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# Introduction

ANXO ABUÍN GONZÁLEZ AND  
EDUARDO PÉREZ-RASILLA<sup>1</sup>

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This volume should be understood in the context of the “postdramatic” (Hans-Thies Lehmann) and “postspectacular” (André Eiermann) paradigms that have put into question traditional concepts regarding representation and role of the spectator in the creation of meaning, and which have also placed the spotlight on the importance of performativity as a strategy to create new scenic perspectives. It deals, therefore, with a new “expansive” textuality that relates to what Claire Bishop (2006 and 2012) has termed the “social turn” in theatrical and artistic practices, embodied in the diffusion of interventionist, collaborative, dialogical or participative forms, forms that are always dissonant and anti-hegemonic, as demonstrated in the civic commitment that has been characteristic of the Spanish stage in recent years.

This is not just an appeal to collective identity, but an attempt to create a public space, an *agora*, in which spectators can participate in solidarity, sharing ideas and debating freely about the future of the community to which they belong. The aim is to create a strong public, capable of accepting the new performative structures and in this way constituting themselves as counter-publics, ready to resist dominant discourses and create a more democratic and egalitarian reality. Using the terminology of Reinaldo Laddaga (2006), according to which there was once a predominant “aesthetic regimen of the arts”, in which the author wrote isolated from his political context, and the recipient remained a passive spectator of a work presented as fixed and closed, in the new artistic “regimen of practice”, the author involves him or herself in collaborative projects, and the recipient

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<sup>1</sup> This work is part of the research project “PERFORMA2-PERFORMADOS (Metamorfosis del espectador en el teatro español actual)” (PID2019-104402RB-I00), 2020–2023) [“PERFORMA2-PERFORMADOS (Metamorphosis of the Spectator in Contemporary Spanish Theatre)” (PID2019-104402RB-I00), 2020–2023)], funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, within the State Plan for Scientific and Technical Research on Innovation 2017–2020).

becomes a participative agent in works whose borders are unstable and unfixed, invested in plural networks and collective projects. This is a theatre that can be understood as an “expanded field”, which we should value as an opportunity for greater creative liberty and, perhaps, an intensification of the potential of the “hyperconnected multitude”, allowing for the emergence of new ways of experiencing and experimenting with the intersections of the virtual and the real. The contemporary artist has no other option but to confront the world within which they exist with the instruments at their disposal in a given moment, instruments that are described in a new vocabulary: hybridization, process, hypertextual navigation, cooperation, flexibility, interaction... The “new spectator”, if in reality such a thing exists, has also moved away from their traditional position and has accepted the challenge of not just being a “hunter of signs” or a “textual pirate”, to use the image dear to one of the apostles of the so-called “culture of participation”, Henry Jenkins (1992), who himself was writing in the wake of Michel de Certeau (1984), but a creator and co-author of unique signs that move in unpredictable and rhizomatic ways.

The new artistic practices can be understood as “ways of doing” that require complex procedural mechanisms and strategies: the theatrical experience challenges us to invent those “ways of doing” that re-establish an authentic public sphere in the context of today’s social networks. It has to do with approaching the status of the “new spectator” in contemporary theatre, understanding it as a locus in which social, political, and gender identities are negotiated... and we attempt to do so from the perspective of the new formulations that have arisen to designate the new figures of the spectator emerging in contemporary theatre: ideal (Balme), emancipated (Rancière). Immersive (Alston, Biggin, Frieze, Machon...), participative (Bishop, White), relational (Bourriaud), committed (Lavender and Walmsley), intermedial (Helbo, in this volume), or expanded (José Antonio Sánchez). With these approaches, we hope to provide tools for the analysis of contemporary theatre, looking at the work of contemporary authors on both dramaturgical and spectacular levels, and relating these to a “politics of vision” (Olivier Neveux).

We have tried to distance ourselves from a monolithic focus on spectators and audience in regard to their corporeal, sensorial, and affective capacities (Matthew Reason’s “corporal turn”), taking into account questions of attention, memory, and semiosis (the process of attributing meanings) and community (the social dimension). Contemporary theatre has addressed these issues in many diverse ways, which are reflected in the ever-increasing

theoretical terminology of theatrical studies, as is evidenced in the recent *Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*, coordinated by Matthew Reason (et al): “audience-participants”, “playing-audience”, “guest performers” (Machon, 2016, 38), “narrator-visitors”, “extended audiences” (Couldry, 2005), “visitors”, “co-players”, “participants”, “mobilised spectator” or “spec-tactors” (Boal, 2009). As Herber Blau (1990: 42) and, in an especially interesting contribution, Ben Walmsley (2019) argue, if the theatre of the 19th and 20th centuries deprived the spectator of their critical judgement (distained and domesticated, in the words of Antonin Artaud), today questioning the role of the audience has become fundamental: “Questions of audience engagement naturally beg the fundamental question of what an audience actually is and does. To what extent do audiences constitute a congregation, a collective, a community, or even a public? How do people transform into an audience and how might they best prepare for this transformation?” (Walmsley, 2019, 3). Of course, these are but some of the possible questions that can frame the audience as a “constructed conscience” of thought and desire, as, again, to use Blau’s words (1990: 25), an increasingly “empowered” and complex entity.

AQ: Please note that the cross-reference “As Herber Blau (1990)” has not been provided in the reference list. Please provide the same.

In these pages can be found some of the most important figures of recent Spanish theatre, writers and companies whose work has contributed decisively to the configuration of new figures of the spectator. A non-exhaustive list would include Los Torreznos, Angélica Liddell, Roger Bernat, La Ribot, Antonio Fernández Lera, Rodrigo García, El Canto de la Cabra, Laila Ripoll, Mariano Llorente, Andrés Lima, Pablo Remón, Álex Rigola, La Fura dels Baus, or A Panadaria. We have grouped the contributions in two complementary sections. The first, titled “Towards a Theory of the Spectator”, includes chapters with a theoretical bent, although they all offer interpretive commentaries on specific texts and spectacles. The second, titled “Case Studies”, while not abandoning theoretical insights, centres its analysis on specific pieces, authors, or companies. We hope that the final result offers a theatrical panorama that is as rich as it is full of subtle detail and that represents a theatre presupposing an ever-changing spectator.

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## **Part I**

### **TOWARDS A THEORY OF THE SPECTATOR**



# Catharsis, Neo-Catharsis, Post-Catharsis: Tragic Consciousness and Ethical Ambiguities in Contemporary Theatre

ANXO ABUÍN GONZÁLEZ<sup>1</sup>

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On January 15, 2019, a review of the performance of Jan Fabre's *Mount Olympus* at Teatros del Canal (Madrid) by Raquel Vidales was published in the Spanish newspaper *El País*. The journalist chose the title *La catarsis era esto* [*So this is what catharsis feels like*], assuming that the average reader would certainly be familiar with the term "catharsis". Just in case, she emphasizes that: "The audience, fully involved in the show since the very first second, experiences the first adrenaline rush of the night. Dionysus, the god of wine, the instigator of orgies, shows up: 'Every man needs a bit of madness' –a motto that he will repeat as a mantra until the end of the show. [...] The people in the audience are mesmerized. They gobble up a scene and drool as they dream of the wonders of the next". The audience are carried away in enthusiasm, apparently reaching a delirious state that urges them to dance using "relentless twerking moves", and many (among which Pedro Almodóvar) are quick to take out their smartphones to capture the moment for posterity. The show concluded with the tragedy chorus admonishing the spectator with the severity of a coach: "Re-empower yourself. Enjoy your own tragedy. Breathe, just breathe. And imagine something new."

