

The Semiography of Representational Techniques in Early Modern and Postmodern Drama

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Semiography

Researchers working in the fields of iconography and postsemiotics founded the Semiography Research Group in the English Department of the University of Szeged in 2001. The interdisciplinary program of the group is grounded in the poststructuralist semiotics of the speaking subject, and it unites the traditions of the semiotic and iconographic workshops that have been functioning in the Szeged school for several decades now.¹ My aim in the first part of the present paper is to provide an account of semiography as a method of research and interpretation. I am going to use the interpretive procedures of semiography in order to explicate the historical changes of the techniques that are employed in dramatic texts and theatrical performances to thematize the cultural imagery, the world model and the dominant identity patterns of society. The findings of iconographic and iconologic research are recontextualized by semiography in the new theoretical framework of the postsemiotics of the subject, and they are located within the semiotic world model of the historically specific social symbolic order, in relation to the status of the sign and the speaking subject. At the same time, semiographic research sheds light on the metamorphoses and survival of the tropes and modes of symbolization and visual representation in the postmodern. It maps out the ideologically specific semiotic logic that governs the social circulation of symbols and images.

In the second part of my paper I shall analyze the analogies and parallels that are revealed in the representational techniques of early modern tragedy and postmodern drama when we apply the semiographic approach and understand the dramatic texts on the basis of a representational logic that is grounded in the semiotic disposition of the specific age. I employ the concept of semiotic disposition on the basis of the writings of Jurij Lotman. It covers those deep-structure beliefs and attitudes which determine the ideas of a culture about signification and the (guaranteed or non-guaranteed) signifying capacity of the elements of reality and the human being.² The structure of the dramatic text withholds a substantial amount of information that is activated only when the text is inserted into the theatrical context of reception (be it an actual theater or a stage hypothetically constructed in the imagination of the reader), and this

¹ Publications of the workshops include *The Iconography of the Fantastic*, ed. Márta Barótiné Gaál, Attila Kiss and György Endre Szönyi (Szeged: JATEPress, 2002); *The Iconography of Power. Ideas and Images of Rulership on the English Renaissance Stage*, ed. György Endre Szönyi and Rowland Wymer (Szeged: JATEPress, 2000), and *Színházzemiográfia. Az angol és olasz reneszánsz dráma és színház szemiotikája ikonográfiája*, ed. Katalin Demcsák and Attila Kiss (Szeged: JATEPress, 1999).

² Jurij M. Lotman, "Problems in the Typology of Cultures" in *Soviet Semiotics*, ed. Daniel P. Lucid (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), pp. 214-220.

theatrical context operates according to the representational logic that is determined by the fundamental semiotic disposition of culture.³

The introduction of semiographic methodology relies on the multimedia studies that are carried out in the English Department of the University of Szeged, applying a *performance-oriented semiotic approach* to the dialectic of dramatic text and performance text. These multimedia projects produce interactive CD publications and they use a multiplicity of sign channels (writing, sound, movement, music, icon, emblem, etc.) to interpret and demonstrate in a hypertextual system the polysemous representational logic of the theater, which also operates through several sign channels. One stream in the work of the research group investigates the analogies between early modern and postmodern dramas from the perspective of theater semiography. The contention of this analysis is that the world models of the two historical periods reveal semiotic resemblances. Both periods are characterized by an epistemological crisis which arises from the questioning of the earlier conceptual paradigms and the absence of a new, stable world model. Early modern culture starts to distrust the high semioticity which determined the medieval world model and considered the universe as an ordered hierarchy of interrelated meanings and symbolic correspondences. In a similar fashion, the postmodern brings about a crisis of the unfinished project of modernism which was established upon the rationalism of the Enlightenment. When we insert the dramatic texts into the representational logic of the theater that functions according to the semiotic world model or the semiotic crisis of the particular age, we realize that the plays use comparable representational strategies to thematize the dilemmas concerning the identity of the human being and the possibilities of getting to know reality. The quakes in the metaphysics of semiosis and the guarantees of meaning are processed in similar ways by the English Renaissance and late Renaissance plays and the dramas of the postmodern experimental theater. As a typical result of the epistemological crisis, plays such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*, Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9* or Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* all portray the character as a heterogeneous structure divided from within, constituted at the meeting point of external determining factors and discourses. I have selected these plays as subjects of the present investigation because they very explicitly display the representational techniques at stake. Since the representability of reality and the human being's capacity to get to know reality are equally questioned in this period of transition, the theater as a context for total communicative effect makes an attempt to employ specific representational techniques in order to exert an effect on the spectator through which it seems to be possible to move beyond the uncertainties of socially posited meanings and arrive at a more complete experience of involvement and witnessing.

