

The Sound and Visual Dramaturgy of Romeo Castellucci

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Brief theoretical introduction

At the end of the 1980s, both internationally and in Italy, there was a need to overcome theatrical patterns and ideologies of the past and to divest theologies of them a change of statute capable of relating New Theater to other emerging media (Valentini 2015, 111-12). This is also the era of the transition from postmodern to postdramatic, a theater «pushing itself to operate beyond drama» which diversifies into distinct theatrical forms, in a praxis that since the 1970s was already expressing itself in heterogeneous forms and codes, ambiguous elements, discontinuous and subversive processes and, above all, in a tension toward the negation of textuality (Lehmann 2019, 21-22). These new forms of expression do not completely erase relationships with earlier aesthetics, rather, they integrate with them especially in the presence of elements such as text and staging. Due to the sinking of old forms and the emergence of new ones, the groups born during this moment of transition between the 1970s and 1980s were starting to present new needs. The urgency is to configure themselves as orphans and stateless without a sense of belonging to outdated practices, this to be “posthumous”, with respect to a past they were now rejecting, preferring to locate the epicenter of the encounter between the different artistic languages emerging at that time in the “new” theater: «The extreme heterogeneity of forms and the deconstruction of all regulatory criteria gave the theater of those years an extreme freedom, on the terrain of experimentation and expression» (Lehmann 2019, 92).

The main position in the argument we're presenting is that of the questioning of dramaturgy as a form of writing a text represented on stage and how this status has been contextualized in the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio and Romeo Castellucci. Although it welcomes its “conventional” elements, such as the actor and, to some extent also the text, since its beginnings in the early 1980s, the Societas Raffaello Sanzio places were at the center of its theatrical practice, a process of deconstruction of theat-

rical conventions that ends up conflicting with other processes, such as those of representation and narration replaced by a new code, in which different symbols and figures act¹. In other words, Iconoclasm is the initial instance by which the company disavows the language of the “old” theatre, although maintaining its writing and acting. This rebellion against tradition advances, then, with the choice of a complex and prominent visual dimension, inconsistent only in appearance and in constant mutation. Such transformations prove to be fundamental in redefining the statutes of contemporary theater (Valentini 1991, 80), resulting in the marginalization of the text and the dismissal of mimesis.

This working perspective centers around a «scene writing» (Mango 2003) which in Castellucci’s works expels the narrative and literary planes in favor of spatial, plastic and visual elements. A theatre intended as a living art and not a process of musealization, oriented towards the complete perception of the work in its entirety and the totality of the arts in which the extraordinarily rich images merge with the languages of the sound, the painting and the architecture. The director calls it «Optical realism», a symbolic constellation of signs that don’t seem to carry any meaning, migrating from one form to another: «a work of falls: from a form to another, another one and another». This set of signs, apparently incoherent and untranslatable in their language of origin, carries within it a considerable semantic potential and that’s exactly Castellucci works on: in the permanence of the symbol, in the story in a condition of virtuality, persisting in a state of enigma and of an inexhaustible question. Castellucci never places himself in relation with his forms with a certainty coming from their same meaning, asserting: «It is possible, there is never a unique answer to these forms, but only hypothesis that I express now [...] I don’t know; I don’t know other things, I discover a lot of them later» (Quadri 2000, 23); and in this heterogeneous position that he places himself in front to the mechanism of meaning set in motion by him. On all this acts an interference of a semiotic character, a passage from one sign to another, on which oversees an act of deconstruction, according to Derrida’s lesson. The result is a mutable matter, and its fragments determine the new organization of its language that refers to Artaud’s “pathological” language. However, this «scenic writing» defined through the deconstructive approach, does not determine the erasure of

¹ «This is the theater that refuses representation» declares Claudia Castellucci in *Manifesto consegnato in teatro*, for the performance *Santa Sofia. Teatro khmer*, (Castellucci, Castellucci 1992, 9). (The English translations of all quotations in the text are mine).

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drama, rather it affirms its erasure. By denying it, does drama assert itself? We need to now ask ourselves, at this point, not in the traditional forms but because of a substraction practiced on its language. Castellucci constructs a «complex machine of pure meanings, devoid of logical connection», on which he builds an incoherently shaped, theatrical and scenic narrative that, abandoning the word, binds itself to the experience of writing on and for the stage, the understanding of which is left to the attribution of meaning that the individual viewer can accrue according to his or her own experience (Mango 2003, 92-94).

It can observe that in certain instance of his performances, the connection between dramaturgy and literature is altered from its traditional form and reshaped into a form of “writing” that consist of images, sounds, and visual structures. In this form, the word, as understood in terms of dramaturgy, undergoes a fluctuating process of submersion and emergence. This type of «scene writing», as described by Lorenzo Mango, goes beyond the dramatic text to encompass all components of the scene, including the framework of Castellucci’s productions. For Romeo Castellucci: «everything comes from a work that is done on the text, which then becomes a work against the text. And the work against the text is relentless work». Dramaturgy, in this context, undergoes a reinvention through the fusion of languages. It relinquishes its traditional role of guiding a narrative created by an author on stage. While the presence of a dramaturg is often acknowledged in these performances, his role has also undergone a radical transformation. The only viable language in this context is that of denied representation, a deconstruction of theatrical code that cannot be resolved by establishing a new code (Mango 2003, 90-91). According to the concept of postdramatic theater, the text loses its central value is considered as one of the constituent elements of staging. Images assume a significant role, as evident and previously mentioned. However, Castellucci’s work cannot be reduced to a theater solely focused on images: «the performance is a grand performative event, yet the actions never fully exist in the present moment. There is a strong sense of dramaturgical consistency, even though the text is denied its traditional function (Mango 2003, 91). Castellucci presents a series of scenes that are “open” in nature, with a religious undertone but not intended for devotion. Instead, they adopt a perspective that references tragic rituals and the practice of bringing together (*religere*) a secular community in a designed space for contemplative exercises, where the spectator plays a significant role. These situations portray a secular “morality” that explores the contradictions of human nature. It is a form

of “visual dramaturgy”, that goes beyond the mere arrangement of visuals alone (Lehmann 2019, 99).

