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From Image into Word: The Semiography of *Titus Andronicus*

Several writings in the poststructuralist study of the semiotics of culture have focused recently on the affinity that has emerged in the postmodern towards those aspects of early modern culture that were groundbreaking or subversive in their own time in mapping out and thematizing the technologies of identity and the interior spaces of the body. The fusion of cultural registers in consumerist culture makes this affinity particularly manifest. Renaissance texts that used to be canonized as high literature now show up among the commodities of popular culture, participating at the same time in that process of decanonization and recanonization which is questioning and revising the reading practices and standards of earlier canons. New perspectives are also applied to the much debated interrelationship and hierarchy of word and image, verbal and visual representation in the early modern emblematic theater of the English Renaissance. Instead of the polemic discourses on whether speech overruled spectacle, or whether costumes were more important than actual bodies, a significant amount of recent critical literature started focusing on the understanding of the representational logic of the complex effects in the emblematic theater.

By the 1990s, the human body has become a specifically favored theme in the considerably extensive literature on the “discovery” of early modern subjectivity and the social practices of self-fashioning. However, the scrutinizing and the iconographic representations of the body appear not only in scholarly literature but in the general postmodern cultural practices as well. The cultural imagery of malls, shopping centers, plazas, movie productions, exhibitions is loaded with representations that establish a parallel between early modern and postmodern representational traditions.¹

When I first entered the building of the main library at the University of Oregon in Eugene fifteen years ago, I caught sight of a large poster advertising a performance of *Coriolanus* with the subtitle: "A natural born killer, too." The title of Oliver Stone's influential film was used as a marketing technique for a postmodern Shakespearean commodity. Five years later at the University of Hull I read articles about ambulance cars lining up in front of a London theater playing *Titus Andronicus*. A couple of years ago, after watching the exhibition of the theatrical anatomist Günter von Hagens in Vienna and reading his program for starting an anatomical theater in London, I saw posters in a cinema plaza with Hannibal the Cannibal staring at me from beneath a great big title saying TITUS. These are examples of the new affinity emerging in the postmodern towards cultural practices and texts of early modern culture that scrutinize and thematize the interiority of the human body through

¹ The publications that I have mainly relied on in the present paper are the following: Francis Barker *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984), P.S. Spinrad *The Summons of Death on the Medieval and Renaissance English Stage* (Ohio State University Press, 1987), Valerie Wayne (ed.) *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), Derek Cohen *Shakespeare's Culture of Violence* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), David Hillman & Carla Mazzi (eds.) *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), Michael C. Schoenfeldt *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England. Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert and Milton*. (Cambridge University Press, 1999), Jonathan Sawday *The Body Emblazoned. Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), Nigel Llewellyn *The Art of Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), Cynthia Marshall *The Shattering of the Self. Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

surgical or representational means of violence.² In the present paper I would like to dwell upon that much-debated Shakespearean piece which has become famous as one of the most excessive early modern representations of violence in relation to corporeality.

After several centuries of canonical resistance, critical puzzlement and straightforward rejection, since the 1970s we have witnessed a revival of interest in Shakespeare's earliest tragedy. The rehabilitation of *Titus Andronicus* and other tragedies of revenge and violence can be accounted for by several critical discourses that have been able to address issues which are thematized by English Renaissance drama, but remained unnoticed or deliberately ignored by earlier critical taste. Feminists and cultural historians, interpreters of rhetorical and iconographic traditions have mapped out various implications of the play, which has thus been transformed, through these close readings, from what T.S. Eliot considered as one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written into a drama of extensive visual ingenuity. Michael Hattaway believes the play is "arguably the first 'Gothic' work in the language"³, and, in an elaborate but very telling judgement, Alan Dessen contends that *Titus Andronicus* is "a pre-realistic, Ovidian-Spenserian, stageworthy revenge tragedy that, in a variety of ways, *resists* 'our' theatrical, critical, and editorial ways of thinking."⁴

