mode of reception they invite to break down completely. A good example is *Hyperion. Briefe eines Terroristen* (Berlin, 2013), based on Friedrich Hölderlin's novel. At the beginning of the

production, the spectator's gaze is allowed to roam across the rooms and furnishings of an empty, dimly lit apartment until commandos appear and, in the course of a fruitless search, reduce the entire flat to rubble – a process that the spectator increasingly decodes as the systematic destruction of a theatrical set – before ushering the audience out with cries of "There is nothing to see here". When we subsequently return to our seats, the action begins in a snow-white space purged of every accretion and visual contaminant that might burden the eye and the imagination – of what Castellucci calls "bourgeois decoration".) The apparent clarity of this protracted situation is, of course, unsettled by numerous details, yet the production offers no interpretative framework for them, and the spectator is therefore unable to integrate them into the sequence of seemingly self-evident events. They remain merely enigmatic, and only in the process of retrospective – reflective – understanding does it become significant that the mother's face bears a faint, elusive sorrow, like that of the Virgin Mary in sacred images. Although she appears caring and attentive – chopping vegetables, laying the table and reminding the child to take his medicine – she does not, in fact, attend to the boy. Three times he asks, *Est-ce qu'il revient ce soir?* – "is he [that is, the father] coming home tonight?" – and each time she leaves the question unanswered. Nor can we explain – should the question even arise – why the mother shows no surprise when, on entering the bedroom to turn off the light, she finds no sign of the boy, who has hidden in the wardrobe; why, later, the boy leaves the living room – and thus fails to greet his father – when he sees the light of the car's headlights filtering in; or why, later still, when his mother calls him in, he does not answer the man's 'fatherly' questions about school, mathematics and so forth. Still more baffling is why the small robot seen in the boy's hands in the first scene later grows to a height of more than five metres and, in a two-minute nocturnal interlude accompanied by the chirping of crickets, breaks through the bounds of the familiar and the intelligible as it towers over the living room bathed in

bluish light, stirring from time to time. The slow-moving, restrained dialogue provides scarcely any additional information beyond the scenario we rapidly construct on the basis of convention and to which we assimilate everything else: the illusion of a peaceful home, a milieu of beautiful, affluent people who love one another. And even as the question marks multiply, we may believe that we understand why everything happens as it does: that the boy asks his question three times because he is waiting for his father to come home, and that when, after a few spoonfuls of soup, the father asks for his hat, the mother bursts into tears and says, "not tonight", because she does not want him to leave again. Moreover, the captions projected onto the gauze curtain stretched across the full width of the stage, gently diffusing its light, may even lead us to believe that we know what is going to happen. From the fourth scene onwards, these captions summarise the actions with the precision of a screenplay, and as those actions are realised, they foster in the spectator the expectation of knowing what will come next: the transformation of word into image. We are therefore all the more overwhelmed by the vertiginous gulf that suddenly opens between word and image when the caption announces that the father, mother and son – referred to throughout as the First, Second and Third Stars – go upstairs to the boy's room, where they play and dance as music is heard, whereas what we actually see is the child disappearing through a door at the top of the stairs, hand in hand with the hatted man. What follows is a passage that seems interminable: before us, we see only the words *La musique* and the empty living room, while the sounds of groaning, weeping, pleas to stop and swearing reach us with ever more unmistakable clarity.

The force of this moment is intensified, first, because after forty minutes the mother's earlier sorrow, the boy's hiding in the wardrobe and her refusal even to answer him all become intelligible in a single instant, and the spectator realises that they had misinterpreted both the wait for the father and his request for the hat as elements of a "cowboy game". It is inten-

sified further because the violence is experienced by the spectator themselves: it takes place within them. We know what is happening – the rape of a child – yet what happens remains "invisible" and "unspeakable": there is no word for it; all we see before us is *La musique*. The answer to the question "where is the violence?" is therefore unequivocal: in the spectator, since it is the spectator who must imagine the unimaginable, drawing on their own sexual habits and the images of sexuality they carry within themselves. This also implies the answers to the questions "where is the sin?" and, since this is purgatory, "who must be purified?": the sin is in the spectator, and it is the spectator who must undergo purification. This is especially true when the bloodied and dishevelled boy comes down the stairs and sits in his father's lap, in a moment that completely overturns our ordinary sense of justice: the father has earlier stumbled downstairs, removed his hat and mask while panting, collapsed exhausted beside the piano and been unable to look at the boy. The boy strokes and consoles him: "Don't be afraid, it's over now." This act of forgiveness, during which music is indeed heard, is more shocking than what precedes it. In an interview, Castellucci emphasises not the contemporary social relevance of these events – their relation to the problem of paedophilia – but their biblical dimension: the father leads the son up the mountain, as Abraham led Isaac, in order to sacrifice him, yet the son forgives the father, revealing the strength of the creature and the weakness of the creator (Laera 2009, 11). The words "Tout est fini", spoken three times by the boy in the production, echo the finality of Christ's "It is finished", just as the posture of the young man writhing on the ground at the very end of *Purgatorio* evokes the Crucifixion. After the scene of internalised violence – that is, the lived experience of Purgatory – the production abandons all logic: the profusion of gigantic flowers awash in vivid colours, together with the "dance" of an older man and a young man who resemble the father and son in appearance but convulse helplessly and briefly form a community, transforms the initially minutely precise re-

alism into outright surrealism. The turning point, the production's "primal scandal", is nevertheless brought about by the disturbing force of forgiveness – by the desire for revenge that involuntarily wells up within us – drawing us far deeper into the thicket of ethical problems than a journalistic mode of engagement can permit.

Paradiso likewise contains a turning point bound up with the act of seeing, and this constitutes the most important moment in the traversal of a path. The Avignon *Paradiso* does not yet initiate this process; rather, through a circular opening in a black screen, it confronts us with a burnt-out piano standing in the bare interior of the Église des Célestins, onto which water pours, while the vaults of the ceiling are reflected in the mirrors and the "sea" covering the floor, and a black drape occasionally cuts through the air. Drawing on the visual vocabulary of the preceding two parts and collapsing above and below into one another, the installation, though differently arranged, allows us to see Hell and Purgatory even within Paradise, gathering "the props of sin" into a startling yet extraordinarily beautiful image and stripping them of human presence. By contrast, the structure erected behind the entrance to the Church of Santo Spirito in Cesena leads the observer from a snow-white space flooded with dazzling light, through a black circular aperture, into a pitch-dark chamber, where a half-naked figure gradually becomes visible, feeling his way at the brink of a waterfall and appearing almost headless because of the black mask that conceals his face. Passing through this black aperture may evoke both birth and death. In this instance, however, the cardinal question of spectatorship is not the process itself, nor the search for the possible meanings of the image just described – knowing, for example, that it was inspired by a passage from Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, in which, following a storm, a sailor is stranded atop a wall and rendered unable to move by the water surrounding him, does little to assist the spectator in this respect (see Laera 2009, 13) – but what happens within the active, participating observer, quite liter-

ally in the eye, as the image gradually becomes visible. When, upon entering the darkened chamber, the spectator initially sees nothing, yet as their eyes adjust to the darkness an image nevertheless comes into being on the retina although the space itself has grown no brighter, the spectator cannot avoid the realisation that the light which makes vision possible is in fact within them and radiates from them. At the summit of Dante's Paradise, God is enthroned but cannot be seen, because his light blinds the human eye. In Castellucci's Cesena *Paradiso*, by contrast, the spectator experiences the birth of light – in a sense that is less physical than spiritual – and departs from the enigmatic image with divine light in their eyes, stepping once more into the Dantean dark wood of everyday life. (The spectator likewise experiences – with the whole body resonating – a black hole in the Perseus Cluster, some 250 million light years from Earth, at the beginning of Castellucci's *The Four Seasons Restaurant* (2013), a production inspired by the art of Mark Rothko: its eerie "silence" is rendered at frequencies audible to the human ear.)

A fuller account of how the Italian director's works emerge within the fields of tension between theatricality and performativity, theatre and truth, semioticity and thingness, the sacred and the profane lies beyond the scope of this paper. More important here, however, is what must be added to this observation: that they invariably come into being within the spectator. Castellucci's productions do not operate through allegories or metaphors; they do not create a "transparent" stage world. They do not allow us to look through their images and see in them merely this or that meaning – even if multiplied, as in Dante's *Convivio*, where he distinguishes four senses (*quattro sensi*) that may also be applied to the interpretation of his major work. Instead, they encourage us to see the images themselves. To borrow Joseph Conrad's evocative phrase, they teach us to see by leading us towards the "heart of darkness" and granting us a glimpse into the deeper strata of existence. In connection with his 2014 Vienna production of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Castellucci

himself refers to the "forbidden gaze" that lies at the heart of the Orphic theme. The lived experience, ethical problematic and sacredness of his much-debated productions consist precisely in making this "forbidden" gaze possible – a gaze that unsettles the spectator's entire being, in body, soul and mind. It is the recognition of this that also makes the *Divina Commedia* trilogy an exceptional experience. (Many of Castellucci's images elicit this unsettling gaze: the gaze of the black dog sitting at the centre of the now purified, whitened space in *Hyperion*. The dog's story, projected onto the rear wall, gradually makes the spectator aware that it is blind as a result of a particular eye condition; our own gaze becomes uncomfortable once we realise that we are looking at a being that cannot see us and that, misled by deceptive sounds, may believe itself to be somewhere entirely different. There is also the gaze of the young woman in *Orfeo ed Euridice / Orphée et Eurydice*, who has lain in a persistent vegetative state for years. A live feed makes her image visible on the rear screen, while through headphones she listens to the music filling the space we occupy and being transmitted to her in real time. Or there is the gaze of the children in *Inferno*, who play and make noise spontaneously inside an enormous, internally illuminated glass cube, wholly unaware that they are being watched both from within – by a figure in an oversized bear costume – and from outside, from the darkness surrounding the cube. Two thousand pairs of eyes are fixed upon the children, who inhabit an intermediate realm, a kind of *limbus puerorum* or "infernal kindergarten", while a black drape darts above the structure. The ethical problem implied by the image arises not from the question of whether children should be allowed to perform in this way, but, on the one hand, from the tension between the myth of childhood innocence and the reality of voyeurism and, on the other, from the Catholic theological conception of an otherworldly abode for those who die unbaptised, in a state of original sin. Nor is the image any less disturbing if, by the end of the scene, the cube covered in black evokes the Kaaba.) This, of course, follows from the fact that

although Dante's masterpiece thematises the transgression of boundaries par excellence, none of the three parts represents boundary-crossing; rather, each performs the act of transgression itself. Castellucci's theatrical transcendentalism carries us beyond the everyday and the familiar, leading us past what appears certain to our senses, yet its distinctive feature lies in its refusal to make clear what lies beyond the individual spectator's experience. And although his startling stage images always seem to transcend themselves, we can never be certain that transcendence exists. This theme, which might be examined within the orbit of the Gnostic tradition, would, however, open up a further field of interpretation for which the present framework leaves no room.

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Zsolt Benedek

The Architectonics of the Sublime in Romeo Castellucci's *Inferno*

> "How can this singer know my innermost being better than me? What is the origin of this music that so deeply affects my own origin? And where do my tears come from, stripped of content and so far from the sentimentality that I detest?" (Romeo Castellucci in Festival d'Avignon, 2013)

In *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, Erika Fischer-Lichte lays new foundations for theatre studies. The author's perhaps most important insight – at least for the purposes of the present study – is that theatrical performance, when analysed from the perspective of performativity, is no longer given as a *work of art* but as an *event* taking place under specific conditions. This shift in ontological status has far-reaching consequences for scholarly discourse on performance:

> "The central concern of the performance was not to understand but to experience it and to cope with these experiences, which could not be supplanted there and then by reflection. In this way, the performance redefined two relationships of fundamental importance to hermeneutic as well as semiotic aesthetics: first, the relationship between subject and object, observer and observed, spectator and actor; second, the relationship between the *materiality* and the *semioticity* of the per-

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> formance's elements, between signifier and signified. [...] Instead of a work of art that existed independently of her and the recipients, she created an event that involved everyone present" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 17).

The quotation above makes clear that performance cannot be fully understood (that is, taken possession of as a work of art), but only *experienced*. This basic situation, however, does not mean that the spectator is incapable of understanding, in some form, what they see, that is, of assigning meanings to the experience of the performance. It means only that this act of meaning-formation takes place *in response* to the forms that appear in the performance, and *is not encoded* in the forms themselves (see ibid., 140–141). This approach therefore requires scholarly discourse on performance, whether within theatre studies or theatre aesthetics, to find new linguistic strategies through which it can gain access to performance conceived as an event.

In this book, Fischer-Lichte sets about grounding precisely such a language. It is hardly surprising that, at numerous points, she draws on the French phenomenology of the second half of the twentieth century – above all on Maurice Merleau-Ponty – since one of this phenomenology's most important contributions to the history of thought is precisely that it does not conceive the world and the beings that appear within it according to the prejudices of everyday thinking (for instance, the subject–object relation), but, by suspending these prejudices (in Edmund Husserl's terms: by placing them in *epochê*), seeks to make them accessible to language in their singular, contingent and fleeting emergence, that is, in their event-character.

In this study, drawing primarily on the work of the French phenomenologist Marc Richir, I attempt a further articulation of this language. At the centre of my attention is the first part of the *Divine Comedy* trilogy created by Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio: *Inferno*, in the version directed by Romeo Castellucci and presented at the Festival d'Avignon. Castellucci's performances

are not merely suited to the unfolding of such a language; they also demand it, since – as the questions chosen as the epigraph to this study also suggest – the director is concerned with an approach to theatre that resists the tendency to fix meaning. Castellucci proceeds from a metaphysical premise that denies the concept of a content behind form, that is, of a transcendent essence;[1] his dramaturgy is therefore organised through the surface play of empty forms. Pursuing this line of thought, it is perhaps no exaggeration to claim that the elemental effect of Castellucci's performances arises from the impact these forms exert on the spectator's body, that is, from the touch of forms. In this case, being touched should be understood in the most concrete, physical sense of the term, as Árpád Kékesi Kun also observes in his study of Castellucci's trilogy: "In theatre, touch is generally understood metaphorically: if a performance touches us, it does so emotionally or intellectually. Here, however, the literal and the metaphorical collapse into one another, as Castellucci's appearance before the audience makes demands on us bodily, even though it does not physically involve us." (Kékesi Kun 2026, 178) The director himself has also stated that what interests him most in theatre is the spectator's body.[2] Thus, if we wish to speak adequately about the performance, we cannot disregard the fact of being touched by it; indeed, I believe we must grant it a central role.

As a first step, then, it is worth outlining how one might speak from this position – namely, from the position of the spectator touched by the performance – without lapsing into the sphere of the merely private, while also avoiding an objectifying relation to the performance. For this reason, before I can speak specifically about *Inferno*, it is necessary to introduce the linguistic strategy I shall use when speaking about the per-

[1] See "This is an iconoclastic theatre: it seeks to shatter every image in order to grasp the one fundamental truth: the anti-cosmic Unreal, the totality of unthought things" (Castellucci & Castellucci, 1992, 9).

[2] See "I like to take the body of the spectator into consideration. The status of the spectator interests me much more than the status of the actor" (Castellucci, quoted in Laera 2009, 14).

formance. I hope that, by introducing this phenomenological "grammar", the problems of sign, meaning and corporeality will appear in a new light, and that the difficulties mentioned above may be overcome.

Affectivity and phantasy as the architectonic basis of experience

When writing about the experience of performance, it is important to bear in mind that we need a language which does not describe the event – that is, does not freeze its flowing energies – but is articulated in such a way that, proceeding from pre-reflective, mute experience, it opens the possibility of a reflective experience. Such a language cannot separate thought from being affected, for this would immediately reinstate the subject–object relation mentioned above. It is therefore important to regard thinking as a corporeal act, much as Richir does in his reading of Merleau-Ponty:

> "Flesh, then, is another, entirely new way of grasping the reflexivity traditionally ascribed to consciousness: a reflexivity that – instead of taking root in spirit, in thought, or in consciousness – makes the invisible (the imperceptible) into the path of a passage immersed in the hollow, or rather in the negative, through which vision or perception must cut its way in order to return to itself. This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, there exists no form of meaningful thought other than embodied thought; or rather – since the status of thought has changed – this is why *seeing and sensing already mean 'thinking', without the sensible being underpinned by some imperceptible that would itself already be an ideality or an idea*" (Richir 1996, 114).

If, in the act of experiencing, the moment of thought in the sense outlined above is always already present (in the form

of reflection), then the task of writing about performance is to render visible these invisibly arising reflections: how the event of performance takes shape as experience, and what kind of experience is undergone by the spectator. In this context, however, it is also important to clarify in what sense we use the word experience. To this end, we turn to Richir's philosophy, which regards phantasy, rather than perception, as the phenomenological basis of experience:

> "Here we must carry out a complete architectonic reversal of classical architectonics. This reversal, which in our earlier works undoubtedly remained too implicit, consists in replacing the primacy of perception over imagination with the primacy of imagination over perception. This follows from the fact that, for us, the most archaic phenomenological field is constituted by 'pure' phantasies schematised outside language and 'perceptive' phantasies schematised within language, which, by means of an architectonic transposition correlative to the (quasi-)doxic positing of intentionality, pass over into imaginings" (Richir 2010, 227–228).

Pure phantasy is the fundamental phenomenon upon which perception and imagination are built. In Richir's conception, the field of phantasy is animated by affectivity. Percepts, representations produced by imagination, and memory-images come into being as schematisations of the field of phantasy set in motion by affectivity, as István Fazakas summarises in his study "Marc Richir és a fenomenológia új megalapozása" [Marc Richir and the New Grounding of Phenomenology]:

> "[...] we may say that imagination is an appearance that images and thereby presents something non-present by means of a present but non-positional image-object. What is at stake, then, is the appearing in the present of something non-present ('Erscheinung

> eines Nicht-Jetzt im Jetzt'). Recollection is the appearance of something non-present which, however, was once present. Phantasy-appearance, by contrast, contains no present within itself and cannot originally be traced back to any present. Phantasy-appearance is a presence to which no present can be assigned – except through an architectonic transposition that transforms phantasy-appearance into imagination, thereby depriving it of the specific traits of phantasy. And it is phantasy, understood in this sense, that must be posited as primary against the primacy of perception" (Fazakas 2018, 75).

In this light, phantasy appears as a pre-linguistic phenomenal dimension in which a flow operates anonymously (that is, in an unnameable way), becoming a percept or an image only later, at the moment when it flows into linguistic form (as phantasy-appearance). In other words, phantasy is the phenomenon of pure presence itself, which as yet refers to nothing beyond itself.[3] The preceding line of thought may become more accessible if we call upon a visual metaphor: phantasy may be imagined as a formlessly billowing cloud, stirred by the wind of affectivity. The figures that emerge from this movement are percepts, imaginings, and memories.

Castellucci's performances play precisely with the operation of phantasy set in motion by affective touch. What is at stake in this play is that, before phantasy can reach the level of a congealed representation (meaning) or a reflectively grasped percept, the performance produces a new affect that jolts the spectator out of the process of forming representations; that is, through corporeal affectedness, it ensures that the spectator

[3] See "Richir's claim may be summarised as follows: since the temporal mode of a presence with no assignable present whatsoever is more originary than the temporal mode of presentation, and since the former characterises phantasy-appearances, while the latter characterises perception, the architectonic register of phantasy is more originary than the architectonic register of perception" (Fazakas 2018, 76).

remains throughout in the present moment of the performance (in its field of phantasy), rather than wandering off into their own imagination or memory, while both of these latter activities are nevertheless kept continuously stimulated.

The spectator's imagination is at work when, in response to the forms appearing in the performance, they begin to construct an internal narrative out of these experiences. At the same time, the performance does not allow this narrative to become coherent, since the forms do not appear within relations of cause and effect – which would be an indispensable condition for the construction of a coherent narrative – but are phenomenalised at the level of affectivity. The rhythm of the performance, however, is composed in such a way that, in certain cases, there is time to dwell on the forms, which the spectator may also recognise as memory-images – whether as personal cultural memories or as images from their own life history. At the same time, through their impact on the body (for instance, as a result of an action or image that provokes bodily excitation), these two kinds of image flow into an affective wave. In this way, the spectator continually remains within the phenomenal field that Richir calls phantasy. In other words, when contemplating Castellucci's performances, the spectator enters a creative state of presence in which they are simultaneously present within the event as it is being phenomenalised, while a space also opens for their personal imagination and memory. This approach is supported by the following statement by Castellucci: "I am not an inventor of forms, one cannot invent forms. I arrange and organize what is already there, what already belongs to the spectator" (cited by Laera 2009, 14).

From this point, one may further articulate Árpád Kékesi Kun's observation concerning Castellucci's theatre: it is "lived experience, rather than either empathic identification or alienation, is the cardinal factor in the process by which theatre exerts its effects; for this reason, among the pioneers of twentieth-century theatre, he may be regarded not as a follower of Stanislavski or Brecht, but of Artaud" (Kékesi Kun 2026, 170).

Seen from this perspective, lived experience, as opposed to identification and alienation, means that, while participating in the performance, we are not held captive by theatrical illusion (imagination), as would be the case with identification; yet neither do we enter into an analytical, that is, objectifying and rationalising relation to what we see, as the gesture of alienation would require. Rather, we are inside the events of the performance while at the same time remaining with ourselves: we experience ourselves within a specific experiential mode for which the performance provides the space. The most intense moment of this experience, that is, the climax of being affected, takes shape in the phenomenality that Castellucci calls personal epiphany.[4] The word epiphany evokes a religious experience; Castellucci's performances, however, distance themselves from every metaphysical premise – including the concept of a transcendent God – that would refer them to some form of essence. The phenomenological mode of thought outlined above may open a space for a purely aesthetic approach to the phenomenon of personal epiphany, by bringing the phenomenality of the sublime into discourse:

> "Indeed, I understand the situation as follows: the failure of the imagination to gather into one what overflows it concerns not so much the imagination itself as affectivity, which in some sense accumulates and becomes over-condensed. For me, in the sublime, it is affectivity in its entirety that is at play. Strictly speaking, there is a moment in which affectivity exceeds [s'excède] itself – this is what Deguy calls its 'rebound' [ressaut] – and this corresponds to the moment Kant designates as attraction. Affectivity exceeds itself towards something that is no longer itself, and that is in fact absolute transcendence in infinite flight [fuite infinie], which inserts a gap into over-condensed af-

[4] See "Theatre is an individual epiphany, so I have no control over the audience's reactions" (quoted in Laera 2009, 14).

> fectivity, and does so in such a way that this gap begins to be schematised in what I call diastole" (Richir 2015, 205).

In the language of Richirian phenomenology, the phenomenon to which Castellucci appeals – the spectator's body – becomes capable of responding to the performance. For this reason, in what follows, the task of the text on *Inferno* is not to understand, nor to objectify through rationalisation, but to cast into linguistic form the dialogue conducted with the phenomenon of the performance, that is, to transpose mute experience into speech. The aim, then, is to render visible the invisibly – unconsciously – operative dimension of the performance, as far as possible in such a way that its experiential quality is not impaired, not severed from its corporeality, but supplemented by a reflective dimension.

From this perspective, the process of writing about the performance means casting into linguistic form the echoes of the performance's events as they resound in the spectator's phantasy. And since the performance is capable of eliciting an experience of the sublime in the sense outlined above, the principal task is to show how this experience comes into being in response to *Inferno*. Since the experience of the sublime is the result of accumulation – the overflowing of affectivity – I undertake to trace how this experiential process reaches its culmination. I call this path the architectonics of the sublime.

Architectonics is a technical term from architecture, also used in music to characterise the construction of a musical structure. In the present case, the "edifice" will be the experience of the sublime. When I speak of architectonics, I do not use the term in a mechanical sense: the "edifice" is not a rigid construction, but takes on its meaning in accordance with the word's original Greek sense. Here, *arkhē* means beginning, ground, origin, while *tectonics* names the movement of this ground in the geological sense of the word. By architectonics, then, I also understand origin as it stirs, trembles, and is

shaken. Here, *arkhē* is not a transcendent idea, but phantasy itself, set in motion by affect. In this approach, architectonics is a structure only insofar as rhythm, too, may be understood as structure, as measure. The architectonics of the sublime designates the intensification of this measure to the point of measurelessness, of immeasurability: the overflowing of measure and its transformation into an unnameable and unassimilable Other, traditionally designated by the word transcendence.

The architectonics of the performance

The basic narrative situation of the performance: At the moment when the spectator becomes a spectator, that is, when they take their seat to watch the performance entitled *Inferno*, they have already given their tacit consent to entering a mode of perceiving reality in which their phantasy will schematise according to the concept of *Inferno*, that is, of Hell. Even if the spectator otherwise knows nothing, or very little, about Dante's *Divine Comedy*, their phantasy begins, within the horizon of this concept, to form its own percepts and imaginings. This is the result of an involuntary intentionality (perceptive phantasy): the spectator does not need to make any particular effort for this to occur, since the concept itself – the concept of Hell – makes possible an attunement through which, for the duration of the performance, the unfolding events congeal into a specific experience.

It naturally depends on the spectator's individual life history and character what representations and memory-images guide this schematisation at the moment of arrival. The essential point, however, is that in every spectator's phantasy some movement begins, prompted by the concept of Hell. It is important to emphasise this barely perceptible yet significant shift in the spectator's perception of reality because this movement of phantasy is the architectonic basis upon which later experiences, percepts, emergent meanings (phantasy-images), and evoked memories may be built: it is this that makes it pos-

sible for the spectator to experience the events unfolding before them as a performance – and precisely as this performance. In this respect, the concept of Inferno stands out among other concepts that schematise the movement of phantasy into imaginings; thus it is perhaps no exaggeration to claim that the concept of Inferno partially places the spectator's general perception of reality in epoché and establishes an intentional relation with the spectator. This altered relational configuration may be called the basic narrative situation of the performance. As noted above, in the present case this situation is created by the concept of Hell and the imaginings and memory-images attached to it, together with the affects associated with them; these are what the event of the performance brings into play and transforms.

The basic phenomenal situation of the performance: As soon as the spectator situated within the basic narrative situation enters the concrete physical space in which the performance will be realised, they immediately enter a performative situation of play, the rules of which will become accessible to them only through subsequent reflection. When they enter the physical space of the performance – the courtyard of the Papal Palace in Avignon – they become part of a soundscape composed of unintelligible voices and other noises. They must also pass by people holding audio guides. This situation may become a source of disturbance within the spectator's conception of theatrical performance, dislodging them from the system of schematisation associated, for them, with the concept of theatrical performance, since the phenomenon is foreign to that system. At this moment, the performance places the spectator in a situation in which, because the formation of meaning has become uncertain, they must somehow take up a relation to what is happening, without knowing exactly how to conceptualise what appears before them. The situation thus formed generates an affective wave in the spectator's body: it gives rise to sensations of uncertainty, fear, curiosity, and so on, and thereby already places them in a particular disposition.

If this disposition does not reach a traumatic level, it is transformed into a kind of openness that pushes earlier representations into the background in favour of affective touchedness. This wave-like movement intensifies further when the spectator recognises that they and their fellow spectators also have an effect on the shaping of the soundscape, since the loudspeakers replay, in distorted form, the sounds of movements taking place in the space. Through this affectivity, the performance therefore begins to phenomenalise within them, and they begin to situate themselves within its sonic and performative space, becoming continuously immersed in it. Once they have found their place in this space – presumably, sooner or later, in their own seat – they have already, unconsciously, taken up some relation to the phenomena mentioned, though not within the customary subject–object relational framework, but from the position of being-in and being-with. Indeed, they also discover their fellow spectators in a new configuration, since both they and the others exert an effect on the emerging visual field as well as on the sound taking shape.[5] This touchedness is as yet almost imperceptible, yet from the perspective of our analysis it is important to mention it, since through it the spectator has – however minimally – stepped outside their customary nexus of reality and entered the phantasy-space of the performance as it is being phenomenalised. As we can see, this now appears to them not only at the level of the concept, but also at the level of affectivity, since, thanks to the soundscape, they are indirectly touched by the bodies of others.[6] The situation of play offered by the performance thus already creates, in a subtle way, a sense of being-together, so that, step by step, the phantasy-images institutionalised in everyday life recede into the background (are placed in epoché) and give way to

[5] In Erika Fischer-Lichte's terms, one might say that this is the moment when the autopoietic feedback loop is set in motion.

[6] At this point, it would be interesting to examine precisely how the Leib–Körper relation is posited within this touchedness, but this lies beyond the scope of the present study.

previously unknown ones. In other words: the spectator becomes still more open to a new experience in which they do not *posit themselves as someone*, but *feel themselves to be part of something*. The quality of the soundscape, which, even if not horrific, certainly produces a frightening effect, also makes it possible – alongside the preceding experience of touchedness – for the spectator to understand the performance not only as a self-referential communal play with sounds, but as an echo of the performance's basic narrative situation: the sonority also gives rise in the spectator's imagination to a representation – for instance, of the rumbling of Hell. That is, at this moment a state of presence is realised both through being touched by others and through the spectator's own disposedness, while a process of representation is also set in motion, carried out by the spectator's own phantasy within the horizon of the preconceptions prefigured by the basic narrative situation. The experience of the performance begins to phenomenalise through the superimposition of these simultaneous processes.

The temporalisation of the performance: As we have seen, through the encounter between the performance's basic narrative and phenomenal situations, a tectonic movement has been set in motion within the spectator, one that at times holds them, through affectivity, within a present-dimension, and at times opens a space for their memory or imagination. The architectonics of the performance arises from the pulsating rhythm between these two dimensions: the structure of *Inferno* is composed of moments that at times exert a very strong affective impact on the spectator – as when the director has several trained dogs set upon him, or when the spectator watches a man climbing the wall of the Papal Palace – and at other times open a space instead for the spectator's imagination and memory. An example of the latter is the moment when the man climbing the wall positions himself within the building's rose window, immediately calling to mind Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* for any European spectator. This rhythmic alternation creates a specific consciousness of time in the spectator:

at times they experience themselves as present within a state of very strong affectivity, corporeally involved in the performance, while at other times they find themselves in the temporal mode of absorption in the visual field. In this sense, then, the spectator's phantasy is in constant motion: it continually constructs images, yet this process is interrupted again and again by sudden shocks, experienced almost as accidents. Thus the forms that appear are repeatedly torn from their everyday horizon of meaning and come to be posited as phenomenal objects: the spectator may establish a new relation to them, endow them with new meaning, or simply contemplate them without conceptual schematisation; as a result, the visual field gives rise to an experience of beauty.

This two-pole pulsation also appears in the sonic space of the performance: at one moment, the spectator encounters a sound-world reminiscent of Gregorian chant, creating the illusion of timelessness; at another, they hear noises which, by virtue of their affective force – because they frighten them, for instance – jolt them out of this feeling. Paradoxically, however, these sounds do not only wrench the spectator back into the present; they also help to summon certain auditory memories. When, for example, the man climbing the wall drops the basketball from the roof and the ball hits the ground, the spectator does not hear the natural sound of the ball, but a clattering noise – the sound coming from the loudspeakers – which recalls the sound of bricks from collapsing buildings. This percept, in turn, links up with the visual field and gives rise to spontaneously emerging configurations of sense that organise the noise within the spectator's stream of consciousness as the representation of something – for instance, the collapse of the building. Experiences of this kind once again – and with increasing force – dislodge the spectator from their habitual processes of forming representations; as a result, the schematising work of both imagination and memory is intensified, while their affective touchedness also increases.

Particular attention should be paid to the moment when the spectators drape a vast cloth over themselves, passing it from hand to hand until everyone is underneath it. This is the gesture in which the two temporal dimensions become intertwined: being dissolved in time, by virtue of the cloth's slow movement, and active presence, which is also accompanied by affect, since the spectator touches the cloth. At the level of phantasy- and memory-images, the representation of death is schematised, while at the level of affectivity this is perhaps the strongest moment of presence, in which the audience quite literally touches the body of the performance. In this touch, however, as in the initial experience of being touched by sound, tactile contact between spectators also takes place indirectly, through the movement of the sheet's membrane: a shared experience of touch and touchedness comes into being, as does a shared experience of space ("we are all under the sheet").

As we can see, the performance plays intensely with both the spectator's corporeal lived experience and their capacity for imaginative and mnemonic schematisation. That is, the movement of phantasy intensifies further. The kind of experientiality that Richir describes in relation to the phenomenon of the beautiful emerges with increasing frequency: "In the experience of beauty, then, just as – as we shall shortly see – in the lived experience of the sublime, the self-identity of the I is suspended, and the *hypokeimenon* [the subject – Zs. B.] that supposedly bears the experience is bracketed" (Richir 1995b, 77). This suspension, however, is not yet complete, since something remains in the spectator of that I-representation which, throughout, continues in some way to schematise the movement of phantasy through the basic narrative situation, that is, through the concept of Hell. The performance also reinforces this tendency towards schematisation in those moments when, for instance, the performers display the inscription "INFERNO", which also has an affective impact on the spectator, owing to the pulsating light-effect of the letters, while the situation of the present moment likewise becomes conceptually schematisable in

the light of this inscription. Moreover, because the spectator sees the inscription in reverse, they also begin to understand themselves from a different position: not facing "INFERNO", that is, outside it, but behind "INFERNO", that is, inside it. Even after the inscription disappears, the two quotation marks framing the word remain in the space; these continue, naturally and involuntarily, to remind the spectator *where* they find themselves, that is, within the horizon of which concept, and therefore *how* they experience themselves – as being within Inferno.

The performance's play with identity and ipseity: As the opening gesture of the performance, the director enters the space and says: "Je m'appelle Romeo Castellucci." Since the spectator is very likely to know who directed the performance, they begin to interpret this sentence in some way. In this form, the sentence does not function merely as information; it also creates a situation: it lets the spectator know that they are not watching a narrative fiction in which they will encounter imaginary figures, such as Dante or Virgil, but are confronted with an individual who, in this case, assumes a name. He identifies himself only partially with this name – only partially because the linguistic utterance encountered here is not "je suis". That is, what is about to happen will happen within the horizon of a name, an I ("Je"), that is, an identity. Yet the treatment of this I as an object is immediately suspended by the event-character of the following moments: when the dogs begin to tug at Castellucci, the spectator cannot reflect on who *he* is (that is, Castellucci), but is preoccupied with what is happening *to him*. That is, the name is immediately placed in epoché, and the experientiality of a nameless body's suffering comes to the fore. The concept of "Je" thus first loses its identity tied to a person, then, through the gesture of the boy with glasses – when he spray-paints the name JEAN on the wall of the building – is recontextualised, that is, becomes the basis of a new identity. This identity also designates a person, though we cannot be certain who that per-

son is, since we cannot be sure that the inscription refers to the boy's name.