³ For the possible reconstruction of the representational logic of the Renaissance theater, see: Alan C. Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

⁴ I employ the concept of the abject on the basis of Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

In what follows I am going to discuss *the semiography of violence and abjection* which are characteristic of the tradition of tragedy and survive mainly in the postmodern experimental theater, performance art and certain subgenres of the cinema. At the same time, we can also notice the survival of the romance tradition which aspired to a different mode of totalization: the elaborate fantastic imagery in the postmodern multiplex cinemas and in the labyrinthine malls and plazas establishes the magic, enchanted islands of consumerist culture.

The primary theoretical consideration of semiography argues that a psychoanalytically informed postsemiotics of the subject is indispensable for the understanding of the *effect* that is exerted on the spectator by the representation of violence and abject subjects.⁴ The abjection of the body and character integrity, the thematization of corporeality deprive the receiver of the expected, fixated, stable identity-position. My contention is that behind such totalizing techniques of pluralization and desubstantiation we can discover the uncertainty and the epistemological crisis of the early modern and the postmodern period. As a result of the characteristics of the genre itself, the theater is a social practice which is the most sensitive to questions concerning the status, the efficiency of the sign and representation. It is an essential characteristic feature of the theater as well as the dramatic text designed for stage production that they always address and thematize representational problems, since the theater itself is a game which is played against an unresolvable representational dilemma, i.e., the impossibility of total presence. The theater attempts to conjure up the presence of that which is absent: the belief in the possibility or impossibility of such an endeavor defines the semiotic disposition of the particular culture. In the course of a crisis in the world model and the semiotic disposition which govern epistemology, the theater will thematize the problems of signification, and it will also explore representations that are more effective than the signifying techniques provided by the available and exhausted traditions.

In order to further elucidate the parallels of the early modern and the postmodern, I am going to summarize some of the findings of *The Titus Andronicus Project* which is carried out within the framework of the semiographic research. I will rely on the postsemiotics of the subject in order to explicate the growing affinity with which the postmodern turns to the emblematic-anatomic drama and theater of early modern culture through various adaptations and reinterpretations.

The postsemiotics of the subject

From a semiotic perspective, the theories of the subject can be grouped into two types: the theories of the enunciated and the theories of enunciation.⁵ The first orientation studies the mechanical relationships between signifiers and signifieds, and it considers the subject as the controller of signification. The subject in this approach is a self-enclosed unit which is in possession of the

⁴ I employ the concept of the abject on the basis of Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

⁵ Julia Kristeva, "The Speaking Subject" in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), pp. 210-220.

linguistic rules, and which always stands hierarchically above the elements of meaning production, as a guarantee and origin of meaning and identity.

Theories of enunciation investigate the constitution and production of the above elements of semiosis, which are no longer considered to be units or monads, but rather non-stable products in the heterogeneous signifying process. The 'Freudian revolution' brought about a decisive turn, an inversion in the relationship between signifier and subject, and led to the realization that the subject is a heterogeneous structure in which several modalities of signification are simultaneously at work. Since these are not all rational modalities, it follows that the subject can no longer be the exclusive governor of meaning. "The present renewal of semiology considers sense as a signifying process and a heterogeneous dynamic, and challenges the logical imprisonment of the subject in order to open the subject towards the body and society".⁶

