

## **The Affective Public Sphere: Romeo Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face Regarding the Son of God***

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In this paper I want to look at the theatrical public sphere as a realm of extreme affective arousal. The theatre today, at least in its Western manifestations, is largely an autonomous sphere of aesthetic experience, which only on special occasions finds topics of interest to the larger public sphere. The relationship between the public sphere and the theatre is, in my understanding of the term, a relationship between inside and outside, between the internal dynamics of exchange between stage and auditorium, performer and spectator, and the more difficult interconnections between the generally closed realm of performance and the wider dynamics of political and social debate. A theatrical performance is something that normally takes place between spectators and performers who enter into an artistic contract, which is therefore outside and beyond state control and moral censure. I shall look at a recent example where this functioning contract was exploded. The production *On the concept of the face, regarding the Son of God*, created by Italian director Romeo Castellucci and his theatre Societas Raffaello Sanzio has led to violent protests in France and Italy coordinated by Catholic groups who have been joined on occasions by right-wing and Islamist groups as well. I shall examine the production and the public protests surrounding it in an effort to understand how the theatrical public sphere functions in a mediatized society.

If we take affective arousal is a gauge of society's moral pulse, then once trusted categories such as obscenity seem to longer function as guarantors of controversy or scandal. In 2011 a Japanese festival production, *Castle of Dreams*, which involves protracted copulation (amongst other sexual practices) on stage, was shown in Munich at the Spielart Festival. The only audible protest I detected at the performance I attended was "Oh No not again" towards the end when the performers looked set to engage

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in another round of ennuied coitus.<sup>1</sup> Despite even some buzz that the sex scenes were, depending on the performers' form on the day, sometimes real and not simulated, the performances occasioned no kind of public protest whatsoever. The festival audience is of course an even more pronounced form of the enclosed theatrical public sphere, which attracts a particular kind of aesthetically hardened and morally indifferent spectator (to which I would count myself). One critical reaction encapsulates the capacity of the theatrical public sphere in the narrower sense to absorb protest:

*Thanks to this formal consistency the spectator experiences surprising feelings of fascination; not that all too middle-class distanced fascination for all that is disgusting and revolting but the fascination for an unforeseen utopian potential that inhabits the activities on the stage.<sup>2</sup>*

In this moral universe formal consistency trumps whatever residual affective response may still be present.

During the same festival another performance took place, which did occasion protest, if only of a mild kind. Outside the two performances of Romeo Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face, regarding the Son of God* at the Munich Kammerspiele, the city's municipal theatre, a group of reticent Catholics hovered around the entrance distributing pamphlets protesting against the production. Apprehension was in fact high that something more violent might eventuate because only a month earlier in Paris the same production had been accompanied by a week of fierce protests.

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<sup>1</sup> First performed in Japan in 2006 as *Yume no shiro*, the performance was conceived and directed by Daisuke Miura. See for example the press kit published online for performances in Montréal. [www.fta.qc.ca/sites/fta.qc.ca/files/documents/press\\_kit\\_fta\\_2011\\_yume\\_no\\_shiro\\_eng.pdf](http://www.fta.qc.ca/sites/fta.qc.ca/files/documents/press_kit_fta_2011_yume_no_shiro_eng.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Online review published on [Nachtkritik.de](http://Nachtkritik.de); cited here on the [Spielart](http://Spielart.org) website: [www.spielart.org/programm/?n=257-283&dId=18](http://www.spielart.org/programm/?n=257-283&dId=18). My translation.



Fig. 1

### **Ten Days that Shook Paris**

On the evening of 20 October 2011 nine demonstrators stormed the main stage of the Theatre de la Ville in Paris during the opening night of Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face, regarding the Son of God*. They unrolled a banner with the words 'Christianophobia—it's enough!' A scuffle ensued with the stagehands who tried to clear the stage, until finally after 20 minutes the police were called to remove the demonstrators. Before the performance another group had tried to prevent spectators from entering the theatre by chaining themselves to the doors, throwing tear gas and stink bombs and distributing pamphlets denouncing the 'Christianophobic' performance. In the eyes of the protesters, the production was highly blasphemous and represented a clear assault on the central iconographic image of the Christian faith, Christ himself. Fortunately, digital cameras were on hand in the auditorium to record the protests, footage of which was promptly posted a website maintained by one of the protest groups.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuPCF238ejI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuPCF238ejI). The film was uploaded by the nationalist group *Renouveau français*.

