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## FALSE RECOGNITION: PSEUDO-HISTORY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN ALVIS HERMANIS' *THE SOUND OF SILENCE*

**Key words:** Alvis Hermanis, Simon and Garfunkel, 1968, community, recognition, *déjà vu*, mythistory.

Fergus Kilpatrick, conspirator and hero of Irish independence, dies murdered in a theatre on 6 August 1824, on the eve of a decisive battle. The circumstances of the crime were never clarified, but English police were widely suspected of being the instigators. On investigating the events, Ryan, Kilpatrick's great-grandson, finds that the oldest of the hero's companions, James Alexander Nolan, had been a theatre scholar, a translator of Shakespeare into Gaelic, and an expert on the Swiss *festspiele*, those hugely popular representations which re-enacted historical events in the places in which they had once taken place.

Particular circumstances preceding the murder cast a mysterious shadow over the case. It is known, for example, that Kilpatrick, as happened to Julius Caesar as he approached the Senate on the Ides of March, received a letter in which he was warned about the ambush. It seems, moreover, that rumours were circulating throughout the country, that the tower of Kilgarvan – the place where the hero had been born – had been burned. This could be taken as a presage similar to that which occurred to Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, who saw in a dream the destruction of a tower dedicated to him by the Senate. A beggar on this fatal day exchanged with Kilpatrick certain words that Shakespeare had attributed to Macbeth two centuries before. "That history should have imitated history was already sufficiently marvellous; that history should imitate literature is inconceivable..."<sup>1</sup>

In the perfect plot of Borges, some days before being murdered, Fergus Kilpatrick had suspected the presence of a traitor in the group of conspirators and had charged Nolan with the responsibility of discovering who he was. That traitor, with an Oedipus-like tailspin, was Kilpatrick himself. In accepting his death sentence, Kilpatrick had however asked that his punishment should not endanger the revolt with a public revelation of his infamy. Thus Nolan organized a plot of actions in such a way as to make it seem that the hero was being murdered by his enemies. There was no time for Nolan to invent a drama; he had to plagiarize another dramaturge by quoting passages, sentences and gestures from Shakespeare's tragedies. The hero performed his role. A theatre was the only place possible for the final scene, in which Kilpatrick was shot, citing at once the theatrical death of Julius Caesar and pre-figuring the murder of Lincoln, which would occur in another theatre forty years later.

Ryan discovers the key of the enigma, the figure in the carpet, because he remembers the cues of Shakespeare, thus discovering the source of the quotations, and exposing the fictional quality of history. Ryan's final thought is about the fact that Nolan had foreseen everything, that he had disseminated many signs so that in the future someone might hit upon the truth, might discover the fiction hidden in the event, an event that belongs to history only as a deposit of an imagery elsewhere, of a theatre, of a representation.



Fig. 1. Alvis Hermanis, *The Sound of Silence*. Photo: © Luciano Romano/NTFI

The key theme of Borges' novel is the fact that, in this case, citation appears in two non-homogeneous fields. It's not a matter of the re-emergence of an image, a gesture, or a sentence within the perimeter of a common fact – the common fact of art, of literature, of the theatre – so as to determine a meta-language. We are confronted rather with an event in which history copies literature, in which the historical truth is besieged and collapses before theatrical fiction.

But Borges declares, at the very beginning of his *Theme of the Traitor and the Hero*, that it is the plot of a story which he shall perhaps write someday – a hypothesis, a draft; we are thus faced with a story that describes the intention of writing another story which would be about a (pseudo)-historical fact that, in its turn, is composed around the citation of elements derived from dramatic fiction.