Let me now share a less amusing and also more recent memory. During the first months of the pandemic, many people raised their voice to comment on the great potential of theatre as a tool for dealing with a crisis, in a double move that I find, at the very least, curious. On the one hand, they emphasized the connection between theatre and illness,

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or theatre and plague, and accompanied these affirmations with the usual allusions to the purifying or healing nature attributed to theatre since ancient times. This discourse was of course sprinkled with erudite references that ranged from Aristotle's catharsis to Antonin Artaud's purgative cruelty<sup>2</sup>. In times of cultural precarity in which the theatre tissue is being subject to complete erasure, this first intervention contrasted with

AQ: Please note that the cross-reference "Katharsis 1970" has not been provided in the reference list. Please provide the same.

<sup>2</sup> It is not the purpose of this paper to offer a (redundant) discussion on the Aristotelian concept of catharsis and its therapeutic or psychological/psychoanalytic applications. Besides the well-known passage in the *Poetics* (VI: 2), I find, however, necessary to remind the reader of the allusion to catharsis as effect experienced by the spectator/listener when they listen to music that we find in his *Politics* (VIII: 7): "For every feeling that affects some souls violently affects all souls more or less; the difference is only one of degree. Take pity and fear, for example, or again enthusiasm. Some people are liable to become possessed by the latter emotion, but we see that, when they have made use of the melodies which fill the soul with orgiastic feeling, they are brought back by these sacred melodies to a normal condition as if they had been medically treated and undergone a catharsis. Those who are subject to the emotions of pity and fear and the feelings generally will necessarily be affected in the same way; and so will other men in exact proportion to their susceptibility to such emotions". This text has also encouraged more "didactics-oriented" (catharsis as learning) and aesthetic readings (catharsis as the aftermath of a formal exercise). Regarding the idea of catharsis as purification, it is worth mentioning Tatarkiewicz's revealing words: "The primary point of dispute has been whether by 'purging' Aristotle meant the purification of the emotions or the purging of the mind from those emotions. Did he refer to a sublimation or a discharge of emotions, to their improvement or to emancipation from them? The first interpretation was accepted for a long time, but today historians agree that the second meaning of 'purging' is the one intended in the *Poetics*. Aristotle did not mean that tragedy ennobles and perfects the spectator's emotions, but that it discharges them. Through it the spectator rids himself of the excess of those emotions which trouble him and gains internal peace. Only this interpretation can be historically justified. Historians have also debated whether Aristotle drew his concept of 'purging' from religious cults or from medicine. There is no doubt that he took a close personal interest in medicine; however, his idea of *katharsis* as well as of mimesis, his views of purging as well as of imitation, derived from religious ritual and Pythagorean views. Aristotle had taken over a traditional doctrine and given it a different interpretation: he saw the purging of emotions as discharging, as a natural psychological and biological process. According to Orphic and Pythagorean ideas, *katharsis* was induced by music. Aristotle endorsed this view. He divided the modes of music into ethical, practical and enthusiastic, and invested the last with the ability to release emotions and purge souls. But it was above all in poetry that he saw *katharsis* in operation. He never claimed, however, that the visual arts could produce similar results. *Katharsis* was for him an effect of some, but not all, imitative arts. He distinguished a 'cathartic' group among the 'imitative arts'; he included in this group poetry, music and the dance. The visual arts formed another group" (1970: 146–147). See Szczeklik (2010).

the very understandable screenization of theatrical experiences by both institutional and amateur platforms that were set up during lockdown. These resorted to a motley arrangement of resources and offered questionable results that would most probably be labeled as *telemorphic* by Jean Baudrillard (2001).

This, however, was not the first time that this century witnessed a tenacious resurgence of the concept *catharsis* with the aim to explain the contemporary circumstances of the stage arts. It indeed happened in successive waves that unsurprisingly led to a revisitation of the tragic model –most of the times from perspectives updated to fit the current situation. I will not discuss here how shocking I found this move that resulted in the contemporization of a genre that historically evolved from pre-dramatic roots through mimesis of the formulations inherited from Aristotle, whose notion of catharsis –as Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1970) pointed out– remains one the greatest conundrums of Western poetics. I will, instead, focus on approaching the cathartic effect as a component of a new dramatic structure –one that places the spectator at the core of many emergent proposals by current creators, which will certainly be classified as post-dramatic very soon.

AQ: "Władysław Tatarkiewicz 1991" has been changed Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1970) as per the reference list. Please check if it is fine.

## Neo-Catharsis

To be fair, tragedy had never really disappeared completely from our theatre scene, even though it might have lost a great deal of its original essence (as a result of being devoid of a specific spatiality, or detached from the political efficiency of using the Chorus as a narrative tool). However, other elements of Greek tragedy, as Patricia Vasseur-Legangneux (2004) pointed out, became especially attractive for contemporary stage directors, such as non-psychologizing approaches to the actors or the absence of identification of a mostly unrealistic and extremely standardized mode of representation, which, despite this, did not exclude (at least in its original form) the expressiveness of excess nor the practice of trance. In the latter's potential for neo-catharsis, Artaud's disciples saw a possible instrument to develop the "will to power" of an ethics of cruelty as a vital force or metaphor –the very secret of life, that is, Nietzsche's "Dionysian ecstasy". For the German philosopher, this "ecstasy" was intended to push to anarchy each and every principle of a given cultural status quo. In the words of Artaud, referenced by Camille Dumoulié, "le théâtre de la cruauté ne présentera l'histoire de héros glorieux, mais ces 'grands mythes

noirs' qui exigent une 'atmosphère de carnage, de torture, de sang versé', [...] les images mythiques réveillent dans l'esprit les forces de dissociation et libèrent sur la scène, sans voile ni transfiguration, 'un jet sanglant d'images'" (Dumoulié, 1992: 51), just like a disease that destroys the existing social establishment, thus liberating the most violent drives of the individual. Let's not fool ourselves: Artaud does not envision any possible healing. All that remains is paradoxes and a lack of closure, unavoidable poison, existence and chaos –such is the Law of life: war, plague, hunger, massacre, madness, Evil... The spectators finally open their eyes; their role is to manage the implacable shadow of violence.

Gilles Deleuze read Artaud from a perspective that placed him at the edge of the abyss; as the cry of life, uttered before the constitution of any language; as a delirium of suffering –impossibility turned into poetic and philosophical power. The battle is fought "here", at the level of the body –that "fecal" body from which he wanted to detach himself. His purpose, just like Nietzsche's, is to get closer to the idea of "Grande Santé" (Deleuze, 1969: 202–203). In the words of Bouillon: "Le philosophe, la penseur, l'artiste, n'est pas seulement critique de la société, il porte en lui la vocation de philosophe-médecin que Nietzsche recherche. C'est parce que Nietzsche, Artaud, Van Gogh et Deleuze sont malades que se joue dans leur propre corps l'instinct secret de la Grande santé" (2016: 15). If the world is not right, our role is not to heal it, but to accept it as it is: the concept at play is not that of truth, but rather those of health and life, as Nietzsche suggests in *Le Gai savoir* (#2) [*The Gay Science*] and Artaud in *Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société* (xiii, 54): "C'est la santé entre deux reprises de la fièvre chaude qui va passer,/ c'est la fièvre entre deux reprises d'une insurrection de bonne santé" (1999, 54). Only from the perspective of disease can we assess the value of life and state its fundamental attributes. What Artaud proposes is a philosophy of intensification that seeks the establishment of a free perception of reality in the face of the ghost of utter extinction:

Therefore, I propose a theatre where violent physical images pulverize, mesmerize the audience's sensibilities, caught in the drama as if in a vortex of higher forces. Theatre, abandoning psychology, must narrate the unusual, stage nature's conflicts, nature's subtle powers arising first and foremost as extraordinary derivative powers. Theatre bringing on trances just as the whirling Dervishes or the Assouas induce trances. It must be aimed at the system by exact means, the same means as the sympathetic music used by

some tribes which we admire on records but are incapable of originating among ourselves (2010: 59).