As for these new critical discourses, I think this resistance within the drama has been best managed by those performance oriented semiotic approaches which restore the dramatic text to the *representational logic* of the stage that it was designed for.⁵ The famous or infamous scenes of the play that may provoke rage, disgust or even laughter in the modern audience will establish a network of interrelated image clusters when they are interpreted according to the representational logic of the Renaissance *emblematic theater*. One of the major challenges directors had to face when staging *Titus Andronicus* was, of course, the representation of excessive violence. Stylization through symbols or the naturalism of buckets of fake blood equally appear to miss the nature of the drama. The codes of the realistic, photographic bourgeois theater, even if they are filtered through symbolism, do not provide the modern spectator with a clue to the understanding of scenes such as the discovery of the mutilated Lavinia.⁶ In this dramaturgical turning point of *Titus Andronicus*, Marcus, before he would engage in real action, spends forty-seven lines describing the horrifying image of his niece who had been raped by Tamora's sons who had also chopped off her hands and cut out her tongue. The rhetorical exuberance appears totally unfitting for a situation when every nerve in your body is crying out "GET FIRST AID!", as actor Terry Kraft said, referring to what he had gone through during the rehearsals.⁷ Our understanding of this stage representation will be different, however, if we interpret Lavinia's mutilated body as an extended emblem of woe, a *tableau miserabilis*, in the interrelated images of the emblematic stage of *Titus Andronicus*. This emblematic

2 "[...]it is an interesting sociological point that the Elizabethans had, like us, a penchant for gory entertainment." Marshall, *ibid.* 107. "[...]early moderns, no less than postmoderns, were deeply interested in the corporeal 'topic'." David Hillman & Carla Mazzio, *ibid.* xii.

3 Michael Hattaway *Strange Images of Death* (, 1982), 127. ???

4 Alan C. Dessen *Titus Andronicus. Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), 4.

5 The importance of the representational logic of the theater, which is grounded in the general semiotic disposition of culture, has been emphasized by Alan C. Dessen in several writings. See Alan C. Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

6 This, of course, applies to English Renaissance drama in general, and, as Alan Dessen observes, to dramas of the 1580s and 1590s. "[...]the modern interpreter must confront a different *pre-realistic sense of style*, an alternative approach to dramatic speech or rhetoric (typical of early Shakespeare and the drama of the late 1580s and early 1590s, including *The Spanish Tragedy*." Dessen 1989, 54. (emphasis mine)

7 Dessen 1989, 54.

tableau is simultaneously created by the visual image and the rhetorical description on the "empty stage" of the English Renaissance theater, where the imagination of the audience was supposed to "piece out" the imperfections of the representation. This imaginative labor was assisted by the juxtaposition of emblematic image and rhetorical commentary, inviting the spectator to embark upon a semiotic effort which is also required by the contemplative understanding of the classical three-piece emblem, an understanding which then will not be hindered by questions such as how Lavinia could survive such an immense loss of blood, or why his uncle does not immediately administer first aid.

If we are equipped with an insight into the iconographic traditions that established a ground for this non-realistic stage logic of the emblematic theater, and if we combine this insight with an understanding of the general semiotic disposition of the social-historical context of this theater, we will be better able to interpret those representational techniques that have long bothered critics: violence, abjection, "unrealistic" stage action, et cetera.

The emblematic theater that activated the texts of English Renaissance drama did not aim at establishing a mimetic duplicate of the actual world. It rather involved the audience in a complex multilayered system of levels of meaning in which various iconographic and emblematic traditions were activated to achieve a total effect of meaning. The attempt to realize the totality of theatrical effect can be interpreted as an answer to *those epistemological uncertainties* of the period which resulted in a fundamentally *unstable semiotic disposition* of the culture. Amidst the speculations and philosophical questions concerning the order of the universe and the possibility of getting to know reality, the theater offers a site where the techniques of emblematic density and audience involvement provide the spectator with a promise of a more direct access to reality, an *immediacy of experience* which is otherwise impossible to obtain.

