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« The question(s) of representation »

### **Showing, representing, aestheticizing human cruelty. On a political function in the theatre that requires great delicacy**

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#### **Abstract**

It is through self-study that mankind learns to accept his own cruelty, to recognise its value and fear it. Theatre, by representing cruelty, educates the *thumos*, the source of civic courage. By not dissociating the empirical and historical reserves of the real from the show, is contemporary theatre creating an audience capable of representing this cruelty to themselves, or is it creating an impassive audience, scorched by excess? Our analysis will present three plays: *Eldorado dit le policier* (2011), *Salle d'attente* (2012) and *Les Damnés* (2016). The crucial issue at stake in all three cases is the possible connection point between the actor's sensible body and that of the audience members. However, this point is different for each actor as it is for each spectator. Without polyphony, the author doubts that it is possible for everyone to navigate a path in order to feel, fall, perhaps get back up, laugh, think

and try to understand what he or she has to do with cruelty, or his or her cruelty.

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### Full text (PDF file)

There are many plays that show the cruelty of our world, with cruelty, but do they represent it? The question is valid if we are to understand that it is dangerous to show without representing, to see without representing what we see, in a representation vacuum. Indeed, according to Patrice Loraux,<sup>1</sup> the “petrification of affects,” this capacity to no longer feel, this anaesthesia comes from the fact that we no longer represent what we see or what we are doing. “Are you representing what you did to yourself? Or what your elders did, watched or underwent?” he asks. We could add: or that which our government, parliamentarians make our civil servants in the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry for Immigration or police stations do, that our taxes pay for? What our governments do to those who are psychotic, to prostitutes, to the poor, to drug addicts, to all of the sacred bodies of the neoliberal modern projects. Do we represent it to ourselves? “It” hurts us to represent it to ourselves.

However, the theatre has been representing cruelty for a long time, and could play a crucial role in this issue. By not dissociating plays from the empirical and historical reserves of the reality of the situations shown, contemporary theatre purports to create an audience that is capable of representing this cruelty, an audience capable of moral and political judgement on what is happening to us thanks to a faculty to judge<sup>2</sup> that is the preserve of the arts. This faculty links reason and emotion in a subjectification process evident in certain emotional reactions: indignation, sadness, anger, joy. So, something inconceivable<sup>3</sup> is seen, heard, then subjectivated and that is how theatre teaches what the Greeks called *thumos*, a vital part of the psyche taking in passion, desire, free will and that can make the individual sink into the deathly shadows of anger or make them feel nothing but

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1 Patrice Loraux, “Les disparus,” in Jean-Luc Nancy (ed.), “L’art et la mémoire des camps. Représenter, exterminer. Rencontre à la maison d’Izieu,” *Le Genre humain*, no. 36, 2001, p. 41-59.

2 Emmanuel Kant, *Le Conflit des facultés* [1798], Paris, Payot, 2015.

3 Adorno claims that after Auschwitz, philosophy must be a philosophy which considers that thought is only really thought when it is dealing with what is not thought, meaning, something other, especially when it is faced with the radical experiment of what is not thought but which is the suffering of the living. Philosophy must then no longer be closed off and must open up to a non-thought, that which cannot be reduced to a concept. He refers to this as negative dialectic. There is the idea that a part of experience cannot be reduced to a concept. There is such a thing as the inconceivable that happens through a sensible strike. The theatre is the place of this fundamental reception of a primary pathos, the place where we can expose ourselves to the inconceivable, where we are in the strike zone.

enthusiasm for life and friendship. However, only education can make *thumos* a source of civic courage, the actual function expected by the theatre, by the Athenians of the 5th century but also by Shakespeare's audiences in the 16th century. Shakespeare himself took his lead from the Montaigne essay *On cruelty*.