The production itself has three parts. In the first section, an old man stricken by incontinence, is cared for by his son. He repeatedly soils his nappy which the solicitous son, clad in an expensive suit, and trying desperately to leave for work, changes in full view of the audience, who are treated not just to a view of the old man's naked bottom, but are exposed to the olfactory sensory experience of uncontrollable diarrhoea. The setting is a clinically white affluent apartment framed upstage by a huge image of Antonello da Messina's 15<sup>th</sup> century painting, *Salvator Mundi*, which literally surveys the stage and the auditorium. After repeated attacks of diarrhoea, the son, in desperation, leaves his stricken father and walks up to the image, touching and kissing it gently on the lips while the old man sits weeping on the bed in soiled sheets. In the second part a group of children carrying knapsacks enter and begin pelting the painting with hand grenades and stones. (Fig. 1) They leave the stage and the old man takes a canister of brown liquid, which he pours over himself, before walking diagonally upstage emptying the contents behind him on the white floor. Finally, the audience is left staring at the face of Christ who stares back. The image begins to tremble, sustaining violent pressure from behind, and begins to break apart until it begins to issue forth a dark viscous slurry that seeps down to the floor. Words become visible and we can read the famous verse from the Psalms: "the Lord is my Shepherd" into which is then interposed faintly the word '(not)'. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2

The storming of the stage on 20 October was only the beginning of what was to become a ten-day campaign of violent demonstrations result-

ing in 220 arrests and a large-scale public debate involving leading church figures, some of whom came out publicly in defence of the theatre, the production, and most importantly the freedom of expression. Fifteen of those arrested were charged under article 431-1 of the French penal code – ‘hindering the freedom of expression’ – which under French law is a criminal offense carrying a maximum sentence of one year’s imprisonment and/or a €15,000 fine. In conjunction with violence this charge can carry up to a three-year prison sentence and a €45,000 fine.

There is no doubt that the storming of the stage, a vociferous protest in the best French tradition, was accompanied by a high degree of affective arousal. I want to look more closely at the different kinds of affective expressions that were at play here. It is of less interest whether the emotions on display were real or staged to underscore what was evidently a political campaign. My focus will be instead on examining the interconnections between the affects/emotions represented and explored within the fiction of the performance and those represented and displayed in the public sphere.

Let us begin by looking at the display of affects and emotions in the performance itself. The traditional theory of the passions as enumerated in eighteenth century acting theory which draws in turn on classical rhetorical traditions views the production and experience of emotions (either passions or affects) in terms of a feedback loop encapsulated in the Horatian maxim *si vis me flere dolendum est primum ipsi tibi* (‘if you wish me to weep, you must be moved yourself’, or more generally, ‘to move your audience you must first be moved yourself’).<sup>4</sup> We find the same idea in Aristotle and Cicero, which is in turn based on a theory that emotions were transported by spirits that could move from the body of the actors to the bodies of the spectators.<sup>5</sup>

We can perhaps start by employing Kant’s distinction between feelings, affects and passions as elucidated in his *Metaphysics of Morals*. In Chapter 16 ‘To attain virtue one must first gain control of oneself’ Kant distinguishes under the broader term feeling (*Gemütsbewegungen*) between affects that are largely somatic (and in his moral universe childish and weak)

<sup>4</sup> Horace. *Ars Poetica*. V. 102.

<sup>5</sup> Roach (1985) 27.

and thus hardly controllable, and passions, which involve a degree of conscious manufacture. Whereas we cannot usually control the *affect* rage or anger, we can, with the right degree of moral virtue, certainly prevent it from being transformed into the *passion* of hate. Passions are therefore subject to conscious reflection and are thus in principle reversible.

