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***Medea material* by Mapa Teatro: reconfiguring Heiner Müller’s rewriting of the Medea myth**

ABSTRACT: The performance *Medea material* by Mapa Teatro (1991) stages Heiner Müller’s re-writing of the Medea myth, *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape With Argonauts*. I analyse Mapa Teatro’s new montage of Müller’s text while also focusing on the aesthetics of this hybrid musical-theatrical performance, which challenge the (Western) theatrical reference. Using a decolonial perspective, I discuss how text and performance relate to colonial tensions and resonate with decolonial epistemologies.

Keywords: Mapa Teatro, Heiner Müller, *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape With Argonauts*, decoloniality, cultural translations

1. Introduction: overview of *Medea material* by Mapa Teatro

In 1991, Colombian theatre company Mapa Teatro produced *Medea material* in Teatro Colón, Bogotá. This performance stages Heiner Müller’s play *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape With Argonauts* (1982), which itself is a re-writing of the Medea myth consisting of three disjointed fragmentary texts alluding to the myth of the Argonauts. Mapa Teatro’s performance title alludes to the second part of Müller’s play –*Medeamaterial*– the only episode of the triptych where discourse is embodied by identifiable characters such as Jason and Medea, to whom is attributed most of the text. In *Medeamaterial*, Müller loosely alludes to the second episode of Euripides’ tragedy, where Medea confronts Jason over his betrayal of their marriage, resulting in her impending exile. Additionally, Medea remarks that she aided Jason in his quest at the cost of betraying her own kin, bringing upon the destruction of her native Colchis by siding with the Greeks.

In Mapa Teatro’s *Medea material*, Medea, interpreted by renowned Swiss-Colombian mezzo-soprano Martha Senn, is literally and figuratively at the centre of the performance (Fig. 1)¹. This is a hybrid of a theatrical and musical production: not only Senn’s singing abilities are put into use as she alternates between sung and spoken word, but the performance also features a chamber music ensemble from the Philharmonic Orchestra of Bogotá. Nonetheless, the instrumental arrangements only include percussion instruments, thus grounding the music of *Medea material* in rhythm rather than harmony. On stage, Medea appears as a stationary figure several feet tall, towering over the remaining actors and the audience, yet

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unable to move. The pedestal where Senn stands is concealed by huge sheets of wrapped cloth that renders as if Medea was wearing an enormous white dress. Staged in a traditional frontal theatre setting, the stage itself contains no objects but the three walls, as well as the floor, are covered in white fabric: “In *Medea material*, (Bogotá 1991), we recycle all the rolls of gauze recovered from the factory of our father, *Tejidos Condor*, to cover the entire space of Teatro Colón, actress-singer included” (Abderhalden, 2014, p. 481, my translation).



Fig. 1: *Medea material* [video recording], Heidi Abderhalden, Rolf Abderhalden, Isauro Pinzón and Mapa Teatro. Photogram ten minutes into the performance, Hemispheric Institute archive, © Mapa Teatro Archives

Likewise, the eight other actors wear costumes made of white fabric as well as white body paint that simulates bare-chested bodies. Besides headpieces and spears, they wear expressionist make up –black around the eyes and red lips– over faces painted white (See Fig 2). These actors and actresses are a chorus of Argonauts that functions as a collective body rather than individualised characters. For instance, during the exchange between Medea and Jason, the Argonauts collectively play the latter by delivering the text in rhythmic unison, perhaps echoing Müller’s stage directions for *Landscape With Argonauts* where “the ‘I’ [...] is collective” (Müller, 1985, p.22, my translation). Their voices explore different textures, in between whispers and growls. Additionally, the materiality of their bodies is put forward through the choreography, which oscillates between mechanical stylised movements and moments of immobility

where the Argonauts strike a pose as if stopped in time. In the same way, the stage lighting fluctuates constantly between darkness and brightness through the use of faint blue lights that contrast with warmer zenital highlights. The whiteness of the fabrics covering the stage –as well as the white costumes and body paint– reflects the alternatively cold or warm coloured-lights. As a result, the actors’ bodies merge (and emerge) in this setting for most of the performance. Towards the end, Medea’s dress falls down, uncovering the metallic structure where Senn stands. She then gets down from her elevated position and, with the help of the Argonauts, sets her former carcass on fire. When the fire dies out, the fabrics covering the walls fall as well, revealing the walls of the theatre: a traditional Italian-theatre building with three arched windows². The performance ends thus in a very different setting, since the structures of the stage are no longer concealed by fabric (Fig. 5).