*The Sound of Silence* by Alvis Hermanis works in the same way, using the same *dispositif*; the theatrical scene re-creates the interior of a sort of hippie commune or squat of the 1960s, with such precision that, at first glance, it appears philologically reconstructed. A portable record player, some pocket

radios, a camera, a projector, seem to be taken from a vintage catalogue, with a precision that reaches a kind of paroxysm in the performers' dresses, wigs, and hairdos. In this, *The Sound of Silence* could appear a historical reproduction, the scene coloured by nostalgia for a possible 1968. We are thus in the same conditions described by Borges, where a fictional frame enframes the event of a plausible history. Here however, as in Borges, the prior event leaves an unsettling clue. This is the fact that in 1968 a scheduled concert by Simon and Garfunkel's never took place in Riga. What appears on stage therefore is not the reconstruction of a past time but rather, amongst the proliferation of authentic details and the galaxy of images that re-create an only ever dreamed of 1968, the capture of an essential impurity. It is thus the ambiguity of memory, its posthumous re-enactment, its (pseudo)-historical appearance, and its fictional plot, whose deceit, as in Borges, is disclosed through the obviousness of the citations. Where Nolan uses Shakespeare as a source, Hermanis re-creates entire sequences from *The Graduate*, *Hollywood Party*, and *Blow Up*. Both situations invite the spectator not towards contemplation but towards an attentive analytic state.



Fig. 2. Alvis Hermanis, *The Sound of Silence*. Photo: © Luciano Romano/NTFI

*The Sound of Silence* is the spectacle of a dreaming collectivity in which spectators and actors share the paradoxical memory not of the past that has been, but of a decantation of the past which constructs a communal memory through the citation of fashion, movies, and music.

Not only is it impossible to remove the phenomenological manifestation of the dreamed collectivity of 1968 (or dreaming the 1968) from remembrance, but also this dream is characterized in a way much deeper than any other period of the past, as if the 1960s had laid down the mark, as the Arcanum of every youth. We are thus faced not with a personal memory nor with a historical one, but with the scenic elaboration of a myth (a contemporary myth).

But since I suspect that many things lie under this surface, I'll try to consider the work from afar, avoiding its more obvious indicators (Utopia, sexual liberation, communal living, the search for happiness) and analyze its structure instead.

First of all, it is a totally mute work, in which the actors don't say a word, with a kind of textuality that migrates rather from Simon and Garfunkel's songs,

which saturate the space, playing from old vinyl and radios, and are then heard coming also from jars and books and even from the plumbing, as if the entire scene was a resonance chamber, a centre for the capture and attraction of sonic waves.

If in its first part the spectacle emanates a kind of bliss – a youthful action that only rarely collapses into uncanny images, in the second part many painful shadows thicken over the scene, culminating finally in a death. Excluded from textuality, the Pathos doesn't coincide with the psychological motive of the action but adheres rather to images and gestures. Here Hermanis seeks an energetic field in which every situation and every occasion is intensified to the extreme, and the everyday, minimal plots to which the action gives rise reach a pathetic tension in this play as a destiny is galvanized – a destiny that the spectator knows already and is able to prefigure.

Taking these premises into account, I propose that this scene corresponds in a most surprising way with the form of tragedy, and that the scene itself tries to capture the contemporary shape of the tragic.

Firstly, through a shared visual, gestural and musical imaginary, *The Sound of Silence* becomes a place for the symbolic appropriation of collective existence, although not based on identification with the polis. Such an imaginary is therefore a mythical creation, a catalogue, and a collection of the remains of today's myths as described by Roland Barthes.<sup>2</sup>

The pop and nostalgic music of Simon and Garfunkel is the mirror of that mythic world, the sonar core of a vision that seeks here its manifestation. More deeply, Simon and Garfunkel are the choir of such a tragedy; they are the first element of connection between the scene and the audience – the aberrant choir of a spectacle in which not a single word is spoken, and whose heroes are mute, innocent and anonymous as in a pre-Adamic humanity, as in a time before nomination.

Finally, destiny. If today's myth, as Barthes has stressed, is an unceasing creation of the bourgeoisie, especially in its revolutionary moments, then this

destiny is fully realized in the elementary spirit of levelling, in the sense of normalization.

Thus in the naked, manifest existence of daily life lies a tragic destiny, which makes us feel something oppressive about such a life. Connected with the bourgeoisie, this destiny – which is not heroic, terrible, nor mournful – this tragically banal destiny is obviously one of marriage, of family, and of home.

To say that *The Sound of Silence* is composed as a contemporary tragedy, or as Romeo Castellucci has stated about his *Tragedia Endogonidia*, as a “strategy in order to support the scope of this age”, implies that it recalls, *mutatis mutandis*, some of the main aspects of tragic form, which I have stressed above taking into account the classical interpretation of Aristotle. What I am particularly interested in, now, is one specific element of the Attic Tragedy analyzed in the *Poetics*: recognition (*anagnorisis*).