It is through study that man learns to deal with his own cruelty, to recognise its value and to fear it. The precept is less a question of fleeing one's own vices than of learning to know them, and how to find the right place for them. Humanity's duty thus becomes a way of existing in the world, man knows that his acts always have consequences that go beyond him but for which he is responsible. As his dignity is tied up with something he cannot control and that he is constantly searching to understand in his theatre, Shakespeare shows awareness of a dignity that is not the absence of cruelty but its always fragile settings. Hamlet's "I must be cruel, only to be kind"<sup>4</sup> testifies to the cruelty inherent in human practices, but also the need, at times, to be fierce in one's defence of dignified humanity.<sup>5</sup> In this, he echoes Montaigne, "Nature, à ce creins-je, elle-mesme attache à l'homme quelque instinct à l'inhumanité."<sup>6</sup>

The cruelty of the world hurts. And if we don't want to suffer or sympathize, we must be hard, impassive. However, having one's sensibility outraged by cruelty can make one impassive. We end up with the intense sensation that we can no longer feel, that we can't feel. For Patrice Loraux, an open wound is not serious if it hurts, but impassiveness can lead to worse. It prevents the circulation of affects and stops us from reflecting on situations of cruelty. It produces compact, even totalitarian societies. If theatrical or film representation doubles down on this direct violence rather than solving it, it produces an impassive audience in the very place where it purports to make an audience critical and sensitive to the things in everyday life they tend to bury, forget or neglect. The spectators who watch or turn away, will perhaps be taken past pain and will feel that they can no longer feel. "Beyond pain" is how Patrice Loraux puts it, that moment when, to defend oneself, one stops feeling altogether. If the absence of regulation of representation of cruelty produces this impassivity or this "beyond pain," then certain plays participate in this desensitization, manufacturing the conditions for a possible submission to a devastating political order rather than being a politically emancipatory act, or producing a political conscience of cruelty.

This is the question I will attempt to cover in this article: do shows that depict human cruelty educate the *thumos* or do they render their audiences impassive?

To support my arguments, I will analyse three recent plays. *Eldorado dit le policier*, by Vincent Rafis, Denis Lachaud, Laurent Larivierre (CDN d'Orléans and théâtre Paris Villette, 2011) for which I acted as scientific consultant first of all, and then as a reflective figure on stage; *Salle d'attente*, written by Lars Norén and directed by Kristian Lupa (théâtre de la Colline 2012); *Les Damnés*, directed by Ivo Van Hove (2016). The first play examines the condition of an illegal immigrant, from his decision to leave his home, to his arrival and settling in France, and the

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4 Traduit par "Ce qu'il faut être cruel rien que pour être humain," acte IV scène 3, in Harold Jenkins (ed.), *Shakespeare, Hamlet*, London, Methuen, 1981, p. 330.

5 Here, I use and discuss the beautiful writing of Jean-François Chappuit, "I must be cruel only to be kind. Le concept de dignité humaine chez Montaigne et chez Shakespeare," in *Actes du congrès de la Société française Shakespeare*, no. 21, "Shakespeare et Montaigne: vers un nouvel humanisme," Jean-Marie MAGUIN et Pierre KAPITANIAK (eds.), 2004, p. 53-78.

6 Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, éd. Pierre Villey, préface V.-L. Saulnier, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France (PUF), "Quadrige," 1988, p. 433.

positions of those who help him or those who refuse to help. The second play deals with the conditions of those on society's margins. The third shows the alliance between the capitalist industry and the political sphere in favour of extreme nationalism, Nazism, while examining the role of perverted affects rather than ideology in this alliance, and finally, in my opinion, submission to Nazi violence and a comparison to present day events.

The three plays have much in common yet different treatments. I will get back to each of these points, by first of all, questioning the issue of "depicting cruelty," through the empirical reserves of reality taken from the world. I will then describe what I refer to as "a semblance of the real despite everything," that is to say, representation as it is. Finally, I will conduct an in-depth examination on the place given to the audience or how the audience is called upon in order to outline the possible or impossible education of *thumos* proposed in the three plays, all of which fall into the category of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty –, the theatre and its life double as such, but with a tension-filled, decided and decisive direction.

## Depicting cruelty that is taken from the real

### Research methods based on those of social sciences

All three plays are based on real enquiries or historical documentation. In *Eldorado*, the three main researchers travelled to Malta to see for themselves what a holding camp at the doors of Europe is like. With this upsetting and memorable experience in mind, they then approached the preparation and writing process.