Some (but by no means all) contemporary theorizations also distinguish between affect and emotions but tend to dispense with the somewhat dated and morally tinged, comprised (vice!) category of the passions. The American psychologist Silvan Tomkins has become a controversial reference point in the taxonomy of affects and emotions, defining the basic affects to be 'shame, interest, surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, and disgust'. He further separates out shame and disgust from the others as affects that construct a 'boundary line or barrier'<sup>6</sup>. Pays particular attention to disgust at bad smells (*dismell*), which he considers to be symptomatic of a later stage of evolution. Affects are, however, genetically programmed and not culturally learned.

In a performance displaying in hyperrealistic detail both the visual and olfactorial dimensions of bowel movements and fecal material, we can say that on one level the audience response, especially to the odour, would be one of disgust (*dismell*), and probably shame. On the diegetic level shame is the dominant affect, as the old man quite explicitly expresses shame for his lack of control over his bodily functions. The final words of the distributed text are from the Father: 'F - Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry... Forgive me... forgive me... forgive me...'<sup>7</sup>

The attack on the painting by the children with hand grenades demonstrates quite evidently anger, but with children it may just be an act of random vandalism without affective motivation. Here the audience must begin to attribute meaning and justification to what we could term 'acts of affects'. Although we find affects being represented diegetically and scenically, there is no attempt to involve the spectators in the *si vis me flere* feedback loop. On the contrary, an obvious disjunction emerges between represented and experienced affects: shame and anger on stage, un-

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<sup>6</sup> Sedgwick and Frank (1995) 22, cited in Gorton (2007) 335.

<sup>7</sup> 'On the Concept of the Face regarding the Son of God'. Unpublished manuscript, n.p.

controllable disgust in the auditorium. One blogging spectator, freelance journalist, Matt Trueman, listed the various emotions engendered by the performance, which he describes as a ‘picture of our own futures – the real horror (as opposed to disgust: horror is concerned with the future)’. The immediate somatic impact of disgust, an affect of absolute presence, is superseded by the more disturbing emotion of horror, which demands a more complex cognitive activity.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, in the critical reception of the production we find frequent phrases such as ‘deeply disturbing’ that suggest an internalisation of affective arousal. Following the psychoanalytical model, as spectators we have been trained to turn our disturbance inwards, thus balancing individualised and collectivised affects in a delicate equilibrium. *On the concept of the face* demonstrates perhaps an extreme expression of internalisation and privatisation as the intimacy of bowel movements is conjoined with filial love, a theatrical emotion that demands exteriorization. Castellucci remarks in one interview: ‘shit is an expression of love.’<sup>9</sup>

In the course of the performance the locus of the spectatorial gaze shifts from intense focus on a defecating, incontinent old man and his Armani-suited son’s solicitous care in a hyper realist mode through an equally intense contemplation of the face of Christ—we look at it, it looks at us. When the children enter the stage and begin attacking the picture with stones and hand grenades our perception shifts again to an allegorical mode as we try and make sense of the action. At this point the religious faith of the spectator, if available, presumably kicks in and creates a highly differentiated sphere of response amongst the audience. This bifurcation of the gaze continues as the image sustains various kinds of ill-treatment, until finally the black, dark liquid begins to ooze down and the text of the psalm is projected.

Spectatorial reaction to the stoning and soiling of the painting will of course differ in the extreme and range from semiotic curiosity (what does it mean?) to visceral outrage over two iconoclastic and blasphemous acts

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<sup>8</sup> <http://carouseloffantasies.blogspot.de/2011/04/review-on-concept-of-face-spill.html>.