*Anagnorisis*, in Aristotle's definition, brings about a shift from ignorance to knowledge. It is the moment in which the characters understand their predicament fully for the first time – the moment that resolves a sequence of unexplained and often implausible occurrences; it makes the world and the text intelligible.

Speaking more generally, *anagnorisis* is one of two different forms of memory conceived by the Greeks, the other one being *anamnesis*.

In *anamnesis* (recollection) there is no novelty, merely the re-experiencing of the old. Its classical definition relates to the Platonic formulation of knowledge. The doctrine of *anamnesis* claims that we have knowledge only because we formerly knew. But that means there can be no fundamentally new knowledge. *Anamnesis* provides the reassuring evidence of complete similarity; it has an element of attenuation about it, making everything a gigantic *déjà vu*.

In *anagnorisis*, on the other hand, memory traces are reactivated in the present, but there is never a simple correspondence between past and present. Recognition is a creative shock, where an element from the past jolts consciousness out of joint and thereby contributes to the creation of novelty. Here



Fig. 3. Alvis Hermanis, *The Sound of Silence*, 2007. Photo: © Monika Pormale



Fig. 4. Alvis Hermanis, *The Sound of Silence*, 2007. Photo: © Monika Pormale

the power of the past resides in its complicated relationship of similarity/dissimilarity to the present.

What I intend to do is to consider the memory-structure that *The Sound of Silence* produces and to describe a dialectics of remembering within this memory-structure. There is no doubt that this is a show about memory. I have no time here to analyze this, but the architectural structure of the set itself, with the five aligned doors signalling five different rooms is the same as the memory theatres of the Renaissance. No doubt also, it is a Memory theatre in itself, but a theatre of memory as recognition, not as recollection – and of recognition as an experience for the spectator but not for the character (it is useful to point out that in his massive study of *Recognition* Terence Cave<sup>3</sup> has found in the transference of recognition from character to spectator the key to the concept in its modern development).

The recognition experienced here by the spectator is made possible through the effect of citation. This particular form of *anagnorisis* proceeds through two steps. In the first moment, we recognize the fact of memory; in the second we recognize that this memory belongs to us, and that we are all sharing it

– in terms of the communal knowledge of myth – as the instantaneous community of spectators, joined together during the event, along with the double of this community – the community of the actors.

Here, recognition is on the side of the spectator: by recognizing the source of the citations and by discovering the mythical form of 1968, s/he suddenly realizes that on stage the actors are not performing a history “about the concert that never took place”. They are performing Mythistory. What, then, is mythistory?

In *The Sound of Silence* the performance materials are derived from movies, fashion, photography, and music. Together these elements concur in the elaboration of the spectacle as originating in a myth – a modern myth. In other words, the mythic is the real content of this spectacle; its content appears as a mythic shadowplay staged in the costume of 1968.

It is not a reanimation of myth, as in Jung and other modern mythologists who presumed to disclose in the great myths of our civilization the ultimate mysteries of the human condition, but rather a recognition of myth as a repository of the stories by which,

as Giambattista Vico saw, “men themselves” have made and continue to remake their histories.

This recognition doesn't mean the invalidation of performance but its re-evaluation according to another critical category, which is neither theatrical nor strictly historical but rather mythistorical: the recognition that what we experience is false in terms of what concerns history, but true if we consider the recognition of myth.

In Hermanis' work, myth does not suppress history; it only impoverishes it. It puts it at a distance and makes it usable. If one believes that history is going to die, it is a death with reprieve; history loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The mythic form is not a symbol. The photographer of *Blow Up* is not the symbol of 1968; he has too much presence – he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable* character in the here and now of the scene. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, and made almost transparent; it recedes a little, and it becomes fake. The dialectical relation between performing history and performing myth is essentially a relation of *deformation*. But this distortion is not an obliteration: 1968 remains here half-amputated, and deprived of reality, but not of memory.