Notwithstanding the contrast between the initial and final stage environments, *Medea material* begins and ends with Medea’s lament over the massacre of her homeland by the Argonauts, marked by the sentence “This was Colchis” (my translation), choosing to repeat this part of the text. In other words, beyond the translation of Müller’s text into Spanish³, Mapa Teatro opts by staging the text in disorder: Medea’s lines correspond to the text of *Medeamaterial*, but, throughout the performance, the chorus of Argonauts deliver fragments of *Landscape With Argonauts*, which contains no identifiable voices in Müller’s play. The first question that arises is how Mapa Teatro works with Müller’s text, from a dramaturgical standpoint but also in terms of cultural translations: presenting a performance for a Colombian audience in the early 1990s, which alludes to a specific context. Moreover, the programme of the performance refers to “Medea’s solitude. The barbarian recognises in her condition of a woman, colonised by a Greek man, a situation of alienation and slavery” (my translation). This depiction alludes to colonial tensions, which are entangled with the Colombian context in historical but also epistemological terms, as seen in the development of local Latin American decolonial⁴ movements since the late 1980s. These currents aim at denouncing and transcending Western modernity –in doing and aesthetics– acknowledging epistemic violence imposed by Western canons, and thus refusing to address non-Western productions solely via a Western prism. Nonetheless, these colonial frictions are, arguably, already present in Heiner Müller’s

² The National Theatre known as Teatro Colón in Bogotá was named in honour of Christopher Columbus and was inaugurated in 1892. It was built following an Italian neoclassical style, also inspired by the Opéra Garnier in Paris. Teatro Colón was conceived for a local elite and remains a traditional venue for national and international high-level performances, moulded after Western spaces and institutions.

³ The artists of Mapa Teatro came upon Müller’s play through its French translation from German by Jean Jourdeuil, published in 1985 (Éditions de Minuit). Subsequently, they translated the text into Spanish.

⁴ I use the term “decolonial” not to oppose it to “postcolonial” but rather to insist on the former’s specificities, such as its development among Latin American scholars, decoloniality’s claim that coloniality survives colonialism, as well as knowledge being determined by a “locus of enunciation” (Mignolo). For more information regarding the particularities of decolonial thinking vis-à-vis other (postcolonial) subaltern schools of thought, see Grosfoguel (2011).

text: the dramatist confronts the Medea myth to his own context, the GDR, while also interrogating the legacy of foundational Western narratives such as Greek myths or Euripides' tragedy. This further raises the question to which extent we can read Müller's re-writing of Medea through a decolonial lens. More specifically, how to approach Heiner Müller's deconstructive writing from a non-Western location?



Fig. 2: Close-up of the Argonauts Chorus and Medea
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For the rest of this article, I aim at discussing Müller's text in the light of the performance *Medea material*, especially how Mapa Teatro works with this text, in order to give a possible decolonial approach to a deconstructive form of dramatic writing. In other words, I'd like to delve on how text and performance relate to these colonial tensions and to which extent they resonate with decolonial epistemologies. In this case, "decolonial" is not to be understood as a label, but rather as *resonances*, such as common traits that can manifest in different forms: decolonial projects share a drive for (Western) emancipation but are as diverse as their specific contexts and locations, thus incompatible with a globalising homogenous label. Conversely, a decolonial approach of Müller's text does not aim at labelling his play as "decolonial", but rather focuses on the different layers of the Western hegemony critique that transpire from this play. Hence, in addition to the subject matter, the arranging of the text and the context of staging in Colombia

converge in the allusion of violence perpetuated since colonialism. More specifically, the decolonial aspect appears as a meta-critique of the destruction of the land of the colonised.