A theatre of experience, of new forms; experience as the core of life; the spectator at the core of theatre; language finally free –the hieroglyphic.

The first wave of resurgence of the idea of catharsis in the 20th century was encouraged by what Christopher Innes called, following Jacques Copeau and Peter Brook, *holy theatre* –a designation that refers to a mystical aspiration to the transmission of the intangible and the metaphysical revelation of the human spirit, which would lead spectators to a state of emotional harmony and to the celebration of a community identity; a sort of therapeutic experience that was, at the same time, intended to alter the emotional state of the audience by making them aware of their most repressed psyche. What Innes (1981: 25) called *avant-garde theatre* was also oriented towards a series of therapeutic, almost mystical goals, and intended to reach them through an expressionist, emotion-based form that “transfigured” the spectators, who allegedly became “New Men” after undergoing this experience. Artaud’s “exorcism” sought to release the brakes of civilization, to repair our natural relationship with the spiritual, and to purify the audience’s social violence with images by showing them images of crimes and cruelty.

Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski were the irrefutable masters behind this almost religious conversion of theatre: “Like Aristotle, they believe that the spectator leaves the theatre in a condition close to an ideal affective state. The spectacle accomplishes this in much the way music does –through abstract theatrical elements (rhythm, sound, archetypal imagery) rather than through mimesis” (Auslander, 1984: 21). Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968: 52) shows us that he believes in a universal, elementary language of comprehensible signs and sounds that exist beyond a word’s semantic value; a language of ideograms “which evoke associations in the psyche of the audience” (1968: 39), associations that are spontaneous and immediate –primitive reactions of the I that enable self-knowledge. Grotowski also endorsed the therapeutic quality of catharsis –an idea that grew stronger in his later works. In a late, rather unknown text, he states:

If someone wishes to be sincere with regard to his own life, giving it a pledge with his own flesh and blood, one might assume that what he reveals will be exclusively personal, individual. It is not the whole truth, however; there is a certain paradox about it. If one carries one’s sincerity to the limit, crossing the

barriers of the possible, or admissible, and if that sincerity does not confine itself to words, but reveals human being totally, it –paradoxically– becomes the embodiment of the total man, with all his past and future history. It is then superfluous to go to the trouble of analyzing, whether –and how– there exists a collective area of myth, an archetype. That area exists naturally, when our revelation, our act reaches far enough, and if it is concrete (1973: 122).

This conception of theatre as a space for celebration, transgression or soul-searching is ratified by the experiences of the Living Theatre (*Antigone*, 1967) and The Performance Group, whose *Dionysus in 69* deconstructed Euripides' *The Bacchae* by the means of a ritualistic and ecstatic sexuality that destabilized the audience: Schechner relied on improvisation to articulate a festive ceremony with the power to release the primary emotions of spectators. Naked bodies and musical props encouraged the participation of the audience, who shared the space with the actors in a ritualistic community ceremony (which Vasseur-Legangneux called “la version hippie du dionysisme” [2004: 62]) that dismembered and reused Euripides' text in different ways, in every stage event (cf. Brecht, 1968)<sup>3</sup>. Greek tragedy thus became an initiatory ritual during which a couple of simple actions were used to increase the participation of the audience: taking one's clothes off, hugging other people, moaning... In the words of Dionysus (actress “*JOAN AS DIONYSUS*”),

Here I am. Dionysus this time. Now I noticed that there were some disbelievers among you when I announced my divinity. If you deny me and my mysteries, if you deny that I was born a god before your very eyes, then you deny truth and you shall suffer for it. If, however, you believe what I tell you, you shall have an extraordinary experience tonight. Together we can make one community. We can celebrate together. Be joyous together. Reach ecstasy together. So join us in what we do next. It is a circle dance around the sacred spot of my birth. It is a celebration of me, of my nativity (Schechner, 1969: n.p.).<sup>4</sup>

AQ: Note that no closing double quote for the opening double quote has been provided in the phrase “Thus what actually occurred in”. Please check and amend necessary.

AQ: “Schechner 1970” has been changed Schechner (1969) as per the reference list. Please check if it is fine.

<sup>3</sup> Froma Zeitlin (2004: 64) points out that *Dionysus in 69* includes 600 of the 1,300 lines of Euripides' text (of William Arrowsmith's translation of 1959) plus sixteen lines from Sophocles' *Antigone* (Creon's discourse about the city) and six lines from Euripides' *Hippolytus* (the character in Phaedra). The rest of the play involved improvisations in the style of *The Bacchae*.

<sup>4</sup> Exploring the connections between sacrifice and ritual from an interdisciplinary perspective, Erika Fischer-Lichte (2005: 211–215) delves into the 1960s to emphasize how the Viennese actionists (particularly Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Hermann Nitsch) invoked the Dionysian-orgiastic power of ritual as a means to encourage a cathartic experience for the participants. What Nitsch called the Orgy Mystery

All dance moves were the result of improvisation, and the energy of the audience was channeled “like a spiral”. The action took place among the spectators, touching them, among a bunch of clunky wooden towers and

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Theatre developed, between 1963 and 1965, extremely eschatological actions that violently involved the spectators: “The spectators were involved in the action –in later actions they even acted as performers. They were splashed with blood, excrement, dishwater and other liquids and were given the opportunity to do the splashing themselves, to gut the lamb, to mould the intestines, to trample barefoot on them, to consume the meat and the wine” (211). The sacrifice of a lamb established a connection with Christian passion and human redemption in a violent communion ritual that brought together many elements of the Eucharist, offering a very explicit set of associations. In the Austrian scene, Nitsch dismantled the taboos of Western culture with the aim to offend the audience: “Thus what actually occurred in Nitsch’s actions was the infection of the participants with violence, bringing about a crisis. By doing violence to the corpse of the ‘sacrificial animal’, the lamb, by splashing it with blood, by moulding its intestines, by trampling on them barefoot, the potential of violence that lurks in each and every member of society –according to Girard– was released in the participants, acted out, and thus ‘abreacted’ in a kind of ‘catharsis’, as Nitsch stated – which, from today’s point of view, seems rather dubious (Fischer-Lichte, 2005: 213). In Fischer-Lichte’s eyes, the participants thus entered a liminal state that “cleaned” them off their own violence. This kind of cathartic purification is also present in Marina Abramovic’s performances: “Norms, rules and securities that had been taken for granted up to then seemed invalidated. Traditionally, in a visit to a gallery or theatre, the part of the visitor/spectator is defined as that of an observer. The visitor of a gallery views the exhibited works from a closer or greater distance without ever touching them. The visitor of a theatre looks at the actions unfolding on stage without ever intervening even in the case of a deep inner empathy, or even if on stage a character (Othello) sets out to murder another (Desdemona). [...]. In everyday life, however, it is a rule to intervene immediately when someone sets out to hurt himself or another –unless that intervention would seriously endanger one’s own body or life. Which rule applied for the spectator in Abramovic’s performance? Obviously, the artist did actually hurt herself and was willing to continue her self-torture. If she had done so in another public space in the city, no spectator would have hesitated to intervene. But here? Did respect for the artist demand that she should carry out what seemed to be her plan and artistic intention? Would intervening not run the risk of damaging her work? On the other hand, was it compatible with the laws of humaneness to watch her calmly with simple human compassion while she was hurting herself in such a horrible way? Did she even intend to pressure the spectator into taking over the part of a voyeur? Or did she test him in order to find out what else she must do before a spectator would end her ordeal? What rules could be applied?” (2005, 216). Abramovic creates a situation that faces the spectators with the rules, in-between ethics and aesthetics, confronting them with a sort of crisis of the conventions that rule social behavior: “The spectators were transferred into a state of radical ‘in between’, into a state of liminality, catharsis” (2005: 216). Once again, the purpose is to destabilize the spectator by altering their perception of both the world and themselves.

a structure that suggested some grandstands. Schechner recounted that Grotowski, who attended one of the shows in November 1968, stated that the acting was “hysterical”, and that the actors’ attire made it difficult for them to do their job properly. From then on, they began to play some of the parts completely naked.