Michel Foucault repeatedly points out in his archeological and genealogical surveys of the history of subjectivity that the notion of the individuum is a relatively new phenomenon in Western civilization, emerging in the eighteenth century together with the advent and the settling in of the Enlightenment world model. "Before the end of the eighteenth century, *man* did not exist – any more than the potency of life, the fecundity of labour, or the historical density of language".⁷ This argument can be joined with Lotman's semiotic typology of cultures and the proposal of Julia Kristeva which suggests a typology of subjectivities on the basis of their historical specificity. As a result of this combined perspective, we will observe that semiotically stable world models result in an understanding of the human being as a compact, self-identical entity which has an inherently guaranteed signifying potential, such as the iconic subject of the medieval high semioticity or the self-identical, sovereign Cartesian subject of modernism. The epistemological crisis of cultures with an unstable semiotic disposition, however, results in questions about the meaning, the self-identity, the homogeneity of the subject.

When we survey the history of Western theatrical practices, we find that the early modern period and the postmodern period equally use the *self-reflexive genotheater* as a cultural mode of expression to set up laboratories in which the constitution of this heterogeneous subject can be scrutinized. Uncertainties as to the self-knowledge, the self-mastery and sovereign identity of the subject are in the focus of these theater models, and they foreground a concept of a subject that is constituted at the expense of losses and through the internalization of pre-fabricated identity patterns. The thematization of self-fashioning in English Renaissance drama and the problematization of character desubstantiation in postmodern experimental drama can both be theorized through the postsemiotics of the heterogeneous speaking subject.⁸

In a semiographic approach it is possible to set up a typology of the theater in which we can distinguish two basic theater types on the basis of the semiotic nature of representational techniques and the presence or absence of the

⁶ Ibid., p. 219.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 308.

⁸ Cf. Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character. Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996), esp. Chapter 4: "Signaling through the Signs".

metaperspectives. Following the textual typology of Julia Kristeva, I apply the name *genotheater* to the first type which operates with various elements of the theatrical metaperspective, while *phenotheater* will be the designation of the second type, which aims at photographic representation.⁹ The genotheater, similarly to the genotext, avoids or even destroys the illusion of the closure of signification and the success of mimetic representation (i.e., the bridging of the gap between signifier and referent), and it employs self-reflexive strategies to continuously jolt the spectator out of the expected, comfortable identity-positions in which reality would appear to be representable and consumable. As opposed to this, it is exactly this unreflected, problem-free position that is offered to the receiver by the phenotheater, which communicates the ideology that reality is totally representable and manageable. Consequently, we can notice in the history of the theater that the genotheater, which reflects upon the epistemological and ideological implications of representation, gains power in those transitional historical periods that are characterized by Lotman as clash-points between opposite world models. The genotheater can be theorized as a social practice that participates in the intensified semiotic activity through which such periods strive to map out new ways of representing and getting to know reality.¹⁰

Dramas written for and staged in the genotheater do not aim at conjuring up the faithful image of a reality which is not present, and they do not tend to stage characters that are in full control of a mastered reality and identity. The presence they establish is not achieved by the deictic and photographic techniques of the stage, but much rather by the effects that the stage imagery exerts on the spectators through representational techniques such as the staging of the abject, tortured body and the desubstantiated and composite character-in-process. These representational techniques will be in the focus of the following part of my paper.

The early modern emblematic theater

Protagonists in English Renaissance drama are situated at the clash of two radically opposing world models, without having safe recourse to either. The metaphysics of the name no longer guarantees their identity, since the earlier, medieval transcendental motivation between the human being as signifier and the divine essence as signified is questioned.¹¹ At the same time, the new tenets of rationalism and empiricism are not fully in place yet, so that old and new identity types are proclaimed and doubted simultaneously in the imagery of

⁹ Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), pp. 86-9.

¹⁰ Cf. Jurij Lotman and Boris A. Uspensky "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture" in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986), pp. 410-22.

