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Deleuze and
Artistic Research

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Volume I

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Journey into the Unknown

Romeo Castellucci's Theatre of Signs

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The aesthetic always uses a mask that, at one and the same time, affirms and negates. It is only in the intermittence of revelation that we have access to works of art. Theatre and art do not represent a space in which to live: here, the laws and values of this world are not valid. Theatre and art are not intended to solve problems: they must add new ones.

—Romeo Castellucci (2015)

THE THEATRE OF SOCIETAS RAFFAELLO SANZIO

Fundamental doubts on the nature of representation constitute the essential theme of the work of Romeo Castellucci, the co-founder of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio. This chapter analyses how, through very specific scenic devices, Castellucci confronts spectators not only with the power of theatre but also with its tremendous darkness. Exposed to violent attacks on the senses, the spectator is forced to see beyond the image and to think the unthinkable.

The chapter argues that the key elements of such a theatre are constituted by what Deleuze, and before him Artaud and Proust, called “signs.” Signs testify to the power of nature and spirit, working at a deeper level than words, gestures, characters, or represented actions. Far from being linked simply to a signifying expression, the content, or an alteration of the consciousness, they are above all a manifestation of forces, of a differential of intensity. In that regard, on the one hand, signs are always accessible to the senses, already part of a process of actualisation; however, on the other hand, they already point towards the virtual system of relations, the ideal coordinates of a problem. This is the reason why signs are always to be interpreted, and why they put our thought in motion. There is a great danger in this interpretation, however, since signs hold a disruptive potential not only when they are lost in the distance (they do not touch us, they do not reveal the nature of the issues at stake) but also when they strike us with full force (they abruptly reveal the unbearable abyss, and lead the one they have confronted to madness or death) (Deleuze 1994, 23). Castellucci’s art (originating as it does from Greek tragedy) consists precisely





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in tearing his spectators apart between these two ways of being lost in the dark forest of signs.

The questions we would like to ask about the Societas Raffaello Sanzio's theatre are, therefore, very straightforward: What is the origin of those signs in which one finds the maximum drama in the least possible information? Why do they make such a deep impression on us? Or, as Castellucci himself puts it about his experience of listening to Schubert, "Where do my tears come from, void of content and so far removed from the sentimentality I loathe?" (2014). Paradoxically, isn't it because signs withhold force that they express their potency, beyond any theatre of representation, any explicit content, and any meaning? Therefore, I believe that Castellucci prominently displays the same new image of thought Deleuze promotes in all his works: the will no longer to have the choice, to have the spirit forced by sensation, to need thought to go as far as the tremendous darkness, but also the need to interpret signs, to elevate ourselves from this darkness to light.

A SIGN FROM THE GODS

ὁ ἄναξ οὐ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει. (Diels 1903, 79)

The God whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks plainly nor conceals, but indicates by signs. (Patrick 1889, 86)

The ninety-third fragment of Heraclitus brings us to the core of the problem. Gods communicate with diviners (*chrosmologos*) or seers (*mantis*) by giving them signs.¹ Since the time of ancient Greece, our fate, but also our tragedy, has been that gods provoke humans. The fundamental nature of a divinatory sign is that (1) it is enigmatic and obscure; (2) it can be dangerous, even deadly, when it reaches the level of human knowledge; (3) its cognitive content is futile, the solution to the enigma is, in the final analysis, extremely simple.² Therefore, Gods cause men to lose balance—not because they are deliberately elusive, vengeful, or irascible, but because the oracle, by nature, is evasive. Gods never lie, and can never be guilty of leading us astray. What the prediction indicates, however, is something men cannot understand immediately. This is the reason why the riddle of the oracle is, according to Deleuze, always the enigma of time: if there is revenge, it is only that of time.³ When Oedipus is confronted with his own destiny, he does not understand it suddenly but is destined to understand only later.⁴ The revelation arrives when the human subject is already trapped