At the same time, the staging of violence and the violated body was also informed by a keen interest in the interiority, the corporeality of the human being as the site of the emergence of subjectivity, the new, early modern type of identity. As much recent criticism has argued, the idea of identity as something interior to the human being is a new phenomenon in early modern culture, signaling the advent of the subjectivity of the "cogito" that later emerges with rationalism and the Cartesian discourses. This *process of interiorization* is a challenge that many characters of English Renaissance drama fail to meet: they oscillate between two alternative types of subjectivity as in-between, abject subjects.⁸

Thus, the representation of violence and the promise of unquestionable meaning as answers to the epistemological uncertainty of the age are accompanied by a cultural urge to move beyond facades, to penetrate surfaces, to dig into wounds that until this point had been prohibited to test. Two popular institutions of early modern culture worked to satisfy this curiosity. Real wounds and surgical interventions revealed the secrets of the body for the general public in the anatomy theater, while emblematic wounds on metaphorical bodies thematized this cultural interest in the emblematic public theater. What the combination of semiotics and iconography enables us to discern is that in the trend of English Renaissance revenge tragedies we have a special union of the two practices. A very telling example of this early modern interest towards interiority as the locus of the secrets of identity is the way Sir Philip Sidney writes of comedy and tragedy in *The Defence of Poesy*:

"So that the right use of Comedy will, I think, by nobody be blamed, and much less of the high and excellent Tragedy, that *openeth the greatest wounds*, and showeth forth the ulcers that are

⁸ Michael Neill calls this "the new discourse of interiority." See Michael Neill *Issues of Death. Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 159.

covered with tissue...”⁹

Since linguistic reasoning is becoming the skin on the ego, the tissue that covers the ulcers in the subjectivity of the early modern subject and in the body of society is that of discursive self-fashioning, on the one hand, and that of civilized order on the other. This tissue of the symbolic separates us from the secrets of our maternal and libidinal corporeality, the simultaneously inviting and repulsive presymbolic memories of the womb as preserved in our own interiority. So, when early modern drama presents persistent images of inwardness, this is not only to uncover and publicly heal the ulcers in the body politic; inwardness is also staged because of the keen self-anatomizing interest of the early modern subject.

Thus, through a *semiographic* (i.e., semiotic and iconographic) perspective, *Titus Andronicus* is an emblematic theater of anatomy, in which, according to the argument of the present paper, one of the most systematic image networks is that of the abjection or problematization of gender roles through emblematic images.¹⁰

It is a critical commonplace that the curiosity towards and the fear of the interior tend to turn the female body into an emblem of menace, monstrosity and otherness on the English Renaissance stage. The female body acts out those gender roles that are inscribed into it by the patriarchal order, and the subversive capacity of these plays is often due to the attempts female characters make to transgress the boundaries of these roles. In *Titus Andronicus*, a network of emblematic images represent and problematize both male and female gender roles, and their system reveals itself if we activate the dramatic text in a hypothetical reconstruction of the original emblematic theater.¹¹

At the beginning of the play, we see a Rome which is represented verbally as an immense mutilated female body. The "glorious body" (1.i.190) of Rome is wounded.¹² Headless Rome is constantly referred to as "she" who needs restoration of order in a situation that is characterized by rivalry, uncertainty, loss. This female body, which is supposed to be maintained by the male authorities of civilized order, is now mistreated, dysfunctional, and it opens up its generating and consuming womb in the image of the tomb of the Andronici. The womb and the tomb become systematically interrelated in the play, and they establish a complex emblem of that desired and at the same time threatening maternal chora which is expressed in the image of the "swallowing womb". In Julia Kristeva's theory, the chora, this container of pre-symbolic drives, psychic and corporeal energies, is not gender specific, but it contains those archaic experiences that are imprinted in us as

9 Sir Philip Sidney *Selected Writings*. ed. Richard Dutton (Manchester – New York: Fyfield Books, 1987), 124. (italics mine)

10 [...according to] semiographic consideration [...] the theater or drama model of a cultural period is always in close relation with the semiotic world model of the era, since the representational awareness, the "high semioticity" of the theatrical space always serves as a laboratory to test the most intriguing epistemological dilemmas of the specific culture. Semiography as a critical approach combines the considerations of iconography and the postsemiotics of the subject to investigate the textual strategies through which in-between dramatic characters articulate subject positions that put the identity of the receiver in crisis. Semiography also reveals that it is impossible to understand the strategies of renaissance and postmodern metatheater without a psychoanalytically informed theory of the microdynamics of spectatorship that can account for theatrical experiences such as abjection and pluralization. Attila Kiss "Character as Subject-in-Process in the Semiography of Drama and Theater." *Semiotische Berichte* 1-4/2003. 187.

