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A *Theatre of Cruelty* Nowadays

Abstract: Nowadays, theatre aims to become once again an *act of healing* the individual and the community, to express the tragic dimension of human existence through the actors' bodies. It is in this context that the present paper puts into discussion and briefly analyses a few key notions such as violence, crime, limit, sight/blindness, non-recognition, misunderstanding and incompleteness from Albert Camus's perspective on the absurd existence of the human being. Starting from the idea that violence, as a language in binary code, manifests itself within a relationship between two entities in a conflict situation, we remark that, today, due to excessive repetitiveness and mediatization, the acts of violence, which can lead to tragic situations, have come not only to be accepted but also to be treated as normal acts. In this context, the role of theatre practitioners to give birth to a new *theatre of cruelty*, a sacred theatre with powers of healing, capable of generating changes in the spectator's consciousness, has become essential.

Keywords: violence, crime, tragic, limit, blindness, misunderstanding, incompleteness.

In the ancient Greek tragedy, we speak about the hero, that is about the individual endowed with extraordinary capacities, predestined to perform outstanding acts, whose *body-mind* endures the suffering caused by his struggle with the material and divine forces of the universe; an individual in whose soul even if doubt nestles, has the courage to face his destiny. The tragic situation, which presupposes on the part of the hero a transcendence of his own existential limits, takes place on the thin line that separates the order from the disorder of the mind. At the same time, going beyond one's limits implies an awakening of one's *inner forces* leading, in certain situations or relationships, to an emergence of violence to the surface of reality. In this context, crime and suicide can be seen as concrete ways of surpassing the limits of the individual considering the fact that they involve existential crises. In order to discuss the act of committing a crime, the notion of violence has to be analysed. We could say that violence is a language in binary code, which manifests itself within a relationship between two entities in a certain conflict situation. In this respect, we notice that in the relationship between the *oppressor and the oppressed* or *the executioner and the victim*, on the one hand, we can identify the hypostasis of the executioner who, during the conflict, can turn into a victim, and that of the victim who

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can take over the role of the executioner. In this case, we are dealing with a situation of interchangeability of roles. On the other hand, there is also the situation in which the executioner considers himself/herself the victim, as in the case of Martha from Albert Camus's *The Misunderstanding*. However, in the play, killing, for mother and daughter, represents a means through which they hope to escape their suffocating lives: "When we have gathered a great deal of money and we're able to abandon this land without horizon, when we leave behind us this inn and this rainy town and forget this country of darkness, the day when we'll finally be in front of the sea that I have so often dreamt of, that will be the day when you see me smile. But we need a lot of money to live by the sea" (Camus, 2008: 4). But to reach freedom requires to murder travellers, strangers, and to live with the memories of their horrible acts. They do not kill to restore order in the reality of their existence or to revenge the beloved ones, but to be free and happy. Paradoxically, they really believe that murder will open, for them, the door to a new, happy life. But murder does not go unpunished and, in the end, when recognition occurs, they suffer the consequences of their acts.

A confrontational relationship, many a time, includes the presence of violence, which can manifest itself due to hatred, anger, envy, jealousy, desire for revenge or sacrifice. The theme of sacrifice reminds us of Eugenio Barba's performance *Ornitofilene* also based on *the relationship between executioner and victim* in which the villagers are willing to sacrifice their children in order to escape poverty. Violence irrupts at the surface of reality in attempts to impose an individual/group point of view in confrontation with another individual/group point of view. Violence can be viewed as one of the most effective forms of communication or one of the forms that fail in the communication process. Violence is used both in less civilized societies and in economically, culturally, and technologically advanced ones. It is violence which writes our history full of tragic events, horrors, atrocious wars. There is individual violence, group violence, institutional violence, domestic violence, crime violence, hate violence, and there is also a terrifying violence contained in acts of bullying and mobbing. Violence is made use of in both the articulation of truths and lies. One cannot speak about violence in terms of good or bad as it is used in a confrontation where an individual/group aims to impose his/its point of view at any cost, that is to emerge victorious from the confrontation.