In Innes’ book, the holy stage eventually leads us towards Robert Wilson’s theatre of images, which is presented as something that we would certainly categorize as post-dramatic theatre nowadays. The connection between one of the most representative authors quoted by Hans-Thies Lehmann and the field of tragedy has been stressed many times, including the occasion on which Marvin Carlson (2015) pointed out the deconstruction/disintegration/sampling of classic texts by some emergent German directors influenced by Heiner Müller: Frank Castorf, Thomas Ostermeier, René Pollesch, Andreas Kriegenberg, Ivo van Hove, and even the very Germanized Katie Mitchell. This kind of revisitation of Greek classics is also present in the theatrical works of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Martin Crimp, and Elfriede Jelinek –all of whom are essential referents to understand the current theatre scene and the very concept of *post-drama*.<sup>5</sup>

## Catastrophe and Disgust: Barker and Kane

Howard Barker and Sarah Kane constitute two extremely representative examples of this, for reasons that go beyond the special attention that Lehmann himself devotes to their trajectory. Over the past twenty-five years, Barker has developed his *theatre of catastrophe* also from a theoretical perspective that is as suggestive as it is coherent. From a perspective that understands theatre as a destabilizing encounter with pain and death (“the most appropriate art for a culture on the edge of extinction is one that stimulates pain”, 1997: 19), the theatre of catastrophe puts the spectator in the realm of a subversive “tragic” where no purification is viable. *Arguments for a Theatre* (1997), which opens with a witty remark on the impossibility of tragedy and, little by little, unfolds as a treaty about (and

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<sup>5</sup> In her analysis of post-dramatic tragedies (1995–2015) –which emphasizes the relevance of Schechner’s *Dionysus*, too– Emma Cole discusses the works of creators like Kane, Crimp, Tom Holloway, The Wooster Group, Punchdrunk, and Jan Fabre.

against) the audience, tells us that the foundations of such theatre lie in the suppression of realism, meaning, and any other form of accessibility:

The Theatre of Catastrophe is more painful than tragedy, since tragedy consoles with restoration, the reassertion of existing moral values. The audience is not flattered with hope, but rather lent pain. It is not taught criticism, but honored with the truth of the absence of truth. It leaves the theatre privileged, but unrewarded. It does not cluck with collective satisfaction, but divided and solitary, it labors with the burden of an art that denies assimilation (1997: 70).

Barker may as well have titled his book *Arguments Against a Theatre*, because his poetics only gain meaning when born against a theatre that advocates social inclusion or moral certainty (like the theatre we frequently see in television and cinema products). To him, the Audience is just an invention of the powerful “entertainment-seekers”, always ready to shower us with their “good vibes”. Barker’s tragedies, especially those that come after *Victory* (1983) do not offer healing nor closure. In the words of David Ian Rabey,

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At the end there is no restatement of collective principles such as justify Greek and Shakespearean work; the individuals who break the social code, in the essential moment of tragic action, do not apologize, are not brought back into the polis, nor do they necessarily die; they possibly wander off into solitude, into a very empty landscape, and disappear into that... (Rabey, 2009: 29–30).

In the eyes of the spectator, who is permanently asked to resort to their emotional memory, everything seems out of control in this exercise of passion, risk, excess, and transgression during which the characters (among which is the spectator) reject any “shared wisdom” (a term that evokes Jacques Rancière’s [2010] *consensus*), in search of their own (ac) knowledge(ment) of the world. In this theatre, there is no room for truth or relatability—all it offers is unchained imagination, excess, chaos, disintegration or lack of closure.

Usually labeled as *in-yer-face theatre* due to their use of extremely aggressive language (or, in the words of Aleks Sierz [2001], “confrontational”) and visceral, offensive themes, Kane’s works also appeal to the emotions of the spectator with relentless scenes filled with (apparently gratuitous) sex and brutality. The purpose? To release the darkness that we all carry inside. To Kane, theatre is “a bit like [...] a vaccine” that protects us against more serious diseases (Saunders, 2003: 97–110). In

Barker and Kane's works, dramaturgy becomes a tool intended to enable a reinforcement of the perverse, abyssal, paradoxical and sometimes enigmatic nature of human beings. In her study on dramatic disgust throughout history (I assume that we can all agree that this has proved to be one of the main topics of the field since the 1960s), Sarah J. Ablett appeals to a primary emotion of repugnance, abjection, and pollution that connects with the contagious quality of theatre and to its potential for purification/catharsis, but which also introduces, in regard with contemporary art (from Francis Bacon to Damien Hirst), the "return of the real" preached by Hal Foster (1996): through the evocation of disgust and other purely primal emotions, that theatre aspires to induct an affective uneasiness resulting from shock, from the destruction of taboo and the impact of a pure ("more real") reality; from moral transgression (Ablett: 2020, 75).

If there is such a thing as a dramatic poetics of disgust, Kane earned a place at the top with the first line of her first play, *Blasted*: "I've shat in better places" (1995: 3). In the five works she has created, disgust sinks in as the sign of a universal crisis of values that unfolds in the intensity of physical violence and mutilation, death... Aleks Sierz draws a connection between these attributes and the reaction of the audience: "The audience had gone to the theatre and emerged shaken, talking, arguing, feeling" (2001: 4). In fact, this kind of theatre requires the spectator to subject themselves to an emotional shock "that questions our ideas about who we are" (Sierz, 2001: 6), inviting us to destroy the binary oppositions that usually are at the core of our identity: human/animal, clean/dirty, normal/deviant, good/bad, true/false, fair/unfair, art/life...

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### ***Affliction and Tragic Pain: Angélica Liddell***

The main themes of Greek tragedy were family (kinship) and war. Today, many Spanish creators choose this genre to approach the social changes of the last twenty years from a contemporary perspective. As with Barker and Kane, the theoretical perspective and stage practice of Angélica Liddell connect with Artaud's "affliction" in the use of an old-fashioned style and violent, radical language. In *El sacrificio como acto poético* (2014), a volume that brings together texts written at the dawn of the century, Liddell unfolds the keys of her "distressed" and "implacable" poetics: the powerlessness and uselessness of language ("distressed, weak, precarious, tired...") (2014: 17); the contempt towards the informative inflation of our mediatized society; the need to express the pain and humiliation

inherent in being human; the impossibility of fully communicating the idea of evil; the reinvention of tragedy as “the highest rampart of human individuality in the face of statal desires and undifferentiated masses” (2014: 23); the emotional recovery of the spectator (“to make the spectator into a victim, subject to the illness of passions, *ibid.*); and pathos, the place of suffering –the “agonizing” body<sup>6</sup>. In words that evoke Artaud, Liddell explains that “Onstage bodies must make us hurt, they must disgust and inflict pain. The body must be corrupt and horrendous with the aim to make the spectator feel guilty” (2014: 26).

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Against a conformist, paralyzed, tolerant, and complying society, Liddell wields her *theatre of passion* –against television terror, she unfolds her poetic violence in a “space of tension” (2014: 46) and she adopts a belligerent attitude intended to incite the spectator to participate in a different way: “We cannot preach for the spectator to change, but we can encourage a different participation, a new perception of reality” (*ibid.*). In the last pages of her book (2014: 113), Liddell introduces the moral aspect and the ethical implications involved from an ambivalent perspective: in her eyes, ethics must be “suspended” onstage so that the spectator, liberated, can face the misery of their own existence<sup>7</sup>.