11 As James Cunningham contends, feminist criticism might not prove the best to investigate the abjection of gender stereotypes in the play, since *Titus Andronicus* does not restore the sovereignty or subversive power of woman. Instead, it problematizes the categories of gender in general. See James Cunningham *Shakespeare's Tragedies and Modern Critical Theory* (Associated University Presses, 1997), 176-177.

12 References are to the following edition: William Shakespeare *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate. The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

the memory of the symbiotic unity with the mother's body.¹³ As the incest taboo and the fear of castration separate us from this origin of our existence, the image and the body of the mother becomes marked, signified, inserted into the symbolic order as other, abjected, that is, coded by gender.

A traditional iconographic image of this gendered symbolization of the generative and destructive femininity is the *vagina dentata*, which is represented in the dramaturgically central scene of *Titus Andronicus*, in the image of the pit. The pit as swallowing womb, trap, and burial tomb, as *vagina dentata* is the second in the sequence of four emblematic scenes (the tomb, the pit, Lavinia's mouth and Tamora's mouth) that set up the dramaturgical rhythm of the drama. The visual connection between the scenes is solidified by the fact that, by all probability, *the trapdoor of the emblematic stage* was used in their representation. The first scene in this emblematic sequence is the trapdoor as the tomb of the Andronici and the womb of Rome; the second scene is the trapdoor pit dug by Aaron to entrap the sons of Titus. Many critics have noted the sexual and gendered aspects of the description of the "abhorred pit" (2.iii.98), the "subtle hole [...] / Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars, / Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood" (2.iii.198). However, it has generally remained unnoticed that Tamora's description which introduces the image of the pit as womb is in close resemblance with the words Titus says about the tomb of his family: an intensified dramatic deixis turns these two scenes into the most concentrated deictic parts of the play, both scenes focusing on the trapdoor of the stage. Titus says of the tomb at the beginning of the play: [...] repose you here in rest. / [...] Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells, / Here grow no damned drugs, here are no storms, [...] rest you here." (1.i.153) However, this is so only as long as the living and the dead are respected and order is maintained. In the chaos of Rome, initiated by the senile, omnipotent, blind and miscalculated decision of Titus, the tomb which is supposed to help us come to terms with the dead now easily turns into the threatening, engulfing womb of Rome, starting to eat up its corrupt offsprings. The deictic 'here' dominates the speech of Tamora as well, when she depicts the pit as a Gorgo's head: "These two have 'ticed me hither to this place. [...] Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds, / [...] here at dead time of the night / A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes, / Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins / [...] make [...] fearful and confused cries [...] they would bind me here." (2.iii.92)

In the vertical tripartite dimensionality of the emblematic stage, the trapdoor was the symbol of the gate of the underworld, and thus, in a psychoanalytical reading, it also signifies the dimensions of the unconscious. Considering the concept of medieval and early modern folklore which connected the female genitalia and the mouth of hell, we see that the various associations of the underworld, the maternal chora, the protective and potentially destructive womb and female sexuality are all condensed into the complex emblem of the pit as *vagina dentata*. However, it is also worth noticing how Tamora conjures up verbally this image of the horrid scene. Her two speeches in the scene are seemingly totally incongruous. First, when approaching Aaron, her lover, she speaks of the forest as a place for amorous entertainment; she cannot wait to have sex with the Moor in the forest, which can indeed be a conventional emblem of fertility. Then, upon enticing her sons to revenge, she describes the same location as a horrible, hellish location with the abhorred pit in the center. We know that, rhetorically, Tamora employs two clichés here, the topos of the *locus amoenus* and that of the *locus horribulus*, but it is very strange to have two opposing descriptions of the same place so closely following one another. Tamora is able to turn the same scenery into two different and contrary locations through her rhetorical performance, combining *ut pictura poesis* with the iconographic

13 Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), Ch.I. "Approaching Abjection."

