

Kubart, Tomáš

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Demythicalised Images by Romeo Castellucci

Tomáš Kubart

Michaela Mojžíšová and Dáša Čiripová. *Obrazy Romea Castellucciho*. Bratislava: Asociácia Corpus, 2023. 152 pp. ISBN 978-80-99904-19-5.

[reviews]

Last year, the Bratislava publishing house Asociácia Corpus published the first monograph in Slovak on the Italian director Romeo Castellucci, *Obrazy Romea Castellucciho* [Images of Romeo Castellucci], by the Theatre Institute researchers Michaela Mojžíšová and Dáša Čiripová. It is no coincidence that the portrait of the Italian director, whose work is dominated by the female principle, was written by women. Michaela Mojžíšová, an opera theorist and critic, brings together the various perspectives on Castellucci's work, generalising themes and placing his artistic agenda in the context of contemporary theatre. She builds on the introductory essay by theatre scholar Dáša Čiripová and adds her deepening of the problem of iconoclasm of representation and the connection between aesthetics and ethics. The work of the Italian 'Hieronymus Bosch of the theatre', scandalous and always at least disturbing, is thus finally comprehensively accessible to Slovak and Czech audiences. The book is divided into two extensive studies, Čiripová's 'Obrazové atlasy Romea Castellucciho' [Pictorial atlases of Romeo Castellucci] and Mojžíšová's 'Castellucciho hudobno-divadelné obrazy' [Castellucci's musical-theatre images], and includes a bibliography, an English-language biography and medallions of both authors.

'Je m'appelle Romeo Castellucci.' When I heard this line while watching the footage of Castellucci in a protective anti-dog-bite suit "being torn apart" by dogs outside the Palais des Papes d'Avignon on July 5, 2008, it changed my theatre life in the same way that Schlingensiefel's *Eine Kirche der Angst vor dem Fremden in mir* [A Church of Fear of the Stranger In Me] (2010) or Alessandro Serra's *Macbettu* (2017) did: all three turned my perception of theatre aesthetics and ethics on its head. At the entrance to the Palais des Papes in Avignon, tourists with audio guides and video cameras swarm around the empty stage as if it were an afternoon without a performance and are told what a monument it is – and that the time when the antipopes lived in Avignon and built the Palais des Papes is also the time when Dante wrote his Divine Comedy. According to Castellucci, Dante cannot really be staged, let alone illustrated. So what does he do instead? He puts himself in Dante's place, so to speak, and uses his resources to reinvent his path to the afterlife. Not a word of Dante is heard, not a 'selva oscura' (lit., a 'dark/shadowed wood'; figuratively, a period of life in which one has lost one's way, become disoriented) is seen.¹ Instead, the

1 'Midway through the journey of life
I found myself in a dark wood,
with the clear path ahead of me lost.'
(DANTE 2008: 24)

author appears and introduces himself: 'Je m'appelle Romeo Castellucci', protects himself with a stuffed costume and allows himself to be attacked as Dante by three very real barking dogs – panther, lion and she-wolf from the book.

There are very few works on the creation of the Italian director Romeo Castellucci in the Czech academic field: apart from the bachelor theses *Romeo Castellucci a jeho poetika* [Romeo Castellucci and His Poetics] by Michal Nagy from Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (2019) and *Tělo a tělesnost jako výrazový prostředek postdramatického divadla* [Corporeality as an Expressive Means of Postdramatic Theatre] by Dominika Šindelková from Palacký University (2011), we come across an interview with the director in *Divadelní noviny* (CASTELLUCCI 2017) conducted by Vladimír Hulec and Jana Soprová during the Divadelní křižovatky Theatre Festival, where Castellucci presented his production *Democracy in America*. Soňa Šimková wrote a study for the anthology *3xs* (2015), and a paper 'Romeo Castellucci po 13. Novembri' [Romeo Castellucci after November 13] for *Svět a divadlo* magazine (2016). It is as if we only perceive heavy images but cannot say anything concrete about them. It is as if the dreamlike images of his productions come to us as a dream itself: the feeling remains, but without a guide (a psychoanalyst, shaman or a researcher) we cannot interpret them.

