

WLC 2016 : World LUMEN Congress. Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty 2016 |
LUMEN 15th Anniversary Edition

Theatrum Anatomicum and the Baroque Vision on Death

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Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.09.41>

In 17th century, death came to be contemplated in Anatomical Theatres, which housed public dissections of fresh bodies of the executed criminals. The dissection was running just like a show, with stage director, actors and audience. In addition, many rearticulated human and animals skeletons were among the participants and held banners with Latin phrases referring to the inevitable end of life, but also highlighted the universality of death and the equality of humans before it. The audience was thus informed that death is the largest democratic force of the universe, and every man must obey.

The place soon became the meeting point of the great philosophers of the 17th century who captured the human nature in its decomposing, lifeless form, as an amorphous object for study. Part of them realized the idea of *res extensa*, a corporeal nature that was quite different from the soul.

In the anatomical show, the Renaissance hylozoist and pantheistic perspective had ceased to fascinate the minds of scientists and philosophers who began to be attracted by mechanical aspects of the body functioning. This new philosophy that appeared in the 17th century due to the anatomical theaters had turned death into a thing, in something tangible, and the consequence was the loss of spiritual, ritual, and even religious dimensions of the human being.

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Keywords: Life and death; Eros and Thanatos; anatomical theatre; baroque.

1. Introduction

During the baroque era, the philosophy of theatre, as well as that of the other related arts, was that of mirroring nature. In the 16th century, the catholic theology's vision, placing the man and the Earth at the centre of God's universe, was challenged by the scientific progress and the Protestant Reform. The Counter-Reform, started by the Catholic Church hoped to restore the lost harmony and order. The baroque artists worked in this context, creating dynamical pieces of art overlapping the anxiety concerning the world's disorder and a traditional representation of the hierarchies, both in heavens and on Earth.

2. The *Theatrum mundi* metaphor or the world seen as a stage

The baroque theatre evoked the fantasy and imagination, the metaphor and the allegory, the miracle and the artificiality. The scenographers applied to the theatre the rules of the perspective derived from the visual arts, and the theatre became a metaphor of the social life. Everything was centered around the Man, as a powerful relationship between artist and audience. By means of *maraviglia*, art becomes much closer to the beneficiary, thus dissolving the cultural gap separating art from its consumer. Although it wasn't a new concept, the *Theatrum mundi* metaphor, or that of the world seen as a stage, was used by the baroque thinkers in order to express an ordered world and the forces threatening it and became the *motto* of this era. All across Europe, playwrights used this theme in order to reveal the strong bond between the stage and reality.

Shakespeare exploited it in plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* or the famous *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players (Shakespeare, 1996: 622).

This metaphor was never as clearly stated as in Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *El gran teatro del mundo* (1635) where the Spanish playwright turns the catholic dogma into an allegorical play, where God himself becomes the director of the theatre, as well as the source of all theatrical elements from actors to the stage, text, music, etc.

For the artists of the Baroque, the world was indeed a stage reflecting the present tensions of a changing world. New themes appear, i.e. the prison, the labyrinth, the death, and the mystical ecstasy. Everything is set in motion, the audience witnessing the mixture and rotation of all the ancient patterns: Egyptian, Greek, Latin and Renaissance, suggesting the transient character of the gods of the immanent world. The technique of the repetition is used to the saturation limit.

The playwrights deployed unlimited energies and an explosive creativity in order to redefine the relationship between art, faith and life. The theatre was transformed into an imaginative model for understanding the world in all its aspects. The setting of the stage responded to the new demands; the simple medieval stage evolves, characterized by machineries, vastness and spectacular.

The theatres all across Europe used a vertical visual hierarchy: the architecture of the stage reflected the world's architecture. The tallest places (balconies, platforms) and flying machines symbolized the nobility of kings, gods and other positive characters. For example, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Boyce, 1996: 633), in order to create the visual magic of the play, some characters' supernatural

qualities were enhanced by the use of the stage effects. Usually, the subhuman Caliban (Boyce, 1996: 88-89), son of the witch Sycorax and of the Devil, would come out from under the stage, through a hatch, wearing a sea monster outfit, whereas Ariel (Boyce, 1996: 32-33), good spirit, would show up at the balcony, flying by means of suspended cables. Thus, the duality between the heavenly and the infernal worlds was being highlighted. We can notice a parallel between the theatre and the church. In the large baroque squares the theatre and the church face each other like in a mirror. The scene has the same position as the altar, and in front of it are the balconies, the boxes and seats. While the mess presented the passions of the Savior, the stage of the theatre presented the drama of human souls in search of the absolute. The theatre and the opera had the role of highlighting by means of the drama the irreconcilable duality between body and soul, between reason and passion, between law and peccancy.

