

CRUELTY IN THE THEATRE OF THE SOCIETAS RAFFAELLO SANZIO

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From the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts of 2003 in Brussels one scene is still beating in my memory. As it is probably in yours, if you have seen it. It's that one scene in which a policeman gets undressed to his underpants and is beaten up like a bloody animal by his colleagues. Everybody could see that the torture was fake all the way. The blood had been poured out before the action took place and the police batons were made of soft rubber. And still, this scene was quite horrible to watch. Especially because of the amplified sound of every beat on the victim's naked flesh, because of his spastic moves and his total silence afterwards.

It was the first time I saw the Societas Raffaello Sanzio of Romeo Castellucci. For the company it was already the fourth time they presented a new episode in their performance cycle called *Tragedia Endogonia*. I jumped in there, and I couldn't resist. Neither as a theatre critic nor as an individual. Even before the festival in Brussels came to an end, I was flying to Bergen in Norway in order to see the next episode. Since then I've seen every single one of them, together with partner-in-crime Thomas Crombez. It was for us an alternative way of citytripping, with Castellucci setting our agenda. Rome, Strasbourg, London, Marseille and finally Cesena, the small home town of the Societas near Bologna in Italy. There the *Tragedia* had taken off in January 2002, and there it landed again last December.

Here we want to report from that journey, focussing on the unique atmosphere of cruelty in some episodes of the *Tragedia Endogonia*. To make this presentation *more* than a report is not easy. The theatre of Castellucci is an autonomous and enigmatic sight, where scenes and images continually clash. With every new episode our interpretation got a little more insecure, instead of brighter. But still, we want to try. First I will give a broader introduction on the *Tragedia Endogonia*, from a more journalistic perspective. This will lead to some thoughts about the kind of violence that is expressed through the episodes. Next Thomas will make a more academic analysis of possible narrative strategies of violence in theatre, and how Castellucci relates to them. Background for both of us is the question to which extent the *Tragedia Endogonia* could be seen as a contemporary tragedy. In between we will show you a ten minutes film of the first episode in Cesena. Because whatever one may say about Castellucci's theatre, it always has the last word itself.

TRAGEDIA ENDOGONIDIA

The title of the cycle is already a contradiction. Or an 'oxymoron', as Castellucci called it. He explained the meaning of the two words 'Tragedia' and 'Endogonidia' in an interview we had with him in Brussels.

"The words cannot be brought together. 'Tragedia' is essentially an epic word, it speaks about the hero. The hero is called to die (*est appelé à mourir*). 'Endogonidia', on the contrary, is a term from microbiology. Certain protozoic formations have both male and female gonads inside. So they don't reproduce sexually but exclusively by means of division. They are indeed small immortal beings."

So, the contradiction in the title *Tragedia Endogonidia* is between the death of the tragic hero on the one hand and an eternal self-replication in nature on the other. It's a contradiction between the mortality of a human being and the immortality of the species, combined in one theatre cycle.

All eleven episodes of the *Tragedia Endogonidia* show implicit images of birth and death and repetitive reproduction. For instance, these themes are present in a scene in the Paris episode where an older mother figure squeezes her empty breasts for more than twenty minutes. Her manic action does not develop at all, it's simply repeated into eternity. As she's sitting at one side of the scene, at the other side there's a large white statue of a Sphinx, the silent reminder of the riddle that Oedipus had to solve. The different stages of man, put into question by the sphinx, is something Castellucci likes to play with in the different episodes. Maybe 'play' is not the right word. The *Tragedia Endogonidia* rather shows mystic transformations between these stages. The Brussels episode moves from a scene in which a child is left alone in a big claustrophobic marble chamber, to a scene in which a very old man is entering on all fours. In the end he sinks into his deathbed, till nothing is seen anymore. But in the next episode in Bergen, this evolution goes the other way around: an old lady is covered with a goat skin and turns up again as a young girl.