method of interpreting signs *in bonam partem* and *in malam partem* simultaneously. This rhetoric is possible and needed on the almost bare emblematic stage, but the fact that Tamora so displays the potential power of rhetoric transforms her into an artist, almost a magician who manipulates our feelings and perception. Here Tamora displays that capacity which makes her the most dangerous agent in the web of revenges, i.e., her capacity to transgress categories, move beyond categories, including gender stereotypes as well. Tamora and her prosthesis Aaron together represent *an agency of abjection* which penetrates the sick body of Rome, leaving greater and greater wounds. They are difficult to categorize in terms of gender stereotypes: Tamora can be very motherly and can put up a very cold, rational male reasoning as well; Aaron is often very much like a male warrior but at other times he displays features of eroticism and motherly tenderness that are traditionally attributed to woman. Their survival capacity in the Roman environment is due to this ability to penetrate the categorical borderlines: in Kristevan terms, they are ambiguous, non-structural: abject. They penetrate the gender categories, unlike the other Roman characters, who gradually go through a process of losing all their gender markers. Titus desperately tries to secure his role as a patriarch after refusing the imperial diadem, and in so doing he embarks on a series of mistakes that will result in his being reduced to a suffering human being. Lavinia's gender determined signifying capacity is reduced to zero when her commodity value as a woman is diminished by the rape; in a second step she is further diminished by a second metaphorical rape when she carries her father's hand off the stage in her mouth, bringing to a climax the images of chaos and the fall of patriarchal order; and then she is even more reduced for a third time in the scene when she guides the stick she writes with her mouth, through this metaphoric image conforming to the patriarchal prerogative of signification according to the symbolic codes and intertexts of culture. These characters gradually lose their gender potentials, and are turned into suffering, opened bodies, walking wounds on the ulcerous body of Rome.

Tamora, however, has no exemption from under the logic of revenge tragedies: she commits the mistake which is typical of revengers that start believing they have finally occupied a metaposition above the other characters in the web of revenge plots. The allegorical revenge scene, when she approaches Titus with her two sons, foregrounds the realization that, although she believes she can usurp the role of Revenge, *this metaposition is not granted* to any of the human agents. The spirit of revenge, the passion that turns to an avalanche of destructive forces in revenge tragedies, is always within the human beings, "motivating their souls" beyond their capacity to control this, as the prototypical revenge play, *The Spanish Tragedy* already thematized. Tamora, the most ingenious manipulator and gender-transgressor of the play, commits a mistake when she thinks she is already equal with revenge: it is this mistake that brings her sons into Titus's web of revenge, and not any ingenuity by Titus. When caught in Titus's plot, she will start doing things that are beyond her capacity to control, her vaginalized mouth as *vagina dentata* will eat up those agents that she has sent out into the world of Rome from her womb of revenge.

The imagery of blood is condensed through the images of the vaginalized bleeding mouths of Lavinia and Tamora, and the parallel in imagery, which is established between the two, otherwise opposite characters, indicates the fact that there is a general, all-encompassing power, a non-gender-specific pre-symbolic energy that will start to emanate from the suppressed depths, the tombs and wombs of our culture, if order no longer separates us from the sway of drive energies, if our passions give a chance to the tombs of our dead to turn into the womb of unstructured, libidinal nature.

As Luke Wilson notes in his article on the anatomical theater, the real function of the dissection in the theater of anatomy was to reconstruct and to restore into order that body in the interior of which

there resided, supposedly, the secret of life.¹⁴ In such terms, *Titus Andronicus* as an emblematic anatomy theater can be interpreted as a process in which the body of Rome as an emblem of civilized culture is *dissected and then cured*, healed, restored to order. This restoration is not due to the ingenuity of the characters, because as agents of revenge they are subordinated to that higher power of passion which is symbolized by the Allegory of Revenge that can find its way for eruption any time, and can start eating up parts of the world it had earlier given birth to.

Within Shakespeare's oeuvre, we can clearly identify a gradual move from the dominance of the spectacle towards the dominance of the discourse, from "abhorred pits" towards "words, words, words." The fact that *Titus Andronicus* was persistently ignored by criticism for such a long time is obviously explained by the drama belonging to that vogue of the image which was later replaced by poetic and philosophizing discourse as the primary representational technique. We had to wait until the institutionalization of the poststructuralist semiotic theories to have a proper insight into the production of special effects in the visual theatrical traditions, and this has also brought about a rehabilitation of "spectacular" plays such as *Titus Andronicus*.

