The Skin and Film on the Ulcer: Anatomy and the Performance of the Body on the Early Modern and Postmodern Stage

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With the gradual unsettling and disappearance of the obstinate binary opposition between mind and body, we have been witnessing, in critical theory as well as in popular culture, a renaissance of the human body since the 1980s. Images of the dissected, anatomized, exposed corporeal structuration of the human being are disseminated and mediatized endlessly in consumer culture, while theories of the somatic, bodily modalities of the psychosomatically heterogeneous speaking subject inform the foundations of almost each poststructuralist theory. Having been liberated from the suppression imposed on it by the non-corporeal abstraction of the Cartesian ego, the body has become a theoretical cornerstone as well as a cultural commodity. Besides the indefatigable vogue of TV series, soap operas, and documentaries on hospitalization, emergency rooms, surgery, and catastrophe management, we are also witness to a growing number of commercialized anatomy exhibitions. Today, the most successful and popular sensation in the world is the travelling anatomical exhibition of specially prepared corpses directed and orchestrated by the German professor Günther von Hagens. Since its first display in Japan in 1996, more than forty million people have visited the various versions of the "Body Worlds" exhibition.[1] The Other of the human subject is back: the materiality of the human being is again in the forefront of public curiosity, and this curiosity is now satisfied in massive anatomical exhibitions and theatres. This otherness finds its propelling fuel in the most deep-seated fantasies and anxieties of the subject, and its historical antecedents go back as

[1] https://bodyworlds.com/wp-content/uploads//2017/09/1498134149_bw_factsnumbers_chjun171.pdf Access: 17.09.2018.

far in time as Shakespeare's age. One of the most telling installments in the history of "Body Worlds" is the famous "Basketball Player" (Fig. 1). The cadaver is positioned over Leonardo da Vinci's well-known "Vitruvian man", and spectacularly unites the signs of the early modern and the postmodern interest in the anatomization of the human body. The renaissance of the body may well account for the popularity and revival of early modern English plays that had been ignored or systematically suppressed by the canon. Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, for example, has been enjoying a growing popularity even in non-English speaking countries since the 1980s, although for centuries it was considered by critics as an error in the canon: an unexplainable perversion of taste, an early and unsuccessful experimentation with the revenge theme. In Hungary, Shakespeare's earliest tragedy had three major productions in the past twenty years, although it had never been staged in Hungarian before 1978. The dissective, penetrative inwardness, which makes "Body Worlds" so appealing to the largest international audience, has been identified by recent scholarship as a sign of the emergence of the early modern subjectivity,[2] and has also become an important perspective in postmodern productions and adaptations of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In what follows, I intend to investigate this growing occupation with the interiority of the human being as a cultural practice that has similar manifestations in both the early modern and the postmodern period because it is a reaction to the same kind of epistemological crisis.

[2] For the voluminous scholarship on the relationship between the body and the emergence of early modern subjectivity, see, for example, Hillman 2007, Hillman / Mazzio 1997, Marshall 2002, Maus 1995, Neill 1998.

Fig. 1[3]

I would like to start out with a unique and revolutionary Hungarian experiment. In the history of Hungarian stage and film adaptations of English Renaissance drama, the anatomical investment was initiated by Gábor Bódy's stage production of *Hamlet*, which was also turned into a film adaptation in 1992.[4] In Bódy's vision, the entire stage is a labyrinthine, magnified representation of Hamlet's brain, with all the cavities, nerves, fibers, and veins of the inside of the skull (Fig. 2-4). During the performance, Hamlet walks through and through the inside spaces of his own material brain stuff, and in this way the production metaphorically connects the inside and outside processes of the quest for self-knowledge. This anatomical interest has been recurring and growing in both Hungarian and international adaptations.

[3] https://sciencefun.wordpress.com/category/gunter-von-hagens/ Access: 19.09.2018.
[4] For the cultural contexts of these productions, see Schandl 2009.