Transformation is the central code of the *Tragedia Endogonidia*. Also in its total form as cycle. On the one hand the eleven different episodes are meant to be stand-alone performances, each one loosely inspired by the history of the specific city where it is produced and shown. In Brussels for instance Castellucci related to the unique language problem of this capital. On the other hand the *Tragedia Endogonidia* produces explicit leitmotifs. The arrow machine that you'll see in the film of Cesena came back in Bergen, as did the letter machine of Avignon in different other episodes. A lot more examples could be named. The *Tragedia Endogonidia* is an ongoing transformation of semiotic objects in continually new contexts, where each episode gives birth to another and makes the previous die, in one eternal reproductive system. Of course there are fixed structures. For instance, in each episode some characters are wearing identical small pieces with a number around their arm. And over their head they get a kind of terrorist cap, which only leaves their eyes and their mouth free. These are core symbols of what we want to talk about here today: the cruelty in the theatre of Castellucci.

But first it's necessary to say how Castellucci relates to the classical tragedy. For Castellucci, tragedy is 'the exhibition of the corpse of the hero to the polis'. Thomas 'll tell more about it. More important for my point here, is what Castellucci says about the tragic: "The tragic is a form of energy that is human and inhuman at the same time. This form of energy does not belong to the gods but to the human and the inhuman."

The tragic energy does not belong to the gods, but to the human and to the inhuman, Castellucci says. The human aspect of tragedy we can understand, but what does Castellucci mean by 'the inhuman'? It's his work itself which gives answers. At least, if we accept his powerful, but incomprehensible images as answers to our questions. They go beyond language, beyond any possibility of rational analysis. They rather form new questions, one could say. The only way to talk about them is in terms of the technical or abstract principles they are based upon. By naming these concrete principles and structures, linked to concrete scenes, I'll try to give an insight in the specific cruelty in Castellucci's theatre. It's a cruelty that is cruel by its anonymity. It's cruel because it passes beyond everything we can *identify*.

The first principle of inhumanity which is developed through the different episodes, is the appearing of animals and machines on stage. To start with the animals: from Cesena 1 to Cesena 11, we have seen rabbits, goats, horses, apes and cats. If they appear on stage, they are extremely theatrical, but they're not aware of it. They haven't any intention to play or to represent, they just are there, as a pretragic appearance of life itself. Of course the goat in Bergen functions as a strong symbol, because in Castellucci's etymology 'tragedy' means 'song of the goat'. But what it sings, what it communicates, has no comprehensible meaning to us. That's why the animals function as such strong images. They go beyond language, and they deny will as a basic category of tragedy.

A little different form of inhumanity is embodied by the many machines in the Tragedia Endogonidia. They do express a sort of will. For instance, there's the arrow machine in Cesena and Bergen, automatically shooting arrows into the opposite wall. There's also the mechanic tree-robot in London, which rather ironically rapes the character of Sint-Paul. They function as a kind of 'deus *in machinae*'. In Paris three cars suddenly fall down from the ceiling, whereafter they park themselves without any human interaction. In Strasbourg these kinds of unbelievable interventions are driven to its extreme when at the end of the episode a real tank is driving into the theatre, aiming at the audience. It's not its possible shooting that is most threatening, but the fact that there's nobody operating on it, which is also the case for the other machines. The human individual as an autonomous initiator or operator is driven out from Castellucci's theatre. Every technical stageprop is mechanically coming out of the walls or down from the ceiling, as if the Tragedia Endogonidia was one big machinery itself. And in the second part of Marseille it really is. That part just exists of colour areas moving up and down behind layers of transparent net curtains,

accompanied by a thrilling soundscape of Scott Gibbons. The gods of the ancient tragedy has become anonymous technicians here.

A second principle of the Tragedia Endogonia is the anonymous architecture in which it takes place. In the first ones episodes the space was looking very monumental and claustrofobic at the same time, five sides of a cube without doors. Remember the golden room in Cesena or the huge marble chamber in Brussels. They show an architecture which is extremely naked, but overwhelming to the same level. These spaces have no identity, so that the characters are dropped there as the last leftover pieces of humanity. In the later episodes however, the architecture grew more open and transparent, which was however blurred by many net or plastic curtains in the front. What you saw, you saw behind a non-reflecting mirror. A direct contact between audience and stage, from face to face, almost took place.

The third principle of inhumanity in the Tragedia Endogonia is the total absence of meaningful language. *If* there's any language one can understand, it's expressed by the lettermachine, for instance in Avignon and Bergen. This machine looks like that kind of older information boards in airports or train stations, with rattling alphabet letters. In Bergen this lettermachine welcomed the audience by forming the sentence 'Hello, it's me the goat speaking'. This is a pure mechanical speech, presenting language in a very physical way.