In the baroque theatre the suggestion of the powerful voices, the alternation between sound and silence played an important part. These disruption dramas gave birth to the tragic feeling of the existence created by infinitely multiplied ambivalences for which the only solution was the death of the character, his disappearance into the abyss formed by the fall of the curtain. The actor dies as an artist each time the curtain falls and the applause represent a magical act by means of which the performer must be revived and freed from the trance of the artistic splitting. It took a long moment of applause in order for the actor and the audience to come back from the artistic trance leaving deep marks and troubling the souls. This emotional state was awakening a mystical feeling sending the audience for therapy inside the other temple, where they were witnessing the resurrection of Christ, the only one capable of balancing the scared and confused soul, consoling it over its unhappy condition.

3. The rediscovery of tragedy through Aristotle's Poetics

The discovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the 15th century will reveal the importance of the tragedy, but it isn't until much later – in the second half of the 16th century and all throughout the following century – that the Aristotelian fragment gets the attention of the humanists. New poetics, based on the Stagyrte's principle, will show up. The object of these writings was mainly the tragedy, their primal destination being that of satisfying the interest of a tragic fund, slowly taking shape, giving birth to the new phenomenon of Baroque (Papu, 1977: 45). William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Tirso de Molina founded the modern tragedy, bringing life onto the stage, turning it into a fable. The baroque characters are weak, fragile (Faustus, Macbeth, Hamlet, Don Juan). In order to succeed, they need help or impulse, usually exceptional, such as Mephistopheles, the witches for Macbeth, or, in Hamlet's case, his father's ghost. Shakespeare's most important tragedies follow characters whose features and qualities become the source of their own catastrophes. The baroque characters are especially ill accustomed, rebelled against their own condition, which they do not accept with the risk of unleashing consequences getting totally out of control. The irrational of the events clashes with the hyperlucidity of the heroes of damnation, minutely following their own fall into the abyss of the nothingness.

The theatre spectacle, similar to a professor's lecture in an amphitheatre, symbolizes the placing of the man in time, the awareness of the fact that there is always an ending (*finita la commedia*). Painting, sculpture and even music don't imply the idea of ending in such a firm manner as theatre. *Totus mundus agit histrionem* (all the world's a stage) was the *motto* embroidered on the flag waving above

the *Globus* Shakespearian theatre and was expressing the glorious Elizabethan ambition of refuting the limits of the power of imagination the theatre was calling into play. The whole world was seen as a figment of the imagination. The world becomes an illusion with extremely dynamical landmarks that had lost all stillness, and the existence gets tragic accents.

4. Anatomical Theatre – the Protestant form of the tragedy expression

Modern tragedy reveals a particular taste for sex and death, for power complexes making life unbearable. Death is contemplated by means of anatomical theatres such as the one in Leiden, opened in 1596, near the capital The Hague, where the great philosophers and doctors of the 17th century would come in order to witness the material nature of man, in its decomposed, anatomical, lifeless, shapeless form, as object of a cold study. In the anatomical amphitheatre, the skeletons, bearing little identifiable sexual marks, found only by anatomists, wear banners with sayings implying the inevitable end of life. *We are but sand and shadows (PULVIS ET UMBRA SUMUS)*, *We are all going in the same direction (OMNES EODEM COGIMUR)*, *The fate is the same for the humble and the important ones (AEQUA LEGE NECESSITAS SORTITUR INSIGNES ET IMOS)*, *Know yourself (NOSCE TE IPSUM)*, *Man's life is like a bubble (HOMO BULA)*, *Remember you will die (MEMENTO MORI)*, *Death is the end (MORS ULTIMUM)*, *Life is short (VITA BREVIS)*.

All these sayings have something in common, they teach the universality of death and the equality of humans before it. Death is the greatest democratic force of the universe, and the man has to obey it. The anatomic laboratory reveals the idea of *res extensa*, of the corporeal nature Descartes talked about, a nature different from the human soul. The degrading of the body and the study of the immobile organs indicate the inevitable end of the life that was once pulsating inside them, provoking desires, passions and all sorts of actions. The man becomes a mere object in these theatres. Inside the anatomic theatre, death loses its spiritual dimension and becomes an object of study. The anatomic theatre turns death into a thing, into something tangible.