In *Salle d'attente*, a title chosen by Kristian Lupa, the director adapted Lars Norén's text *Personkrets 3:1*, (category 3.1.) from the Swedish. The author, when doing research for the play, took to the streets to listen to those the Stockholm city council designates with these numbers: the marginals. The critics referred to it as sociological theatre. Lars Norén's research led him to reproduce a specific language, a language that is not the norm, nor that of a sociological survey, but one that welcomes the otherness of these drug addicts, psychotics, alcoholics, homeless people. The dialogue is in the absolute present, in the troubled immediacy of their survival, that which is experienced every moment by those who frequent cement-filled Sergelstorg square. This world is often seen as a ghetto, and is shown here as an ethnographic elsewhere, so far yet so close.

In *Les Damnés*, even though the play is based on Visconti's film, photographic and sound archives of the fire in the Reichstag, auto-da-fés in the Berlin night, from the concentration camp in Dachau where the German communists and all government opponents were interned from 1933, are used to accompany the play. We are constantly informed that the story of a period of History is being told in/by this fiction about the Von Essenbeck family. The story of the rise of Nazism and Hitler, and the parallel rise of Germany's industrial power – the Essenbecks in fact stand for the Krupp family.

### Debiting from the actor's life

But the question of the real is not limited to this empirical, sociological and historical reserve. What is asked of the actors splits it open. The preparatory rehearsals provided a large part of the text of *Eldorado* based on the actor's improvisations after a period of rehashing and evoking real-life situations, reflection on the issues of cruelty at the table-read, sometimes with the collaboration of the choreographer, Nathalie Ageorges, or a scientific consultant

they met at a seminar at EHESS, namely myself, Sophie Wahnich. On the stage, the work developed from ideas that anyone involved was free to propose, for example, “controlling cruelty.” The intellectual, mental, physical and bodily universes of the actors and those working with them provided the material for what was then turned into a play. The writing process was collective and polyphonic, the director teased out the elements and slowly began to structure the piece.

Some actors took the violence of the theme well during this process, others felt the need to break the tension with laughter, interrupting, finding escape hatches or creating distance. The real was also the level of how much real they could take as they needed to go inside themselves and take what these stories of dashed hopes, extortion, rape, drowning, losing the will to live, red tape nightmares, illness, language problems, loneliness, revolt and resignation, inflicted on them each day as individuals and as a group. Feeding off the real does not happen in a homogenous way as one must feed off the most difficult to reach zones of the self, and some don’t want to make that journey. In order to bring out subconscious elements and impulses, the actors worked with a choreographer, again picking up things that happen when one least expects them.

In *Salle d’attente*, Krystian Lupa says he only really heard the text for the first time at the first table read with the young actors. Why is that? Because this type of reading doesn’t take place until the actor has found what Krystian Lupa calls their inner voice, imagining what their character is feeling beyond what is actually being said by the character on stage. The inner voice is how the actor “debits” from his or her own sensibility, imagination, the unwritten part of the character that is woven by the writer, but also by the actor who gives it a specific colour linked to his or her own life, memories, worries, encounters, hopes, even anxieties or dreams. Here again, it is a question of “debiting” from the actor’s life what can add consistency to a character. Incarnation also occurs in this fusion of self with the character having “dilated” the parts of the character that resonate with the actor by association. As such, the play, for Lupa, revolves less around the text and more around these characters once they are “dilated” by the actors. The character takes precedence over the story and the text. In fact, Lupa, in order to legitimise his way of adapting the text, states clearly that it isn’t Shakespeare. The text is perhaps a sort of canvas, he says, not a text to be respected down to the letter. Then the canvas is brought to life, and that is when the theatre begins. Lupa mentions a mental patient in “L’Homme sans qualité” by Robert Musil, who says that in order to understand a murderer you must act with him. He recognises that this would involve condemning an actor to a life of madness in order to fully understand madness. But, by affirming that “an artist is a crazy person who wants to understand other crazy people,” we realise that, in fact, that is what he expects from an actor: that they take this cruel risk, simply to be a good actor. Lupa wants to remove distance, for himself and others. Everything must be felt from within. Lupa was fascinated by the fascination the young actors have for the text. It was what he expected: “this group of young people, boys and girls, took on the process of identifying with the characters of the play in an amazing way and I was expecting no less. We don’t know why, in a mysterious way this zone brings a symbolic flow to our imaginations. We could even say that we feel like falling with these people, just as we sometimes dive into horrific dreams. [...] When you’re twenty years old and fear death in an ecstatic way.” We could say that Lupa’s material comes more from young people than the text that he says is basically just “rough accounts.” So, the actor himself is the place where the connection occurs, a concept perfectly explained by Vincent Ravis about