<sup>9</sup> John O’Mahony, ‘Romeo Castellucci: Christ...what is that smell’. [www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/apr/19/romeo-castellucci-concept-face-son](http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/apr/19/romeo-castellucci-concept-face-son) (retrieved 3 April 2012).

against the central icon of Christianity. The gamut of responses cannot however be simply measured against a yardstick of faith. Theologically sophisticated Christians may see in blasphemy actually a confirmation of faith, the 'other side of side of prayer', as a Catholic padre put it in a post-performance discussion at the Munich Kammerspiele.<sup>10</sup> From an interpretive point of view – cognitive-cerebral, not affective-visceral – Castellucci seems to be less interested in consciously creating blasphemous images and eliciting affects of anger than exploring *in extremis* the central theological image of ecce homo in its modern sense of beholding human (rather than divine) suffering and the complex mimetic relationships between God, his son and man. Although God created the first man in his own image (Genesis 1.26), the fourth commandment expressly forbids the manufacture of images and likenesses of all things in heaven, on earth or in the water, a directive Christians, especially Catholics, have studiously ignored to great advantage.<sup>11</sup> The history of iconoclasm tells us that religiously motivated image-making can continue to incite extreme reactions. Whether we think of the Protestant iconoclasm of the Reformation, which systematically destroyed church art, or the recent reactions over the Mohammed caricatures where perceived blasphemy resulted in over 120 deaths, we can observe that the perception of blasphemy has always been the tinderbox waiting to be ignited.

As we observed above, it is difficult to shock an experienced theatre audience. The affective fault lines in Western societies today run along religious sensibilities and not moral outrage. Representations of extreme violence or even explicit sexual acts seldom elicit scandals – unless the acts of violence are directed against animals (see below). All critical comment focuses not surprisingly on the extreme depiction of excrement on stage and in particular its juxtaposition with a religious image. In a public statement Castellucci states that the 'old father's excrement is only a metaphor of human martyrdom as an ultimate and real condition.'<sup>12</sup> The phrase

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<sup>10</sup> 25 October 2011. Discussion between Castellucci, Jörg von Brincken and Father Rainer Hepler.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 20.4.

<sup>12</sup> Marion Cocquet, 'À qui déplaît le "visage du fils de Dieu"?' [www.lepoint.fr/culture/a-qui-deplait-le-visage-du-fils-de-dieu-24-10-2011-1388636\\_3.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/culture/a-qui-deplait-le-visage-du-fils-de-dieu-24-10-2011-1388636_3.php) (last retrieved 3 April 2012). All translations from the French are my own.



‘martyrdom’ to describe an advanced state of physical degradation and care dependency can only be justified in terms of the image of Christ behind the man, looking at him and us. A medical case is hereby overloaded with theological import. Yet this in itself is not disturbing, just disgusting perhaps in the direct physical sense of our somatic response to this sight and smell of faeces. All this can be coped with within the ethical universe of the internal theatrical sphere. The problems arise with the final image when the dark liquid begins to drip down the painting. It is this moment that the closed world of theatre breaks open and is pushed it out into the public sphere of political and religious debate.

The protests in Paris were preceded by a campaign against the performance that began shortly after the performances in Avignon in July 2011. Before that the production had been seen in a number of European cities and had occasioned little or no complaint. On 5 September 2011 a fringe Catholic group Institut Civitas posted a petition on the Internet protesting against *On the concept of the face* and a Spanish production entitled *Gogotha Picnic*. Entitled ‘Défendons Le Christ’ (in defence of Christ) the petition urges Christians to place direct protests with the theatres planning to program the two productions. The petition lists theatres and their contact details. Unusual for France it is offered in English as well:

I have learnt that your theatre plans to present a show (either *Golgotha Picnic* or *About the concept of the face of God*) the contents of which are uninhibitedly anti-Christian and raise my most profound indignation. The concept of freedom of expression in art does not allow everything. In any case, it is obvious that if this show were anti-Jewish or anti-Islamic you would not have it on your program. Have Christians in France become second-class citizens? Like many other Christians, I cannot remain indifferent and let Christ be insulted and humiliated on your stage. I therefore strongly ask you to remove this show from your theatre forthwith.<sup>13</sup>

The website is linked to France Jeunesse Civitas, which describes itself as a ‘satellite’ of the Institut Civitas and a Catholic political youth movement. It is in other words the youth arm of Institut Civitas and, like its parent organisation, expressly devoted to militant action with the aim

