



## Representation of Consciousness in Gábor Bódy's *Hamlet*

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**Abstract.** Starting from theoretical considerations regarding the relationship between the dramatic text and its representation, the present paper proposes to investigate the space construction in the Hungarian experimental director's stage/video adaptation of the Shakespearean play. The performance makes use of a "bio-radical" setting modeling the shape of a dissected human brain. On the one hand, the paper focuses on the multimedial feature of the aesthetic experience provided by the television version of the performance, blending both theatrical and cinematic space experience. On the other hand, the study argues that the performance initiates a fruitful dialogue between tradition and innovation, simultaneously evoking the emblematic character of the early modern theater and setting up a postmodern experimental stage. The consciously explored simultaneity of various representational and theatrical traditions/inventions results in a Neo-Avantgarde reinterpretation of the Renaissance *Theatrum mundi*, aimed at staging the micro- and macrocosmic (corpo)reality of the subject and its social environment.

**Keywords:** multimediality, experimental theater/film, space representation, new/imagist theatrality

Gábor Bódy (1946-1985) is primarily accounted for as a film director; nevertheless, for one performance his career crosses the institutionalized Hungarian theater. If we approach Bódy's relationship with the theater on broad terms, obviously we should not ignore the theatrical aspects of his film either, however, these do not constitute the subject matter of the present study.

Gábor Bódy was an innovator who strived to renew the language of the Hungarian film and to connect it to contemporary international trends. He made his first films within the framework of the Béla Balázs Studio; he was the first to direct films in the BBS already before graduating the profile of film and television directing at the College of Theatre and Film Art. It was within the BBS that he accomplished the *Film Language Series*, that is, the first experimental film project of the Studio, then his diploma film, the *American Anzix* (*Amerikai anzix*, 1975). He presented himself in front of the large public with his first feature film, *Narcis and Psyche* (*Nárcisz és Psyché*, 1980); he initiated the first international video magazine; he founded the experimental unit of the MAFILM. He held lectures on film theory; his studies on the aesthetics of film language showed the influence of János Zsilka's works in linguistics. In his theoretical writings Bódy significantly contributed to the semiotic theory of the film and elaborated his theory of seriality as well as his concept of the attribution of meaning related to the motion picture. Besides, he acts the main role of his third—and last—feature film entitled *Dog's Night Song* (*Kutya éji dala*, 1983). All in all, Bódy's experimentalism—and here I refer to both his theoretical writings and his artistic productions—presents a strong tendency of redefining the rhetoric of visual representation (whether films, theatrical performances or video installations) on aesthetic and (film-) philosophical grounds. Within the context of this career, it can be taken for granted that on Bódy's stage *Hamlet* (1982) also became a product of an experimentalist artistic endeavor.

When examining a *performance-text*, the investigation must indispensably start from considerations regarding the relationship between the dramatic text and its representation. When examining the status of the text as compared to its representation, we have to take into account both historical and theoretical aspects. On the one hand, the text/representation relationship is historically determined; from the end of the seventeenth century onwards the view that the text “precedes” its representation starts to spread, however, earlier theater used to be representation-focused, based on a more intimate relationship between the word and the body, the actor actually taking part in the fulfillment of the creative activity. Together with the gaining ground of the written word, the status of representation is gradually repressed; it gains an additional quality, a secondary significance, becoming the servant of the dramatic text. Patrice Pavis regards this as a “historical accident” brought about by the act of recording the texts in writing, their repeated utilization, by the sophisticated rhetoric of plot and also by the quality of creativity attached to the director (175). Out of these historically determined factors two distinct views of the *mise en scène* have emerged and co-exist, namely the text-centered and the stage-centered ones. The co-existence of these two views reveals an interpretive urge of establishing a hierarchy between the text and its representation.

According to the text-centered views, representation “fills in” the dramatic text; Anne Ubersfeld uses the term “textual matrix” for the gaps of the dramatic text that the *mise en scène* serves to complete (qtd. Pavis 176). In this respect, theatrical representation is a medium which interprets the possible meanings of the dramatic text. Furthermore, the text-centered views regard the text as being a distant, absent reference, which normatively prescribes the space formation of the stage.