Sarah Kane's work: "an encounter where an action whose truth is unreachable meets another truth, the intimate, secret truth of the actor – an entire jungle of affects, impulses, instincts. In this way, the connection also happens at the place where fiction and reality – irreconcilable between the drama presented and the actor present – stumble into one another. The remains of this stumble are what is left of the actor after he has given himself entirely to the execution of fiction and, measuring up to its unsurpassable, is almost entirely consumed." But does the act of consumption and the remains produce a Socratic *savoir-faire* for the actor? The actor would then be faced with the un-lived part of his or her experience, meaning faced with a pure present that cannot make sense as "it" goes beyond the actor. We could say that the work of the actor produces knowledge of non-knowledge and its place; it is taken into account, or not by the subject.

The work of the actors from the Comédie Française on *Les Damnés* is not the same process as on-stage "debiting" from the actors. Nevertheless, they too can be consumed by the art of suffering, perverting or dying that is demanded of them. However, *Les Damnés* in its use of filmed images, shares one part of "debiting" with the other plays. As in all three cases, a video image punctuates or accompanies the actor's work on the stage, proposing another connection to the real of bodies and faces, tears, shouts, rictus, perverted smiles. This video/film art that accompanies the actor's work is the thinking of the director or video artist "debited" from the bodies of the actors, bodies that obey the decisions that the director makes but manifestly unknown to everyone, it is also their own truth. When Vincent Rafis reflects on the work of an actor on a piece of writing by Sarah Kane, he expresses beautifully what is going on in the actor's reality when faced with a certain cruelty of hidden action recreated by the images, the shouts of people put to death now shut up in coffins. These deaths continue in an almost identical fashion and accompany the vertiginous ascension of Martin Essenbeck. Here, the actor is no longer guaranteed by the presence of the audience, as he is removed from this connection in the coffin. The actor cannot see, he acts as though he is encountering his own death. His shouts express the terror of this encounter: "because what he depicts each evening is no longer doubt (however bottomless) about himself, but the yielding of that very doubt under the certainty of death."<sup>7</sup>

Cruelty makes blood run and kills. Cruelty turned against oneself is suicide. What is asked of an actor in this theatre of cruelty is, to face up to suicide, to self-harm. This is true for Lupa's drug addicts and for Ivo Van Hove's executed characters in the confinement of the coffin.

In *Les Damnés*, the audience is also a part of what the director intends to take from the reality of the theatre situation, the connection of a piece with its public. The audience is already on the screen without having been asked, and is thus included in the show in the way Walter Benjamin<sup>8</sup> denounced the use of crowd scenes as Nazi propaganda. The audience can see themselves, a portion of reality, impassively giving in to the intolerable that is happening right in front of them.

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7 Vincent Rafis, *P.S / S.R, essai sur Sarah Kane*, Dijon, Les Presses du réel, « Nouvelles Scènes », avril 2012, p. 90.

8 "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art" (Walter Benjamin, "L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique," in *Œuvres III* [1939], translated from the German by Maurice de Gandillac, Rainer Rochlitz, and Pierre Rusch, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 113).

## A semblance of the real, despite everything, what the audience sees and hears

However, it is indeed this debit from the real that creates the dramatic, even tragic tension, in these plays. However strenuously the actor is required to go to a place that is real and to supply a little human flesh to the show, he remains an actor, and a little fake blood is nevertheless needed to represent the night of the long knives. Artifice, however naturalistic, reminds us that it is indeed artifice. However, the crucial question is whether or not this semblance leads the audience to stick to the real or if, on the contrary, the depiction on stage gives the audience the means with which to choose its place, meaning to change it and thus, perhaps, manage to question it.

### Conflict of images, conflicts of position, conflicts of listening

As we already pointed out, these three plays work with the stage and a screen where previously shot videos are projected, or images that the camera records and choose on stage. This dual, evanescent, incarnated presence, creates confusion. As the two art forms that for so long were in opposition, now must face everything.