- 1 For an in-depth study of the way in which classical antiquity treated and developed considerations of the sign, and the application of these theories to the spheres of divination and astrology or to the art of navigation, see Manetti (1993).
- 2 Castellucci is greatly influenced here by his fellow countryman Giorgio Colli, who compiled an extraordinary anthology of *aenigmata* in *La sapienza greca* (Colli 2005, 339–69).
- 3 Deleuze explicitly mentions these topics in a lecture given at Vincennes on 7 February 1984 (see Deleuze 1984). See also Châtelet (1962, 1:144–48).
- 4 On the difference between fate and determinism, see Deleuze (1994, 83).



in time. The position of the one who receives the sign is essentially passive, the position of the seer and no longer that of the agent. Oedipus and Macbeth record rather than react. They are prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in a sensory-motor scheme.⁵ Too soon or too late, however, they fall into the trap of this divine (or rather devilish) gesturing, in such a way that the solver of riddles becomes a riddle to himself that he cannot solve. “Who am I?” is Oedipus’s one and only question, the horror of his fate. His inability to interpret is not a simple transitory lack of understanding, since obscurity is the very mode of being of this grandiose revelation.

A sign from the gods merely drops a hint and alludes. Its meaning does not suddenly emerge, sparing us the need to search; but it is not absent, it does not confine our lives to absurdity. With the revelation of signs, in short, nothing is immediate and nothing is out of reach. Everything is there, but in the shadow, *en filigrane* (implicit) as Rosselet (2004, 41–42) says. “Neither the problem nor the question is a subjective determination marking a moment of insufficiency in knowledge. Problematic structure is part of objects themselves, allowing them to be grasped as signs” (Deleuze 1994, 63).

THE SIGN AS FOOD FOR THOUGHT

“The sign is coming” (Nietzsche 2006, 265). Castellucci brings back to the theatre this fundamental lesson of Attic tragedy. He has an extraordinary capacity for treating every figure onstage as an answer to an unknown question. “In a tragic perspective,” claim Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988, 38), “man and human action are seen, not as things that can be defined or described, but as problems. They are presented as riddles whose double meanings can never be pinned down or exhausted.” In line with this description of the problematising nature of tragedy, Castellucci’s stage productions not only interpret and not only emit signs to be interpreted; they also produce signs by particular procedures.

So what is a sign? Signs, as we know, were Deleuze’s main concern, insofar as they mobilise the problem of the relationship between sensibility and thought. Signs force us to think. The sign is the object of an encounter, but it is precisely the contingency of the encounter that guarantees the necessity of what it leads us to think.

Deleuze’s *Proust and Signs* ([1972] 2008) and *Difference and Repetition* (1994) deal with this issue. Deleuze’s intensive theory of signs links the ideal synthesis of the difference and the asymmetric synthesis of the sensory, the two parts of the system: the actual and the virtual. The fulguration of a sign is akin to lightning:⁶ it is within the actual, it has physical properties, it is a phenome-

5 One recognises here a central element of what Deleuze called “the time-image” (on hallucinatory possession in Visconti see Deleuze 1989, 3; on somnolence, dreams, and troubles of attention, see 55–56; on fate and time, see 96–97).

6 The dark precursor only takes place within these dissymmetrical systems where disparate elements are communicating: “The phenomenon that flashes across this system, bringing about the communication between disparate series, is a sign” (Deleuze 1994, 222).



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non, an event . . . and yet the imperishable, the impassive part of the virtual, of the problem, or of the Idea continue to insist, to persist, beyond actualisation. The sign, by its very constitution, aims at an evasive thing that deprives us from common-sense understanding. In other words, it is when we do not recognise things that we are finally able to think them. We need something that does violence to thought, which wrestles it from its natural stupor and its merely abstract possibilities. The domain of thought is not the clear and distinct idea of good sense and of common sense anymore, but the domain of distinct and yet obscure Ideas, present in an enveloped state, implicated in signs. Dream-like experiences of paramnesia—where memory is blurred and recognition doomed to failure, forcing the spectator to return to immemorial times (*Human Use of Human Beings*)—are at the heart of Castellucci's aesthetics. The sign has come, like a morning sun coming out from behind dark mountains, bearing with it the contradictory character of sublime clarity and darkness.



Figure 1.19.1.