A theater transcends the boundaries of traditional and contemporary, where the intimate connection between the stage’s two polarities – the spectator and the actor – is the defining presence of the latter and their physicality. It introduces a new concept of the “amateur” actor. According to Castellucci, «The body is the starting point and perhaps also the destination, after going through an ellipsis, after shaking the bodies of the spectators as well» (Sacchi 2012, 141), as the other significant and meaningful polarity is, indeed, the spectator. According to Castellucci, «the theater experience resolves around the spectator» (Castellucci 2005, 6). He ponders whether it is the play that observes the spectator or if it is the spectator’s gaze that contorts until they see the back of their own head, perceiving themselves solely from behind in the theater. The naked individual, exposed to everyone’s gaze, is simply the spectator (Castellucci 2005, 6). His experience becomes a reflection of «seeing himself seen» (Castellucci 2015, 177-79), questioning what is being observed and who is performing the action. The scene is constructed through a synesthetic relationship between sound, body, and space, guided by an installation aesthetic and an assembly of fluctuating and deliberate images. These images are laden with meaning, evoking fear and trauma, leading towards a non-cathartic disturbance. Knowledge is attained through suffering and solitude (Sacchi 2012, 141), deviating from Aeschylean pain characterized by «knowing through suffering». Instead, the focus is on the display of extreme physical pain bordering on masochism. This shift from represented suffering to suffering experienced in representation is a novelty, as stated by Lehman (Lehmann 2019, 188). The exhaustion inherited from performance art in the 1970s (Lehmann 2005, 106-07), is embedded in the spectator’s sensitive sphere, extending beyond the duration of the event. What remains of a performance is the impact it had on an individual, how it resonated within them, how they perceived it, and how they transformed it (Sacchi 2009, 128). The director’s conscious vision enriches the viewer’s experience, stirring their sensitive and emotional elements.

From Generalissima to voice dramaturgy of Giulio Cesare

The connection between the death of an individual and the death of language, which Giorgio Agamben discusses in *Il linguaggio e la morte* (Agamben 2008), can be found in the theoretical references of *Kaputt Necropolis* (1984) In this work, Società Raffaello Sanzio introduces the

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creation a “new” language called the *Generalissima*, which is an artificial “Language” transcribed on a sepulchral wheel. This language synthesizes words from the creole languages, the Antillean-Caribbean pidgin of the 18th and 19th centuries and Raimondo Lullo’s *Ars Magna*. The *Ars Magna* is articulated in four “cognitive leaps” corresponding to four key words: *agone*, *apothema*, *meteora*, *block*. These words challenge the compressed power beyond the grave. This mysterious language reappears in *Uso umano di esseri umani* (2014), which is inspired by Giotto’s *Resurrezione di Lazzaro*. In This performance, the spectators are initially gathered in one of the rooms of the Ex Ospedale dei Bastardini in Bologna. The entrance to this room, like Lazarus’ tomb, is closed by the same sepulchral stone containing the *Generalissima*. Accompanied by three officiants in protective overalls and gas masks, the spectators experience a ritual involving the release of ammonia, filling the room with a strong odor reminiscent of death and decay. This initiatory ritual is followed by a ritual of death and resurrection, which follows the iconographic theme of Giotto which is joined by the exercises on the *Generalissima*.

At this state of the work, Societàs considers images to be elusive and incapable of being defined in a clear manner. They do not serve allegorical purposes but rather have the ability to: «stop you, freeze you, and focus your attention» (Castellucci 2010). Societàs aims to create «conducting images» that sweep away reality and its paradigms - language, representation, aesthetics – and introduce the viewer to the «direct vision of the unreal» (Castellucci 1992, 10). Following the Platonic belief that reality is illusory, art helps reconstruct its illusoriness, dismissing the traditional function of the mirror image (Semenowicz 2018, 23). This concept forms the foundation of *St. Sophia. Khmer Theater* (1986), where «iconoclasm» manifests as aggression towards the canonical structures of the image,² opposing a tradition that is meant dismantled. The eidetism of art, as a condition of visibility and presence, is challenged, as every artistic figure must now confront the specter of its own absence, acknowledging the possibility that it may not have existed at all.

The creative process undergoes of traditional theater elements. Antonin Artaud and Carmelo Bene serve as key for the Castelluccian aesthetics. Artaud challenges reality and language, introducing a «language of the

² «This is iconoclastic theater: it is about tearing down all images in order to adhere to the only fundamental reality: the anti-cosmic Unreal, the whole of things not thought» (Castellucci, Castellucci 1992, 9).

flesh» (Perrier 2022, 77) that represents a different world filled with intense and violent imagery. This theater aims to overpower the audience with physical sensations, moving away from conventional text-based realism. Carmelo Bene, influenced by Artaud, also disrupts traditional stage writing through his «depensamenti» approach. Initially embracing Artaud's utopia with scandal and provocation, Bene later incorporates the concept of «cruelty» into his stage techniques. Carmelo Bene's work reflects Artaud's vision through innovative explorations of voice and body, emphasizing a radical departure from traditional text-based theater.

