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Boundaries In Theatrical Representations of Violence

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the role of symbolic violence in theater as a catalyst for fostering civic consciousness and a nuanced understanding of the human condition. By examining the dramaturgical, social, and aesthetic dimensions, the study explores how theatrical productions, through the metaphorical depiction of violence, transmute intense emotional experiences into vehicles for societal introspection and education. The analysis emphasizes the transition from overt physical aggression to more subtle forms of symbolic violence, and examines the implications of this shift for both the audience and the broader cultural discourse.

KEYWORDS: Symbolic Violence, Theater and Society, Civic Consciousness, Emotional Catharsis, Pedagogical Theater, Power Structures

The study highlights the shift from physical to symbolic violence, as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu, and considers the impact of this transformation on the spectator's perception. It further discusses how theater addresses and subverts mechanisms of domination through both comedic and tragic forms, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of cruelty and its representation.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Lacan, the paper argues that theater not only reflects but also critiques the underlying power structures and social norms that perpetuate violence. By engaging with the emotional and intellectual capacities of the audience, theater transforms fear into cathartic enjoyment and pedagogical insight, ultimately contributing to a more informed and empathetic public discourse.

The analysis draws on theoretical perspectives from Lacan, Barthes, and other scholars to illustrate how theater serves as a cognitive and aesthetic lens, providing a means for viewers to confront and reframe their understanding of violence and justice. Finally, it underscores the importance of accurate linguistic representation in addressing the world's miseries, reflecting Albert Camus' vision that to name things accurately is to enact justice.

The present study questions the textual and scenic figurations and limits, oblique and frontal, of violence. It raises the question of violent excess in art and its effects on receptive sensibilities. Is it possible to stage violence without offending the spectators, or should we shock their conscience to reveal them to themselves and the world? What connections exist between violence, language, and desire? How does the aestheticization of cruelty transform fear into cathartic enjoyment and educational knowledge?

The representation of violence is a dramaturgy of limits and possibilities. It is subversive in that it questions the stakes of artistic creation, upsetting the boundaries between what is theatricalized and what can be theatricalized, and upsetting the rhythm of reception. The staging of violence has gained visibility on the media scene, where the border between the natural and the artificial, the real and the virtual, is tenuous.

This leads us to question the complexity of the various semiotic and discursive devices used by playwrights to bring violence to the stage and construct a posture of denunciation and connivance with the spectator, such as strategies of equivocation and games of veiling and unveiling. The dialectical relationship between the scopic and the speculative, which every staging is capable of inducing, also needs to be clarified.

Tensions are at the heart of dramatic action. Analysis of an eclectic corpus of plays by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Anton Chekhov, Fernando Arrabal, Luigi Pirandello, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg leads us to believe that, when it comes to the fundamental antagonisms that underpin human relationships, there is a repetitive pattern that suggests violence as a symptom of a lack of symbolization, of an impossibility of enunciating unconscious psychic representations.

The unspeakable generates inner chaos when it fails in its attempt to clarify. Entangled in the clutches of these silent words that kill, the characters descend into unheard-of violence. At the margins of society, yet at the heart of the plot, they vacillate between empty and full speech, never quite able to express their intentions.

Boundaries In Theatrical Representations of Violence

Theater and violence are intrinsically linked. This contiguity is a question of both nature and intensity. Violence is an action, as is theater, but an extreme action. By linking gesture to speech, theater aims to name the unspeakable. Playing on the tension between what is said and what is meant generates meaning. The spectator's threshold of acceptability is put to the test.

It is all a question of measure, as the game consists of pushing back the limits of what is possible. The decorum that governed ancient Greek theater forbade the representation of acts of brutality on stage. Nonetheless, the violence portrayed created a terrifying effect on the audience. The revenge tragedies of the Roman playwright Seneca, which greatly inspired Shakespeare, dared to be realistic.

Theater is at the heart of tragedy, in that it brings us face-to-face with the anguish of existence in a vertiginous yet pleasurable way. Freud believes that there is something fascinating about the spectacle of dread, which provides a high level of enjoyment."[1]

Driven by a taste for voyeurism that goes as far as the obscene in the Latin sense of obscena—that which remains undecidable in the off-stage state—the audience revels in the monstrous, the figure on which collective phantasms crystallize. In a subtle interplay of veiled and unveiled, desire manifests itself as a desire for the other at the end of which is the giving-to-see."[2] It offers itself as a scene of enjoyment to the public's sensibility, opening it up to that part of the Shadow intrinsic to being that sometimes expresses itself in awful ways.