At the same time, Jean is one of the most common French names, so this identity recedes into a kind of generality. The word "Je" next emerges in the repeatedly uttered formula "Je t'aime", when the nameless figures embrace and metaphorically murder one another; that is, it appears not in relation to an object, but in relation to a "you". Later, it returns in the form of an inscription, when we read in a projected text: "Je m'appelle Andy Warhol." Here, the "I" refers to the memory of someone who once existed, to a presence that can never again attain actuality – except through representation – since the person who ought to be present is dead. This representation does indeed take place when an actor wearing a mask reminiscent of Warhol's face enters the space of the performance. In this respect, then, a present "I" (Romeo Castellucci) is replaced by an "I" formed from imagination and memory, that is, an invoked "I" (Andy Warhol). This fictive I then gives way to an even more elusive "TOI" (YOU), which appears only at the level of the concept and is itself merely a fragment of another word – ÉTOILES (STARS), displayed on television screens placed in the windows of the Papal Palace – that is, part of a larger configuration. It acquires meaning only because something else, the remaining letters, is destroyed: the television sets crash to the ground. The performance thus shows the spectator – at least at the level of conceptual schematisations – the path of the loss of identity and its subsequent re-formation. The institution of the I is replaced by the institution of the YOU, even if this YOU possesses no actuality whatsoever.

The edifice of the Papal Palace undergoes a similar transformation of identity: at first, it is constituted for the spectator as a tourist attraction through the figures with audio guides, setting in motion the schematisations that belong to the building's everyday conception – the largest Gothic palace, part of the World Heritage, and so on – and that make its current identity visible. This identity is then suspended by the action

of the wall-climber, and the building becomes an event-like experiential site for its formal givens. Yet since, within this event-character, there are moments when a memory-image is invoked – for instance, in the case of the previously mentioned positioning within the rose window – it also expands into a metaphor for an entire cultural memory: the institution of the Christian Church. But this occurs without the building losing its affective impact, because of the situation of play analysed above. Then, in moments when the edifice comes into operation – for instance, when lights flash in its windows amid powerful sound effects – this affectivity comes to the fore: the spectator feels fear, a sense of threat, while at the level of imagination the sight of the building is schematised into a threatening monster, as something that recalls the destructive forces of nature. Later, it is transformed into a dwelling-place of the dead, and then into a sacrificial site, where a piano is burned; finally, it becomes an anonymous place that opens space for an indeterminate other, for a YOU.

In light of the above, I claim that the spectator becomes part of a process in which persons, objects, and concepts undergo continual reinterpretation: their fixed identity is suspended, and they merge into an anonymous flow of experience in which they become event-like phenomena. That is, they are not posited as identities – as identical with something not present – but, owing to the continual breakdown of schematisation, show themselves as ipseities: in themselves, as they appear in the experience of the moment. Within this event-character, the phenomena that appear are released from their essential ideality; that is, they are detached from their objectified purposiveness and transposed into a state of purposiveness without purpose – into the experience of beauty.[7] Yet because this

[7] See "In beauty, beings, things, qualities, and forms, caught up in a constantly changing constellation, always mean something other and more than themselves: this surplus is expressed with particular aptness by Merleau-Ponty when he speaks of things as 'active forces of radiance', as 'rays of flesh [chair] and of the world', as modes of being [ester]" (Richir 1995b, 75).

experientiality does not unfold in a state of calm contemplation, but is organised through the continual running aground of the spectator's conceptions of the events, the spectator, in an ever-intensifying state of affective touchedness, increasingly finds themselves in uncertainty and fear, feeling that they are losing the referentiality on the basis of which their own identity might be posited. If the movements of imagination, memory, and perception reach the point at which the spectator loses themselves among these schematisations, and becomes incapable even of schematising the wild flow of experientiality according to the performance's basic narrative situation, that is, according to the concept of Hell, then the I dissolves in the movement of affectivity – or rather, drowns in it – and ipseity emerges: the state of schematisation without concepts, the experience of selfhood within the pure field of phantasy. In Richir's conceptual system, this means nothing other than that the experience of the sublime takes place. To quote Richir:

> "In these phenomena, the imagination operates freely ('schematises'); yet this schematisation is itself unlimited and exhausts itself in the sense that it is never brought to completion, never able to come to rest in a stable phenomenal unity. This 'exhaustion' – appearances notwithstanding – does not mean that the operation of the imagination reaches some kind of goal, but rather that, since it is unable to catch up with itself and to find itself within some unity, the world itself comes to be phenomenalised within it" (Richir 1995a, 66).

At the same time, this experience is also equivalent to the fact that

> "the human being – and, in the human being, the imagination – recognises that there is something greater than itself: yet a 'greater' so great that it can neither

> measure nor even schematise it, for instance by means of an infinite mathematical series. And this is so because the imagination is incapable of schematising the possibility that something may appear which absolutely exceeds the human being, and which corresponds to what I have called absolute transcendence – or to what Descartes called the infinite: something that can be thought, since there is indeed an apperception of this absolute greatness, but which remains incomprehensible. In other words, this means that the human being is called to more than its sensible, positivist determinations, which can be measured or accounted for by concepts" (Richir 2015, 200).

It is important to understand, however, that even if this experience is identical with what Castellucci calls personal epiphany, it is still not a religious experience:

> "In my view, whatever language can produce concerning pure absolute transcendence is nothing but a simulacrum [counterfeit – Zs. B.]. That is why I do not really understand what religious experience is – I do not know what it is! The fact is that absolute transcendence is radically other: peculiarly unimaginable, incomprehensible; and even if I am able to think it, this is possible only insofar as it has always already slipped away and will continue to slip away. This is why absolute transcendence cannot be God; for it has no relation to humanity, and likewise none to affectivity: it is that dimension of affectivity which slips away from all affectivity, and about which affectivity itself can say nothing at all – quite apart from the fact that affectivity does not speak, that affectivity is nothing other than the blind and innocent impulse of 'living' [vivre] to 'live' [vivre] (it speaks only when it is

> modulated into a language-schematism set in search of some meaning or other)" (ibid., 209).

In light of the above, one may say that if, as an effect of the performance, the experience of the sublime comes about at a given moment – provided the spectator has sufficient inner strength to expose themselves to this experience – and if they undergo the experience of absolute transcendence, this can occur only in a moment of unselfconsciousness. Within the situation of the performance, this moment is equivalent to the cessation in the spectator of every form of schematisation, including that of the concept of Hell. In this state of suspended identity, a kind of transgressive movement takes place within the spectator: they merge into an anonymous other. Yet as soon as this happens, they immediately return to themselves as an I; otherwise the experience would lead to a traumatic rupture of the self. As a consequence of this movement, through the experience of its own abyss, identity is also placed on new foundations. This is the gift of the experience of the sublime. Since, however, the performance is phenomenalised not as a private event but as a form of communal being-together, a kind of communal experience also comes into being among those who have shared in it: the experience of a community of which Richir writes as follows:

> "In this sense, the sublime is nothing other than origin itself – yet an origin independent of every determinable and univocally determining beginning and arkhē: the unfathomable source of thought and practice. Only through it can I be myself and begin in my radical singularity, whose secret is reflected, through the abyss of my death, in the symbolically instituting dimension, and which awakens me to the enigma of the singularity of others like myself. Although Kant does not state this explicitly, sensus communis is present in the experience of the sublime no less than

> in the experience of beauty; except that the former points to a utopian human community which has no determinate social place anywhere, yet whose absence inevitably leads to the disintegration and destruction of society – without it, society is nothing more than a disorderly aggregate of monads open to unlimited manipulation. If we forget that, within the horizon of the sublime, we can only ever do what it is possible for us to do, rather than what we would like to do, or what we believe we would like to do, nothing remains of the human being but a somewhat complicated biped" (Richir 1995a, 69).

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Péter Závada

The Apprehension of Essence and Imaginative Variation in Romeo Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*

I. Eidos and the apprehension of essence

This paper seeks to determine whether the apprehension of essence, also known as eidetic reduction – a procedure employed by the positive sciences, phenomenology and, implicitly, the arts – can also take place in theatre. According to Edmund Husserl, such apprehension is attained through the method of imaginative variation. Can a mode of spectatorial attention therefore be elicited that focuses not primarily on the concrete, individual properties of the figures, characters, conflicts and events presented on stage, but rather on their invariant essential features? To answer this question, I shall attempt a phenomenological reconstruction of Romeo Castellucci's production *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (2010), presented in Budapest in 2012.

As we move along the borderland between theatre studies and phenomenology, we may begin to entertain the possibility of a distinctive mode of theatrical consciousness in which we perceive bodies, objects or texts divested of certain individual properties. Although the body, object or text in question still possesses concrete givens peculiar to it, its function within the work is not to restage events from everyday life. Nor does the work seek to present clearly delineated figures, characters and relationships on stage; in other words, it does not tell a

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story in the sense of psychological realism. On the contrary, by disclosing reality to us in this singular manner, it advances a distinctive claim to truth, indeed a world-constituting claim, and accordingly undertakes to apprehend essences. Examples might include certain non-verbal performances, movement- or dance-based productions, various forms of object theatre, or stagings of poetic texts of a hermetic character.

As will be discussed below, Husserl locates the essence of philosophical art in the apprehension of ideas and sets out the phenomenological method for doing so in the second part of the *Logical Investigations*. The question, then, is whether it is possible to describe – and, if so, how – a type of artistic strategy that seeks to grasp the essential nature of its object by means of the phenomenological method of eidetic reduction. A further question is whether, as spectators, we undergo a purely aesthetic experience in such cases, or whether we may already perform the transcendental phenomenological reduction while experiencing the work and, oscillating between the spheres of art and philosophy, derive a form of enjoyment that is at once aesthetic and scientific from both the performance's formal language and phenomenological contemplation.

In discussing Husserlian apprehension of essence, Bence Marosán argues that the eidetic seeing involved in eidetic reduction is not confined to transcendental phenomenology, but is also present outside the phenomenological attitude, since it is what makes possible, among other things, the emergence of the positive sciences. "Eidetic disciplines concern the regions of being of the real world. As regional ontologies, they encompass the most fundamental genera of beings" (Marosán 2017, 78). As such, they deal with "the formal relations and structure of beings as such" (ibid.). These ontologies provide the theoretical foundations of particular scientific disciplines and are also referred to by Husserl as mundane ontologies. One example, Marosán notes, is the formal ontology of mathematical and logical objects. As phenomenologists, however, we must obtain the ultimate evidential grounding of things from tran-

scendental phenomenology; these mundane ontologies must therefore be bracketed by means of the phenomenological reduction. What is thereby attained is an absolute ontology that provides the ultimate context for every mundane ontology. As Husserl writes in *Ideas I*: "But although every eidetic science is necessarily independent of every science of matters of fact, the reverse does not hold for the latter sciences. There is no science of matters of fact which, were it fully developed as a science, could be pure of eidetic cognitions and therefore could be independent of the formal or the material eidetic sciences" (Husserl 1983, 17).

"Eidetic reduction is the methodologically conscious and theoretically elaborated practice of eidetic seeing" (Marosán 2017, 79). It is grounded in the insight that, alongside real, individual objects, we must also posit the existence of ideal, universal objects. This, however, is not mere metaphysical Platonism, since these ideal objects do not inhabit an autonomous region of being beyond the world; rather, they are ideal forms of the real and therefore do not exist independently of it. "Abstracted from the real, the ideal is thus only an abstract possibility" (ibid.). According to Husserl, the ideal object has no real existence either within or outside consciousness, but exists only ideally, as constituted by consciousness. At the same time, there can be no experience without ideal objects. "Ideal objects make it possible for us to perceive states of affairs and to find ourselves in situations" (ibid., 80). Categorial intuition is our capacity "to perceive the universal, ideal features of a thing, as well as the formal relations between things. […] To see a particular thing from the outset as a specific instance of a universal type of object" (ibid.). Marosán notes that this is not a mystical faculty, but one that can be developed through methodologically conscious practice and sustained reflection, resulting in increasingly refined eidetic seeing. In practising this method, we apprehend the universal object in the individual object. The concrete act of such apprehension is known as ideational abstraction, or the apprehension of essence.

The question of apprehending eidetic structures is directly connected with the question of truth. According to Husserl, these structures are a priori: their validity does not depend on empirical experience. Statements concerning essences [eide] are apodictic, necessary and universal. Essence is therefore a priori and necessary, whereas the individual thing is empirical and contingent. The apprehension of essence enables us to extract the essence from the dense web of individual and factual relations and to set it before us purified of all contingency. Yet eide are not isolated either: each essence is always embedded in a broader nexus of essences and appears as part of it. Newly disclosed eide place those previously identified in a different context, enriching and refining their meaning. As Marosán puts it, "the cognition of essence is therefore an infinitely open-ended process" (ibid., 82).

"In imaginative variation, also known as eidetic variation, we vary a concrete, factual, individual datum in imagination in order to arrive at its invariant essential features and the corresponding pure eidos" (ibid.). Furthermore, "when a certain property cannot be removed from a thing without destroying its essence, we recognise that property as belonging to the essence of the thing in question" (ibid.). Drawing on Husserl, Marosán argues that the cognition of essence also takes place in the arts, including literature. One manifestation of this procedure of variation is characterisation through the observation of fictional characters' behaviour in different situations. This is comparable to Descartes's celebrated example of the wax, in which every factual property of a particular piece of wax is altered, thereby revealing the pure essence of materiality as such: extension. It may therefore be said that "the eidos appears to us through the identification of the relevant invariant essential features" (ibid., 83). The method can already be found in embryonic form in the *Logical Investigations*, but the pure eidetic procedure is formally set out in *Ideas* (1913). As Marosán puts it: "Eidetic variation is a methodological guiding thread which, when followed within the transcendental phe-

nomenological attitude, enables us to reach the pure, universal essence of experiences and objectual givens that have already been phenomenologically reduced but remain concrete, factual and individual" (ibid.).

Phenomenology can unfold as a science of essences through eidetic reduction as practised within the phenomenological attitude and, more specifically, through its concrete procedure, imaginative variation. In the aesthetic attitude, then, we perform the neutrality modification, a preliminary stage of the transcendental phenomenological *epoché* – that is, a suspension of reality-positing – and within this suspension carry out an eidetic (imaginative) variation. Phantasy discloses ideal possibilities, which are only partially constrained by our knowledge and expectations concerning the real, factual world. Phantasy must free itself from what is factually given if it is to disclose the universal eidetic laws governing any possible appearance. It is through phantasy that we isolate the invariant features of factual givens. By purging ideal structures of their references to reality, we can discover the intuitive character of concepts and their limits, examining how far they may be applied without exceeding those limits. Literature employs this procedure successfully and, indeed, carries it out at a vastly higher level of complexity, since phantasy enables it to generate an infinite number of variations on imagined figures, characters, situations and relationships, as well as other states of affairs.

I.1. The abstraction of the object and the essence

I.1.1. Categorial intuition and ideational abstraction

In *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, Husserl distinguishes four types of art – realistic, idealistic, philocallistic and philosophical – and cites Arthur Schnitzler as an example of realistic fiction (see Husserl 2005, 654). This classification is useful here only insofar as it shows that Husserl, too, regards the apprehension of ideas as the essence of philosophical art.

i. Realistic works, among which Husserl includes novels, paintings and sculptures, belong to a particular world and time within an indeterminate horizon. They depict a particular sequence of events in a purely imagined mode and render it vividly. They do so not through mere description, but in such a way that we, as recipients, may witness the events ourselves. They place us within the world of a particular life and destiny, as though we, the readers, were present and part of the imagined society. According to Husserl, the description of this observer position is integral to every realistic presentation, whether verbal or visual. "In this case delight is the intuitively produced formation, which yields understanding and the circumspection of judicious insight. To this belongs 'the matter of factness' of the situation, the restriction by time, by the real" (ibid., 652).

ii. By contrast, Husserl's second type of art, idealistic fiction, apprehends not only facts and types belonging to regions of the empirical world, but also ideas and ideals. In contemplating these ideas, it evaluates them and presents them as values. A realistic work may likewise show that people possess ideas and are guided by them, but its orientation remains positivistic: it is concerned with typical empirical facts. The idealistic author, by contrast, adopts a normative orientation. Such an author presents types of value in concrete images or embodies them in characters, "and the values battle against disvalues in real quasi-situations" (ibid., 653).

iii. The third type is philocallistic art, which is defined primarily in opposition to realistic art. Its concern is beauty itself, rather than the object characterised by beauty.

iv. At a still higher, fourth level, however, art may also be philosophical or, as Husserl puts it, metaphysical. Such art discerns the world of ideas in the real world and replaces the real with the ideal because it finds the former imperfect (see ibid., 654). In what follows, we shall attempt to formulate a few observations, from a phenomenological perspective, on the possibilities of philosophical theatre.

According to Husserl, I, as a real human being, am, like others, a real object in the natural world. "We define a real object as the possible object of a straightforward percept. There is a necessary parallelism between perception and imagination, which guarantees that a possible imagination (or more precisely a whole series of imaginations) having the same essence, corresponds to each possible percept, a straightforward imagination is correlated with each straightforward percept, thereby giving certainty to the wider concept of sensible intuition" (Husserl 2001, 285). This is crucial if we are to determine how, in experiencing a theatrical performance, we may move from straightforward perception – whether through the "as-if world" of illusion or by bypassing it altogether – to the examination of abstract concepts, and how we may thereby apprehend the essence of certain objects perceived on stage.

We therefore have an initial perception of the objects appearing on stage, and abstraction arises in conjunction with it: we abstract from the roles they play in the lifeworld or even in the illusory world of the play, and examine them purely in conceptual terms. "Abstraction gets to work on a basis of primary intuitions, and with it a new categorial act-character emerges, in which a new style of objectivity becomes apparent, an objectivity which can only become apparent – whether given as 'real' or as 'merely imagined' – in just such a founded act. Naturally I do not here mean 'abstraction' merely in the sense of a setting-in-relief of some non-independent moment in a sensible object, but Ideational Abstraction, where no such non-independent moment, but its Idea, its Universal, is brought to consciousness, and achieves actual givenness" (ibid., 292). Thus, "we become aware of the identity of the universal through the repeated performance of such acts upon a basis of several individual intuitions, and we plainly do so in an overreaching act of identification which brings all such single acts of abstraction into one synthesis. Through such acts of abstraction, woven into new act-forms, there arise, further, acts of universal determination, acts, that is, which determine objects generally […]"

(ibid.). In the act of abstraction, then, the universal itself becomes manifest to us.

As Tibor Schwendtner explains in his essay "A kategoriális szemlélet és a létkérdés" [Categorial Intuition and the Question of Being]: "Husserl distinguishes between so-called 'straightforward perception' [*schlichte Wahrnehmung*] and the founded acts based on it. In straightforward perception, the perceived thing is apprehended, as it were, 'at a single stroke'. This perception requires no articulation; the perceived thing simply appears to us. On the basis of this straightforward perception, intuitive acts can be performed that are already complex – or, in Husserl's terminology, have a many-rayed structure – and are explicitly directed towards categorial moments" (Schwendtner 2009, 3). Husserl presents the structure of the categorial act as comprising three interrelated stages:

i. The initial stage is what is termed straightforward perception of the whole, through which "we intend the object, as it were, as an unarticulated whole".

ii. In the second stage, through selective, articulating attention, "we single out certain moments from what was previously an unarticulated unity; and although we are still directed towards the object as a whole, we now view that whole by way of one particular moment – for example, we apprehend the sheet of paper before us as white paper".

iii. In the third stage, that of categorial synthesis proper, "the genuine transition occurs insofar as we now distinguish the various moments of the perceived object predicatively and connect them by means of the statement 'this paper is white'. Here we apprehend the object of straightforward perception as paper and as white, and synthetically connect these two categorial moments" (ibid.).

Schwendtner argues that "one type of categorial intuition plays a privileged role in phenomenology's status as a science: ideational abstraction, or the intuition of the universal, also known as eidetic intuition. What gives this categorial act its privileged status is that 'in the act of abstraction […] the

universal itself is given to us; we do not think of it merely in significative fashion as when we merely understand general names, but we apprehend it, behold it. Talk of an intuition and, more precisely, of a perception of the universal is in this case, therefore, well-justified'" (ibid. Schwendtner cites Husserl 1984, 691). Schwendtner further notes that "[Dieter] Lohmar, in his interpretation, emphasises that 'the fundamental model for analysing the act of eidetic intuition is that of the three phases of categorial intuition: perception of the whole – focused perception – categorial synthesis.' In the case of eidetic intuition, then, we may likewise say that the starting point is the straightforward, non-founded intuition of the object – for example, a piece of white paper; differentiating attention is then directed towards the whiteness of the paper, from which ideational abstraction proceeds towards white as such" (ibid., 4. Schwendtner cites Lohmar 2008, 219).

"The point of departure," Schwendtner writes, "is an experience that is initially unarticulated and characterised by wholeness, yet requires articulation in the course of subsequent analysis. The articulation of this original unity of experience is not initiated by philosophy; rather, philosophy draws upon this non-philosophical process of articulation and radicalises it. In Husserl, the first articulation of straightforward perception is already performed by everyday attention when, in perceiving an object, it begins to shift from the object as a whole towards one or another of its moments. The predication 'this paper is white', which still belongs to the sphere of everyday experience, expresses and fixes this transformation of attention. We may speak of the beginnings of scientific validity when ideational abstraction is directed towards these constituent moments" (ibid., 5).

I.1.2. Eidetic reduction and theatre

In the phenomenological method of eidetic reduction, then, we move from consciousness of the concrete, individual object

into the trans-empirical domain, beyond physical experience, where pure essences are disclosed. We thereby attain an intuition of the thing's eidos, or essence – of what the thing is in terms of its invariant, essential structure, once everything contingent about it has been excluded. On this point, Husserl writes in *Ideas I*: "When we said that any matter of fact, 'in respect of its own essence', could be otherwise, we were already saying that it belongs to the essence of anything contingent to have an essence and therefore an Eidos, which can be apprehended purely; and that Eidos comes under eidetic truths belonging to different levels of universality. An individual object is not merely an individual object as such, a 'this here', an object never repeatable; as qualified in itself thus and so, it has its own specific character, its stock of essential predicables which must belong to it (as 'an existent such as it is in itself') if other, secondary, relative determinations can belong to it. Thus, for example, any tone in and of itself has an essence and, highest of all, the universal essence tone as such, or rather sound as such—taken purely as the moment that can be singled out intuitively in the individual tone (alone or else by comparing one tone with others as 'something common'). In like manner any material thing has its own essential species and, highest of all, the universal species 'any material thing whatever', with any temporal determinations whatever, any duration, figure, materiality whatever. Everything belonging to the essence of the individual can belong to another individual too; and highest eidetic universalities of the sort just indicated in our examples delimit 'regions' or 'categories' of individuals" (Husserl 1983, 7–8). As Husserl writes in the introduction to *Ideas I*: "pure or transcendental phenomenology will become established, not as a science of matters of fact, but as a science of essences (as an 'eidetic' science); it will become established as a science which exclusively seeks to ascertain 'cognitions of essences' and no 'matters of fact' whatever. The relevant reduction which leads over from the psychological phenomenon to the pure 'essence' or, in the case of judgmental thinking, from matter-of-fact

('empirical') universality to 'eidetic' universality, is the eidetic reduction" (ibid., xx). The eidos, then, grounds the thing's necessary structure.

Eidetic reduction is carried out through free variation; that is, it depends neither on specific mental constructs nor on concrete, actually existing objects, although it takes knowledge of facts as its point of departure. As Husserl puts it: "At first 'essence' designated what is to be found in the very own being of an individuum as the What of an individuum. Any such What can, however, be 'put into an idea'. Experiencing, or intuition of something individual, can become transmuted into eidetic seeing (ideation) – a possibility which is itself to be understood not as empirical, but as eidetic. What is seen when that occurs is the corresponding pure essence, or Eidos, whether it be the highest category or a particularization thereof – down to full concretion" (ibid., 8).

Starting from a concrete object, then, we may imaginatively vary the perspectives from which it can be viewed. The resulting series of variations partially overlap, and the invariant common to them – their "intersection" – is the essence itself. In this way, by moving from the certainty afforded by the sensory sphere to that afforded by the imaginative sphere, we may apprehend the object's invariant, essential structure. "The Essence (Eidos) is a new sort of object. Just as the datum of individual or experiencing intuition is an individual object, so the datum of eidetic intuition is a pure essence" (ibid., 9). According to Husserl, "the Eidos, the pure essence, can be exemplified for intuition in experiential data – in data of perception, memory, and so forth; but it can equally well be exemplified in data of mere phantasy. Accordingly, to seize upon an essence itself, and to seize upon it originarily, we can start from corresponding experiencing intuitions, but equally well from intuitions which are non-experiencing, which do not seize upon factual existence but which are instead merely imaginative. […] If we produce in free phantasy spatial formations, melodies, social practices, and the like, or if we phantasy acts of experiencing, of

liking or disliking, of willing, etc., then on that basis, by 'ideation', we can see various pure essences […]" (ibid., 11). Eidetic reduction, then, is neither an induction derived from empirical data nor an abstraction. Like phenomenological reduction, it refrains from positing the real existence of objects and brackets – that is, suspends – concrete, factual content. Nor is it an empirical generalisation performed within the natural attitude. We may therefore conclude that eidetic reduction can also be carried out in the course of theatrical reception and that, in the case of certain performances whose prescribed or represented content is less determinate, it may itself become the object, indeed the very aim, of aesthetic experience.

The final aim of this paper is to explore, through an analysis of Romeo Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*, how we may arrive at eidetic reduction – and, within it, at a presupposition-free categorial or eidetic intuition of objects on stage – either while remaining within the suspension of reality effected in theatre, that is, within the aesthetic attitude, or when that attitude is disrupted; and to what extent this process may itself become an object of aesthetic enjoyment.

I.2. The apprehension of essence and imaginative variation in Romeo Castellucci's production On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God

We have seen, then, that categorial intuition is possible not only within the transcendental phenomenological attitude but also within the aesthetic attitude. The central question, however, is how a theatrical performance can bring about the apprehension of essence. If a comparable process of imaginative variation can take place in literary works, then the medium of theatricality must surely also be capable of it: it need only present objects possessing real, individual properties in different situations, thereby helping us, through them, to envisage the corresponding ideal objects until we arrive at their invariant essential features. Since the suspension of reality is already ef-

fected within the neutrality modification of the aesthetic attitude, eidetic reduction and its concrete method, imaginative variation, can also be carried out within it. This procedure of variation may take place both in theatrical characterisation, where we observe the behaviour of individual dramatic figures in different situations, and in performances less centred on character and plot, which are not based on the enactment of specific roles and focus neither on the characters' dispositions nor on their psychological relationships, but confront us from the outset with categories, states of affairs, judgements and affects. However, further research would be needed to determine the extent to which eidetic reduction taking place within the aesthetic attitude differs from the intuition of eide within the transcendental phenomenological attitude; whether, in the course of a work's reception, this shift in attitude can be effected without the spectator returning to the plane of reality; and whether this return to reality – this "sobering up" – may itself be regarded as part of the aesthetic experience. Such performances may include, among others, works that, rather than relying on linear storytelling and stage text, focus primarily on staging the actor's body in a space and time shared with the spectators, as well as on the theatricality that emerges through and upon that body.

As Péter P. Müller writes in his book *Test és teatralitás* [Body and Theatricality]: "The most evident [though at the same time specific] relationship between the body and theatricality can be observed in actors and in theatre. […] The actor who works with the body uses, above all, their own body to create, through it, the theatrical situation – the medium of theatricality. Through the actor's activity and art, the body becomes the source and surface of theatricality: the site from which theatricality originates and on which it appears" (P. Müller 2009, 121). We can therefore see that the body and theatricality are inseparable. Romeo Castellucci's 2010 production *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* offers a striking example.

We contend that, for all the pronounced performativity and corporeality of *On the Concept of the Face*, the production cannot be examined solely through the lens of a phenomenology of the body, since, in moving beyond concrete individual characteristics, it also brings into play the abstract concepts of essence discussed above. Although it clearly engages with questions of the sacred and the profane, one of the production's fundamental aims is to subvert traditional gender roles. At numerous points in the production, Castellucci attempts to liberate male sexual identity from the stereotypes imposed upon it by hegemonic masculinity. One of his most effective strategies is to draw on the subversive force of displaying the naked, ageing and deteriorating body. *On the Concept of the Face* presents male members of three generations – grandfathers, fathers and children all appear – while portraying both the sufferings of an elderly man with incontinence and the everyday yet harrowing, almost ritual sequence of events in which his son attempts to care for him. In terms of this deheroised image of the body of an elderly, helpless man who cannot control his bowels and therefore has to wear nappies, Árpád Schilling's *Lúzer* [Loser] invites comparison with Castellucci's production.

In his book *Thália árnyék(á)ban* [In Thalia's Shadow], Árpád Kékesi Kun observes that performance-theatre productions which draw on the subversive potential of nudity often seek to "liberate" socially constructed gender roles and body images, while their avant-garde performance techniques are linked to the performance art of the 1960s (see Kékesi Kun 2000, 206). The production under discussion differs from those performances in that we see not only a performer's own vulnerable body, but also specific roles embodied by actors. Together, the stage situation unfolding before us, the figures' movements, behaviour and relationships, and the fragments of speech heard within the performance space create the illusion of a unified and coherent theatrical "as-if world". In such cases, however, this is not a matter of a dichotomous opposition between the orders of so-called "representation" and "presence".

The performer cannot appear on stage as their authentic "everyday self", not only because of Jacques Derrida's concept of the instability of "presence" or Wolfgang Iser's account of the performative character of mimesis, but also because a role-like category is constituted even here: not an invented, fictional character, but a performer-role grounded in actual bodily presence.

We may therefore say that Castellucci's theatre places strong emphasis on performativity and that, as a form of physical theatre, it is also characterised by a pronounced choreographic dimension. It affects spectators not only at the emotional and cognitive levels but also at the motor and energetic levels. The actor's body is central to it, and we, as spectators, respond bodily in turn: the performance elicits such visceral, corporeal responses as the throat tightening with pity, nausea brought on by disgust, and the agitation produced by sadness or outrage. As Árpád Kékesi Kun also observes: "the call to break down inhibitions surrounding corporeality […] paradoxically [because of its astonishingly powerful effect] served precisely to bring those inhibitions to conscious awareness, that is, to lead the spectator to acknowledge that, in a public setting, our relationship to our own bodies and those of others [to undressing and to witnessing it] is 'necessarily' governed by inhibitions. The spectator's task is not to eliminate those inhibitions temporarily [since any such elimination can inevitably last only until the end of the performance], but to learn to live with them" (ibid.).

We can therefore see that Castellucci's distinctive formal aesthetics intersects at numerous points with the tradition of the phenomenology of the body most commonly associated with Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Yet what insight concerning phenomenological apprehension of essence in the Husserlian sense might Castellucci's production help us attain? What is the distinctive mode, unique to this production, in which it discloses reality to us and thereby advances a distinctive claim to truth, indeed a world-constituting claim? Across the various

stage situations of *On the Concept of the Face*, we imaginatively vary, within the phantasy-world of physical theatre, concepts associated with stereotypes of the male body, such as beauty, strength and heroism, together with their opposites – ageing, nudity and vulnerability – as well as attributes that directly challenge the conventions of machismo, such as compassion, care and an intimate father–son relationship. From one scene to the next, the production redefines the conceptual frameworks within which these attributes are understood. In the course of experiencing the performance, we suddenly find that we are no longer scrutinising the individual characteristics of the actors on stage – a shift facilitated by the fact that we never learn the names or ages of the figures who appear, or their social and personal relationships – but instead begin to formulate universal determinations concerning their essence. Through imagination, we divest them of the concrete particulars of their factual givens and attempt to determine their invariant features. How might the essence of the twenty-first-century European male be defined? What constitutes the eidos of masculinity? Do we regard something as masculine only insofar as it conforms to the expectations of a symmetrical, closed Cartesian image of the body, or do the ageing body with its waning strength, the wrinkled and sagging skin, vulnerability and helplessness also belong to the essence of being male? Yet we are confronted with such questions not only by the sight of the father's ageing body, but also by the son's devoted, caring sensitivity. Can sensitivity be a masculine attribute? Must we distinguish at all between feminine and masculine attributes on the basis of biological sex? We may venture still further in eidetic reduction if, within the aesthetic attitude, we move to an additional level of reflection and make certain categories of art theory themselves objects of direct scrutiny. How legitimate, within the formal aesthetics of contemporary theatre, is the Aristotelian mechanism of catharsis, traditionally founded on pity and fear? What counts as effective, and at what point does effectiveness give way to calculated sensationalism or even kitsch? Where does

the production cross the boundary into gratuitous grandiosity, and to what extent does it rely on devices that are overly obvious and too readily decoded? To what extent does the work of art disclose its own intentions? What might constitute the eidos of an effective work of art, and where does gratuitous pathos begin? If such questions arise during our experience of the performance not merely incidentally, but because the performance itself, through the artistic strategies of its mise-en-scène, invites or facilitates reflection upon them, then we may speak of the stage as a site of categorial intuition.

The space of *On the Concept of the Face* is the interior of a gymnasium or hangar. Although it contains a few pieces of minimalist white furniture, a coat rack, a plasma television and a potted plant, the bleakness and expansiveness of the room make it anything but homely: above all, it evokes a transitional place, a space outside space. The downstage area is divided into three sections: a living-room-like area on the left, furnished with a sofa and coffee table; a kitchen table at the centre, with chairs arranged around it; and a bed at the far right of the stage. Yet the performance space is dominated not by these set pieces, but by the gigantic portrait of Christ suspended upstage and hanging from ceiling to floor – a painting by Antonello da Messina.

Castellucci draws inspiration, among other sources, from the visual arts, and this visual-arts-oriented approach to theatre links him to Robert Wilson. The face of Christ may be read equally as expressing pity, weary resignation or stern reproach – it serves as a perfect projection surface for the spectator. As the gaze of the portrait of Christ remains fixed on both the performers before it and the spectators watching them, we sense that this is nothing other than a "theatre of gazes": everyone watches everyone else, and it is ultimately the collision between sacred and profane gazes that generates the production's fertile tension. The sacrality of the space, however, derives not only from the image by da Messina, but also, symbolically, from its three distinct areas – the living room, the kitchen and the bed-

room – through which the old man passes as though traversing the simultaneous stage of a medieval Passion play, progressing through the stations of his own Calvary. Over the course of the hour-long performance, he moves from the right-hand side of the space to the left, so that the bed may also be interpreted as the hell of the simultaneous stage – the sulphurous maw of Leviathan.