The dramaturgy of *Giulio Cesare* (1997) is a manifestation of the fall of authorship that embraces the fusion of language and physicality. Drawing inspiration from Shakespeare and Plutarch, this production incorporates rhetoric and gestures from ancient statuary. On the stage, the human body becomes a vessel for the creation of visual representation (Belting 2009, 74), allowing the word to transcend its traditional role in drama. The actor's performance is redefined, finding expression through the body and voice, aligning with Carmelo Bene's concept of the "acting machine". The voice, as a mere sound or "technology of saying", emerges as a subjective force rooted in the corporeal nature of the body. Shakespeare's influence is evident in the portrayal of vocal cords as they transform into a gateway for the original expression of the voice, unveiling its carnal and sexual origins to the audience. The stage itself is transformed into a provocative space, with a menacing giant ram's head looming between the stage and the audience, creating an atmosphere of hostility. After this initial confrontation, the performance commences with the appearance of the word «Onan» in an empty and dark stage, where only a few bricks, a pile of shoes, and a projection device are visible. The actor known as «...vsky» is introduced, his name displayed on a blackboard as a nod to Stanislavsky. Using an endoscope inserted into his nostril, he reveals the inner workings of his vocal cords, projecting their movements onto the backdrop of the stage while reciting lines from Shakespeare's dialogue between a cobbler and Flavio Marullo. This fusion of body (*soma*) and voice (*phōnē*) as a rhetorical apparatus produced by the mouth (*stoma*) challenges the conventional image of the actor, delving into the scandalous interior that transcends the mere meaning of words generated by the vocal cords' movements. It lingers in a realm beyond conventional understanding.

The additional figures in the Shakespearean play draw inspiration from the Latin historians mentioned in the playbill and by Castellucci himself (Castellucci, Guidi, Castellucci 2001, 204-06) do not reproduce their scenic physiognomy nor their dramaturgical conformity. What re-emerges is

the recompositing of rhetorical tension, achieved more by indefinite and solemn postures than by the word decrying the failure of their speeches. Brutus fails to “live up” to his rhetorical commitment his words are diminished by the helium he breathes from a cylinder that ridicules his voice making it similar to Donald Duck’s verses, degrading him to an infantile state. When he is ready to deliver his famous speech, he wears a metal collar that vibrates and beats his neck, disfiguring and truncating his words. Cicero is a large-bodied man with his face covered by a latex mask; he utters a few sentences from the *De Oratore*, but his rhetoric is tedious; he falls asleep as he declaims them, and his mask swells, showing the pomposity of his speech.

Caesar embodies the ancient essence of the theater (Sacchi 2014, 123), his dull white figure covered by a purple-colored peplos is Christological. Brutus greets him by washing his feet, introducing an evangelical iconography. The omen of death is announced by a horse that has entered the scene with a servant of the emperor, on which the biblical expression «Mene Tekel Peres» is traced in white paint. But it is «...vskij» who will carry out “the line of action,” a phrase with which he presses Brutus without the latter’s going to act. In his shameful, soft nakedness Caesar is an expression of the rhetoric of the body, central to this play. Speech is an equally pained and torn element. To deliver his speech Antony climbs a pedestal, his stance is solemn, as crucial as he has to say, but even now the rhetoric of oration is defused, as Antony, played by a laryngectomized actor, “speaks from a wound” by laying his esophageal oratory, his phonatory technique (harking back to the benian machinic), on Caesar’s mortal wounds. His “voice” is doubled by the reproduced voice of Marlon Brando who recites the same monologue in Mankiewicz’s film and, at times, is confused with it. A tracheostoma that becomes a *stoma* becomes the performative polarity of *Giulio Cesare. Pezzi staccati* (2014), whose dramaturgy is composed of the two central monologues of the drama of the voice staged in ‘97: the speech of the character «... vskij», in which the name of Stanislavskij echoes, founding father of the theatre of xx century theatre and Marco Antonio’s funeral oration in honor of Caesar who rhetorically defeats Brutus’ speech. In the span of time between 2002 and 2004 the dramatic cycle is accomplished in which the sound dimension assumes a dramatic function.

Castellucci’s sound and visual dramaturgy

The publishing of *Epitaph* (2003), a wordless book filled with images capturing performances from the 1990s, marks the beginning of a shift

away from a symbolic and somewhat mythical framework. The visual essence of the book encapsulates previous works and sets the stage for future exploration of imagery. The title and cover image (depicting a mummy's face) hint at a desire to commemorate the end of an era, as seen in the significant volume titled *Epopoea della polvere*, while also preserving a memory, a burial³. The “sculptural aesthetics” that aim to shock, as developed by Societàs Raffaello Sanzio, are contrasted with the exploration of tragedy through the presence of bodies afflicted by various ailments on stage. This exploration is guided by the notion that «every body has its own story», as articulated by Romeo Castellucci (Lehmann 2019, 185), creating an «elusive and unbearable reality». The influences of Francis Bacon's paintings and the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti and George Segal can be seen throughout, shaping an «exposed body reality» that supersedes traditional dramaturgy (Lehmann 2019, 185-86).

Despite the deliberate subversion of traditional dramatic texts, Societàs Raffaello Sanzio persists in exploring the complexities of tragedy. After acknowledging the futility of merging the forms of tragedy and myth with contemporary theater, the focus now shifts towards extracting the essence of tragedy from a theatrical framework that has been drained of significance in our era. The aim is to introduce an anonymous, «antimitological» hero onto the stage (Perrier 2022, 65), who rebels against the notion of representation and seeks to transcend reality. At the core of these inquiries lies the innovative approach taken by Societàs Raffaello Sanzio in reimagining the visual and verbal elements, particularly through the increasing prominence of sound that deviates from its conventional role in relation to text. The entire creative process enriches and amplifies the organic aspect of Castellucci's works (Castellucci, Castellucci, Guidi, Kelleher, Ridout 2007. Pitozzi, Sacchi 2008)⁴. This organic quality pertains not only to the biological realm but also to the continuous evolution of voices, bodies, and materials on stage, which are immersed in antimitofluids and compounds, forming images that merge with sound, akin to chemical reactions (Perrier

³ «Dust, or in other cases ashes, is after all an essential matter of their theater, as is fire. *Epopoea della polvere* is entitled one of their most extensive texts, and dust drips from the bodies of their actors, from the elements of their scene» (Sacchi 2015, 195-96).