Walter Benjamin quoted Pirandello “The film actor, [...] feels as if in exile – exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort, he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence.”<sup>9</sup> But it is indeed the mute images with accompanying music that are shown onstage during *Les Damnés* that are shown to us with the addition of specificity. In particular, the shouts without shouts of the executed shut up in coffins. But the image also serves to document the real, the historical and material real of what’s happening onstage, with objects and bodies that become dreamlike. This, the alternating between the true and the factice produces a hugely real effect, or a vast dreamlike effect that Benjamin mentioned in terms of an optical unconscious: “The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.”<sup>10</sup> We could, when re-reading these lines, consider that the camera work in *Les Damnés* is intended to illustrate and activate this revealed unconscious. It is indeed interesting to remember that the dishes that are tipped over at the end of Joachim’s birthday are metal, that they don’t break, and that the reflections accompany an imminent death. Between the flesh and blood characters, the impulse-ridden unconscious, on the screen, the optical unconscious. When there are faces on the screen, they bang off

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9 Walter Benjamin, “L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproductibilité technique,” in *Œuvres III* [1939], translated from the German by Maurice de Gandillac, Rainer Rochlitz, and Pierre Rusch, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 89.

10 Walter Benjamin, “L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproductibilité technique,” in *Œuvres III* [1939], translated from the German by Maurice de Gandillac, Rainer Rochlitz, and Pierre Rusch, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 103.

one another. But in any case, the audience witnesses an unveiling ceremony. The ceremony is hugely aestheticized in the representation of the night of the long knives. On stage, the blood spurts out but on the screen the pale, lying bodies beside the SS in their dark, stiff uniforms form an almost floral rosacea on the fiery, orange ground. Here, there is nothing to understand, except the killing. Everything is done to allow the audience to flee into aesthetic contemplation rather than having to face the violence between SS and SA head on. The director avoids shock without giving up on signifying that this event is a turning point in the history of Nazism. Finally, it is yet again the image that produces the effect of confusion between dream and reality when Martin takes a machine gun and fires randomly into the audience as if he is overwhelmed, yet again, encountering the self in an act of cruelty. But is this encounter that of the audience with itself? Is it the audience encountering its own suicide?

The treatment of images in *Salle d'attente* does not have this dreamlike quality. The dream aspect is in the language, the image comes either to back up the meaning – as in the statement in the pre-taped segment: “There is infinite hope, only not for us” –, or to stretch time, suspend it, as with the lost, questioning gaze of the young psychotic. The incarnated image and the disincarnated image superimpose on one another, to manufacture the lengthened time of the wait in the waiting room. It doesn't cut or rhythm anything, it can be upsetting, but the time remains in the pure present, there is no other dramatic intensity. Of course, “it” all happens on stage, and nothing happens, not story, just bits of often sordid situations that provoke worry, disgust, fear, pity. As such, *Salle d'attente* absorbs the audience in its discontinuous yet very uninterrupted rhythm. The discontinuity comes from the way the characters have no history, just experiences, and uninterrupted because nothing comes to break the repetitive nature of what we see on the stage. The audience must also agree to be taken up in this urge to fall, otherwise it remains separated from those who constitute a danger of “overdosing” as Sarah Kane said. An overdose is always waiting to happen for the young people who are injecting their collapsing veins. If the audience doesn't want to join the actors in this borderline experience, they can put up defences that will make them impassive and patient faced with that which can only hurt them, or they can leave the theatre. The choices are limited, and don't seem to provide options for more knowledge. Does sharing the abyss from the comfort of a soft Parisian seat really constitute sharing? Lars Norén claimed his aim was to “bring the audience to the point where it has no more defences; so, we can really touch them, really make contact, hit them.<sup>11</sup>” So, we are back to the strike of the inconceivable, but can it really be done with the audience's obliviousness as referred to by the journalist Armelle Hélot: “The relationship to time is spellbinding. We move into this waiting, this oblivion with them (the characters). We go to the other side. That is the real revelation of Krystian Lupa's theatre.<sup>12</sup>” So, what has been forgotten then? The social gap? That is the effect Lupa is going for, sticking to the real. According to him, “Diagnosing reality with a certain feeling of superiority is a leftover from 20th century rationalism, and in our current spiritual world, that can only lead to failure. If today's world is sick it is precisely because people who are trying to run it are watching reality from the outside.<sup>13</sup>” So, the audience is supposed to commune from the inside, in fear, in pity. But pity is all the same, an emotion that overlooks

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11 Programme for the Théâtre de la Colline, 2012.