2. Staging the figure of Medea: Euripides, Heiner Müller

Mapa Teatro was founded in Paris, 1984, by Swiss-Colombian siblings Rolf, Heidi and Elizabeth Abderhalden Cortés. In 1986, the company relocated to Bogotá, Colombia, where Rolf and Heidi have been working as a transdisciplinary artistic laboratory ever since. As the Abderhalden siblings studied in Europe, they are interested “in cultural translations and transpositions of Western sources like Greek mythologies, or texts of Heiner Müller, Samuel Beckett or Sarah Kane into their hybrid theatrical language” (Röttger, 2021, p. 172). Mapa Teatro founder Rolf Abderhalden explains the recourse to myth: “Myth is story par excellence. Its original nature makes it an enhancer of stories; these repeat themselves like dreams, configuring and unconfiguring themselves continuously in a mobile structure that always comes to life” (Abderhalden, 2010, my translation). In the early stages of their theatrical work, Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden turn to Samuel Beckett’s theatre to “learn how to talk, to say the word and make it vibrate and give it a body in space before rendering it again into its originary silence” (Abderhalden, 2014, p.95, my translation). In 1991, after their production of *De Mortibus: Requiem for Samuel Beckett* (based on texts by Beckett), Mapa Teatro approached the figure of Medea first through Euripides’ tragedy, where Medea embodies an *Other* from the perspective of the Argonauts: “[s]he represents what is alien to Greek society, a society that provides the basis of our western tradition” (Rogowski, 1993, p. 171). Nonetheless, Beckett had opened the door of language while also confronting the Abderhalden siblings to the impassable wall of language: the tragic incommunicability of the modern human experience, confined to a regime of communication. Wanting to revisit the ruins of the West and “stare at history into the white of its eye”⁵, Mapa Teatro turns to Heiner Müller “to question, from an aesthetic and political perspective, the *limits* of representation” (Abderhalden, 2014, p. 101, my translation). Rolf and Heidi Abderhalden’s interest for Medea as an “emblematic figure of the beginning of barbarism and colonization in the West” (ib.) follows Heiner Müller’s re-writing of the Medea myth. Medea is thus perceived as a colonized woman by a Greek, Jason, who embodies the coloniser, bearer of the figure of the empire.

In Müller’s *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts*, these tensions between Western achievements and their violent counter-parts on the colonised are brought forward in spite of the text’s fragmentary construction. According to Christian Rogowski, “Heiner Müller radicalises the critique of

⁵ See Umbrecht, B., *Entretien avec Heiner Müller*, cited from Abderhalden, R., *Mapamundi. Plurivers poétique (Mapa Teatro 1984-2014)*, p. 101.

civilisation implicit in Euripides' tragedy" (Rogowski, 1993, p.180). Following Albrecht Dilhe, Rogowski alludes to the ambiguous treatment of Medea as a character by Euripides: despite Medea's demonized otherness, she is able to maintain otherness and agency. In this perspective, Medea's destruction of identity stems from her internalisation of the honour codes and male value system of the Greek warriors, which "forces her to overcome her womanly feelings of motherly love for her children" (p. 175). Heiner Müller follows Euripides' in what regards Medea's conflictive identity, but further stresses the figure of Medea as Jason's subaltern, or even his slave, as she reproaches. Additionally, her murder of the children is barely alluded to in Müller's play, shifting the axis of her identity conflict. Instead, Müller's Medea delves on the betrayal of her kin, the murder of her brother being "her first transgression" (p. 176).