As a playwright, Liddell is also prone to delve into family taboos, usually around the idea of sacrifice –at the core of her theatre poetics–, in a desperate attempt to restore the stage’s holiness. At the time Liddell was writing the essays included in *El sacrificio como acto poético*, she was also giving the final touches to the plays included in her *Trilogía de la*

<sup>6</sup> “Angélica Liddell conçoit la scène comme un espace de résistance, elle fait preuve d’un engagement absolu non seulement physique mais également moral. Elle libère ses passions, repousse les limites de la douleur et de la pudeur. Le public est pris à témoin, bousculé, dérangé, à tel point que certain spectateurs s’eclipsent” (Bottin, 2012: 779).

<sup>7</sup> It is not in the scope of this paper to track Liddell’s ethical concerns, which are already present (with an emphasis on catharsis) in her work *Mi relación con la comida*: “Medicine heals with bitter methods the illnesses that cuisine has caused by the usage of pleasurable but harmful ingredients. / My point is: / Shall theatre be more like medicine or more like cuisine? / You, who work in the field of theatre, answer this to me:/ Shall theatre just please the spectator, or shall it make them uneasy to offer them ethical benefits?” (2005: 50–51). In an interview with Cornago, Liddell herself kind of gave an answer to these same questions: “Theatre is a moment of suffering, of shared suffering. [...] It is an explicit offer to make [the spectator] participate as a monster. [...] It is about individual consciousnesses that get together in the ritual of conflicts of the stage mass –the congregation” (quoted in Cornago, 2005: 319). Cf. Albert (2016).

*aflicción*. The characters of *El matrimonio Palayrakis*, released in 2001, are presented as “destroyed, annihilated, sick” beings, but their circumstances and actions (which include assaulting and murdering a little girl) are justified by their innate evil –a part of them that they will never be able to escape. With clear references to the structure of fairy tales, Liddell creates characters doomed to horror, blood, and the perpetuation of pain: “We are all born with a certain degree of cruelty and evil. The evil in me isn’t greater than the evil in other men” (2004: 95), says Mateo. The role of theatre is to bring to light that misery as a natural thing, something that is inherent in human beings, just as the Narrator says at the end of the play: “After a certain hour, one could see whole families sitting in front of the TV, motionless, motionless, motionless; their eyes empty like Oedipus’ eyes. They, too, knew horror now” (2004: 99). We, too, are monsters.

In Liddell’s *Once upon a time in West Asphixia o hijos mirando al infierno* (2003), the two teenagers can be seen as victims of the fake decency of today’s society, which they reject in the prayers they say at the beginning of the play –almost a curse where they evoke Simón, the parricide, to intensify their desire for murder: “Make our blood flow faster, Simón. Infuriate the wolves in our tormented spirits and kill the lambs, Simón. [...] Do not ever leave our side, oh Simón” (2004: 103). The play, whose first part is written as a sort of documentary that brings together the testimonies of a series of people who knew the protagonists, faces us with the amorality of Natacha and Rebeca, two nice, sweet, and beautiful young women, who, nevertheless, still look at the world from very dark places where sexuality has no limits: “I destroy with my sex, with the fragility of my sex” (2004, 109) says Natacha, the tougher of the two. The girls’ “passion for insanity” unfolds evil as a mirror of who we are and how we act, portraying society as a dump, a huge madhouse inhabited by all of us sick people, because madness and violence are inherent in life. The beasts are us, insists Liddell; the characters are “a carbon copy of our failure” (2004: 116) but their thoughts “have no limits”: “we need to listen to those things that nobody listens to” (2004: 124). Natacha puts it into words with Artaudian cruelty in one of her monologues, right before murdering her father and the fetus in her mother’s womb. Just as it happens in *El matrimonio Palayrakis*, she evokes the original sin: “Listen to me, listen to me; this is extremely important. We were born from the spine of a snake, we were impregnated by our own pain, by sick, passionate sperm; we were born from our own infected brain, from the great

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vagina of our infected brain. We are the daughters of disease, because disease is necessary to reach lucidity” (2004: 128).

*Hysterica Passio* (2003) closes the trilogy while taking up many of the subjects approached in the two previous plays. In this work, they are thrown in the face of the spectator through Hipólito, the fruit of a sexual encounter between a “pale dentist” (Senderovich) and a “starving nurse” (Thora). The boy, murdered by his indecent parents, acts as the master of a macabre ceremony in search of a motive for such violence. We are asked the same question once again: “Are we, sons and daughters, fated to feel guilty for the pain inflicted on us by our parents?” (2004: 155). The answer, included in Hipólito’s long final monologue, is an ironic dart thrown against the audience, a closing argument that depicts evil as an inevitable component of human relationships:

Come closer, / touch the monsters, they have killed without ideology,/ their crimes bring them closer to what is human, / excess is human, / love is human,/ but you, my dearest,/ you are so polite,/ you are so comfortable playing your part in society,/ you are so half-hearted;/ who knows what filthy crimes / you could perpetrate / [...]. You’ll always be good. / You’ll always despise those who are not like you. / Now come closer, / pet the monsters. / Do not be afraid. / You are safe. / The Law will judge them, and they shall have no mercy. / [...] touch the monsters, / this is real life (2004: 170).

All of Liddell’s works insistently explore the same ideas, with each new play offering a more radical approach than its predecessor. Fernanda del Monte (2020) has approached the tragic in *Trilogía del infinito* by delving into the foundational questions of the genre, as tragedy is a depository of the mystery of life in all its forms. In *¿Qué haré yo con esta espada?*, the second (and the more consistent) part of the trilogy, autobiographic corporeality takes the form of a diary and is associated with the notions of pain and punishment. The body falls sick and is driven to insanity. It becomes monstrous, thus enabling the transgression of holy sacrifice:

Here I am, by the side of the dog I love the most./ Love is an answer/ to man’s strong desire for meaning./ Dogs prove it./ The time will come when I’ll have slit his throat, / if after fifteen seconds/ there still is a remain of precious life in it/ I will thrust my knife deep into its bowels/ cutting through its entrails with my fist;/ its blood will stain the tip of your shoes/ and its guts will tangle up around your ankles (2016: 139).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> As Patricia Úbeda (2019) points out, this work (biographically related with the impact of the November 2015 Paris attacks and the murder of Renée Hartvelt by Issei

AQ: Please note that the cross-reference “Hipólito 2004” has not been provided in the reference list. Please provide the same.

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Existence needs to atone for its own crime (“the sin that lives in me”) from an exacerbated position that somehow is influenced by ethics, too: “The author invites us to discover the rottenness of a world where morality goes hand in hand with primal paganism” (Del Monte, 2021: 33) in a (performative) context where transgression involves a confrontation between law and the subject (the I), at the crossroads of ethics.

I don't understand what's going on, as I do not do what I want, but what I abhor. / However, when I do what I don't want, I do feel that law is good,/ but then it's not me who does the deed, but the sin that lives in me./ I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in the sinful essence of which I'm made. Even though I wish to do good, I do not have the ability to do it./ I have thus ascertained this law: when I want to do good, evil walks with me. / My innermost being rejoices in the law of God,/ but I realize that my limbs are ruled by a different law –the law of sin. This law fights the law in my mind, and holds me prisoner./ I'm a miserable man! Who shall free me from this mortal body? (2016: 202).