The gigantic portrait of Christ and the events associated with it lend the production a powerful symbolic dimension. Apart from this, however, what we see is a quasi-naturalistic, indeed hyperrealist production. Its treatment of time is likewise almost realistic, at least in the sense that stage time – that is, represented time – coincides with the time narrated by the production. Yet, compared with our habitual theatrical experience, events seem to unfold more slowly: the performance is characterised by a deliberateness and slowness that run counter to our expectations. Castellucci slows the underlying tempo, lifts the spectator out of the temporal dimension of everyday life, and this gesture again aligns him with Wilson, according to whom time in the theatre can be extended indefinitely. Castellucci's productions are characterised by repetitive sequences of movement that appear catatonic, while pauses and the complete suspension of action are also frequent. All this draws the spectator out of the sphere of the dramatic and relocates them within a mythical or even philosophical dimension. There is time to reflect on how the perception of one's own body and that of the other may be understood; how intersubjective relations unfold between them through gazes and touches; or even why time-consciousness cannot be conceived as point-like. In the course of experiencing the performance, the spectator may also reflect on questions pertaining to the theological attitude, such as original sin, divine providence, predestination and free will.

Apart from the opening of the performance, when the elderly man listens to music through headphones and his son gives him medicine in a glass, the stage action may be described

as a catatonic cycle of repeatedly soiling himself, being washed and having a fresh nappy put on. The pristine white furniture, towels and dressing gowns are repeatedly stained with faeces. Eventually, the elderly man sits in a wheelchair, leaving clearly visible brown wheel tracks across the floor behind him; then, after yet another round of washing and being put into a fresh nappy, he soils himself once again while sitting on the pristine white bed. This time, however, he does not move, but remains seated with his face buried in his hands. It is at this point that the gesture of disruption or estrangement occurs. As Panni Néder writes in her review, "It is here that Castellucci first wrenches the spectator out of the performance. The old man pours several litres of brown liquid over himself and the pristine white double bed from a petrol can, then sits down in the middle of it […]" (Néder 2012), thereby signalling that the smell of faeces pervading the auditorium and the brown liquid running down his legs are not real. According to spectators' accounts, the production further reinforced the naturalistic character of the experience through some form of olfactory effect, so that the illusion was virtually complete until this sobering gesture occurred. At that moment, the spectator is briefly jolted back into reality, regains the reality-positing that had hitherto been suspended, and suddenly finds themselves in a theatre auditorium, surrounded by flesh-and-blood spectators and actors, outside the illusory "as-if world". Since, however, the production deliberately and overtly produces this effect as part of its mode of operation, we may speak of an intentional termination of the suspension of reality – that is, of the *epoché*. The only question is whether the fact that the mise-en-scène occasionally wrenches us out of the neutrality modification of the aesthetic attitude may itself be regarded as part of the performance, and whether it returns us to the natural attitude or merely to a theatrical quasi-reality.

The production thus seeks not only to destabilise the binary opposition between theatre and reality in a distinctly subversive manner, but also, at numerous points, to dismantle through its

disconcerting naturalism the image we harbour of the heroic male ego. In doing so, it attempts to liberate the naked body from the roles prescribed by stereotypes and thereby contribute to redefining our conceptions of the hegemonic masculine body. All three male figures in the performance find themselves in positions of vulnerability: Christ suffers on the cross; the father undergoes his Calvary in the grip of old age and illness; and the son is tormented by the burden of responsibility for his father. *On the Concept of the Face* thus reverses the father–son relationship, forcing the son to assume the role of the father. The sight of wrinkled, sagging skin runs counter to the stereotypical image of the macho body. Incontinence, moreover, infantilises the individual and renders him utterly vulnerable to the other. This may also be symbolised by the act of putting a nappy on him, a gesture that is at once concrete and symbolic. The inability to control one's bowels stands in clear opposition to the self-censorship of verbal expression and likewise underscores the individual's subjection to bodily needs that cannot be consciously controlled. Like the elderly man in the production, the son who cares for him is also incapable of action: he cannot escape the relentless cycle of washing his father and putting a fresh nappy on him. At the same time, his solicitous concern, his gentle gestures towards his father and his eventual collapse all call into question conventional categories of masculinity. They also reinterpret established clichés by incorporating into the defining attributes of masculinity such behavioural norms as care, attentiveness, reliability and self-sacrifice, which have traditionally been associated with women.

In Castellucci's theatre, the performance is not centred on a story governed by its own internal logic, and we perceive its composition merely as an apparent logic of action. The sequence of events presented in the performance, which Panni Néder describes as a "Sisyphean cycle of wiping bottoms, washing, cleaning and changing nappies" (ibid.), is devoid of any narrative function, unless we regard as narrative the metaphorical biblical Passion that may be read in the set, the bodies and

their proxemic relations. In the absence of a unified plot, stage characters and conflicts, we contemplate the bodies and their movements through space in general terms, despite their concreteness. In my view, the production's gestures towards redefining our fundamental concepts and phenomena thus make the staging capable of facilitating the categorial intuition of essences proper to transcendental phenomenology.

The theatre of *On the Concept of the Face* is therefore "no longer reducible merely to a literary process" (Lehmann 1989, 39); indeed, it dispenses with text altogether or uses it only sparingly. The performance's spoken text is confined to barely audible fragments of dialogue between father and son, sentence fragments, moans and sobbing. Castellucci's theatre is also a theatre of performativity: although the role-like categories of father and son are constituted on stage and the actors do not play "themselves", embodiment in Fischer-Lichte's sense – of the kind characteristic of traditional naturalistic theatre – nevertheless does not occur. The actors do not assume the identities of dramatic characters with defined personalities and relationships, deliver a pre-written text or enact a pre-written story. The essence of the roles of father and son lies in the shared experience of bodily presence. In phenomenological terms, once the neutrality modification of the aesthetic attitude has been effected, the image-presenting act does not foreground the resemblance-based, depictive character of image consciousness; instead, it brings into play the pure phantasying characteristic of perceptual phantasy. The bodies perceived on stage correspond neither to actual persons who once lived nor to fictional characters, and they imitate no one; rather, they primarily foreground performativity through their own bodily presence. The depiction of Christ suspended at the back of the stage, however, constitutes an exception.

Insofar as we understand the detail from da Messina's painting as a portrait, aesthetic image consciousness in the strict sense may be activated in the course of spectatorial reception as we direct our intention towards its object, since we

recognise Christ in it. The pure perceptual fictum constituted in the painting's physical support – that is, the image-object – presents a particular person to us in a particular way; the image-subject is therefore given. By contrast, for someone who – as is entirely conceivable – is unfamiliar with the representational traditions of religious art and therefore fails to recognise the Saviour depicted in the image, the fresco will be merely a face upon which they may freely project a range of imagined contents. Let us nevertheless assume that the purpose of the image of Christ is to enable us to recognise the person it depicts. What matters here is not the work's actual resemblance to the Christ who once lived – or was imagined – for, as Wolfgang Iser observes, representation is always also performance, meaning that the work's formal configuration invariably possesses a free and creative character. Rather, what matters is that it enables the spectator to recognise a particular object. In pursuing this aim, however, da Messina's image stands apart from the unified whole of the production not only in terms of the acts of consciousness involved in perceiving the work of art, but also in terms of its formal aesthetics. Its mythological world disrupts, yet thereby also opens up, the production's quasi-naturalistic contemporary world. The everyday furnishings of the interior and the painting cannot, therefore, belong to the same illusory world, nor can they be apprehended by the spectator within the framework of a single suspension of reality. The painting is not a picture scaled to the room represented by the stage set and hung within it, but a scenic element that deliberately introduces a rupture into the stage space and explicitly breaks the illusion. It cannot therefore be claimed that Castellucci's production transports the spectator into the "as-if world" of a unified artistic illusion. Rather, the mise-en-scène repeatedly foregrounds the contradiction and tension between, on the one hand, the bodies perceived on stage, which do not embody specific roles and thereby activate perceptual phantasy, and, on the other, the depiction of Christ, whose function is to present a particular object.

Although my analysis is phenomenological in nature, it is nevertheless useful to draw on the theoretical insights of theatre semiotics when attempting to determine the type of production at issue. In my view, Castellucci's production falls somewhere between Hans-Thies Lehmann's "scenographic" and "situational" models of staging, occupying the space between them and effectively creating a category of its own. It is scenographic insofar as "the theatrical means are not organised around a pre-existing meaning that forms a centre, while the meaning that might function as a possible synthesis is left entirely to the observer"; and it is "situational", that is, close to performance art, insofar as "it presents a situation distinguished by the necessary co-presence of production and reception, performers and recipients" (ibid., 39, 42).

Approximately two-thirds of the way through the performance, members of the youngest generation also enter the space: eight children come onto the stage, take props resembling hand grenades from their backpacks and, acting together, pelt the image of Christ with them. The soundscape that rises as they enter, reminiscent of the clamour of a gymnasium, now intensifies into the deafening roar of explosions. We witness the gesture of destruction, but at first may not understand the reason for the violence. Our questions still receive no answer, yet the image of Christ continues to meet our gaze. In Andrea Tompa's words, "the theatrical frame breaks two further taboos: both the figure of the child as an aggressive, destructive being and the wounded face of Christ constitute a form of iconoclasm inscribed within the broader Christian tradition. Finally, the face itself is literally destroyed: the image is flooded with black ink [according to others, faeces], then literally deconstructed from behind and taken apart. The visual procedures are difficult to describe and grasp; an inscription emerges from behind the image, immediately accompanied by its negation: 'I am your shepherd'. The word 'not' also appears within it, then darkens until it is barely perceptible" (Tompa 2012, 48). We may not be able to identify the production's communica-

tive intent, but it derives its provocative force precisely from its refusal to provide unequivocal answers, leaving spectators alone with its questions. Castellucci does not communicate through the spoken word; instead, he speaks the language of the body, the viscera and bodily fluids and, not least, that of abstract essences.

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Imola Nagy

A Blink of an Eye. On Romeo Castellucci's *Orphée et Eurydice*

According to Vedic literature, only that which possesses consciousness can blink. The transition from the world before creation to the world after creation was a blink of an eye. Creation itself was the act of seeing. But our blinks are numbered. Meanwhile, being awake is the same as blinking.

If the world disappears in the blink of an eye, what remains in its place? Metre, rhythm, music, time. In opera, this is fixed. The scenography must penetrate the very fabric of the music in order to provide a simultaneous image of the wound inflicted on the listener by the sound. It must be precise. Indeed, it must be rigorous. It must strike a balance between the weight of the eyelids and the amount of reality that can be taken in, even as each is pushed to an extreme. The auditory and visual processes must each be attended to in their entirety, with equal intensity and at the same time. Nor can even the slightest hierarchy guide us.

Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice* premiered on 17 June 2014 at La Monnaie opera house in Brussels. Romeo Castellucci directed the opera. The production was based on Berlioz's 1859 version. The conductor was Hervé Niquet, and the cast was as follows: Orpheus – Stéphanie d'Oustrac; Eurydice – Sabine Devieilhe; and Amor – Fanny Dupont.

Castellucci interwove the Greek myth with the life of a real woman in an extreme existential situation, a woman capable of only one action: looking. The young woman we came to know as Els was lying in a hospital 14 km from Brussels. Her life story was projected as captions written in the present tense, and she herself appeared in the performance via a live video

feed. Els was a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two who had collapsed one day in the kitchen and never stood up again. Following a thrombosis, she developed pseudocoma, or locked-in syndrome, which meant that she was fully conscious but unable to move her body. She could move only her eyes and communicated with her husband through sequences of blinks. At the time of the performance, she had been in hospital for 18 months. Her husband visited her every day.

George Loomis, an opera critic for the *New York Times*, writes the following about Castellucci's production in an article published on 1 July 2014 in the newspaper's opera review section: "[Castellucci] abandons Gluck's story and replaces it with a fictional one about a woman named Els, who, as Eurydice's alter ego, lies in a hospital near Brussels… Now a blurred film leisurely shows the road leading to a hospital, followed by a walk through the hospital corridors… Mr. Castellucci may argue that he is presenting two stories at the same time, but Gluck's story doesn't count, because Mr. Castellucci does little more than show Orpheus singing into a microphone. And Els's story, in terms of both concept and execution, is hardly a credible substitute…" – for Gluck's story.

Indeed, Romeo Castellucci did not simply update the great Greek myth, but rather discovered today's Orpheus and Eurydice. Loomis criticises the director, noting that, although Castellucci was nominally the opera's director, the result can hardly be called a production. However, this "barely-directed" quality is one of the most important phenomena of postdramatic theatre. "The aesthetic cannot be understood through a determination of content (beauty, truth, sentiments, anthropomorphizing mirroring, etc.) but solely – as the theatre of the real shows – by 'treading the borderline', by permanently switching, not between form and content, but between 'real' contiguity (connection with reality) and 'staged' construct. It is in this sense that postdramatic theatre means: theatre of the real. It is concerned with developing a perception that undergoes – at its own risk – the 'come and go' between the per-

ception of structure and of the sensorial real", as Hans-Thies Lehmann points out (2006, 103).

In contemporary theatre, it is not self-evident *what* we are seeing; we must make an effort to become aware of the medium at work before our eyes. Attending to the medium can be meaningful in itself – and in this case it certainly is, since we rarely encounter such a seemingly simple yet astonishingly powerful interweaving of reality and myth, reality and performance.

The performance draws our attention – in a particularly subversive yet subtle way – to the importance of consciously engaging with the media, while the staging leaves the possibilities for reflection entirely open. We might also ask: are we then entirely confined to the role of spectators? There is certainly a melancholic undertone to Castellucci's statement, made during a conversation: "We are all permanent spectators. This is the new reality of human society" (Castellucci et al. 2007, 208). This may be connected with the contemporary social experience of having so little say in the political decision-making and exercise of power that affect our lives. But when are we spectators of our own lives, and when are we actors? There is no simple answer in Castellucci's world, as he subtly reverses the two roles. For him, the actor is a pathetic figure in the word's original sense of suffering – passive rather than active, undergoing an action such as the spectator's gaze rather than initiating it. In this case, the spectator is the agent and the actor the subject who undergoes the action. When the University of Bologna awarded him a *laurea honoris causa* in 2015, he said that, for him, theatre is "the possibility to think, to think of seeing, to see to seeing, and to acknowledge therefore, the deep significance of being a spectator nowadays" (Di Matteo 2015).

At the beginning of the performance, we see a dark, empty proscenium, with a curtain behind it, a chair in the centre and a device resembling a control panel on the right. Orpheus enters and sits down. The lights on the device come on as the music begins.

Behind Orpheus, high above, the word "Els" is projected onto the curtain, which serves as a fixed screen. Someone brings in a microphone, and a caption begins to scroll, explaining that Els is currently listening to the music via a live stream from a hospital, while a video crew is on its way to her and the spectators can watch the live stream of their journey. We are also given a precise technical description of the audio (outbound) and video (inbound) transmissions, and we learn that "Els" is not the hospitalised woman's real name. Afterwards, the text detailing Els's life story appears on the screen for approximately 20 minutes.

As Orpheus sings desperately, Amor appears behind her. Orpheus cannot see Amor and does not know where the voice is coming from. Amor sings in an otherworldly, sparkling voice, then remains beside Orpheus, invisible to her, until we learn from the projected text what happened to Els, after which Amor exits the stage.

After Orpheus's aria, a live video feed of the road leading to the hospital appears on the screen, and the concise description of Els's current condition and care continues to scroll for a while.

Orpheus's facial expressions and sparse gestures are the sole conveyors of all the nuances of affection. The singer's face and the wall-sized live feed behind her constantly invite shifts in perspective. From the tiniest gestures and facial expressions to the entire stage setting, the visual flow of images demands concentrated attention.

After a roughly 10-minute drive, the video crew turns into a park, and the handheld camera's journey continues along a path, then through wooded countryside. Orpheus's eyes are closed. The trees are reflected in the water of the lake. Leaves drift into the frame, brushing against the camera. The moving leaves transform into a play of light and shadow.

Then the hospital comes into view. The camera moves slowly down the corridor, registering even the smallest details:

door handles, handrails, ward signs and doctors' names. It peers this way and that, searching for the door.

Orpheus opens her eyes; disbelief and joy appear on her face, and she begins to sing again.

The camera finds Els's room, enters, and its gaze rests on the motionless hand of the young woman lying in bed.

And it is precisely behind this image that a diminutive, floating figure of Eurydice appears, about 50 minutes after the performance begins. At first glance, it seems as if we are seeing an image produced by a gigantic camera obscura: the image has a body. Yet Eurydice is also singing. If, up to this point, we had – whether against our will or under the influence of the music – blurred the lines between reality and myth, the visual sequence now gently reminds us: no, the camera's eye (Vincent Pinckaers) is not Orpheus's eye, and Els is not Eurydice. Or rather, not entirely – only tangentially, through contiguity. The path we have seen is the one that Daniel (also a pseudonym), Els's husband, travels almost like Orpheus – but every single day. Reality, however, strikes a chord, moving spectators to tears despite themselves.

Eurydice sings; Els listens through headphones. We, the spectators, see only the headphones – that is, we see that Els is listening to the music.

During Eurydice and Orpheus's duet, the video feed shows children's drawings and family photos on the wall of Els's room, followed by personal items, an alphabet chart, an aquarium, medical equipment – visual layers holding twenty-eight years' worth of memories.

Now Eurydice sings alone. She begs Orpheus to turn towards her. Later, Orpheus joins in the singing, and Els's bed slowly reappears in a blur, with her lying motionless in it; the camera then zooms in on her hand and finally her face, settling on her dilated pupils and her flickering gaze. Els does not look at the camera. The camera begins to pull away slowly as Orpheus turns around.

Silence falls. The screen goes white. Orpheus stands alone on the stage, bathed in the light of day, realising what she has done.

Then complete darkness falls, and Orpheus begins to sing again. She sings in pitch darkness for several long minutes before Amor appears with a lantern and uses it to send signals into the distance while singing to Eurydice. In response to the light signals, a moonlit landscape appears in the background, and Eurydice emerges naked from a lake surrounded by a forest. Water drips from her hair. Eurydice listens as though she can hear something; she looks around but sees nothing and eventually retreats into the forest.

Then Amor draws back a layer of the curtain, and the stage brightens. Now, in daylight, the wooded landscape surrounded by mountains appears, with the small lake in the centre. In the foreground are abandoned Greek columns; in the background, castle ruins sit atop the highest mountain. In the light of day, Eurydice returns once more from the forest. She waves her hand as if calling someone, but to no avail; then she disappears into the lake for good. And night falls once more.

On this moonlit night, Els's image in bed is projected once more, gradually covering up Eurydice's liminal space.

The chorus sings. The camera zooms in on Els's face. The music ends.

Someone (presumably Daniel) removes the headphones from Els's head and strokes her head.

The camera slowly pulls back out of the room.

There is silence. Orpheus stands alone and motionless in the centre of the proscenium. Then the stage goes dark.

For a while, as we watch the performance, it is difficult to decide whether we are being presented with a very sparse or a very rich array of visual processes. It seems sparse – until we realise that the materiality of the medium itself is difficult to pin down, whether it takes the form of the empty stage, the constructed set or elements appearing on and beyond the projection screen, sometimes superimposed upon one another. The

production also brings into play other kinds of visual elements: mirror images, dreamscapes, memories, the interplay of light and shadow, white light, complete darkness and so forth. "We can recognize here an aesthetic intention to make space for a dialectic of plethora and deprivation, plenitude and emptiness" (Lehmann 2006, 89).

Castellucci works not with images, but with media. On stage, we see almost exclusively a seated or standing singer performing the role of Orpheus. The singer "works" in work clothes – a costume designed, like every visual element, by the director. Her gender has long since ceased to matter, and at times her presence is no more significant than that of a sound technician. But who is she, since she does not act but "merely" sings the role of Orpheus? One possible answer would be that she is a mediator. There is no question that she mediates through sound. But between what and what? We have long since given up on the idea that art mediates between the audience and the gods, or between truth and reality. It seems that Orpheus mediates between spectator and spectator – or rather, between spectator and spectatorship. Els is the spectator's mirror – the mirror of the spectator condemned to complete stillness, passivity and the impossibility of self-expression; the spectator trapped in spectatorship.

Even when Orpheus glimpses, in broad daylight, the intermediate realm where Eurydice is trapped, they remain separated by another translucent curtain – one that nevertheless allows Orpheus to see Eurydice. The curtain brings together in a montage various elements of the stage environment – a three-dimensional pond, plants, constructed and projected trees, mountains, ruins, columns and time-lapse videos depicting the transition from darkness to light – creating a unified illusion in which the depth of the stage is undecidable. This reflects Els's actual liminal space. By contrast, reality appears in a highly mediated form, through the most sophisticated medium. The live broadcast is a conceptual extension of the stage. What we see on the first fixed screen does not function as a document

but rather as an expansion of the *theatron*'s axis. On the one hand, the live broadcast is integrated into the performance text; on the other, it expands the performance space.

The visual world builds up gradually and imperceptibly, reaching a level of complexity that is almost impossible to follow by the end of the performance: the direction of the projections, the positions, materials and even the number of projection surfaces, the direction of the lighting, and so on, are almost indecipherable. The visual layers multiply, overlap, float and mirror one another. At the same time, Els's face breaks through this masterful intermedial interplay, refusing to let us lose touch with reality. The soundscape dictates the rhythm throughout, except at the end of the performance, when the music has ceased and, in the deep silence, we are still looking at Els's face as Daniel removes the headphones and gently strokes her head, while the camera slowly withdraws from the hospital room.

But let us return for a moment to the scene in which Amor appears to Orpheus one last time, as she considers suicide in order to follow her beloved irrevocably into Hades – which, according to Plato, Orpheus should have done in the first place, as the incomparable Alcestis did (Plato 1956, 21 [179a]). Amor sends signals of light to those operating the visual machinery of the soul. An astonishing amount of work has gone into creating the most illusory segment of space, which also contains the only physically constructed, three-dimensional set elements, as well as the most complex projection and lighting techniques. We see all of this for a few minutes, shortly before the end of the performance, in both a night-time and a daytime version. At the same time, this is the most elusive dimension of the staging: the depiction of that liminal space – and, even more, of the liminal state – in which Eurydice and Els exist. Notably, this scene is entirely absent from interpretations of *Orphée et Eurydice* that end on a positive note. Here, too, the chorus celebrates Amor, for perhaps love is the only state that – albeit dimly, through a mirror or

mesh screen – can still offer insight into that liminal space. Or, as Plato writes: "Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities…" (ibid., 52 [212b]). After all, the director, along with the philosopher, argues against the multiplication of images.

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Árpád Kékesi Kun

Encrypting, Inscription and Inspection in Romeo Castellucci's *Go Down, Moses*

Most productions by Romeo Castellucci's Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio are compelling variations on the theatrical staging of enigma. *Go Down, Moses*, which premiered in November 2014, is no exception: its relationship to the biblical hero named in its title is as fragmentary and indirect as the relationships between Robert Wilson's legendary productions of the 1970s and Freud, Stalin and Einstein. Although Castellucci considers the *Old Testament* one of the most psychologically profound books and *Exodus* one of the most beautiful stories ever written (see Castellucci 2014), his *mise-en-scène* does not draw a portrait of the prophet but focuses instead on the figure of Moses' mother and the motif of the loss of a child. As an enigmatic example of the theatre of images, *Go Down, Moses* does not tell a story by means of words (dialogue), nor does it confront us with tableaux that we ourselves could put into words. Castellucci's theatre is founded on what lies beyond all that can be directly seen and narrated in concrete terms: "I use images just to overcome them and get to that invisible image I am interested in" (Castellucci 2014).[1] His stunning stage constructions compel the spectator to oscillate between their proliferating associations and the cognitive patterns suggested by discursive logic, the principle of montage and so-called puzzle dramaturgy. They enable us to examine the process of theatrical understanding: despite the impressions and meanings ordinarily crystallised and verbal-

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[1] "Ich setze Bilder ein, um sie zu überwinden, um zu jenem unsichtbaren Bild zu führen, das mich interessiert."

ised *a posteriori*, we always perceive performance as a flow – a highly complex flow when set against the reductive "sense and sensibility" constructed retrospectively. In Castellucci's work, this flow is not the steady accumulation of a meaning apprehended with ever greater confidence, but a continuous oscillation between certainty and uncertainty: between establishing the meaning of an image in our minds, suspending it and establishing it anew. Although it cannot be fixed, the flow does not preclude significant moments of revelation. Yet we may also observe how the uncertainty, indeterminacy and ambiguity perceived during a performance often become certainty, self-evidence and lucidity in some critical responses to productions by Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, presumably as a result of an obsessive search for answers that begins instinctively in response to the numerous questions arising within the spectator. This essay therefore models the reception of *Go Down, Moses* while reflecting on that process.

Characteristically, I cannot say exactly what I hear and see when I take my seat in the auditorium and begin to follow the events already taking place on stage.[2] The "prologos", with the house lights still up, *de facto* asserts itself before *logos* – that is, before speech and reason. There are no words to set a course, nor is there any obvious context to give meaning to the performers' enigmatic movements. Performing almost mechanical gestures, three women and four men walk about an empty space enclosed by white drapes and filled with amplified and electronically modulated sounds of footsteps and friction. We do not know where they are, what they are doing or why their clothes and hairstyles recall the 1970s, but the way they use the space, look around and trace shapes in the air with their hands suggests that they are visitors to an exhibition. Our suspicion is confirmed when, after the house lights go down, we see a reproduction of Dürer's famous watercolour of a hare (*Feldhase*,

[2] My account is based on the performance of *Go Down, Moses* that I saw as part of the Wiener Festwochen at Theater an der Wien on 29 May 2015.

1502) affixed to a drape at the rear.[3] Yet this does not allow us fully to identify the opening situation of *Go Down, Moses*, since a recurrent action remains indecipherable – and has gone unnoticed by critics – amid the slightly ceremonious movement and occasionally tableau-like arrangements of the people on stage. From time to time they gather, and one of them appears to pierce or cut into another with an arm bent at a right angle, while sounds of breaking and clashing are heard. The action lasts only a few seconds, after which everyone quickly returns to their routine. A scene from Castellucci's *Inferno* (staged at the Festival d'Avignon in 2008) comes to mind: an elderly woman tries to force a basketball into her abdomen. Yet it cannot resolve the enigma of this peculiar "internalisation".

The prologue is followed by a scene of "technicalisation" that places before us a single steel cylinder at the front of the stage, rotating at furious speed, while sounds resembling aircraft engines fill the auditorium.[4] The image and noise of the rotation become almost intolerable when wigs resembling long-haired scalps descend from high above, allowing the cylinder to catch and spin them at dizzying speed. The piercing sound – as though a cutting disc were biting into metal – links the earlier sounds of breaking, in my mind, to a mechanism of cutting.

[3] This is another example of the inspiration Castellucci draws from the visual 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). In 2010, Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* confronted us with Antonello da Messina's enlarged portrait of Christ; now we are confronted with the image of a hare.

[4] Castellucci's *mises-en-scène* frequently include scenes without human figures, in which machines operate autonomously. For example, his 2014 "dust ballet", set to Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, relied entirely on sophisticated machinery that sent several tonnes of bone powder cascading onto the stage. He allows machines to become agents – equal partners of the people and animals on stage – while their autonomous operation and inscrutable nature (since we do not know exactly what they do or why) cause the spectator anxiety.

The extended scene of wild automatism compels me to allegorise, as I futilely yet involuntarily ask myself why it is there and what it means beyond its powerful effect. That effect, however, brings to mind the "wilderness" – or rather, the "desert" – that Castellucci invokes in relation to the story of Moses and, in an interview, connects with "our dysfunctional Information Age" (*unser dysfunktionales Informationszeitalter*): "We have so much to see and hear that everything ends in indifference" (Castellucci 2015).[5] Although this scene has no direct connection with the prologue, it seems, like Dürer's image, to be an astonishingly precise record of a condition.

The third scene surprises us once again, offering a hyperrealist yet – because of a nylon curtain between the stage and the auditorium – slightly blurred image of a woman close to death in a public toilet in which she has locked herself. Since no word has yet been spoken, we experience bodily the tension generated by the sight of blood flowing from the woman's breast and staining the entire space, by moments of unbearable spasm, and by her unsuccessful attempt to summon help by telephone. These events contrast sharply first with the chatter of a restaurant filtering through the door, then with a choir resounding in the darkness that descends upon the woman in agony and with two emoticons projected onto the nylon: :-), :-|. So far, the scenes have lacked any logical connection; yet the spiritual accords with the "atmosphere" of the prologue – evoking the United States some fifty years ago – while the emoticons support our interpretation of the second scene. Nevertheless, beyond its specific evocation of the "Negro Question" (Thomas Carlyle) through the well-known spiritual *Go Down, Moses* – which links the biblical plight of the oppressed Israelites longing for redemption with that of the African American community – the title remains enigmatic.

The fifth scene, the only one in which speech is heard, reinforces the allusion described above. Before it begins, how-

[5] "Wir bekommen so viel zu sehen und zu hören, dass sich alles aufhebt in Indifferenz."

ever, the image of a dustbin gradually emerges, accompanied by the sounds of crickets and passing cars. This nocturne is disrupted by movement in a black bag atop the rubbish and the sound of a baby crying from within it. A report projected onto the nylon curtain clarifies the situation: apparently written by a police officer, it describes the discovery of a missing child. The brief dustbin scene gives way to an interrogation in a police station recognisably situated in contemporary Italy. We see the woman again, now exhausted, wrapped in a blanket and with matted hair, as a detective presses her to reveal where she has hidden her newborn baby. In light of the account projected moments earlier, this line of questioning complicates the chronology of events; yet, through the principle of montage, we can reconstruct a nativity story from this scene and the preceding two. At first the woman says nothing; then she reaches beneath the blanket and smears her face with blood from between her thighs. In this way, she identifies with her own blood and does not compulsively try to wipe it away, even when the policeman reprimands her, finding her action embarrassing and regarding blood as mere filth – just as the son in *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* regards his father's faeces. (The same actor, incidentally, plays the son and the detective.) Later, the woman finds her voice, but instead of answering the questions, she speaks of boredom and indifference, present even in animals and reflected in their eyes. She then describes people who live like slaves although they lack nothing. Her vague sentence fragments – as if uttered by a clairvoyant – recall Castellucci's "record of a state", his description of our contemporary existential condition, and dissolve the opposition between human and animal. It is none other than the detective who displays boredom and indifference when, in the name of reality and normality, he dismisses the woman as a deranged fantasist; he then loses interest and buries himself in his pile of documents. Which behaviour is more beast-like: the woman's loss of her child, or the policeman's shift from single-minded attentiveness to utter insensitivity? Ambiguity deepens when

the woman mentions Moses, whom the people must follow, and we realise that it was Moses who was born in the toilet and who then stirred inside the rubbish bag. Although the woman mentions slavery and a new covenant with God, her speech and gestures belong to the present day. She wears no archaic clothing, and nothing suggests that she inhabits a different age. Yet she appears separated from the policeman by thousands of years as she speaks of that particular Moses – not a new one – and of the Nile and a basket, although earlier we saw a black bag atop a dustbin. Unlike the spiritual *Go Down, Moses*, however, the woman does not transpose the biblical situation onto another context – her own, or ours as "the people" – but lives and recounts it, unsettling our understanding of everything we see and hear. Nothing is unambiguous: both the detective and the woman want to save the child; that is why he wants to find him as quickly as possible and why she acted as she did. They are unlikely to understand one another, the situation or even the same words, since the difference between their modes of "worldmaking" places the realities they inhabit in a relationship characterised by *Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen*.[6] As the detective turns away, Dürer's *Feldhase* reappears, reinforcing the challenge to the human–animal opposition noted above. The woman unfolds the image, caresses it and speaks to it as if the mere representation of an animal with boredom and indifference in its eyes were more attentive than the man. She then curls up, pulls the blanket over her head, and her monologue becomes "interior" as the projection on the nylon quotes the words of a woman who has lost her baby and will no longer feel his breathing or tiny movements. Piano music suffuses these moments, which unite feeling and knowledge: the grief of physical separation from a child and the knowledge

[6] See "[...] 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).

of its necessity deepen all the preceding ambiguities and reveal extraordinary psychological sensitivity.

The sixth scene can be interpreted as a consequence of the fifth, since we see the woman, dressed in a white nightdress, lying on an examination table as it is pushed into an MRI scanner. The hospital, a familiar hell and recurring visual setting in Castellucci's productions, becomes particularly disturbing here: its beeps merge with a soprano aria and are followed, when the MRI scanner is activated, by loud thuds reminiscent of machine-gun fire. It is then terrifying to see this device give way to another: the rapidly rotating cylinder, once again sucking in a wig. Almost immediately, however, the cylinder is displaced by the production's most powerful image, and the spectator can scarcely believe their eyes when the interior of a grotto appears, with cave dwellers silhouetted against a starry sky glittering through its opening. The shift from the sterile, desolate hospital to a cave resplendent in earthy brown and bluish hues is staggering; the latter forms the antithesis of the opening scene. The stage presents a naturalistic image of primeval conditions, yet it differs entirely from the manner in which certain films (e.g. *La Guerre du feu* and *Ao, le dernier Néandertal*) take us back in time: the figures' sluggish movements, the slightly hazy quality of the image (caused by the nylon curtain), and Scott Gibbons's soundscape, rising to ecstatic heights, confront us with sheer mystery. We see a slowly unfolding vision in which naked figures with simian 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, 12). A man suspends and skins something, while others – including a woman carrying a baby – gather around and begin to eat its flesh. When the woman realises that the baby in her arms is dead, her grief is palpable in the way she places the tiny body on a rock; the others' gaze at the pair before leaving her alone conveys pity and a desire not to disturb her. Finally, she digs a hole with her hands, places the baby inside, covers it with a little earth and lays a stone over it. The

scene remains enigmatic because we cannot identify what was skinned and eaten at the outset. The flesh could have come from an already dead baby, in which case a tension between insensitivity – which we project onto cannibalism – and deep feeling – which we perceive in the mourning of a child's death – pervades the scene. This is not the representation of a transition – the expansion of a moment in which cruelty is replaced by humanity – but rather of the coexistence of inhuman and humane behaviour. Alternatively, the flesh could have come from an animal, perhaps the hare that has appeared during the performance. In that case, when read in relation to Dürer's image, it prompts us to reflect on the relationship between art and nature. Only if the flesh came from neither a baby nor a hare, but represented nothing more than a basic foodstuff, would it become meaningless.

