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THEATRE AND WAR

The relationship between theatre and war has always constituted a central element in the living matter of theatre. Theatre is a political element, an essential quality of civil life. Theatre is a political instrument and it is especially for this reason, perhaps, that it opens the way for the utilization of an ambiguous terrain which is particularly dangerous and pursued by power. The twentieth century accomplishes what was launched in the previous century with the advent of instruments and ways that are proper to mass culture. Propaganda, the lethal machine of consent, organizes itself with means which are, all the same, contiguous to artistic expression. Through cinema, the broad dissemination of the press, up to the advent of radio and television, we have witnessed a terrain that is contiguous with the question of art. Beyond the purely aesthetic element, through theatre other bluntly declared functions such as those of information, the formation of public opinion, the orientation of thought and the mutation of diffused orientations found their realization. Nevertheless, the arts have always found a big space within these processes of power, functioning as channels and vehicles of the latter, in this ambiguous ground between entertainment and civil commitment, terrains which merge into each other.

It is interesting to note the subversion of the cinematographic tradition with regards to the slap stick comedy of the silent movies, in comparison with Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin who are chased by a crowd of policemen. This subversion takes place progressively over the years, until the examples, in the eighties, of *Police Academy* where a revolt in the suburbs is tamed by few police agents who are chased by a mass of villains. Such subversion is telling of the clear overturning in the order of discourses in which the protagonist is no longer the vagabond that was Charlot, a figure loved by the surrealists, homeless, inexplicably accompanied by a son, living relationships outside marriage, a tramp, jobless, who would steal on occasion, a drunkard, smoking the cigars he picks off the ground. He is certainly an atypical construction, an outcast, certainly not a positive hero. And such a model is abandoned and is increasingly and progressively subverted within the creation of consent to the war machine. Such an overturn occurs with the consent of the war machine. Whereas slap stick comedy actually disappears with the assertion of the Second World War, the subverted power mechanism is perfected and sublimed to regulate the anomalies taking place in California towards the end of the seventies.

We could probably say that slapsticks are at the interstice between the First and Second World War, and this is a significant point for the discourse I am trying to make.

A powerful machine of consent exists, a machine we have previously indicated as a weapon of mass *distraction* - a value, that of distraction, which is determinant to the efficacy that is proper to weapons of mass destruction. Such ambiguity is very significant, and important, because distraction does not simply imply the *diverting* of divertissement, that is to shift to the different level of diversion or entertainment, but implies a shift in perspective. It distracts via an overturning of the point of view and asserting a strong order of point of view. So much so that one of the last films worth citing for its contiguity with the issue of the war in Iraq, *The men who stare at goats*, furnishes a terribly significant element. It is a kind of *Mash* parody, referring to the war in Vietnam, of the idiocy of these "men of war", U.S. soldiers, all a little drugged, paranoid, but who deep down are there to bring democracy with all their beautiful contradictions.

A historical passage is necessary here. We know that in classical times Aristophanes no less than Aeschylus, than Euripides or Sophocles played a significant role in the political debates of their time - the *polis* awaited the element of debate, of discussion on current events. Nowadays, in our times, it is more difficult to think of theatre works as fully entitled to enter the debate of existing matters. This *all news* world appears not to leave room for a debate based upon a slow and dense vision of the world.

Between the third and fourth decade of the past century, we witness events that mark the life of theatre through war. With figures who pay heavily, with their lives, the bill of war: Bertolt Brecht, Federico Garcia Lorca, Vsevolod Meyerhold. Brecht, born in 1898, is forced into exile at the age of 34, to return fourteen years later, that is at the culmination of his potential, of his artistic productivity. The time in exile allows him to delve deep with his theoretical reflections, but we cannot neglect the fact that he was marked by such experience. Garcia Lorca is executed, shot by the soldiers of Franco. Garcia Lorca is a fundamental figure in the Spanish civil war, a lengthy war, far longer than one might think, and much more articulate, a war in which the Italian and German army and military aviation play a central role – a civil war in which Italy and Germany have a very strong responsibility.

In Spain, the weight of nazi-fascist intervention in support of Franco-of a dictatorship will endure until 1975- is evident, in a Mediterranean area that is scarred by fascist dictatorships till the mid-seventies of the twentieth century. Hence the murder of Garcia Lorca, who is shot for his political affiliation, for his militancy in the theatre, in poetry, for his unsustainable homosexuality, all unacceptable elements for a masculine and fascist order. What of Vsevolod Meyerhold, who is also shot dead after arrest in the prisons of Stalin? One cannot forget Antonio Gramsci, whose important dynamics call for a careful understanding, as it is equally important to carefully articulate the all but simple issue between theatre and war, an articulation that starts from the awareness the epoch in which we live is that of global conflict.