In regard with this, Fernanda del Monte draws attention to the fact that the subversion of the social contract is transferred to the spectator: the realization of the tragic “manages to face the reader and the spectator with the violence that is an essential component of law, and therefore, of that which is human. In this light, the poetic sacrifice acts as an aesthetic device that codes, by the means of signs –be it words or scenic and bodily expression– that immanent violence in order to exhibit it in front or ‘before’ what has been agreed by a group of citizens” (2020: 34). Liddell disorients and destabilizes the spectator's perception by placing herself on the other side, playing the role of Antigone, that is, “in the place of the prostitute, the murderer, the sinner, with her rifle made of words, to introduce in the reading and scenic spaces a freedom to be someone,

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Sagawa) is an exercise of “corporeal writing” through which the author approaches the origin of evil and its relationship with beauty and love: “Love is the divine precept that gave birth to the extraordinary violence on which we are grounded” (Liddell, 2016: 44). According to this, horror materializes as an open, liminal corporeality that challenges the logics of the hegemonic discourse –for example, the taboo approach that sees cannibalism as the continuation of flesh. Virginia Trueba (2020) considers that corporeality (in connection with the ideas of Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari –approaches that draw from the Nietzschean and Artaudian traditions) as something with the potential to interrupt meaning and overcome rational (and moral) thinking via the abject and the grotesque. Cf. Garnier (2012 and 2015) and Loureiro (2021).

to be somewhere” (*ibid.*). This turn towards the passions (the flesh) and the holy –in a Batailleian sense<sup>9</sup>– is intended to cross limits and create, through excess (blood and sacrifice), an in-between space that enables a radical approach of the contemporary.

In the face of the violence of media sensationalism and the culture of zapping, Liddell blatantly offers the sacrifice of her body, self-mutilation, and blood. The memory of suffering sinks in the memory of spectators, maybe testing their knowledge. The purpose, in any case, is to destroy ethics, to reset it so it can be rebuilt from scratch (Obled, 2012).

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### **Tragedy Is a Farce: Rodrigo García**

Rodrigo García’s approach to tragedy is, so to speak, less transcendental, rooted in a more lighthearted conception of the genre –one that is populated by extremely violent, withered antiheroes with an over-bloated masculinity. The political subjectivity present in his works connects not only with individual failure, but also with that of a whole civilization, and it materializes in a parade of ridiculous beings (word bearers that many times are *non-characters*) trapped in the farce of History and in the horrors and cruelty of existence. In his play *Agamenón. Volví del supermercado y le di una paliza a mi hijo*<sup>10</sup>, García explores the themes of family and war

<sup>9</sup> Regarding “erotic convulsion”, Bataille stated that “it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered will of the lovers. Their considered will is followed by the animal activity of these swollen organs. They are animated by a violence outside the control of reason, swollen to bursting point and suddenly the heart rejoices to yield to the breaking of the storm. The urges of the flesh pass all bounds in the absence of controlling will. Flesh is the extravagance within us set up against the law of decency. Flesh is the born enemy of people haunted by Christian taboos, but if as I believe an indefinite and general taboo does exist, opposed to sexual liberty in ways depending on the time and the place, the flesh signifies a return to this threatening freedom” (1962: 92).

<sup>10</sup> This work was premiered in Gibellina (Sicily) on September 11, 2003, and it was recognized with the Ubu award to the best foreign show presented in Italy (2004). We find the first approach to the mythical universe of the house of Atreus in *Martillo seguido de “el regreso de Agamenón”*, a piece published as part of his *Obras (in) completas* (2000). The influence of Heiner Müller is clear reveals itself in the fragmentary nature of the play, the disjointed styles brought together, the presence of overlapping discourses, the usage of collage, and a monologue-based structure that destroy the sequential quality of the narrative. To learn more about reinterpretations of the mythical tradition of Agamemnon, see De Paco (2003) and Bierl (2004).

through the character of a father who, after coming home from buying groceries at the supermarket, beats up his wife and son and embarks on a curious reflection on the genre of tragedy itself. I will not delve into the (post)dramatic devices used by García (no plot, corporeality, “plethoric” objecthood, chaotic accumulation...), who considers himself a “classic” author (see his reinterpretation of Greek myths in works like *Prometeo* [1991] or *After Sun* [2000]). Instead, I will focus on the tragic elements of the play. In the first part of *Agamenón*, the violent behavior is, so to speak, unjustified (what triggers it is the fact that the character bought unnecessary and superfluous products). Domestic violence is extremely explicit in the father’s monologue. Like Agamemnon in Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis*, who sacrifices his own daughter to start the Trojan war, unchaining a succession of horrendous actions (Clytemnestra takes revenge by killing Agamemnon and Orestes murders his mother), García’s *Agamenón* is a merciless father who acts as if he did not have the ability to do otherwise –as if his actions were but the result of a contingency in the face of which the spectator can only laugh. Frustrated by his useless purchase, the Father states: “So I open the door and I say to my wife: / “Honey, seems to me this evening every ass is gonna get a good old beating! / And I see no more ass in this house than those little butts of yours and the kid!” (2016: 331). This laugh, however, acts like a boomerang, as that seemingly absurd violence conceals the discomfort that the contemporary individual feels in the face of today’s hyper consumption. On this occasion, García uses –as he recurrently does in his work– industrial food to illustrate his point (Sánchez Acevedo, 2014; Palau, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the Father’s lecture on tragedy takes place in a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant –a fast-food temple, one of those non-places that so irritate García:

So I pick up the chicken wings and with them I draw on the table/ a perfectly clear concept map of TRAGEDY,/ with the fried chicken wings/ [...] And then I grab the ketchup bottle and with nice big letters on the table I write/ the word:/ TRAGEDY./ And my son just can’t stop laughing./ I explain to him that TRAGEDY/ starts with the industrial era./ That TRAGEDY has always emerged there where there was money,/ where there was food./ Then they spread it. / They exported it/ in the form of atomic bombs, / AIDS,/ hunger,/ drought,/ or dictatorship (2009: 341).

Tragedy –now intensified by a post 9/11 temporality (“A man who jumps out the window/ off a tower in flames in Manhattan/ is a victim of the same cruelty, the same unjust/ experienced by a man who dies of starvation/ in

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*Tucuman or Ruanda/ as a casualty of economic liberalism*" *ibid.*)— has always been linked with food and money, with the need to colonize the other, with the inhuman and immoral exploitation of the natural resources. Tragedy is a tool with which we can map the world and draw ourselves a geopolitical picture of it, just as the Father does with the waste from other tables at the KFC restaurant, finally turned into a global landfill. In her analysis of García's *Agamenón*, Lorena Jiménez (2018, 80) brings back an extremely pertinent quote by Pierre Vidal-Naquet: "the tragic order (or disorder) calls into question the beliefs of the city. It argues, distorts, renews, asks questions..." (2004: 52–53). The piece encourages us to reflect on our position in the world from a perspective that is openly belligerent towards the social images spread by the media. García tells us that the audience needs to be "bluntly shocked": "We want to be at struggle with the audience, because they're so sure they can tell good from bad, but they do it according to the dictates of the media and the systems of social order" (quoted in Hartwing and Portl, 2008: 14).

Commenting on the *mise en scène* of García's *Agamenón*, Gianfranco Capitta (who, as a programmer, selected it for the Festival Internazionale delle Orestiadi di Gibellina in Sicily) stated that the play "takes us on a journey from the violence of the father and his blind blood-thirsty *hybris* [...] to the everyday madness of the contemporary world, which is just as violent and bloody, but it is brightened by the lights and temptations of consumerism" (2014: 139). The audience's morality is put to test as they are confronted with a parade of roasting spinning chicken, ketchup showers, and platters filled with salad and spaghetti—a metaphor for the abundance of food in the so-called *First World*. *Agamenón's* monologue tells us about the decline of a civilization and the impossibility of tragedy: "Catharsis is not an option anymore. Consumption is an indigestible bacchanal. Poetic consciousness is the last shelter for the individual, but it is locked within a sarcophagus, which today has taken the form of a classic of teleshopping spots: a mattress" (Capitta, *ibid.*). At the end of the play, after one of the actors is locked inside it, it indeed becomes a sort of sarcophagus, a "panting" sculpture. The action is presented in a more open, direct way; it is rooted in the face-to-face experience with the audience. The stage is filled with music and images (a ridiculous Berlusconi displaying absurd gestures), the actions are intensified by an emphasis on indecency—on the dancing naked and sexualized bodies or on the junk tossed around the stage (which is covered in small coffins enveloped in American flags), and the rhythm becomes frenetic. In this

eventually moralizing farce, the stage mirrors the hypocritical, degraded face of today's society (of consumption).