After the burial, the woman stands facing the cave wall for a long time. She then collapses, and a man slowly lies down over her while their shadows follow them across the wall. Their naked bodies undulate against one another at length, allowing us to project deep feelings onto their copulatory movements. Their slow lovemaking is both the man's response to the need to secure the future and a tender act of consolation. The man then rises and turns towards the "wailing wall" in a belated expression of his feelings, while the woman steps forwards and strikes the nylon curtain repeatedly, leaving a muddy handprint each time. Each blow sounds like thunder and draws the others back. They watch the woman for a long time as she writes SOS across the curtain at the climax of the reverberating soundscape. It would be futile to ask what writing, as a form of communication, has to do with this cave scene. Lettering and inscriptions in Castellucci's productions – such as INFERNO in *Inferno* or YOU ARE (NOT) MY SHEPHERD in *On the Concept of the Face* – function as signals rather than as signs with a well-defined communicative function. The woman's action signals an intense desire to leave a trace in time or to escape temporal captivity, and recalls recent research according to which "persons

who made hand stencils" in Upper Palaeolithic caves "were predominantly females" (Snow 2013, 746). The unbearable suffering of losing a child, expressed earlier, offers a response to the questions "Where does the longing for redemption come from?" and "Where does art come from?", both implicit in the woman's action. At the same time, it further complicates the questions "Who should be saved?" and "Who is behind the nylon curtain?"

The cave scene is the inverse of the opening scene: if we assume that the people in the opening scene are viewing an exhibition, it depicts the worship of art as a "golden calf", whereas the cave scene depicts the birth of art as a vital necessity. The two scenes may also be linked through "internalisation", since, in the cave scene, the longing for redemption arises from the awareness of death. If we assume that the skinned creature is a human baby, "internalisation" first occurs physically, when every member of the community consumes the dead child. It then occurs figuratively, when the torment generated by the unconscious dimension of emotional attachment is transformed into art and we witness a particular form of Freudian sublimation. The prologue appears to concern the "internalisation" of art – that is, the transformation of all that is perceived into corporeality, into part of our physical being. The finale presents the inverse process: the manifestation of our innermost emotions. The prologue foregrounds reception, which ideally affords new experience and shatters everything habitual and conventional within us, whereas the finale emphasises creation through frantic suffering condensed into handprints. The cave scene completes Castellucci's "theatre essay" on the principles of art and belief in such a way that Freud's conception of culture and religion comes to mind, even though the production does not evoke his writings on Moses.

When the mourning woman disappears into the darkness, we are startled by the sight of the MRI scanner in the middle of the cave. The other woman – Moses' mother – emerges from the machine, looks around as though she had entered a strange

world, and instinctively approaches the baby's grave, the lettering on the nylon and the place where the cave-dwelling man and his partner made love. She lies down on the ground and embraces empty air, while the contours of the MRI's black tunnel glow like a solar eclipse. The sight of the machine now evokes a solar eclipse – a kind of black hole and a recurring image in Castellucci's productions – and grips us as the rotating cylinder gripped the scalps. The parallel between these two images is eerie, as is the opposition between the age of technology and digital communication and prehistory, which appears not as a fictitious state of unmediated existence but as an explosion of mediality. The inscription "SOS", set among the handprints, presents writing not as something detached from corporeality but as an eruption of physical experience. The body is not excluded from communication; rather, it expands the simplest sign with elemental force, just as the bodies of performer and spectator form the basis of communication in Castellucci's productions. At the same time, prehistory does not figure in *Go Down, Moses* as a historical epoch but as an *Urbild*, akin to the "golden age" of Castellucci's *Orfeo ed Euridice / Orphée et Eurydice* (Vienna/Brussels, 2014), whose finale features a lush green forest bathed in moonlight and a naked nymph. Although we travel backwards in time from the present to the archaic period, the cave scene, according to the topography of the psyche, represents "the id" itself in the depths of the MRI – in the psyches of both the mother who has lost her child and the cave woman – where we behold the archetype of a cry for salvation condensed into art.

While Scott Gibbons's soundscape evokes the music of the spheres through beautiful angelic chorales, our diverse emotions, associations and thoughts take shape, and we understand that the mythical, ahistorical images of *Go Down, Moses* do not merely criticise our civilisation, technology and culture but pose fundamental questions about our lives. They invite us to reflect on the human condition and the role of art within it. Thousands of years seem to separate *Go Down, Moses* from the

bulk of contemporary theatre; it leads us into depths that we glimpse only in the most trying situations of our lives. When I saw it in Vienna, the production met with a cold reception, which hardly surprised me. Why should an audience like it?

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Magdolna Jákfalvi

Sfumato. Romeo Castellucci: *Go down, Moses*, 2014

> "The theatre is a device for the construction of truths." (Badiou 2007, 42)

I saw Romeo Castellucci's *Go down, Moses* at the Vienna Festival in 2014 and immediately wrote about the experience for the most widely read Hungarian-language theatre criticism website. In that piece, I sought to capture the sensation I had experienced in the Viennese theatre space – one in which sentences and interpretations recede from the experience itself, while the spectator is suffused by an atmosphere born of an unnameable bodily experience. What struck me was that *Go down, Moses* was an acutely painful experience. I became aware that the work marks the site of mental pain through the sensation of physical pain: the soundscape, which assaults our eardrums for minutes at an unbearable volume, repeatedly triggers emotional pain. In the production's second tableau, for example, a machine takes possession of the entire stage before us – and from us. It revolves like a lathe, and the wigs falling into it from above are smeared across its cylinder with a shriek – an image I then perceived as a Gorgon's head (Kékesi Kun 2015, 26). As this annihilating image, through its sound effects, spatial structure and the utilitarianism of its objects, simultaneously evokes the dramaturgy of horror cinema, the framework of Greek myth and even the historical reality of the Shoah, we are deafened in the auditorium, despite having taken the earplugs handed out

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at the cloakroom. For it is thus, deafened, that we are prepared for the third tableau: we can barely hear the sounds of the ensuing scene. A woman labours alone in a clean, orderly Western European public lavatory equipped with both paper towels and a hand dryer. She gives birth there before our eyes; someone even knocks impatiently at the door, while our already battered eardrums make it difficult to hear the moans of her vulnerable body. She delivers her child in agony on the tiled floor of the public lavatory; the sight of so much blood likewise places the spectacle beyond the reach of comprehension, for this is not something one can wish to see. It cannot be represented, yet, as in so many of his earlier productions, Castellucci places before us precisely what is unrepresentable. Here it is the concealed, solitary birth; elsewhere, the body at the mercy of dementia (*On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*), the toddler (*Inferno*), or sensory impairment (*The Magic Flute*).

The critical literature on Castellucci's productions varies greatly in both volume and methodology. Scholars of contemporary theatre have discerned transcendence, phenomenological purity (Závada 2021), shock effects (Féral 2011) and the catharsis of the sublime; their analyses, moreover, draw more heavily than usual on video recordings of Castellucci's productions. Castellucci's œuvre – or at least his work of the past decade and a half – is also accessible through moving images: now-famous excerpts from his legendary productions circulate through academic networks, with the result that moments apprehended as film and viewed only in fragmentary form enter into the interpretation of the productions themselves. Many of these observations may be valid, and the conclusions drawn from them may cohere within a perceptive line of argument; yet recordings convey quite differently how a performance works upon the spectator's lived experience at the level of bodily chemistry and physiology. I agree with those analysts who approach the work by examining spectators' experience and who, in exploring the singularity of sensation, attend to the event in its entirety.

In 2000, Castellucci received the highly prestigious Europe Prize Theatrical Realities for his artistic forms of theatrical *reality-making*, thereby formally joining the ranks of artists experimenting with the possibilities of Theatrical Realities. At the time, he was concerned above all with the status of the body and the stage figure, as well as that of the textual environment, which „wrapped up – by forgetting it – the body, can only fall down now as an old and worn-out bathrobe, no longer held up and left in a low, nonpretentious dimension: a rag on the floor." (Castellucci 2007b, 39). This hauntingly beautiful allegory yields two insights into the process by which reality is posited. The first is that, once the garment of text has fallen away, the sensation generated by one body and received within another can flow more freely. There are, in other words, two bodies – that of the performer and that of the spectator – and these two bodies relate to one another primarily through sensations, just as they do in empirical reality. This is why we feel that this theatre communicates with each spectator individually rather than with the audience as a whole; it is also why Castellucci's productions have elicited such a wide variety of readings and analyses. The second insight is that, within this constructed reality, we see not only the event itself – the falling away of the (textual) garment – but also the place it continues to occupy: it remains there on the ground, around us, and even when reduced to a rag reminds us of the inescapable imperative of semiosis. Together, then, within a single space, we perceive consensual processes (such as the formation of meaning) alongside sensory processes (such as the unfamiliar sensations encountered here). Exploring the relationship between the two leads to a possible reconstruction of the performance.[1]

In the fourth and longest sequence of *Go down, Moses*, we see a section of a bureaucratic interior, illuminated like a fenc-

[1] My reconstruction of the theatrical performance and its process of reality-making is based on the 2014 Vienna presentation of *Go down, Moses*, although I also draw on the recording of its 2014 Paris performance.

ing piste: a large office desk to the left, an office chair behind it, a lamp and a landline telephone on the desk, and a plain chair perhaps a metre and a half in front of it. We might be at the end of the previous millennium. Four people escort the unknown woman, wrapped in a blanket, into this space; we recognise her as the woman we saw giving birth earlier. Her female attendant supports her and seats her on the chair; two uniformed police officers step aside to the right and wait, while a man in plain clothes takes his position beside the desk: he commands the space. Nothing more is needed to set the mechanisms of meaning formation in motion, chiefly because this sequence outlines the basic model of dramaturgical opposition – a Creon–Antigone relationship, say – except that here it is not burial but birth that is at issue. This is the production's only sequence in which text – the sentence itself – is also assigned a function, and Claudia Castellucci's dialogues present forms of utterance familiar from classical Greek tragedy – not necessarily at the level of linguistic structure, but certainly in the speech acts they perform.[2]

The investigator wants to know where the newborn is. Although he is rational and helpful, caring and attentive, he nevertheless embodies within this situation a form of external control and power. Although the representative of power she faces may be understanding, the woman remains in a position of vulnerability, and her sentences are incomprehensible. Secular power – the state (*la république* in Plato) – focuses on the child; the dramaturgy of the sequence, and of the production as a whole, focuses on the woman who has given birth, the mother. The spectator, meanwhile, sees and hears them both. From the man's perspective, the woman is delirious: she speaks of the Nile and of her son's safety, hallucinates and sees animals on the floor. The man tries to be understanding, but this very effort makes him coercive and threatening. The man (M) does not understand the woman (W).

[2] The quoted lines are translated into English from the dialogue as delivered in the 2014 performance at the Théâtre de la Ville, Paris.

W: There are lots of animals.
M: What are you saying about the animals? Where do you see them?
W: On the floor. There are lots of them. Can't you see them?
M: I don't see any.
W: I always perceive them.
M: And why are you so interested in them?
W: No, it isn't a question of interest. It is because they live in the same world.
M: What do you mean, the same world? The same world as us?
W: I mean that they know – they know it.
M: Know what?
W: How to live in this world.
M: Well, yes. It is easy to live without any consciousness.
W: No, it isn't easy for them.
M: Why do you think that?
W: Boredom.
M: You mean that they experience boredom? Animals experience boredom?
W: Yes, I think they do.

Two worlds confront one another, and the interlocutors talk past each other; by recognising such dramaturgical formulas, we perceive that different truths exist behind appearances. Through minute dramaturgical decisions, Castellucci keeps the spectator oscillating between two truths: worldly constellations of power (such as social care as a means of maintaining order) and inner faith (as the bearer of ideas). What the man says is rational:

M: We know that you suffered a severe haemorrhage. You will shortly be taken to hospital for tests. But first you must tell us where you hid the child. We found a bloodstained plastic bag. Did you carry him in it?

What the woman says is true, both as prayer and as (witness) testimony.

W: I am tired, Lord. So tired. Come and shake me. Deliver me from the blood, God, my God. The Nile, the River Nile.
M: No, she threw him into the river.
W: I had to do it. It was the only way to save him.
M: Save him? What do you mean, save him? Is the child alive or dead?
W: He will live. He will live a long time. He will live long enough to free his people from slavery.
M: But what people are you talking about? What slavery?
W: The people do not yet know that they are a people. Because they do not yet know that they are enslaved.

The staging of these truths visibly disrupts empirical reality; when the Old Testament narrative is voiced in a contemporary setting through the dramaturgical structure of Greek tragedy – that is, when the confrontation between Moses' mother and the Egyptian pharaoh is articulated in contemporary sentences – the myth that still lives within us, and the collective memory it transmits, are rendered present (Didi-Huberman 1992, cited in Semenowicz 2016, 141).

As in all his productions, this presence without meaning is sustained by an animal being; here, in *Go down*, the animal is replaced by an image of one: Albrecht Dürer's hare. In the police-station sequence, when the woman is left alone, she draws a folded paper image from beneath the shroud-like blanket. Opened out, it expands to almost a square metre, revealing a seemingly life-sized hare. Utterly exhausted, Moses' mother sinks to the floor upon this image, almost fainting. As a dialectical image, the scene gives visual form to the truths. It should be understood, however, that, as Claudia Castellucci repeatedly indicates, when they speak of truth, they invoke the semantic field of the Greek *aletheia* rather than that of the Latin

veritas: "It is more about 'discovering'. Truth involves certainty; discovering does, too, but it entails a veil" (Claudia Castellucci 2016, 167–168).

The lines spoken in this scene are those of Jochebed, the mother of Moses. She whispers them in Italian (while, depending on the host theatre, we read them in French or German), and our perception of the situation oscillates between the image of an atemporal police station belonging to the twentieth or twenty-first century and that of a mother who holds time together, saving her newborn child by letting him go. Viewed in the light of the biblical story of Moses, Jochebed is the archetypal mother who can entrust her child to the Nile and thereby save him – and, through him, her people – at the cost of her own anguish. Yet as we listen to Jochebed's lines, we see an undocumented woman on the verge of delirium, suffering from postpartum hormonal depletion – someone who might be from the neighbouring village, a woman who has given birth in secret and placed her baby in a rubbish bin. We, the spectators, know where the child is, for in the preceding sequence we saw a bin that, judging by its dimensions, was more like a skip – an enormous municipal refuse container that we watched for several long minutes on the darkened stage, illuminated by a small pool of light. This image comes close to conventional representational practice, since the sound of a baby crying leads the spectator to recognise that what is moving atop a cubic metre of rubbish is an abandoned child. Yet the image leads the spectator far from the truths conveyed by representation, for it asserts nothing of the kind. It establishes no rhetorical analogy between the woman who places her child in a rubbish bin and Moses' mother, since we know nothing about the woman who gave birth in the public lavatory. Nor does it impose a Brechtian didacticism by suggesting that every woman who relinquishes her newborn makes the same sacrifice as Jochebed, for the social circumstances surrounding childbirth remain illegible. Truth consists in investigating the circumstances.

Jochebed's monologue contains a sentence that is in many ways pivotal to the production: "C'est la vérité, elle est réelle comme une sensation." The actor delivers the lines as a perfectly matter-of-fact argument, in a quiet, neutral tone; she argues, yet her voice, like her body, is shrouded. "This is the truth, as real as a sensation." And to convey this sensation within this estranging yet receptive setting, a supplication arises – the mother's testimony. This supplication is perhaps the simplest and most harrowing monologue in the production – and perhaps even across the countless unsettling productions of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio. By analysing it, we may be able to reconstruct the dramaturgical procedures of Socìetas. We hear these lines in Italian and read them in German or French.

> "It was so beautiful. So beautiful to hear him swallowing the milk and breathing at the same time. I shall never hear that little sound again. Another woman will hear it. I shall never again hear those sobs. […] That snuffling through his nose. Those tiny crackles of cartilage, softer than a heather leaf. Since it will be as though I do not exist for him. I shall turn my head whenever I hear other children calling, 'Mummy.' But since Moses will not be able to speak to me, I want to speak for him, in his place. Mummy, Mummy, are you coming to fetch me? And I shall answer: I cannot, my son. Mummy, why are you being cruel to me? I did it to save you, my son. Will he believe me, Lord, will he believe me?"

Yet the final lines of the supplication are sung by a soprano voice: what cannot be uttered has now swelled into music, become song. From this point until the end of the production, Scott Gibbons's musical composition is heard, and the supplication concludes as a song. Its dramaturgical structure recalls above all those dramas that create reality through such inward confessions – for me, most notably the monologue to the Sun

in Act III of Racine's *Phaedra*, where every unanswerable question – and hence every question addressed to the Lord – is wrenched from the vulnerable and tormented female body. It is rare in Castellucci's productions for the (textual) garment to remain with a scene throughout as its context; here, however, it does, and on stage Jochebed collapses to the ground like an old, worn-out bathrobe (Castellucci 2007a, 213). The spectator watches Jochebed alongside the others – the interrogating officer, the police officers and the social worker. Together, they watch a woman they do not understand; they therefore try to see more deeply into her. Perhaps it is once again because of the spectator's compulsion to make meaning that I find it natural for an imaging machine – an MRI scanner – to stand at the centre of the stage in the following scene and swallow the woman. At this point in the production, the overcoming of reality becomes directly perceptible, and this results not from a surreal representation of a world beyond reality – that was the experiment of early avant-garde theatre – but from the suspension of interpretative processes.

In its endeavour to overcome reality, the company stages the relationship between the visible world and the Ideas, giving it artistic form, and frequently turns to Plato as a point of reference that can also offer guidance to spectators.

> "For [Plato] visual reality was deceptive, as opposed to the incorruptible truth of ideas. Art, instead of eliminating the deceit of visual reality, reproduced it while useless attempting to overcome it. But how could it be possible to overcome reality leaving out its phenomena? How could it be possible to reproduce the world without having in our hands its same constitutive elements, which include our hands? This was the paradox that stifled in a contradiction the art the most similar to existence: theater" (Chiara Castellucci cited by Romeo Castellucci 2007b, 36).

Within Castellucci's company, the process known as "the overcoming of reality" takes the form of continual experimentation; this is why, when considering the œuvre as a whole, we may speak of a range of solutions and outcomes. The grand operas – *Don Giovanni*, *The Magic Flute* and *Orphée et Eurydice* – as well as the performative events (*Bros*, *Credere alle maschere*), the Passions, the paraphrases (Dante, Moses) and the constructions of thought (*On the Concept of the Face...*, *Tragedia Endogonidia*) explore a wide range of questions, yet perhaps share a common focus: the possibilities of perceiving the relationship between appearance and reality and of rendering it visible. Castellucci's mode of reality-making works – and plays – with the concepts of appearance and truth and the perspectives they open up, alternately separating, bringing together and intermingling modes of apprehension derived from what is seen and what is learned. We might readily read the claim that Castellucci shows what cannot be named as a Badiouian paraphrase of Wittgenstein (Badiou 2007); yet our experience suggests, rather, that language given textual form would offer a gentler strategy of naming than does the scene presented before us, whose image of the world – and of a single human being within it, a woman, a woman giving birth alone and in secret – is extended and layered across space and time, kinesics and dynamics, bodily sensation, odours and colours, music and silence. Such showing is above all an unfamiliar form of aggression: Castellucci will not let us look elsewhere (Semenowicz 2016).

The production's second sequence, already discussed, shows the bodily suffering of a woman giving birth alone and in secret; there is nowhere to turn one's gaze, for the Theater an der Wien stage is confined to a tiny, one-square-metre area, intensely illuminated amid the darkness – starkly and beautifully. What is morally discordant becomes aesthetically harmonious, and this tension in turn tenses the spectator's body. The woman, having given birth, flushes the toilet; water gushes forth, and once again we hear a gospel song breaking through

the rush of water and rising above it. Gradually, we understand: waves of joy from a baptismal song and of gratitude for new life wash over us. This is the beginning of a new life; yet, pinned to our seats, I wrote in 2014: "Dear God, what are we being made to see?"

The spectator confined and fastened to their seat, able to look in only one direction – perhaps because their head, too, is immobilised – is none other than the Platonic spectator. As I watch Castellucci's production again in 2026, I find myself reading it in conjunction with Alain Badiou's work, published in 2012 but long awaited and years in preparation – a translated and adapted version of Plato's *Republic*, charged with new connotations. Using new images that become new sentences, Badiou reconstructed the celebrated, millennia-old allegories line by line; his allegory of the cave reads as follows:

> "The spectators are prisoners: for as long as they have existed, they have been nailed to their seats, their gaze riveted to the screen, their heads held immobile by headphones that cover their ears entirely. Behind the tens of thousands fastened to their seats, at head height and running parallel to the screen along its entire length, stands a broad wooden bridge. Behind it are enormous projectors from which an almost unbearable white light floods the screen" (Badiou 2022, 50).[3]

Badiou transposes the cave, the dark pit, into the space of the film-*theatre*; seeing thus becomes the only activity available to the theatre spectator – and a guided one at that. The spectator sees only what is shown to them and hears only what is relayed to them. Although Alain Badiou is among those

[3] See "Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave? True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?" (Plato, *Republic* 515a–b, trans. Benjamin Jowett).

thinkers who know and speak theatre as a philosophical language, Castellucci's production is not simply a paraphrase of Badiou's reading of Plato, even if Castellucci too *floods the screen* with a philosophy of theatre centred on insight and understanding. Castellucci and Badiou proceed almost in parallel in adapting the thought of Plato's *Republic*, and both turn to images in order to render Platonic language intelligible, updating the reality available to perception and experience – after all, who goes into a cave at all in 2005, when *The Century* was written? In the world of "*nothing* and *empty talk*" (Badiou 2022, 367), far removed from "what truly exists", shadows exert their influence over human beings. The shadows stand arrayed within the domain of their own life, a domain assumed to be seen and understood with certainty; the world of nothing and empty talk holds human beings captive until they are set free. This mode of seeing is, as several commentators have put it, a glimpse into "the deeper strata of existence" (Kékesi Kun 2026, 187). What we can see in Castellucci's productions is invariably a distant image, stripped of its context, whether narrative or dramatic, yet creating beauty and harmony through its serene compositional poise. Castellucci arranges the municipal refuse container within the space so that it can be seen as beautiful, with the abandoned child lying inside it in a plastic bag. Within the composition of the image, the woman giving birth in the lavatory is beautiful; the white bulk of the gigantic MRI scanner is beautiful; human bodies of every kind are beautiful; and most beautiful of all – idyllic and bucolic – is the cave in the final image.

The opening sequence of *Go down, Moses* prepares the ground for this entire field of sensation and for the conceptual framework of events transformed through the act of looking. A few gallery-goers dressed in pale beige wander about a rather drearily neutral space. They look. At curtained walls, at one another and at an image – Dürer's hare (as though we were in the Albertina, only a few hundred metres away). As the performance unfolds, it is scarcely possible to discern who these peo-

ple are, so alike and schematic do they appear; yet an occasional gesture – if our gaze happens to be directed towards it – imitates a knife thrust or a blow and, like a miniature Meyerholdian moment, generates an unexpected and unexplained tension. Looking and being looked at constitute a mode of existence; the metaphor of the exhibition space sets this interpretative thread in motion, and it may guide us through this event of just over an hour. Admittedly, the production's title also prepares us for Moses, an actor who struggles to speak: "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant..." (NRSV, Exod. 4:10) Thus, when the Lord sends him down to Pharaoh to ask that his people be set free, Moses carries with him the miraculous signs bestowed by the Lord; Aaron will speak the words. It is the visible spectacle of the miracles surrounding Moses that will convince his people: his staff appears to be a serpent, his hand to be leprous and the water he pours out to be blood.

In this way – although this, too, may be a rash association – miraculous images that accord with neither appearance nor reality are placed before us in the production through precise and mysterious transitions; one new visual surface after another appears before us so swiftly – quite literally in the blink of an eye – as though only the frequency of a dream had shifted. A second-long interval of darkness separates each image from the next, even though each requires the movement of sizeable scenic elements and heavy objects, whether we find ourselves in a gallery, at the gates of hell (I read the machine as a metaphor for this), in a lavatory, a public space, a police station, a hospital or, finally, the cave. At one moment the stage is a pristine white gallery space. The performers arrive with us, look around and stroll as they might in the nearby Albertina. We see them, but indistinctly: now visitors, now works of art – Rodin and Delacroix figures with blurred outlines. Then – or so I seem to see – they form a tableau of the early-sixteenth-century *School of Athens* by Raffaello Sanzio, with Plato and Aristotle conversing at its centre. As if. The only two-dimensional artwork here

is Albrecht Dürer's hare, which comes before us as an image. Yet we view both Dürer and the spectators through a fine tulle curtain, as though a cloud hung over everything; this was how God would speak to Moses.

This haziness, familiar from Renaissance painting, is achieved through sfumato; Raffaello, too, used this painterly technique of blurring contours to render his images ethereal, almost transcendental. Behind the production stands Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, a theatrical collective active for decades; perhaps we may sense in this choice of name an influence comparable to that evident in the relationship between the Hungarian film and theatre director András Jeles and the Monteverdi Birkózókör (Monteverdi Wrestling Circle), whose members wrestled to Monteverdi's music by way of preparation, or between the Théâtre du Soleil and Ariane Mnouchkine, who chose their name in homage not only to the Sun, which sustains our world, but also to the Sun King, the greatest of theatre-making monarchs. In any event, Raffaello's richly detailed, graceful images are implicitly present behind – and mingle with – Castellucci's spaces. Moreover, it is readily apparent that, in Castellucci's theatre, *sfumato* – a fifteenth-century Florentine painterly technique – enters into play when a theatrical tulle curtain is stretched across the stage, casting an atmosphere now over a familiar Italian Renaissance landscape (*Orphée et Eurydice*, *Moses*), now over a gallery, now over a hospital room, a bed or a face; and we know that it is this atmosphere that sets in motion the blurring of contours and the dismantling of experience predicated on understanding. Thus a serene duality accompanies the production – thought and sensation, the seen and the sensed, reality as experienced and as constructed. In theatrical space, then, sfumato blurs together the contours of the visual field, now by means of a curtain, now through lighting, now through distancing, now through the projection of a film shot through a hazy lens; the state of seeing and not seeing (*non guardarmi*) (Ridout 2014, 434) thus both guides and haunts the spectator.

Since the mode of being of theatrical performance renders the contours of hearing, as well as those of vision, intensely perceptible, the fading and refraction of reality also extend to this sensory register. In *Go down, Moses*, what we might hear is inaudible and cannot under any circumstances be semiotised. Only one scene – analysed at the beginning of this essay – is structured around dramatic dialogue, and even this concerns the persistence of misunderstanding; rather than sentences, however, it is sounds that saturate the theatre. Castellucci's works possess a distinctive sonic aesthetic, and while the powerful soundscape provides contextual bearings – indicating whether we are in the street, an operating theatre or an old police station divided by thin partition walls – it simultaneously amplifies the background noise to an unbearable level. In the opening sequence, as I have argued thus far and as many others have written, we are in a gallery: a few people walking about and looking towards the walls signify and embody the experience of being at an exhibition. This is how the theatrical sign operates: the spectator assembles meaning from a handful of elements. We do so even when Castellucci, in seeking to overcome reality, ushers us into a space blurred by means of sfumato, which we (immediately) identify as a gallery so as to remain within the reassuring and controllable domain of conceptual thought. The sounds are those of footsteps; yet the people walking about – spectators like ourselves – make strange movements. A few paragraphs earlier, I described this opening sequence as an image of the creation of dramaturgical tension; I also noted that it presents us with the classic theatrical prologue-cum-overture of looking and being looked at, yet occasional gestures remind us of the deceptive nature of visible reality. Two men, for example, stand facing one another, their suits differing only in shade. One begins to examine the other and then, like a voodoo doctor, reaches into his abdomen with both hands. They then move on.

I call the first sequence an overture not only because of its position, but also because of the proposition it makes to the

spectator: it shows us how we look. We walk, perceive and move on; we see and hear, the two senses mutually supporting comprehension. Only in the final tableau do we depart from the sonic dramaturgy established thus far, for Castellucci deprives us of our point of *audition*. At first, perhaps, we strain to locate and distinguish the sound sources, but we have no intelligible context, nothing to guide us; and we understand, of course, that sound, as a formative element of theatrical representation, offers as much interpretative assistance through its particular qualities as a caption, a sentence or a painting in the space. In the final tableau, however, we helplessly abandon any attempt to comprehend the ethereal sonority of an electronic effects score, sustained to the point of unbearability and evocative of the harmonies of religious faith. Only when the composer Scott Gibbons breaks this resonant mass down into its constituent elements for us do we hear what it contains: locusts noisily swarming through the space. The work ends with the insectophobia-inducing sound of a plague of locusts.

But what, then, is the ending? The infinitely precise rhythm of the production's entire dramaturgy makes the final tableau – here, as in *Orphée et Eurydice* from the same year – unbearably disturbing at the level of sensation. As something that has actually happened. The representational planes of the theatrical conventions that had remained operative to some degree until this point disappear, and we see a cave inhabited by half a dozen prehistoric humans. A sheet of plastic lowered in front of the spectators softens the contours; the sounds are sonorities, as I have noted, and by the end of the production we experience for ourselves that what we see cannot be recounted even as a story. The people – our ancestors – gaze up at a starry sky familiar to us too; dawn is breaking, and their every movement is slow. Mourning and burying a lifeless infant, then conceiving another, seem perhaps to exhaust the possibilities of action. But then the mother approaches the stage's fourth, transparent Plexiglas wall and recognises that the appearance of reality can be fractured, that reality can be overcome. She dips her hand

into mud or paint, first leaving the imprint of her palm on the surface, then forming three letters: SOS.

The idea is sublime in its obscurity. In both the production and Plato's allegory, it is we who are bound within the prison of the cave; yet, as we watch the shadows onstage, we gradually emerge into the light. In Plato's republic, it is the philosopher who leads us out of the shadows, but Castellucci and the company have composed, as the production's conclusion, one of the most beautiful images in the history of scenography. From here, and in this way, a thought readily takes shape: theatre – and Castellucci, the philosopher – lead us out of the darkness. The act of being led out, of being set free, is painful even in Alain Badiou's decidedly combative translation:

> "Then our hired thugs drag him mercilessly through the rows of seats in the auditorium. He is made to pass through a small side door, hitherto concealed. They then shove him into a filthy tunnel leading into the open air, and he emerges onto a mountainside awakening to spring and awash with light. Dazzled, he tries to shield his eyes with a weakening hand; but our thugs relentlessly drive him higher and higher up the steep slope for what seems an eternity – ever higher! Higher still! They reach the summit, where dazzling sunlight awaits him; the guards release him, then race back down the mountain and disappear. And there our man stands, alone, in the very midst of a boundless landscape. The overwhelming light annihilates his consciousness. Oh, how he suffers from the terrible violence inflicted upon him, from all that he has been forced to endure, from the way he was cast out! How he hates our thugs! Yet, little by little, he tries to cast his gaze around him, longing to see the mountain peaks, the valleys, this dazzling world. At first, the radiance of every object blinds him; he can see nothing of all that we ordinarily describe by saying: 'This ex-

> ists, this is truly there!' He cannot say what Hegel said so disdainfully upon seeing the Jungfrau: 'das ist' – 'it merely is'. He must also gaze into the Sun" (Badiou 2022, 51).

Reading Badiou's translation of Plato and his accompanying commentaries in 2015, I approached the relationship between appearance and reality through Plato and, more specifically, through theatrical representation, which Plato regarded as paradoxical. The present essay is the result of reading the two together. It seeks neither to disclose the director's intention nor, certainly, the volition underlying the production of meaning and the process by which it occurs; on the contrary, it offers a model of how a Castelluccian structure or practice of sensation might produce its effects. I have borne in mind that "the theatre director is something like a thinker of representation as such, who carries out a very complex investigation into the relationships between text, acting, space and public" (Badiou 2007, 40), chiefly because criticism has narrated Romeo Castellucci's œuvre – at least within the history of its Hungarian reception – through the visual arts and the visual proposition, pointedly avoiding the terrain of hermeneutics, psychology and perhaps even "the Parousia of the body" (ibid., 42); thus, this theatrical practice, consistently developed over four decades, continues to be received within its own tradition primarily as an aesthetic pleasure. Although the works of Castellucci and Socìetas may be traced back to and measured against avant-garde practitioners such as Artaud, reading Badiou alongside them suggests that "the passion for the real and the necessity of semblance" (ibid., 47) is at least as fundamental a premise for the company as a whole as it was for Brecht. The imagery held at a considerable remove – the distancing characteristic of Castellucci and his company – is a hallmark of twentieth-century art, above all of the avant-garde: "semblance works out its proper distance from the real" (ibid., 49), and when the frame of reality is revealed, it is appearance

that somehow locates us. The investigation of the relationship between appearance, perception and reality is the philosophical question animating Castellucci's productions and the basis of their radical artistic articulation. Throughout, they reveal to spectators the manifold nature of reality-making – spectators who largely perceive relations between people within a web of ideological discourses and, in the theatre, generally encounter representations of those relations.

Castellucci's artistic questions are commonly traced back to those of Artaud (Závada 2021; Darida 2022), and he is thus regarded as extending an insight that never established a praxis of its own, because no such praxis could be established. Artaud's cruelty (*cruauté*) resides in presentation, and all those who attempted to put it into practice – Peter Brook in 1963, Richard Schechner in 1969 – inevitably faltered before the barely controllable flow of performative energy inherent in the act of showing. Castellucci belongs to the generation that came after those who recognised the destruction of language (and of the world); for him, the disintegration of the relationship between words and things constitutes an artistic point of departure. Among the possibilities confronting him, he distances himself from the performative force of a reality constructed onstage (the performance-art tradition), drawing closer instead to the sensuous power of the visual and aural environment constructed there – and using it to overwhelm us.

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Mihaela Michailov

Fiction Washes Violence Away
Romeo Castellucci – Sharing Atrocity

I saw Romeo Castellucci's performative installation *Le Metope del Partenone* in an industrial hall at La Villette, a few days after the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015. The violence that had flooded television screens; the ravaged, panic-hollowed faces of witnesses and survivors recounting in breathless haste the horror they had endured; the gazes laden with unspoken questions; the dozens of young people in cafés, restaurants and bistros who embraced the need to be together as the most liberating existential *statement* – all returned to me as I heard Castellucci's voice. "I would like to share my state of mind with you. This action has the 'misfortune' of containing images identical to what the people of Paris experienced only a few days ago. This action bears the anguish of an atrocious mirror reflecting what happened on the streets of this city. Images that are difficult to bear, obscene in their unconscious exactitude. You alone can decide what you wish to do: whether to stay or to leave. I am aware that too little time has passed for us to heal this immense burden of pain, and that our eyes remain wide open to the glimmerings of violence... To be here tonight means that we must be present and alive before the dead."