Syntagms such as primitive violence, ritualic violence, violence between individuals/groups, or physical, psychical, mental violence, or family, educational, social, political, cultural violence, or the violence of written, visual, aural, theatrical, film language are frequently used to define different ways of committing acts of violence. Probably mental violence is the greatest evil done to a person. Regarding the nature of evil, M. Scott Peck observes: "When I say that evil has to do with killing, I do not mean to

restrict myself to corporeal murder. Evil is also that which kills spirit. There are various essential attributes of life — particularly human life—such as sentience, mobility, awareness, growth, autonomy, will. It is possible to kill or attempt to kill one of these attributes without actually destroying the body. Thus, we may ‘break’ a horse or even a child without harming a hair on its head. Erich Fromm was acutely sensitive to this fact when he broadened the definition of necrophilia to include the desire of certain people to control others—to make them controllable, to foster their dependency, to discourage their capacity to think for themselves, to diminish their unpredictability and originality, to keep them in line. Distinguishing it from a ‘biophilic’ person, one who appreciates and fosters the variety of life forms and the uniqueness of the individual, he demonstrated a ‘necrophilic character type’, whose aim it is to avoid the inconvenience of life by transforming others into obedient automatons, robbing them of their humanity. Evil, then, for the moment, is that force, residing either inside or outside of human beings, that seeks to kill life or liveliness” (Peck, 1998: 39-40). It has become noticeable that, nowadays, the violent acts, due to their media coverage, have entered a sort of normality. It seems that the act of violence, which often generates a tragic situation, is received by those who are in the hypostasis of spectators/observers, as a normal act, often treated as being the rule and not the exception due to both its repetitiveness in excess and its mediatization. Thus, the tragic situations, disseminated in all aspects of reality, no longer having the quality necessary for reordering things, putting them in balance and harmony, lost the tremendous impact they used to have on the participants in the ancient Greek or Elizabethan tragedies.

In a dramatic text, based on a dialogic structure, violence generates a climax in the fictional reality. The characters, the conflict, the situations, the relationships, respectively the relationship of the character with himself, with the other characters, with the divinity/invisible, the atmosphere induced by the way the stage space is designed and the music, light, technology are used, often, contain violent elements or aspects with the aim of intensifying the dramatic tension. From a dramaturgical perspective, we deal with two types of expressing the tragic dimension of violence. The first type is represented by ancient Greek tragedy, Elizabethan tragedy, Spanish Golden Age tragedy, in which “up to a certain limit everyone is right and that the person who, from blindness or passion, oversteps this limit is heading for catastrophe if he persists in his desire to assert a right he thinks he alone possesses. The constant theme of classical tragedy, therefore, is the limit that must not be transgressed. On either side of this limit equally legitimate forces meet in quivering and endless confrontation. To make a mistake about this limit, to try to destroy the balance, is to perish” (Camus, 1970: 231-232). The second type is represented by the dramaturgy of the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries which, Peter Brook remarks, does not have the capacity of giving tragic expression to contemporary problematics. In the sense of Peter Brook's observation, we note that tragedy is no longer written not because wars, crimes, suicides, rapes have suddenly disappeared from the world, not because the individual's *hunger and thirst* for freedom have ceased to manifest, not because today there are no more human beings who feel love or hate *in extreme* or who bear the heavy burden of suffering the loss of a parent or a child, or who feel the pangs of being exiled or being a stranger in his own country. The truth is that "Anger, violence, hysteria, disgust and despair – these are so real that they must be expressed, powerfully, passionately" (Brook, 2017: 70). Today, as in Camus's times, "man proclaims his revolt, knowing this revolt has limits, demands liberty though he is subject to necessity" and "this contradictory man, torn, conscious henceforth of human and historical ambiguity, is the tragic man" (Camus, 1970: 235). We still live in a world where God has the image of an *old servant*, almost blind, deaf, and dumb, or in a world where God has been declared dead, in a world in which the individual's revolt against destiny is as strong as when he had unwavering faith in gods and their power to intervene in his destiny. In a world in which there has been and always will be a revolt of the *oppressed against the oppressor*, an attempt to transcend the human condition. Even though all forms of political theatre propose a vivisection of violence, most of them prove to be incapable of reflecting the problematics of the actual individual, of recreating present tragic destinies. Most of the time the different forms of political theatre fall into the trap of *illustrating and commenting* daily events. Furthermore, these forms are usually positioned in relation to different ideologies which keep the profound problematics of the twenty-first century individual in banality and parody: "Professional politics destroy the normal rapport between people, alienate them; *engagement* amputates man. [...] It is only for the weak-minded that history is always right. As soon as an ideology becomes dominant, it is wrong. [...] We must go to the theatre as we go to a football game, a boxing match, or a tennis tournament. These games, in effect, can give us the most exact idea of what theatre is in its pure state: antagonism brought face to face, dynamic opposition, irrational clashes of opposing wills" (Ionesco, 1963: 151).