Notwithstanding the confrontation between Jason and Medea in *Medeamaterial*, Jason's demise, slain by his ship, is already announced in *Despoiled Shore*: "Until the Argo crashes his skull the useless ship" (Müller, 1984, p. 127). In an interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1976, the dramatist explains how Euripides characters resonate with the present from which he writes: "European civilization began with colonization... That the vehicle of colonization strikes the coloniser dead anticipates the end of it. That's the threat of the end we're facing, the end of 'growth'" (Weber, 1984, p. 124). In this quote, Müller refers to *The Limits of Growth*, a 1972 report commissioned by The Club of Rome "expressing concern over the global destruction of the environment by industrialised nations, [which] puts the figure of Medea in the context of what Müller broadly defines as colonialism" (Rogowski, 1993, p.175). Furthermore, Müller's use of Euripides interrogates Western canons and its epistemic violence: "Müller's take on the Medea myth seriously critiques his own culture and the political, social, and dramatic structures that it represents and propagates, while recognising the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of escaping those structures" (Campbell, 2008, p. 87). Müller's text challenges (Western) dramatic tradition by operating in a fragmentary structure: from the three disjointed fragments, *Medeamaterial* is the only one where words have identifiable speakers, whereas *Despoiled shore* and *Landscape with Argonauts* present disembodied words. While *Landscape with Argonauts* "presupposes the catastrophes, on which humanity is working" (Müller, 1985, p. 22, my translation), *Despoiled Shore* contains mentions of industrial and bodily waste, such as "Cookie boxes feces" or "Torn menstrual napkins", as well as "dead fish" (Müller, 1984, p. 127). As Ivar Kvistad writes, "[t]he fact that this scene is of a lake polluted by commodities [...] suggests the impact of mass consumerism on the environment." (Kvistad, 2009). This "contemporary poetic hell" (Campbell, 2008, p. 89) could also evoke East Berlin suburbia: "a polluted landscape swarming with people whose minds are just as polluted" (Weber, 1988, p. 124).

If Müller's text is appealing for Mapa Teatro regarding the figure of Medea as a colonised woman, the Colombian company translates the text and works with it from within to address their context, which is

also entangled with specific colonial tensions. Just as Müller contaminates the myth with his critique of modernity and Western civilization from within the GDR, Mapa Teatro uses Müller's challenging play to explore visual and aural possibilities on stage, (re)presenting the figure of Medea in its multiplicity rather than fitting her into a character incarnated by one body. Medea is hence a figure that unfolds as her text is spoken by two voices, or embodied through different bodies at the same time. For instance, at the beginning of the performance, two actresses among the chorus of Argonauts play Medea and the Nurse on the apron, then, following Müller's text, Senn takes over by declaring "That is not Medea" (my translation). In other instances, it's ambiguous whether Senn or the Argonaut actress lip-syncs as one voice is heard but two mouths (and bodies) move: despite being confined to her pedestal, Senn uses her arms not only as a means of expression but also to interact from a distance with the chorus of Argonauts. As a result, Mapa Teatro stages a complex Medea that is hard to grasp or to fixate into a character: even if Senn is the protagonist, the figure of Medea transcends the body and voice of the actress-singer. Moreover, the performance bypasses Müller's references to consumerism and industrial waste of *Despoiled Shore* to focus more concretely on the despoiled shore of Colchis. In other words, Mapa Teatro's work with the text reveals what particularly resonates with their experience of reality from a non-Western location.

3. "This was Colchis"... or was it? Mapa Teatro's specific work with Müller's text

Mapa Teatro's staging of Müller's play does not follow a subordination relationship to the text, which echoes Müller's deconstruction of Euripides' tragedy: Müller's re-writing resists to be read solely through an established narrative focusing on the plot and characters of the Medea myth. Mapa Teatro's *Medea material* stages Müller's text in disorder, as the three separate episodes are not performed chronologically but simultaneously. Medea, who only appears as a named character in the second part of Müller's play, is present throughout Mapa Teatro's entire performance. In between parts of her speech, the chorus of Argonauts deliver fragments of *Landscape With Argonauts*. The stage note of Müller's play indicates, "The simultaneity of the three parts of the text can be represented as one wants" (Müller, 1985, p. 22, my translation). While this indication has widely been interpreted as a provocation on Müller's part (Campbell, 2008, p. 97), Mapa Teatro creates simultaneity in the performance by delivering on stage their own montage or reassembling of the text. In other words, the triptych-structure of Müller's text is dissolved and, instead, the performance saws together pieces from different parts, further fragmenting the text. If the chronology of Müller's text is compromised, the dramatist himself resists the idea of a straightforward delivery of content through theatre. Rather, Müller conceives theatre as a space of

confrontation between the text and the stage. In Müller’s words, theatre presents “a combat, not a victory” (Müller, 2019, p. 237, my translation), alluding how in daily life, people are faced with exponentially more information than they can treat and thus reduce. Already in 1975, referring to his play *Cement*, Müller evokes the need to approach as many issues as possible simultaneously to force the spectator to choose: instead of feeding the spectator an unequivocal message, it is the spectator’s agency (and attention) that participates in the creation of meaning.

