

Castellucci's Theatre of the 'Object/Sublime': or, the Theatre of Failed Transcendence



Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* presents its audience with two startling yet – at least in terms of their respective symbolic systems – incongruous images; an incongruity that derives, no doubt, from a certain iconoclasm, and therefore from a certain mischievousness. On the one hand, one finds the stage overwhelmed by an image of Christ that gestures towards what might be called the 'Christian Sublime' – a sublime that in its mystical form will further point to the ineffable power contained in the idea of the transcendence of God, and before which one finds, dwarfed on the stage, the puny figures of two men, who in all their powerlessness suffer and bear the absolute vertigo of humankind confronted by an excessive and unbearable infinite. What this image invokes is the idea that redemption from fallenness, attained through suffering, is contained in the Christian sublime through the mystery of God's grace; and yet already one senses, art's capacity for allusion which claims peculiar access via the use of figurative form to religious transcendence, is shown at best to be an ambiguous power on the theatrical stage, in so far as is shown to be *theatrical*.

A second image troubles the presupposed authority of that sublime ideality of God in a manner that brings to mind the Gnostic tradition, with its fascination for base matter – not through figuration but in a turn to the violence wrought by thingly abstraction. Lyotard's pronouncement that in order to present the unrepresentable 'you have to make presentation suffer' comes to mind (Lyotard 1993: 125.) Thus we are confronted with a vast, bleeding 'stigmata' that finally obliterates the first image, and in so doing exposes what the stage hides, and has always hidden in plain sight behind its representations. What one finds on Castellucci's stage destroys whatever idealism may lurk in theatrical symbolism: it is the presence of those bodies that must ultimately bear the expectations of the stage – and that attest to an intransigent materiality, in the same way that a stigmata, which can only be borne by tissue and skin, by flesh and blood,

vessels and sinews, reveals the numinous reality of the body to the person who endures it. In a short essay on Gnosticism, Georges Bataille would write:

Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations. But the psychological process brought to light by Gnosticism had the same impact: it was a question of disconcerting the human spirit and idealism before something base, to the extent that one recognised the helplessness of superior principles (Bataille 1996: 51).

If what one finds here is not helplessness per se, but the helplessness of *superior principles*, it is because what Castellucci confronts us with will be, precisely put, 'human all too human'. This 'helplessness', however, will also help disclose the depth of theatre's ontological *failure* – or perhaps the failure of a certain ontology that once provided theatrical representation with a ground and a sure footing. It is the failure of the power invested in theatre to indicate a privileged signified that incessantly pulls the theatrical image away from its representative function, back towards the body, and – on Castellucci's stage, at least, towards a demonstration of human abjection and suffering.

What I would like to suggest here (since we are quite literally caught in the temporal differential that correlates these two event-images, in which what is revealed, finally, will be the abject space of theatre itself) are two things. Firstly, what opens before these two images will be a *theatrical* space in which a certain minimal action will unfold and which, if it is not exactly inappropriate or improper, will nonetheless provoke a profound unease amongst its auditors – not however because they are assailed by the sight and stench of the theatrical shit, which drifts through the auditorium, but rather, and despite this nauseating spectacle, *because it describes an action* – in other words, *because it stages the problem of the 'ethical'*. Secondly what one encounters through its overt manipulation of the audience's sensory faculties – the vivid use of noise, for instance, and in its spectacle and use of smell – will be the image of theatre itself as a site of abjection in which 'theatricality' is not simply *exposed* but exposed to the fault line of the abject/sublime. So, between the plasticity of representation, the base materiality of theatrical form, the affective power of matter and the passivity of the soma, in which theatre's idealism will be confounded and disturbed, what Castellucci stages, I shall argue, is nothing less than a theatre in which theatre's own claims to transcendence are played back to it as 'disaster' – a disaster that arises as a consequence of the failure of theatre's representative function; a disaster, therefore, that points to the extreme ethical crisis that assails the stage in post-industrial capitalist societies.