The history of the productions and adaptations of Shakespearean drama also illustrates the trend in which the technologies of canon-formation marginalize the plays that do not conform to the bourgeois taste, such as the revenge tragedies by Shakespeare's contemporaries. The importance of plays such as *Titus Andronicus* is later minimized even within the most favored Shakespearean canon as well, since they do not obey the value patterns and stereotypes that are disseminated about the 'Bard of the Elizabethan Age'. In the postmodern, however, because of the similarity in the semiotic disposition of the periods, a new sensitivity and receptiveness emerges towards the early modern plays which problematized the questions of epistemology and the constitution of the subject through the power of the image and the spectacle. The number of new stagings of *Titus Andronicus* has been steadily growing since the 1970s (sometimes with ambulances lining up in front of the theaters during the performance), the critical approaches start to rehabilitate and reinterpret the play through the perspectives of feminism, postcolonialism and performance theory. Julie Taymor directs her monumental movie *Titus*, and Eastern European companies also allow a place for the play in their repertoire. "The dramatic rise in favor of *Titus Andronicus* among critics and directors has – perhaps not coincidentally – closely paralleled the growth of feminist Shakespeare criticism" – says Deborah Willis at the beginning of her article that provides a comprehensive overview of the recent critical revival of the drama.¹⁵

My contention is that the feminist perspective does not encompass all the interpretive possibilities of "[...] the play's vivid representation of Lavinia's victimization and rape; its foregrounding of patriarchal attitudes; its monstrous, sexualized mother, Tamora; and its imagery of womb, tomb, and pit".¹⁶ It is through the perspective of semiography that we become able to account for the logic and the appeal, the theatrical (and cinematic) effect of violence and abjection in the tragedy.

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14 Luke WILSON: "William Harvey's *Prelectiones*: The Performance of the Body in the Renaissance Theater of Anatomy." In: *Representations* 17, Winter 1987. 62-95.

15 Deborah Willis, "'The gnawing vulture': Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 53 (2002), pp. 21-52.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

The move from discourse to spectacle, from word to image is perceivable even within the recent stage and adaptation history of *Titus Andronicus*. I have selected two dramaturgically crucial scenes that I am going to analyze in five subsequent realizations of the play, three of which were produced within the past ten years in Hungary (a theatrical phenomenon which testifies to the „postmodern renaissance” of early modern anatomical tragedy even within the space of an East-Central European country). For copyright reasons, video footages are provided from the Hungarian productions only.

In the first scene, the mutilated Lavinia appears as a magnified emblem, a *tableau* of horror and suffering. Having lost her tongue, her hands and her chastity, she has been deprived of language, writing and honor, i.e., of all her signifying potentials. In the second scene that I have chosen, we see Tamora slain by Titus, her mouth spilling blood, which sets up a parallel with the blood her sons had shed in the ravishing of Lavinia, and the blood that leaves Lavinia’s mouth. The macabre irony of inversion is that it is Tamora who swallows the blood of the sons in the form of the pie prepared by Titus, thus receiving those sons back into her generating body whom she had sent out into the world for destruction. Of the five interpretations of the play I list as examples here, three are careful enough to recognize the emblematic parallel in the blood imagery of the two scenes.

The first production (see first pair of pictures) is the 1975 BBC film version, where the manner of performance is still unquestionably determined by the ideology of the conservative canon, by the emphasis on the Shakespearean rhetoric, the language, the importance of the word and eloquence. The film version employs very good focus on the ritualistic elements in the play, the ceremonial circular marches, the killing of Tamora’s sons as a sacrificial offering of blood, but it does not (as it was probably not supposed to) pay sufficient attention to the potential images of abjection and horror, their possible emblems and impact on the spectator. Compared to the later productions, Lavinia is a restrained, stagnant and docile daughter of sorrow here, and the parallel between Lavinia’s and Tamora’s scene is not established. The production does not really violate the borderlines of „decent bourgeois” taste, effect and meaning are supposed to be produced by language and poetic imagery.

The second in the chronological order is the stage production by the Hungarian Csiky Gergely Theater of Kaposvár, Hungary, which utilizes the imagery of abjection much more systematically (second pair of pictures). After an elaborate ‘mutilated dance’ of crawling and creeping around the entire space of the stage, Lavinia spits the blood from her tongueless mouth into the hands of Lucius, producing a mighty display of the constitutive image of the play. This stain, spitted into the hands of the representative of the patriarchal order, has its visual rhyme in the blood ejaculating from Tamora’s mouth at the end of the play. The imagery of tragic topsy-turvydom, the inversion of the order of the world receives a magnified expression in the way the hand, the emblem of the law of the father is stained by the diminished daughter.