⁴ Valentina Valentini suggests an analogy, «as monumentality of purpose» with the «aesthetic system» of the *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002) by Matthew Barney, «The work-types that connote the 1990s [...] a complex structure in which precipitates his production-performances, drawings, sculptures, installations-between premodern regression, firm roots in postmodernism, and the mythologizing of the neo-avant-gardes» (Valentini 2015, 110-11).

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2022, 110). In *Tragedia Endogonia*, a series of eleven performances developed between 2002 and 2004 by Romeo Castellucci in collaboration with Societas Raffaello Sanzio, voice serves as the fundamental source of each segment and its residual essence. Sound assumes the role of sculpting a transformative vision that resonates with the audience's auditory senses, creating a "theater of sound" characterized by a dramaturgy of sonic imagery. The interplay between sound and image governs the performative and spectator experiences, blending theatrical and cinematic languages to confront the unfamiliar and unsettling, unveiling an electroacoustic realm that is in a perpetual state of emergence and metamorphosis (Pitozzi 2015, 115-116). The overarching objective remains to challenge conventional directorial conventions, forging new pathways guided by a personal connection to artistic expression while minimizing external influences. To be activated is a device that looks at the definition of the scene in an involuntal sense with respect to representation, a careful procedure of disassembly that presides over a montage aimed at shattering unity and any relation to the real, organized with «Images that are born slowly in the scene» and live for and in the spectator, are «exhalations of thought» that take distance from artificial constructions and definitions of space (Sacchi 2012, 216-217). Images «happen, take place» (Belting 2009, 75), the object of vision arises from the director's conscious depths, but germinates in the viewer and fertilizes his sensitive sphere. In some episodes, the encounter with the city reverberates its history. In *R.#07 Rome*, preceded by the entrance of a monkey, reminiscences of the cohabitation of temporal and spiritual power take shape on the scene, with the figures of Mussolini and the pope placed under a large bell that swings and rings without a clapper. They are «servants of two masters» of an «insufferable commedia dell'arte» like Harlequin present on stage in a double androgynous image. Similar presence is that of *P.#06 Paris*, in which images return of «the civil community, the organized community, military politics, human history that intersects mythology and theology», the Pavilion of the Exposition Universelle (1889 and 1900) that seems to engulf General De Gaulle (Societas Raffaello Sanzio 2007, 11-12). Then the sudden fall of some cars crashing violently and thunderously on the stage evokes the presence of the machine, of its signification beyond its objective appearance, its being device in action as the very structure of the whole cycle. The presence of the machine, along with the organic and chromatic dimensions takes on significant and symbolic space. The aforementioned cars crashing to the ground in the Paris episode, in *C.#01 Cesena* a mechanical contraption fired a few arrows, while a talking face taught a child the basics of an

unfamiliar language while isolated in the center of the scene in *BR.#04 Brussels/Brussel*. Finally, the arrival of a tank in *S.#08 Strasbourg* menacing the audience with its powerful mechanical presence and the gun turret aimed at the spectators, representing the epitome of «supertechnique» as a machine devoid of intentions or goals (Cimatti 2022, 187). Light and color also take the form of «scenic forms» (Pitozzi 2015, 121). In *M.#10 Marseille* the stage space is unveiled through a dynamic interplay of colors, a continuously shifting flow that merges substance and structure, defining «chromatic architectures» where the actor's figure fades away. In *B.#03 Berlin* and *BN.#05 Bergen* witness the invasion of optical specters in the stage space, moving with a molten-like quality that eventually transforms into «Rorschach spots», intensifying the eerie nature of their transformation. In episodes like *C.#01 Cesena*, *A.#02 Avignon* and *BN.#05 Bergen*, the prevalent gold hue (a common feature in Castellucci's works) showcases its reflective nature, erasing spatial boundaries, rendering the figures on stage luminous, and immersing the audience in the scene's imagery. The interplay between appearance and dissolution of images in these episodes is influenced by the shapes and patterns formed by smoke or talcum powder, making air, volume, and substance visible (Pitozzi 2015, 121), reminiscent of the transient nature of dust and ash, akin to Claudio Parmiggiani's *Delocazioni*. George Didi-Huberman explores the theme of absence and presence through a powerful combination of visual and emotional elements. He introduces the concept of the «dialectical image», which captures both the contact and loss experienced in the absence of a presence. This concept is illustrated by the example of a foot sinking into the sand, leaving behind an imprint. Didi-Huberman's work delves into the significance of this absence and its impact on our perception. (Didi-Huberman 2002, 27-41).

In addition, the term endogonidia is introduced to describe a cycle that encompasses both conceptual and biological aspects. This term provides a foundation for redefining the theatrical experience within the context of history. It goes beyond the traditional notion of contemporary theater and introduces the concept of «living theater». This new perspective surpasses and challenges the existing theoretical framework (Societas Raffaello Sanzio 2007, 7). The cycle itself is characterized by a generative process called parthenogenesis, which involves the creation of new forms without fertilization. It is driven by a chemistry of the living, a physics of chain reactions, and an economy of interconnected elements. These elements come together to reveal vital theatrical figures. Within this cycle, a number of *Crescite* are formed. These are spores that detach from the central

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organism and develop into short moments with a circular dynamic. These moments are characterized by brief actions concentrated in their spatial and circular dimensions. Although connected to the central core, each *Crescita* can be observed and considered as an autonomous form (Ponte di Pino 2013, 88). Didi-Huberman's research delves into the intricate interplay between presence and absence, influencing our comprehension of theater and history. The concept of the dialectical image and the term endogonia offer valuable perspectives on this investigation.