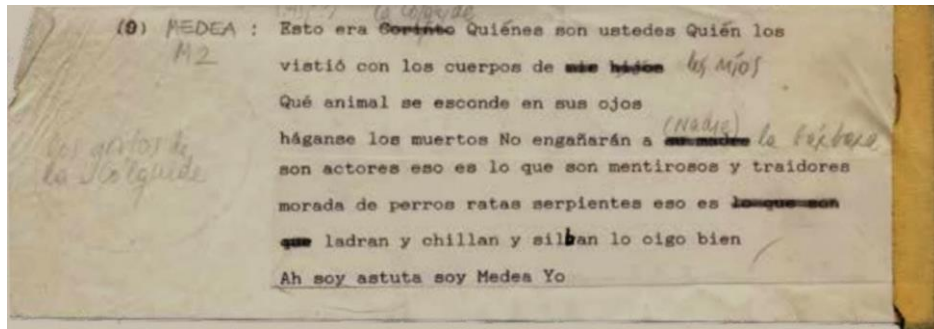


Fig. 3: Mapa Teatro’s alterations on Heiner Müller’s text (the end of Medea’s tirade in *Medeamaterial* translated into Spanish). The first line of printed text reads, “This was ~~Corinth~~ Colchis”; on the left, added with a pencil, we have “the cries of Colchis” (my translations).

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[Retrieved at: Abderhalden, 2014, *Mapamundi. Plurivers Poïétique*, p. 100]

Despite giving more autonomy to the spectator in what regards the decryption of the performance, Mapa Teatro’s dramaturgical choices indicate an emphasis on the destruction of Colchis by the Argonauts. *Medea material* has a cyclical construction: the performance begins and ends with Medea’s lament over the destruction of her homeland, which in Müller’s text is situated at the very end of *Medeamaterial*, the second part of the play. However, in Müller’s text, Medea’s attributed words are “This was *Corinth*”, while Mapa Teatro changes it into “This was *Colchis*” (my emphasis), alteration which intervenes at the opening and closing of the performance. This change constitutes an assumed choice by Mapa Teatro as they also refer to “the cries of Colchis” (Fig. 3). The prologue, also named “This was Colchis”, ponders the question “Are we really, us men of the twentieth century, so far from the massacres of Colchis or from the Trojan War?” Through the mention of war and bloodshed, Mapa Teatro can interrogate the spectator’s own experience of violence given the geopolitical context of this production of 1991, which was shortly after Mapa Teatro relocated to Bogotá in 1986. The 1970s in Colombia saw the start of the industrial production of cannabis and, by the 1980s, the consolidation of cocaine cartels. The latter half of the 1980s was a particularly violent moment in Colombia’s recent history, as the industrial production of drugs had crystallised into narco-terrorism, cartel wars, and cartel attacks on the State such as the assassination of police agents or presidential candidates. In response, the State fought the organised crime

through paramilitary action, which, despite its counterinsurgent mission, also had a criminal façade since the paramilitary were also in service of the drug-traffickers that financed their operations. As a result, the State endorses violence to counter violence, with agents of narco-terrorism on both sides⁶.

What hides behind endless mechanisms of violence? A development-oriented reading would point at these issues of poverty interlaced with drug-traffic and violence as a result of the lack of development in so-called “Third World countries”. However, a decolonial lens allows to reveal “development” as a narrative established by the West, as well as consider the current lasting effects of historical violence and exploitation from European colonisers to their former colonies (Mignolo, 2011, pp. 39-49). Since the 1980s/1990s, Decoloniality has emerged as a movement in Latin America, tackling Western hegemony from a specific Latin American perspective. Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano identifies coloniality as “still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed” (Quijano, 2007 p. 170). Coloniality features concealed mechanisms that are, not one homogenous global force, but rather configured as a matrix of entangled different hierarchies such as whiteness, capitalism, patriarchal order, heteronormativity, and Christianity among others, arriving in Latin America with European expansion and colonialism (Grosfoguel 2011, p. 7). These “heterarchies” (ib.) operate in forms of exclusion and alienation, which resonate with the figure of Medea as a colonised woman, an expelled immigrant, or even a barbarian in the eyes of the Greeks. By focusing on the destruction of Colchis, “land of the barbarians”, Mapa Teatro emphasizes on the violence and the ones who suffer it, from the “barbarians” point of view. The spectator is invited to approach the Argonauts’ myth through the mourning of Medea, a subaltern perspective of sorts, which, in turn, makes visible the destruction often erased by the narrative of the Argonauts’ heroic exploits.