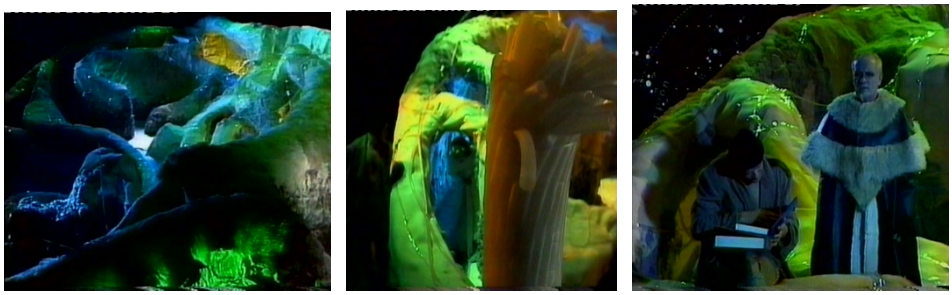

Fig. 2-4

A more recent example of the postmodern affinity for the early modern anatomical interests and representations is an experimental staging of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by Maladype Theater, Budapest, first performed in 2013. In a dramaturgical turning point of the performance, Macduff enters the scene and puts a replica of Macbeth's flayed skin into his lap (Fig. 5-6). Contemplating his own skin image, the tyrant appears to arrive at some climactic realization, a point of *anagnorisis.* I consider this representation a very interesting solution in this daring adaptation of the tragedy. My paper relies on the early stages of a research into the cultural semantics that informed Tudor and Stuart understandings of the skin, so aptly picked up by Maladype Theater for a corporeally sensitive postmodern audience. I maintain that the act of unskinning, foregrounded both in early modern and postmodern anatomical representations, is a general metaphor of the attempt to arrive at the substance beyond the show, the depth behind the surface, the reality beneath the appearance of things. It emblematizes the desires and the inward, anatomizing attitudes that are common to both the early modern and the postmodern epistemological crisis.

Fig. 5-6[5]

The image of the skin, to be removed to reveal the truth, proliferates not only in representations of autopsies but also in English Renaissance tragedy, *Hamlet* being a notable example. It emblematizes the scene of an important breakthrough that commences with the decline of two historical periods that suppressed the idea of the corporeal human interiority: with the end of the religiously overdetermined medieval period, and that of the unfinished project of modernity. Let me stay with *Hamlet* to illustrate the gravity of this image with a quote. In the closet scene, in an attempt to instruct his mother, Hamlet employs a visual metaphor of spiritual corruption which, curiously, contains one of the most favored corporeal images of early modern tragedy: the ulcer.

> Mother, for love of grace,
> Lay not that flattering unction to your soul
> That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
> It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
> Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
> Infects unseen. (3.4.141-46)

The ulcer in the early modern cultural imagery becomes a metaphor of the innermost infection, the corruption in the depth, which is covered up by the social masquerade of self-fashioning and pretense – by the skin and film Hamlet mentions. At the same time, the curative practice of tragedy, Philip Sidney argues, is exactly in the act of removing this

film, breaking the surface, in order to expose the infection. The violation of the social skin of masks aims at making the ulcer bare in both the collective and the individual body. "Tragedy… openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue." (Sidney 2004: 27)

Much recent criticism has dealt with this anatomical imagery in Sidney's poetics. I would like to argue that the emphasis in this line is not so much on the image of the ulcer and the wound. I would rather lay stress on the idea of the tissue: the scalpel of English Renaissance tragedy removes, in an epistemological maneuver, the surface layer of our social as well as very corporeal reality to reveal the interiority, the depth.

Looking at it from this anatomical *and* representational point of view, Hamlet is engaged in an attempt at the private level which is also the goal of the tragedy itself on the communal level: to cure the soul, to open the wounds, to remove the concealing tissue. If, however, the skin is the carnal envelope that covers up the body together with its corporeal diseases, what is, we might ponder, the cover on the soul? What is it that envelopes our spiritual essence, if there is any? What is the skin of the soul, what makes the film on the spirit? In the period of the emergence of a nascent early modern subjectivity, amidst the protestant debates about the availability or absence of an innermost spiritual essence of the human being, the question arises with growing intensity[6].

There is an obsession in the English Renaissance with the skin that covers the depth of things and hides the structuration of some innermost reality from the public eye. Transgression in early modern tragedy is very often not merely a violation of social or

[5] Pictures of the production *Macbeth / Anatomy* are provided by courtesy of Maladype Theatre, Budapest. Director: Zoltán Balázs, Macbeth: Ákos Orosz, Macduff: Zoltán Lendváczky.