Following the realization of *Tragedia Endogonia*, there is a significant reassessment of the creative endeavors within the group, with three distinct operational nuclei revolving around Claudia Castellucci, Chiara Guidi, and Romeo Castellucci. The latter continues to focus on image and sound in his artistic journey. Castellucci's sound and visual dramaturgy also extends to unconventional theatrical spaces. In 2008, during the Avignon Festival, he presented Dante's *Comedia*. For the three *Cantica*, he presents diverse scenic solutions. While for *Paradiso*, he opts for two installations in the Church of the Celestini in Avignon and the Church of Santo Spirito in Cesena. Castellucci abandons verse entirely in this work, translating poetry into the language of bodies. His staging, characterized by a centrifugal dynamic, explores various aspects of the poem in unconventional and disorienting ways. Rather than simply reinterpreting Dante's journey into the afterlife, Castellucci aims to transform the essence of the work, starting from the concept of "terror", from a "book of terror". In Castellucci's interpretation, *La Divina Commedia* is intertwined with his established poetics, which encompass the imaginary, the classics, tragedy, and the Christian tradition. These elements serve as a foundation to portray the fragmented and deceptive perception of the contemporary individual. This approach to Dante's work draws inspiration not only from his poem, but also from tragedy, postdramatic and iconoclastic dramaturgy. The poetic verse undergoes a significant transformation, submerging itself into the physicality of bodies, movements, and images. The play encompasses all three canticles within a unified dramaturgical structure, where "multiple hells" coexist. However, this unity is not manifested in a singular staging, but rather through a piecemeal assembly of scenic elements, which are chronologically distant and scenically disjointed "episodes".

In *Inferno* he makes the Cour d'Honneur in the Palace of the Popes of Avignon inhabited by infernal presences. The place exhales damnation and emits its miasma through a vast range of sounds, knocks, crackles, noises that cannot hold back and suffocate breaths and sighs, distorted voices in which scraps of words that come from the scene resonate. The

sound dramaturgy swallows the mass of bodies on stage that visually recall the hordes of the damned, not only those narrated by the literary tradition but also those who painfully inhabit the now. It is the least narrative and most fragmented part of the trilogy and is developed through conceptual cores such as innocence, love, art, the figures of the artist and the spectator, devised and interconnected according to the principles of postdramatic theater that unites stories at the very moment it fragments them. In the stage space reverberates the theme of the «Avignon captivity», found in Dante's poem. In this place of terror, in the «middle of the road» of his life, the author-director presents himself in the first person, strikingly breaking the fourth wall and following the metalinguistic line of Dante's original that sees the poet within his work of fiction, with a declaration of intent that affirms and presents one of the thematic nodes of the staging: that of the *autor-actor*, the artist. Here the reference to the original is clear: Castellucci wears a padded suit and protects himself from the attack of three dogs thrown at him; he is Dante in the presence of the three beasts that await him at the entrance to the infernal cavern. Like this place inhabited by terror, the theater is not a neutral place and reveals its danger to which the director exposes himself in the first person: «Je m'appelle Romeo Castellucci» he proclaims as he advances on the still empty stage space. The animal presence on stage is also an evocative element in Castellucci's theatrical aesthetics from the very beginning, as an evocation of instinct, dehumanization, and the unexpected that inhabits the stage. Animals reinforce the pre-tragic and ritual core of theater and refer to a pure materiality of being. The animal on stage does not act, while dodging the dynamics of empathy and any narrative dimension, it does not embody the sphere of the savage, it marks the scene with its non-communicating presence, it is pure being that defuses the theatrical mechanism and, when compared to the machine (which has the same function on stage) «opens a meaningless abyss» (Cimatti 2022, 191). For Castellucci, animals lead back to the origin of theater (the «poet» goat in the *Tragedia Endogonidia*) and, at the same time, are «conducting images, functioning as detonators» (Ponte di Pino 1988, 126). They defuse the theatrical device, their presence as «pure being» moving on stage pulverizes the performance, «prevent empathy, break the narrative temptation and only bring back to the body, the presence of the body» (Cimatti 2022, 191)⁵. Their appearance signifies the

⁵ «The beast is different from the animal. The beast is that animal which has no relationship with language. That has never been contaminated by language. The beast is the real. When

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transformation of the actor into an animal, by sharing the organic essence, is a statement that delineates a trajectory in Castellucci's theatrical work. The human element on stage is magnified as a group of characters enters, the multitude that symbolizes the Inferno for Castellucci, the city of sorrow, with its movement resembling a wave, both in terms of choreography and emotions. The progression is foreshadowed and then accompanied by the diabolical emergence of the palace, whose foreboding nature is revealed through intense lights and sounds. As Dante descends into the Inferno, he is initially struck by a sonic disturbance: the darkness is absolute and all the information he can gather about the surroundings is auditory: «Diverse lingue, orribili favelle, / parole di dolore, accenti d'ira, / voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle» (*Inf.* III). The damnation aligns with the scattering of the singular voice amidst the chaotic babel, the dissolution of identity in the indistinctness of sound. The tragic essence, identical in nature, takes form in a group of children (the unbaptized born of Limbo) who are placed within a shrine. Seemingly unaffected, they amuse themselves with joyful games and sounds, unaware of their presence on the stage or their role as performers. They inhabit this sub-world. However, the shrine that houses them, as if to protect them from evil, is soon covered by a large, foreboding black spot descending from above. It engulfs the shrine completely until it vanishes from sight, creating a sort of "hell of innocence". According to Agamben, children (the *infans*) and animals exist outside of language and possess a deeper perception of reality (Agamben 2002). Castellucci views children as representations of "becoming minors", as they are weaker and "lesser" than adults, making them an extraordinary resource for the stage. Within the chorus present on the scene, another reference to Dante's cantica emerges: a man and a woman (Paolo and Francesca?) attempt to approach each other but fail to make contact. Others in the group come together, embrace, and kiss. One of them, turning his head from side to side, continuously says, «Je t'aime. Je t'aime. Je t'aime même si tu n'es plus là». Then, one by one, they take turns climbing a tall plinth, as if in a death ritual, and throw themselves back with open arms, disappearing into the void. The phrase «Je m'appelle Andy Warhol» appears in the background,

a beast comes on stage, it is not actually entering the stage as an actor. The beast does not act, does not represent, does not want to be the pure tautology: the beast is the beast. But only from the point of view of the spectator, that is, the animal fictive. The beast, in Romeo Castellucci's theater, is not a metaphor for anything else, for instinct, for animality, for wild nature. If it were so, the beast would still be a fictive beast, it would be a symbol» (Cimatti 2018, 147).

signifying a shift in the action and a reminder of the initial authorial statement. The presence of a “new” Virgil is announced, no longer the enlightened guide who accompanies Dante on his journey, but rather the creator of the so-called *Crash* (reproductions of crash-tests, using the artist’s typical technique) that intensify the sense of impending catastrophe, characteristic of contemporary art. This catastrophe lacks catharsis.