¹¹ For the problematization of the metaphysics of the name, see Franco Moretti, "The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty" in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. John Drakakis (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 45-83. Serpieri relates the same problem to the clash between world models: Alessandro Serpieri, "Reading the Signs: Towards a Semiotics of Shakespearean Drama" in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 118-43.

binarisms such as appearance vs. reality, show vs. substance, surface vs. depth, identity vs. disintegration.

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 the epistemological uncertainties of the period. 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 the *immediacy of experience* which is otherwise impossible to obtain. We need the postsemiotic viewpoint to investigate the spectator in its complexity as speaking subject in order to perceive the logic of this *totalizing semiosis*.

The *theatrical interaction* between stage and auditorium, based on the tradition of audience participation in Shakespeare's theater, imposes a complex semiotic labor on the audience, through which they do not simply decode, but also *create or encode emblematic meanings*. This semiotic disposition played a very important part in the strategies of interpreting the character or the play as a whole. [...] The emblematic devices and systems of encoding are at work *simultaneously* with the developing techniques of mimetic roleplaying and the questioning of emblematic correspondences. We have a peculiar *polysemy* of stage and character, which is a result of the inherited allegorical-emblematic and the emerging syntagmatical modes of thinking. [...] Through the images of blindness, folly, suffering and fallibility, the character of Lear is transformed into an emblematic representation, and, to recall the terminology of the emblem, this representation is commented on by the title of the play as inscriptio and the verbal enactment as subscriptio. This emblematic value is constantly *decentered and questioned* by the new [rational, non-emblematic] strategies of interpretation, which desemiotize the human signifier, and deprive it of its multilevelled polysemous potentiality. Yet, a balance or rather an uncertainty is maintained between the two semiotic attitudes, situating the Renaissance stage at the point of *transition* from emblematic to photographic theater.¹²

The English Renaissance emblematic theater, which stages characters as composite agents without originary identity, works as genotheater to exert a total semiotic impact on the audience which results in the spectator being transformed into a subject-in-process. This *spectator-in-process* again and again occupies new positions and gains a metaperspective upon his/her own heterogeneity as well. At the same time, this genotheater also operates with representational techniques which are directed at the non-rational, psychic and corporeal modalities, in order to affect more directly the psychosomatic

¹² Attila Kiss, *The Semiotics of Revenge. Subjectivity and Abjection in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Acta Universitatis de Attila Jozsef Nominatae. Papers in English and American Studies V. Monograph Series 1. Szeged: Department of English, Attila Jozsef University, 1995), p. 35. For the emblematic theatre, see also: Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages. 1300 to 1600. Vol. 2: 1576 to 1660, Part One* (New York: Columbia UP, 1963), pp. 153-8, 206-9. Peter M. Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1979), Dieter Mehl, "Emblematic Theatre", *Anglia*, 95 (1977), pp. 130-8.

structure of the subject. The representation of violence and abjection is a technique which is capable of involving the entirety of the subject in the process of semiosis, since the experiencing of the abject plugs the subject back into the dimension of the suppressed memories of the body and the motility of the drive energies. In this way, the theatrical representation achieves a more direct impact upon the material presence of the subject.

The foregrounding of the semiotic modality of signification through rhythm, violence of linguistic logic, code-breaking or abjection of the symbolically coded object (e.g. the body), deprives the subject of its comfortable linguistic self-identity, plugging him/her back into corporeal motility and the pulsations of the body. [...] The body, the material basis of signification is always the opaque, suppressed element of semiosis: it is the body which speaks, but the identity of the speaking subject is always predicated as opposed to the otherness, the heterogeneity of that body. Historically specific discourses contain and suppress this experience of the body through different technologies, and one of the specific semiotic achievements of the syntagmatic world model is the construction and dissemination of a 'modern' understanding of subjectivity through the expulsion of the experience of the body from the dimensions of discourse.¹³

Thus, the production of the new, abstract subjectivity of rationalism and the project of modernism will be supported and enhanced by the photographic realism of the bourgeois theater, which participates in those social discourses that disseminate the misrecognition of the subject as the non-corporeal, compact ego of the *cogito*.