No doubt it will already be understood that this attempt to make sense of theatre's relation to the abject/sublime recalls the work of Julia Kristeva; and, indeed, we will

need to grasp the theatre, its problematic forms of representation, and the crisis of its transcendence in light of Kristeva's dictum that the 'abject is edged with the sublime'. Nevertheless, this crisis of representation is exemplified in relation to the 'concept' of the face; and one can already perhaps understand something of the nature of the crisis of representation, which will assail the image of Christ on Castellucci's stage, if we consider Levinas' claim that the face is nothing less than the 'infinite which blinks' (Levinas 2002a: 93). The face in the Judaic tradition, we should recall, exceeds all powers of human designation and art; it will provoke Kant to write, in the third critique: 'Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image' (Kant 1952: 127) – the analogy for Kant being that the sublime, like the face of God, evades depiction, and evades it in an absolute sense – as the very law of its being. What results from this ethical crisis of representation, and what is proposed here, then, is a theatre of 'failed transcendence', as I shall call it, in which Castellucci's 'face' of God, returned to the abject condition of its own corporeality – the concrete, fleshy, disturbing and abject materiality of the human face – marks the traumatic site of the ethical demand.

SEVERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE ABJECT/SUBLIME

First question: What is more sublime - the incarnated or the ineffable face of God?

This seems to be at least one of the many questions one could pose in relation to Castellucci's *On the Concept of the Face...* – a performance that describes the relationship between an incontinent old man and the son who cares for him. It is a performance that takes place, as we have said, against a backdrop bearing the colossal and iconic image of Christ's face, taken from Antonello da Messina's painting *Salvator Mundi*, the Saviour of the World. Castellucci's show has its own way of responding to this question, and in so doing forces us to confront the deeper question of what sublimity means for us today in theatre, as well as, perhaps, serving to direct our attention to the vexed relation between the theatre and the experience of the sacred.

But let us begin by dwelling for a moment on the face of Christ who watches over both the action on the stage and over the audience. His expression although open and sincere is nevertheless not easy to decipher. If it is not quite impassive, it is certainly inscrutable and unfathomable. What is he thinking? What does he feel? Is it pity or sorrow or bliss at the thought of our salvation? What does he want from us? What does he want *for* us? It is impossible for us to say. It is because the expression is inscrutable, unreadable, and disturbingly enigmatic that it confers upon the viewer the sense that there is a power at work within it that captures something of the 'sublime' – that is,

something boundless and in excess of our cognitive capacities. If it is hard to say why the expression chosen by the painter, which to be sure is undoubtedly empathetic, is so fitting, and why the feeling it produces is not quite resolvable into the pleasurable form of the 'beautiful', or the reassuring consensus that founds a community of taste, we can perhaps at least say that the comportment of the man whose face it is escapes any fixed location within the space of the mundane. Subjecting the spectator to an infinite gaze, he both sees us, and looks beyond us. In fact, to the extent that it holds us captive to this gaze, one might say that in Messina's portrait of Christ, here we find a face that resolutely refuses to blink. Thus the image of the son of god does not refer its viewer back to man, or to the world stage, or to an existence bound by the mortal or morbid corruptions of the flesh – the 'ills to which the body is heir'. It refers man to what surpasses bounded existence: the infinite and unseen countenance of God and the ineffable 'mysterium' of an absolute, omnipotent and transcendent authority. And yet, is it not the case that the power of Messina's portrait of Christ in fact rests upon a paradox? It lies in the way we are referred to that which exceeds all human capacities of signification, and to an absolute that no image could contain. Nonetheless, at the same time, one is confronted with the imperfect face of a man. It is here that the icon hovers miraculously over the abyss of representational form, conjuring all the powers of art to defy the effects of gravity. The binding of God to the materiality of the flesh and to the finite particularity of the body cannot but assail Messina's attempt to represent Christ as a mere man, invoking the paradox of how an absolute and universal being could come to be expressed in a form with which it is incommensurable and with which it shares no common measure. Messina's icon, then, whose empathetic effect derives from its remarkable realism, and from the attempt to depict Christ as a 'psychological' being, will unknowingly insinuate into the doctrine of the incarnation the impossibility that already lies at the heart of representation and which was implicitly understood in the Judaic prohibition against the idolatrous act of presenting the countenance that even Moses was not allowed to see. This is why the problem of the incarnation cannot evade the problem of representation, and why the latter at least, which claims to stand in a relation of transparency to the thing 'represented' will in time capitulate to the contradiction inherent in the opaque matter of representation – an opacity that renders representation and its rationality ultimately inscrutable.