The invocation of a visual artist raises questions about the role of the spectator and the gaze, which are central to Castellucci’s aesthetic. The presence and function of these elements in the performance dynamics evoke the image of the audience already resonating on stage. These two aspects converge where the fourth wall has been dismantled. A large, translucent white sheet swiftly ascends and envelops the audience, transforming into a shapeless mass integrated into the stage action, accompanied by escalating sounds, creating a fully immersive experience. Moving forward, the stage is graced by a burning piano - the crackling flames and the sound of its strings snapping counterbalance the other stage noises - while a phrase emerges in the background: «A voi attori della Società Raffaello Sanzio che non siete più». The theater transforms into a funeral ceremony that recalls an ancient sense of sorrow, rooted in the tragedy that emanates from the stage’s Hell. Once again, it becomes a ritual of death, with the characters marking each other’s necks as if with a slashing knife, coldly ending each other’s lives, possibly alluding to the violent seventh circle and the circle of murderers. Within this surrender of goodness, an off voice asks the question: «Où es-tu? Où es-tu?», intensifying the dream-like atmosphere of the scene that blurs the delicate boundary between guilt and innocence for the viewer. This is further heightened by the appearance of a white horse on stage, which stains its legs and tail red as it moves in a circular motion. The final sequence evokes the presence of Andy Warhol, who emerges from the remains of a burnt-out car, carried onto the stage by three actors dressed in emergency response uniforms. Armed with a Polaroid camera, Warhol captures snapshots of the audience before repeating the backward flight seen earlier. As an integral part of the performance, the spectator becomes the recipient of its conclusion. Three monitors placed at the windows of the building that initially formed the word «Etoile» rush onto the scene with a thunderous impact, leaving the stage engulfed in darkness, only to reveal the word «Toi». The last verse of *Inferno* («E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle», *Inf.* xxxiv, 139) is subverted, as Dante’s ascent is replaced by a plunge into catastrophe that once again challenges the spectator.

The *Purgatorio* presents a unique resolution in terms of setting, with the

director opting for a bourgeois theater space consisting of a modern kitchen and an elegant living room. Throughout the dialogues, the names of the three characters on stage are never spoken; instead, the three «Stars» are identified by captions projected onto the translucent veil covering the proscenium. These concise texts create a sense of anticipation and a temporal gap between the text and the scene. The limited dialogues, initially between the mother and son, later joined by the father, depict what appears to be a “typical” family dynamic, yet an underlying tension pervades this facade, particularly evident in the son’s discomfort. Every action is sterile and controlled, in harmony with the environment they occupy. When the father arrives, signaled by lights and car noises, the chilling ambiance gradually shifts as he requests to see his son (who has meanwhile left the scene upon his arrival and sought refuge in his room, another area of the house depicted on stage), a request the mother tearfully tries to resist. This is followed by a peculiar request to the son, who has returned with his mother (who exits the scene), to don his hat, while the father retrieves a latex mask from his briefcase, saying: «soyons un cow-boy comme la dernière fois?» (the caption, with a sardonic undertone, only displays a chilling hint of laughter: «ah...Ah...ah»). The seemingly playful invitation conceals a much darker motive on the father’s part, as the most intense moment of the performance approaches. The two ascend to the son’s room, and the vacant stage is filled with the father’s anguished cries as he assaults his sobbing son, though the audience is spared the visual depiction of the act, with the scene remaining motionless and empty in the living room where the event has transpired, even the atrocity (as in classical tragedy, the horrific deed is left unseen on stage). The horror is emphasized by the caption «La Musique», in an utterly antiphrastic way, wedges a guilt without expiation on the scene. The sole hero, in the traditional sense of the term, is the colossal robot with whom the child interacts, seemingly seeking its saving intervention. Subsequently, silence falls, and the visibly distraught father reemerges, descending the stairs to sit at a piano that stands out in the spacious living room. His son, with a swollen face, joins him, offering words of comfort to console him, almost reversing the scene’s meaning. In *Purgatory*, the son does not achieve his atonement, preparing himself to be welcomed into heaven, but rather faces the complete failure of paternal authority. The revelation of evil lies within life itself, the very life from which the father begot his son, the original sin for which he seeks forgiveness. The son’s return would have redeemed him, had it not been for the son’s own salvation, even though reconciliation seems impossible. The director suggests that the father’s violence towards

his son represents a reinterpretation of the biblical sacrifice of the lily and the tumultuous relationship between creator and creation, rather than a mere allusion to domestic abuse. A sudden shift in scenery interrupts the narrative, transporting it to a dreamlike realm where the boundaries of reality blur. Within an illuminated circle, images of blossoms flow, appearing both ambiguous and unsettling. Adjacent, we catch a glimpse of the son's silhouette, observing and resting a hand on the screen, as if establishing a physical connection, a tangible correspondence with those images. In the projection, the father's figure wanders amidst the blossoms. The scene transitions once more, returning to the nearly empty hall where the transformed father and son now stand. The first character is portrayed by an actor struggling with motor coordination issues and tremors, while the second character is depicted as a very tall teenager. A hanging iron hoop encircles the two individuals on the stage, as the son kneels on the floor beside his shaking father, attempting to comfort him. The tall teenager then splits in two, dons his cowboy hat once more, and exits towards the upper room where the altercation took place. The stage fades to black, revealing only the circular frame containing the image of an eye.