That of *Global conflict* is a category shared among various scholars, a category born in the awareness of a changing panorama, the change in historical context since the separation in two blocks, since the fall and separation in two blocks, and in the assertion of a new social and historic dynamic. Many scholars tend justly to hold that the Second World War never came to an end, and that in any case we would today benefit from an awareness of the dynamics of the world conflicts of the twentieth century, and of how such dynamics were heavily informed by an idea of the world. I believe that it is necessary to seek an understanding of those characteristics of global conflict which derive from certain strong ideas which constantly nurture global conflict. The first notion which might appear to be banal, but which in actually continues to result effective, is the doctrine of Huntington on the clash of civilizations. Such a notion constitutes an essential instrument in order to construct the idea of the enemy – that is to say that global conflict necessitates the constant construction of the enemy. The creation of the enemy is one of the cardinal points made by Carl Schmitt, a scholar who furnished important theories on war and domination, and who identifies as his point of departure and reference Clausewitz, the Prussian thinker who treated the theory of war in terms of how to win a war and the characteristics of war. The Clausewitz/Schmitt nexus is founded upon certain considerations which are still extremely characteristic: the awareness of constructing a dissymmetry. The dissymmetry of war, of global conflict, is evident and depends on the construction of a constant shifting. A shifting that comes primarily from not placing the label of “war” upon the very interventions of war, constructing a new kind of domain which is not that of the assimilation of states, but of the constitution of democratic, local states, which are anyhow sustained by a military presence on their grounds. Such an affirmation is possible within the awareness of the current geopolitical situation in Italy. The Italian peninsula is an enormous U.S. military base which renders a significant military service, a territorial occupation doubled by the presence of NATO structures. And Italy is in any case the country of most strategic significance, in the Mediterranean and Euro-Mediterranean dimension, for its longitudinal configuration which likens it to an enormous aircraft carrier 1300 km long. This dissymmetry exists also between the contrasting forces on the ground, i.e. we no longer have regular armies facing one another or, rather, we do at the beginning, but with such a disparity in means, weapons and technology, with the decisive factor of the disparity in air force capacity and, so to speak, of the above space facilities, there certainly is no symmetry in this kind of conflict. Surely the irony of it all lies in the fact that the role of the infantry remains crucial. Schmitt and Clausewitz know this well: a territory is conquered and has to be maintained (defended) on the ground.

What does this panorama have to do with theatre? It is very pertinent indeed, because the clash of civilizations is substantiated primarily via the belittlement of the enemy, via the lack of recognition towards the culture of the enemy. The enemy is the barbarian, he who is not endowed with language, culture and history. The attack on archeological sites, museums, telecommunications, does not happen by chance. All those elements which tend to constitute or restore an articulate idea of a culture that is homologated become targets of aggression. Within the dynamics of world conflict, globalization has borne an attempt at rejecting the plurality of cultures, in order to recognize instead a single mediating language, of an elementary value of communication. The ideas expressed by the Italian journalist Michele Serra regarding Twitter are not banal: to say something in 140 words constitutes a telling problematic restriction and exchanges via SMS, as well as Facebook and similar media tend to considerably limit communication and restrict users worldwide to the idea of a poor homologating language, terminologically and lexically poor, poor also in thought complexity, because the complex disposition of a discourse derives its wealth from the plurality of thought.

We have experienced a very specific issue, for instance, realizing that the repertory of classical theatre culture is far from being easily available. Moreover, such difficulty of access to this repertory is tied to translation practices. The translation from one language to others is an expression of cultural wealth and it travels in a sense that is contrary to conflict, it puts the idea of conflict in serious crisis, because the clash of civilizations is erected upon a unifying language and unifying thought. When we worked in Jordan, in Syria, in Palestine on *War gifts*, on Euripides' *The Trojan women*, and when started to work on Aeschylus' *The Persians*, even in Albania we met with the problem of availability of those texts, besides their not being available in Albanian, and the fact that the translations available are all taken from English, prose versions. Here is an enormous rip, a truly heavy fault which exposes the brutally armed sense of the idea of cultural unification, because cultural unification supports global domination at the cost of whichever idea of democracy, of a participative democracy, of the participation of all in public reality. For what is critically at stake is the democratic process, because it is not true that occidental democracy produces democracy. An occidental democracy which is not exercised by a popular control that is transparent and distributed generates nazi-fascism, the most substantial and inhuman of fascist dictatorship. Such false democracy generates the most abhorrent forms of domination and command witnessed in story of the human being, and therein lies the risk of an enormous empire, one that is completely uncommitted to the possibility of popular governance. It is here that theatre, by its very nature, succeeds with a resistance that is different to the cinematic industry. Theatre is, by contrast, a space that can be constituted in any place, in which people assemble. For this reason theatre makers are strictly controlled, censored, arrested, suppressed, murdered, as in the case of Juliano Mer-Khamis, as well as in the example of the Freedom Theatre of Jenin (Palestine) and of other theatres worldwide which seek to give voice to life. And the conflict currently underway is that between life in theatre and the logic of global conflict. In this sense, therefore, I believe that theatre, staging human vicissitudes that are present, concrete, also via the allusive reference to past events, can furnish a clear idea of the necessity for a revolution that is profound, democratic, popular and distributed, that knows how to overcome the logic of conflict, which acknowledges all the orders of colonization as actuating logics of conflict, and a revolution in which a fundamental role is played by the presence of women, the presence of the feminine. I have often spoken of the importance of the role of women in *Commedia dell'Arte*, solid in my conviction that this is an archaic thought, because all these female characters present in the plays from classical Greece, both in tragedy and in comedy, are telling of the centrality of feminine thought, of the presence of the female figure and of female practices. And across time, these are the practices that still constitute the questions which can critically topple a model of power which brings about only death, homologation and absolute commercialization. I stop here. There are several important elements, for instance in seeking to understand why Brecht is hunted, why Garcia Lorca is shot, why Meyerhold is arrested and murdered, and why Juliano Mer-Khamis is also murdered.

I would like to underline an important point, a word which today emerges predominantly again today: liberty. The concept of freedom is different. Liberty is a very important issue and it surely does not refer to a bourgeois freedom that is sustained by private property, i.e. on the guarantee for the rich to continue to condemn the rest of the world to die of hunger. Liberty is to me an essential element, the affirmation of a living theatre.