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Memory, Conflict and Space

**Body as a marked space**

**The writing memory. The case of Death and the  
Maiden by Ariel Dorfman**

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For a very long time theatre, which also functioned as a great transmitter of cultural memory, used the poetics of nineteenth-century realistic drama to present coherent stories. In the second half of the twentieth century the way in which theatre and reality have been perceived has changed. In this new perspective the realistic aesthetics has been proved to be insufficient to talk about the experience of a modern man. The structure of drama had to be refreshed and filled it with content that could set foundation for the new agreement between the stage and the audience.

Realism in drama was created in the late nineteenth century, with the growing importance of the theatre as a place that aspired to the status of a media that was telling and showing the world and the truth about it. It was supposed to show an objective image of the outside world. In addition, theatre also aspired to the role of a modern institution of public life that could help shape the modern emerging society. Realism became a convention used to create an exact image of reality and that reveals the truth and thus allowed the viewer to somehow escape from his everyday boring and grey life.

The same role theatre had in Latin America after colonization. One has to remember that after colonization every country on the continent needed a story to base new national identity upon to create national unity, and every each of this countries had to found the proud of being independent cultural and politically. Especially in Chile theatre was place for ordinary people like *araucanos*. After the first years of independence Chilean stage started to assimilate European theatre theory of Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello and Brecht. Cultural life was blooming.

Historical turmoil didn't spare South America and although the two World Wars affected mainly Europe and Asia, the consequences of armed struggle in the old continent could also be seen in Latin America. The unstable economy and the influx of a large amount of post-fascist immigrants from Germany and Italy disrupted inner balance. As a result stability of the social impact was taken over by the military authorities, who introduced censorship and banned performances explicitly political. Playwrights were forced to seek alternative forms of storytelling about the world and used achievements of the European theatre. The Latino playwrights discovered that Ionesco and Beckett's theatre and alternative vision of reality created by existentialist philosophers could be used to talk about the dictatorship and the absurd reality in which they lived. For example the coup brought Chilean cultural life into what Soledad Bianchi has called a "cultural blackout". The government applied censorship to non-sympathetic individuals while taking control of mass media. The formerly thriving *Nueva canción* scene suffered the exile or imprisonment of many bands and individuals. Key musician Víctor Jara was tortured and killed by elements of the military. Contemporary Chilean rock group Los Prisioneros complained against the facility with which Argentine Soda Stereo made

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appearances on Chilean TV or in Chilean magazines and the comfort they had to obtain musical equipment for concerts in Chile. Soda Stereo was invited to Viña del Mar International Song Festival while Los Prisioneros were neglected despite popular acclaim. This situation was because Los Prisioneros were censored by media under the influence of the military dictatorship. Experimental theatre groups from Universidad de Chile and Pontifical Catholic University of Chile were restricted by the military regime to perform theatre classics. Some established groups like *Grupo Ictus* were tolerated while new formations like *Grupo Aleph* had its members jailed and forced to go into exile because of making a parody performance on the 1973 *Chilean coup d'état* [kudeta].

In addition, the period of fear and terror destabilized social unity, so after the fall of dictatorial governments in latest '80 the society looked for new internal agreement about democracy and once again the theatre turned out to be helpful. It was necessary for the arts to find a way to talk about trauma by recalling the recent events to try to deal with them by taming them, thus helping to enter the sphere of social dialogue and cultural memory. Shortly after the collapse of military government in Argentina Roberto Cossa gave an interview in which he wondered about the condition of the theatre at the time of post-regime: "The political changes have brought about - as was to be expected - confusing situation in the area of creativity. To address this issue by the theatre requires a longer time. Cinema creates a chronicle, the theatre operates a metaphor, and it requires the formation of a certain foundations, which can only arise theatrical aesthetics' – said to journalist.

In this paper I will use the term cultural memory as defined by Aleida Assmann in *Spaces of Remembrance: Forms and Transformations of Cultural Memory*. Assmann understands cultural memory as memory based on different media, always controlled by institutions with well-organized politics of memory and forgetting. However, the transfer from individual to collective memory causes problems like deformation, reduction, instrumentation of memorized contents. I find this approach particularly useful because I believe that cultural memory could be transferred by drama as a medium. Drama also could write about and describing body – as a flesh /as a body of actor and of course like an artistic representation. In this way body is understood as a medium and on the other hand it is also a marked space. Marked in a very authentic way – with scars. Marked for the audience – like they body of every viewer. And marked like historical place of memory with objective signs. In this case by Dorfman play, the body is established particularly for memorized historical trauma.

Ariel Dorfman attempted to write about the art and personal experience of the dictatorship after the collapse of the system in Chile in 1991. Dorfman used the classical structure of a realistic drama, and even the melodramatic *piece bien fait* and filled it with new content based on his

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personal experience as well as the social experience of the past regime. It seems that Ariel Dorfman by writing *Death and the Maiden* in 1991 wanted the audience to face not only the recent history, but also the pain and suffering that the period of dictatorship left: loss of the loved ones, fear and terror, the uncertainty of the future, bodies marked and crushed by painful tortures. It seems that the confrontation with the past in the theatre was supposed to help with coping with it also in the outside reality.

Dorfman introduced veracity to the theatre and with a precision of a chronicler he made allusions to current political situation in his play. In the beginning of the first scene we see the presidential committee responsible for crimes of the dictatorship. But before it turns out to be the main motive of the play, we watch an ordinary conversation between an old married couple about a broken spare tire and the woman's mother-in-law. Paulina and Gerardo are characters deriving from melodramatic structure. This structure seems to be introduced only to tease the audience, creating the illusion of a quiet, middle-class life in the suburbs. Whose main function is to emphasize the ridiculous behaviour of Paulina in the second part to surprise the recipient even more.