The decolonial critique materializes in the performance through the denunciation of the destruction of the land by the coloniser, hence acknowledging coloniality as a lingering framework. More concretely, the resonances between text, context and performance, become more palpable through the allusion of war. By tracing a link between the massacre of Colchis and the violence of the Colombian conflict in 1991, Mapa Teatro extends the resonances of Müller’s text by injecting their own experience of violence, which also has ties with colonial violence, from a specific Colombian perspective. This irruption of reality into the myth (and the theatre) is further seen towards the end of the performance when the fabrics fall, unveiling Medea’s carcass but also the walls of Teatro Colón: “In the journey of Mapa Teatro, the veil functions as a veritable vision machine, but it goes far beyond questions of perception alone: it is also an

⁶ For more information regarding the Colombian Conflict (conflicto armado interno de Colombia), see *¡Basta ya! Colombia: memorias de guerra y dignidad*, published in 2013 by Colombia’s National Centre for Historical Memory. This report gives an account of 50 years of the armed conflict, revealing its barbarity, as well as the consequences on civilians.

ideological apparatus, a political and moral veil that is for us to dismantle” (Abderhalden, 2014, p. 485). Thus, notwithstanding the work with the text, Mapa Teatro’s performance features aural and visual media, further decentralising the text, which is a hierarchical given in traditional Western theatrical tradition.

4. Challenging established modes of perception and (re)presentation

Medea material is both a theatrical and a musical production (Fig. 4). As the chorus of Argonauts speaks the text, it is mostly sung by mezzo-soprano Martha Senn, “the most outstanding lyrical voice in Colombia during the eighties” (Abderhalden, 2014, p. 101, my translation). Regarding this hybrid lyrical/spoken choice, Rolf Abderhalden acknowledges Müller: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must sing⁷” (Heiner Müller): by shifting the text towards the music, we had, back then, a powerful intuition” (Abderhalden, 2014, p. 101, my translation). The music, as well as Senn’s *cantata*, composed especially for the performance by Colombian psychoanalyst and musician Sergio Mesa⁸, features a counter-intuitive structure since the chamber music ensemble uses percussion instruments. In other words, the music of the performance is not grounded on harmony but on rhythm, distancing itself from traditional Western chamber music. This was also a challenge for Martha Senn, who had to memorize the notes given the absence of harmonic landmarks in the composition: “the singer we chose, coming from classical opera, had to work from a vocal technique that comes from Greek theatre, far removed from the tonal music of her vocal repertoire” (Abderhalden, 2014, p. 499, my translation). Moreover, passages of text are interrupted by choreography moments such as the chorus of Argonauts surrounding Medea with their spears, the burning of the carcass, or the falling of the fabrics.

⁷ This sentence by Müller, quoted extensively by Georges Banu, would be an answer to Wittgenstein’s formula “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”.

⁸ Sergio Mesa integrated Mapa Teatro in 1990, remaining one of the closest collaborators of the company until 2000.

The figure is divided into two main sections. The left section contains a script with stage directions and dialogue. The right section contains a handwritten musical score for a chamber ensemble and a soloist.

Left Column (Text of the performance):

Recapacita y disimula ingenusa como una niña agrega POR MI Y SUS HIJOS QUE AMA.

Mientras tanto la nodriza ha transformado su RISA en un llanto amargo, la memoria del amor... Como hace muchos años MEDEA dice irónica como recordando un verbo viejo y extarso para su boca.

Y amarga Triste, escuchando el llanto del AMA.