The Parthenon metopes, which depict violent clashes between gods and Titans, Lapiths and Centaurs, Athenians and Amazons, are reinterpreted by Castellucci through the lens of the city's struggle against pervasive violence. In the performative action, Castellucci tells us, "there are six tableaux of a city, six tableaux of pain... The injured person is an actor, one actor for

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each tableau. There are six different medical response teams, and each team is real. The work adopts a perspective centred on voyeurism, on the fact that we like watching accidents. At the end, an immense painting made of fake blood and all the other fluids remains on the floor."[1]

The performative action created by Castellucci unfolds under the sign of atrocity's repeatability, existential irreparability and, at the same time, the salvation that fiction can imagine. We are "contributors" to the reality of inexhaustible violence, which fiction – fiction alone – can "outmanoeuvre" by conferring upon it another plane of existence. Every violent ending is a new atrocious beginning, within a nexus of impending tragedies that consigns every possible form of order to the margins of everyday life. Accidents, explosions, detonations and attacks in which hundreds of people die in cafés, concert halls and offices are the new site-specific performances, drawing together, in a frenzy, dozens of onlookers – dozens of disseminators of intermittent chaos. Violence persists through the circulation of images and information, amid a surplus of destruction that is difficult to control. Violence is the enigmatic, unwritten command of the gaze: look and pass it on!

In an industrial hall where the spectators remain standing, Romeo Castellucci constructs a dramaturgy of tragic horror. Tightly concentrated actions recur: mini-scenarios of violence, performative formats of brutality. One after another, events conceived according to the logic of a catastrophic ritual – an urban tragedy at once compressed and expanded – unfold among the spectators, who form a circle around each action; the installation is designed for forty spectators. An actor or actress appears, pours various substances over their body or, in full view, inflicts physical pain upon themselves; they bare their swollen, bruised body, cry out for help and call for an ambulance. An ambulance arrives, from which an emergency medical team emerges and attempts to resuscitate the dying body. The body convulses in a final paroxysm of vital fury, in one last

[1] Excerpt from *Portrait: Romeo Castellucci*, Festival d'Automne à Paris.

grinding struggle for survival. It no longer breathes. The team covers the body. The performer gets to their feet, approaches the wall and stares directly at us, distancing themselves from the traces of the accident, from the "aura of violence", from the stains seeping into our gaze. A few minutes of immobility. A few moments of resurrection. The horizontality of "real" death is counterbalanced by the verticality of the fictional return to life. Theatre "raises" death from the impotence of the event. Fiction raises life from the dead. Performative fiction transcends what the reality of catastrophe cannot save, detaching tragedy from the blood-soaked ground. Across the floor, the traces of catastrophe – splashes of liquid violence – spread. At the end, two devices – two cleaning machines – move onto the stage and remove the stains. As though none of it had ever happened. Fiction washes violence away, removes the frame of pain, lifts a mutilated body from the ground of everyday atrocity and places it within an order of questioning: who are those reduced to scattered fragments in a massacre; who are we who watch the disasters unfolding before us with fanatical devotion, as if hypnotised; who are those who propel these disasters into a disordering reality that increasingly banalises its own evil?

Above the body that has escaped as if "through the ears of death", a text is projected. A poetic-political, existential interrogation of the human condition. The enigmas transcend a violence exhausted by violence itself. Once each performer has taken their place against the wall, their presence is accompanied by a compressed, enigmatic text:

"I open by closing in on myself.
I am transparent, yet
you can see me from afar.
I am eternal even though I come to an end. What am I?"

"I have never been, yet I shall always be.
No one has ever seen me, and no one ever will.
And yet I am everyone's hope for life. What am I?"

Each block of text, composed in a register entirely unlike that of the performance, ends with an expansive question. The enigma is the abstraction of a rupture with life, a rescue from the fall into the opacity of the endlessly repeatable, the hope that we might discover an "unknown" within the capsules of predictability in which we live.

The figures subjected to violence in the performative actions – wounded, injured, burned and vulnerable, with swollen faces, mangled legs and swollen hands, their bodies crushed to a pulp, split open and distended by pain – expose the fragility of their condition, peeling away the "skin" of imminent danger and of repeated tragedy transformed into an everyday occurrence. The flesh of horror is sublimated. It is paired with a miniature philosophical poem that takes violence beyond its own limits. Castellucci relies on the destabilising repetition of catastrophe, which, through the attrition of ritualised everyday exposure, becomes consciously perceptible for only a few minutes – just long enough for us to film it and pass it on, within a cycle that consumes abomination and hungers for brutality. Romeo Castellucci searches for traces of tragedy – which the director regards as the paradigmatic model of theatricality – within the formats of contemporary existence, and finds the counterpart of the tragic event in the accident – a syncopal break in the order of the everyday.

Romeo Castellucci turns the explosion of violence within micro-situations of everyday life into a scenario of death and rebirth, of witnessed destruction and the transgression of horror.

Castellucci rethinks the frames of performative action, constructing circular accidents and circular contexts of reception. He privileges the proximity of the gaze and makes us all participants in the production of violence, cynically intensifying our addiction to brutality – the atrocious "cocktail" mixed in the laboratory of pain.

We live amid an abundance of interlinked forms of violence, which erupt into and contaminate the structures of every-

day life until violence itself becomes normalised. Repetitive, stratified violence – a hard and enduring part of the social fabric, now a mechanism for generating and consolidating tensions in human relationships – ultimately becomes the foundation of every gesture.

Castellucci does not extract frames of violence but extends them, "horizontalising" them so that their succession is perpetuated. We are confronted with violence dilated across successive sequences, erupting suddenly, without warning and compulsively.

The performance activates two registers of violence: a factual register, grounded in the concrete, identifiable situations in which accidents occur and recur; and a trans-factual register, grounded in the theatrical construction of violence, the staging of moments in which the body is brutalised, and what we might call "the visible laboratory in which violence is stitched together".

The body becomes at once an imprinted surface, "eaten away" and abused by violence; a carnal "glossary" of suffering; and a visceral "screen" – material to be viewed, captured and remembered – suspended between the instant in which the eye registers its singularising pain and the endless duration in which bodies made neighbours in violence write the anonymous history of decomposition. Castellucci renders this decomposition quotidian through confession – every day, a fragment of violence confesses itself before our eyes, rendered immune by the abundance of terror – while simultaneously sublimating it, transposing it into a fracture of poetry. Into a question with a mystery held within. The body, transformed into a site of excess violence, accentuates our dependence on atrocity and our need to record that atrocity as evidence that we are alive, that we have participated in the spectacle of violence, that we have contributed to recording its traces. One of the indirect questions posed by Castellucci's performative installation is this: can we still speak of violence today if it has not been spectacularised? Can we understand violence if it does not become a

performance with temporary spectators who film it, display it, give it a like and continually reactivate it through a share? Who makes violence reproduce itself beyond the moment at which it erupts? Can violence exist without "trace and follower", without recording and transmission, without the witnessing gaze and the disseminating eye, without the dissolution of the body that stimulates our participation while simultaneously exhausting our gaze? Castellucci removes violence from the channel of everyday abomination and lifts it into an enigmatic disappearance. Little by little, violence is erased. And when it reappears, how will we re-view it?

Zsófia Emma Szilágyi

Object And Emotion: The Problem of Correlation in Romeo Castellucci's Productions

Romeo Castellucci's productions characteristically bring together thoroughly familiar images, often laden with stereotypical meanings, and something seemingly alien to them and resistant to decoding, forging a new context from their conjunction.[1] This essay examines that context through the concept of the objective correlative, drawing on the respective understandings of T. S. Eliot and the Italian director.

It is well known that, in his celebrated – and notorious – essay *Hamlet and His Problems* (1919), Eliot portrayed the protagonist of Shakespeare's tragedy as being in thrall to an emotion "which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear", and maintained that "the intense feeling […] without an object or exceeding its object" cannot find expression in art (Eliot 1964, 125 and 126). Over the past century, Eliot's concept of the objective correlative has been invoked primarily in literary studies to explore the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in particular texts; theatre studies has made comparatively little use of it. It is therefore all the more striking that, in an interview, Romeo Castellucci invokes Eliot's concept and translates it into his own terms as follows: "you speak of something without showing it directly" (Castellucci and Gelesz 2023, 128). But does Castellucci un-

[1] I have based my analyses on the following recordings: *La Passione*, Internationales Musikfest Hamburg, Deichtorhallen, 2016 (NDR – Arte – e-motion-factory – Ozango Production – M Media); *Salome*, Salzburger Festspiele, Felsenreitschule, 2018 (ORF – 3sat – UNITEL); *Moses und Aron*, Opéra National de Paris, 2016 (Arte France – Bel Air Media).

derstand the concept as Eliot did when applying it to *Hamlet*? And if not, how might we apply it to Castellucci's theatre? What interpretations of the objective correlative are possible in the first place?

The episodes of *Tragedia Endogonidia*, staged between 2002 and 2004 as eleven discrete productions, each lasting around half an hour and bearing the name of a major European city, are, in Céline Astrié's words, "'pure and accomplished acts', 'without roots'. They do not articulate on anything and do not articulate anything" (2002, 8). This mode of composition is characteristic of Castellucci's other works as well: the images in his productions can indeed be described as rootless. The *Tragedia* episodes were not based on pre-existing dramatic works, and thus disclose no underlying texts from the history of European drama or literature. In those Castellucci productions that do take a well-known play as their point of departure (*Amleto*, Cesena, 1992; *Orestea*, Prato, 1995; *Giulio Cesare*, Prato, 1997; etc.), the connection to the text, plot and characters becomes so attenuated as to be almost invisible. They evoke no historical period or circumstances identifiable through historical knowledge, nor do they draw upon situations, relationships or figures familiar from everyday life. It is as though they had no roots extending into history, culture, theatre or the lifeworld; they can therefore scarcely be approached through anything familiar or known, or accessible through shared experience. Astrié describes this as "the function of the Episode [in *Tragedia Endogonidia*]: a procedure of 'isolation' aiming to elude any narrative, illustrative or figurative character, and to disarticulate the representation" (ibid.). This mode of operation, devoid of pre-existing models, may in turn direct the spectator towards their own deeply intimate, personal experiences.

The "rootlessness" mentioned above – the impossibility of tracing the scenes back to any concrete, identifiable origin – suggests a construction of reality that takes its bearings from a map of its own. Castellucci's productions may be regarded as autopoietic systems – a view reinforced by the term *endogonidia*

coupled with *Tragedia*: "the word derives from the Greek *endon* ('within') and *gonos* ('generation'), and refers to a living organism capable of creating and multiplying itself from within" (Perrier 2022, 79). A succession of singular and startling images unfolds on Castellucci's stage, potentially eliciting a powerful emotional response and setting each spectator upon an individual path of reception.

In one scene of *La Passione*, created in Hamburg in 2016, a refrigerator is wheeled onto the stage, the cable snaking behind it indicating that it is in working order. The appliance is snow-white, like the clothing of the man who wheels it in, the costumes of the orchestra, soloists and chorus, and even the floor and the curtains enclosing the space. The refrigerator's appearance might even seem ironic, since, in this performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, the narrative has just reached the Last Supper. Yet as Ian Bostridge, in the role of the Evangelist, sings the familiar biblical account of the events in the Garden of Gethsemane, the production creates, through the projected text and the image juxtaposed with it, a heart-rending experience that dispels every trace of irony. The text projected in the background informs us that the *Leuchtfeuer Hospiz* in Hamburg – and we should not forget that the production was created in Hamburg, placing the hospice within the audience's own "here and now" – provides medical and psychological care for terminally ill patients. It is Germany's first such institution to employ a chef, who, when a patient is nearing death, prepares a meal in accordance with their wishes. The text alone is deeply moving, but it is not yet apparent how it relates to what we see onstage: a bottle of champagne and a small porcelain bowl, brought in on a stainless-steel table, are placed inside the refrigerator after it has been wheeled to centre stage and its door opened. When, however, another projected text gives the name and age of one of the hospice's recently deceased patients, together with the time and cause of their death, and then reveals their last supper – champagne and Greek yoghurt – the import of what we have seen suddenly becomes clear.

Like Robert Wilson's, Castellucci's theatre is a theatre of images; since its images disclose no meanings but instead set affective associations in motion within us, it might even be called poetic, insofar as poetry does not "use words to describe or explain. […] You speak of something without showing it directly. That is how poetry works […]. It is *correlative* and *objective*: that is, it concerns things that stand in relation to one another. It is the relation between them that gives rise to emotion" – as Castellucci remarks, invoking T. S. Eliot's concept discussed above (Castellucci and Gelesz 2023, 128).

In *La Passione*, words and images operate together without the production having to explain their conjunction explicitly. The biblical episode of the Last Supper, the story of the chef who prepares the dying patients' last suppers at the Hamburg hospice, and the bottle of champagne and Greek yoghurt in the refrigerator are objective things standing in relation to one another. What is heard, what is projected and what is presented before us in material form do not explain one another; rather, it is the sudden flash of understanding of the relation between them that gives rise to emotion – to the experience of being profoundly moved. Castellucci uses the term "epiphany" for this "flash of understanding"; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht writes in similar terms when reflecting on the tension inherent in the oscillation between meaning and presence:

> "I want to comment, under the heading of 'epiphany', on three features that shape the way in which the tension between presence and meaning presents itself to us: on the impression that the tension between presence and meaning, when it occurs, comes out of nothing; on the emergence of this tension as having a spatial articulation; on the possibility of describing its temporality as an 'event'" (Gumbrecht 2004, 111).

By evoking the final hours of one of our contemporaries, Castellucci brings a familiar yet remote episode of Christ's Pas-

sion inescapably close, making it not merely something to be experienced vicariously, but something to be lived; he thereby invests the profane and banal confrontation with our mortality – with the human story of suffering shared by us all – with poignant beauty.

This example likewise shows that Castellucci's works invite us not so much to engage in analytical thought as to apprehend a connection without being able to derive its particulars logically. Discussing his *Salome*, presented at the 2018 Salzburg Festival, Castellucci notes that its eponymous Judaean princess, in keeping with the Gospel account,

> "is captivated by this beautiful man [Jochanaan, John the Baptist] and wants, at all costs, to kiss him. In the end, as we know, she succeeds… Now, in order to render this dark, sombre, dangerous beauty – the allure of the naked Prophet: the black hair, the black beard, the black eyes, because Salome gives an astonishing, spellbound description of Jochanaan's body – I did not want to put a handsome man on stage" (Castellucci and Gelesz 2023, 128).

In the absence of an attractive male body, a black stallion appears onstage; the horse does not stand in for the prophet, however, but enters into a complex interplay with the figure of the singer portraying him. Meanwhile, various pieces of horse tack displayed on the rear wall of the stage – a saddle, driving reins and leather straps – allude to the former function of the venue, the Felsenreitschule, thereby invoking the audience's "here and now". Then, in Scene 3, as Salome (Asmik Grigorian) yearns to touch and kiss the prophet, Gábor Bretz, as Jochanaan, appears before an enormous black circular shadow, as though it were an enlarged projection of the opening of the stylised cistern onstage – the cistern into whose depths, according to the libretto, the prophet has been confined. Only Bretz's head and upper torso are caught in a faint, diffuse circle

of light. His face is black as soot, while dark bird feathers have been affixed to his nearly shaven head, forming something like a horse's tail. As the production progresses, the black circular shadow begins to contract and eventually disappears altogether. The prophet's figure is now visible from head to toe: he wears a long black fur coat that almost reaches the floor. Yet his abstract appearance does not provide a visual equivalent of the metaphorical extravagance of Salome's extreme similes. For the images that emerge at once from the rapture of a lover consumed by desire and the revulsion of a woman lashing out in wounded anger would be almost impossible to represent without lapsing into banality:

> "Your flesh is / white as the snow on the hills of Judea. / The flowers in the gardens of Arabia's / fabled Queen are not so white as your / flesh, not the flowers in the gardens of / Arabia's Queen, nor the footsteps of / dawn that waken the forest, nor the / breast of the moon upon the ocean. / […] / Your flesh is horrible. It looks like / the flesh of a leper himself. It shines as / foul as a whitened wall, which vipers / have stained with slime, evil as a / whitened wall where the scorpions have / built their nests. It gleams like a / whitened sepulchre that hides so many / horrors. Your flesh is / hideous. I'm enamoured of your / hair... […] / Your hair is like the vine / harvest that hangs in swarthy clusters in / the vineyards of Edom. Your hair is like / the cedars, the towering cedars of / Lebanon, hiding lions and robbers in / their shadows. The long black nights of / winter, when the moon hides her face / and the stars are frightened, are not so / black as your hair. […] / Your hair is hideous... […] / It looks more like / a crown of briars they've set upon your / head. It looks like a tangle of serpents / entwined in knots round your neck. / […] / It's your mouth that I desire... […] / Your mouth is like a scarlet band upon a / tower

> of ivory, or like the pomegranate / fruit a silver knife has severed in two. […] / The bloodthirsty fanfares of / the trumpets that proclaim some royal / triumph, while the enemy cowers in / terror, are not so red as your scarlet / mouth. Your mouth is redder than the / bare feet of men who tread the vines / gathered in the wine press. It is redder / than the feet of the doves that nest in / the temple towers. Your mouth is red as / a coral branch from the dim twilight / sea, red as purple from the valleys of / Moab, the purple of emperors..." (Strauss 1988, 35–37).

And when Jochanaan finally denies Salome his gaze and then curses her, he slowly descends into a broad black aperture evocative of the cistern's darkness. Shortly afterwards, however, the head and back of a black stallion rise from the same opening; as the animal steps to and fro in the darkness, the silhouette of its head and ears recalls the prophet's figure, while Salome – sent into a state of ecstasy by the sight of Jochanaan – treads the air with her bare legs raised skywards, their movements alternating between softness and tension. The prophet and the horse appear onstage together only once: after Jochanaan's execution. The horse's head, placed beside the prophet's headless body, unites the two figures even in their dismemberment: the spectator apprehends the animal and human body parts as a single whole, thereby bringing the correlation between stallion and man to completion.

Another striking example of Castellucci's poetic rather than illustrative rendering of images and visions already present in the libretto is Act II, Scene 3 – *The Golden Calf and the Altar* – in his 2015 Paris production of *Moses und Aron*. According to Arnold Schoenberg's libretto, dusk is falling, while an ecstatic orgy awash in wine, oil and blood unfolds around a majestic statue of the Golden Calf placed at centre stage:

> "Happy is this folk, / and great is the wonder / and the rapture, and the joy they've created. / None is untransfigured; each is exalted. / None is unaffected; each is enraptured. / Powerful human virtues are reawakened: / grave and joyful; temperate, dissolute; / cheerful, pleased, and longing, active, resting. / Repression, lust, abstention, greed, / profusion, and envy. / All of beauty, goodness, ugliness, evil, / all that can be witnessed, manifest, sensate. / Sense first gives to spirit sense. / Spirit then is sense. / Those gods who have given you spirit, / sense and spirit to affect you, / let them be exalted! / *(Four Naked Virgins, one of them the Girl, step before the calf.)* / *(The priests embrace and kiss the maidens. / Behind each pair a girl stands holding a long butcher's knife and a jug for catching the blood.)* / *(The girls hand the priests the knives. The priests seize the virgins' throats and thrust the knives into their hearts. The girls catch the blood in receptacles. The priests pour it forth on the altar.)* / *(Destruction and suicide now begin amongst the crowd. Implements are shattered, stone jars are smashed, carts destroyed, etc. Everything possible is flung about: swords, daggers, axes, lances, jars, implements, etc. In a frenzy some throw themselves upon implements, weapons, and the like, while others fall upon swords. Still others leap into the fire and run burning across the stage. Several jump down from the high rock, etc. Wild dancing with all this.)* / *(Erotic Orgy.)* / *(A naked youth runs forward to a girl, tears the clothes from her body, lifts her high and runs with her to the altar.)* / Holy is the creative power! / Holy is fertility! / Holy is desire!" (Wörner 1963, 175–179)

None of these wild, brutal images is visible on Castellucci's stage. At this point in the production, the black partition curtain that has hitherto served as the backdrop is raised behind the chorus, John Graham-Hall as Aron and a naked

female body lying on the floor. The spectator is confronted with a Charolais bull standing inside a glass cube mounted on a stepped plinth – a veritable colossus, with mature specimens of the breed weighing as much as 1.2 tonnes. At first glance, we seem to be looking at a taxidermied likeness, a lifelike sculpture displayed in a glass case; it soon becomes clear, however, that the animal is alive, staring in perfect stillness at Aron as he sings at the front of the stage. When the singer moves aside, the naked female body lying on the floor and the bull face one another along a single axis, and the bull appears to be watching the woman. The door of the glass cube is then opened and the bull is slowly led out. As the animal emerges onto the first tier of the plinth, its hindquarters rise high into the air, drawing the eye towards its broad back and the mass of muscle rippling beneath its cream-coloured hide. The immense, dimly lit body advances with slow, placid steps; when it draws level with the woman, the utter incommensurability of the two bodies in every respect other than their almost identical colour becomes fully perceptible. The crowd (the chorus) then begins to retreat slowly before disappearing from the stage, leaving Aron, the bull and the naked body alone. A man dressed in white enters, lifts the woman from the floor and carries her slowly towards the bull. Holding the motionless body in his arms, he stands there utterly still for a few moments, then sets the woman on her feet, and a choreography centred on the body and the ground begins with the other white-clad figures who have by then filtered onto the stage.

In Castellucci's staging, the sight of the bull gently courting – and quite literally circling – the naked female body may bring with it the sultry breath of the unseen orgy. This impression is all the stronger because the pairing of the nude woman with the bull advancing majestically towards her evokes the sensual myth of Europa, in which Zeus, in the guise of a bull of golden-yellow hue, abducts and possesses the mortal princess. According to the myth, when Zeus saw the beautiful Europa gathering flowers with her companions on the seashore, he

burned with desire for her and appeared before her in the form of a bull.

> "So came he into that meadow without affraying those maidens; and they were straightway taken with a desire to come near and touch the lovely ox, whose divine fragrance came so far and outdid even the delightsome odour of that breathing meadow. There went he then and stood afore the spotless may Europa, and for to cast his spell upon her began to lick her pretty neck. Whereat she fell to touching and toying, and did wipe gently away the foam that was thick upon his mouth, till at last there went a kiss from a maid unto a bull. Then he lowed, and so moving-softly you would deem it was the sweet cry of the flute of Mygdony, and kneeling at Europa's feet, turned about his head and beckoned her with a look to his great wide back." (Moschus 1912, 435)

The princess mounted the bull's back, and the animal sped away with her across the sea, carrying her all the way to the island of Crete, where the bull – that is, Zeus – possessed her. The sight of the Charolais bull and the naked female body together may quite reasonably evoke the story of Europa for the spectator, imbuing the scene with erotic tension and allowing the spectator to complete the image in imagination. The human and the animal become one within the correlation between the visible and the invisible.

The introduction of animals onto the stage elicits elemental, instinctive bodily sensations: rather than asking what these images mean, the spectator feels the tension generated by the muscular, flawless black body of the beautiful stallion as it paces restlessly in the stage trap beside Salome writhing on the ground, or by the bull's monumentality in relation to the fragile female body lying on the floor. The spectator registers the animal's presence against their own human scale and ap-

prehends its meaning somatically within this presence – within its overwhelming physicality – rather than arriving at it mentally by way of such simple equations as Jochanaan = horse or Golden Calf = Charolais bull. The intellectual connection thus becomes "inescapably close and available as lived experience", felt and understood at once, without either Salome's attraction to St John the Baptist, imagined by Oscar Wilde as mounting to the point of madness, or the ecstatic orgy described by Schoenberg in realist detail and erupting around the Golden Calf fashioned by Aron being expressed in concrete, unequivocal terms or shown directly on stage.

If we proceed from Castellucci's remarks – and from the understanding of correlation as a relation established between two or more things – then a relation is created between a dramatic "condition" (Christ's Last Supper, the prophet's physical beauty, the orgy surrounding the Golden Calf) and a stage image, that is, an objectivation (the appearances of a black stallion and the singer portraying Jochanaan, the simultaneous presence of the immense bull and the naked female body, the presentation of a hospice patient's last supper), without the objectivation exhausting the meaning or conceptual content of the other term for which it effectively stands. The objectivation does not explain the condition; rather than closing down interpretation, it opens up a space in which our experiences, memories, associations and phantasmagorias can unfold and set something in motion within us. The stage makes the essence of the given "condition" flash up within us (not necessarily through a conscious process), rather than covering it over and concealing it through some unequivocal visualisation – a handsome male body, the Golden Calf as an element of the set, or a pictorial evocation of the night in the Garden of Gethsemane familiar from paintings and films.

Yet Castellucci's understanding of the objective correlative does not necessarily coincide with Eliot's formulation, which brought the concept into general currency. Eliot writes, in effect formulating a general aesthetic principle: "The only way of

expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (1964, 124–125). According to this principle – which extends beyond literature and can be applied to other arts, including theatre – the emotional and semantic content presented in a work is not articulated directly; rather, it must be rendered apprehensible through a structured configuration comprising "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events", so that this configuration adequately elicits in the recipient the response intended by the artist.

If we take Eliot as our point of departure, we may argue that Castellucci invariably finds an objective correlative for whatever he seeks to express: the refrigerator containing the last supper requested by a hospice patient who has since died, the black stallion and the Charolais bull are all cases in point. Here the objective correlative is not, as Eliot suggests, "a situation, a chain of events" – not a dramatic component, in other words – but an image, and specifically a theatrical image. It does not conceal a determinate meaning that the spectator must identify before anything can be understood. The objective correlative possesses powerful emotional potential, but the emotion itself must be generated by the spectator.

Castellucci's theatre, in turn, acts as a catalyst, foregrounding visuality and thereby facilitating a sensory and emotional experience for the spectator. The director does not invest his images with a specific meaning or sense awaiting decipherment, which the spectator must then extract from them; rather, for particular "conditions", he finds images capable of eliciting an emotion in the most appropriate manner. Yet for that emotion to be elicited, the spectator must also be willing to give themselves over bodily to the experience of the production. After all, as Ernst Gombrich writes, "it needed two conditions […] to turn a stick into our hobby horse: first, that its form

made it just possible to ride on it; secondly – and perhaps decisively – that riding mattered" (1971, 7). Such willingness is a precondition for engagement with the production's images, an engagement that the "haptic space" (Astrié 2002, 8), operating through an absence of perspective, is intended to facilitate, since the production

> "does not represent a world any longer, but it becomes an 'operational field' […] [I]t proposes an 'haptic' and no longer optical space to the spectator. [...] Perspective, in fact, means 'seeing clearly', operating a rationalisation process of sight; it is representation of the depth and relief, creator of an optical space, since it is the reflection of a representation of the real world. The spectator finds himself structurally involved as a point of view. However, he remains outside the action, since the point of view implies a detachment from the subject." (ibid.)

Engagement with these images is further fostered by rendering the scenes and images rootless, as noted above: the spectator is thereby encouraged to attend not to history, culture, theatre or anything else activated by their knowledge, but to the image itself, whose elemental force elicits an emotion. The emotion need not be elicited in an entirely unmediated and direct fashion: it may arise through the evocation of an association or memory, or through an image or "condition" encountered in another work – a painting or film – or in life itself; yet the outcome is invariably an emotional – that is, bodily – response. Owing to the inseparability of body and consciousness, however, this response is not purely emotional but is imbued with powerful and often surprising intellectual content, even if it cannot immediately be rendered determinate or shaped into meaning capable of linguistic articulation.

The intellectual content implicit in Castellucci's images often manifests itself as an intimation or impression rather

than as meaning that can be verbalised in concrete and precise terms. Meaning, of course, cannot necessarily be circumscribed in language and may therefore best be described as a state of consciousness (see Fischer-Lichte 2008, 151); Castellucci's theatre, where meaning is articulated through the body and registered in bodily awareness, provides a striking example of this. The intimation, impression or state of consciousness assumes a different form in each of us, since no two bodies respond in exactly the same way to the memories, mental images and associations sedimented within them. Experiences, sensory imprints and unconscious connections, often impossible to isolate or disentangle, render every act of perception unique and unrepeatable. This does not, however, imply that the processes of perception and understanding are subjectively unconstrained or beyond reflection; it simply renders the spectator's experience of Castellucci's theatre profoundly personal and all the more enduring.

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Oana Stoica

Like a Punch in the Stomach

Bros was conceived by Romeo Castellucci in 2021 as a theatrical experiment interrogating violence in relation to the law and free will. Featuring one actor, Valer Dellakeza, two police officers and twenty-three ordinary people – different at each performance, recruited in the host city and given only a few rehearsals in which to learn to follow precisely the instructions relayed to them onstage through earpieces – *Bros* investigates police brutality at its most immediate level. This theme is closely bound up with violence perpetrated by American police against people of colour, for which George Floyd has become emblematic. He was killed in Minneapolis in 2020, a year before the premiere of *Bros*, by a police officer who knelt on his neck for several minutes. This was the moment when #BlackLivesMatter became a global movement.

Yet the production also proved prescient: a year after its premiere, in 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine generated scenes of extreme violence, some recorded and circulated online, others discernible only from the traces left behind. Physical torture has re-emerged as a reality of war, and one scene in the production re-creates waterboarding, a practice prohibited under all military conventions. *Bros* also contains scenes that seem to anticipate the current protests in France against raising the retirement age – protests marked by fierce confrontations between demonstrators and police. Indeed, in an interview for RFI, Matei Vişniec asked Castellucci whether theatre had anticipated the war in Ukraine. Castellucci replied that "unfor-

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tunately, violence never ceases to be relevant. […] Reality is always more powerful than fiction." Yet *Bros*, too, is a powerful production – so powerful that, at one point, I felt afraid, even though I knew that "it was only theatre". That "only" matters because *Bros* also places theatre itself under scrutiny, together with its function of representing reality.

Bros was presented in Timișoara with the support of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Bucarest as part of FEST-FDR Seasons, a year-long festival organised by the Timișoara National Theatre and curated by Oana Borș. Featuring Romanian and international guests, this edition was conceived especially for the European Capital of Culture programme.

Bros is a performative construction operating on multiple levels. The space is empty, at times populated by intimidating metal installations – a kind of sonar resembling those mounted on tanks, which becomes almost humanoid, like a surveillance robot – or, conversely, enchanting ones – a sort of organ with flexible pipes that release water and steam as it plays – as well as immense, striking photographs, all of them portraits: Samuel Beckett, master of non-narrative, non-conflict and non-character, of the absurd and of life as futile agony; the profile of a young woman; a man seen from behind; and a gibbon, I think, with a searching gaze, posing "artistically". A life-sized wooden child, a representational puppet, appears as the leader of the police officers, communicating with them through screams; it is a caricature of Hitler. The space is dark and held in half-light, at times traversed by tightly focused spotlights that scan the area like prison searchlights sweeping a detention zone; neon tubes cast a cold, intimidating glow. The principal character is the group of police officers in dark uniforms, a brotherhood of aggressive masculinity. These bros – the word derives from "brothers" – move in unison or compose complex tableaux, many of them violent; some are tableaux vivants based on celebrated paintings: Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*; I believe I also discerned *The Night Watch*; and numerous images of the Passion of Christ. In counterpoint

stand three figures in white: the prophet Jeremiah, played by Valer Dellakeza; a nude young man, a victim of the police, who is savagely beaten in a scene recalling the Passion of Christ; and a child. Jeremiah's voice is lost in the maelstrom of violence, while that violence – as we read in the text handed to every spectator upon entering – comes from the Lord himself: "You are my hammer and weapon of war: / with you I break nations in pieces; / with you I destroy kingdoms; / with you I break in pieces the horse and his rider; / with you I break in pieces the chariot and the charioteer…" Dressed in white, his imposing beard accentuating the image, Dellakeza appears as a wandering prophet who receives, with some bewilderment, the commands of a God taking vengeance on human frailty.

There is also an olfactory layering in *Bros*: the smell of heated metal and the choking stench of blanks fired from pistols mingle with the scent of incense. Castellucci's irony is palpable in this deliberately irreverent juxtaposition of violence and divinity. It is worth recalling that his production *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (2010) provoked protests in France, both in the streets and inside the theatre during the performance itself – this excerpt shows why. *Bros* caused discord in Italy, where audiences split into two camps, vociferously expressing their sharply opposed reactions, because Castellucci essentially equates power with divinity, and here power manifests itself through violence. In a Catholic country, this assault on the divine by a Castellucci who has always sought to interrogate divinity and expose its vulnerability and lack of benevolence elicited a response commensurate with the "affront".

Yet the most powerful element of *Bros* is its sound: an expansive, complex, industrial construction whose sonorities materialise violence – the dull thud of a human body being struck repeatedly, the buzzing of neon tubes and pistols, the staccato sound of machine-gun fire, the victim's rapid breathing, the rhythmic barking of the dog – an unusual performer that functions here as an instrument of intimidation and part of the ma-

chinery of policing. The sound is loud, metallic and vibrant; speakers are positioned throughout the space – some, I assume, at floor level in the auditorium, since the seats themselves tremble – and the spectator feels it within the body, as though inhabited by it. Strictly speaking, no violence actually takes place in the production. No act of aggression is represented naturalistically: every movement is visibly choreographed and ostentatiously presented as such. The police officers paint their faces with "blood"; the beatings are created through a choreographed dynamic between aggressor or aggressors and victim, in which each blow is mimed while the body being beaten convulses violently without ever being touched. And yet the sensation of witnessing – and, at one point, even participating in – acts of aggression is extraordinarily powerful, arising almost entirely from this sound felt directly within the body, like a blow.

There is very little text: it is either almost inaudible or displayed in Latin on black, funereal banners, like encrypted commands – something akin to tablets of Jeremiah. The ending is once again ironic, with the appearance of the words "De pullo et ovo" (The Chicken and the Egg). Those who inherit the earth will reproduce its violence: the child, identified on his white tunic as Ovo (the egg) – that is, the beginning – receives the police baton like a sceptre. The new power is violent. Humanity endlessly repeats the same mistakes. God grants humankind dominion over the world, but humanity loses its free will and abuses that power. Group tableaux evoke fascism, with the formation of police officers raising their arms sideways in a gesture suggestive of the Nazi salute. Since the performers are mostly amateurs – ordinary people, different in every city where the production is staged – the relationship between the director-as-demiurge and the performers-as-executants, as well as the interrogation of theatre as an interface with reality, becomes evident. The performers wear earpieces through which they receive instructions during the performance; they theatrically represent the raw, brutal force of the police – vio-

lence commanded by a "God" of the stage. Castellucci is ultimately presenting parallel imbalances of power. The director–performer relationship mirrors the God–human relationship; it is a representation of it. Here, the performer loses both identity and free will, remaining – or becoming – a mere executant. Who, then, is responsible for the violence and for the creation?