The second canticle's performance concludes without providing any chance for redemption. In *Purgatorio*, Castellucci delves deeper into the question of what this intermediate realm between the damned and the blessed signifies in contemporary times, more so than in *Inferno* and *Paradiso*. The setting chosen is an ordinary space: a household where a family resides. However, this reinterpretation uncovers a chilling reality beneath the serene bourgeois facade. The obscene is not limited to what cannot be depicted on stage; the fact that it occurs "offstage" does not shield the audience but rather intensifies the unease by alluding to a concealed domestic realm, leaving one to imagine any horror. For Castellucci, theater (or rather, the harshness of theater) encompasses not only what unfolds on stage but also what transpires in the minds of the viewers. If Dante's *Purgatorio* symbolizes time, Castellucci opts to portray time through the cycle of this family, where guilt and innocence intertwine, revealing the darker aspects of humanity. According to Romeo Castellucci, this is *Purgatory*: a realm of violence, exploitation, and guilt where no chance of redemption exists.

The challenge faced by Dante in transcending towards *Paradiso* proves to be nearly insurmountable for Castellucci. However, within the realm of the "unrepresentable", he identifies essential opportunities. Consequently, the director opts for a site-specific installation at the Église des Celestines in Avignon, transforming it into an "exhibition" rather than a tradition-

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al performance. The journey towards the divine is substituted with a melancholic contemplation of nature, viewed by the audience through a circular aperture overlooking the church's perimeter filled with water gently stirred by waves. Amidst this setting, a piano (previously featured in the two preceding episodes) prominently stands. In addition to the visual experience, the viewers' interaction is stimulated by the auditory landscape crafted by Scott Gibbons, incorporating the sounds of water and silence, which, in this context, become a form of sound themselves. Water, a fundamental element of nature symbolizing life, plays a significant role in the installation. A striking image within the exhibit is that of the sea, reflecting an intense light reminiscent of the radiance enveloping Dante during his celestial journey in *Paradiso*. The absence of human figures and voices holds profound symbolic significance, suggesting that Heaven may only exist as a distant dream or vision. This somber reflection underscores a profound sense of separation. The sparse elements in the installation tragically allude to a desperate and unattainable reconciliation with the universe. Before Paradise, humanity is portrayed as an outsider: unable to participate as an actor or character, but merely as a silent observer.

Show to take away

Continuing our analysis, let us now shift our attention to the “sequence of subordinates” that links a series of crucial yet disjointed scenes in the initial part of *The Four Seasons Restaurant* (2013). The title of this work is a nod to the pictorial cycle created by Mark Rothko for the famous New York restaurant, which he ultimately decided not to deliver. Castellucci highlights Rothko's act of refusal and intertwines it with the removal of gestures and movements distilled from poses found in classical statues of actresses, set against the stark whiteness of a sparsely populated stage. The drama draws inspiration from Friedrich Hölderlin's *La morte di Empedocle*, where the poet recounts the suicide of Empedocles who plunged into Mount Etna, opting for a renunciation that would elevate him to a divine status. The actresses, adorned with golden crowns, take turns embodying the role of the archon of Agrigento. Clad in aprons, they recite the poet's verses while distorting their speech, which is then echoed asynchronously by a radio's crackling on stage. Subsequently, they enact a renunciation by silently severing their tongues with scissors. The *Shepherd's Black Veil* (2016) is also associated with the concept of subtraction. In this performance, Willem Dafoe embodies the character of Reverend Hooper from Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, where the protagonist conceals his face

from the community. Pastor Hooper explains, «This veil is an emblem, a symbol, and I must always wear it, in the light and in the dark, in solitude and in front of the gaze of the multitude, in front of strangers and closest friends. No mortal gaze will ever see him rise. This gloomy shadow must separate me from the world». Castellucci does not adapt the literary text into dramaturgy, character, space, representation, they are immersed in an iconoclastic and pre-theatrical ritual, whose dramaturgy is composed by Claudia Castellucci as «Preparation for meditation», delivered to the spectators in the form of a booklet prayers. On stage, the text collapses in its purely theatrical and illustrative, as well as contemplative, dimension, becoming a further occasion for the denial of appearing, for the annulment of action. The very relationship between the character and the community he watches is not consequential, the straight line along which the reverend's speech moves does not reach the faithful, it does not outline a world that can be shared as a community.

Rites of human race

Once again, the boundaries of *Democracy in America* (2017), are explored through the themes of speech and emptiness. This performance draws inspiration from Alexis de Tocqueville's essay of the same name, envisioning a new form of democracy influenced by the European model and experienced through the egalitarianism of the Puritan communities in the United States. However, this anticipated future of renewal and freedom is destined to fail. The barren desert yields no harvest, and the faith of the farmers wavers. Their rebellion against a self-denying God is seen as blasphemy, erupting into glossolalia - a prophetic language spoken unknowingly in the grip of delirious possession. The meaning of this language is elucidated through projected captions on the backdrop, eventually giving way to a group brandishing flags, each adorned with a letter. Their synchronized movements initially form the words of the performance's title, and then spell out words such as «crime», «coca», «car comedy», «carcinoma» and «cynic». Amidst the whirlwind of words, the final act of the performance unfolds as some Native Americans shed their skin and hang it from a descending trapeze, symbolizing their willingness to adopt the language of the settlers and forsake their own, quite literally tearing it away from their flesh. A Greek bas-relief, partially exposed, serves as a backdrop, evoking a rocky landscape reminiscent of a Native American *pueblo*.

