

"Such epochs are transient, but very brilliant: they are fertile without exuberance, and animated without confusion." (Tocqueville, 1848)

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## The dancing Glossolalia of European Identity in Romeo Castellucci's *Democracy in America*

My article aims to demonstrate that both contemporary theatre and dance offer significant means of elaborating a personal as well as collective identity in Bauman's terms of a constant process of aggregation of different aspects and trends (Bauman, 2003: 17). More precisely, I propose through the analysis of Romeo Castellucci's *Democracy in America* (2017) to reflect on the European identity as an epiphenomenon of today's tendencies.

### **Fluidity and European identity**

Using a Ricœurian terminology, we can say that contemporary identity focuses on *ipséité* rather than *mêmeté*. This means that human beings no longer recognise themselves as "in what is immutable, like [their] fingerprints" (Ricœur, 1990: 16)<sup>i</sup>, but in an ever-changing ontological *continuum*. This change in the Western logical conception prompted Bauman to theorize the birth of the "society of uncertainty" (Bauman, 1999: 3) within a "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000: 2). According to him, "the world around us is cut into loosely coordinated fragments, while our individualised lives are fragments into a series of never-ending episodes" (Bauman, 2003: 4).

Inevitably, this phenomenon has consequences in the sense of belonging to a community, more *vis-à-vis* with a national state. If in modernity identity was asserted mainly as a national identity, today the affiliation with a culture or a community is no longer unambiguous and immutable. As a result, membership no longer depends on origins, but is determined by a multitude of personal or external factors, which are then taken into account subjectively and ephemerally.

Upon consideration, this identity liquidity is a constant feature of European selfhood, which has, in fact, always been characterised by its instability and its provisional nature: "there has been, since men began to reflect, an immense variety of Europes" (Duroselle 1965: 68). The geographical concept of Europe has indeed evolved over time, following a heliotropic route from Asia (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo*), passing through Greece in *The Histories* of Herodotus or in *The Persians* of Aeschylus, to arrive at the modern *doxa* from Strabo (*Geographika*). Even the political concept of Europe has changed in both ancient and modern times, before and after the Treaty of Rome (1957) and the birth of the contemporary concept of the European Union, arguably the most important break in the conception of Europe. Only after the creation of the EEC, the borders were moved in 1973, 1981, 1986, 1990, 1995, 2004, 2007, in 2013, and they moved again in 2020 with a formal Brexit. The European identity is fluid and its spatial, temporal as well as ontological varieties have been adding and continue to add different constituent elements, depending on the eras and areas in which it is adopted (Bauman, 2008: 88; Berl, 1983: 15). As D'Andrea summarises: "the European identity turns out to be that of a civilization freed from constraints, which constantly goes beyond its internal and external limits, thus creating its own distinctive mark" (D'Andrea, 2001: 134).

This attribute also solidifies a status of continuous change, of continuous crisis – another term typical of modernity – of the European identity: quoting the title of a notorious essay by Paul Hazard (Hazard, 1935), we could say that Europe has always been confronted with a crisis of (self-) consciousness and communication or relationship between its various

parts (geographic areas, cultural areas, States, citizens etc.). The European crisis seems to be a force that is at the same time centripetal and centrifugal, taking into account the chronological and semantic variations we have spoken about. One of the biggest social obstacles for the European Union project is the split between the national-states' identities – which are facing a similar identity crisis at the local level (Lauret, 2009: 20–31) – and a European post-national identity (Ferry, 1998) not yet completely conceived and felt. Thus, the European project is undermined by the "subjectivism" (Eco, 2015) of the States, caused by the lack of reference points due to the European social and identity liquidity.

### ***Democracy in America: Language and Identity***

A corollary of this identity liquidity is a deterioration of the communication and trust in contemporary (European) society (Bauman, 2004: 27). In order to propose a reflection on the mechanisms and the languages able to keep communities progressing towards unity and equality of their members, Romeo Castellucci created *Democracy in America*, in which he explains that: "The aim of the work is to speak about the language. This play is not political. It is not a reflection on politics as much as, if anything, its conclusion" (Iachino, 2017).