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<sup>13</sup> [www.defendonslecrucifix.org](http://www.defendonslecrucifix.org). Last retrieved 3 April 2012.

of restoring 'the social and political domination of NSJC (our Lord Jesus Christ) in our Fatherland'.<sup>14</sup>

The website with a petition outlines in precise detail the blasphemous material of the two productions. In the case of *On the concept of the face* the text describes the succession of scenes focusing in particular on the children attacking the image of Christ with 'genuine grenades to make it more real', the physical maltreatment of the picture and its transformation into a "brownish red colour evoking more the faecal matter of the preceding scene than blood."<sup>15</sup> The petition provides in effect a rudimentary form of performance analysis that pays special attention to the semiotics of colour.

This precise description and analysis of a blasphemous image presumably motivated Castellucci to issue a public statement on 22 October 2011 on the website of the Theatre de la Ville, two days after the riot on stage, in which he controversially 'forgave' the protestors, 'for they know not what they do.' He emphasizes the power of Christ's gaze which deeply interrogates every spectator:

*It is this gaze, which disturbs and lays bare, certainly not the brown colour whose evident artificiality represents fecal matter. At the same time – and I must say this with clarity – it is completely false that the face of Christ is soiled with excrement in the performance. Those who have attended the production have been able to see the final flow of a veil of black ink, descending down the picture like a black shroud.*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> www.francejeunessecivitas.com. Last retrieved 3 April 2012.

<sup>15</sup> www.defendonslecrucifix.org. La succession de tableaux montre tour à tour un vieillard nu se torchant les fesses, des enfants caillassant le visage du Christ (avec des grenades factices pour faire plus vrai) puis le visage innocent de NSJC est attaqué de l'intérieur. Il est d'abord trituré, déformé. comme par des mains et des pieds qui pousseraient la fine peau de surface. Ensuite on dirait qu'un grand couteau l'entaille, et de grandes coulures d'un brun-rouge évoquant plus les matières fécales de la scène précédente que le sang, se répandent sur lui, avant qu'un voile noir ne recouvre le portrait du fils de Dieu pour faire apparaître le mot de la fin : "You are not my shepherd" ("Tu n'es pas mon berger"). Last retrieved 3 April 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in 'Romeo Castellucci: adresse aux agresseurs', <http://blog.lefigaro.fr/thea->

Castellucci offers an alternative semiotic reading of his own production in response to that of the Catholic militants, making a distinction between the brownish colour of the excrement and the 'black ink' of the final scene. It must be said that this is somewhat disingenuous, as basic theatre semiotics tell us that spectators will establish analogies and correspondences between colours so that is difficult cognitively not to equate the brown material in the old man's nappies with the discolouration of the picture of Christ.

Semiotically speaking, the Institut Civitas were probably therefore justified to read the image as one of defilement. The black shroud that engulfs the face of Christ in the final scene carries, however, another meaning for Castellucci, but this is part of his own private artistic universe. The production *On the Concept* is part of a diptych loosely based around Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, *The Minister's Black Veil*, which remains incomplete, as Castellucci withdrew the eponymous piece after its premiere in April 2011 in Belgium. Production photographs of the performances at De Singel show the same image of de Messina's *Salvator Mundi* being engulfed by black material of some kind.

Despite the convincing visual and conceptual coherence behind Castellucci's own understanding of the image, the real meaning of the work lies in the mind of the beholder, the old truism of modernist aesthetics, which in the case of *On the Concept*, returned to and continues to haunt the production.

### **The Protestors**

But who are these combative theatre semioticians? The protests in Paris and their continuation in Italy in 2012 have brought to the fore a network of interconnected militant Catholic and ultra right-wing groups who seized the opportunity provided by Castellucci's production to pursue their own political agendas that, while not always congruent, certainly intersect tactically. According to *Le Figaro* several groups joined forces for the protests in Paris. In an article entitled 'Parmi les manifestants, des radicaux de toutes confessions', Christophe Cornevin remarked that other radical

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tre/2011/10/romeo-castellucci-adresse-aux.html. Last retrieved 3 April 2012.