## Post-Catharsis and Ethical Claims: Tragic Ambiguities

As it has been laid out in the previous sections, neo-catharsis can be seen as an attempt at renewing the Aristotelian concept from transcendental or metaphysical perspectives. Post-catharsis, on the other hand, seems to involve the negation of catharsis, or, at least, the removal of its therapeutic value, from a more radical nihilistic perspective or from the acknowledgment of the impossibility of accessing the audiences in terms of purgation. If post-drama can be understood (in a rather simplistic way) as the removal of drama and the exacerbation of the sensible beyond the purely textual, post-catharsis is more ambivalent towards the relationship with the audience, as we have seen in the plays of Barker, Kane, Liddell, and García. This is also applicable to the works of Romeo Castellucci and Jan Fabre, as I will now show in detail.

In his book, Lehmann includes frequent references to catharsis, which is not surprising coming from a researcher with a background in classical studies who writes about the genre of tragedy<sup>11</sup>. Already in the foreword, he suggests that catharsis is the fundamental axis of the dramatic<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> In his book *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (2016) devoted to defining the tragic, Lehmann introduces the concept of catharsis already in the first pages, connecting it with post-dramatic theatre and some of its most recognized representatives (including Romeo Castellucci, Jan Fabre, and Howard Barker). The notion of “tragic expression” unfolds gradually and, far from Aristotle’s logocentric conception, it is placed on the perception modes of the spectator, which impact the intelligibility of the world: “Tragedy epitomizes a culture of violating boundaries” (2016: 78). The tragic confronts the spectator with the transgression of the law (Bataille), with excess and hyperbole, in an experience that is “communal”, that is, which happens “with other people” (2016: 125) and introduces an ethical practice that eventually brings Lehmann closer to Rancière (2016: 159). Tragedy is also *pharmakon* –its nature is dual (it can heal or poison you). This comes with a strong ideological ambivalence: on the one hand, it encourages us to conceive the polis as a collective; on the other hand, it urges us to challenge the conventional understanding of the limits of reality.

<sup>12</sup> “As an associated, rather unconscious motif of this classical theatre conception we can point out the attempt to form (or strengthen) a social bond through theatre, a community uniting the audience and the stage emotionally and mentally. ‘Catharsis’ is the displaced theoretical name for this – by no means primarily aesthetic – function of theatre: the bringing about of affective recognition and solidarity by means of the

However, after explaining its ethical relationship with drama and its rather sensorial/experiential connection with performance<sup>13</sup>, he connects catharsis with the sphere of pain and its effects on the spectator's perception, framing it as a fundamental aspect of the post-dramatic:

The novelty resides in the fact that there is a transition from represented pain to pain experienced in representation. In its moral and aesthetic ambiguity, it has become the indicator for the question of representation: exhausting and risky physical actions on stage (*La La La Human Steps*); exercises that often appear paramilitary (some dance theatre; Einar Schleaf); masochism (*La Fura dels Baus*); the ethically provocative play with the fiction or reality of cruelty (Jan Fabre); the exhibition of diseased or disfigured bodies. A theatre of bodies in pain causes a schism for the perception: here the represented pain, there the playful, joyful act of its representation that is itself attesting to pain (2001: 166).

*La Fura dels Baus'* predilection for the violent exhibition of the body and that of Fabre for the agony of exhausted bodies are, indeed, well-known. Of all the creators discussed by Lehmann, Fabre is possibly the most active in claiming catharsis as the manifestation of stage ecstasy. In an interview with Luk van der Dries, he stated: "La cruauté et la terreur personnelle génèrent la liberté qui permet d'atteindre cette extase. La liberté elle-même est une forme d'extase. La liberté de devenir quelqu'un d'autre, comme la larve qui devient papillon" (2005: 363). Let me clarify that here "ecstasy" refers to a construction by the actors that is intended to be transferred to the audience in Grotowskian terms. Fabre sees the (ritualistic, physical, associative, irrational...) stage as "the place of pain", populated by images of suffering, torture, or extreme sexuality in a very Artaudian style: Artaud and Fabre both see themselves as a sort of shaman; theatre is the tool they use for healing the performers and even the audience (Van den Dries, 2010: 67–68).

When we delve into the works of another "paladin" of post-dramatic theatre, Romeo Castellucci, we discover that a critical approach to

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drama and the affects represented and transmitted to the audience within its frame. These traits cannot be separated from the paradigm of 'dramatic theatre', whose significance therefore reaches far beyond the validity of a simple genre classification" (2001: 21).

<sup>13</sup> "The ethics of catharsis – aggressiveness repressed in civilization is being reintroduced into the space of consciousness and the experiential – demands participation and transgresses the 'splendid isolation' of the spectator through the arousal of uncontrollable affective reactions (fear, disgust, fright)" (Lehmann, 2001: 138).

catharsis, along with the symptom of a crisis (that is simultaneously a life crisis and an aesthetic crisis) is what lies at the core of his “fifth wall” plays (this fifth wall being a –black– canvas onto which the spectator constructs different meanings). Let’s take a moment to reflect on the linguistic turn that so pleases Castellucci: “L’art n’a jamais résolu les problèmes: ce n’est ni une thérapie ni un médicament. L’art tragique est un poison, avalé, consciemment et volontairement, par la communauté et qui finit, sans apporter aucune consolation, par l’effroi devant la découverte de la fragilité et de la solitude de l’être abandonné” (2008: 17–18). That “abyssal blackness” that refers to a lack of hope but also to the circumstances caused by an state of emergency (I will not go further in discussing Agamben’s position), is fully revealed in the light of his reference to Walter Benjamin (1984), who suggested that the “dynamic and enthusiastic chants” of tragedy loosened the limits of the gaze as they provided a certain “pleasurable relief” or “an innocent joy” beyond morality with the power to encourage the emergence of an anarchic impulse towards a new way of looking at the world. I find this remark by Castellucci specially interesting, because he goes beyond the development of a theory of emotions, suggesting that catharsis belongs to the realm of form and is linked to the emancipation of the spectator’s moral perception (I deliberately chose the term “emancipation”; the reasons will be detailed in subsequent paragraphs). This is present in his *Tragedia endogonidia*, a multi-location experiment on a different idea of Europe, but it is also noticeable in his adaptation of *Divina Commedia* (2008), whose *Purgatorio* confirms his interest in the tragic model and its connections with obscenity and catharsis: “*Purgatorio* means purification, catharsis, so it is like a Greek tragedy. Where there is something to purge, there is excrement, violence and treachery. We don’t really know who needs to be purified: maybe the spectators need to purge themselves from the things they’ve seen” (in Laera, 2010: 9). The scene where the Son is raped (the sacrifice of the Son)<sup>14</sup> can then be read as follows:

AQ: Please note that the cross-reference “Laera, 2020” has not been provided in the reference list. Please provide the same.

<sup>14</sup> “The familial dimension of violence is something that the Greeks have taught us. Matricide, infanticide, uxoricide and so on. When one talks about the origin of violence, one talks about the origin of society, of the nature of human relationships. For this reason, violence always means treason, it is always a kind of killing. The fact that in *Purgatorio* we staged child abuse can be seen as a reference to our society, but the idea that one would see in *Purgatorio* a reference to all these horrible chronicles about pedophilia actually disturbs me, it is a coincidence which I would happily do without” (in Laera, 2020: 11).