If, next to the machines, characters speak, they only produce sounds without any semiotic connection. They only utter a ritual score of separate notes. So what Castellucci is doing, is making language fall apart in its smallest components: alphabet letters or just sounds. This is not really a postmodern vision on language, but a utopic one. By the dissolution of all known language, a new language has to be found. Text as a basic category of tragedy is denied to give birth to an alternative kind of pretragic unity of speech.

And the last principle, even the most cruel one, is the opposition between a uniform group and a naked individual, which is depersonalized by a terroristic cap pulled over the head. The group on the other side is often clothed in the same way, and by that it also loses all personality: the religious vicars in Rome, the cleaning team in London, the gothic counts in Bergen, the policemen in Brussels, the shooting women in Berlin, the old fashioned detectives in Cesena... They form a choir, but not longer a passive one. They operate as a collective body ruled by higher demands, and this is always leading to the sacrifice of one of them by the others. In Marseille one naked woman is becoming the victim of extreme bondage, whereas in Bergen the old lady is repeatedly bashed by an immense battering-ram in the form of a tragic goat's head, operated by four gothic counts in white. Their violence is precise and autonomous, as a ritual acted out by one identical collective. It's what René Girard would call the mimetic drive leading to a sacrifice, in order to reinstall the Law. But in the Tragedia Endogonia this violence is unique by its anonymity.

To me this anonymity is the basic key Castellucci is using to open up ancient tragedy into the 21st century. He finishes with individuality as the tragedy's central category to give way to a collective intimacy. At the same time he conserves the real tragic situation of 'not having a choice'. Without any willing language the characters of the *Tragedia Endogonia* are subordinate to a higher order not of the gods, but of autonomous machines and an overwhelming architecture. They are horrified by the anonymous choir that 'll sacrifice them, but they do not resist. At least that's the way that policeman in Brussels meets his fate: he undresses almost spontaneously, in a great acceptance of life's cruelty.

After Wouter has given a sort of phenomenology of the *Tragedia Endogonia*, I would like to discuss two specific problems posed by the cycle. The first problem is that of the relationship between the *Tragedia* and tragedy. The second is the problem of violence, or, as the programme for today announces, cruelty.

Romeo Castellucci is at the same time very clear and very vague about the relationship between the cycle and classical tragedy. "Tragedy is a structure that is able to house everybody who is born in the West. It's one of the sources of the West. I did a lot of work on this problem, but now I understand that I understand nothing. Tragedy is really an unknown object. It is unknown because it is obscure, and it is obscure because it is within us. It's a core that belongs to everybody. And maybe everybody belongs to this core."

So, first of all we have an 'object' that is not by definition highbrow art or a relic of the past. Tragedy belongs to everybody and it is a contemporary object. It's even connected to such concepts as *community* and *intimacy*. "Intimacy is the keyword that opens the possibility of tragedy for the future." Tragedy is something that concerns all of us, but sadly enough we cannot understand it very well. That's the vague side. On the other hand, Castellucci is very precise as to what is the essence of classical tragedy for him. He even defines tragedy: "Tragedy is the exhibition of the hero's corpse. The hero's corpse is exhibited to the city and to the citizen. 'Look, this is the corpse.' For the city, this moment is critical. The corpse breaks the rules, it breaks the law. However, this does not constitute a transgression from the outside. The transgression rises from the heart of the law. (*La transgression sort du milieu de la loi.*) It is the law that is breaking the law, by means of the law. And the corpse is the final point of the law." Now how are we to make sense of this? To clarify this, I will make use of Klaas Tindemans' reflections on the political nature of Greek tragedy.

Castellucci's definition sounds quite confusing, but actually it's a very technical definition. Castellucci pinpoints the moment in Greek tragedy where the dead body of the hero is brought out using the *ekkyklema*. The *ekkyklema* is a platform on wheels rolled out through a door in the *skene*, used "to indicate that whatever is on the platform (actors and props) is

supposed to be viewed as an interior scene”¹. For example, in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, the corpse of Agamemnon is being wheeled out through the doors of the *skene* using the *ekkyklema*.