In the kind of *anagnorisis* which *The Sound of Silence*

stimulates, the spectator suddenly tastes something of the work of the historiographer, if we accept the definition of Joseph Mali, who proposes an historiography that recognises myth for what it is: a story that has passed into and become history. “The critical task of this historiography, or mythistory, is to reappraise these stories as inevitable, and ultimately valuable, histories of personal and communal identity”<sup>4</sup>

In this account, *The Sound of Silence* re-activates one of the essential tasks of Tragedy – the composition of a community, which here is instantaneous and disinterested: a community that shares nothing but some sort of loss – the loss of something that has never happened but that everybody knows and remembers – in a word, a community of mythistorians.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Theme of the Traitor and the Hero’ in: *Ficciones*, New York: Grove Press, 1962, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> See Roland Barthes, ‘Myth Today’ in: *Mythologies*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Terence Cave, *Recognition. A Study in Poetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Mali, *Mythistory. The Making of a Modern Historiography*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. xii.

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## **Klaidingas atpažinimas: alternatyvi istorija ir kolektyvinė atmintis Alvio Hermanio *Tylos garsė***

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Alvis Hermanis, Simonas ir Garfunkelis, 1968, bendruomenė, atpažinimas, *déjà vu*, mitoistorija.

#### **Santrauka**

Alvio Hermanio *Tylos garsas* suteikia galimybę analizuoti *mitoistorinės rekonstrukcijos* idėją. Spektaklyje atkuriamas XX a. septintojo dešimtmečio hipių komunos arba pusiau legalios jaunimo bendruomenės gyvenimas. Tai daroma su savotiška filologine precizika, todėl *Tylos garsą* galima suvokti kaip istorinę reprodukciją, kaip sceninį ir nostalgiską 1968-ųjų atkūrimą, kai fikcija įremina istoriškai galimus įvykius. Tačiau Hermanis pateikia mus trikdančią užuo-

miną. Tai faktas, kad Simono ir Garfunkelio koncertas, kuris turėjo įvykti Rygoje 1968 metais, taip ir neįvyko. Taigi tai, ką matome scenoje, yra ne praeities rekonstrukcija, bet greičiau tarp daugybės autentiškų detalių ir vaizdinių, atkuriančių 1968-ųjų įkvėptas svajones, tarpstančią esminio grynumo netekusią alternatyvą. Hermanis iš tikrųjų atkuria ištikus epizodus iš *Absolvento*, *Holivudo pokylio* ir *Padidintos nuotraukos*. Tačiau tai, ką šios akivaizdžios citatos atskleidžia, yra apgaulė, nurodanti į atminties dviprasmiškumą: jos pomirtines rekonstrukcijas, jos (pseudo)-istorinius pavidalus ir fiktyvius siužetus.

*Tylos garsas* – tai spektaklis, sudarytas iš įvairios medžiagos, paimtos iš kino, mados, fotografijos ir muzikos. Scenoje šiais elementais sukuriama šiuolaikinį mitą atspindintis reginys. Kitaip tariant, būtent mitas sudaro tikrąjį spektaklio turinį: tai tarsi mitinis šešėlių vaidinimas su 1968-ųjų kostiumais.

Tad žiūrovas pirmiausia atpažįsta atminties faktą; antra – jis atpažįsta, kad ši atmintis yra jo ar jos atmintis, ir kad tai – visų bendra atmintis, kaip bendras yra mito suvokimas. Tai žiūrovus trumpam suvienija kaip bendruomenę, spektaklio metu susibūrusią bendruomenę, kartu su kita – aktorių – bendruomenę.

Atpažinimas čia būdingas žiūrovui: atpažindamas citatų šaltinius ir visą 1968-ųjų mitą, jis/ji suvokia, kad tai, ką vaidina aktoriai, nėra istorija apie „koncertą, kuris niekada neįvyko“. Tai, kas vaidinama, yra mitoistorija. Šis suvokimas nereiškia, kad spektaklis tampa bevertis, bet kad jį reikia vertinti pagal kitokią kritinę skalę, kuri nėra nei teatrinė, nei grynai istorinė, bet mitoistorinė: suvokimas, kad tai, ką matome, yra klaidinga istoriškai, bet teisinga kaip mitas.

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