In the first half of the twentieth century, Camus observes that "a movement of ideas and reflections on the theatre, whose most significant product is Antonin Artaud's fine book *Le Théâtre et son double*, and the influence of such foreign theoreticians as Gordon Craig and Appia, have once more brought the tragic dimension to center stage in our thoughts" (Camus, 1970: 231). Undoubtedly, we may note the presence of the tragic dimension in performances directed by Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Romeo Castellucci who are constantly preoccupied with the rediscovery of

the tragic nature of the *actual individual* often put in relation to the *primitive individual*, with ways of transposing the present human tragedies in spectacular forms. Thus, from a theatrical perspective, we note that under the influence of Artaud there has been significant research regarding the presence of the actor as an *affective athlete* capable of creating *shocking images* which whip the spectator's senses, cause a *change of state*, and make him act. Artaud, like other reformers of theatre, proposes a rediscovery of the sacred linked indissolubly to the violence of ritual. What Artaud "wanted in his search for a holiness was absolute: he wanted a theatre that would be a hallowed place; he wanted that theatre served by a band of dedicated actors and directors who would create out of their own natures an unending succession of violent stage images, bringing about such powerful immediate explosions of human matter that no one would ever again revert to a theatre of anecdote and talk. He wanted the theatre to contain all that is normally reserved for crime and war. He wanted an audience that would drop all its defences, that would allow itself to be perforated, shocked, startled, and raped, so that at the same time it could be filled with a powerful new charge" (Brook, 1968: 59-60). In this regard, we notice that in *The Misunderstanding* we deal also with an exacerbation of senses and self-devouring passion of the character which evokes the passion of the heroes of ancient Greek tragedies or Shakespeare's tragedies, with a desire to live life to the fullest that reminds us that, in fact, the *theatre of cruelty* is a search of a theatre *more violent, more extreme* (Brook, 1968: 61) created with the aim of healing and not entertaining the human beings.

Jerzy Grotowski's theatre takes shape at the confluence between sacredness and blasphemy, apotheosis and sordidness; a theatre of contradictions, tensions, which, through clear, precise impulses, through a language of pure signs, a symbolic language, reveals aspects of the tragic condition of the twentieth century individual. The characters of *Akropolis*, for instance, condemned to live "in a world that has ceased to make sense" (Esslin, 1961: XX), tell a story of dehumanization as, in the absence of God, the individual relapses into bestiality. However, the characters' belief, even in a *headless saviour*, an impersonal divinity, makes the spectators perceive them as tragic heroes. The explorations of the borderline situations are done through the bodies of the actors who follow the path of the human being in suffering. The performance profoundly disturbs the spectators who enter a reality of memory.