Indeed, the exhibition of the corpse constitutes a perplexing and confusing moment for the citizens who are watching. They have to think about this corpse, about what the death of this important political figure – a leading hero, very often a king – means to the city. When Castellucci singles out this critical moment to define tragedy, it is clear that he understands theatre as a medium for reflection. Or at the very least a medium for astonishment and unexpectedness, an occasion for puzzling and perplexing experiences. Tragedy makes us think about a corpse that is not a normal corpse. The hero has died a violent death. The circumstances of his death are often very sensational. Agamemnon is killed by his own wife and will be avenged by his children. Tragedy asks us to look at this corpse, then think about it. What does this corpse mean for the city?

This, then, is probably what Castellucci means with the enigmatic sentence: “It is the law that is breaking the law, by means of the law.” Tragedy was a democratic institution in ancient Greece. It belonged to the city, and it belonged to religion as well. So we have the city itself displaying the corpse of a political hero to the citizens.

Now we have an idea of what Castellucci means with the word ‘tragedy’. I’ll take that as a starting point to discuss the violent acts he shows, and, more importantly, the way in which he shows them.

Tragedy is an ‘amazing space’. It’s not the space itself that is amazing, but what can be shown in this space. Theatre, according to Castellucci, is a space to show amazing events. It’s not a coincidence that Christian Biet has made the link between early modern theatre, in particular French *tragédie sanglante*, and the theatre of Castellucci. In the Renaissance, there is an abundance of new, theatrically structured, ‘amazing spaces’. A lot of such spaces are being invented, such as the anatomical theatre, an educational stage to display the amazing insides of the human body, or the Wunderkammer, literally a ‘chamber of wonders’, the prototype of the museum. The Wunderkammer houses a collection of rare and wonderful natural objects, such as precious stones, big shells or the remains of exotic animals, that are displayed together with expensive books, weaponry, and objects made from gold or silver². The Wunderkammer is the prototype of the ‘amazing spaces’ of early modern times. It’s a spatial structure designed to maximize astonishment. It’s crammed full of wonderful objects, so that when something catches your eye, the next moment you will already be watching something else, equally wonderful, that’s lying just next to it. In the Wunderkammer, “objects were positioned next to one another so as to maximize dissimilarity” (Daston/Park). What’s more, the Wunderkammer is

¹ Roger Dunkle, “An Introduction to Greek Tragedy.”

<http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classics/dunkle/tragedy/intr20.htm>

² See Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150–1750*. New York: Zone Books, 1998; Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets de curiosité*, Paris: Gallimard, 2002.

quite explicit about this structure. The visitor of the Wunderkammer knows that he will be amazed – there won't be any sudden shock of surprise. The Wunderkammer has nothing to do with suspense.

The *Tragedia Endogonidia* has the same structure as the Wunderkammer. This theatre is not about suspense or psychological examination. It's not about fantasy or storyline. It's not about beautiful, touching scenes. This theatre is about astonishment. For Christian Biet, the similarities between the *Tragedia Endogonidia* and early modern 'amazing spaces' such as the *tragédie sanglante* (or the Wunderkammer, we might add) imply that, when we are faced with an act of violence in this kind of theatre, this act is framed such as to make us reflect on it. Just as the *tragédie sanglante* always shows both sides of a moral problem, the *Tragedia Endogonidia* shows how an act of violence and the frames for watching that act are 'constructed'. However, this is only a vague suggestion. I would like to discuss in a more detailed way the nature of the amazement we experience when we witness a violent scene on Castellucci's stage.

My main proposition is that 'pure' violence or 'naked' force is never visible to the human eye. Whenever we watch an act of violence, be it real or imagined, we are being subjected to powerful perceptive and conceptual mechanisms in order to be able to frame this event. Of course, this is true for all of human experience. But in the case of violence it's especially striking. As a matter of fact, *we do not know what we are talking about when we utter the word 'violence'*. 'Violence' is one of the most abstract concepts in our language, which is in stark contrast to our daily experience. When someone says a movie is too 'violent' for children, we all seem to agree that we know very well what that person is talking about. Actually, we know nothing. 'Violence' means nothing more than 'force' (from the Latin *vis*, force). It's the same in other European languages: 'geweld' and 'Gewalt' both have as their origin the ancient German word 'wal', which means 'to rule'. My proposition is that there are quite specific mechanisms at work underneath this very abstract words. And what Castellucci does in the *Tragedia Endogonidia* – amongst others – is to bring these mechanisms to light.