Castellucci's choice to stage *De la démocratie en Amérique*<sup>ii</sup> (1848) by Tocqueville is correctly dictated by the fact that in this essay the French thinker affirms that the creation of a new democratic community – most of it being heterogeneous – is inseparable from a revolution of knowledge and language, which are the real vectors of identity recognition and of internal structuring of this type of community (Tocqueville, 1848: 134, 297). It is not by chance if according to Saussure (1972: 20), language is in fact a "conventional communication system. It's a social fact, independent of the individual's actions".

Furthermore, Tocqueville (1848: 157) as well as Castellucci think that theatre "constitutes the most democratic part of [...] literature" and that a linguistic and social transformation "will therefore first be discernible in the drama, and it may be foreseen that they will break out there with vehemence". According to the Italian artist, dramatic art is able to help the spectator and the community in their quest for identity because right from the beginning it has been closely linked to religion and politics:

Technically, politics is born when the gods die. Politics is born when the great god Pan dies; politics is born when the party ends. Politics and all the rights that derive from it originated when we stopped dancing. At that moment, Greek theatre was born. It is a controversy over politics; it is also a way of reconsidering the function of theatre. Political models are worn out and theatre gives access to a new form of thinking that is the unthinkable. (Sebastiano, 2017: 79)

From this point of view, theatre finds its origins within a revolution of the social structure of the community in which it is created. This process would push the actors as well as the spectators to rethink their personal and social identity, seek other forms of collective knowledge and use the theatre as a 'laboratory'. In Castellucci's words:

When [...] the political models are exhausted, it is the theatre that gives us access to a new form of thought that is inconceivable. The theatre represents the duality of life, and does not provide models. Thanks God, there is no pedagogy. The theatre offers lights, lights in an abyss. It shows possibilities. Thanks to narration, to fiction, the theatre is able to suspend reality. This is the form of authentic liberation, of reconciliation with your body, with the bodies of others, with being together. (Sebastiano, 2017: 77)

Therefore, dramatic art becomes for Castellucci a fundamental aesthetic vector of reorganisation and rationalisation – in which irrationality isn't excluded *a priori* (Duvignaud, 1965: 88; Turner, 1982: 144) – of a community facing an ontological and epistemological transformation. In order to represent and stimulate the creation of a new community, the play immerses the viewer in a time "out of language" (Pellanda, 2016), during which the languages and the community are created. Castellucci's work atomises language and identity, inviting viewers constantly to question and adapt their thoughts and perceptions, analysing every part with the same attention. It is both the personal and collective work that does not engage the audience in a precise and eternal theory of community, structure, language and identity, but stimulates them to make first-person (autonomous) decisions, to change their opinion, always to express their own ideas and feelings.

The communicational crisis of our society pushes Castellucci to reject a traditional narrative and an exclusively dialogical communication – "the modernity and its crisis marked the crisis of narration" (Lyotard, 1981: 5) – in order to ask open questions without accepting any *a priori* or nihilistic tendency. Castellucci's *modus operandi* is close to Plassard's idea that "if there is a fracture, it mainly concerns the macrostructure of the text of the representation, while at the microstructural level anecdotes, tales of life, historical events, myths and other narrative *topoi* continue to be used" (Plassard, 2017). Furthermore, we could say that "instead of representing facts and acts, we find a position of sound, of words, of sentences, of noises whose logic does not derive from a single meaning, but from the scenic composition, from a visual dramaturgy not oriented purely on the text" (Lehmann, 2002: 42). It is no coincidence that the subtitle of another work, *Giulio Cesare*, is "*pezzi staccati*", which is translated as "detached pieces": it is a question of self consciousness, of order, of relationship with the others: "the order that is destroyed and transformed, the omnipresence of disorder, the creation of an organization arise from basic needs. Every theory of disorder, all theory must involve and establish the concept of organization" (Morin, 1977: 227).