If this paradox, which assails the image of Christian transcendence, in Messina's portrait of Christ, nevertheless provides a means for opening up the possibility of the experience of the abject/sublime – it is precisely because it touches upon the essential ambiguity inherent within representational form into which the face of Christ threatens to collapse. Hovering between legibility and illegibility; transcendence and immanence;

recognition and misidentification, it is the face that disturbs us precisely because it reveals something inaccessible. The cause of this disturbance and turmoil is not just attributable to the fact that, as Levinas says at one point, 'in the image, thought reaches the face of the other reduced to its plastic forms' (Levinas 1999: 123) but also, and more disturbingly, it is because it reveals that the face is, above all else, an image, a resemblance of itself, embodied in a plasticity that confronts thought with a density it cannot fully penetrate, comprehend or grasp. Greater, therefore, than those yawning precipices, where solitary travellers measure themselves up to the abyss, or those rising pyramids, so beloved of orientalist painters, that seem to hold sway over the infinite magnitude of the desert, or the ravaged seascape, in Gericault, which imperils the lives of a few shipwrecked survivors, clinging piteously to a raft that is already breaking apart, or the 'vast scale', as Kant puts it, of nature's might (Kant 1952: 115), here, on Castellucci's stage, it is the depiction of nothing more than the face of a man that makes present the impossible object of the sublime.

A preliminary observation on the sublime: to traditional aesthetics, the sublime refers to any object which excites or causes profound and disturbing feelings or sensations. Burke associated it with 'astonishment' – the 'state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror' (Burke 2008: 53). According to Kant, however, its proper element is associated with the noumenal realm, by which he meant the realm of suprasensible being, inexperienceable by the empirical faculties, and thus inexplicable in terms of inductive reasoning. But insofar as the sublime takes the phenomenal form of a 'feeling', it also gives rise to the thought, again essentially Kantian, that sublimity, the 'absolutely great', is to be found 'only in the proper estate of the subject' (Kant 1952: 121) – in man himself, although not man understood in terms of the 'sphere of empirical psychology' (1952: 117). What follows from this thought requires careful consideration.

The sublime can no longer be ascribed to an object considered as something 'real'. It is rather a mental event in which the subject believing it has encountered such an object is able nevertheless to secure, through grasping its own subjective finality, a passage of transcendence, from sublime affect, to its origin in the autonomy of reason. Where, then, is the *object* of the sublime to be located? Obviously, not in the sensible form of a phenomenal datum; as perverse as it may seem, the 'broad ocean agitated by the storm cannot be called sublime' (1952: 92) for the sublime exceeds, by definition, the faculty of sensibility and thus objectification. That which is immediately intuited does not provide the motive according to which the source of the sublime affect is to be located and described, determined and verified. In the sublime, says Kant, the 'mind has

been incited to abandon sensibility' (1952: 92). The feeling of the sublime is not produced by nature at all but by the work of the imagination which, as Kant says, '*by its own act*' deprives itself of its own freedom. In the sublime, the subject's freedom appears in the *negative* form of subjection to an object for which it is essentially responsible. But in the moment of sublime affect: 'the ground of this [freedom] is concealed from [the subject], and in its place it *feels* the sacrifice or deprivation, as well as its cause, to which it is subjected' (1952: 120). This is why, to truly understand the sublime phenomenon, we must displace the subject's fixation with the object to reveal the very ground of freedom in which sublime feeling originates. Here it is a matter of 'setting before our eyes the sublimity of our nature (in its vocation) while at the same time showing us the lack of accord of our conduct with respect to it' (Kant 2001: 74). Only by realising its true vocation, which is one of freedom, does the word 'subjection' take on, for the subject, an authentically sublime quality. In so doing, it immediately displaces the series of affects that are usually associated with the phenomenon of the sublime: horror, fear, terror, melancholy, etc., – in fact, what we might call Kant's radical sublime, is discovered at the cost of downgrading such sublime *affects* to mere theatrical *effects*. There is only one feeling that Kant is willing to credit with genuine sublimity: that of 'respect' or 'reverence'. This is because only respect can claim to have a ground not based on empirical stimuli, as Kant expresses it, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*:

reverence... should function as an inflexible precept for the will; and it is just this freedom from dependence on interested motives which constitutes the sublimity of the maxim and the worthiness of every rational subject to be a law-making member of the kingdom of ends (Kant 1995: 100).

The form of subjection, then, which commands *respect* is subjection of the subject to its own law; that is, subjection to the only law through which the subject can, at one and the same time, learn the true dignity of obedience *and* (without succumbing to logical absurdity) assert its freedom.

Nevertheless, we should take note of the discrepancy marked by Kant, above, between the sublimity of our vocation for freedom and our *actual* distance from freedom's reality, our lack of accord with it. For the subject to be able to achieve its freedom, it must transcend the pathological domain of sensuous interests: it must oppose itself to all worldly desire. The subject thus finds itself inscribed within a dimension that is purely negative. Just as in the sublime, which, as Kant says, 'can never be more than a negative presentation' (Kant 1952: 127), so the problem for the subject, in Kantian

ethics, is that its own freedom must also be defined negatively, in terms of the will's 'independence of coercion [from] sensuous impulses' (Kant 1929: 465). And yet, in defining freedom as negative, Kant condemns the subject – at least if it is to exist – to the very thing that its autonomy was meant to master. The reason is as simple as it is stark: having been elevated to the empty dimension of pure negativity, the subject has no other place to go but to fall back into the world. Hence the project of the radical sublime in Kant founders on the rock created for it by the attempt to wager the subject's freedom on the overcoming of its passions or – to put it differently – on the postulate of a suprasensible law that in so far as it seeks to inhibit our actions through the mediation of what, in Kant, must be construed as *improper* feelings such as shame, embarrassment, and humiliation, cannot guarantee that such states of abjection will be sublimated into the higher dignity of respect. There is no obvious passage available within transcendental philosophy that leads from an ignoble sense of shame to the 'nobility' of respect.



Second question: what could be more abject than the torment of an old man, ravaged by Alzheimer's, as he smears his own shit across his face?

This second question should also be posed in relation to *On the Concept of the Face....* The performance is not without its affective power – and quite literally so: the auditorium reeks of the stench of defecation, as the son cleans the excrement from his father's backside. But it also presents us with a powerful and moving depiction of care, solicitude and responsibility. Isn't this a theatre that precisely employs the mediation of negative feelings such as shame, embarrassment, and humiliation, in short, states of abjection, so as to sublimate them – through the power of performance - into the higher dignity of the feeling of respect? To be sure, the image of a son patiently and diligently washing the faeces from his father's weak and infirm body would appear to constitute the very epitome of duty and ethical obligation, placing us therefore firmly within the

gravitational field of Kant's ethical universe. But it would be strange to say that the son performs his duties out of respect for the moral law, rather than, more simply, and straightforwardly, out of respect for his father. Therefore it would be more prudent, or at least, more challenging, to consider the question in light of Castellucci's juxtaposition of sublime icon, with its infinite gaze, and the scene of abjection which confronts us on the stage; after all, if Castellucci's theatre hereby invokes the precepts of Kantian ethics, might it not do so only so as to more firmly interrogate that space of anomie – of lawlessness – left open by the failure of the project of [Kantian] transcendence? Seen in this way, it seems to present a twofold dilemma that grips the stage just as strongly as the stench that induces the audience to recoil from it, gagging. Firstly, it presents us with the crisis of transcendent authority that stems, at least in part, *from* Kantianism; it is the question of how one might exist in a world knowing that – to occupy the very place of man – is to face the abandonment of the world by God. The second impasse stems from the crisis *of* Kantianism itself: how to ground an ethics, knowing that the subject occupies the site left vacated by the failure of the philosophy of transcendence: the question, in short, of how to ground an ethics, not in the autonomy of the subject, but in light of the experience of abjection.