12 *Le Figaro*, 29 June 2011.

13 Actes sud Papiers, CNSAD, 2004, p. 43.

and to be on the side of compassion we need less separation between the audience and the stage. What remains is the experience of the fall, in this semblance of theatre.

While the reiteration through the image of what is happening on stage exists in *Eldorado dit le policier*, in act III, the work shown aims more to disassociate the image, the voice and the bodies that are physically present. The play begins in the darkness of a cinema, but is it darkness or gloom, our own gloom? Whatever the case, for thirty long minutes, we only get fleeting flashes of reassuring light. And, is it really reassuring? We are visited by ghosts singing a lament, but we are separated from their voices by the veil of night but even when the light comes to soften the scene, by a wall that separates us from the actors of whom we can only see shadows, so this visit is not at all reassuring.

The body is thus reduced to a voice. Voices like gestures, voices like sensible presences of a dreadful libretto. Three voices. Two are here, and perform the cruelty of a lover's break-up. The other is over there, and tells of Elisabeth's cruel and even mortally dangerous crossing, as she left her country behind and perhaps left herself behind too. The couple break the silence with their banalities. But Elisabeth's voice superimposes itself over theirs like a baroque response where each musician listens and waits for the other. The two visions of the world are not as disjointed as all that. They veil one another in snippets, blurring or distinct choices. As the audience – listener can choose to hear nothing but the music of everyday gentleness, that is broken here, or hear the bitterness of a narrative where the narrator asks, "But why do I have to tell you that?" They can listen or refuse to hear, refuse to be plunged into it. "Why should I have to hear this?" But the veils are there so that the audience can accept the alteration generated by the relation between comfort and shock, and the audience is enveloped in the nocturnal veil. Shock doesn't take over and turn the audience completely away from a reality that radically alters its way of being human.

When the wall opens, the lamentation changes form. It comments ironically on the renouncement of love and humanity accepted by the Versailles people in their compromise with a life transformed into a programme to be managed. In bright light, they make us laugh and yet are dreadful. When faced with the vast emptiness of a society that is protecting itself, faced with the platitudes of those who give the wall consistence: laughter is formalised in a vaudeville atmosphere. Some would like to make the vaudeville laughter disappear under the sofa of the very history of theatre. But no, in the great dislocation of forms, it occupies the place of inlier protected by a hard surface, whether in private or public theatres. Behind the wall, there is yet another wall, even if the veil now comes from laughter that swings from exasperation to derision. The chic formalism of a devastating unconscious. There is no mystery other than this brutality where one wall opens on to yet another wall. When the character from over there comes on to the scene, the nightmare begins again, as everyone knows, this phantasmagoria of the foreigner is mired in social distance and in our capacity to let them co-exist in the greatest indignity.

The third part superimposes lament and laughter. Desperate monologues, claire-obscur, the joy of doing what's right never exempt from cruelty and ridicule, the joy of a feeling of powerlessness, the joy of the pain of never-ending repetition, the joy of also depicting humiliation where compassion has become impossible, as we would love just if "it" would end and if "it" would keep going. The bodies here are alive, but grappling with a significant negativity. When the wall falls, the audience knows that we have no idea how to get out.

Here again, time is dilated. A historical rear-view mirror can't save anything, it can just bring flashes of light, knowledge and understanding. Yes, man is gifted for cruelty and if he refuses to acknowledge it, he cannot control it and loses his humanity, sensibility, tenderness. Here, there, anywhere: we must face the truth of this danger, in anger or fascination, but also in dislocation. The writing of *Eldorado dit le policier* owns this dislocation/re-composition of all things, like an art of darkness that is the only way to foil any complicity, the only way to avoid the illusion that it would be easy to sort this out simply by becoming angry. The closing choreography is a plunge into the subconscious. That's exactly where we must look, and it's at times unbearable.