groups, not noted for their dedication to Christian values, had appeared in 'the wake' of the Catholic groups. Originally instigated by the Catholic Institut Civitas and France Action Jeunesse, these groups were joined by the royalist Action française, the nationalists of *Renouveau France* and by even a black-shirted delegation of the violent right-wing student group *Groupe Union Défense (GUD)*.<sup>17</sup> Edouard Klein, the leader of the student group, justified their presence by explaining that when 'Christian and civilised values in Europe are attacked, the GUD must be present.'<sup>18</sup> One explanation for this 'unholy' alliance between devout Catholics on the one hand and neo-fascist, nationalist groups on the other points to recent 'readjustments' within the *Front national (FN)* which have resulted in the expulsion of some radical fringe elements who have now turned to 'direct struggle'.<sup>19</sup> At one point the protestors were even joined by Islamists opposed to the vilification of their prophet Issa (Jesus).

While the particularities of French right-wing politics certainly provide a partial explanation for the intense, interconnected opposition, it is by no means exhaustive. Recent protests in Italy show that the Catholic opposition there has corresponding groups also evincing similar allegiances between faith and blackshirts.

Before the performances planned to run from late January 2012 at Milan's *Teatro Franco Parenti* the conservative Catholic group *Militia Christi* began a campaign via internet blogs, Twitter and Facebook demanding the cancellation of the performances. The artistic director of the theatre, Ruth Shammah, received e-mails containing anti-Semitic abuse and threats. A press conference and public discussion before the premiere were cancelled so as not to exacerbate the situation. In comparison to France, where the official church, or at least some of its officials, had defended the production, the Vatican reacted with a statement by a leading official in which the production was termed 'offensive to Christians'. The statement was

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.lefigaro.fr/theatre/2011/10/30/03003-20111030ARTFIG00226-romeo-castellucci-la-piece-qui-fait-scandale.php>. Last retrieved 3 April 2012.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.lesinrocks.com/actualite/actu-article/t/72387/date/2011-10-30/article/1500-fondamentalistes-chretiens-defilent-a-paris-contre-la-christianophobie/>

<sup>19</sup> See Marion Croquet, 'À qui déplaît le "visage du fils de Dieu" ?', [http://www.lepoint.fr/culture/a-qui-deplaît-le-visage-du-fils-de-dieu-24-10-2011-1388636\\_3.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/culture/a-qui-deplaît-le-visage-du-fils-de-dieu-24-10-2011-1388636_3.php)

signed by Monsignore Peter Brian Wells, Assessor for General Affairs of the Secretariat of State, and thus a member of the inner circle of the Vatican. The statement ends with a sentence directly including the Pope: ‘his Holiness hopes that any lack of respect for God, the saints, and religious symbols meets with a strong and composed reaction from the Christian community, illuminated and guided by their pastors.’<sup>20</sup> The statement was not, however, intended as a direct intervention by the Holy See. Rather it was formulated as an answer to a letter by a Catholic priest to the Pontiff. Although the answer was not formulated or formalised by the Secretary of State, the addressee, Father Cavacoli immediately posted the response on the Riscossa Cristiana website, which was coordinating the protests and from there it was further distributed to journalists. Once the putative papal statement began to circulate, the Vatican hastened to provide official clarification, which was much more circumspect and less partisan than the first one. Writing for the *Vatican Insider*, published by the major daily, *La Stampa*, Andrea Torielli summarised the situation as an unfortunate case of bad impression management:

*The impression given by the sequence of events is that the Vatican has somehow been ‘dragged’ into a matter on which it had no intention of ruling, and that a devastating critique of Castellucci’s work ended up being attributed directly to the Pope (...) That same Father Cavacoli, as well as the organizers of the Committee of St. Charles Borromeo, had to acknowledge that public protests planned were at high risk of infiltration by groups and factions with strong ideological characteristics.*<sup>21</sup>

The risk of ‘infiltration’ by groups ‘with strong ideological characteristics’ proved well founded, as in Milan too militant Catholics were joined by neofascist groups and a climate of violence ensued which resulted in a massive police protection with demonstrations directly in front of the theatre being banned. From the point of view of militant protest, the issue is less one of semiotics of stage signs than of strategic politico-religious