When the drama becomes unsustainable, one conceals everything. So at the peak of the drama, there is nothing to see. But it's not a true concealment, it's a double exposure, because this violence falls entirely within the personal sphere of the spectator. If you want to make a bloody and brutal scene, you have got to hide it because only this way can it become effective. This is not decorative violence, it's not media violence, it's an intimate, individual kind of violence. That's why for some people it's hard to sustain (in Laera, 2010: 11).<sup>15</sup>

Castellucci sees tragedy as “le plus grandiose laboratoire de violence de l'homme occidental”, “un poison, avalé, consciemment et volontairement, par la communauté et qui finit, sans apporter aucune consolation, par l'effroi devant la découverte de la fragilité et de la solitude de l'être abandonné” (2008: 17). In this sort of post-catharsis, Castellucci does not consider the possibility of creating a collective gaze that might give us some community relief.

In one of the best books ever written about the spectator and their role, Marie Madeleine Mervant-Roux states that “le théâtre est un dispositif émotionnel” (1998, 66), but, contrary to what is expressed in many of the accounts provided by the author, I believe that in post-dramatic theatre emotions are intended to unleash chaos so it becomes the structuring force of a new reality that is portrayed as chaotic and irremediable. What's more, if one agrees with Catherine Bouko (2010), emotions are also expected to configure a new model of spectatorship with a spectator that calls into question the validity of the perceptive (and ideologic) categories that they apply to their experience. Some authors—in a way that might prove too enthusiastic—have suggested that these post-dramatic experiences are connected with the emancipation proposed by Jacques Rancière. This assertion is based on a reading that considers every piece of drama text “comme non linéaire, discontinu, non hiérarchique dans son intermédialité (i. e. dans l'ensemble des arts et/ou médiums qui le constituent), énigmatique, relatif” (Vuillemin, 2013: 24). I believe we

AQ: Please note that the cross-reference “Mervant-Roux 1998” has not been provided in the reference list. Please provide the same.

<sup>15</sup> “There is nothing that interests me more than tragedy. It's the strongest, deepest, most radical, violent, and striking form ever invented, both from the point of view of aesthetics and of human relations. It is the most beautiful and honest thing. This is especially true in Western culture, as tragedy doesn't make sense in Eastern cultures. Its movements are simple, but they are carved inside our spirit. Tragedy has shaped Western aesthetics, and one cannot do without it. It is not simply a thing of the past, an archeological relic, it is totally projected into the future. It is inevitable” (in Laera, 2010: 15).

should go even further and take the path opened up by authors like Nic Fryer (2021) and Ryan Anthony Hatch (2021): we should approach catharsis, and maybe post-catharsis, too, as a disruption of the modes of perception; an intervention in the political distribution of the sensible and the expressible –“a lightening, an alleviation”; the construction of a radical space: “The problem, first of all, is to create some breathing room” (Rancière in Battista, 2017: 234). A room from which to conceive a new sensible universe and envision the possibility of a new order in a fragmented, dissonant world: “For me, the fundamental question is maintaining spaces of play. To discover how to produce forms for the presentation and for the organization of spaces that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity is consensus –that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities and competences” (in Battista, 2017: 238).

I believe that Simon Critchley, who wrote the latest great work on tragedy, has provided a masterful reading of the current state of the genre and a definition that perfectly matches the idea of an emancipated spectator: tragedy presents a world emerged from conflict and defined by ambiguity, duplicity, uncertainty, and the impossibility of cognoscibility; a world that cannot be made rationally intelligible through the application of principles and axioms (Critchley, 2019: 119)<sup>16</sup>. This is a transversal thesis in the book, which, offering a review of the works by authors like Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Jean Pierre Vernant (1990 [1972]) and Peter Szondi (1978) reads tragedy as a destabilizing, dialogic (or, using Critchley’s term, dialectic) device, intended to reorient the perception of the spectator and to unlock its senses, as “it is centrally concerned with the conditions for actually seeing and actually hearing” (2019: 39). Tragedy is a mode of experience that takes us into the realm of moral ambiguity (2019: 87), in the realm of contradictions, as it postulates the existence of a “disoriented”, conflicted spectator –one that casts a problematic gaze on the world in an endless questioning of reality, even in the face of xenophobic and patriarchal reductionisms (Critchley devotes several memorable pages to the “anomaly” of slaves and women in Greek tragedy).

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<sup>16</sup> Critchley’s studies on tragedy are at the core of his doctrine, which is grounded in the notions of failure and of (a very Levinasian) ethical subjectivity, while bringing back Rancière’s *dissensus*. *Infinitely Demanding. Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (2007) is a good example of it.

At the same time (I shall not dwell in the connections of this approach with the postmodern movement), tragedy is defined by its ambiguity, duplicity, uncertainty, or incognoscibility, so much so that the philosophy of tragedy allows us to become theoretical spectators “in the theatre of human complexity” –spectators of an ambiguous, contradictory reality that can never be reduced to what could be called a “monotheist point of view”. An analysis of the notion of catharsis is not necessary, either, as it seems to reveal itself in the realm of affects (“tragedy provides a safe environment in which emotions are raised and then relieved”, 2019: 314–315). In his book, Critchley offers a sketch of what could be called an *ethical spectator*, who necessarily would be an active spectator (in post-dramatic tragedy). This spectator would be defined as a subject that is destabilized (in Critchley’s words, “disoriented”)<sup>17</sup> by images of injustice, poverty, and war; someone who is ready to activate their (practical) responsibility in the space allowed by a performance and in the form of a reflection or action triggered by their being confronted with a world dominated by consumerism, rampant capitalism, globalized violence... The position of such ethical spectator will always be ambivalent (Graham, 2009: 22), as it is in that kind of position that lies the possibility for experiencing a disruption or interruption of meaning that might lead to a concrete emotion of doubt or bewilderment or, at least, to a certain distancing from normalcy (that is, our usual understanding of the world). It is likely that the spectators that leave the space of the

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<sup>17</sup> To know more about the connections between ethics and spectatorship, see the works by Helena Graham (2009) and Nicolas Ridout (2009). Graham, who is philosophically influenced by Levinas and Bauman, comments on her own reaction to Castellucci’s shows (*Genesi*, 1999) to approach the notions of responsibility and commitment, seeing performance as a space for questioning and ethical challenges. In Ridout’s eyes, a work like Castellucci’s can be the source for a research project on the conditions of the real. It is also worth mentioning Emma Willis’ work on thanatourism and its portrayal in theatre plays (2014). In the field of cinema, we find earlier approaches to ethics and the role of the spectator, like Michel Aaron’s: “Ethics, is all about thinking through one’s relationship to morality rather than just adhering to it. It is about our personal powers of reasoning and choice when faced with, say, social custom, rather than our complete and immediate accord. One of the first milestones on our journey towards an ethics of spectatorship, then, is to consider the relationship between ethics and morality in the sphere of cinema, how some films nurture reflection, recognition and responsibility, and some prevent it” (Aaron, 2007: 109). If you wish to delve into the connections among ethics, performance, and trauma, I highly recommend Cole’s works (2020: 265–266) and Oliver’s (2010) masterful study on the notion of “response-ability”.

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performance experiencing a certain degree of ambivalence will continue examining the work and reflecting on it for a while. Through the answers they offer to it, they will stay open to the ethical claim of the Other outside the theatre, too. Then, far from being mere “seekers of sensations” or “collectors of experiences” (Bauman, 1995: 213; 2000, 140, in his writings on postmodern morality and the notion of consumerism), they will become involved and open to other possibilities –they will start considering the consequences of the act of watching even beyond their own self-reflective and community-related engagement (Graham, 2009: 35). In fact, the act of watching is performative, too, as it confirms the need to challenge our idea of reality (which is dismantled as a result). At the same time, regardless of how destabilized or confused we might feel, a place of resistance emerges in the face of the dogmatic or pre-established positions that prevent us from redefining the conditions of our perception of the world.

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AQ: Please note that the reference “REBEY 2009” has not been cross-referred in the text. Please provide the same.

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