The characters are a housewife Paulina Salas, her husband Gerardo Escobar – a lawyer who has just been promoted to a member of the presidential committee and mysterious Roberto Miranda. The play begins in a realistic situation. Paulina is preparing dinner in their suburban house. She is waiting for Gerardo who is late. As it turns out, the cause of the delay was a flat tyre in Gerardo's car happen in a remote area in heavy rain. Fortunately, on a dirty road was also traveling Roberto, who offered a Gerardo a lift home. That's how he became friends with Gerardo and gained his gratitude, which he will benefit a moment later. He decides in the middle of the night to visit his new friend and enjoy a fine glass of pisco with him. As if by chance the first political allusions are expressed by the playwright through the mouth of his characters because Dorfman wanted to communicate with the viewers. Actual, politic work on a report about victims of the regime, the emerging democracy citizens of Chile have not yet gotten used to the fact that in the middle of the night someone can knock on the door. However, the initial coincidence makes the situation minute by minute more horrible, deforms and distorts it, dialogue providing always new information that would characters and viewers rather not remember.

Paulina turns out to be a victim of the recent dictatorship. In the past, she was kidnapped; she was humiliated during the interrogation and repeatedly raped by soldiers of the regime with Schubert's music played in the background. Her bruised body through the voice of the night guest recognizes her former torturer. Listening to the conversation of the two men, Paulina comes to the conclusion that she recognizes the voice which repeatedly informed her that she would not survive the interrogation, and if she luckily survives, she should forget everything and remain quiet to avoid

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conjuring up the nightmare. Especially now that the country is reborn anew and thriving democrating society expects the perpetrators and the victims will live in symbiosis, forgetting about the past. But the victims need revenge, compensation, penalties for crimes or at least a sincere confession and regret that the victims could work through the trauma and indulge in mourning.

During this scene we – as viewers or readers – can for the very first time see and understand the importance of the body. Aleida Assmann wrote that the body is stabilizing memories by dissemination and affects. Affect as a corporal component of memories has ambivalent attribute – it could be a signature of authenticity or falsification. When memories are unconscious we could speak about trauma. And trauma can be seen because when we have a trigger – an experience hidden in the body and forgotten are manifested by bodily symptoms – as is clearly visible on Paulina's body. If we are going further and call the body as a space, we also could say that marked space stores and authenticates memory even in terms of forgetting. After the time of dictatorship which interrupted tradition we can go back to this space and find memories. But sometimes we have to use a game of imagination or better – an artistic artefact.

Once Paulina recognizes Roberto Dorfman breaks the genre of scenes involving residents of the suburbs, deforms and distorts reality, taking in to the brink of absurdity. Paulina decides to undergo a treatment and wants to talk. At first to her husband, but she believes that the story of the forgotten and painful past, will turn to the real experience and will be heard not only by the citizens of Chile and South America, but also around the world. To understand the past and convey her experience to others, Paulina wants to look at the suffering of her persecutors. However, there is no tangible evidence or proof that the oppressor was exactly Roberto. Her certainty of his guilt is based only on her dubious memory and the voice she heard in the darkness which was the voice from her past.

Running and reviving memories of the trauma, the woman takes control. She becomes even more brutal and cruel than the henchmen of the system. She rearranges the kitchen into a torture chamber. She attaches him to a chair and begins to threaten him with a weapon to break him mentally. Using force she forces him to admit he is guilty, to make a confession, which she needs as well as her whole country. She treats his body the special, marked space – identical as her own. From this moment he has to live with visual scars on his skin. There are the same like the marks on Paulina's body. From this moment his body can also be treated like a space of memory. There is also no need to name and clarify what has happened in the recent past because it's obvious for the viewers.

Paulina wants to record, write and pass on the remains of her individual story of suffering. Her suffering is a proof of what really took place that was silenced because it was not only

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convenient for the regime but also easy for government to forget. It is difficult to put into the words the image of the doom that took place. Especially since the collapse of democracy occurred within a nation and there was no aggression from the outside, so no one really “attacked” the defenceless country but it was the people living in the country that attacked each other - neighbours turned against each other.

In the afterword Dorfman wrote: ‘How can you tell the truth, if taming of the massacre ends up changing our beliefs? How do we know if the memory saves us or cheats? How do we preserve innocence in a broken and corrupt world? Can we forgive those who have done us irreparable evil?’. It seems that his play can answer these questions, involving the personal experience of the audience. Dorfman wanted them to look for answers and set the bill. Either their conscience, or authority, which did not pay for the damage they have done. A subject presented in this way of dramatic form gives many opportunities to engage the audience in the drama. I suspect that many Chileans like to hear a confession, to be on Paulina’s side and mete out justice. But Dorfman did not simply exceed the aesthetic of a realistic drama, not knowing which way to go next. This in turn meant that the gap was closed in the old and tame the maudlin melodrama, from which we can learn that love is the most important, and forgiveness really is in revenge.

Dorfman remaining faithful to realistic aesthetics forgot that the greatest strength of political theatre is its use of metaphorization. While using the traditional framework of nineteenth-century theatre he still couldn’t tell anything new about the tangible wounds of Paulina and about the deeper ones beneath the skin of society. The old aesthetic involved only the recipients emotions through the mechanism of projection and identification making him turn into a passive observer and not an equal partner in the conversation. This failure in the dialogue between stage and the viewer is even more obvious when we take into the account that the memory of viewers is filled with the still fresh experience of the dictatorship and they could say much more about torture and fear, and justice and how to cure society than Paulina, who locked herself in costume of a realistic heroin. Because the marked body isn’t present only at stage. We can see more of these marked spaces by looking around on a Chilean street.