[6] I contend that it is possible to examine this history of the interrelationship between the bodily and the spiritual container, the corporeal and the mental skin in the light of Didier Anzieu's famous theory about the skin-ego, which, as the comparison of early modern and postmodern anatomical habits suggests, must have its own historicity (Anzieu 2016 [1985]).

political standards and laws, or a mutilation and dissection of bodies, but primarily a transgression that penetrates the surface of things in an *epistemological attempt* to locate the depth behind the surface.

Performance oriented semiotic approaches have explicated the representational logic of the English Renaissance emblematic theater, and the various techniques it used to thematize the antagonisms of the constitution of early modern subjectivity. The postsemiotic scrutiny of these techniques has revealed that violence on the Tudor and Stuart stage did not merely function to satisfy the appetite of the contemporary public, an audience that demanded gory entertainment in the public theater. These representational techniques of dissection participated in a general epistemological effort to address those territories of knowledge that had formerly been hidden from public discourses. The human body, the temple of divine secrets and the model of universal harmony, was undoubtedly one of the most intriguing territories. The *skin* of the human body started to be understood as a general metaphor of the new frontier that started to be tested in the process that I call the early modern *expansive inwardness*: a more and more penetrative testing of the inward dimensions of the human body and the human mind. Traveling and exchanged body parts, dismemberment, dissolution by poison, self-beheading, torture, macabre spectacle, madness and terror – anatomical images of the body recur in English Renaissance tragedies from *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* to *The Revenger's Tragedy, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Broken Heart*. The popularity of the public autopsy and the anatomical theater was second only to the public playhouse by the beginning of the 17th century. The lesson that the emergent modern cultures of Europe learned from such anatomies was that the human body is something uncontrollably heterogeneous and difficult to contain.

The obsession of early modern tragedy with the skin in particular, and its repeated penetration has been investigated by much recent criticism. Maik Goth examines in great length the practices of "the performative opening of the carnal envelope", and he enlists the many instances of killing, hewing, stabbing, dagger-drawing, fighting, butchery as forms of skin-penetration in Renaissance tragedy (Goth 2012: 141). Indeed, early modern culture stages the "violent but calculated transgression of the outside into the vulnerable interior of the body" to find out, as Norbert Elias would put it, what is the sheath upon the human being, and what is locked up in this container of the *homo clausus*.[7] I would like to add, however, that this skin-penetration is also always a metaphor of the new habits of seeing and inwardness, closely connected to the early modern crisis of death (Neill, 1998: 102-140). It carries an epistemological and semiotic stake in an age when the *homo clausus* is being constituted by the simultaneous discourses of an unsettled medieval world model and an emergent modernity. Embedded in the typically anatomizing imagery of revenge tragedies, skin penetration foregrounds the incalculable nature of reality as well as the anxiety with which the early modern subject strives to discern what is on the other side of that skin.

Sidney's and Hamlet's ulcers are curiously echoed in Vindice's words in *The Revenger's Tragedy* when he promises to increase the suffering of the Duke by combining physical with mental torture:

> Puh, 'tis but early yet; now I'll begin
> To stick thy soul with ulcers, I will make
> Thy spirit grievous sore: it shall not rest,
> But like some pestilent man toss in thy breast. (3.5.170–173)

[7] "Is the body the vessel which holds the true self within it? Is the skin the frontier between 'inside' and 'outside'? What in the human individual is the container, and what the contained?" Elias 2000 [1939]: 472.

The extreme visions of a tongueless Hieronimo, the idea of a Faustus torn apiece by devils, a systematically mutilated Lavinia, a Regan anatomized in vivisection in *King Lear* all mark the relentless anatomization of the body in English Renaissance tragedy. Within this imagery, however, the skin, or more exactly, the losing of skin, the unfilming of the surface deserves special attention. I turn again to *The Revenger's Tragedy* to demonstrate an example:

> (…) Oh, that *marrowless* age
> Would stuff the hollow *bones* with damn'd desires,
> And stead of *heat* kindle infernal fires
> Within the spendthrift *veins* of a dry duke,
> A parch'd and *juiceless* luxur! Oh God, one
> That has scarce *blood* enough to live upon!
> And he to riot it like a son and heir?
> Oh, the thought of that
> Turns my abused *heartstrings* into fret!
> Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love,
> My study's ornament, thou *shell of death*,
> Once the bright *face* of my betrothed lady,
> When life and beauty naturally fill'd out
> These *ragged imperfections*,
> When two *heaven-pointed diamonds* were set
> In those *unsightly rings*: then 'twas a *face*
> So far beyond the artificial shine
> Of any woman's *bought complexion*…
> (…) Be merry, merry;
> Advance thee, O thou terror to fat folks,
> To have their costly *three-pil'd flesh* worn of
> As bare as this. (1.1.1-47, emphases mine)