For Castellucci, elements onstage are only important inasmuch as they disseminate signs for decipherment. A priest walks out of a church and with his steps goes the whole light of the universe (*The Minister's Black Veil*), a woman draws the floor towards her crying body (*Schwanengesang D.744*), a terrifying technological device (*Le sacre du printemps*), a baby playing in a huge golden room (*Tragedia Endogonidia*), a crowd endlessly walking towards the audience (*Parsifal*): the value of each scene is based only upon what it imparts to us. Castellucci's strength is always to negate both the idea that the object being represented onstage holds



the secret of the sign it emits, and the idea that the meaning merely lies within the subjectivity of the spectator. An artist, in that regard, really is a tyrant, since in front of a work of art I never think what I want to think. The significance of signs is that they avoid the danger of objectivism and subjectivism and indicate why object and subject are very bad approximations for thought indeed. There is always something inhuman, involuntary, impersonal, and supra-logical in the imperative to decipher signs. This is the very reason why signs give thought to what Deleuze and Proust call “claws [*griffes*] of necessity” or “claws of authenticity” (Deleuze [1972] 2008, 61, translation modified). Thus, demonstration and intentionality, personal expression and artistic style, are equally expelled from such a physical, energetic theatre. Societas Raffaello Sanzio achieves this task through flawless technical mastery, and yet a perfect grasp on the call of the “problem,” enabling its spell to be communicated, in other words transmitted to the viewer.

TO LOSE MYSELF IN FORM

I believe such signs are the crucial elements of Castellucci’s theatre: no longer a theatre of meaning or representation, but a theatre of forces, intensities, and drives, where the sign plays the role of the instrument through which thought is activated. The Idea makes the sensation meaningful, while the sensation, in its turn, expresses the Idea. Or, put another way, the problematic, the Idea, has to be *dramatised* by specific sensations for it to be expressed on the stage, which is conceived as a field of energies and intensities.

For such a dramatisation to occur, it is obvious that the main task is to abolish representation and the pretentious ambition to depict the world. This war against *mimesis* can only be won when we realise to what extent the diminution of images is actually positive. The general implication is that the destruction of clichés (the “white noise” produced by media culture) becomes a great figurative operation. Iconoclasm is closely related, although in a paradoxical manner, to unbridled production of art. One cannot even conceive this gesture as still being negative. Thus, the images the spectators are exposed to are diluted as soon as they have appeared, which gives Castellucci’s theatre an essentially fragmented, nightmare-like character. Perfect figures are destroyed by the artist himself before anyone else does it, in order to attain the highest possible tension between creation and destruction. What is at stake here is the affirmation of the terror of plenitude, and the correlative abolishment of the great power of publicity.

Rather than creating meaningful, complex, original figures, Castellucci thus tries to *empty out* and disturb his images. His aesthetic forms are always rather simple and abstract: circles, squares, identifiable cultural figures (Julius Caesar, a police officer, a little girl, a cleaning lady, a horse). Castellucci eliminates details to obtain unpretentious, undecomposable forms. But because of their place within the temporal chain of the play, their radical simplicity is experienced as a surprise and creates an emotive tension in the viewers. The movement towards essence is only possible where there are no stable realities



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that could be placed, defined, and judged, but where sensory signs are the cause of problems, unanswerable questions, and riddles whose double meanings still have to be deciphered. The problem or the enigma persists over and above every solution. In *Difference and Repetition*, the objective structure of the problem consists in retaining explicated extensities within the original depth (instead of cancelling it), so that the problem continues to persist and to resist, and to be unleashed within signs. Let's turn to the use of animals onstage, for which Castellucci's company is well known: a horse is not a horse at all, but a figure that is captured standing out: a white shape on a black background. If we follow, in all confidence, the burning power of such an image, we experience the dynamics of menace and opportunity contained within it. When we see such a shape, not only do we not see anything stable, but we realise that we are also being seen, pushed back to the void that looks at us, moves us, and constitutes us.

Such is the power of the sign: if we find the thing we were looking for in the right place, then it is false. We have to look where there is nothing to find: the task is to search. This melancholy is the condition of thought. When I'm confronted with a figure that forces me to change my manner of seeing, it is not I anymore who is the viewer: I'm also being viewed by the figure as if a gaze was directed upon me out of darkness. In that sense, tragedy is an intrusive power; above all, it should be thought of as something that sees me, strips me naked, and makes me uncomfortable (see Didi-Huberman 1992). To experience a Castellucci performance is to experience the striking *passivity* imposed by signs, but also to be *reawakened* in this condition.