Second observation – on the abject/sublime: It is as if Castellucci's theatre sought to traverse the very edge, the perimeter, the borderline, described by Julia Kristeva, wherein the sublime and the abject separate and differentiate themselves. To be sure, Kristeva marked this point of differentiation with terms borrowed from Freud, those of the 'symptom' and 'sublimation': 'In the symptom,' Kristeva wrote, 'the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control' (Kristeva 1982: 11). She thereby inevitably reduced the phenomenon of abjection to the indices of psychopathology, with its phobias, obsessive behaviours, and perversions. But the abject is also conjured non-theoretically through a phenomenology that discloses the ambiguity at the heart of subjectivity, which in order to assert its autonomy associates alterity – that which is radically other to the subject – with the sign of what must be shunned and excluded, even as it constantly recurs. It is as though abjection were the very condition of the subject's existence: 'from its place of banishment', says Kristeva, 'the abject does not cease challenging its master' (1982: 2). The strange draw of the abject, the 'radically excluded', shares this in common with the sublime: it 'draws me to the place where meaning collapses' (1982: 2).



Hence sight of the father's destitute body provokes the involuntary reflexes of self-preservation within the audience: confronted by his self-defilement, one recoils from the image; one seeks to expurgate the taint of its sickness-unto-death; one refuses to countenance its wretched infantilism. Incontinence discloses, with an uncomfortable immediacy, the sheer affective power and horror of the abject. Now, in contrast to the Kantian sublime, it is the abject that gives back to the realm of dispossessed things their power to disturb the subject. And yet it would seem to me to be a mistake to simply associate the abject with the impure, corrupt, decaying, or polluted body, and its excretions; or with what one finds vile, repulsive and disgusting. For the work's affective power is all the more profound for being associated with a peculiar phenomenon that we must now endeavour to bring to light. If the condition of the father is abject, it is not just because of his infirmity, which threatens to deprive him of his subjectivity. Nor is the primordial horror provoked in the audience by the thought of the loss of sphincteral control simply reducible to the threatening loss of the 'I' – and still less are we held in thrall by mere morbid curiosity. What compels us to watch is the demand that abjection must not be evaded but rather confronted; it is a demand provoked by the *sight of the father's anguished face*. It is the face that turns abjection into the very image of human suffering, and through it, opens up the dimension of the ethical.

We are inevitably drawn here to Levinas' remark in *Otherwise than Being*: 'The disclosing of a face is nudity, nonform, abandon of self, ageing, dying, more naked than nudity. It is poverty, skin and wrinkles, which are a trace of itself' (Levinas 2002a: 88). We might say: the face is itself a source of abjection but it is not itself abject. If it appears to be abject, it is because it is uncanny. The Levinasian face 'escapes representation; it is the very collapse of phenomenality' (2002a: 88). It may seem strange to assert that the face collapses phenomenality, given that it appears; but if one recalls that it is not a mere object in the world, then one begins to understand something of what Levinas intended us to see, which is that the face, unlike an object in the world, announces, through its corporeality, an otherness that is inassimilable to knowledge and understanding. It is closer to an event that reaches from beyond the solitudes and

familiarities of my being to bring me before the unfathomable presence of the other, and of a temporality that is not my own. Thus even as it repulses me; it calls me toward it. It commands me to respond. It places me in its debt. Through its nakedness, the face is the pure openness of an unconditional appeal; and the shame it induces is mine alone. The abjection, then, is the abjection of the subject before the face of the other; the face which, as Levinas says, in emphatically hyperbolic terms, holds the subject 'hostage'. The face of the other ab-jects the subject, destabilises it in its ipseity, in so far as it refuses to be assimilated into the domain of identity: 'I am', says Levinas, 'ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that commands me' (2002a: 87). If Levinas speaks here of transcendence in relation to the face, it is not the kind of transcendence associated with the power of the will that seeks, through self-legislation, to master itself. It is transcendence achieved without the passage of sublimity that places me before my own excellence. It is achieved through the 'pathology' of the subject's *obsession* with what is other to it.