The representation of excess, if it aims to raise awareness of the meaning of measure, provokes a discursive, perceptual and cultural shock in spectators, as ethical and aesthetic values are revisited. Brechtian distancing is essential if the performance is not to be mistaken for the thing. The scenic space is invested with a transfigurative force; the violent act is stylized and suffering aestheticized.

The principles of pleasure and reality coalesce in perfect osmosis. The theater thus becomes, in the words of Kunders, "the imaginary paradise of individuals [...] the territory where no one is the possessor of the truth."[3] On stage, truth comes in an infinite number of shades and nuances. A way for playwrights to shake the violence of certainty and fixity that tends to contradict the mutability of the things of life.

The failure of speech to convey meaning can be interpreted as a break in the signifying chain. The impossibility of saying generates a linguistic insecurity that leads to violent action or, worse still, insanity. This is where insanity as a signifier of the unspeakable takes on its full force for Maurice Abiteboul, who sees it as "a misleading word to designate — or rather evoke — the unnameable that frightens, the undecidable that disconcerts, the reality — or unreality? — that eludes the known, the routine, the banal, the easily understood."[4]

The figure of madness as a means of verbalizing the unmentionable, while saving the need to show obscene acts (rape, incest, murder, cannibalism, etc.), disrupts the symbolic order of speech. It exposes disturbing truths that viewers flee from in the real world and seek, consciously or unconsciously, in art. The irruption of life in the theater creates a mise en abyme that opens the way to a greater lucidity of human consciousness.

More generally, violence is part of a changing world, where humanism is atrophying in favor of the instinct to turn in on oneself. Whether symptomatic or structural, inflicted or endured, it insinuates itself into the psychic core of the human being, undermining the fabric of society. The ensuing risk of alienation explains the recurrence of the madman as a meta-theatrical metaphor in modern and contemporary dramaturgy.

In Tennessee Williams's play A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Blanche Dubois's words against her husband wound him to death and send the heroine into psychosis. A woman of letters, moreover, Blanche flinches in the face of an as yet unnamed, if not unspeakable, desire. This corroborates the idea that desire is rooted in "a field where the word, the signifier, reigns."[5]

In another play by the same author, Cat on Hot Tin Roof (1955), Maggie Pollitt threatens to take her own life to end the violence of her husband's indifference[6]. The outbursts of rage and mute cries of the characters reflect the break with a reality that has become impervious to words, insensitive to the other. The staging of violence acts as an outlet, enabling artistic sublimation and the restoration of order in chaos. This process transforms mortifying impulses into vital momentum. The healing process of catharsis becomes the primary purpose of the theatrical act. The critic Jean Chapelain underlines its significance as follows:

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[1] Sigmund Freud (1920), *Au-delà du principe de plaisir*, in: *Essais de psychanalyse*, Payot, Paris, 1981, p. 62.
[2] Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, livre XI (1963-1964), *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 105.
[3] Milan Kundera, *L'art du roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 194. My translation.
[4] Maurice Abiteboul, « La folie au théâtre », *Théâtres du Monde*, n° 17, 2007, p. 5. My translation.
[5] Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, livre VI, *Le désir et son interprétation*, Paris, La Martinière/Le Champ freudien, 2013, p. 63. My translation.
[6] Maggie: "You know, if I thought you would never, never, never make love to me again—I would go downstairs to the kitchen and pick out the longest and sharpest knife I could find and stick it straight into my heart, I swear that I would!" In: Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, ed. Mel Gussow and Kenneth Holditch, New York: Library of America, 2000, p. 892.

The primary goal of any performance is to move the spectator's soul through the power and clarity with which various passions are expressed on stage and, by this means, to cleanse the soul of the bad habits that could lead it into the same pitfalls that these passions bring about.[7]

Violence belongs to the realm of pathos as it represents the opposite of reason. Gaining metaphorical value in theater, it serves as a pretext for the staging of passions. Making the monstrous that looms over us both intelligible and perceptible is achieved through the disruption it causes.

Violence enacts a pedagogical exploration of human nature and its limits. Reflex precedes reflection, becoming an intellectual mechanism that generates knowledge capable of transcending moralizing morality toward a realm beyond good and evil, thus opening up a field of possibilities. In short, the excessive portrayal of violence is not merely a category of moral judgment but is instead measured by its dramatic and didactic qualities.

We now turn to examine violence in its relation to gender. In a context of equality, where women assert their rightful place, we observe the decline of authority that constitutes the very structure of patriarchy. The balance of power has insidiously shifted from actual violence to the symbolic violence that Pierre Bourdieu describes as gentle, imperceptible, invisible even to its victims, which is exerted primarily through the purely symbolic means of communication and knowledge, or more precisely, through misunderstanding, recognition, or ultimately, through sentiment."[8]

A Doll's House, a masterwork by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1879), does not display any physical domestic brutality. However, violence is presented through the perverse protagonist, Torvald Helmer, who inflicts a cold violence upon his objectified wife. Rebellious against her subordinate role, Nora slams the door of her family home and opens a new one in modern theater, thereby becoming a libertarian icon.