Consequently, summarising this piece is quite difficult, but we can do so in this way – two parts each made up of three scenes: (1) Chapter of the language: glossolalia; the dances with flags on each of which stands a letter; a dialogue between two Indians about the language and its role and value; (2) Behind a semitransparent curtain the actions are nuanced and indecipherable: a child in the arms of an adult who runs or moves away; choral dance; Sabbath; (3) A body without a figure, a simple stone, men (the actors are all women) must split it, build it, transform it; (4) Pilgrim peasants Elizabeth and Nathaniel measure their material and spiritual misery; the faith of the two colonists is no more than blind superstition; potatoes are rotten; she screams and is possessed by a demon; (5) A series of writings follows: of places, historical characters, biblical citations, titles, the (non-chronological) succession of the acts that make the history of the nation; (6) Two mechanical bodies twirl in the air, slow, abstract and threatening.

In Castellucci's opinion, the religious faith and the Greco-Roman heritage cannot completely answer contemporary problems in our fragmented society. Therefore, their language is no longer sufficient to create and structure a contemporary society, is no longer homogeneous, but multiplied *sensu stricto et sensu lato* in an eclecticism devoid of any smoothness. As in others of his works, "words are the key" (Perrier, 2014) to *Democracy in America*, but they lose their uniqueness and cohesion. Castellucci exploits many forms of languages: English, Hebrew, Latin, Native North American tongues; as well as visual – paintings, tableaux, transparent curtains that form a fourth wall between the spectator and the scene, statues and light effects; acoustic – noises and music; kinetic – dances and *tableaux vivants*; and finally robotic – algorithmic movements of machines. Each scene is both independent and linked to the others, never fully explained. Each form of expression is only part of a complex reflection regarding the body, objects, words, space, light, sound and

chronology.

More precisely, Castellucci says that in order to search for new expressions and escape the illustrative and the trap of *vitalisme*, he had to rely upon dance and choreography. In a historical transitional context, what attracts the Italian artist to dance is its metamorphism evoked by Michel Bernard. As the liquidly identity, the movement is in fact never identical or fixed, but always precarious and in transformation. In Castellucci's opinion, the first specificity of the dancing body is "its dynamics of indefinite metamorphosis and the exuberance of the movement due to its own change. Dance always offers itself as a mad search for an individual body that tries in vain but constantly to deny its apparent unity and identity in the manifold, the peculiarity of its acts" (Bernard, 2001: 18). Dance is not exclusively tied to a rational organisation, but more to logic and a physics of the body and movement. It is an unpredictable logic that produces the strength and novelty of its imagination. Dance becomes a way of research; it summarises the movement that helps us understand who we really are within an increasingly unstable balance (Beauquel, 2010: 65–77). This continuous transformation introduced by dance offers an example of the instability of a contemporary society, showing the viewers its constant and irregular flux: every movement is possible, the most codified and controlled as well as the most free and irrational.

We can find an example of these phenomena in the majorettes' dance in the first part of the piece, where dance acts as the mirror to a newborn society, searching for a common identity. In the scene, eighteen amateur dancers, dressed as majorettes – half women, half soldiers – shake the bells attached to their belts. Each one bears a flag or cane on which a letter is printed. Within a few moments, they first form the phrase DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA; after, alternated by short dances, they form many anagrams such as DECAY CRIME MACARONI, CAMERA DEMONIAN CRY, and finally the name of some countries – democracies as well as dictatorships: CANADA MACEDONIA ROMANIA ARMENIA MYANMAR YEMEN IRAN OMAN etc. It is a precise ballet, apparently elementary, a game as much as a military exercise. The dancers form a single figure only in the first part of the dance and ephemerally, dividing continuously afterwards into always different and heterogeneous groups and subgroups. Their only *traits d'union* are the uniform and the freedom to join new groups.