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<sup>20</sup> Reprinted on the website: [www.riscossacristiana.it/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1283:lett-ss&catid=54:societa-civile-e-politica&Itemid=123](http://www.riscossacristiana.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1283:lett-ss&catid=54:societa-civile-e-politica&Itemid=123)

<sup>21</sup> Andrea Torielli, ‘The Vatican “dragged” into the controversy against Castellucci’, *Vatican Insider*, Feb. 13, 2012, <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/homepage/inquiries-and-interviews/detail/articolo/castellucci-teatro-theatre-francia-france-11983>.

alliances with a view to challenging an ideological opponent, in this case the theatre (with a Jewish artistic director) aided and abetted by the stage apparatus represented by the police.

Whether brown shit or black ink, the image of Christ is besmirched in Castellucci's production. Thus a public defilement takes place (in this case we can define the theatre as a public arena). We can observe a case where the internal workings of a presumably coherent artistic concept have escaped the safe enclosure of theatre and entered the wider public sphere. Here the actors, in this case transnationally well connected militant, Catholic and right-wing groups have been able to refashion the reception of the production according to their own political agenda.

The often violent protests ultimately serve to renew theatre's function and efficacy as a public sphere – if not of debate then as a point of intervention where much broader values are at stake. When riot police in Paris and Milan do battle with militant Catholics (not Islamists) and employ tear-gas to defend the freedom of artistic expression then we observe that firstly the immense institutional importance of theatre, especially those that receive state and or municipal support. Secondly, because it is a live public event theatre seems to occasion an even higher degree of arousal than other art forms.

Thirdly, perhaps the most effective affects are those that are enacted not on the stage within a fictional universe but on the stage as a public forum. The storming of the stage in front of prepared cameras can be seen as a well planned counter performance. Finally, the proliferation of these images in the internet – the filming was an integral part of the protest – ensured a medial distribution above and beyond traditional reporting in the newspaper or television. In any event theatre becomes – for a period at least – a nodal point of public discussion, debate and protests.

The continuing protests accompanying the production lead us to reconsider the relationship between theatre and the public sphere from a historical perspective. The idea of a self-satisfied, art-enjoying theatre public, which in the privacy of its publically subsidized institutions pursues its constitutionally protected right to view performances of a blasphemous

nature poses anew the question of the public nature of theatre. Why should a consensual artistic act even of a blasphemous kind not be possible? That it is not only possible but enjoys a high degree of legal safeguards can be seen by the reaction of authorities in both France and Italy, which provided massive police protection for spectators and performances. The more interesting question is why the protestors despite their obviously illegal actions – spectators' rights take precedence over the right to protest against blasphemy – continued their actions, even risking arrest, fines and prison sentences. Nobody after all was forcing them to watch the performance. Nevertheless, the idea that blasphemous acts and/or images were being enacted in a public space is reason enough to justify the protests. Leaving aside the political agenda of these groups, they seem to define theatre as a public sphere much more clearly and unambiguously than theatre spectators and politics do. Many countries have laws against the premeditated violation of religious feelings, if the injury is done in public. It is not my intention here to pursue the legal implications of two conflicting legal categories: the freedom of art versus the basic rights of third persons. Of more interest is the collision between two different perceptions: most theatre spectators and advocates of artistic freedom privatise theatrical space in order to enjoy this freedom, whereas the opponents declare it to be a public space, thereby being able to invoke blasphemy laws. Since the defenders of artistic freedom enjoy the protection of the state, the opponents have only via affective arousal which they employ with considerable physical and medial investment. Indirectly these new *indignants* significantly upgrade the public function of theatre. Because theatre – in comparison to television or cinema – can act without censorship, it takes on a particular role. Interestingly enough it is this freedom from censorship which theatre, the oldest medium, has in common with the Internet, the newest medium. It seems that the radical fundamentalists are more adept at using this regulatory vacuum than the artists themselves.

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