The Shakespearean theater, with its very structure as the emblem of the universe and its preconditioning motto 'Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem' above the entrance of the Globe theater, relies on the audience's emblematic way of thinking, which semiotizes every element of the stage on different levels. With the rise of the syntagmatic world model, which projects the vertical axis of cognition onto a horizontal dimension with no correspondences and semiotic overcoding, the dominant techniques of theatrical representation change. Emblematic stage properties and actions are replaced by an aim to create an illusion of reality, a photographically mimetic theatrical environment.¹⁴

In what follows, I will observe some representative pieces of early modern and postmodern drama to demonstrate the operations delineated above, with special emphasis on the representation of violence as a totalizing semiotic effect, and the thematization of the constitution of the subject.

The Spanish Tragedy, the prototype of English revenge tragedies, introduces us into a universe in which we are taught the lesson that no total metaposition can be obtained by the role-playing subject, since the absolute position of mastery is already occupied by the allegory of Revenge, the metaphor of the unconscious and the supremacy of drives over the rational reasoning of the split subject. The revenger enters into a chain of roles, trying to control the discursive space around him through the production of corpses, since these products, the signifiers of death have the *most unquestionable meaning* in the cosmos of the play.

Shakespeare provides us with similar labyrinths of role-playing and identity

¹³ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

crisis, but he gradually moves from a focus on the impact of visual and emblematic horror towards the thematization of the social symbolic order as an all-enveloping discursive power. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, the proliferation of emblematic images and the visual representation of violence and abjection simultaneously target the rational, iconographic decoding activity and the unconscious, psychosomatic reactions of the spectator. Shakespeare then gradually abandons this primacy of visual and emblematic density as a promise of total semiotic effect, and in the later tragedies the protagonist's most important recognition is that the word, the symbol, the skin of ideology impenetrably covers everything.

Later on in Jacobean tragedy the multiplication of roles and metaperspectives often turns into a burlesque of the revenge tradition. Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy* excels in a full-scale elimination of any original identity by transforming himself into an author-director-actor of revenge, while the systematic prolongation of the anatomical depiction of violence pushes the spectator to the limits of tolerable stage representation. When the Duke's mouth is rotting away, his eyes are starting to move out of their sockets, and his tongue is nailed to the ground while his soul is being tortured by the sight of the affair between his adulterous wife and his bastard son, the spectator falls into a gap of indecidability that opens up between emblematic exuberance, psychic torture and absurdity.

Postmodern experiments

The pluralization and desubstantiation of subjectivity and the representation of the object both function as theatrical techniques of spectator involvement in postmodern experimental theater as well. The semiotic disposition of postmodern cultures faces dilemmas that show significant analogies with those of the early modern period. After the unsettling of an ordered and teleological world model, the early modern as well as the postmodern period have to cope with the absence of a guaranteed epistemology. The unfinished project of modernism ends up in postmodern doubts concerning the enthusiasm of the Enlightenment heritage, while the status of the cognizing subject and its relation to reality become doubtful. The representational techniques of postmodern drama and theater, just like those of early modern drama, endeavor to effect the spectator through more than words by decomposing the position of reception through the disintegration of the character positions and the fixed expectations in the horizon of meaning creation.

We get a comprehensive demonstration of the above in the one act plays of Adrienne Kennedy, who seems to encapsulate the problematic of the postmodern in her extraordinarily condensed dramas. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro* the protagonist Negro-Sarah is accompanied by four other characters (Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba) which are each "one of herself" according to the stage directions.¹⁵ In *The Owl Answers* all the characters are pluralized, composed of several emblematic identity types, such as the protagonist: "She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl".¹⁶ In this play it is not only the