Nevertheless, the postmodern audience had to wait until 2001 to witness a total reactivation of the traditions of the abject and the macabre in Julie Taymor’s movie *Titus* (third pair of pictures). In the first scene I am examining, Lavinia is shown with a sudden camera movement as a stiffened and blown up emblem of pain, screaming her blood into the face of the spectator. This image of blood recurs in the second scene of the dinner with equal emphasis when the camera zooms in on the blood streaming from Tamora’s mouth, establishing the interconnection of clusters in the systematic imagery of the play.

The fourth, experimental staging of the tragedy is from Shure Studio Theater Budapest (fourth pair of pictures). The production employed a tight, gloomy, self-enclosed space, with several

stage mechanisms that were based on the original representational logic of the early modern English emblematic theater. Aaron emerged from under the trapdoor at the beginning of the play as a representative of hell, actors performed continuous audience involving techniques and gestures, stylized stage objects functioned as emblems of meaning clusters. The first scene we are dealing with here does foreground the idea of the hand of the patriarch besmeared by the blood dripping from the mouth of the ravished woman, but Lucius handles Lavinia like an object, a commodity even more than in earlier adaptations. In the dinner scene, Titus is sitting with a cane in his hand in the position of a clock ticking away the time of the guests, and then bursts the balloon filled with water over the head of Tamora, the ritualized metaphor of death in the production. The parallel in the blood imagery is not thematized here, but the representation resembles the production of the Csiky Gergely Theater, except that the general atmosphere is much more infernal and sinister.

The fifth production is a recent and very experimental, 2004 Hungarian performance in the Gyulai Várszínház, an open air theater in the inner yard of a brick castle in the Southern Great Plane of Hungary (fifth pair of pictures). The adaptation was a multimedia performance in which several pre-shot scenes of the play were projected on a video-screen, characters were speaking into microphones and camcorders and then also got projected on the screen, sometimes simultaneously with the stage action. All this created an effect reminiscent of the attempt of the emblematic theater to establish full semiosis, a totalizing theatrical effect through the multiplicity of sign channels and iconographical representational traditions. The staging made use of the space, walls, the objects and utilities in the yard, the dramaturgically central “pit” of the ravishing scene, for example, was represented by the great furnace in the wall of the castle, through which Lavinia emerges as if descending from the fire of hell, black as charcoal. However, she is also presented in an embryonic position, as if the furnace, which functions here as the vaginalized, all-devouring pit, was a birth canal which gives birth to a new Lavinia, the result of the foul deeds of Tamora’s sons. This representation intensifies the womb-like nature of the furnace-pit, and strengthens its role as an organic element in the womb-mouth-blood imagery of the play. In dinner scene, which is a pre-shot film and is video-projected on top of the back canvas of the stage (after the film on the massacre of Tamora’s sons which is shot in the local sausage factory), Lavinia is, in turn, gulping the pie made of his sons flesh as an all-devouring pit, as an insatiable womb turned backwards, eating up the flesh it had earlier given birth to. Thus, it is not only the blood imagery but the mouth-pit-womb parallel that is thematized and foregrounded in this production, and the director ironically puts the pie-cutting knife in the foreground of the frame when Lavinia is stabbed by Titus.

The various postmodern productions and adaptations of Shakespeare's earliest tragedy all testify to a special affinity for the representational techniques of abjection, violence and anatomization, and the complex emblematic image clusters are based on an awareness of the visual effects that aim at going beyond the limitations of the rhetorical level. In other words, these performances possess an awareness of the importance of the way a Shakespearean play is supposed to go from word into image in an actual performance text.

It is my conviction that the systematic employment of abjection and spectacle in the postmodern stagings and adaptations of early modern tragedy cannot be explained simply by a supposedly postmodern degenerate public taste, the perverted sensationalism that many critics liked to attribute to the spectators of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as well. Rather than being content with such trivialism, we should consider that these postmodern representational techniques function within the horizon of the epistemological uncertainties and the changing

ideas about the nature of the human being and meaning. They aim at breaking through the exhausted verbal, narrative traditions in order to produce a total effect upon the receiver, which was also the ambition of the early modern emblematic theater that condensed the iconographic traditions and combined them with the representation of abjection and violence.