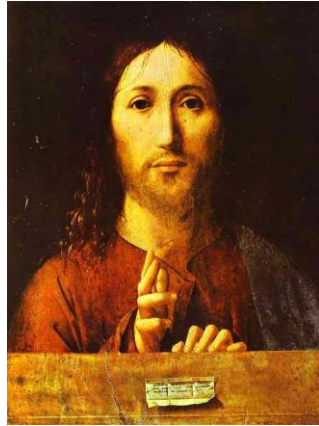
Yet in responding to the demand of the other's face, in becoming abject before it, might this not risk losing the subject to the condition of abjection?

In Levinas one finds the opposite to be the case: for transcendence is simply exposure to the ethical; and it is the ethical that brings the subject to itself in the form of a responsibility that is its alone: 'transcendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face' (Levinas 2002b: 305). By contrast, we might argue: the failure to accomplish such transcendence is abhorrence in the face of the abject; yet in retreating into the immanence of subjectivity, in the moment of recoil, the subject, paradoxically, loses the good and abandons itself all the more firmly to abjection – that is to say, it fails to transcend the abject as condition.

A third and final question: what does the *theatre* of the 'abject/sublime' mean, not just for our understanding of Castellucci's vision of the theatre, but in terms of theatre's relation to its own institution?

Let us try to understand this question as an attempt to locate the problem of theatrical representation, always at play in Castellucci's work, in terms of theatre's relation to our current epochal crisis (an ethico-political crisis). It therefore requires that we shift perspective, and radically so – away from an attempt to interpret the content of the work to the question of how this theatre constitutes itself in relation to this crisis, and specifically, in terms that would seem to exploit, through the very mechanism of theatre, the injunction of the Judaic Law, which Kant was to cite so approvingly in the third critique, against the act of representing the face.

Further observation: to look at Antonello da Messina's painting is to understand the subtle and yet decisive transformation that Castellucci's use of the image brings about, in so far as it exposes its iconography to the power of the abject.



In blowing it up, it is precisely the face that Castellucci cuts out of the painting – not by removing it, however, but on the contrary, through the act of isolating it from its symbolic framework. This cut immediately destabilises the face – and precisely by removing the theatrical gesture, which grounds its meaning: the hands of Christ, the one that rests on the table, subtly directing us to the little prop - the *cartellino*, the piece of parchment bearing an inscription, indicating the theatrics of the trompe l'œil form of representation; and the other, the hand that forms the benedictory sign, which indicates its function as a devotional image. The effect is to press the face to the point at which its phenomenality indeed seems to hover on the brink of a collapse; and where the image itself seems to give way to the violence of abstraction. Deprived of the apparatus of the symbolic order of representation – its expression no longer possesses the power of signification; the face seems to suggest the dispersal of its elements ... and becomes anonymised... are we not led to ask: who's face is this?

This anonymity, which is of the essence of the face, should, I think, trouble us. If as Levinas says, the face contains within it, the biblical injunction 'Thou Shalt not Kill' but must 'Love thy Neighbour' – is it not also the case that the face, and not just the unrecognisable face of the stranger, but precisely the faces of our neighbours with whom we are most familiar, have the power to inspire us to violent, even murderous passions – those of hatred and fear?¹ This will be the kind of criticism levelled at Levinas by Žižek, who accuses Levinas of an 'ethical prettification' of the other that fails to take account of the radical 'Otherness of a human being reduced to inhumanity' (Žižek 2009: 165). What Levinas overlooks is the fact that 'the Neighbour is the (evil) Thing which potentially lurks beneath every homely human face' (2009: 16); Sartre, likewise, albeit in a different