Most of the 'violent' scenes of the *Tragedia Endogonidia* are about torture, sacrifice, or humiliation. There is the police officer who undresses to be beaten by his colleagues in the Brussels episode; there is the sacrifice on the washing machine in Paris; there is the naked woman being 'punished' by an invisible voice in Rome; there is another naked woman being exhibited, abused and photographed in front of a group of gentlemen spectators (in the Marseille episode).

In each of these scenes, the stress is not on the person being tortured or the persons executing the action. It is on the ways these acts are being *watched*.

In theatre and film history, there are two methods of representing violence. In most cases, the violent scene is framed by a narrative. This narrative makes it easy for us to digest what we see. During a torture scene, for

example, many directors make sure the spectators have no difficulty separating the good from the bad. The tortured person becomes a hero, the torturers appear as utterly depraved demons. The narrative, for example that of a historical drama or war drama, makes it clear why the violence was unavoidable and what will be the consequences of it. The hero might, for example, through torture become a martyr. (From this perspective, the essence of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* [2004] was already announced by the torture scene at the end of his *Braveheart* [1995].) The violent action may very well be gripping, such as for example a supposedly unwatchable rape scene or horror scene (e.g., the infamous chest-burster scene from *Alien* [1979]³), but once it is finished, the movie relaxes its grip. It's easy to recuperate from a horror picture; we are feeling very tense while watching it, but afterwards we have an immediate feeling of relaxation. The violent action was just a part of the narrative; once the narrative is over, the violent action disappears with it.

A second method of representing a violent action is to fuse it not with a narrative, but with a performative. There exist a set of culturally defined reactions to watching violence. For example, most kinds of torture presuppose the presence of spectators. You can't burn a witch if nobody's watching. The spectators are part of the show; without them, the frame for the violent action would be incomplete. There are some artworks that do not frame representations of violent actions by means of a narrative, but by referring to certain performatives. You are all familiar with some examples: *Salò* by Pasolini (1976), or *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* by John McNaughton (1986). In both of these movies the voyeuristic position of the viewer is explicitly brought to his attention.

In the *Tragedia Endogonia*, we don't find any narratives or performatives for staging violent actions. Instead, these methods themselves become the subject of the performances. During the beating of the policeman in Brussels, or the bondage scene in Marseille, the *theatrical frame for violent actions* is turned inside out. The frame is made explicit. This relates to another statement of Castellucci: "The real problem is not the statue, but the pedestal."

This, then, could be the 'meaning' of violence in the *Tragedia Endogonia*. A violent action must be isolated from its habitual frames of perception. Only in that way may we become conscious of the *specificity* of violence. We may get to know more about how we watch a violent scene, and why 'violence' as such means so little. We may learn that to watch violence is very often to cover up violence. We may learn that, in fact, we need to know every single detail of every single violent act if we are to get a clear view of this abstract concept.

³ "Proving one's mettle by enduring this scene turned out to be an immensely popular rite of passage; not since the shower murder in *Psycho* (1960) had a shock scene generated so much word-of-mouth publicity. The film prompted a good deal of repeat business - individuals challenging themselves to "handle" the scene, or bringing friends to watch their reactions." (David Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. London: Plexus, 1993. 301.)

But, as Castellucci himself would say, “that’s only a hypothesis of me”. It is important to know that, in almost every interview, Castellucci states that he himself is equally ignorant about the exact meaning of his images as everyone else. He has only a number of hypotheses about his work. We should therefore conclude with a remark of Castellucci about the *Tragedia Endogonidia* being a project that is essentially ‘on the run’, wandering or roaming, just as the Voyager spacecraft:

“The image that is closest to the spirit of the *Tragedia Endogonidia* has been reproduced on the programmes. It was engraved on a gold disk that is on board of the Voyager. This spacecraft was sent adrift in space. The project is adrift too. Great discoveries are only possible adrift. This image is concerned with the experience of *aporia*. You don’t know the end of the road.”