The stage-centered views reject the normative, derivative, cause-effect relationship between text and representation, and declare the autonomy of the *mise en scène*. According to Hans-Thies Lehmann, the *mise en scène* stands for an artistic practice that is “invisible” from the perspective of the text (qtd. in Pavis 177).

I would like to point out the relevance of these theoretical considerations related to the topic of my paper. In the social-political framework of the 1980s the Hungarian theater—and its reception—proved to be text-centered,<sup>1</sup> and could hardly come abreast of Western European innovative endeavors. The stake of staging a play in this period is, thus, to evade the oppressive political ideology, to make possible for the audience to “read between the lines,” to filter meanings resounding with the current—liminal—existential situation, to provide interferences. In his writing entitled “‘Dead Theater’—Cultural Vacuum” Gábor Bódy accuses the Hungarian theatrical culture of the decade of being out-of-date, of bearing the stigmata of obsolescence. In fact, the charges—in line with Peter Brook’s use of the term—refer to the customary theater-going practice, to the lack of originality of the performances, to the merely subscription-based relation between the theater and the audience, to the superficial cult of actors as well as to the museal, alien atmosphere within the confines of the theater. He summarizes what he lacks in this “malaise” of theatrical life as follows:

. . . it seems that our theaters regularly remain debtors of the culture of the *presence*, that is, of arts, which does not interpret, is not simply ‘culture’, but present-time *creation*, live failure or success, reflector of social-political questions, touchstone of ethical habits, visual sensation; which raises, whether scandal or enthusiasm, but surprise anyway, and offers the public the impression that we expect from every great encounter: namely that *we have changed*. (Bódy, “‘Dead Theater’” 83, trans. by me, J. P.)

<sup>1</sup> Árpád Kékesi Kun draws attention to the strongly text-oriented character of the traditional discourse of Hungarian theater criticism, which bears the imprints of Dezső Kosztolányi’s influential view. This discourse primarily pays attention to the verbal part of the complex, verbal and non-verbal semiotic system represented by the stage performance; it measures the success of the performance in accordance with the effectiveness of the recited text and reserves the attributes of creativity for the—almost mythical—figure of the playwright (Kékesi Kun, *The Revolt of Mirror Images* 147-61).

The cultural vacuum formed in the “official” theatrical life favored the revival of alternative artistic enterprises—amateur theater, happenings and performances—aimed at compensating for the deficiencies of the extant institutions, in other words, a kind of “underground theatrical culture,” which encountered the Avantgarde orientation of the other arts.<sup>2</sup> Bódy describes the characteristics of these alternative forms with the following words: sharp presence; expressiveness; everyday-like character; spontaneity; the assumption of failure; readiness for renewal (Bódy, “Dead Theater” 85). Although it brings a new air, the theater of the *presence* set against “dead theater” cannot fully represent the Hungarian theatrical life, due to its subcultural character; besides, these endeavors had mostly ceased to exist by the 1980s, they had become a legend. Under these circumstances, Bódy considered that the task of modernization was to be incumbent upon regional theatrical institutions and was to be fulfilled by the new views and concepts of young directors carrying out their activity within these institutions. Although the National Theater from Győr formed part of the official institutional structure, it allowed alternative, experimental endeavors and made several attempts to stage performances set against the ruling ideology, even at the expense of prohibitions.

The director under discussion conceives the reform of the Hungarian theatrical culture by subverting the customary ways of expression, by basically ignoring public taste, with the freedom of an experimental language reinforced by impulses of alternative concepts. Bódy is interested in the renovation of theatrical language in line with international trends; according to him, this renewal is possible through a specific combination of tradition and innovation. Thus, he strives for a twofold approach of the dramatic text: the setting is aimed at representing both a stylized imitation of the Renaissance emblematic theater and an abstract Neo-Avantgarde installation. In this way the performance seems to function both as a kind of representation coded in the Shakespearean dramatic text and as an original and autonomous contemporary way of staging. As follows, I would like to present my arguments in defense of this hypothesis.<sup>3</sup>

Bódy directed *Hamlet*—initially—as a theatrical production; then it was turned into a video film aimed at being broadcast on television. The transmediation—from staging to video recording—undoubtedly modifies the viewer’s aesthetic experience. In his study about the theatrical space experience written in the 1930s, Max Herrmann remarks that there is a fundamental difference between theatrical and film experience, as in the film the real space and the real bodies are absent (509). As long as a stage production is transposed into a film, the theatrical

<sup>2</sup> For an exhaustive analysis of the cultural discourses of resistance, and within, the functioning of theatrical subculture in the Kádár-era, see Havasréti (88-98).