Romeo Castellucci seems to be strongly attracted to what can be called the *existential evil* which manifests itself in various forms. Like Grotowski, Castellucci incarnates on stage the coexistence of force and vulnerability, revealing in his performances, the darkest aspects of the human being's existence, those aspects that most of the time remain hidden. Exploring the nature of tragedy, the tragic themes, the condition of tragic characters, he

analyses the notion of *crisis*, which he treats as a possible means of interpreting the human condition, emphasizing the idea of the ephemerality of human life, but especially of its fragility. The images he creates overrun the depths of the spectator, unsettling him. Castellucci's directorial vision is also based on a return to archetypes and myths, to rituals, such as ritual of initiation or ritual sacrifice, to ancient Greek tragedies but also to Shakespeare's tragedies. These explorations aim to identify the nature of the contemporary man's deep self in relation to aspects relevant for the existence of the primitive man. The performance *Oresteia (an organic comedy?)* is thought up in terms of ferocity and barbarous ritual, unveiling on stage the presence of bodies subjected to excessive suffering. If in ancient Greek tragedies, the acts of violence were not presented on stage, in Castellucci's tragedies, violence seems to invade the entire stage. Criminal instincts, cruelty, carnality, grotesque-erotic sensuality, monstrous appetite for devouring and self-devouring, loneliness and alienation are expressed through the bodies of the actors, a language of flesh and blood. The space, designed to create images of a world falling apart, to generate an air stinking of putrefying blood, is filled with cavernous or celestial voices, further accentuating a twilight ambience reminiscent of the atmosphere of Rembrandt's paintings and also of Ionesco's plays for whom "a play is a construction, made up of a series of states of consciousness, or of situations, which are intensified, densified, then are tied together, either in order to be untied, or to end in an unbearable entanglement" (Ionesco, 1963: 155).

Essential to the creation of the tragic dimension of violence in a dramatic text or on stage is the theme of sight/blindness. When dealing with this theme, we identify in the structure of the character the lack of *vision*, or the presence of *a seeing which sees only what it wants to see*. In this case, the readers/spectators are invited to reflect on what it means for the character to perceive reality in the absence of an inner vision. Instead of lucid reading of reality, the character becomes the victim of his blind faith in a game of appearances designed to hide the truth of things. It is the situation in which the character does not want to see precisely because he strives to act in accordance with his dreams, desires, fears. After all, in *The Misunderstanding*, for the Mother, the victim can be anyone, a person she knows nothing about, a person she cannot see, and consequently cannot identify and recognise; and, for Martha, a person whom she does not want to see, a person whom she treats as an object and not as a human being. We could say that Martha's yearn for *total freedom* makes her reduce *man to an object* (Camus, 1982: 26). Caught in the net of her desires, she ends up being crushed by the reality of her crimes. In this fight for freedom and happiness, there is no good or evil, only a blind wish to make one's dream come true even if this requires to destroy oneself. So, Martha who feels no

remorse for killing her brother finds neither freedom nor happiness. Her dream ends in a nightmare, the crimes committed turn out to be in vain, her life has been nothing but an endless self-devouring, and at the end of the road, she does not see the light of the sun, but steps into the total darkness.

Regarding *The Misunderstanding*, Camus states: “When the tragedy is done, it would be incorrect to think that this play argues for submission to fate. On the contrary, it is a play of revolt, perhaps even containing a moral of sincerity” (Camus, 2008: II). *A moral of sincerity*, that is a moral of unveiling the truth of one’s life. Indeed, there is no submission to fate, submission to the norms of family (Ionesco), to the social conventions. The Mother and Martha seem to have been buried within the walls of their inn, prey to a destiny against which they revolt; but this *revolt against destiny* leads inexorably to a hardening of heart, to human degradation as they do not feel any sense of guilt or remorse. Doubts, when they arise, are repressed or kept under control. The characters live in a continuous delusion, as crime, for them, seems to be, in fact, an act of charity. They consider their preys to be poor beings predestined to live their lives in a world devoid of compassion, a world of pain. Thus, the crimes they commit represent in their eyes merciful acts as it is due to them that their victims liberate themselves from this senseless world. The elderly couple in *The Chairs* also live in a world empty of sense and “in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land” (Camus, 1979: 13). Both the death of the Mother in *The Misunderstanding* and of the elderly couple in *The Chairs* resembles a plunge into a deep sleep, an immersion into the realm of the unconscious or into the waters of oblivion.