Collaborations on the book, whose original intention was 'to analyse the work of Romeo Castellucci in terms of its dramaturgy, ideological intentions, poetics and specific stage devices' (140), began in 2014. The authors interrupted their work on Castellucci's images for a while, when Čiripová was busy with

motherliness, and the renewed collaboration included research at the Institute of Theatre and Film Research of SAV (Slovak Academy of Sciences), carried out under grants from VEGA and the Fund for the Support of the Arts. The grant under which the authors began their work on the subject dealt with the poetics of contemporary performing arts, with one of the subtopics being modern transformations and interpretations of myths and archetypes. This is also the theme of Romeo Castellucci's theatre work, as well as his musical theatre productions, which the authors commissioned two researchers from the Bratislava Theatre Institute to work on at the time. Mojžíšová, the initiator of the project, managed to recruit an expert on contemporary Italian theatre, Čiripová, who wrote an introductory study outlining the basic methodological approaches to researching Castellucci's work and presenting his work before he became primarily an opera director. Čiripová presents Castellucci's theatre productions in which the living human body was presented in a form deformed by age, physical handicap, obesity or anorexia. Čiripová leads the interpretation of Castellucci's aesthetic through the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, perceiving it in the context of Schechner and Living Theatre. A thoughtful explanation of his performance, in the context of world and domestic work, emphasising the neo-avant-garde nature of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio theatre platform, which acts as a loose group whose 'merging element is only me' (CASTELLUCCI 2017). Čiripová always describes the production with precision, making key topoi accessible to the reader in an analytical way and immediately applying methodological

approaches, often by Giorgio Agamben or Didi-Huberman. Čiripová provides one of the best and most detailed portraits of Castellucci to be found not only in Czech and Slovak, but also alongside Max Lyandvert and other experts on his work.

In the part about Castellucci's musical-theatre images that Mojžíšová explores, corporeality is a constantly present sign, instrumentalised on two dominant levels: 'In the first of these, it is in the position of an object, [...] in the second, the thematisation of human physicality – fragility, vulnerability, mortality – is the central idea of the director's conception' (111). She also traces the peculiarities of Castellucci's directorial signature, which is 'dark, slow, introverted, stylised in movement, interwoven with images that provoke the viewer's associativity' (84) and 'the actors were non-actors, most of whom had a direct relationship with the activity or phenomenon being performed' (92).

Mojžíšová gracefully guides the reader through Castellucci's most powerful stagings and images, the powerful stories of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, projected from the hospital room of Karin Anna Giselsbrecht, a young auspicious dancer in a waking coma, or *Resurrection*, which depicts the exhumation of bodies from a mass grave and, by a coincidence of absurdly tragic circumstances, premiered shortly after the discovery of the mass graves in Bucha, Ukraine, the work of the ruthlessness and cruelty of the Russian army. Mojžíšová's first thesis is that Castellucci's inclination towards opera was to be expected, since his works had long 'suppressed the position of the literary text' (31), and Castellucci himself tended to produce 'oratorios and mass opuses in which the poetic dimension of the musical narrative is to the fore' (31).

Mojžíšová deconstructs and explains Castellucci's demythicalising language based on three archetypes with which the director works: 'the pilgrim on the road to salvation (*Parsifal*), the Don Juan seducer (*Don Giovanni*) and the dark ruler with Mephistophelian features (*Blaubart*)' (34). Here I observe a striking similarity with the work of Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch (1938–2022), for whom *Parsifal*, and especially *Amfortas*' wound, is a central artistic topos.

What I appreciate about Mojžíšová's text is her great erudition in the field of musical theatre ('his stylised movements refer to rococo court opera' (46), or 'When their voices intertwine at their first meeting in the desert, Moses' part evokes the embodiment of an idea, Aaron's its articulation, Moses materialises the reflection, Aaron the deed. (60)), but above all in the visual arts, thanks to which she can make the scenes of Castellucci's productions more vivid for the reader (e.g. the comparison with Dan Flavin's installations (36)). Her extensive knowledge of musical theatre allows her to provide a remarkable contextual interpretation of Castellucci's interpretation of *Parsifal* ('In the recent staging tradition of this Wagnerian work, we can find several conceptions whose creators do not identify with the characterisation of Kundry as a vicious seductress; on the contrary, they have emphasised her human side.' (39)) According to Mojžíšová, Castellucci's opera stagings do not follow the path of threatening first-rate indignation, as in *Sul concetto di volto nel figlio di Dio* [The Concept of the Face Looking at the Son of God], but 'in his music-theatrical work [...] we can hardly find a more iconoclastic production than *Parsifal*'. (42) She cleverly and plausibly interprets: 'Don

Giovanni sprayed one of the fruits with gold paint and placed it, like an apple of discord, between the jealous, resentful Masset and Zerlina' (47), and confidently proves his opening thesis of Castellucci as a feminist: 'The aria, which usually has a meltingly comic character, was thus interpreted by Castellucci from the point of view of an abused woman, who refused to find it funny' (48). In fact, Castellucci surrounds himself with female co-workers, and his directorial-dramaturgical interpretation is dominated by a female perspective, as I mentioned in the introduction of this review. This is evidenced not only by the example given of his take on Parsifal, but also by his response in an interview with Iante Gaia *Roach for Art & Culture Today*: 'I believe the main reason is that women are artists by nature, they don't need to create art, their bodies hold the power to create, so they are less detached from things' (CASTELLUCCI 2013).