Reinventing from a spatial point of view the gray and dusty automobile depot, transformed into extra-diegetic theatrical space, Romeo

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Castellucci stages *La vita nuova* (2018)⁶ transforming the gray and dusty automobile depot into a spatially reinvented theatrical space. This transition becomes an iconic and alienating experience for the audience, as they enter through a dimly lit corridor and catch glimpses of cars covered in white sheets, surrounded by mist. Five African brothers, dressed in chitons and *pedilons*⁷, enter amidst the silhouettes of the cars, wielding long white sticks. Accompanied by a bird of prey flapping its wings, they embody a gestural theory that challenges Western representation and transforms a symbolic universe rooted in Nietzschean philosophical Zoroastrianism. The scene takes on a prophetic dimension, reminiscent of Zarathustra's cave, as these «superior men» and «shepherds» officiate an ancient cult, creating a profound connection between the stage and the spectator. The prologue is filled with country sounds, bleats, bells, and chirps, echoing Nietzsche's poetic and prophetic interpretation of the Zoroastrian myth⁸. This mythological space is brought to life in a tangible setting, with cars draped in white cloths, symbolizing the cultic function assumed by the performers and their interaction with objects and bodies. The sacral space is illuminated by a white-gray color scheme, where the interplay of light and darkness accentuates the contrast between life and death.

Moving on from the introduction, the central action unfolds as the five prophets navigate through space, uncovering the cars hidden beneath their tarps and propelling them around the perimeter of the stage. The transition from natural sounds to the screeching of sheet metal and tires

⁶ The performance debuted on November 28, 2018 at Kanal, the largest Citroën depot, in Brussels, which the Centre Pompidou in Paris has transformed into a major cultural hub, one of Europe's most important exhibition hubs. It was then replicated for *Art City*, Bologna, on Jan. 24 and 25, 2020, in the former railway yard warehouse, now shed 4 of the urban regeneration space, DumBO (Distretto urbano multifunzionale di Bologna).

⁷ Primitive form of sandals typical of ancient Greece that raised the natural height of the wearer.

⁸ «For ten years you came up here to my cave: satiated with your light and this path you would have become, without me, my eagle, my snake». Among the central ideas and place in the *Prologue* at (Nietzsche 1968, 3). Always in *Prologo di Zarathustra* tells that: «An eagle swirled in wide circles through the air, from it hung a snake, not as prey but as a friend: it was in fact ringed around her neck. «They are my animals», said Zarathustra and rejoiced with his heart. «The proudest animal under the sun the most intelligent animal under the sun-they were in flight to explore the land» and allegorically refers to the same animal, dwelling on the «origin of evil», describing its predatory act against the lambs, (Nietzsche 1984, 33-34). Castellucci had already approached Persian myths in an early phase of his reflection on the pre-Tragic, with *La discesa di Inanna* (1989) e *Gilgamesh* (1990). To «superior men» who rise above their own worth Nietzsche refers in a section of his *Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1984, 336).

signifies the transformation of the cars into anguished sacrificial victims. Lying on their sides, they reveal their dark, mechanical wombs to the audience, housing a classical-style artistic object. This metamorphosis of objects echoes a profound shift in both artistic and human values. The action is accompanied by sudden bursts of horn and gear sounds, intermittent neon lights on the ceiling, and the intrusion of everyday life that disrupts the silence. Amidst the chaos, the five «shepherds» perform ritualistic gestures, invoking something beyond themselves with a golden circle resting on a branch, symbolizing Nietzschean concepts of eternal return, new fertility, and perfection. This symbolic offering is presented to a spectator, solidifying the communal understanding established between the actors and the audience. Adding to the circular ritual and gestures of brotherhood performed by the actors, one of the overturned cars comes to life, its wheels moving and exhaust smoke billowing from the tailpipe, accompanied by the sound of the engine. The interaction between bodies and objects, both significant elements shaping our daily existence, is deeply rooted. The concept of reversal challenges us to reconsider our lives, highlighting the choices we make that impact various aspects such as society, politics, work, and art. Claudia Castellucci's dramaturgical device operates a liturgy of the word that entrusts to the voice of one of the performer-priests the appeal to Ernest Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* for which these African brothers: «intend to inaugurate a new and better way of being together. Better than the world from which they have separated themselves, from alienated activity, from salaried labor, from politics and art». It pronounces a concrete call for the overturning of all values of art and humanity, a call for the freedom that is still «not here», a repeated and historically paradigmatic allocution, evocative of the exploitation to which these men are subjected. A “here” and an “now” that is combined with the places and historical time of a «new life» broken by the holocaust of the castaways that bursts forth and demands reason from us all. The fate of those individuals whom the world calls “immigrants” and who often do not arrive on dry land and remain there, at the bottom, like the bottom of a garage where humanized carcasses, like shipwrecks, now lifeless are covered by white tarps (Zangari 2020).

Small final fragments

So, for what has been said and to conclude, the theater becomes, in Castellucci's intentions, the place of a complex vision that results from a sensitive stratification in which sight and hearing support the triumph of

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the dramatic power of the image. Dramaturgy understood as the grafting of a path which is the result of a cooperation of not only linguistic codes, the outcome of which, in addition to decontextualizing the action from a narrative and theatrical tension in a codified sense, displaces it towards an installation aesthetic, in the sense of establishing significant relationships with the theatrical context aimed at modifying its coordinates and creating an event in which several codes interact.

Looking at some significant moments of Romeo Castellucci's research testifies, in a clear and disruptive way, how the artist has become the protagonist of a theatrical aesthetic that has contributed to transform dramaturgical objectivity by placing it in relation to the act of looking. In such a designation, the viewer is placed at the center, in a position of pre-eminence in which the dimension of looking and listening, the technology of the eye, are summoned to reveal the power of vision without a text intervening to support the task. The viewer is confronted with an architecture defined by a complexity of codes that charge the vision with a choice, dialoguing with each other, conflating any contribution of the theatrical tradition, primarily that of canonical dramaturgy, in an assumption of responsibility toward what is placed at the disposal of the gaze that at times turns upside down and shines in its sound dimension. For Castellucci, looking is also "seeing oneself seeing", questioning what one is looking at and "who" is performing that action, a process that does not involve preordained directions or messages to be grasped, only the immersion in a prodigious enigma.

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