Even the algorithmic language structuring the movement of the machines in the final scene is part of this (de)construction of language. It does not escape the arbitrary limits and therefore the asymptotic identity of any other language. As Castellucci says, the schematisation of the movements looks to symbolise a "victorious industrialization" (Génécard, 2014), a better future, as well as its potential dark implication: "machines feed the scene. [...] In my opinion, machines are clearly a masculine principle with the notion of order and control" (Sebastiano, 2017: 78). In other words, new technologies are not a *deus ex machina*, but present the same limitations of any other language. In addition, "the new technologies, creators of virtuality, lead to the rupture of every rhythmicity, whether biological or social, associated with the idea of *cycle of existence*, a rupture to which an idea of simultaneity, instantaneity and *presentification*" (Semprini, 2003: 158), which is as we have seen a feature of contemporaneity. Instead of simplifying the understanding and the sense of belonging derived from it, the new technological language does not give any definitive answer, becoming even more metaphysical and intelligible than traditional ones, in an evident reference to the technological transcendence of Durkheim (Maffesoli, 1991: 33). As Bauman (2003: 25) stated: "The virtual communities that have replaced the natural ones create only the illusion of intimacy and a fiction of community. [...] Nor are these virtual communities able to give substance to personal identity, the primary reason for seeking them". It is interesting to notice that this is the same critique that many Eurosceptic movements make against the actual European Union and sometimes against the European

identity *tout court* (Muzzi, 2019: 7).

These negative tendencies and acts of sacrifice that underlie the play – the most important ones being the abandonment of the native language by the Indians and the abandonment of the son by the Puritan mother – summarise the sacrifice that every adhesion to a new community and to a new identity, that every creative act entails: "Starting from Cain, every act of creation carries within itself a kind of black core, a negative charge, the power of a non-being that from within undermines any claim to existence," (Castellucci, 2000). According to Castellucci, "Tocqueville was the first to study this system and to emphasize the gray areas that force us to downsize the idea that democracy is the ideal political system" (Perrier, 2016). Furthermore, these shadow areas have been the basic material of the theatre since ancient Greece: "[Greek tragedy]" says the Italian artist "is a kind of laboratory to study the shadow areas of all human existence. It is from this shaded area that the immense artistic expression of the Greek polis was born. [...] Tocqueville thinks that one must continually pay attention and remain conscious, eyes and ears open" (Perrier, 2016). For Castellucci "there is no tragic gaze worthy of being tragic, that is, no tragic gaze capable of creating a human community with its own strength. This is the task that the theatre of the future must carry out [...]" (Perrier, 2014).

As a result, he dynamises the spectators, who are called to adopt a personal vision, to intervene actively in the development phase itself, to the detriment of all stability and intelligibility: "The theatre is a temple and its oracles never speak distinctly. Here, the spectator works and deciphers; his unconscious too" (Sorbrier, 2017: 7). This empowerment of spectators inevitably implies that the dramaturgy "invites the spectator to reflect on his habits of perception" (Lehmann, 2002: 147) because the contemporary identity is an "effort" and a "duty" of construction "avoid[ing] the solidification and leav[ing] the options opened" (Bauman, 1995: 124).

### **Glossolalia**

Castellucci applies this non-hierarchical exploration of dramatic possibilities that can influence contemporary social and identity relations to language through the idea of *glossolalia*. In the first scene a glossolalic speech, recorded in a religious congregation in Kansas in 1890, is broadcast while the spectators can read in a projected caption a passage of the *Acts of the Apostles glossolalia*. Here glossolalia is described as the act of speaking and praying aloud in a language having the appearance of a foreign language, unknown by the person who speaks it, or by a sequence sequel of incomprehensible syllables.