Theater is the very art of the visible, according to the Greeks' definition, with theatron being "the place where one sees."[9] It reveals the invisible, makes it express something else, and thus becomes a device for subversive action. This leads Barthes to believe that "literature is a salutary deception, a diversion, a magnificent illusion, which allows us to hear language outside of power, in the splendor of a permanent revolution."[10]

Symbolic violence embodies acts of hostility with invisible yet nonetheless devastating effects. Deconstructing the multifaceted nature of cruelty requires dismantling the mental, social, and discursive representations that make the unbreakable spiral of violence possible. Playwrights resort to the playful and the ominous to disengage from the intricate mechanisms of domination. Comedy subverts clichés to re-invest them with meaning, while tragedy allows for distancing from passions through the lens of catharsis.

In the spectacle of violence, the torments of the unconscious are projected onto the stage, which becomes "a vaster arena: the psychological drama, between impulse and renunciation, and then the psychopathological drama, between the conscious source and the repressed source."[11] Thus, theater transforms passionate experience into civic consciousness.

The spectator is invited to symbolize the signifiers of their psyche, which, being excluded from language, risk resurfacing with even greater virulence; Lacan attests that "what is repressed in the symbolic reappears in the real."[12] The power of a theatrical performance lies in its ability to move the spectator from denial to awareness.

The meaning-making of the theatrical act is analogous to a ritual, through which the subject exhumes the corpses of their blind thoughts. This amounts to saying, as Heiner Müller notes "overcoming fear by confronting it. One does not rid oneself of anxiety by repressing it."[13]

The metaphor of violence in theater serves as a gateway to knowledge and a pedagogical tool that enhances our understanding of reality, allowing us to perceive the world with continually renewed clarity. By engaging both the intellect and the senses, it functions as a cognitive and aesthetic lens, providing a view that is both insightful and empathetic towards the human condition.

Through its aesthetic value, violence brings humanity back to its ontological essence: a being of language and desire that aspires to be, if not intelligible, at least audible. This elevates theater as a noble cultural expression that carries meaning and provides pleasure.

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[7] Jean Chapelain, *Lettre sur la règle des vingt-quatre heures* [1630], *Opuscules critiques*, éd. Alfred C. Hunter, Paris, Droz, 1936, p. 125. My translation.

[8] Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine*, Paris, Seuil, 1998, p. 12. My translation.

[9] Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du théâtre*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2002, p. 382. My translation.

[10] Roland Barthes, *Leçon*, Paris, Seuil, 1978, p. 16. My translation.

[11] François Regnault, « Le héron de l'empereur, Freud et Lacan devant l'acteur », *Théâtre – Equinoxes sur le théâtre – I*, Paris, Actes Sud, 2001, p. 108. My translation.

[12] Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, livre XVI, *D'un Autre à l'autre*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 320-321. My translation.

[13] Heiner Müller, *Fautes d'impression. Textes et entretiens*, Paris, L'Arche, 1991, p. 50. My translation.

Theater has a cohesive quality in that it conveys values that create social bonds; works such as Molière's Le Médecin malgré lui (1666) and, more recently, Gérard Watkins' Scènes de violence conjugale bear witness to this. However, nothing seems to curb the violence that Alain Bentolila correlates with "the inability to put one's thoughts into words by organizing them."[14]

Furthermore, Alain Bentolila asserts, "When one cannot peacefully inscribe oneself upon the intelligence of others, the only means of existence becomes leaving physical traces upon the body of the other."[15] Since the verb is intrinsic to action, it is crucial to name things accurately to avoid contributing to the world's miseries, as Albert Camus would argue. In essence, to position things correctly within their proper context is to achieve justice.

In conclusion, the exploration of symbolic violence in theater unveils its profound capacity to shape civic consciousness and deepen our understanding of the complexities of the human condition. By aestheticizing violence, theater transcends mere depictions of brutality, inviting audiences to engage with the social and psychological forces that underlie it. This engagement fosters a critical awareness that surpasses the spectacle, transforming fear into cathartic insight and reflective learning. Theatrical representations act as a mirror, revealing both the overt and subtle forms of violence that permeate society, while also challenging audiences to reconsider their own complicity and potential for change. Ultimately, the power of theater lies in its ability to reframe violence as a catalyst for empathy, social critique, and the pursuit of a more equitable world.

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[14] Alain Bentolila, *Tout sur l'école*, Odile Jacob, 2004, p. 22. My translation.
[15] *Ibid.* My translation.