## Passive and impassive audiences

In *Salle d'attente*, the language is influenced by the unconscious, more than the images. It alone can operate to make known what ordinarily escapes the audience, a decentred language, Lupa tells us, far from any interiorised politeness. But this language is itself characterised by its way of sticking to the real. The project is then a project, not of critical unveiling, but of ecstatic acquiescence. For Lupa, "this zone gives us something universal that concerns all of us [...]. Their fall can tell us something that belongs to each of us. [...] Man begins his decline from the moment he leaves school. Our utopia of development is a sort of lie."<sup>14</sup> Lupa says he is searching for the symptoms of our era's moral crisis. But his theatre is itself a symptom and *in fine* does not really propose a true symbolic space of existence that would allow us to remake what we share, other than through a fall, and to reflect on our place in this world in crisis. By sticking to the real, Lupa is close to an admission without political consequences, as the hidden part only reveals itself to seal the story like the end of the narrative, otherwise it is a fall that cannot be stopped, that is forever suspended, a fall that invades the entire world. It is a theatre of statement rather than of representation, and the audience does not represent the cruelty it sees, it enjoys it.

In *Les Damnés*, the intentional or unintentional direction (Ivo Van Hove does not discuss his work) shows how an impassive audience, when it sees without seeing, or by refusing to see and know, by refusing the Socratic exercise, are in fact actors in the disaster that befalls them. But is it possible to understand if we remain impassive? As all audiences seem impassive: those who are actors and become spectators on the stage watching the executions, those who become actors on the screen, those who are actors of the encounter produced by the theatrical event. During the representation I saw, not only did no one get up to say they refused the assigned place of consenting and powerless spectator, but the play received a standing ovation at the end. Obviously, some seemed more like spectators rather than being invested in the collective moment, but again we witnessed a *mise en abyme*: how does one extract oneself from a collective movement, how does one refuse consent? I feel that the success of the show lies in this element. Each spectator, knowing he has felt something here that relieves him elsewhere, can do nothing about it whatever they think, despite their vague attempts to resist. On the stage in fact, those who resist die, and in the theatre, the terror afflicts everyone indifferently, whether they want to resist or not.

Does this knowledge make us braver? Doubtless, at least, more aware. As the spectator was able to circulate, and the director managed to avoid feelings of both

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<sup>14</sup> Programme for the théâtre de la Colline, 2012.

shock and fascination. But while the alarm was indeed raised, consent to a story that escapes us seems to invalidate the idea that knowledge about the history of the world helps to avoid repeating the worst. The play is a Cassandra. Can knowledge taken from the real then powerfully aestheticized politicise art? How can we unravel aesthetic pleasure and political experience? The representation project seems to languish in this maze.

The audience do not always support *Eldorado dit le policier*. They leave angry, slamming the door, saying enough is enough, often at the point where there is a break where they can pull themselves together and think, at the point of an overly brutal change in tone, or at the point where they are plunged yet again into the shadows of the unconscious, the nightmarish dream. When we talk to them they say it's too long, too disjointed, all the different types of theatre in one show; that they feel like they were being held hostage. But they were never hostages as there is zero shock here, just choices to be made, pauses for laughter, breathers offered with no illusion, without derision and without taking it seriously, or with the theory that is the other side of impulse, a fragile other side. The second and third acts are very funny, regardless of what anyone says. We realise that it is not easy to listen to Elisabeth's story, as while Western love is cruel, it interests us more than the political cruelty that is tearing Elisabeth apart. In *Eldorado*, the cruelty is both said and represented, and the actors' bodies do not presume the identification, more the interpretation, not of the characters but of the situations. Each actor changes places and roles in each act, and in act 3 even every short scene. The body is present, but at a point where the actor can place it to get to the connection point or to the boiling point. As this point is different for each actor and each spectator, and this polyphonic play gives everyone the possibility to clear a path to feel, fall, perhaps get up, laugh, think, and try to understand what regaining dignity really means. So, there are real stories that end badly, allegories, monotonous chants, heart-rending monologues and funny comments, flashes of life and joy. Because if one has to accept to be in suffering as an experience, one must also accept joy, and recognise the irreducibility of the experience of desire, love, even love of life. This would mean bringing faith in the impossible back down to earth as a rupture, a tear, and an affirmation that another world is possible. It is this faith in the impossible that can maintain hope for the chance to orient toward a future that is not a repetition of the past, a new future, another future. A future where we will be represented.

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