In the anatomical show, the Renaissance hylozoist and pantheistic perspective had ceased to fascinate the minds of scientists and philosophers who began to be attracted by mechanical aspects of the body functioning. Harvey published in Frankfurt *De motu cordis* (1628), presenting the heart as a pump used for the circulation of blood. Descartes wrote the manuscript *L'Homme* (1629-1633) where he compared the human body with a complex biological machine that should obeyed to the laws of physics as it was made of mechanical pumps, fluid and resorts.

The taste for contemplating nudity, vanities, for the spectacle of one's death or others' is born. Bones and skulls were used to decorate the funeral monuments, next to contorted nude bodies. The images of old age, represented by an old lady, and that of the youth, represented by the lively body of a young woman, are abundant on the frontispieces decorating the large baroque arches of the access gates, sometimes accompanied by the images of birth and death, symbolized by representations of children and skeletons. Thus, a strange taste for this bizarre bond between *eros* and *thanatos*, as Freud would call them later, is present in the baroque theatre, literature and painting.

5. A tragic character on the edge of Europe - Duca Voda

A particular case, completing what we stated so far, is that of Duca Voda – sovereign of Moldavia, a controversial character of his time, ending his life on the dissection table of an anatomic laboratory in Krakow.

Caught, after the retreat from Vienna, in the house of Lady Dabija, his mother in law, on Christmas day, he was taken by an army formed of Kazaks, Polish and Moldavians, and brought, according to the chronicles of the time, to Poland. The former great sovereign of Moldavia and Ukraine ended up alone, abandoned by all, including the beautiful queen Anastasia, who refused to pay a large sum of money as ransom. He took the road of the exile in a two-horsed sleigh, shamed and insulted, and died away from home, in great sorrow and grief, as Neculce states (Neculce, 1990: 307).

The most impressive thing, rarely encountered at the time, was the performing of an autopsy on the corpse of the deceased, coming as a total humiliation for the former sovereign of Moldavia and Ukraine, having participated to the siege of Vienna under the flag of the Ottoman Empire: “When the doctors opened him, after his death, they found in his bile 27 red stones, and two large ones in his kidneys and his lungs were burned from thirst” (Gane, 1991: 312). Based on the description of the chronicles, we can, in fact, deduce that Duca Voda had gallstones and kidney lithiasis as a result of his food excesses and that he had died from pneumonia, most likely contracted in prison.

During his first reign in Moldavia, that started in the year of the Beast, 1666, it was believed that he had been a good sovereign, as Neculce tells us that “when he ascended to the throne in Iasi, the population was satisfied, as he had his origins in the local aristocracy, and no one was complaining about injustice” (Neculce, 1990: 283). The same chronicler, though, tells us that, during his second reign, he had become “even worse and he treated the aristocracy and the people terribly”. He needed lots of money, requested by the Ottoman Empire which was preparing intensely for the attack of the Occident, and he planned to get it by means of heavy taxes, imposed not only to the commoners but to the members of the aristocracy. The country was depopulated and impoverished, and the population started to hate him. During the last part of his reign, a taste for torture became obvious at the sovereign whose personality was falling apart as he was developing an inclination towards sadism. The chroniclers remind us that: “the prisons were full of noblemen and the quods filled with commoners, and he was torturing them, and beating them and letting them starve to death, both men and women” (Neculce, 1990: 301). Moreover, the sovereign himself was conducting the trials of the allegedly traitor noblemen, killing them himself with a mace.

During the baroque era, the entire world is a theatre where people become actors on the great stage of life. They dissimulate their feelings, as they are caught in the instability of the fortune. They seek greatness and experiment the vanity of the entire earthly glitter. The same person may be now a king and later a poor wanderer. The wheel of Fortune was spinning fast during the 17th century. Duca, sovereign of Moldavia, just like the people of his time, is actually a fragile character, whose power originates in a foreign, external instance. Just like Mephistopheles, offering power to Faustus, such as described by Christopher Marlowe, for the imaginary of the baroque Moldavia, the sultan Mahomed 4th is a demon. He sells the access to the throne for lots of gold and becomes the true demonic power over the country.

The dissection performed on the sovereign's corpse in Krakow is perceived by the Moldavians as an obvious seal of the satanic pact, depriving him of the traditional burial rituals. The great Duca becomes, abroad, among foreigners, a thing, a corpse, a *res extensa*. Thus, he loses his human dimension, the greatness he so much desired, he loses his soul and becomes a mere object of an anatomic study, analysed strictly for material reasons, capturing only the external aspects of his life.

This is how early modernity is born, descending the meaning of life in the corporeal world that will cause Pascal to say that he is frightened by the silence of infinite spaces; spaces that lost God.

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