¹⁵ Adrienne Kennedy, *In One Act* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984), p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

characters that are composite but the places as well. At the beginning of the drama “The scene is a New York subway is the Tower of London is a Harlem hotel room is St. Peter’s”.¹⁷ In Kennedy’s plays the characters are portrayed as temporary meeting points of different *discursive identity traces*, composite subjectivities that feed on various traditions and emblematically powerful cultural imageries, markers of race, culture, religion and rank. Negro-Sarah and Clara Passmore desperately try to construct an identity of their own, which repeatedly turns out to be just a fragile intersection of intertexts. This intertextual identity foregrounds an awareness of the poststructuralist realization that subjectivity does not stem from an inherent originary and transhistorical core of the speaking subject. It is fabricated by the technologies of power that situate us in social positions where we will have access to the traces of identity patterns that will add up to the masks we wear. Hence, these desubstantiated protagonists of postmodern drama are thrown into process, and they produce a theatrical effect that puts the spectator on trial and in process as well. Our meaning making activity, which is the precondition for the emergence of our ego-position, is destabilized through the ambiguities, pluralities and uncertainties in the labyrinth of names, references and multiple plot lines. Instead of the illusion that reality can be comfortably processed and handled through representation and closure by the self-sovereign subject, these plays thematize the heterogeneity of the subject and they deny any closure that could grant a teleological satisfaction for the reader.

Kennedy’s dramas work against automatized meaning-creation, very much like the prototypical postmodern play, *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Müller, in which the protagonist stages an attack not only against his name which is emblematic of the Western canon and the cultural practices of identity-generation, but also against the very play in which he is embedded. Nonetheless, this metaperspective will reveal the irony that no subject can shake off the constraints and determination of the symbolic order, just as no character can break free from the play in which it happens to be raging against the play itself. “I’m not Hamlet. I don’t take part any more. [...] My drama doesn’t happen anymore”.¹⁸

A similar irony can be perceived in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud 9* where characters are constructed according to the technology of gender and abjection. Black subjects are compelled to try to become white, female subjects are coerced to strive to become males, which results in their total blindness to the conditions of their subjectivity and the fact that they have already gone through a total metamorphosis. This transformation is foregrounded by the fact that the black character is played by a white actor, while the female character is played by a male actor. We are reminded here of the post-structuralist recognition that the precondition of any ideology is the subjects’ total blindness to the nature and all-encompassing presence of that ideology.¹⁹

I have selected the above examples to demonstrate how the postsemiotic

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁸ Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984), p. 56.

¹⁹ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 20-1.

perspective reveals that the heterogeneity of the subject, which results from the general epistemological crisis, is an extensively thematized problem in early modern and postmodern drama. Similarly to early modern plays, the dramas in the postmodern non-classical experimental theater engage the technique of the pluralization of identity roles and the representation of violence and abjection. Absurd drama launches the trend that problematizes the uncertainty or the loss of meaning and identity, which will run through Artaud's theater of cruelty, Kantor's theater of death, and the ritual self-mutilations of postmodern performances up to the French Orlan's artistically performed self-operations or the new twenty-first century anatomical theater and exhibitions of the German professor Hagens.²⁰ When we disclose the logic of the tradition of the spectacle and the representational techniques in the theater, the semiographic perspective we employ also uncovers that it is not simply bad taste or the thirst for sensationalism that makes the postmodern audience turn again with growing interest to those early modern tragedies, revenge plays and manneristic melodramas which have long been repressed in the modern canon. Through the analysis of the semiotic disposition in these two historical periods of transition and uncertainty, we gain a more accurate understanding of why a play such as *Titus Andronicus* becomes again a well-liked drama for postmodern criticism, theater and film, although earlier on several critics were determined to prove that 'the genius of Shakespeare' could not have much share in the writing of the play.