In these terms, *glossolalia* represents in Castellucci's play an attempt at communicating<sup>iii</sup> within a community using a language in which the meaning is given through addition, by being with others rather than by a predetermined proper sense. It is a multiple ephemeral and personal code, arbitrarily chosen<sup>iv</sup> and only partially understood, formed by words as well as images, gestures and dances. This glossolalic approach is close to a hieroglyph system, which "protects from this decline in communication because it does not compete with [normal] language. These are conceptual images, not signs that point to words. Since they don't refer to the spoken language, they cannot replace it either" (Assmann, 2018: 195). The whole show is a continuously changing and not completely understandable *glossolalia*, becoming a hieroglyphic practice and a rite which "as for gestures, [is] as transitory hieroglyphic, and [is] to hieroglyphics as words spoken are to words written, in that they abide not" (Bacon, [1605] 2010: 213).

Nevertheless, no structure supports glossolalic language, only inspiration, only the intelligence, sensitivity and imagination of the sender and recipient, of the artist and of the public (Castellucci, 2019). To establish these associations, the viewer must consider every stimulus, every language. As Perelli states:

Reading the dialogues outside the imaginative context in which we listen to them would be useless for the purpose of understanding because out of context they are simple, to the limit of the banal, anyone could ask themselves these same questions. This is because these same dialogues are moving images and are part of a work in which there is no preponderance of one element over the other, in which harmony is total and inseparable; (Carraro, 2017)

Castellucci thinks that a play is a:

[...] contact, [a] shared creation. I deeply believe in the role of the spectator. A show is nothing, it has no object. It is the artistic language, the most fragile thing imaginable because in the end, the stage empties and nothing remains [...] What remains then? The experience lived by every spectator. Each show is a sum of objects, shapes, colours, sounds, lights. But without the experience, the history, the scars of each spectator, the show is useless. And it's the spectator who brings the show to life, not the opposite; (Castellucci, 2019)

We can say that the understanding of the association between 'content' and 'form' is entrusted to the viewer, the director "develops an autonomous visual dramaturgy, which loses its function of dramatic support to invite the viewer to reflect on his habit of perception" (Lehmann, 2002: 75) and, we might add, sharing a sense of recognition and belonging.

The glossolalic association is summarised by the opaque curtain that forms a fourth wall between the spectator and the scene, which performs again a hieroglyphic function of "transmit[ing] a truth by concealing it" (Assmann, 2018: 133). It is interesting to notice that traditionally this is the representation of the law and the identity in a hieroglyphic culture (Assmann, 2018: 130–134), suggesting to us why the Italian director wants to stimulate the spectators as well as the communities to reflect through a hieroglyphic, opaque representation of the

"[...] dilemma of liberation from the law as the learning of freedom, to the manipulation of consciences, to the muscular strength of individualism, to the role of everyone's choices concerning the social contract which defines the rights and the rules of collective life, without these themes becoming direct discourse on democracy. The ancient Athenian model here is only a false papier-mâché frieze, and American history is a sequence of legends relating to historical events and dates with a bloody echo. (Castellucci, 2018)

The limited vision is sublimated by sounds and noises, leaving room for the imagination and the sensitivity of the spectator: "the signifying opacity not being able to make sense, makes a sign: we can only identify languages that we don't understand. Then, we can only name them, which allows a return of the meaning and breaks the suspension of the signifier" (Courtine, 1983: 56).

This personal and social rethinking is made possible by *glossolalia* because this type of language "[...] already implies the exteriority of a commentary, a strange feature necessary for its own empowerment" (De Certeau, 1980: 14). Consequently, *glossolalia* becomes a new form of "integral communication, without remainder, where the *said* and the *meaning* abolish all mediation to run through the assistance of the same dynamic from the same original impulse, the inspired discourse does not belong in its own right to any of those who utter it or receive it, who no longer belong to themselves" (Puech, 1988: 28).