<sup>3</sup> The present paper is not aimed at carrying out a full performance analysis of Gábor Bódy’s *Hamlet*; its focus is deliberately limited to the formation—and poetics—of theatrical space.

features are apparently preserved; however, the fixed viewpoint of the viewer of a theatrical play is replaced by the changing perspective of the moving camera. The “camera eye” penetrates into the inner space of the stage and dissolves the prescribed distance between the viewer and the performance, better said, it alternates an outer, distant perspective with the possibility of following the significant details of the performance and of the actors in close-ups. In addition, the theatrical features are also modified by cutting and montage. In the case of Gábor Bódy’s *Hamlet* the video recording does not only serve as to make possible a revision after rehearsals, or does not only provide an archive of the theatrical performance; on the contrary, it is aimed at creating a new work of art, assigning a distinct quality to visual representation. All these contribute to the formation of “another stage” which is ultimately built up in the viewer’s imagination, as a symbolic scene of the imaginary.

The director’s intention offers a Neo-Avantgarde interpretation of *Hamlet* as a play and Hamlet as a personage. *Hamlet* as a play has known various interpretations throughout the past centuries; its readings are stratified upon one another in a palimpsest-like manner and complete—or play off—one another along the mainstream interpretive orientations of the respective period. As a classic, in the qualitative sense of the term, the dramatic text itself creates the links with the specific preoccupations and interpretive practices of different ages; practically each age produces its own *Hamlet*, as the sense of universal disorder and crisis—so profoundly elaborated in the (speech) acts of the tragic hero—is an iterative social, cultural pattern characterizing human existence (cf. Hankiss 22).

In this way, in the limelight of the experimental endeavors of the 1980s, the Shakespearean tragedy initiates a dialogue with Neo-Avantgarde action theories. The *mise en scène* presents Hamlet not only as a hero or a plotter, but also as a subject defining himself in relation to others, in relation to the surrounding social environment, reflecting on the social reality in which he has to place himself. While the title proposes an interpretation of Hamlet’s figure as the “armed philosopher,” the two parts of the television version of the theatrical performance divide, separate the two colliding spheres of Hamlet’s identity: that of the philosopher and that of the warrior respectively. Hamlet’s figure can be “read” as the allegorical embodiment of Reflection and Action; Hamlet’s dilemma becomes the dilemma of arts: should arts only reflect on the social milieu, or should they turn to action, that is, exercise an authority extending beyond the limits of the aesthetic? The Shakespearean world view successfully meets the endeavors of the Neo-Avantgarde artists to attack the secure position and world view of the spectators, to dislocate the category system of the interpreters and to orientate the theatrical discourse towards paradoxical dead ends.

Gábor Bódy focuses on a radical re-reading of the play, starting from a fundamental interpretation according to which the tragedy presents “how

Reflection changes into Action, how an open, young and inquisitive mind resolves to make the single, final bloody act,” but immediately amplifying this with a contemporary layer of interpretation, according to which Hamlet embodies a modern myth of the individual “whether Hamlet is regarded as the hero of subways . . . , the monster . . . of horrors, the political representative of truth or as a lonesome singer” (Bódy, “Hamlet” 189).

In this way, Bódy attempts a twofold orientation: on the one hand, to turn back to the early modern stage, to grasp and render the original feature of the play, on the other hand, to open it up for contemporary concepts of the individual and of the stage. Bódy also recognizes the tensions between the different ages, and proposes a stage adaptation that benefits from this tension and is thus based on “such tectonics that we can make conclusions regarding the future with as much of assurance as the past” (Bódy, “Hamlet” 190). In this way, the clash between the old and the new will be consciously explored in the performance, in which a suitable terrain is provided for a dialogue between different corpora of representational and theatrical traditions. The past dimension of the performance can be traced back to medieval mystery plays, while the future dimension points forward to the corporeal turn gaining ground in poststructuralist theories, emerging and becoming widely spread, in fact, after Bódy’s endeavors (cf. Kiss, “The Stage of Consciousness”).