I have always preferred Castellucci's productions that come closer to performative installations, such as *Hey Girl!*, to the expansive, hyper-metaphorical constructions that characterise most of his work. I have also appreciated his religious iconoclasm in works such as *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* – which is, in fact, a production about ageing, illness and the deterioration of the human body – and *Purgatorio*, from the *Divine Comedy* trilogy, a production about child abuse. *Bros* encompasses both strands. It is emotionally and physically terrifying, even though the only moment when the audience comes into close proximity with the performers occurs when they descend into the auditorium and stand in the aisles between the seats, half-concealed in shadow and accompanied by the full sonic arsenal, including the barking dog onstage. In practical terms, nothing happens, yet the mastery of the directorial construction at this moment – particularly the power of the sound – creates profound discomfort among the audience.

Bros is an extraordinarily dense production, owing to the themes it addresses, the depth of its reflections upon them and the immense machinery of symbols and metaphors operating across every dimension of the performance – visual, sonic, olfactory, physical and dramaturgical. In all its dark splendour, *Bros* is evidence of remarkable artistic intuition and an exemplary multilayered performative construction, but also a warning about the risk of losing our humanity.

Oltița Cîntec

With Romeo Castellucci in the Lowest Circle of Human Hell

As the audience enters the auditorium, the stage presents itself as a dark abyss. In an all-black setting bathed in hazy light, an oversized, multi-barrelled machine gun rotates on its own axis, prophetically charging the atmosphere with conflict. A low-pitched sonic backdrop – a combination of frequencies and intensities that assails the senses – hits you squarely in the solar plexus. It attacks your eardrums, and somehow you can touch, smell and see the sound. This is the prologue to Romeo Castellucci's *Bros* – produced by Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, Italy, in association with a dozen theatres and art festivals all around the world. In everything he creates – theatre, opera and installations – Castellucci displays an astonishing originality. His origins in the visual arts are unmistakable: he paints with actors, sounds, images and dance within the theatrical frame, generates meanings and treats the stage box as a three-dimensional visual field.

Bros is about institutionalised human violence, about the Tartarus into which we sometimes choose to descend – despite being higher beings – arming ourselves with batons, rifles, machine guns, pistols or whatever other potentially lethal blunt instrument lies to hand, and brutalising ourselves in the process. Its dramaturgy does not unfold as a linear narrative and has no epic structure; instead, it strings together brief stories in a tightly controlled rhythm, sometimes several simultaneously,

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This essay is an expanded version of the article "Cu Romeo Castellucci, în cel mai de jos cerc al iadului uman" [With Romeo Castellucci in the Lowest Circle of Human Hell], published in *Observator cultural*, no. 1155, 27 April 2023.

all unified by a single organising principle. The dominant sensation is one of impending violence, enlistment and control imposed through coercion and punishment.

The sound design – by Scott Gibbons, a magician who shapes the audible into astonishing forms – is itself a protagonist. I perceived it as a creative echo of the artist's work in *Hey Girl!*, a suite of highly conceptual, coded micro-narratives. The acoustic envelope renders the fiction in sound. The soundscape of *Bros* expands the action beyond the stage: it seems to emanate from backstage and somewhere beyond, channelling an entire world through the amplification system directly into our ears and bodies, where it continues to reverberate long afterwards. It is an assault on the sensorium. Sound is spatialised, and unexpected objects are treated as instruments from which it emanates. Sonic vibrations, together with deliberate, explosive fluctuations in frequency and volume, create electroacoustic textures and rhythmic energies. Gibbons has collaborated with Castellucci since 1998, and the consonance between their visions is apparent across the many productions they have created together. The sounds deployed here are physically intense: they are registered by the entire body or by specific parts of it – the chest, back or head. Whether delivered frontally (for Castellucci, theatre, like painting, is defined by frontality) or, at times, in surround sound, they break new ground. The sonic space is composed of "epiphanies" (see Castellucci and Sala 2023): natural sounds from beyond the range of human hearing, technologically captured by Gibbons and translated into forms accessible to human perception, industrial noise and unexpected juxtapositions. This accounts for their strangeness. Emitted as though from another world, they alter our pulse and breathing. In *Giulio Cesare* (1997), a work inspired by Shakespeare, Cicero and several Latin historians, Castellucci offers a fragmentary reconstruction of the ancient world by foregrounding that world's concern with rhetoric (see Cîntec 2016). We hear the movement of the larynx: the director draws upon the biological stratum of speech, while an

endoscope renders phonation both visible and audible. In *Inferno*, the "noises" made by blood circulating through arteries and veins, the sounds of our own bones and so forth convey, in concentrated form, other worlds and other facets of the human. The sound score also performs multiple functions in *Bros*: it generates tension (bursts of gunfire, booming detonations, and so forth); operates contrapuntally (an operatic aria sung *piano* after one of the most harrowing sequences); creates atmospheres – nocturnal ones, for example (the chirping of crickets); conjures unseen characters, stimulating our imagination through the sound of footsteps; suggests spatial sensations (ascent or descent); and deploys unusual frequencies in unexpected alternations (the crack of a baton, angelic piano chords). The richness of the soundscape unfolds deliberately at an *andante* pace, activating hypnotic rituals with metronomic regularity. Like Chinese water torture. The sonic layer of *Bros* carries dramaturgical connotations: its technological mediation transforms sound into an exogenous force, deliberately desynchronised from the visual dimension. It acts as an emotional trigger, drawing upon the less familiar register of *dark ambient*.

Within this interplay of media, the sensory dimension of spectatorship becomes central. Castellucci establishes a mode of "writing" through visual structures, to which sound contributes substantially. He deconstructs theatre as representation and replaces it with a "visual dramaturgy" (Lehmann 2006, 93).

The climactic moment is that of a naked body collapsed on the black boards of the stage, curled into a child's defensive posture and repeatedly struck with a baton. A precise choreography lays bare with clinical detachment the mechanics of brutality over the course of a few seconds that stretch interminably. Pain on an epic scale assumes the form of mute cries, articulated through the body's tense reactions after every blow, each one marked by sound. As we watch the body curl inward under the assault, its inarticulate "cries" for help revert to an infant's whimpers that soften even the most hardened hearts. These are moments in which malign sensory presences engulf us.

A child dressed in white appears as a barely discernible form, almost an optical illusion, and inevitably evokes archetypal innocence. The child witnesses these "protocols" of brutality and of regimentation through the transmission of the "model". The image also invokes the recurring cycles of history – an invitation, an exhortation to halt these nightmarish patterns of evil perpetrated by human beings against one another.

Most striking of all is the vertical interplay of fountain jets erupting in controlled bursts from oxygen cylinders, spraying fine droplets of water in synchrony with soaring organ chords. Through their glacial grandeur, music and image temper the emotional ferocity of the stage arrangements and the daunting complexity of the subject. The dramatic intensity rises and falls with the restrained yet perfectly delineated stream, which erupts in time with the music, granting our besieged state of mind a brief reprieve.

Bros is a visceral production that gives aggression material form through stylisation, making you feel it through sight and sound. It narrativises this aggression without words, rendering a savagery that recalls our animal nature and the behaviour of the pack. The production is also about commands, manipulation and subjugation. Its choral cast comprises twenty-three men identically costumed as police officers, in black uniforms and with the equipment characteristic of law-enforcement agencies, as well as two officers – always played by Luca Nava and Sergio Scarlatella. Some two dozen ordinary people, selected from among the residents of the host cities, form a participatory element that fosters engagement and promotes awareness of the production's themes. This collective character rehearses for two or three days, and during the performance each participant is told through an earpiece what to do – a tactic for deciphering the algorithms of command, submission and blind obedience. The convention is extremely strict: the performers do not know in advance which orders they will be required to carry out, but have committed themselves to obeying them. Particularly telling is the sequence in which the assembled police offi-

cers venerate a figurine raised above their heads on an invisible plinth and mechanically imitate its movements – a perfect illustration of the forms of uncritical behaviour that cause so much harm in the world. For evil – and dictatorship as one of its forms – does not insinuate itself into the world unaided; it requires complicity. This human machine moves through exact, faultless geometries under directions issued from *offstage*. Castellucci is highly skilled in mass choreography, and this is not the first time he has enlisted residents of the cities visited by his productions, redefining spectatorship through artistic inclusion. In recent theatrical practice, the fusion of different expressive modes has also extended to encompass the audience. As a potentially creative component of the theatrical process, the audience is asked to enter actively into the artistic imaginary. In *Parsifal* (La Monnaie, Brussels, 2011), his first operatic production, Castellucci works with a mixed-age group whom he choreographs skilfully across the stage. In *Inferno* (2008), he relied on seventy to eighty extras selected through a *casting call* – not individuals who merely populated the stage, but "actors" whose participation caused small-scale stage actions to vary from one venue to another. Participation thus becomes a creative form of commitment to the project, while the non-professionals bring with them an imperfection that is also a form of authenticity. This also reflects a concern with sustainable forms of theatre and local resources.

Castellucci subtly blends the sacred and the profane – the latter in its crudest form. The only spoken interventions are those of the prophet Jeremiah, who delivers an allegorical monologue on the generalised deafness that has prevailed at certain junctures in the past, when, although we hear perfectly well, we choose to ignore warnings and allow history to repeat its ruinous course. For this role, Castellucci held an international audition, which was won by Valer Dellakeza of the Marin Sorescu National Theatre, Craiova, at the age of eighty-one. His experience finds its fullest expression in his delivery of the Romanian text – in accordance with the directorial concept,

the word functions as vibration, as transmitted vital energy, rather than as a bearer of semantic meaning – interspersed with several quotations in Latin: "You cannot tell the past what to do", "Celebrating the margins keeps the circle intact", "The part that appears is nothing without the part that does not appear", and so forth. Dressed in white and supported by a slender wooden staff, Jeremiah prophesies through word and corporeality. Dellakeza's delivery is resonant; he commands the pauses as markers of rhythm, controls anticipation, dramatically secularises the prophetic content and complements it with physical agility.

Large-scale photographs become visual citations that set meaning free (Samuel Beckett, an ancient statue, a monkey, the foot of a water bird, and so forth). Bringing animals onto the stage speaks nonverbally about the human; whether present as living beings or as reproductions, they perform a counter-intuitive function. The German Shepherd reifies power relations: trained and held on a leash, it embodies discipline in its purest form, while its bark and menacing demeanour give that discipline palpable expression. This creature, humanity's companion since the dawn of canine domestication, is a recurring presence in Castellucci's work. I recall the intensity of *Inferno*: in the production's brief prologue, first performed in the Cour d'Honneur of the Palais des Papes in Avignon, seven German Shepherds, each restrained on a chain by a handler at the edge of the stage, launch a controlled attack on the director, to the spectators' horror, after he introduces himself simply – "My name is Romeo Castellucci" – and dons a protective suit. The sequence ushers us into the atmosphere of Hell – "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate" / "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here". Someone places a dog pelt on Castellucci's back in an act of symbolic transference, invoking the three deadly sins in Dante's work (the lion as pride, the leopard as lust and the she-wolf as greed). As a manifestation of post-anthropocentrism, the dog's presence evokes archetypes and reconfigures the human and the animal through mythological references trans-

posed into the present – pathways leading back to an immemorial time when relations between humans and animals were different. In *The Four Seasons Restaurant*, an untrained dog eats, in full view of the audience, the artificial tongues that ten young actresses cut from their own mouths one after another at the beginning of the performance, and takes possession of the space. The curtain then repeatedly falls and rises, revealing the same ten young women in poses evocative of Botticelli's paintings as they recite passages from Friedrich Hölderlin's *The Death of Empedocles* (see Pochko 2012). A German Shepherd also appears in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, while in Act III of *Die Walküre* nine Friesian horses – glossy black, with long manes and tails, a breed favoured by knights for its solemn elegance – bear the bodies of fallen heroes to Valhalla. Wagner's grandiloquence meets Castellucci's visual language for the stage, realised in images in motion. These contrasts give bodily form to the idea of the limit. The Italian artist understands the tragic as a form that he explores ceaselessly, with paroxysm as its upper boundary. Love can be glimpsed in the background, not in its happy embodiments but in contexts that test our humanity, through the metaphorical and sensory configuration of the corner of the world into which he transports us. In *Die Walküre*, white doves carve out purity against a vast expanse of black and grey; several are seemingly strangled by means of a stage effect, without being harmed. The chromatic opposition thereby assumes profound symbolic force for the spectator, in a sequence of dark splendour. The reception of Castellucci's works is an act of personal reimagining. The presence of animals (elsewhere goats, sheep, donkeys, cats, rabbits and so forth) stems from Castellucci's interest in "alien presences on stage, like children, machines, animals, etc. There is no hierarchy of roles in my theatre: everyone and everything, including technology, participates in the same way. My preoccupation is to provide a wave of feelings which are able to touch the spectator simultaneously through all elements onstage" (Laera 2009, 9). These appearances, unusual within the theatrical canon, invite hermeneutic

interpretation through the ancestral symbols associated with them. Within a stage polyphony whose postdramatic artistic logic is fragmentary, non-linear and repetitive, the hermeneutic codes belong to each individual spectator, who brings them into the auditorium; they derive from general cultural knowledge, an appetite for the aesthetic, a capacity for reimagining, empathic engagement and so forth.

Romeo Castellucci's visual theatre is structured in layers of depth. It is a radical art, experienced physically. Water cannons, blood being washed away, a body bag, waterboarding, dominant black, a little white, a touch of red and milky light paint the dark side of our world in *Bros*, conjuring a mire-filled dream from which there is no escape. For the Italian artist, space is a state created by sound, light and darkness – elements that define the reality being invoked. The director also makes room for salvation. I read the conclusion, with the collective convulsions of the law-enforcement officers and the seraphic presence of an adolescent in immaculate garments, as an opening towards the possibility of awakening before it is too late. His journeys of the imagination lead us down into the lowest circle of human hell, giving concrete form to the essence of violence in a disturbing compositional puzzle.

Sometimes we find ourselves unable to tear our gaze away from something atrocious, experiencing in real life an irrational attraction to existential darkness. It is this hypnotic pull of evil that Romeo Castellucci portrays in *Bros*. Through a stringent and effective aesthetic discipline, he awakens in the spectator a sombre potential for questioning. Theatre is a place of terrible truths, not of delight.

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Hannah Gelesz

The Beginning and End of All Things On Romeo Castellucci's Salzburg Staging of Bartók and Orff

At the Salzburg Festival on 26 July 2022, Béla Bartók's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* was presented, followed, as its counterpart, by Carl Orff's choral oratorio-opera *De temporum fine comoedia*, a modern mystery play of "world theatre", as Orff himself defined it. The two one-act works were staged by the same creative team: the musical interpretation was by Teodor Currentzis, while the stage vision was Romeo Castellucci's. In *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, I took part as the only Hungarian involved, working as language coach alongside the conductor and the director; I also coached the two singers in the Bartók opera, the Lithuanian Aušrinė Stundytė (Judith) and the Finnish Mika Kares (Bluebeard), in the prosody of the Hungarian language, and accompanied them throughout the musical and stage rehearsals. This study analyses the two works – the creative process and the completed production – from a perspective that, by virtue of my involvement, is both professional and personal.

The pairing of the two works is surprising – the combination itself was also a world premiere – and the idea originated with the Austrian pianist Markus Hinterhäuser, artistic director of the Salzburg Festival between 2017 and 2026. Bartók's only opera is usually – and traditionally – staged together with his pantomime or ballet (*The Miraculous Mandarin* or *The Wooden Prince*), and theatre scholarship has accordingly tended to analyse it in conjunction with these works, although it is an autonomous work and, in many respects, merits analysis in its own right. Over the past decade or two, there has been a marked increase – particularly outside Hungary – in attempts

to release Bartók's aesthetic from the weight of the traditional consensus, or constraint, governing its presentation, placing the opera in ever bolder musical and theatrical contexts. A recent example is *Trittico Ricomposto – Barbablú e Tabarro*.[1] Whereas expert opinion proved far more willing to accept and absorb the pairing of Puccinian verismo and *realismo magico* with Bartók's avant-garde, modernist-symbolist opera, the Salzburg concept – perhaps the boldest, yet also the most intriguing, artistic pairing to date – proved deeply divisive among audiences and critics, above all music critics, Currentzis and Castellucci notwithstanding. What they saw as a weakness, and on that basis invoked to question the legitimacy of the idea, was precisely the virtue of Hinterhäuser's vision: the confrontation of two extremes. *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) and the *Comoedia* – in its revised, definitive version of 1981 – are separated by exactly seventy years, as well as by the immense gulf between the two creative aesthetics, and by the bloodbath of the twentieth century. Seen in the "big picture", seventy years may seem a mere instant in music history; in the context of the twentieth century, however, it marks an enormous difference.

Bartók's only opera is regarded as one of the paradigmatic works of twentieth-century music theatre; it has by now become part of the standard repertoire and remains a constant presence in opera houses across the world. A distinctive feature of its stage reception history is that, over the past quarter of a century, there has been a proliferation of major productions based on the work, with landmark approaches to its interpretation and staging emerging both in Hungary and abroad. The turn of the millennium therefore marks a watershed, since until then Michael Powell's 1963 film version of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* had been the decisive reference point in the interna-

The original version of this essay appeared in Hungarian in *Theatron*, vol. 17, no. 3. (2023), pp. 102–117.

[1] A pairing of Béla Bartók's one-act opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* and Giacomo Puccini's one-act opera *Il tabarro*, directed by Johannes Erath and presented as a co-production between the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma and the Puccini Festival, Torre del Lago, in April 2023.

tional opera world, both interpretatively and in terms of theatre aesthetics, while in Hungary the same role was played by Miklós Szinetár's legendary 1981 film, starring Kolos Kováts and Sylvia Sass. (It is interesting that, although the work in question is a stage work, both of these reference versions are films.) For years, even decades, Powell's and Szinetár's films effectively fixed the work's interpretative possibilities, becoming so-called *Bluebeard* reference points – with all the advantages and disadvantages this entailed. These film adaptations faithfully follow Balázs's dramaturgy and the psychology of Bartók's music: what happens in them is precisely what the libretto describes and prescribes. Both approaches raise a question that is by no means negligible in theoretical terms, and remains very much alive in theatrical practice: to what extent must a production follow the libretto; whether this kind of textual fidelity determines – or *can* determine – the success of a contemporary adaptation; and what the process of adaptation itself is ultimately about. In the early 2000s, the first innovative directorial interpretations began to emerge – by La Fura dels Baus, Barrie Kosky, Mariusz Treliński, Kasper Holten, Balázs Kovalik, Róbert Alföldi and Kornél Mundruczó – which dared to break away from the interpretative traditions associated with Bartók, Balázs, Powell and Szinetár, and, with them, from the medieval and folk-ballad traditions, articulating more boldly and more expansively the encounter between "the" Man and "the" Woman – or, rather, the impossibility of that encounter. By contrast with the directors mentioned above, Romeo Castellucci follows with the utmost precision the dramaturgy dictated by the symbiosis of music and text, while opening the radically abstract yet intensely concrete micro-reality of Judith and Bluebeard onto the broadest and freest philosophical and theoretical understanding of the world, linking it to Orff's oratorio and raising the two works to a further aesthetic and interpretative level. To analyse and understand this, I consider it necessary to engage closely with the two musical works.

How dark your castle is
Béla Bartók: Duke Bluebeard's Castle

"Folk music, then, is a phenomenon of nature. […] This creation developed with the same organic freedom as nature's other living organisms: flowers, animals, and so forth. This is precisely why folk music is so beautiful, so perfect" (Bartók 1981, 14). *"For this reason, these melodies embody the highest artistic perfection. They are veritable examples of how a musical idea may be expressed most perfectly in the smallest form and by the most modest means"* (Bartók 1931, 626).

It is well known that the appearance of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály marked the first major turning point in the history of Hungarian opera, which until then had been defined by Ferenc Erkel's historicising–patriotic national operas. During the roughly seventy years between Erkel and Bartók/Kodály – Erkel's first opera of European stature, *Bátori Mária*, was premiered in 1840 – no opera composer of outstanding stature, innovative ambition and/or truly exceptional talent emerged, as is also borne out by the processes of canonisation and the reception history of individual works. Károly Goldmark, Mihály Mosonyi and Ferenc Doppler could, of course, be mentioned; yet Goldmark and Doppler, by virtue of their musical culture, should be treated rather as Austro-Hungarian, while Mosonyi – although the composer of several pioneering works in both instrumental and vocal music – unfortunately had almost all his operas weakened by markedly anaemic and feeble libretti.

The most successful and most exceptional works in the history of opera remain in the canon – and in the repertory – because they were born of a great encounter: the meeting of two extraordinary creators, magicians of music and word. The poet who understands music and the musician who understands poetry create by inspiring one another and respecting the other's knowledge and inspiration. Such encounters produced, to give only a few examples, the Shakespearean masterpieces of Arrigo

Boito and Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello* and *Falstaff*; Pierre-Joseph Bernard and Jean-Philippe Rameau's opera traversing an entire universe, *Castor et Pollux*; Luigi Illica, Giuseppe Giacosa and Giacomo Puccini's heart-rending tragedy of a Parisian micro-reality, *La bohème*; and Béla Balázs and Béla Bartók's enigmatic and psychologically extraordinarily multifaceted work, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*.

The elemental power of *Bluebeard* lies – alongside its shocking novelty – in the equally high calibre of its music and text, and in the perfect, mutually complementary interweaving of the two "textures". At the time of the work's premiere, however, many did not see it this way. Like every innovative work, *Bluebeard* had a long road to travel: its world premiere took place in 1918 at the Royal Hungarian Opera House, but it was only some twenty years later that it began to make its way towards international success. At the time of the work's premiere, criticism was directed above all at Béla Balázs's libretto: "The reviews are almost entirely in agreement that Balázs's piece is not suitable for musical setting (*Pesti Napló, Az Újság, Alkotmány, Budapesti Hírlap, 8 Órai Újság, Az Est*); that it is a weak work (*Magyar Hírlap, A Hét* and the papers already mentioned); and that it is obscure, or indeed confused and incomprehensible (*Politisches Volksblatt, Neues Pester Journal, Pester Lloyd* ['etwas unklare Symbolik'], *Vasárnapi Újság, A Hét*). For *Pesti Hírlap*, the work recalled a feverish vision, and the paper regarded it as a brief in defence of sadism. Several critics charged it with imitating Maeterlinck, while a number of reviews claimed that the *plotless* text had entirely destroyed the music's potential as well, and that the opera, purely because of the poem's poor quality, *could not have succeeded* […]" (Molnár in Burda and Kis 2006, 78). Perhaps less vehemently, Bartók's music also came under considerable criticism; nevertheless, musical symbolism was more readily accepted than literary symbolism: "Is the music of the future the one for which Béla Bartók is laying the foundations? I do not know. I do not dare to assert it; but I will say that what he produces is utterly

original and valuable, and for this he deserves the fullest respect and recognition" (Demény in Burda and Kis 2006, 83). Sándor Bródy saw the production both at the dress rehearsal and at the premiere, and was unstinting in his sincere enthusiasm for the work:

> "*Duke Bluebeard's Castle* is not only the greatest musical sensation I have experienced; in all my life, for as long as I have been interested in art, Bartók's work has made the greatest impression on me. […] This opera was a revelation to me, like a new continent, something in the nature of an epiphany. All at once I came into contact with music, with which until then I had had only as much connection as the most ordinary layman. […] If I may be more daring and theorise, I believe that what bursts forth from it, from the work of this Hungarian genius, is courage: the break with outworn tradition, the new force that is the lifeblood of all the arts; behind it there shines immense culture, and at the same time a spotless virginal purity" (Bródy in Burda and Kis 2006, 86).

Bródy also spoke appreciatively of the libretto: "My colleagues have written of Béla Balázs with the least enthusiasm; I believe they are wrong: it is simple, theatrical and poetic. […] Among opera librettists, this Balázs ranks very high; and here he is also particularly sympathetic, because he did not place himself in faithful and self-sacrificing service to a popular composer" (ibid.). Alongside Bródy, Kodály was the most perceptive critic of the opera's controversially received libretto, even though, as he remarked towards the end of his life, the work was so alien to him that he never considered setting it to music – and, as we know, Balázs had originally offered it to him – whereas Bartók immediately felt it to be kindred and seized on it at once.

Balázs's text thus proved extraordinarily inspiring for Bartók; at the same time, it presented him with a formidable challenge.

> "In the process of recreating the speech-like quality of Hungarian folk song on the operatic stage and forging a dramatic Hungarian vocal declamation, Bartók faced a dual compositional task in his treatment of the text: he had to take account of the laws governing stress patterns in the Hungarian language, while also breaking up the monotony of the versification. Two possibilities presented themselves for counteracting the rhythmic uniformity generated by the text: on the one hand, the transformation of the verse variants into rhythmic formulae; on the other, the exploitation of the variant layers of parlando rhythm, which remains the principal source of rhythmic variety even in performances in foreign languages" (Pintér 2010, 124).

Although Béla Balázs belonged to the *Nyugat* circle, he is still known today for a body of poetry – the only aspect of his extraordinarily multifaceted œuvre under consideration here – that is far more abstract, philosophical, reverie-like and remote from immediate intelligibility than that of his contemporaries in the great turn-of-the-century poetic generation around Ady. His libretto does not readily yield to translation into another language; in the original, this "folkloristic musicality is, of course, also enhanced by a metre with an unmistakably native Hungarian sound, whose rhythm, however, cannot appear in the English (or Italian) version, since the laws of the language do not in themselves allow for the realisation of Hungarian-style accentual metre" (Szűcs 2017, 122).

Between 2021 and 2023, I found myself involved in three productions based on Bartók's opera; all three were staged abroad – two in Italy, in Novara and Rome, and one in Austria, in Salzburg –, each with a very different approach and creative

aesthetic. I assumed different roles in the three productions: in Novara I was assistant director and language coach; at the Salzburg Festival, language coach; and in Rome, costume assistant. In Novara, in 2021, I was also asked to produce a new Italian translation of the libretto for the surtitles, since the translation generally used in Italian opera houses – Giorgio Pressburger's 1985 version – resembles a florid *bel canto* libretto, replete with complex linguistic structures and countless qualifying adjectives, and bears no relation to Balázs's modern, spare, almost minimalist text. An example of why this may happen is that, in the essentially compressed and metrically taut verse lines of the prologue, the rhyming pairs operate both figuratively and literally: *bent – jelent, fent – bent, fent – lement*. These are hard, percussive words that close off both sentence and thought. Their sequence is reflected in neither the Italian nor the English texts: in Italian, *dentro – fuori, si alzi – dentro, si alzi – s'abbasserà*;[2] in English, *outside – within, is raised – within, is raised – dropped again*.[3] The play of figurative meaning and "consonance" is lost; only the semantic dimension can be conveyed. For this reason, translators working into the target language almost invariably feel the need – as a kind of *horror vacui* – to decorate the resulting "stripped-down" text. The consequence of literal translation, however, is the inevitable loss of verse form, and thus of the unity of content and form. Similarly, translators "waste" a great deal of time and energy searching for synonyms. This, however, damages the rhythm and meaning of the text, for it eliminates the force with which deliberate verbal repetition reinforces what is being said, together with its emotional motivation: in argumentative enumeration – "I left my father, my mother, / I left my fair elder brother, / I left my betrothed"; in terrified refusal – "I need no roses, I need no sunlight! /

[2] Translated by Giorgio Pressburger (1985), in Béla Bartók, *Il mandarino meraviglioso: Il castello del duca Barbablù* (Firenze: Giunti Editore, 2012).

[3] Translated by Péter Bartók (2005), in the programme booklet for the 2022 Salzburg production, 12.

I need no roses, I need no sunlight! / I need no… I need no… / I need no…"; and as a means of demand – "Give me the other keys! / Give me the other keys! / Every door must be opened! / Every door!"

The Salzburg production was one of the outstanding projects of my career, and it is linked to one of the most important professional and personal encounters of my life: working with the director, designer, visual artist and philosopher Romeo Castellucci. During rehearsals for the production, we used my Italian translation; I insisted that, if the story and the libretto were to serve as the principal point of departure for his stage adaptation, then we should work from a text that remained as close as possible to the original Hungarian work. Castellucci's theatre is not centred on verbal expression; yet the few words that are spoken and made visible carry a hundredfold weight.

The most interesting part of the rehearsal process was the work of textual interpretation that took place in the rehearsal room with the singers and Castellucci, as well as the musico-linguistic work carried out with the singers, the conductor, Currentzis, and our répétiteur, Petros Bakalakos, with only a piano at our disposal. It is a great advantage when the conductor also takes part in the staging rehearsals; fortunately, Currentzis regarded this as particularly important. Castellucci, as a director, and Currentzis, as a musician, were both encountering this opera for the first time, and the unfolding and interpretation of the symbiosis between music and text genuinely took shape as the unified vision of the two artists. For this, of course, the musical, intellectual and emotional interpretation of the two singers – or, more precisely, performing artists – Aušrinė Stundytė and Mika Kares was also indispensable. Words create rhythms, and rhythm sets the mind, the soul and the body in motion; this is how the complete transformation of two artists comes about on stage. Pronunciation, after all, is only one element: alongside it come stress, the rhythm of words and sentences, the coordination of textual and musical rhythm, and the mastery of the more freely interpretable rhythmic idiom, drawn from

ancient Hungarian folk songs, that is so central to this opera. This is not to mention the questions of intonation and dramaturgical interpretation.

> "The vocal parts of the opera cannot be described unambiguously as *parlando-rubato* in style. Its forms of sung stage declamation balance on the borderland between folk-derived *parlando-rubato*, the likewise folk-derived *tempo giusto*, and operatic declamation. Bartók classified the rhythms of folk music essentially according to two terms referring primarily to tempo and mode of performance: *parlando-rubato* and *tempo giusto*. In doing so, Bartók, as composer and creator of rhythm, brings into being an entirely distinctive *parlando-declamation*: he consistently differentiates the types of sung declamation from one another and, consequently, assigns them important dramaturgical functions. In poetry, of course, rhythm, the contrasts or similarities in the sound of words – one might say, the musical harmonies of words – are sometimes more important factors than the meaning of the words" (Pintér 2010, 142).

This study does not aim to offer a music-theoretical analysis – I myself am not a music historian, but a theatre-maker; yet, as part of my preparation for the Salzburg project, I immersed myself deeply in linguistic and musicological studies. Since the subject of this essay is a contemporary theatrical interpretation, however, and since the principal point of departure for its creator, Romeo Castellucci, in staging the opera was the text, the narrative and the dramaturgy, I considered it important to touch upon this question as well. For the core, the very soul, of Castellucci's staging and concept lies within this shell.

Bluebeard is the only widely known opera in the world that is sung in Hungarian. It was a privilege to represent this language and, in a broader sense, Hungarian culture, and to

spend a month in Salzburg, in such an international milieu, speaking about my own mother tongue, our history, our traditions and our "national soul". It was here that we crossed into a broader dimension, one that extended beyond the correction of rhythm, intonation and the proper pronunciation of consonants; at this point, from the professional plane of the production, there unfolded a dimension that was, for me, intensely personal, one in which I was speaking as much about myself as about my language.

I have lived and worked abroad for many years, yet to this day, in every international opera production, I feel as though I were in an ocean in which I must identify myself anew, again and again. At such moments, one becomes distanced from one's own reality and looks at oneself – and at how one became the person one is – through the "filter" of other, unknown people. It is a prismatic experience: we pass through others like light, enter into interaction with them, and are refracted by them into another form. Over the course of many years spent living abroad, the "emigrant" tries to immerse themselves in the language and customs of the country they have chosen – and, as an artist working in the world of opera, I would add to this the knowledge expected of that country's theatre, literature, music, architecture and philosophy, indeed of its entire cultural history. In this intense effort to learn, one may for a time also try to assimilate, only to realise – sooner or later – that this will never succeed, and that one will in fact always remain rootless. Yet there is nothing disheartening in this. What defines one is precisely the fact that one has come from elsewhere.

What was, however, entirely new and unfamiliar to me was that, in this situation, this process of encountering myself anew took place through a Hungarian work. Through a work that, in truth, within that international team in Salzburg, only I understood – the text, and its meaning as well. (Here I am speaking specifically of the meaning of the text, not of its interpretability.) What a *regösének* is – a ritual song of greeting, a kind of winter nature-incantation; what Hungarian folk

customs are, and which of them remain living traditions to this day. What the difference is between *A tavaszi szél vizet áraszt* [The spring wind blows the waters] – that is, an old-style folk song belonging to the so-called archaic stratum – and *A csitári hegyek alatt* [Under the Csitár mountains] – a new-style Hungarian folk song. What it means, and why it matters, to become familiar with folk song built on the five-note pentatonic scale in order to analyse and understand Bartók's music. Who Márta Sebestyén and Irén Lovász are. Why the Hungarian soul can be understood through the folk song *Szerelem, szerelem* [Love, love]. Why Kodály could write that "Hungarian folk song […] is not merely the echo of present-day village life, not only the expression of the 'primitive feelings of the villager', but the mirror of the entire Hungarian soul, […] as old as the Hungarian language itself" (Kodály 1930, 422). Why *csillag* ("star"), *szerelem* ("love") and *fülolaj* ("ear oil") can be considered the three most beautiful Hungarian words. And what *fülolaj* means.[4] Who Dezső Kosztolányi was. What a language is about; what the Hungarian language is about, where it comes from and where it is heading. (Most members of the team were, incidentally, aware of its Finno-Ugric origin, but less aware that this applies only to our language, not to the Hungarian people themselves.) Why Péter Esterházy could write: "the iridescence of words is not only spatial, but temporal too. Words have time, or, to put it differently: there is time in words, our time, the time of those who use them, our history, *ourselves*" (Esterházy 2003).

I do not wish to rely on stereotypes, in either direction, but it was a profoundly moving and uplifting experience that, for the first time in my life in an international production, we were able to move beyond the holy trinity of Lake Balaton,

[4] The list alludes to a well-known Hungarian reflection on the sensuous life of words: *csillag* and *szerelem* are semantically elevated words, meaning "star" and "love", whereas *fülolaj* means the prosaic "ear oil". The humour lies in the disjunction between meaning and sound: in Hungarian, the word's phonetic texture may be felt as unexpectedly beautiful despite the banality of what it denotes. (Translator's note.)

Ferenc Puskás and the Sziget Festival as the definition of the word *Hungarian* – without even bringing current political associations into the picture – and that the word could be approached on a philological level. I believe, or at least sincerely hope, that this working process gave the other participants at least as much as it gave me – which, of course, is not to my credit, except insofar as I was able to contribute to the discovery of the singularity of the work and of the culture it represents. For the first time in my life, I felt that *my* country was being approached with genuine curiosity, precisely because it was regarded as something rare. And, without any pathos-laden or patriotic declaration, this simply made me proud. So, too, did the moment when, during the première, I sat in the auditorium, tense throughout, listening with my eyes closed to Mika Kares singing the most beautiful aria in *Bluebeard*, after the opening of the seventh door – singing *in Hungarian*: "Szépek, szépek, százszorszépek. / Mindig voltak, mindig éltek. / Sok kincsemet ők gyűjtötték, / Virágaim ők öntözték, / Birodalmam növesztették. / Övék minden, minden, minden." ("Beautiful, beautiful, most beautiful. / They always were, they always lived. / They gathered many of my treasures, / They watered my flowers, / They made my kingdom grow. / Theirs is everything, everything, everything.")