Figure 1.19.2.



There is indeed something very *cruel*, in the sense Artaud gave to this word, in such a theatre of intense liberation of signs: gestures and attitudes acquire an ideographic value, figures constitute hieroglyphs to be deciphered, every pronounced word becomes physical, and it is the acoustic power of speech that has the most immediate impact upon us. There is no illustrative, psychological dimension whatsoever, no need to “stage” a classical text, only to extract material impressions and pure rhythms from it. Texts inherited from culture here play the role of a material among many others (light, body, space, sound). This is a fundamental principle inherited from Artaud, who conceived theatre as something that must act upon the nervous system and address the senses rather than the intellect, thus avoiding the tedious necessity of storytelling. This emphasis on sensibility was also the valuable lesson of Deleuze’s *Proust and Signs*: logical and commonsensical truth is less profound, less necessary than the truth that reaches us through the senses. The outline is as follows: (1) intelligence is placed under the pressure of signs; (2) sensibility, in the presence of that which can only be felt, finds itself confronted by its own limit; (3) our organs become metaphysical, so that both sides of aesthetics are reunited (theory of art and theory of sensibility).⁷ Through signs, we feel what must be the mark of their authenticity.

We also begin to understand why the antiphrastic character of an image is central to the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Castellucci constantly uses extraneous and violent material elements to convey an opposite meaning. The following entries from his notebook provide a good illustration of this antiphrastic nature of all signs:

A metal thread that leads from the mouth of a man to the ear of a little girl. The man whispers something. The thread starts to heat up, to smoke and finally glow incandescent red. (Castellucci 2007, 263)

A black flag swinging through the space succeeds in “extinguishing” the lights on the stage by capturing the light within its folds. One light after another goes out until they are all extinguished. Darkness. (ibid., 64)

These notes (pure visual and aural images) are constellations of appearing/disappearing signs. Here we find once again one of the basic features of riddles: their capacity to connect atomic elements in completely unexpected ways (just as a kiss can signify a betrayal). The viewer may feel a hallucinatory impact, like an animal trapped at the very bottom of its burrow. “There is a great difference,” claims Romeo Castellucci, “between a surreal image and an enigmatic image. In the enigma, there is always a system, like a bomb that needs defusing, although there is a logic to it. The surreal image is an automatic image, a decoration for the spirit; its shock is a pseudo-shock” (Castellucci et al. 2007, 255). This beauty, this ray capable of reaching the most hidden corner within me, gives me no intellectual consolation, no recognition of what I already know,

⁷ On the being of the sensible, see Deleuze (1994, 139–40).



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but preserves, with reservation, my anxiety intact. Such signs necessarily bear characters of the kind of latency or withdrawal that Heidegger (2013, 127–28) described: “The work [of art], as work, should point toward that which is not yet available to mankind, toward the concealed, so that the work will not just repeat whatever we already know, understand and do. Should the work of art not keep silent about that which remains concealed, that which as concealed awakes modesty in the human being, insofar as it here confronts whatever cannot be planned nor controlled, neither calculated nor manufactured?”

In the final analysis, the dimension of risk present in signs leaves us without a map to orient ourselves: signs act like radioactive, dangerous elements—precisely the reason why they avoid decorative and illusionistic dullness. This inhuman darkness and this void present deep inside my gaze is the reason why Castellucci declares that theatre, to be beautiful, must act like a poison, like a black mirror reflecting our human condition, sending back the riddle we mortals are to ourselves (*Les métopes du Parthénon*). This nightly gift is the most dreadful, and yet the most comforting. We have to dive into the inhuman to find a fragile human touch in art.

Unfortunately, discussions of Castellucci’s work have recently become highly mundane, often conceiving his work from the viewpoint of the outrage it aroused among conservatives or the overestimated value of his artistic project. However, let us not think that Castellucci is concerned with reflecting on social reality, fame, or political provocation. His work cannot be reduced to its apparent content or its political impact, but should be grasped from (1) its physical attempt to emit signs and (2) the affirmation of opacity peculiar to thought. Provocation is always excessively intentional, and always takes the form of a specific communication-oriented project; whereas, in Castellucci’s work, we always have the impression it was made by a non-human entity, a deity or an extraterrestrial.