The stage performance makes use of a “bio-radical”—Bódy’s expression—setting modeling the shape of a dissected human brain. Bódy’s stage design is aimed at the fulfilment of a conceptual project, namely, that of creating a “stage of consciousness,” through exhibiting, exteriorizing the human organism in its naturalistic physicality:

This space should be void, dark—cosmic—out of which planes, figures, performers are isolated by the single gleaming lights. Or it should be an organic labyrinth, passages in space-with-brain-neurons. A field which is suitable for separation and conjuncture alike. A section of the brain that sometimes works, but sometimes detaches itself with a stiffness as regards to picture and sound. It is a macrocosmos on the outside, a microcosmos in the inside. Yet it should be living, dynamic, rather than exhibition-like. (Bódy, “Hamlet” 189-190)

The scenery is devised as a total space construction, which consists of constructional elements—a dissected brain with its passages standing for blood vessels, plastic tubes standing for neurons and fibres—as well as additional light and sound effects. The movements and the proxemic possibilities of the actors were basically restricted to the spatial conditions provided by the brain-labyrinth. It should be mentioned here that the activity of the actors was not fully prescribed by the director; the actors were invited to become co-authors of the performance, in

accordance with the Neo-Avantgarde—and the early modern—staging practice. Besides, the performance fully respected the dramatic text; its Hungarian version translated by János Arany was neither cut nor altered.

Bódy's ingenious setting deconstructs the conventional arrangement of the theatrical space. The setting represents the interior of the hero's consciousness, but it is also aimed at representing the world of the interpersonal relations set up within the dramatic text. It represents the physical, the material, the corporeal, conceived as both a macro- and microcosm: "perhaps a monumental wall or quite 'small' like a skull" (Bódy, "Hamlet" 189-190). Several film procedures employed by Bódy indicate that the human psyche and cosmic universe are regarded as each other's mirror reflections.

For the Hungarian (reading) public, the depths of the human brain had already been explored, its minute vivisection had already been carried out by Frigyes Karinthy in his *Journey around my Skull* (*Utazás a koponyám körül*), written in 1936, one year before his death, creating in a way the pre-condition, the horizon of expectations of the radical stage design created by Bódy. The space design of the stage is based on a metaleptic inversion of the binary oppositions of interior/exterior, material/spiritual. The brain is the ultimate terrain of knowledge, representing a task for mankind similar to getting to know the cosmic universe. It is simultaneously a structure and a counter-structure, order and chaos; this is why it can be considered as a heterotopia in Foucault's sense of the term. At the same time, by displaying the dissected human brain, an epistemological interest in the play gets into the foreground. What is there to be known? Do mental "representations" have a real body of reference, or they get apart from reality, as in the case of Hamlet's much debated madness? Who knows and what and about whom?<sup>4</sup> Is there a possibility to penetrate into each other's mysterious mental territories within the framework of our interpersonal relations? The staging centers on the mental processes presented in the philosophical play; in fact it is the brain, the mind that is pushed into the foreground as the main character of the play.<sup>5</sup>

A connection can be made between the preoccupation with the body in the twentieth century as well as in the Shakespearean age. The Renaissance exploration of—and experimentation with—human anatomy led to an epistemological crisis, together with a shift in the concept of the body as a signifier. Attila Kiss identifies this problem as the problem of Renaissance theater, regarded as a possible forum of the display of the human body:

<sup>4</sup> This layer of meaning might have had resonances for Bódy's contemporary public as overhearing, the transmission of knowledge about others to certain political "organs" was a widely spread social practice.

<sup>5</sup> In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, there is a striking predominance of allusions to the mind and other organs, suggesting an anatomic view of the human body.