Abject bodies

Shakespeare's first tragedy abounds in the images and emblematic image clusters of violence, horror, mutilation and abjection, thus committing itself to the idea of the spectacle, the representation of visual image. In its dramaturgical focal point we find the emblematic stage tableau where the mutilated Lavinia, as the outcast of the patriarchal system, carries in her mouth the symbol of the phallic order, the hand of the father, in this way totalizing the imagery of chaos which is so persistent in the play. Here, Shakespeare is still committed to the tradition which is also observed by the majority of English Renaissance and manneristic dramas. The semiotic density of the emblematic stage is produced by the spectacle, the all-enveloping visual effect, the narrated and depicted abjection. Well-known protagonists of English Renaissance drama belong to this vogue. Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* appears on the stage with the decomposing corpse of his diseased son, before biting his tongue out to reserve all possible meaning to himself in a universe where language has become utterly unreliable. Marlowe's Faustus is torn into pieces by devils after a prolonged scene of mental and physical agony, Tamburlain is indulging in the proliferation

²⁰ In spite of the official prohibition, professor Günther von Hagens performed his first public dissection on November 19, 2002 in London, creating a postmodern revival of the tradition of the early modern anatomical theater. His traveling exhibition of dissected corpses keeps provoking world-wide criticism, acknowledgement and enthusiastic applause. For the anatomical theater see: Attila Kiss, "The Body Semiotic in the Theater" in *Sederi IX*. ed. Pilar Cuder Domínguez et.al. (Revista de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Renacentistas Ingleses, No. 11, Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2002), pp. 13-24.

of violence, while Webster sets body parts on journey and Middleton's revenger follows the itinerary of a skull which becomes his fetish. No wonder that these plays were not granted high places in the canon that was later established to serve the emerging bourgeois taste of the eighteenth century. An artificially constructed mythical image of Shakespeare could become the cornerstone of that canon, and this image was made possible by the fact that he gradually turned from the power of the image and the spectacle of horror towards the thematization of the rule of the word and social discourse.

A comparison of *Titus Andronicus* with *Hamlet* reveals that in the latter drama the spectacle of the abjected and violated body no longer offers the promise of more direct experience that would surmount the uncertainties of semiosis. For Hamlet, the word, the codes of the symbolic order impenetrably cover all the phenomena of the world, and the uncertainty or ambiguity of those codes cannot be overcome through an earlier theological recourse to transcendental guarantees, or some direct experiencing of reality. Nonetheless, the effect of abjection is still powerfully present, since Hamlet himself as a character becomes an agent of abjection, but this, of course, was largely ignored by the rhetorical and character criticism that canonized Shakespeare. No metaphysical center exists any longer in the universe of *Hamlet* which would guarantee a transcendental inner core identity for the human being. Oscillating between the feudal, military heritage of his father, and the new reality-patterns of the humanist world of Wittenberg, Hamlet is transformed into an extended emblem of ambiguity and uncertainty, an in-between subject which we can also consider the prototype of "the hollow subject of modernity".²¹ It is the original heterogeneity and previously so spectacular corporeality of this subject that later on the Cartesian discourses of rationalism will be continuously trying to suppress and contain. The discourses of bourgeois ideology on the self-mastery and self-identity of the individuum will constitute a dominant technology of power up until the postmodern, when the body, the spectacle of its decomposition and the deconstruction of essentialist identities once again become the fields of experimentation for renewed attempts to move beyond the power of ideological containment, to penetrate the linguistic skin on the word and our subjectivity.

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. In a second step, the importance of plays such as *Titus Andronicus* is minimized 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

²¹ Cf. Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body. Essays on Subjection* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 28-37.

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.²²

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”.²³ 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.

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 three subsequent realizations of the play. 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. Of the three interpretations of the play I list as examples here, only the second and the third are careful enough to recognize the emblematic parallel in the blood imagery of the two scenes.

The first production is the 1975 BBC film version, where the manner of performance is still unquestionably determined 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 second in the chronological order is the stage production by the Hungarian Csiky Gergely Theater of Kaposvár, which utilizes the imagery of abjection much more systematically. After an elaborate ‘mutilated dance’ of crawling and creeping around the entire space of the stage, Lavinia spits the

²² Deborah Willis, “‘The gnawing vulture’: Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 53 (2002), pp. 21-52..

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

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.

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*. 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 dinner scene 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.

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. We also have to 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.