Undoubtedly, violence also manifests itself due to the adoption by the individual of a certain existential hypostasis, and here we make reference to that individual who claims to be what he is not, or claims that the crime he commits is not a crime, as in the absence of certain *ordering forces* belonging to another level of reality, sometimes called the *Beyond*, life, for him, is just a series of criminal acts and nothing more; consequently, he believes that he has total freedom to do away with all those who stand in the way of achieving his personal goals, not letting us forget that “Shame, shame, shame – that is the history of human beings!” (Nietzsche 2006: 67). This individual ends up denying reality as such because it is a reality that he cannot stand and therefore chooses to superimpose his own illusory reality which is convenient for him or which he dreams of. However, this individual concocts his own reality, often, attributing to it meanings that it does not contain, in an attempt to see something where that something does not exist, or not to see something where that something does exist. His personal illusory reality generates a chain of misunderstandings that can often lead to acts of violence.

Misunderstanding crosses the existential path of each individual, as life seems to be a series of contexts, and in some of them the individual is in the hypostasis of a stranger to a certain place, to the mentalities and behaviours specific to that place, but also stranger to the thoughts and intentions of the other/others with whom he establishes different relationships. The thought that he/she can get to know the other/others as long as he/she does not enter a relationship based on *sincerity*, remains at the level of *wishful thinking*. Misunderstanding, however, may also arise from non-recognition, as it happens in Camus's play where the Mother does not recognise her own son, "I haven't recognised him and I've killed him" (Camus, 2008: 36), and Martha does not recognise her own brother; this incapacity of recognising the other ends in murder and suicide. Misunderstanding may also arise from fear. There is a fear of oneself, of what one would be capable of doing in certain circumstances, a fear of freedom that one feels as too much pressure or responsibility, a fear of the other, fear of failure, fear of illness, fear of death. Fear, like envy, is one of the major causes leading to violent acts. Oedipus is afraid of the destiny that has been prophesied to him and in his attempts to avoid it, he comes to fulfil it step by step. Haunted by nostalgia and hopes, afraid of not being received with love by his mother and sister, Jan chooses to postpone the moment of recognition, the moment of truth. The constant leaps of thought between the happy past shared with his wife and the uncertain future prevent him from perceiving the danger lurking in the present. Trying to reach the unity and harmony of his being, Jan chooses to remain a stranger, thus opening the way to misunderstanding.

Jean in Eugène Ionesco's *Hunger and Thirst* like Jan in *The Misunderstanding* is a stranger by definition. A stranger to himself, exiled in his own home, a place inhabited by presences of the past. But there is nothing scary about Aunt Adelaide, she does not hold any terrifying secret that could change the destiny of the main character. The past he speaks of is made of distorted, incongruous memories, emphasizing the idea that "forms are suddenly emptied of their content, reality is unreal, words are only noises stripped of all meaning" (Ionesco, 1963: 127). The meeting between the aunt and Jean degenerates into an absurd conflict. They threaten each other without being capable of agreeing on some past events. It is the past that does not let Jean gain peace, haunting him for he could have saved his aunt, but turned out to be a coward. Consequently, Jean feels *incomplete* and decides to embark on a journey that could reveal to him a sense of his own existence. However, his journey unveils strange situations, emptied of sense, put together in a chaotic order, in a dreamlike logic, as for Ionesco theatre is often a *confession*: "I try to project upon the stage an inner drama (incomprehensible to myself) telling myself, nevertheless, that since the microcosm is an image of the macrocosm, it may happen that this torn up, disarticulated inner world is in some way the mirror or the symbol of universal contradictions. No