Images of human corporeality abound in Vindice's opening soliloquy. The presenter-revenger literally dissects the visualized image of Gloriana's head and face and arrives at the bare skull. The lethal motion of this skull will generate the anatomization and death of the royal members in the corrupt court. As a matter of fact, Vindice presents a *public and retrospective autopsy* of Gloriana. Characteristically, he concludes the prologue by instructing the skull to transform the enumerated figures of the tragedy into flayed, skinless figures, probably in order to reveal the ulcers that have been growing under their protective dermatological cover.

Within the dramaturgy of these tragedies, the anatomization of body and mind is accompanied by a special double anatomy of the revenger itself to the extent that, on the one hand, an anatomy of adversaries is staged by the revenger, but the revenger's anatomy lesson at the same time gradually turns into his own self-dissection, stripping his personality bare naked to the point of self-loss, at which point it is best possible to act out and master those roles which have been necessitated by the taking up of the task of revenge. "Man is happiest when he forgets himself." (4.4.85) – says Vindice, and the explanation for this seemingly paradoxical *ars poetica* is that the performance of the capacity of the human being to go through endless metamorphoses necessitates the art of self-loss, a self-anatomy which then enables the revenger to carry out the anatomy of his enemies. In other words, in order to master the art of revenge, the revenger has to step outside his own skin.

Tudor and Stuart understandings of the skin went through gradual and significant changes so that, by the beginning of the 17th century, the Galenic porous and defenseless skin changed into a protective shield, a castle that encloses the precious organs and the soul of the human being (Pollard 2010: 115). However, in his influential monograph on the history of the skin, Stephen Connor argues that at the time of the growing popularity of public anatomy and the dissemination of dissective practices in social theatricality, the skin did not receive more attention than earlier in the Galenic discourses (Connor 2004: 13). For the anatomist, it was considered just a dispensable outer layer, a figment that dissection took no interest in. In the light of the dramatic literature and the anatomical imagery of the age, I contest this position. Connor argues that the recurring images of the self-flaying man in the anatomy books are just examples of how, for the anatomist, the skin is to be discarded. I maintain that the persistent presence of the flayed skin, and the epistemological gaze interwoven into the act of self-revelation are indicative of the

growing importance of the skin as a revelatory element. Later in the new cultural imagery of modernity, this presence and cultural imagery of the anatomized body will be suppressed and replaced by the abstraction and linguistic performance of the ego. After the anatomical discourses that penetrated the surfaces of the human body with relentless effort in the Renaissance, the human corpus had to be covered up again totally during the beginnings of modernity by a new ideological skin, that is, the discourses of rationalism and the newly fabricated Cartesian ego. This commences, however, only in the eighteenth century, with the rule of the error that had been introduced by Descartes:

> This is Descartes' error: the abyssal separation between body and mind, between the sizable, dimensioned, mechanically operated, infinitely divisible body stuff, on the one hand, and the unsizable, undimensioned, un-pushpullable, nondivisible mind stuff; the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgement, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body. (Damasio 1994: 249)

In a historical perspective, then, we are perhaps witness to the process in the early modern period when the anatomical, corporeal reality of the human being is revealed under the skin, but this does not result in a constitutive body – mind binarism: much rather, it grants a much greater importance to the corporeal than earlier, medieval understandings of the human being. This period leads us over to a new age when the bodily constitution of the human being gradually gets marginalized and forgotten. The post-Enlightenment, self-identical subject is contained and articulated by the new skin which is put on the sovereign individuum by the Cartesian discourse of the noncorporeal, abstracted ego-functioning. After the early modern anatomization, the subject of modernity dresses in a new, non-transparent discursive skin, which will not allow the heterogeneous body to show through.

Macbeth was written and performed in the dissective, revelatory stage of this historical process. What Macbeth needs to realize towards the end of the tragedy, and what is foregrounded with such brutal visuality in Maladype Theatre, is that, behind the skin on

the surface, his original identity has been totally disintegrated (Fig. 7). No self-identity, no essence, no human core is left inside him, he has become the ever-growing *ulcer* itself, which has finally been revealed by the anatomical work of the tragedy.

Fig. 7

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