The thematization of the body, the production of corpses in Renaissance theater is a strategy of representation which tries to provide some kind of answer to the epistemological crisis. It is not satisfied with the commonplace skull of *memento mori*; instead, it experiments with the dissection of the body with meta-theatrical awareness, with a prolongation of the moment of death, with the setting of the abject onto the stage, so that, through these it should exercise a *total impact* onto the spectator, resulting in immediacy of experience. The theater becomes a semiotic laboratory, in which the *abjection of the body* tries to get through the ambivalences of appearance and reality, and tries to provide the presence of the signified through this impact. This is the body, the image system of wild violence, brutal mutilation and heterogeneous corporeality, which will be absent from modern theater built on the concept of the unified subject. The presence of *theatrical anatomy* separates, among others, the Renaissance *emblematic theater* from the modern *photographic theater*. (Kiss, "The Theater of Anatomy" 12, trans. by me, J. P.)

The meta-theatrical awareness, together with a renewed interest in corporeality turns back, among other trends and endeavors, in the Avantgarde, Neo-Avantgarde and experimentalism. Bódy's *Hamlet* avoids the tradition of modern theater and joins the tradition of Renaissance meta-theater; it is after this fashion that it attempts to bring a new quality into the relationship between the performance and the public. Attila Kiss argues that the *representational insufficiency* of theater is consciously thematized by metatheater, which permanently reveals that a representational experiment is going on, breaking thus the illusion of dramatic reality and attempting to create a total experience in this way (Kiss, "The Post-Semiotics of Testimony" 68).

However, the—mostly negative—critical echoes of the stage performance reveal an asynchrony as concerns the relation between creativity and reception.<sup>6</sup> They disapprove of the predominance of the spectacle and formulate their objections in critical discourses revealing the—already mentioned—text-centered approach, outdated from the viewpoint of today's performance theories.

Árpád Kékesi Kun offers the term *imagist theatricality* for one of the "postmodern" theatrical orientations emerging in the Hungarian theater of the 1990s, defying the realist tradition by the very dominance/excessive use of the spectacle. Imagist theatricality confers an unusually significant role to the visual created within the theatrical space, it strives for achieving a dream-like spectacle, reinforced by various effects. Kékesi Kun distinguishes four trends within the theater of the end of the millenium; besides imagist theatricality he also mentions the

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<sup>6</sup> According to Árpád Kékesi Kun, it is only apparently that reception and creativity form a binary opposition; in fact they are mutually interdependent and in close connection within theatrical culture (Kékesi Kun, "Reception and Creativity in Theatre (Culture)" 9).

endeavors striving for radical reinterpretations, the Neo-Avantgarde trend as well as the performances representing a disharmonious beauty ideal. He offers the term *new theatricality* as a common term comprising all these orientations:

. . . the action unfolding on the stage is continuously put in quotation marks, the act of pretending and the viewer's empathy become impossible. Thus, through an extension of acting, new theatricality makes the situations on the stage relative, in this way it reaches a kind of 'meta-theatrical' dimension, the aspect of 'theater about theater.' . . . Thus, in the theater of a new kind of visuality the associative construction, the disruptions of style, the application of impressive effects, in short, all the elements of postmodern eclecticism serve to displace, to suspend and to continuously postpone authentic experience. (Kékesi Kun, *The Revolt of Mirror Images* 102-103, trans. by me, J. P.)

While in the theater of Western Europe the change of paradigm in the direction of new theatricality had already taken place in the 1970s-80s, we can only speak of isolated endeavors as concerns Hungarian theater, and Gábor Bódy's *Hamlet* is one of them. Additionally, while in the 1980s the theater of the spectacle was not recognized due to its unusual forms of expressivity, in the 1990s the critical discourse—under the auspices of the *performative turn*—comes abreast of these theatrical forms and offers an adequate theoretical terminology (see Fischer-Lichte 27-47). The concept of Gábor Bódy's *Hamlet* proves to be asynchronous with its age,<sup>7</sup> however, as this paper has tried to point out, it can be linked both “anaphorically,” to the Renaissance tradition, and “cataphorically,” to critical discourses contemporary to us; as such, it can be rightfully regarded as a paradigmatic performance, a significant moment within the history of Hungarian theater.

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<sup>7</sup> In connection with Bódy's *Hamlet*, Gabriella Schuller uses the oxymoron “synchronous asynchronity” (Schuller, “Performances Directed by Gábor Bódy and András Jeles”).

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