intrigue, then, no architecture, no enigmas to solve but the insoluble unknown, no personalities, but characters without identity (they become, at each moment, the opposite of themselves; they take the place of others and vice-versa), simply a continuity without continuity, a fortuitous sequence without relation of cause to effect, inexplicable adventures or emotional states, or an indescribable but living tangle of intentions, of movements, of passions without unity, plunging into contradiction. It may appear tragic, it may appear comic, or both at once, for I am unable to distinguish the one from the other. I only wish to translate universal implausibility and strangeness, my universe” (Ionesco, 1963: 128-129). At the end of his voyage, Jean reaches a place which can be seen as a barracks or a monastery or a prison, an inn or a concentration camp, a hospital or a theatre. And in this place, nothing is what it seems. Jean’s searches prove futile, and his revolt, like Jack’s in *Jack, or The Submission*, leads to resignation. Jean finds no salvation and remains an incomplete being, a stranger imprisoned in a place of unending torture.

The individual’s living in *incompleteness* makes him do everything to overcome his limits, to change his human condition. Jan also experiences this state of being incomplete and that is why he returns home, but in his attempt to have everything he ends up losing everything. Thus, returning home, to the origins, to his family, turns out to be his final journey. His mother and his sister do not recognise him and kill him. Jan relives his return home as in a dream, the emotions clouding his reason, preventing him from noticing that “important matters may manifest themselves through small signs” (Freud, 1920: 64). His home, the much-dreamed-of paradise, is a reflection of an insensitive world, in which God seems to be an *absent presence*, accentuating the idea that “the existential condition is unbearable” (Ionesco, 1973: 45). A world of misunderstandings and vain hopes. Martha feels the inn as a cage of death whose bars tighten to suffocate her; a space from which she longs to escape and therefore accepts her condition as a criminal: “That which is human in me is what I desire and to get what I desire, I believe that I would crush anything in my way” (Camus, 2008: 24). In fact, Martha fervently lives a life parallel to her daily life, feeds on illusions, contrasts crime with the idyllic image of a paradise that will be hers one day. The character comes to life, becomes alive, in the moments when she immerses into her inner world made of daydreams without realising that they are actually causing her a sleep of consciousness. All that matters for her is to succeed leaving behind a place “where the autumn has the face of spring and spring the smell of misery” (Camus, 2008: 24).

It is impossible to reconstruct the conditions in which the great ancient or medieval mysteries took place. Therefore, we think that today the role of the theatre rooted in the tragedy of the twenty-first century individual is to

challenge the spectator, to disturb him, to heal him by harmonizing him with himself: “It is said that at its origin, theatre was an act of healing, of healing the city. According to the action of fundamental, entropic forces, no city can avoid an inevitable process of fragmentation. But when the population assembles in a special place under special conditions to partake in a mystery, the scattered limbs are drawn together, and a momentary healing reunites the larger body, in which each member, re-membered, finds its place” (Brook, 1999: 196). The theatre, which reveals the tragic dimension of the human existential condition, aims to transpose in stage language the metamorphoses of the actual individual who, in essence, is in a continuous search for a sense of life and who in the absence of this sense, often is led by criminal instincts and commits acts of violence, most of the time, deliberately. We consider that theatre as an act of healing may offer the spectator the possibility to rediscover himself, to reveal his deep self and thus to identify a possible sense of his passage through this life. Let’s remind ourselves that “A strong presence of actors and a strong presence of spectators can produce a circle of unique intensity in which barriers can be broken and the invisible become real. Then public truth and private truth become inseparable parts of the same essential experience” (Brook, 1989: 41). The experience of the sacred quality of both life and theatre may prove to be a healing experience.

In conclusion, we notice that a theatre based on the tragic dimension of human condition always aims to create intense experiences which lead to acts of healing the spectator/community. Nowadays, more than ever, as the acts of violence are an existential threat, the creation of a new *theatre of cruelty* has become absolutely necessary.

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