In these terms, *glossolalia* – and *Democracy in America* in general – seems to be an

approach in order "[...] to find an exit from uncertainty" (Bauman, 2004: 17) of personal and social life nowadays:

It's true that we compose our identity (or our own identities) as a drawing is composed starting from the pieces of a puzzle, however the problem is that the puzzle is defective and some pieces are missing. [...] No facilitation is available when we compose our identity. [...] In the case of identity, we don't start from the final image, but from a certain number of pieces that we have already come into possession of or that you think are worthy and then we try to find out how to order and reorder them to obtain a certain number of satisfactory images. (Bauman, 2004: 95)

### **Conclusion: A new European glossolalic *krisis***

As we have seen, the mobility and the alteration of contemporary – personal as well as collective – identity are typical features of the conception of Europe since antiquity. We have confirmation of this phenomenon even within the current European project if we consider that the adhesion as well as the separation from EU take place as a choice and not as an imposition.

The Europeans should stop trying to crystallise something that is historically and ontologically dynamic and rather accept that it as a quintessential and innovative feature of their European identity. In order to realise what Montesquieu defined as "a nation made up of several" (Montesquieu, 2000: 88), Europeans must admit that their European identity is not formed solely from a common past, but modulated on the present and projected into the future. It is not a question of claiming this or that other historical-cultural affiliation or of imposing a certain artificial identity. All citizens and all member states are called upon for their contribution, to constantly adapt to new challenges and historical phases, to be "united in diversity" beyond any difference or identity crisis, choosing which values, symbols and memberships to belong to.

It is interesting to note that the link between European identity and the concept of scission or isolation is already present in the etymology of the word crisis, because in ancient Greek the word *krisis* contains the nuance of separation, differentiation and choice (Montanari, 2001: 258). Moreover, this concept – born in the agricultural environment and subsequently applied to medical jargon – has been linked in Greek mythology with the legend of the kidnapping of Europe, daughter of a king of Asia Minor, that Zeus, transformed into a bull, takes to the island of Crete to father the first Europeans (Wissman: 2014). The very birth of Europeans would therefore be a result of a separation, of a *krisis*, which we still have to accept and integrate in our *modus essendi et cognoscendi*. The real European crisis would be the non-choice, the standardisation and the conformity.

However, the fact of choosing always implies an enormous freedom as well as a great responsibility (Baumann, 2003: 83) that we must be able to manage, to transform it successfully into an opportunity and an obstacle. Castellucci and contemporary theatre show us how not to be afraid of transformations, of crises. In order to create a true community, the Italian artist suggests we adopt an integral communication taking into consideration the various "detached pieces" to create a new voice, changeable but not necessarily chaotic. By doing so, a dynamic community is formed, in which everyone – citizens as well as national and international institutions – is called to participate directly and responsibly in decisions being made by trying to combine all the different opinions and cultures personally as objectively, logically as well as sentimentally. The risk for Indians in *Democracy in America* and presently for Europeans is, that the other's "words don't tell our things" (Castellucci, 2017). Using Max Weber's terminology, we can say that in Europe we have a *Gesellschaft*, but we still need a *Gemeinschaft*.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> All quotations in languages other than English have been translated by the author.

<sup>ii</sup> Tocqueville did not want to write a simple study on the American democratic and national epiphenomenon, but rather to draw up an *oeuvre de pensée* operating on different temporal and thematic axes. Diachronically, the book presents the ideal form that American national and democratic community has adopted, but it also works synchronously suggesting the political line to be followed in the transition towards the birth of any new democratic organisation, as in France at the time. It is an outdated, comparative work, not contained in a single *hic et nunc*.

<sup>iii</sup> Rousseau had already imagined a *total* language accepting all types of mistakes or deformations (Rousseau, 1993: 60).

<sup>iv</sup> Even the theatre as a place is nowadays considered arbitrary. The semantic individualisation is associated with a reconstruction "of the spaces of convention where the human being could imagine even the most complex and ambiguous idea of reality. [...] The citizen must accept the intermediate of the figure and the sign in order to participate in the political relationship. The access to the problematic community which needs the participation of the citizen involves the deviation through the arbitrary space" (Wallon, 2005: 302).