His theatre work is strongly influenced by the visual arts, through which he tries to 'address both hemispheres of the brain' (121). It is as if Castellucci is deliberately going back before Raphael – indeed, the name of the (open) theatre association La Società Raffaello Sanzio (1981), founded by him and his sister Claudia, refers to this – and becoming a theatrical pre-raphaelite of the 21st century. Luca Signorelli and Mark Rothko, myths and legends, and Antonin Artaud's delirious echoes of reality are mixed in Castellucci's theatre and opera productions. A powerful visual frenzy bursts forth, bringing remarkable light and hope through darkness and resistance. In an interview with Soprová and Hulec from November 2017, Castellucci says that Raphael, after whom he named his theatre company, 'was a painter who perfect-

ed Renaissance beauty. There is nothing more perfect in form than the paintings of Raphael. But behind the beauty, the perfect beauty, you can smell his illness. He is, in fact, the first ill painter in history. With him, everything leads to mannerism. But he was the first. You can feel the fever behind his beauty. That's what we were and are after' (CASTELLUCCI 2017). In their interpretation, Čiripová and Mojžíšová go in this direction: towards the illness behind the beauty.

Like Hermann Nitsch, whose combination of Artaud and pagan myths gave rise to a complex theatrical form of orgies and mysteries (*Orgien-Mysterien-Theater*), Castellucci acquires an intimate relationship with the night, which is 'maternal without having to be a mother' (128). Moreover, both creators consciously attempt to 'de-mythologise' (*Entmythologisierung*) (NITSCH 2009: 136–139) and deconstruct myths, and through deconstruction return them to the human being. To make the experience of the divine accessible to everyone, and at the same time to return to the theatre its coveted power: catharsis.

And because catharsis is not achieved by linguistic and textual means, but by corporeal and material means, it often moves in the realm of scandal. While Nitsch earned criticism for his *Valküre* at Bayreuth in 2021, Castellucci risked the same with his non-canonical take on *The Magic Flute* (2018). And while Nitsch's scandal provokes great misunderstanding among contemporaries, Castellucci sees scandal and shock as 'When someone walking down the street hits a stone, an obstacle, and is thrown off balance for a moment, as something that forces the spectator to re-route, like an open door that allows you to enter another space' (141).

The publication is extremely useful in terms of the methodology it brings to Czech and Slovak Theatre Studies and offers an implementation of the methodological framework of the aesthetics of shock. The performance *Sul concetto di volto nel figlio di Dio* caused a scandal at the Hebbel am Ufer theatre in Berlin in 2012. The performance showed an old man being cared for by his son. The old man is incontinent, soiling himself and his home, and the once little man cares for his father, who becomes a child again, in front of a large painting of Christ by Antonello da Messina. The Berlin audience was ‘sometimes shocked’ (SCHAPER 2012) by the smell of excrement and the ‘plot’ but appreciated the play. The production had already provoked fierce debate and protests, some of them militant, by conservative Catholic groups in various Italian cities. Performances in Paris could only take place under police protection. German Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki spoke of blasphemy – without having seen the play. The press defended the performance: ‘In the past, theatre needed scandal. Here the church wants to cause it. To protect something that has slipped away from them – the souls and feelings of their contemporaries’ (SCHAPER 2012).

In the reading list I was very surprised by the Russian author Nikolai Berdyaev, whose *The Soul of Russia* is still very relevant today, and his *The Truth of Orthodoxy* also makes sense of Castellucci’s interpretation (of his *Last Judgement*, since according to Berdyaev, Origen’s theology is closer to Orthodoxy, pp. 85–86).

While neither Mojžíšová nor Čiripová work with the more familiar methodolog-

ical approach of the aesthetics of shock in the theatre of Paul Ardenne and Josette Féral, they bring a focused interpretation that extends into the realm of theology to analyse Castellucci’s imaginative and associative directorial style. Moreover, Čiripová dispenses with Ardenne when she describes, almost in his vocabulary, what happens to us as viewers when we watch Castellucci’s productions: ‘Rational detachment contrasts with emotional fusion [...]’ (28), because Castellucci is so creative and yet intuitive that a rational analysis of his work is almost impossible. As Castellucci himself said in an interview with Soprová and Hulec: ‘[...] art is about reaching the viewer’ (CASTELLUCCI 2017). Mojžíšová and Čiripová allow us to understand this intervention, at least in part. For Castellucci’s maxim that ‘the titles of the works [are] portals that open into the image’ (106) also applies here.

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