context and milieu, in which it is scarcity, rather than alterity per se, that constitutes the radical negation of man, would argue, nevertheless, that the other is ‘an anti-human member of an alien species’ and the ‘principle of Evil’ (Sartre 2004: 149). Still, what is evil if it is not precisely the horrifying appearance before the subject of something it considers abject? Evil and alterity converge in the face where all apparent meaning has collapsed; nevertheless, as with Kant’s radical sublime, one should not confuse the source of evil with the evil attributed to the hated object. Let us give that source a name: if it is not exactly one’s own body, with its excretions, plasticity, functional failings, and so on, it is something proximate to it; it is the ‘thing’/ *das Ding* that one is. Is it not the case, then, that the subject, in an effort to evade the traumatic convulsion caused by encountering its own impersonal and uncanny ‘thingly’ presence, withdraws from its alienation by attributing an evil and monstrous density to a human other, even though, as we have said, the abjection is the subject’s own? What this shows is that Levinasian ethical transcendence and the radical evil associated with states of abjection, which is to say, the failure to achieve such transcendence, remain two sides of the same human ‘face’. Both faces – the face that holds me hostage and the face from which I withdraw in abject disgust – derive, also, from the same crisis; both must be seen to be symptomatic of the same predicament that arises with the permanent revocation of the ethical today – in Žižek’s terms, from a kind of unending ‘politico-religious suspension of the ethical’ (Žižek 2009: 478) or what Agamben refers to as the permanent state of exception – in which what we confront is a world deprived of the guarantees afforded by the former safe havens (or consolations) of religion or transcendental philosophy.

Final observation: how it ends.



As the father slowly makes his departure from the stage, his absence is gradually replaced by an increasingly excruciating noise: a deafening, inhuman, soundscape – what appears to be the white noise of grating metal. It is as if the theatre machine itself were suddenly exposed in its infernal purpose – and, as if to confirm this: the image of

Christ's face, peering at us from out of the gloom of what little light remains, appears to begin weeping. Instead of tears, however, it is a putrid black effluence that seems to seep through the pours of the painting – slowly at first, but eventually forming a torrent, until nothing remains of the image - or the face, which is literally effaced...what one is left with is the 'faceless' anonymity of the stage. What one might call, the *Il y a*... the bare fact of the 'there is' of the theatre (Levinas refers to the 'Il y a' as 'existing without existents', it is a 'being without nothingness, which leaves no hole and permits no escape' Levinas 1987: 50).

If there is more at stake here than mere iconoclasm, it is because the destruction of the image on the stage brings us before the abject condition in which theatre's own materiality is announced. Or rather, produced: and it is into this field of production, which is usually concealed from the audience, that the viewer is drawn, revealing a space of discrepancy, opened up between what the theatrical image promises, on the one hand – that which is meant to produce, through the machinery of the theatre, a complete meaning, that is to say, deliverance of the audience from the turbulence and disarray provoked by the disturbing 'event' of the theatre through to the relaxation induced by a catharsis – and, on the other hand, what those images fail to symbolise: the safe passage to a conciliated world, which is meant to demonstrate the spectator's autonomy as much as the character's salvation. This discrepancy, in Castellucci's work, would appear, thereby, to rent open the very frame of theatrical representation revealing its inherent instability. It produces a hiatus in the symbolic function of the image, or of theatre's capacity to produce an image capable of transcending its theatrical origin in order to attain that hallowed and sacred place where art and religion were once conjoined; and it points to the crisis – one is tempted to say, once again following Lyotard, the 'disaster' of theatre in so far as it makes this failure to complete the circuit of representation its object.

What we are left with is the curious satisfaction that comes with displeasure: Castellucci's is a theatre that refuses to console its audience with the theatricality of false icons, that is to say, with mere theatrical transcendence. As such, it is a theatre that seems to relish in exploiting the tension that opens up the edge that runs between the abject and the sublime: the latter, the sublime, grounds the theatre in the failure of representation; the former, however, which returns us to the abjection of theatre's questionable materiality, suggests that the theatre is also *not* so sublime: it is grounded in the failure of the achievement of transcendence.

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¹ Levinas writes: 'behind the already plastic forms in which the face does no more than present itself, re-present itself and appear as an image, and where, in that image, the face reveals itself as *some thing* [there is revealed] the ancient, biblical call and command that awakens the subject to a responsibility for the other on the basis of an uprightness that is exposure to death' (Levinas, 1999: 130).