A dark world, full of shadows – Carl Orff: De temporum fine comoedia

"We do not hear one another. We do not hear ourselves. We do not hear, we do not listen. But one cannot write music without a heart. Without a heart, one cannot make music in a group without knowing what is happening within that group. I do not teach people to read music. I teach them how to open their ears. To hear the world in which we all live" (Palmer 2008, 1:06–08).

Compared with Bartók's, Carl Orff's music approaches the interpretation of the world from an entirely different direction – indeed, from the opposite extreme. The artistic and personal reputations of the two composers are also very different, although their popularity is comparable. Yet while an enormous number of studies, analyses and biographies of Bartók have appeared to date, we know essentially very little about Orff. *Carmina Burana* has become almost a pop hit of classical music – even those who do not know it have heard it – yet Orff's œuvre, and his life, are far more complex and intriguing than this. When interpreting a work, priority must of course be given to understanding and deciphering the ideas articulated within it, rather than to probing the author's intention; yet Orff's personality and actions lie hidden in the deepest musical and textual recesses of the *Comoedia*. In the course of his life, he passed through the deepest hell; like Faust, he sold his soul, and the forgiveness granted at the end of the work can be understood as an absolution of himself no less than of humanity.

In moral terms, Orff is one of the most controversial artists of the twentieth century. His genius, and the monumentality and significance of his works, are beyond dispute. Alongside his work as a composer, the "Orff method", also known as *Orff-Schulwerk*, which he developed for children's music education, is likewise of decisive importance; it should be added that it began with pupils of the Hitler Youth and continues to exist in institutionalised form across the world, from Europe through Japan to South Africa. His method is based fundamentally on beat, on the beat of the body, on its recognition and use – in this respect it is connected to Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's eurhythmics – and Orff obsessively collected and studied Indian, Chinese and African percussion instruments. "Sound is movement. Sound prompts movement. Sound is dance. Dance is music. Music is a fundamental part of every human being" (Palmer 2008, 0:32–36). But why would someone choose the Last Judgement as the subject of his final work? "The sun will not rise tomorrow" is heard several times in the work, and in

the *Comoedia* not even the faintest glimmer of hope appears until the final five minutes of the opera.

Orff's life unfolded as a series of contradictions, each giving rise to the next. He was a Bavarian local patriot through and through, spent most of his life in Munich, and moved only in old age to Dießen am Ammersee, in the heart of Bavaria. He married four times, yet managed to secure burial in a monastery near Dießen. The idea of emigration never even occurred to him; he despised the Nazis, yet the Third Reich held him up as the country's foremost composer, and he silently acquiesced. *Carmina Burana* was premiered in 1937 and became extraordinarily popular in Nazi Germany. His closest friend and collaborator, Kurt Huber, was an active member of the White Rose,[5] the peaceful German resistance movement against the Nazi regime during the Second World War. Orff did not say a word in Huber's defence, although he was a prized figure for the regime and might have been able to prevent his friend's execution by the Gestapo. The documents of the Orff Zentrum reveal, however, that in order to secure post-war amnesty Orff lied, claiming that he too had been a member of the White Rose movement. In the final years of his life, he wrote an imaginary letter to Huber, in which he explained why he had had to act as he did and asked for his forgiveness. Orff wanted to remain apolitical; yet this was not a moment in world history – least of all in Germany, in Bavaria, in the hotbed of Nazism – when remaining neutral could truly have meant taking no position. Orff survived the war by compromising with the regime, and did so while his works remained on stage throughout. He had Jewish ancestry: his father was of partly Jewish descent, a fact which, curiously, came to light only after the war. He regarded Monteverdi as his master, and at the beginning of his career as a composer he was utterly fascinated by Baroque mu-

[5] The White Rose movement (German: *Weiße Rose*) was founded by Christian German students who were deeply shaken by the brutality with which the Nazis treated Jews and those with left-wing sympathies.

sic. Most of his works are grounded either in the mythic world of ancient Greece (*Oedipus*, *Orpheus*, *Antigonae*, *Prometheus*) or in Christian–Catholic culture (*Carmina Burana*, *De temporum fine comoedia*). In other words: in the great family tragedies, and in the conflict between God and Man. He gave scarcely any interviews during his life; his thoughts are known to us through his works and through the accounts of those close to him. According to his third wife, Luise Rinser, "Orff should have been born 2,500 years earlier, in Epidaurus. Instead, he found himself in Catholic, Baroque Bavaria, and over the decades this caused an irresolvable tension within him. Carl loved no one; he despised people. He used them – as long as he needed them. He needed me in order to emerge from his depression" (Palmer 2008, 1:55). It is not our task to pass judgement on him – he did so himself with his final work, *De temporum fine comoedia*.

Orff spent ten years writing the music and libretto of the *Comoedia*. Its subject is the Last Judgement, yet its conception is based on the collision of two dogmas. It reaches back not merely to Christological teaching[6] or to the doctrines of Augustine of Hippo, but much further: all the way to Origen, the Egyptian early Christian theological writer of the Alexandrian school, who wrote in Greek. The expression *apokatastasis panton*, "the restoration of all things", occurs in the New Testament, in Peter's speech in the Temple precincts (Acts 3:21). In the history of theology, Origen was the first among the early Church Fathers to base his teaching on the idea of the Last Judgement as renewal: *Omnium rerum finis erit vitiorum abolitio*, that is, *The end of all things will be the abolition of all evil*. This does not mean that every human being will be converted, but rather that the events foretold in the Old

[6] Christology (from Greek *christos*, meaning "anointed one"): the branch of Christian theology concerned with the nature and person of Jesus Christ on the basis of the biblical Gospels and the New Testament. Its primary field of inquiry is the relation between the nature and person of Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Testament prophecies will come to pass, as will the universal renewal of the earth. The verb *apokathistēmi*, on which the expression is based, originally means to put back, to restore, to return something to its original condition. On this view, God's salvific will removes from the created world the disorder caused by sin and brings every creature to a harmonious state of being – including Satan himself. The Last Judgement, then, is not eternal damnation, but the universal reconciliation of all things. Forgiveness.

The libretto was written in Ancient Greek, classical Latin and modern German, and each of the three languages has its own function and meaning within the work, as Werner Thomas, music historian and scholar of the classical world, points out: "ancient Greek is predominantly the language of 'prophecy and eschatological promulgation', a 'vehicle that expresses a mystical connection with the deity' and a 'medium of transcendence'. Latin, conversely, serves as the language of 'prayer, doxology[7] and hymns but also, of course, of their negative counterparts such as the rejection of evil, excommunication and conjuration'. German, finally, is 'the language of the folk, a language described by learned writers as »the vernecular« and as the »indigenous language« of the untutored'" (Rösch 2022, 111).

The *Comoedia* is a monumental work, requiring an enormous orchestra and chorus for its performance. The orchestral forces – in Salzburg, the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester – are astonishing: three pianos, three harps, eight double basses, six flutes and six piccolos, six E-flat and three B-flat clarinets, six horns, eight trumpets and eight trombones, a contrabassoon and a tuba. These are supplemented by a celesta doubling electric organ, a church organ and four violins. The percussion section consists of 25 to 30 musicians – at the conductor's dis-

[7] Doxology (from Greek *doxa*, "glory", and *logia*, "saying"): a Christian hymn used to praise the majesty of God. It is often used as the conclusion to canticles, psalms and hymns. Its origin can be traced back to the Jewish Kaddish prayer. In Trinitarian churches, it is used in honour of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

cretion, depending on the acoustics of the performance space – who play nearly a hundred traditional instruments from all over the world. According to the score, the live music is supplemented at certain points by a pre-recorded musical insert, which, in the case of the Salzburg production, was recorded in advance in St Petersburg with Currentzis's orchestra, musicAeterna; this, in turn, requires a piccolo, two trumpets in C, percussion instruments, three pianos and three double basses, as well as a children's choir. The chorus singing and acting on stage – the musicAeterna Choir and the Bachchor Salzburg – numbers sixty, while the children's choir singing from the orchestra pit – the Salzburger Festspiele und Theater Kinderchor – numbers twenty. Although Bartók's work is also scored for large orchestra, and was likewise performed by the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester – with strings, four flutes, including two piccolos, two oboes, cor anglais, three clarinets, four bassoons, including two contrabassoons, four horns, four trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, tam-tam, cymbals, suspended cymbal, xylophone, triangle, two harps, celesta and organ, as well as the two vocal roles, a soprano/mezzo-soprano and a bass-baritone – the scale of *Bluebeard* still falls short of Orff's orchestral apparatus. In the Salzburg performance, *Bluebeard* was performed first, and the length of the half-hour interval between the two works – although it also involved a major set change – was justified above all by the need to rearrange the orchestra pit. Moreover, the conductor's idea and concept was to "scatter" the music of the *Comoedia* throughout the space: the musicians, choruses and soloists were heard not only from the stage and the orchestra pit, but also from the openings carved into the rock face of the Felsenreitschule – the former boxes used for equestrian displays – and from the foyer outside the auditorium, while the chorus also sang from the orchestra pit. In addition to giving the music spatial depth through the alternation of near and distant melodies, this made the spectator feel as though they were sitting inside

the music. As though Orff's music were sounding within us, and from within us.

"Das ist das Ende!" – Bluebeard *and the* Comoedia *in Salzburg*

In Romeo Castellucci's vision, *Bluebeard* moves far away from the story of Charles Perrault's bloodthirsty medieval serial killer and the young ingénue who falls victim to him. It also moves beyond the well-established – once "trendy", but now rather worn and exhausted – psychoanalytic, or Freudian, interpretation, and essentially reframes the story from the ground up. It is no accident that the contemporary press drew parallels between the opera's world premiere and Debussy/Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*: a story with virtually no action, a drama of figures without clearly defined passions, of unspoken thoughts and emotions that have not taken form, unfolding in a dreamlike, fairy-tale atmosphere. Castellucci steps outside this frame, giving narrative form to the absence of action while nevertheless remaining on the plane of abstraction. In his vision, it is not Bluebeard who is the protagonist, but Judith; and the castle is not the third character, because the castle belongs to Judith – more precisely, it is part of her: it is her soul. "There are frequent hints of dance in the music, and the neraness and distance between the two bodies reveals the dynamics of *folie à deux*,[8] a mutual psychosis" (Matteo 2022, 90). The psychic dance, however, is led by Judith throughout: this story is her story, and it is about existence, solitude, the laying bare of the human soul, sin and absolution.

The first five minutes of the performance are a visceral auditory scene, through which the director immediately marks

[8] *Folie à deux*: "shared psychosis" (literally, "madness shared by two"). In psychiatry, the term refers to a very rare psychiatric syndrome in which the symptoms of psychosis – typically paranoia or a delusional belief – are projected from one individual onto another. As a result, both individuals come to share the same delusions and/or hallucinations, in a synergistic and potentially exponential manner.

out his field of operation, as well as the story and theme of the two hours to come, including the *Comoedia* that follows *Bluebeard*: in complete darkness, we hear an infant crying bitterly, and then, once it falls silent, the terrified sobbing of what is probably a woman. This simple yet ephemeral experience, opening onto mythological, cultural, narrative and emotional dimensions, leaves the spectator alone with their thoughts; only over the course of the performance are we given points of orientation for interpreting it. Judith is a mother, the mother of a dead child. It is not made entirely clear whether she embodies the mythological maternal figure of Medea or the biblical image of Mary; whether the loss of the child was the result of her own decision or occurred through no fault of her own. Yet the intellectual and cultural-historical "investigation" of this question is itself irrelevant. We do not see the child's death, nor what causes it. In rhetorical terms, this is elliptical storytelling: we do not see precisely *the thing itself*, only its consequences. And we do not see the child's death because we cannot see it. Because Castellucci does not show what cannot be shown. He excludes visuality, and as a result we perceive only the gaping hiatus, without understanding it. The director leaves us alone and entrusts to us the task of unravelling the entire complex of the performance. The image initially seen only in the mind's eye later takes bodily form on stage: we see Judith with a dead infant in her arms, as the manifestation of the experience of loss. For the performance is about loss. About Judith's work of mourning; and, more deeply, about the phenomenon of sin. The loss of a child is an unforgivable sin, and there is no feeling more painful than that of a parent burying their own child. One might say: this is not the order of the world. But what is order? Is there no pain in order? No loss? No mourning?

Everything takes place from Judith's perspective: the director shifts the point of view, moving us to the other side of the mirror.

> "It may have been something I read in one of David Foster Wallace's works that prompted this image. He asks why mothers are so loving; for him, behind this inexplicable, excessive love was concealed an original crime, a pain that underlaid it. Accordingly, loving affection is a compensatory mechanism. This theory has always fascinated me, even though it has no mythical, theological or philosophical correlative. It is simply a formidable idea. In our case, this conjectural grief is the stimulus for reconsidering the stage as Judith's mental force field. A pointer to indicate that everything that unfolds in front of our eyes can represent as a mental katabasis, a 'descent into hell', borne by this woman's phantasms. Here the seven ghostly doors thus correspond to stirrings of inner awareness, paths that give ever deeper access to this emotional landscape" (Matteo 2022, 88).

The point of departure is the *regös* song of the prologue – in the Salzburg performance, delivered in English, so that the production could begin in complete darkness, without even the surtitles becoming a distracting source of light – whose key sentence, and in fact the only real door in Castellucci's vision, is: "The curtained lashes of our eyes are raised: / Where is the stage: outside or within?" The parallel between eyelid and curtain is an injunction to reverse our gaze, and to experience the story in that way. We move from complete darkness to a flickering light, and back again into darkness. Judith is the "Mistress of the Night"; at the end of the performance, she becomes one with the darkness. The stage is covered with black water, and Judith and Bluebeard move, meet and part among dangerous, sharp metal installations which, at certain dramaturgical points – not when individual doors are opened, but at the most intense moments in Judith's emotional trajectory – flare up, the flickering and light of the fire helping to illuminate the depths of the space. Water and fire: elements that extinguish one an-

other and symbolise life; primordial elements that resemble one another in their instability, their trembling reflecting the trembling of the two characters. In the director's words: "The use of real fire and water is a literal evocation of the violence in nature, as if we were in a cave and back at the zero state of theatre" (Matteo 2022, 90). Classical psychology – to this extent, Freud can indeed be discerned in the interpretation of the performance – understands water as the manifestation of the deeper layers of the personality, as a symbol of unconscious contents.[9] The flaring-up of fire brings light into darkness, and light brings warmth to body and soul, knowledge to the mind.

The concept of *Bluebeard* is closely connected to *De temporum fine comoedia*, with which it is paired and which is staged in the second half of the performance. The philosophical and conceptual bridge that binds the two works deeply together, and catapults the spectator from the intimate, inward relationship between Judith and Bluebeard into a broader context – that of humanity, of the Christian–Catholic world – is the concept of sin. From the mother's sin we arrive in the realm of the dead souls awaiting the Last Judgement and undergoing punishment – and then, in an unexpected twist in the final five minutes of the performance, back to the mother.

The *Comoedia* consists of three large sections. In the first section (*I. Die Sibyllen*), the nine Sibyls[10] proclaim the immi-

[9] According to Sigmund Freud's well-known topographical model, the psyche is composed of three parts: the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious. Freud compared these three regions of the psyche to an iceberg floating in water. The largest part of the iceberg, and perhaps the one that raises the most questions, is the unconscious realm lying beneath the surface. According to Freud, we possess a great many submerged emotions, feelings, impressions, forms of knowledge and memories of which we are unaware, but which can be brought to the surface, thereby allowing unconscious material to become part of consciousness.

[10] Sibyl: the name does not designate a single historical person, but priestesses who prophesied in a state of spirit-inspired ecstasy, above all priestesses of Apollo. Their prophecies were uttered over many centuries. Their content consists largely of interpreted history and, in

nent end of the world and the eternal damnation of the godless. They are driven by boundless, overwhelming hubris; they hate humanity, and their prophecy concerns its deserved damnation. They appear as horrific visions: bald-headed, with faces made up as skulls, and with bodies that recall female figures. Their instrument is stoning: they step onto the stage with the stones of judgement in their hands – evoking the phenomenon of biblical punishment and justice. The performance begins in silence, with Judith being stoned to death. The orchestra sits motionless; all we hear is the dull thud of the heavy stones. The blows rain down on Judith's body and on the rock behind her, against which, after a while, the lifeless body collapses. One of the Sibyls impassively drags Judith's corpse off the stage, and the ritual proclamations of the prophecies begin. During the prophecies, delivered in a state of ecstasy, small children are suddenly herded onto the stage, aged between four and ten, and are executed one after another, almost tenderly, yet with blood-curdling precision. After these sacrificial, ritual child-murders, the scene ends with the scream: "Ibunt impii in gehennam ignis eterni, ignis eterni!" ("The godless shall go to hell, to its eternal fire, its eternal fire!").

These terrible prophecies are counterbalanced in the second section (*II. Die Anachoreten*) by the categorical statement sung in Ancient Greek by the nine anchorites[11] – desert hermits –"οὔποτε, μήποτε, μήπου, μηδέποτε" ("Never, never, nowhere, never!"). The music of the female voices, which until then had

part, of an apocalyptically coloured depiction of the future. Over the course of history, several collections of Sibylline utterances came into being. These collections are known as the Sibylline writings; they were gathered by the pagan world, by the Jewish people and even by the Judaeo-Christian world.

[11] Anchorites (from Greek *anachōreō*, "to withdraw"): originally peasants who fled into the wilderness or desert to escape state and seigneurial burdens; later, early Christians who, during the systematic persecutions under the emperor Decius, fled into the desert and, finding that this eremitic way of life corresponded to the path leading to Christian perfection, remained there even after the persecutions had ended and continued to live as hermits.

been deafening and had dissolved into ecstatic screams, now assumes a hard-hammering, rhythmic quality filled with masculine energy. We pass from a community of women into a community of men. The anchorites carry onto the stage a large, scarred tree trunk stripped of its branches: an object reminiscent of a hammer, or perhaps a club, and one that reflects the group of men brought into a hypnotic–ecstatic state by the rhythmic force of the music and the text. (The origin of the "image of the tree" can be traced through a little further research: in the desert of Scetis, in Wadi Natrun, the "Tree of Obedience" was planted some three kilometres away. According to tradition, this tree grew in the fourth century from a dry stick planted and watered by John the Dwarf[12] at the command of his elder. The tree is a symbol of the vitality and fertility that the faith of the first anchorites rooted in the desert.) The desert hermits also carry hope within them: although the day foretold by the Sibyls will indeed come, that day will also bring evil's being drawn into the divine. They bring to life a vision according to which, at the end of time, sins will disappear. Here Orff brings into collision the two dogmas mentioned earlier: the teachings of Augustine of Hippo clash with those of Origen of Alexandria – and the latter triumphs in the third and final scene.

III. Dies illa (*Day of God's Wrath*) proclaims the collapse of time; the moment of the end of the world is frozen in the cry of the choruses united in the scene – humanity – in which language exists only in fragments, and its "shards of thought" are swept away by the forces released in that instant. This is the scene of great fear, in which the dead rise. According to the Christian worldview, the dead sleep and wait. Not in heaven or in hell, but beneath the earth. They await the day of the Last Judgement, when they may climb out from under the earth and receive the judgement that will determine where they are to

[12] Saint John the Dwarf: an early Christian Egyptian hermit belonging to the third generation of the monks of Scetis, and one of the so-called Desert Fathers. He is venerated as a saint by the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches, which celebrate his feast on the day of his death.

go at their "second" death – see the paintings of Fra Angelico, Luca Signorelli or Hans Memling. A mass of naked, neutral bodies, female and male, devoid of all sexuality and stripped of their individuality, mingles in panic on stage; like sheep, they flee on all fours in complete despair and disorientation. Orff's music – especially in this final scene – is aggressive, overwhelming, bombastic, often repetitive, operating with almost mechanical means; Cindy Van Acker's choreography, of the utmost delicacy and at the same time infinitely brutal in its handling of masses, translates it and moulds it into tableaux of sculpted bodies and synchronised sequences of mechanical movement that abolish even the idea of the individual. After Bartók's subtle refinement and his playing upon the strings of the soul, this music virtually tears the soul out of the spectator, thrusting them into barely bearable, deafening heights and visceral depths.

At the height of despair, an unexpected figure emerges from the background: Lucifer, Satan. What is most astonishing in Orff's apocalypse is that, at the end of the work, during the terrifying Last Judgement raging at an almost unbearable volume, the music changes completely, and with Lucifer's appearance we enter an entirely different world, one never heard before. The final minutes make room for a uniquely tender easing of tension, suffused with melancholy – Herbert von Karajan cut these minutes outright from the 1971 Salzburg world premiere, perhaps for one of two reasons: either he felt the final scene to be musically out of place, or he did not believe in forgiveness. Fortunately, in Castellucci's directorial vision and Currentzis's vision as conductor, this scene is fully justified – so much so that it is difficult to watch without tears. Amid the heart-rendingly ethereal music, this is the moment when Lucifer now stands entirely alone on stage and repeats three times in succession: "Pater, peccavi" ("Father, I have sinned"). After each utterance, he lets a heavy robe slip from his shoulders, as though shedding parts of his armour, until at the end this fallen angel stands before us in a snow-white, floor-length

tunic: thin, bony, fragile, head bowed, body trembling. We see Satan in his human, sinful reality, begging for forgiveness. After the disappearance of a seething humanity, raging with shouts and screams, Lucifer approaches and stands before us filled with humility, imploring forgiveness for his sins. In Castellucci's staging, this is the moment when Judith and Bluebeard reappear on stage. Judith hands Lucifer an untouched, perfect apple. In the reversed biblical gesture of a new Eve, she transports the scene back to the beginning of all things, to the original place, and by her act also offers reparation. "For them, too, the time of liberation has arrived. They are waiting for someone to loose the fetters that bind them eternally to their pain. [...] One might even say that the evil deed was not committed, that the sinful act of pride never in fact took place, perhaps also that the pain suffered by this couple now no longer exists" (Matteo 2022, 93).

Castellucci's closing scene raises several questions and possible interpretations. The gesture of a new Eve, the return of the untouched apple, can be understood, on the one hand, as the highly permissive and merciful Christian–Catholic cycle of sin, repentance and forgiveness; and, on the other, as time itself treated as malleable matter: as the manifestation of time halted, rewound and set in circular motion, in which beginning and end are one and the same. And although, in relation to the Last Judgement, Orff excludes the Augustinian doctrine of final judgement, allowing Origen's teachings to prevail, Castellucci nevertheless returns, paradoxically, through the creation story that marks the end, to Saint Augustine: to the philosopher's biblical interpretation of Genesis.

> "The time of the first book of Genesis is cosmic time, not historical time, although the creation narrative is also the 'beginning' of the human drama. The Book of Genesis opens with the phrase 'in the beginning'. We may imagine Augustine's 'culture shock' […] when he first took the Bible into his hands. What do you mean,

> beginning?! What do you mean, time?! How is it that creation takes place in time? How can time be brought into being within time itself? How can something be both *origo* and *principium* at once – indeed, at one and the same time? For, from the perspective of its double meaning in Genesis – as we see in Augustine's explanations – the 'beginning' is both *principium* and *origo*: that is, the origin of things is at the same time the point to which everything can be traced back as ultimate self-evidence" (Huszár 2008, 10).[13]

The closing stage action, which at once unfolds and turns upside down the universe of the "double performance", may therefore be understood, from a theological perspective, as a critique of religion; from a philosophical perspective, however, it also evokes the Stoic doctrine of fate (*fatum*) in ancient Greek philosophy – resignation to the unchangeable, the acceptance of the irrevocable – which in this case means the absolution of Bluebeard and Judith from their experience of loss and pain. Yet could there be a more contradictory, more problematic and more "disturbing" image than that of a woman handing an intact apple to Lucifer – who stands before us in his human reality? Does this create a "confusion of images"? Does the woman *give* the apple, or *give it back*? Is the gesture to be interpreted as *action* or as *reaction*? For if Genesis is both *origo* and *principium*, and *nothing has yet happened*, how could Eve/Judith's movement be a reaction, or even *something*? The scene shows precisely the opposite of what the director in fact understands by it: resignation to the final and irrevocable through the gesture of undoing, of changing. For the Stoics, who viewed the universe as an organic unity, fate was partly synonymous with divine reason (*logos*), partly with divine providence (*pronoia*) and nature (*physis*), and partly a determinate web of causal relations of which every event in the world forms part, includ-

[13] The author follows Ágnes Heller's line of argument. See Heller 2006, 41–69.

ing the actions of individual human beings. For the existence of *fate* – of an end inscribed in things – necessarily vindicates the right of *existence* itself to exist. This performance offers a finely tuned philosophy of *extremes*, of opposing pairs: being and non-being, beginning and end, birth and death, creation and passing-away, sinning and forgiveness, the guilty and the innocent, heaven and hell – and all of this is set turning by the mirrored play of endlessly revolving clock-hands, in which *time conditions the human being, and the human being creates time*. For this is cosmic time, historical time, objective time and inner time all at once. Romeo Castellucci is, in essence, a Heideggerian thinker, one who studies the twentieth-century German philosopher's assumptions and propositions concerning the structure of being and time from a critical perspective and gives them theatrical form: he calls many things into question, yet he formulates Heidegger's theory of "being and time" in theatrical terms – as a kind of axiom – by stating that *the human being is temporality itself*.

"Dasein *is* in such a way as to be something which understands something like Being. Keeping this interconnection firmly in mind, we shall show that whenever Dasein tacitly understands and interprets something like Being, it does so with *time* as its standpoint. Time must be brought to light – and genuinely conceived – as the horizon for all understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it" (Heidegger 1962, 39).

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Árpád Kékesi Kun

Messiaen and Castellucci: Opera and the Memory of Performance Art

In the summer of 2026, at the Salzburg Festival, Romeo Castellucci staged Olivier Messiaen's monumental opera *Saint François d'Assise* in an exquisitely beautiful and wholly extraordinary production. Running to more than two thousand pages of score, the work does not evoke the life of Saint Francis, born eight hundred years ago, in an epic or biographically oriented manner; rather, it focuses on its turning points and on characteristic features of the Franciscan conception of life and the world. Across eight tableaux,[1] Messiaen's opera, conceived as a sequence of stations, attempts to capture complex inner states through multifaceted musical means and to document their transformations, entering into dialogue with such twentieth-century works as Berg's *Wozzeck*, Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Messiaen received the score of Debussy's work at the age of ten, and it played a decisive

[1] In the Premier Tableau (*The Cross*), Saint Francis teaches Brother Leo to endure bodily pain and thereby attain Christlike love; in the second (*Lauds*), during morning Mass Francis prays that he may encounter a leper and be able to show him his love; in the third (*The Kissing of the Leper*), Francis heals with a kiss the leper who is driven frantic by suffering; in the fourth (*The Journeying Angel*), the Angel tests two brothers with a question, and they recognise her only after she has departed; in the fifth (*The Angel-Musician*), the sound of the Angel's violin evokes for Francis the beauty of heaven; the sixth tableau is *The Sermon to the Birds*; the seventh, *The Stigmata*, in which Francis receives on his body the signs attesting to his attainment of sanctity; and the eighth, *Death and the New Life*. Each tableau marks a further stage in the attempt to attain an ever deeper spiritual understanding of sanctity, culminating in death, which within the work's worldview signifies ultimate fulfilment, redemption and resurrection.

role in shaping his musical world. Castellucci, whose previous production, in April 2026, had been *Pelléas et Mélisande* at La Scala in Milan, approaches Messiaen's opera in the spirit of Performance Art, which displaced closed, finished works in favour of action – the process of creating the work of art, carried out largely through working on and with the material itself. This approach is unusual but not unique: in 2011 Hermann Nitsch likewise melded the events of *Saint François d'Assise* into the reality of *Aktionskunst* in a Bayerische Staatsoper production. The work by the master of Viennese Actionism who remained active the longest dovetailed strikingly with Messiaen's conception that colours in his opera are in constant motion and that what music offers above all is "une audition-vision" – seeing through hearing – "basée sur la sensation colorée" – based on coloured perception (Messiaen 1983, 18). Like Castellucci, Nitsch designed both the sets and costumes for the production; drawing on the full repertoire of action painting while at the same time retaining the distancing stance of demonstration, he transformed the stage of the Munich opera house into "a temple of synaesthesia" (Roussel 2020, 199). Although colours likewise become dominant in Castellucci's 2026 production, the memory of Performance Art structures its dramaturgy in an entirely different way. This essay sets out to demonstrate this while subjecting what may perhaps already be described as one of the high points of Castellucci's œuvre to a comprehensive analysis.

Saint François d'Assise had appeared at the Salzburg Festival before: following its 1983 Paris world premiere, the work's first major staging to attract widespread attention took place in Salzburg in the summer of 1992, and the production was revived six years later. Peter Sellars's staging relied heavily on George Tsypin's set, which filled the exceptionally wide and high stage of the Felsenreitschule both horizontally and vertically: the timber framework of an enormous cathedral, a ten-by-ten-metre wall constructed from neon tubes, and forty television sets, some suspended from above and others placed on

the stage. (For a more detailed analysis, see Marx 2003.) Composed of elements drawn from diverse and heterogeneous contexts, this visual world also rendered visible, through the neon lights and the images playing on the television screens, Messiaen's conception that complexes of sound are at the same time complexes of colour; nor did it remain a mere installation, since it entered into continuous interplay with the opera's dramatic and musical events. Thirty-four years later, in the same space, Castellucci uses no constructed set. Although, as in his 2018 *Salome*, he conceals the arcades of the tiers of boxes carved into the rock face at the rear of the stage, covering them with grey canvas to create a uniform surface, he nevertheless relies heavily on the architectural features of the venue itself. There can scarcely be another contemporary director whose work gives such powerful expression to site-specificity – realised differently on each occasion – as Castellucci's. In *Inferno* (2008), the Palais des Papes in Avignon was elevated almost to the status of a character in its own right; in *Resurrection* (2022), spectators could also experience the rebirth of an abandoned stadium in Provence; *Ma* (2023) was choreographed specifically for the archaeological site at Eleusis; and *I mangiatori di patate* (2025) for the former hospital of Il Lazzaretto Vecchio, on a tiny island near Venice. The site-specificity of *Saint François d'Assise* lies in the way the rock architecture of the Felsenreitschule evokes the atmosphere of the place where Francis once liked to meditate – the distinctive rock formations of the Sasso Spicco at La Verna in Tuscany – not through its man-made divisions, but through the undifferentiated surface created with the aid of panels resembling the colour and texture of the stone. The evocation is thus sensory rather than intellectual; moreover, the production transforms even this remnant of the natural environment into a theatrical medium, a thoroughly performative space, confronting the spectator with the theatricalised rock face of the Felsenreitschule. Only in the second act is it concealed by a canvas filling the entire rear of the stage. At first, an upside-down image of a contemporary metropolis appears on

it; when this canvas falls, another is revealed behind it, this one entirely snow-white.

Castellucci's production neither historicises nor updates the opera, even though figures in contemporary dress appear on stage at the beginning. Beside them, however, a huge photograph leans against the wall and, if only minimally, evokes the Middle Ages: it shows half a torso and a right hand resting on the hip, with a breastplate over the torso and an elbow guard on the arm. Otherwise, the stage is empty, and the visual world it presents tends towards stylisation. The photograph is black and white and looks above all like an enlarged fine-art photograph; its presence alone defines the opening scene, rendered in shades of grey and slightly underlit, after which the first act unfolds as a characteristically Castelluccian display of images. As Messiaen's tableaux change, so do the photographs positioned at the rear: one is turned around, revealing another image on its reverse, while yet another appears in the space it occupied, creating the effect of leafing through a large album, with each new stage of the "story" bringing another image into view. After the opening scene, which does not appear in Messiaen's opera, the libretto designates the setting of the first tableau (*The Cross*) as *une route* (a road) – and in the photograph revealed when the first image (the one with the breastplate) is removed, we see a long road disappearing into "nowhere". Apart from this, however, the photographs are not visual metonymies of specific places, since the image of the endless road is followed by that of a little boy wearing headphones, then by that of a black tree with a thick trunk, its broom-like branches thrust up against the grey sky, and finally – in the place of the last photograph to be turned around – by a large black mirror.

Castellucci inserts three short silent scenes at the beginning of Messiaen's three acts, each linked to an episode in the life of Francis. The first (*The Baring of Francis*) shows one of the seven figures who enter the stage in suits and skirt suits assuming the same pose as that shown in the photograph at the rear, gazing at the image with his left hand on his hip as

though looking into a mirror. He then withdraws behind a pane of glass at the foot of the rock wall and strips naked beside the black vomit spat onto the glass and slowly trickling down its surface. The second silent scene (*Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio*) gives visual form to the taming of the beast that had terrorised the town of Gubbio and its acceptance as a companion: a Czechoslovakian Wolfdog crosses the stage from the left, then exits to the right at Francis's side. The third silent scene is not given a title, since it is not set apart to the same extent: it opens the seventh tableau (*The Stigmata*), which culminates in the final one (*Death and the New Life*). A long black beam emerges through a gap in the front curtain and, moving first to the left and then to the right, parts it slightly. Within moments, this spatial element, thus seeming to "observe" the scene, almost becomes a character in its own right, as though peering about inquisitively with a faintly threatening presence, while through the opening in the curtain there is revealed the chilling image of a black pit, with mounds of earth around its edge and, among them, a death's-headed figure shovelling earth over the body of a fat, naked old man. These three silent scenes place the production on a different footing from that originally envisaged by the composer. In Messiaen's opera, the first tableau is concerned solely with Francis demonstrating to Brother Leo that perfect joy can only be attained after enduring terrible ordeals; then, high above, the cross flares up in a piercing light, and the invisible chorus closes the scene with the words of Jesus. Messiaen thus begins his work *in medias res* and in a fairly abstract manner, whereas Castellucci, with the aid of the first silent scene, opens the staging of the opera in entirely concrete terms and *ab ovo*.