Moreover, the only political task of art is precisely to get rid of communication, to create images that make commercial reappropriation difficult—that is to say, to put spectators in a condition where they see something that has not been thought for them. We can appreciate and enjoy a theatre piece on the basis of common affinities, a certain shared culture (my studies, my knowledge of the adapted text, my Western culture); however, very different from this mundane *conversation* is the journey into the unknown, the *contact*, through sensibility, with signs that force us to sense differently and penetrate the world of unfamiliar evaluations.⁸ The aim of art is not to reproduce the world, but to produce it as it has never been seen before. Once again, we should stress here that the sign is the only object worthy of encountering. That is to say, only signs (always problematic for the empirical exercise of our senses) are bearers of problems; thus, they lure us into dangerous zones where the human subject no longer has any absolute criteria and we are projected outside ourselves.

⁸ On the difference between contact and conversation, see Zourabichvili (1997).



In reducing the σκάνδαλον⁹ of theatre to mere provocation, we have already favoured the facility of recognition (with its double characteristic of good sense and common sense) to the expense of the exploration of encounters (a passion to think). Art should remain the interrupter of reality, able to create feelings that get into our flesh and nervous systems.

PILGRIMAGE WITHIN MATTER

In conclusion, this article demonstrated how Castellucci's theatre of signs confronts something bigger than "me," which escapes. The sign is the cause of problems; that is to say, it is the cause of a discordant exercise of our faculties, of an exploration of Ideas, of an arousal of thought. The theatre of signs is a theatre linked to matter and fear within matter, where the implementation of thought takes place materially.

To achieve this, Castellucci questions the extent to which I genuinely cannot see without being seen in return, why that which is worth being represented is always the unrepresentable; ultimately, by means of art, he addresses the main philosophical problem Deleuze was obsessed with: the sensory origin of thought. "A sign envelops another 'object' within the limits of the object which bears it, and incarnates a natural or spiritual power (an Idea)" (Deleuze 1994, 22–23). Thus, it is with the sign that we assist the aberrant nuptials of pure materialism and the most perfect spiritualism. Even if the body is being addressed, the mind is affected, making it necessary to penetrate the image, to search for the secret of its assemblage. This theatre is made for the nervous system, not for the consciousness, and yet every image is a wake-up call. Castellucci rediscovers the most basic, non-intellectual form of communication, which is linked to the nervous system, passes directly through sensation, and directly touches the mind. Directly means it is outside all representation, without interposition; that it substitutes direct signs for mediate representations.¹⁰

"*Go Down, Moses*": this title of a Castellucci production is also an imperative made to the prophet by God. Onstage, a line of visions: blood, a loud turbine, boring policemen, a medical scanner, a prehistoric cavern, and, finally—like a reminder about our destiny—written on the barely noticeable translucent screen that has been separating the audience from the stage, these simple words: "Save our Souls." It is as if a spell was cast upon time. In *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, Dostoevsky (1995, 112) wrote, "When she was tugging and calling out to me, a certain question had crossed my mind and I had been unable to answer it." The feeling viewers get from this riddle, coming to themselves after such a performance, is that our destinies will be decided later, in an unsaid third time.

⁹ Etymologically, the *skandalon* is a stumbling block or the trigger of a trap, here a trap of time and a trap of the gods.

¹⁰ On this immediacy, see Deleuze (1994, 8).

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Appendix

ONLINE MATERIALS



As further illustration to the chapters “Deleuze’s Fold in the Performing Practice of Aaron Cassidy’s *The Pleats of Matter*” (pp. 56–66) and “Alone/Together: Simulacral ‘A-presentation’ in and into Practice-as-Research in Jazz” (pp. 167–73), an online repository of audio and video examples has been created and hosted within the website of the Orpheus Institute, Ghent. These examples, which should be viewed in connection with a reading of the relevant articles, may all be accessed under the URL: <http://www.orpheusinstituut.be/en/the-dark-precursor-media-repository>.