Within the context of the director's œuvre, the kind of illustration we encounter in *Saint François d'Assise* is something of a rarity – illustration understood in no pejorative sense and employed here in a highly distinctive way – as is the fact that Castellucci places the spectator within a story rather than removing them from it. In rhetorical terms, he employs antithe-

sis: when something is concrete, he abstracts it; when something is abstract, he renders it concrete – here he adopts the latter procedure, while still leaving ample room for abstraction. The first act of the production offers veritable textbook examples of this. In Messiaen, the first scene centres on a conversation between Francis and Brother Leo, who are travelling and pause along the way at the foot of a long flight of steps, above which a black cross rises against the blue sky. In Castellucci, we see none of this: neither the set described in the stage directions nor any sense of being on a journey. He weaves the dialogue between the two characters into an entirely different scene, one that gives the first tableau a narrative form and depicts the emergence of the Franciscan brotherhood. Over the course of the scene, a succession of men remove their suits and put on white habits smeared with black paint like Francis's. Rain drenches the small group gathered upstage right, soaking their hair, bodies and habits; their heads, however, turn upwards in devotion, their illuminated faces raised to the rain as their mouths greedily drink in the water. In the second tableau (*Lauds*), the libretto's stage directions specify a small monastery church with three arches, where the friars say their morning prayers. In the production, trestles are set up in front of a photograph of a barren black tree and the black mirror beside it, with a tabletop laid across them, while two broad metal cabinets are rolled in on the right. At first the spectator cannot tell what purpose they serve, but it soon becomes clear that they are industrial ovens. The white-robed figures who enter the stage knead bread dough on the black table: flour hangs in the air, dough is worked between their hands, rounded portions are placed on a baker's peel, and through the ovens' glass windows we watch in real time as they brown into well-formed loaves. Castellucci thus relocates the tableau to a bakery, transforming the scene of the dawn office into bread-making and showing the Franciscan community engaged in an entirely everyday activity. An atmosphere of good cheer pervades the stage; the carefully calculated movements cohere into a beautiful chore-

ography, while the sight of the loaves accumulating in the ovens fills the spectator with a pleasurable sense of well-being. The scene thereby acquires an appealing earthiness and sensuous vitality, becoming human in a way one would least expect from Castellucci.

At the same time, of course, unmistakably Castelluccian images of profound emotional force[2] also unfold, elevating illustration to another level.[3] In the third tableau (*The Kissing of the Leper*), Castellucci separates the musical events from their visual representation. In the music (in the opera), Francis visits a leper hospital and, after kissing one of the patients who rails against his fate, a miracle occurs: the leper is healed. In the production, the tenor singing the role of the Leper merely accompanies the representation: wrapped in a white sheet, he forms a trio with the similarly clad Angel, with long blond hair, and a dark-haired woman of colour, the three performing a slow dance on the right-hand side of the stage. Although Francis conducts a musical dialogue with the Leper, it is not with him that he takes part in the stage action brought into focus by the visual representation, but with a skeletal, naked old man who first inches his way onto the stage in a nappy, feeling his way along the rock wall. The analogy is clear: what the leper is to Francis, who recoils from illness, the old, helpless body teetering on the brink of death is to us – a body that may be familiar from one of the key works in Castellucci's œuvre, *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (2010). The confrontation with bodily deterioration is profoundly disturbing: although the Leper (the forty-five-year-old, well-built Sean Panikkar) speaks of his former youth and strength, what we see as his alter ego is a worn-out, gradually failing (real!) body

[2] On the relationship between profound disturbance and tragic sensibility in Castellucci, see Zsófia Emma Szilágyi's essay "Tragic Sensibility and the Tragic Gaze in Romeo Castellucci's Theatre", in the present volume, especially pp. 75–76.

[3] For an example from the end of the first tableau, see my essay "Epiphany, Experience, Presence and Meaning in Romeo Castellucci's Theatre" in the present volume, especially pp. 21–22.

in the final years of life, which we cannot simply disregard even when Francis sings of the beauty of the inner light. The thirty-eight-year-old Philippe Sly, singing Francis, spends a long time washing the old man with a sponge; then, to the strains of Messiaen's sublime music, he embraces the frail body, and the older and younger men stand for a long while holding one another. Meanwhile, the ovens open and, through the clouds of steam billowing from them, the baked loaves emerge – some thirty in all – which are arranged in neat rows on two benches at the front of the stage. The act closes with the chorus singing, "he who loves much is forgiven everything", yet it is the illustration that raises the production to sublime heights: looking beyond the surface events of the tableau, it captures the essence of the scene and gives it visual form with heart-rending force.

Bodily exposure becomes just as central to *Saint François d'Assise* as it is to Performance Art, which has been an important source of inspiration for Castellucci since the very beginning of his career. Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio's first action, *Cenno*, performed only once, in a Roman apartment in 1980 in the presence of a single spectator (see Kamegawa n.d.), was likewise a unique, unrepeatable event, albeit a less uncompromising one than the works undertaken by so many artists over the preceding two decades, from Marina Abramović and Hermann Nitsch to Vito Acconci. Although they did not foreground the characteristic features of Performance Art to the same degree, Socìetas's subsequent productions likewise had more in common with Performance Art – itself strongly oriented towards the visual arts – than with contemporary theatre. When Castellucci began to develop an idea of theatre, he did so not in response to the tendencies then shaping Italian theatre, but within the milieu of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna and, paradoxically, through his engagement with Performance Art. From the outset, the director sharply opposed performance to theatre. In performance, he saw "the ontology of the here-and-now" at work (Sartore 2025), and the embodiment of a truth arising from the rejection of another time, another

place and another self. By contrast, theatre, in his view, always constructs a conception of time and space, "doesn't seek truth because it fights for liberation from it", and "deals in falseness, and fiction is its liturgy" (ibid.). Although, within the binary opposition created by this contrast, performance appears as the superior and more valuable art form, Castellucci ultimately "found theater much stronger" than performance, with "a much more radical conception of life" (Kamegawa n.d.). Yet, as in his works, here too Castellucci allows binary oppositions to bleed into one another when he recognises in theatre not "a second branch of literature" – not the form in which it was practised in Europe for centuries – but "the art of the flesh" (ibid.), which is unquestionably a legacy of performance culture. In all Castellucci's works, the force of the present moment is astonishing, but there is also "a strong sense of dramaturgical consistency, even though the text is denied its traditional function" (Fanelli 2024, 139, citing Mango 2003, 91). Cutting hair, for example, is an irreversible, unrepeatable action that takes place here and now, and this is precisely how it appears in the opening scene of *Saint François d'Assise*. While, on the right, the men put on white habits in order to join Francis, on the left Brother Bernard shaves the head of a young man in a suit. This action is not an imitation: we see his thick black hair fall onto the white towel spread before the kneeling figure, and we see his scalp gradually emerge. Once the haircut is complete, the man folds the towel, puts on a habit and presses his shaven head against the forehead of Francis, who has approached him. Since the hair will not have grown back by the next performance, a different person appears in the scene each evening: the programme lists six names for the role of Neue Brüder, each accompanied by the date of one of the six Salzburg performances.

The fusion of performance and theatre is exemplified particularly well by the now legendary opening of *Inferno* (2008), in which Castellucci himself appears with three wolfdogs that rush at him and bite him (see Kékesi Kun 2026b, 175–176). This scene is a free reenactment of Joseph Beuys's coyote ac-

tion – a "totally Franciscan" piece of performance art (Castellucci 2026, 86) – which readily calls to mind Francis's encounter with the wolf of Gubbio and, in a distinctive way, also makes its way into *Saint François d'Assise*, in the silent scene that opens the second act.

As an art-historical formation not yet entirely consigned to the past, Performance Art functions as a recurring reminiscence that structures Castellucci's productions, particularly the performers' work. *Saint François d'Assise*, for example, draws a parallel between the founder of the Franciscan order and those radical artists of the 1960s and 1970s who, using their own bodies as the site of an experiment – not merely aesthetic but existential – placed fragility, vulnerability and suffering at the centre of their work. Francis's "Christlike" gesture of stripping naked in the main square of Assisi, leaving his former identity entirely behind and seeking to make the Gospel a way of life, finds a parallel in the actions of Chris Burden, who had himself crucified to the back of a VW Beetle (*Trans-Fixed*, 1974), and Gina Pane, who pierced her forearm with rose thorns (*Azione sentimentale*, 1973), both of which employed powerful Christological imagery. These examples also bear out Gilles Deleuze's claim, made in relation to Francis Bacon's painting, that if we attempted to define Western art, "we could take Christianity as our first point of reference", which "contains a germ of tranquil atheism that will nurture painting; the painter can easily be indifferent to the religious subject he is asked to represent" (Deleuze 2003, 124). The public display of bodily suffering and vulnerability in these actions is obviously not undertaken with the aim of following Christ, but neither is it an end in itself; rather, it is a necessary concomitant of attaining a kind of enlightenment. Castellucci's production, however, evokes the memory of these artists and of body art not through the figure of Francis himself, but through the stage performance of the singer portraying him. Two months before the premiere, Philippe Sly moved into the Capuchin monastery in Salzburg, seeking to attune himself to the way of life of Saint Francis's

followers; on stage, he works with his body as a performance artist would, and not merely because he appears naked at both the beginning and the end of the production – at Francis's rebirth and his death. Rather, it is because his body, continually coming into contact with and being soiled by various materials (paint, blood, dough, earth), gives itself no respite: it twitches, jerks, jumps, spins, at times almost dances. He subjects his body to a degree of physical strain unprecedented among opera singers, while his performance displays such inspired intensity that it pushes the portrayal towards the extremes of human endurance, foregrounding its performative rather than its semiotic dimension. After all, when, following a scene lasting several minutes and verging on physical theatre, the singer, drenched in sweat and still panting heavily, is forced to sing while taking enormous gulps of air, the extremity of his physical exposure inevitably comes to the forefront of our attention. (Given the ecstatic intensity of Sly's performance, it is hardly surprising that, before the two-hour second act – at least on the evening of 14 August 2026 – a member of staff stepped before the audience and asked for our understanding on account of the title-role singer's exhaustion, citing the immense demands of the rehearsal process and the performance, and asked us to support him in spirit, as his colleagues were doing.) Sly's obsessive commitment, which goes far beyond method acting, may also be understood as a distinctive reenactment of Ryszard Cieślak's legendary performance in *The Constant Prince* (1965), a theatrical tour de force that helped define the era of Performance Art. (The production programme even includes the iconic photograph of Cieślak, showing the naked actor seated, his head tilted to one side, supporting himself on a piece of drapery held in his right hand and falling to the floor beside his body, his half-closed eyes turned inward. The fact that Castellucci dedicated *Faust. Fatto, non detto*, which premiered in October 2026, to Cieślak clearly shows how much the memory of the Polish actor has preoccupied him in recent months.) Grotowski located the essence of the actor's work in the act of

self-revelation, which he characterised as sacrifice, and Cieślak's performance became emblematic of this conception. Sixty years later, with a similarly uncompromising transgressiveness, Castellucci and Sly likewise present Francis's sacrifice as the sacrifice of the performer. In doing so, the Italian director introduces into Messiaen's work a radicalism that is otherwise present only in the music, and certainly not in the action, the portrayal of the title role or the conception of the staging. According to Castellucci, following Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* (written around 1263), the French composer aligned his Francis with the official image promoted by the Franciscan order: in the opera, he "is a more celestial one, perched halfway between heaven and earth" (Castellucci 2026, 90). Castellucci remains faithful to Messiaen's vision, but he also makes present a Francis whose life, according to non-canonical accounts, contained far more rawness and filth; he reveals in Francis the human, all-too-human, because he regards "Francis's relationship with the earth" (ibid.) as fundamental.

Like the all-round artists of Performance Art's heroic age, Castellucci approaches theatre as a visual artist, particularly in his treatment of space; and although he often works in found spaces, he emphasises not their spirituality but their materiality. On his stage, it is not the actor's expressive ability that matters – not the techniques that can be learnt at drama school – but the form, bearing, movement and intensity of the body, to the point that during the first two decades of Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio some of the performers themselves were likewise "found". Similarly, what is emphasised in props and stage objects is not their semioticity but their thingness, as exemplified by two recurring elements in *Inferno* (2008): the basketball and the dogskin (see Kékesi Kun 2026b, 180–182). All this makes palpable the force of a materiality that became strikingly apparent in Performance Art as the primary dimension of the artwork understood not as a product but as a process, and that the performance of *Saint François d'Assise* likewise brings into play in manifold ways. In the bread-making scene, the loaves

are kneaded and shaped before our eyes, and through the ovens' glass windows we watch life at work within them. Flour hangs in the air above the table, dough clings to the hands, and the material takes shape in continuous contact with the human body. At the end of the following scene, Francis and the Leper's alter ego – the emaciated old man – withdraw beneath a large white sheet and become a shapeless mass, while the Leper (the singer) moves above them as though kneading and working some sizeable mass of "bread dough". At the beginning of the fourth tableau, two brothers sit down at potters' wheels, while others knead clay at a long table, and the mass takes shape between their hands – as an analogue to the shaping of bread – swelling into unfired jugs, which they cheerfully set before us in two rows, only for the Journeying Angel to crush them one by one underfoot, while, from afar, her hand and restless fingers virtually guide and mould the restlessly tossing bodies of the Franciscan brothers lying in the background. The Angel's left foot, with which she crushes the jugs, is painted gold, as is her right hand, and in the scene we see her applying the paint to them with a brush; in the sixth tableau, Francis paints one of his feet and one of his hands blue before six brothers follow suit. At the beginning of the seventh tableau, dust once again fills the air, though this time it is no longer white: dust rises from the black earth surrounding the large grave pit, across which a host of dark-robed figures, taking bodily form from mounds of earth that come alive, drag, pull, fling, wrench and roll Francis's sweating, panting body. Through a succession of astonishing associations, these many moments confront us again and again with the force of materiality.

The actions evoked above – bread-kneading and clay-working, as well as the compelling images of flour and earth rising into the air – likewise show how the production is tightly woven together by a whole series of visual parallels and contrasts, relying to a considerable extent on the spectator's associative capacity. In the first tableau, before the photograph depicting the endless road, Francis smears the white habits with

black paint and, after putting one on himself, gives the other to Brother Leo. Then, in the sixth tableau, he once again soils his habit, which this time turns red with the blood that wells up on the chests of the angels as they lay their wings on the ground. In the first silent scene, the black paint vomited onto the glass and slowly spreading across it reappears in the second tableau as an inverted and enlarged mirror image: the photograph of the black tree with the thick trunk, its bare branches slicing the grey sky into fragments. In the second tableau, as Francis sings to Mother Earth, he makes dance-like movements with a white ribbon; in the eighth tableau, now literally among the mounds of black earth, he spins and whirls with the same ribbon almost to the point of complete exhaustion. In the first tableau, rain falls from above in a single vertical strip onto the brothers' heads; in the eighth tableau, fire is kindled in the same place, likewise in a single strip. This series of visual correspondences is complemented by the angel–bird analogy, which is reinforced by Francis's words: birds speak without words, like angels, through music. After the Journeying Angel, who enters in the fourth tableau, removes her white robe, she hangs it on the backdrop, and in the garment, with its sleeves spread wide, one can discern as readily the two-dimensional image of an angel as that of a bird. After the shocking effect in the sixth tableau (*The Sermon to the Birds*) – the cascade of bird carcasses falling onto the stage – Francis lifts a white "bundle", which looks most like a sizeable angel's wing, then unfolds it and affixes it where the Angel's robe had hung; and as he steps away from it, what catches our eye is the flattened form of a large white bird, resembling above all a fossil or a preserved specimen. In the eighth tableau, Brother Bernard likewise brings a white bird carcass, which in his hands seems to form a "heap" of angelic wings, and lays it beside the dying Francis. (The poetic force of the moment is heightened by the fact that it is the seventy-nine-year-old Willard White who passes on "death" to his younger colleague – White himself having already "died" in the opera's title role in San Francisco in 2002.) Most poignant of

all is the return that belongs to this same sequence: the gaunt, naked old man from the third tableau shuffles in once more in the eighth, and now it is he who scrubs the body of Francis, kneeling before him with arms outstretched. After the slow motions of the washing, now repeated in reverse, the old man helps the saint standing on the threshold of death back to his feet and, as if he were a child, smooths his hair, strokes his face, and then embraces him for a long time.

The descriptions above also reveal the many ways in which the visual arts – perhaps the art form most indispensable to theatre – permeate Castellucci's work: on his stage, numerous works of art from almost every period in art history either appear directly or leave their traces. At times paintings are literally placed before our eyes, as with Antonello da Messina's *Salvator mundi* (1465) in *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* (2010); at others, particular works can be discerned as sources of inspiration, as with Diane Arbus's photograph of a very thin boy holding a grenade in the same production. At the same time, Castellucci's approach to drama and theatre is "painterly rather than literary, an investigation of the embodied motif rather than the abstracted idea" (Lichtenberg 2007). Unlike practitioners of *Konzeptregie*, Castellucci's productions of well-known works from the history of drama and opera are not organised around a unified reading of the work that holds together the individual parts and the whole of the production. For this reason, the memory of Performance Art likewise returns in *Saint François d'Assise* not as an "abstracted idea", but as a deeply embedded motif that manifests itself both in the creation of stage images and, as I have argued above, in the performers' work. The soiling of clothing (with paint or blood), contact with the earth, the embrace of a body already beginning to decay while still alive – in short, physical contact with the abject – runs through the production as an "embodied motif", even if behind it lies Castellucci's distinctive conception of Saint Francis. The director regards Francis's so-called "inverted rebellion" as particularly significant, specifically the fact

that "Francis's submission to the Pope [...] can be interpreted as a savvy act of obedience that is actually aimed at saving his community from the wave of violent repression of heretics – the Cathars in particular – that was being unleashed across Europe at that time" (Castellucci 2026, 83).[4] In this connection, Castellucci singles out one episode from Francis's life: the occasion when Francis travelled to Rome to get official approval for his Franciscan order from Pope Innocent III.

> "According to contemporary accounts, the pontiff, appalled by the beggarly appearance of Francis and his acolytes, tells him to go 'back home and wallow in the dirt you've come from', i.e. the pigsty. Francis obeys literally and rolls around in pig dung, presenting himself before the Pope again in the sullied state. While this undoubtedly represents a gesture of submission, it's also a kind of inverted rebellion. Francis has made himself invincible, his weapon was humility" (ibid.).

Whether or not Francis's action was motivated by political shrewdness, the essential moment of the story for our purposes is his immersion in dung, his ability to rise above the instinctive revulsion provoked by dirt and filth.

> "For Francis, everything is God's creation, including illness, ugliness, leprosy, and anything worthless or despised, right down to the lowly dust. [...] Lepers are indeed the zero ground of dignity. If God exists, then He is to be found with them as well. Friar Minor means precisely that: to minimize oneself, to sink to the level of the lowest pariah, to the level of the soil itself. For the aesthete that Francis had been as a youth,

[4] Castellucci openly acknowledges that his conception of Saint Francis was shaped by the influential monograph by the Italian medieval historian Chiara Frugoni. Cf. Chiara Frugoni, *Francis of Assisi: A Life*, trans. by John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1998).

> it was an extraordinary action to choose the colour brown for his habit. [...] he chose brown because it's the colour of the earth" (ibid., 83–85).

This striking interpretation of Saint Francis's life – one that leads in an entirely different direction from Messiaen's – is absorbed into Castellucci's mode of image-making rooted in the visual arts, while nevertheless remaining present within it in an intensely sensuous form. Early medieval painting and early twentieth-century movement art are present in the production in a similar way. The way the brothers' hands reach towards Francis in the first tableau, the way arms and legs bend and gazes turn, may be familiar not only from Giotto's celebrated frescoes but also from works by other artists of the period; although their vivid colours are absent from the stage images, the latter are instead permeated by an exquisitely beautiful greyness. The way the Leper (the singer) and the two angels perform a slow "dance", repeatedly touching hands and arranging their bodies in distinctive poses, recalls photographs of early twentieth-century eurythmy or orchestics demonstrations. Beyond this, the brothers' collective play in the sixth tableau and, in the seventh, the struggle between Francis and the dark-robed figures swirling up out of the earth are likewise inspired by physical theatre. Yasmine Hugonnet's work is once again integrated into the production in the way choreography functions in Castellucci's stagings: on the one hand, as a substitute for acting in the realist sense, and on the other, as a form of maximal kinetic planning and fixity. It functions as a "refined discipline" from which the director strips "messages and athletic bodies", because he finds them "repugnant on stage" (Sartore 2025). On Castellucci's stage, events unfold slowly and precisely, sometimes in recurring sequences, that is, through repetition. In *Le Metope del Partenone* (2015), one fatal accident follows another; in *Four Seasons Restaurant* (2012), one girl after another cuts out her tongue; and in *La Passione* (2016), a staging of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, the "episode"

of the Crucifixion features a succession of non-professionals hanging from a lowered trapeze for as long as their hands can support the weight of their bodies. Meanwhile, faces remain impassive and express nothing, while neither facial expression, gesture nor movement allows the spectator to infer emotional or intellectual states, or from these any motivations, intentions or psychological background. Castellucci suppresses vitalism in his theatre, reducing "the spending of energy, indication, exhibitionism" to zero because he despises "an egocentrism of the actor" (Bent 2014). The actor's self-expression, the pretence arising from the classical phenomenon of "A impersonates B, while C looks on" (Eric Bentley), and the "as if" situation, with all its consequences, are excluded from Castellucci's universe. In a distinctive way, the director applies to his theatre the Greek-derived term *katechon*, which came to play a role in Christian doctrine and means 'that which withholds': "I try to lower the temperature in everything I do. I try to restrain the energy just a moment before it is expressed externally; [...] because the energy that works on a deeper level is that which is withheld" (ibid.). This approach entails a working process in which choreography and dramaturgy effectively go hand in hand, while the production takes shape not during rehearsals but in images conceived in advance and precisely planned. If Castellucci's stage world appears distant and cold, the reason lies in the fact that the director does not seek to fill these images with life in the realist sense, but rather to "freeze" them, assigning the spectator the reverse process, the opposite task: it is they who "must break through the ice of the images" (Perrier 2022, 117). Yet even if there is little in them that can be *experienced vicariously* (as an emotion "transmitted" from actor to spectator), the productions offer all the more opportunities for the *lived experience* of profoundly human situations, which constitutes the *differentia specifica* of Castellucci's theatre.[5]

[5] On lived experience as the central event taking place both with and within the spectator in Castellucci's theatre, see my essay "Epiphany,

The production of *Saint François d'Assise* not only possesses strong internal connections, which I have already analysed, but is also linked to a number of other works in Castellucci's œuvre through elements of the director's *Formenkanon*. Einar Schleef's concept of the *Formenkanon* (1997, 155–158) denotes a conception of theatre in which the mode of staging is determined not by changing formal elements and characteristics adapted to, and developed from, the particular source material – most often a dramatic text – but by a relatively homogeneous repertoire of *recurring* formal elements and characteristics, which are nevertheless capable of casting both the material being staged and themselves in a new light. A *Formenkanon* of this kind, giving rise to a special inter-artistic form of intertextuality, can likewise be discerned in Castellucci's theatre; and since the director does not stage a text, even when a text occasionally serves as the point of departure for a work, for him "form precedes content and determines it" (Semenowicz 2016, 33). Among the elements to be mentioned here is surface painting – which became a scenographic principle particularly in *Requiem* (2019) – as when Francis vomits black paint onto the glass panel in the first silent scene, or when, during the second tableau, the brothers kneading dough throw flour into the air and it sticks to the dark mirror, evoking the image of an Abstract Expressionist painting. Inscriptions likewise belong to this repertoire, such as the letters painted on the backs of the brothers' habits in the first tableau – elements of an incomplete alphabet – or the words (JAUNE, BLEU, VERT) written on the white placards that the brothers hold up before the Journeying Angel in the fourth tableau. Projected inscriptions also appear before us: a sentence of a personal nature, as well as the names of birds, to which I shall return later. These components and characteristics of the *Formenkanon* contribute substantially to our perception of Castellucci's theatre as a markedly introverted stage universe: "a hermetic, bizarre world, which is inde-

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pendent from reality and in which anything can happen" (ibid., 132). This effect is reinforced by the multitude of concrete intertextual references that draw the productions into close proximity with one another. In the first tableau, the brothers' arms strain against the rock wall as though their fragile bodies were attempting to topple the massif, recalling the legs of the crowd members braced against the inner façade of the Palais des Papes in Avignon in *Inferno* (2008). In the second tableau, Francis seems to don a white mask when he smears flour across his face, and the spectator may suddenly feel they are seeing the Pierrot figure into which Pelléas turns in the fourth act of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (2026). In the third tableau, the bread dough placed on the naked old man's head flows down over him just as the outer layer enveloping the body of the girl "born" at the beginning of *Hey Girl!* (2006) flows down from the table. The crown of thorns seen in the fourth tableau, when pulled apart, becomes a length of barbed wire, only on a much larger scale than the one that coils across the stage in *La Passione* (2016); in the sixth tableau, the brothers collapse to the ground holding leafy branches in their hands, just as we also see in *Requiem* (2019); and in the eighth tableau, Francis inhales the scent of the orange given to him by the Angel in the same way as the old woman at the beginning of *Requiem*, who is about to disappear from her bed. Beyond such correspondences, the most prominent images are those that link the production to *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*, to such an extent that *Saint François d'Assise* can be understood as a visual paraphrase of the 2010 production. Messiaen saw Francis as a Christ figure (see Balmer 2026, 108–109), while in *On the Concept of the Face* Christ locks eyes with the audience in Antonello da Messina's enormously enlarged portrait, as both he and we look on at an inverted father–son "story". When, in Salzburg, the naked old man appears in the scene of the encounter with the leper, wearing nothing but a nappy, it is as though we were seeing the old man from *On the Concept of the Face* with a different physique. As Francis kneels before the

old man and washes his back with a sponge, the corresponding moment from *On the Concept of the Face* is reproduced almost exactly; indeed, when the old man stumbles away, at one point he stops and looks back in precisely the same way as the old man in the earlier production. The ending of *Saint François d'Assise*, however, goes beyond analogy when the naked old man scrubs the dying Francis, so that the action seen earlier is repeated in reverse. (The profoundly moving force of this reversal is heightened by the fact that Christ can be discerned just as readily in the old man, who recalls the central figure of Grünewald's *Crucifixion* on the Isenheim Altarpiece, as in the opera's title character. According to Christian legend, moreover, Saint Francis encounters Christ in the leper just as Saint Martin does in the ragged beggar, or Saint Christopher in the child he carries across the water on his shoulders.)

Despite all its hermeticism, Castellucci's stage universe leaves interpretation open at numerous points: the production is full of alluringly enigmatic moments. One such moment occurs in the first tableau, when Francis places a slender-trunked sapling in a white shoe and, moving backwards, drags the shoe along beside him with the tree still standing in it. Or when, in the second tableau, he blows the flour from a chasuble embroidered in gold, puts it on over his habit, and then raises a black eight-pointed star in front of his face. In the sixth tableau, he affixes a similar but smaller star to the backdrop; together with a star-shaped white light that comes on above it, the star begins a slow migration, moving from side to side until it suddenly falls to the ground, whereupon, as though we were witnessing the fall of countless dark stars, hundreds of bird carcasses begin to rain down from above. (The enigmatic quality permeating the production may justifiably call Robert Wilson's theatre to mind, as may the lines that recur across several tableaux: a thin red strip of light, the long black beam, an orange-glowing rectangular block, and so on.) In such instances, the director seems almost to block the possibility of any unequivocal correspondence, one might say leaving the spectator underinformed. The

sixth tableau mentioned above, *The Sermon to the Birds*, moves as far as possible from the serene tranquillity of the famous detail from Giotto's fresco, taking on the form of an apocalyptic vision as dead birds plummet to the stage and gradually cover it. Meanwhile, the names of some forty birds are projected in French and Latin, and, depending on their knowledge of the opera, spectators may recognise among them the species whose calls Messiaen incorporated into the scene. According to the director's statement in the programme, however, the scene gives visual form to the catastrophe represented by the gradual disappearance of birds, given that since the opera was composed, many of the species admired by Messiaen have become extinct or are now on the verge of extinction. "The birdsong in this scene is thus a kind of Requiem in which we, the audience, [are] witnesses to a tragedy that neither Francis nor Brother Matteo can see. We are eyewitnesses to our own destiny, where birds stand in for the whole of humanity" (Castellucci 2026, 83). Reading this directorial interpretation, the spectator is struck by an epiphany: the realisation that links the apocalyptic vision created from *The Sermon to the Birds* with Castellucci's Mozart production of seven years earlier, *Requiem*, whose central motif was disappearance, articulated through the entries of the *Atlas of Great Extinctions* projected onto the backdrop: a profoundly moving multitude of names of extinct animals, plants, tribes and languages, destroyed cities, buildings, works of art, and so on. Yet while watching *Saint François d'Assise*, such an epiphany can scarcely occur, since the spectator is given no explanatory inscription comparable to the *Atlas of Great Extinctions*, and the names appearing before them are not those of extinct bird species. Indeed, they are even slightly misled, since what they see in succession are the names of Francis's birds ("Les oiseaux de François"), which are also listed in the programme.

The spectator is similarly taken by surprise when, towards the end of the fourth tableau, the backdrop bearing the inverted cityscape falls away to reveal a snow-white one behind it, and

an inscription is then projected onto the stage, which for several minutes is bathed in red: "je t'aime Olivier, immense artiste" (I love you, Olivier, great artist). The spectator immediately recognises that this sentence does not appear in the opera and that Olivier, being the composer's first name, refers to Messiaen. What they cannot know, however, is who the "I" refers to, although – once again depending on their prior knowledge – they may recall the opening of *Inferno* (2008), in which the director himself came onstage and introduced himself to the audience: "je m'appelle Romeo Castellucci". Thus, even if the spectator cannot know who the subject of the production's only such moment of direct communication is, they may suspect that it is not the other possible candidate, God, but the director. They may therefore surmise that this is a personal statement by Castellucci, through which he addresses across space and time a composer long dead, the creator of *Saint François d'Assise* – a fellow artist who, although he does not appear before us as Andy Warhol does in *Inferno*, is incorporated into the production in a comparable way. The sentence conveys a sense of rapture, but we have no idea why it is being declared, why it appears in the production at all, or what it is doing at this particular point. Once again, an explanation may be found in the director's own statement, in which he links Francis's eccentricity to that of Messiaen, who obsessively transcribed birdsong, and posits a profound connection between the two.

> "The former talked to the birds, while the latter went into nature's cathedral, the woods, to transcribe their songs in an attempt to capture the essence of music devoid of the sin of human pride. In Olivier Messiaen we find an exceptionally close connection between faith, music and ornithology. The mystical link between these elements is reflected in the figure of Saint Francis. For Messiaen, birds were not in any way an ecological affectation. He described them as 'the first and the greatest musicians on the planet' and in par-

> ticular as 'the prime messengers of God'. He dedicated his whole life and art to them. I would call Messiaen a great artist – to describe him as merely a composer strikes me as nonsensically reductive" (ibid., 89).

Reading this, the spectator is once again struck by an epiphany only retrospectively; even if their suspicion has now been confirmed, they must still find for themselves an answer to why this declaration has been inserted into the production. It appears so unexpectedly that, at that particular moment, the spectator can scarcely experience the rapture conveyed by the sentence – nor is that the aim. Theatre criticism tends in such cases to register a flaw, but it is more productive to regard such moments as forms of deliberate openness, as "empty spaces" inserted into the production that do not necessarily await completion and whose comprehension, whose arrangement into a meaningful whole, is not necessarily required for reception. In this way, they become part of the production's characteristically Castelluccian enigmatic moments, which by turns fascinate, shock and perplex, and, depending on the spectator's theatrical disposition, rupture the fabric of intelligibility either pleasurably or almost unbearably.

The final minutes of the production appeal not to our intellect but push our perception to its limits, as the ending comes crashing down upon us in all its beauty. When Francis's corpse is laid out at the rear by the dark-robed figures, one of whom even triumphantly plants a foot on it, the rock wall is illuminated through the smoke billowing like a cloud overhead, and the roof of the Felsenreitschule slowly opens. The cool night air pouring in presses the white cloud of smoke downwards; the smoke floods the stage and swallows up the scene, before light spreads above the rock wall and, as though we were being granted a glimpse into some Paradise, we see the green trees on the Mönchsberg and the little house standing above. When the view below them clears as well, the naked corpse is still there on the right, at the foot of the wall, like human

refuse, a discarded superfluity in the solitude of an alley; on the left, meanwhile, a small flock of sheep ambles in, and as they wander about, looking this way and that, the final chorus sounds: "he rises from pain, weakness and shame; he rises in strength, glory and joy." The opera's final word, "joie", is followed by an astonishing crescendo, and then the silence strikes us to the heart. The conductor holds his final gesture for a long time; the applause has not yet broken out, and as we all live through the silence, the city bells begin to ring outside. The final image seems unequivocal, yet it too points towards an open interpretation, since it offers as much of a parallel with the opening image as a counterpoint to it. In the first silent scene, seven figures entered from the left, among them Francis's elderly mother and father; in the finale, seven sheep mill about in the same place. We may see in them just as readily a group of "sheep" impervious to vocation and to higher things – especially with the mortal remains lying opposite them – as Francis's "flock", the community of his disciples, followers and successors. In the theatre, however, this is unlikely to become an object of reflection, since the emotional impact overrides everything else. The feeling that comes to dominate the spectator is the one encapsulated by the opera's final word, "joie", and corresponding to a key term in Francis's way of life, "hilaritas". In the first act, Francis sings that the greatest delight or joy ("joie") can be attained only at the price of the greatest suffering. And although the production by no means inflicts suffering on us, after an intense six hours the spectator fully *lives through* the truth of Francis's words: the greatest delight becomes theirs, after no small number of "trials".

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This collection of studies is devoted to Romeo Castellucci, whose productions both evoke archaic patterns of human existence undivided by geographical, cultural or other boundaries and constitute compelling or unsettling, but invariably extraordinary, idiosyncratic worlds. Castellucci has himself been inspired by numerous other artists – above all visual artists, film directors and writers – while in turn providing inspiration for a whole range of scholars across Europe, Asia and the Americas. The work of some of these scholars has gained greater visibility than that of others, largely because of linguistic barriers and the limited accessibility of certain publications, and it is this latter anomaly that the present collection seeks, in part, to redress. The idea for this book originated at the Doctoral School of the University of Arts Târgu Mureș, where some professors and their students have been engaged with the work of the Italian director for a decade and a half. One of the volume's explicit aims is to reach an international readership. In our view, Romanian and Hungarian scholars have produced a considerable body of important writing on individual works by Castellucci and on his theatrical thinking, work that deserves greater visibility rather than remaining confined, because of linguistic limitations, to the spheres of theatre research and higher education in the two countries. This is why the contributions collected in the volume have been translated into English. Most were also revised for publication in English, and throughout the editorial process we have sought to take the needs of Anglophone readers into account.

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