EL AMA le responde con una tristeza de las mujeres viejas

LAS DOS EN UNA PROFUNDA DESOLACION, DESERTICAS

MEDEA SE ESTA SINTIENDO VIEJA, LO SIENTE EN SU C CUERPO EN SU VOZ EN... AUTORITARIA DURA

LAS DOS SE PARAN COMO BUFONAS SE LES ACABO EL T EATRO LA NODRIZA AVANZA IMITANDO A MEDEA Y UNA PARA ATRAZ OTRA PARA ADELANTE.

MEDEA ESPERANDO CON LA FATALIDAD DE SU CUERPO APAGADO DESILUSIONADO, VIEJO UN ESPEJO

LA NODRIZA CON LA CRUELDAD QUE CARACTERIZA LOS BUFONES PREPARA EL CORO PARA ENTRAR EL ESPEJO.

Right Column (Music sheet):

MEDEA PARTITA a CANTO 1 Medea 1

Lento $\text{♩} = 52$ Heva metros

Plat Tamb. 3/4 4

Trum I pp

Trum II pp

Plat Tamb. 3/4 4

Trum I pp

Trum II pp

Plat Tamb. 3/4 4

Vibr. pp

Trum I pp

Trum II pp

Fig. 4: The “scores” of the performance *Medea material*

Left: Text of the performance. The right column corresponds to fragments of Muller’s texts while the left column depicts corresponding stage directions to these fragments such as the actors’ movements as well as specific attitudes or emotions.

Right: Music sheet for the chamber ensemble and protagonist Martha Senn.

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[Retrieved at: Abderhalden, 2014, *Mapamundi. Plurivers Poïétique*, pp. 814-815]

Despite Mapa Teatro’s assumed interest for Medea as a figure of a colonised woman, the performance resists a clear delivery of this content. Instead, the aural and visual media work in a destabilizing way regarding the (Western) dramatic theatrical reference and tradition. Said otherwise, Mapa Teatro’s performance works *with* the text, not only refusing to illustrate it, but further challenging theatrical conventions by creating a dynamic and hybrid space where fragments of text resurface now and then, as a part of the whole. Nonetheless, transgressing conventions is not without its risks, especially in the context where “dramatic text still reigns tremendously as an axis or theatrical reference” (Abderhalden, 2011, my translation). Regarding the concrete materialisation of the performance, or how the different media interact on stage, Rolf Abderhalden writes:

Its materialisation, in the end, perhaps remained a bit shy, even formalist. It was our first experience with song and sung word, a chamber music ensemble, and a chorus of young actors. The tension and contrast between text and

music, between text and gesture, never illustrative, produced a strong dimension of strangeness. [...] Although having brought this relationship of tension to a spatial limit, the limit collided with a “safe” setting that nothing else could destabilise (Abderhalden, 2014, p. 101, my translation).

A critique of the performance written by Enrique Pulecio was published in Colombian Journal *El Tiempo*, acknowledging the frictions between the innovative aesthetics of *Medea material* and Western tradition regarding the Medea myth as well as traditional dramatic theatre settings. Pulecio is well-informed of Müller’s fragmentary text and its subsequent demand for collaboration on behalf of the spectator, which is perceived as an obstacle that ultimately turns the performance into abstraction: “but the synthetic composition of Müller’s play lacks exposition development, which is made clear and intelligible by Greek authors. Such a succession of possibilities and difficulties locks up Mapa Teatro’s new montage” (Pulecio, 1991, my translation). Hence, the lack of intelligibility in the performance is perceived as an obstacle for the spectator. In his book *Poetics of Relation*, French-Caribbean poet and critic Édouard Glissant remarks: “If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency (Glissant, 1997, p. 190). This entails the reduction of other cultures or minorities as they are analysed according to Western norms and criteria. Conversely, transparency and intelligibility seem to be a conventional grid used to read the Medea myth, through its plot and dramatic characters, as Pulecio suggests. This reading of the myth aligns with a text-centred dramatic model as the theatrical reference: using such grids can indeed become frustrating to approach a performance like *Medea material*, where signifiers do not rely in fixated signifieds. In other words, Mapa Teatro’s performance challenges traditional modes of decryption as it refuses to aim at the transmission of an enclosed signification, focus on the plot, or even on the text. In this way, *Medea material* resonates with decolonial aesthetics and ideas by resisting conventional dramatic modes of representation, hence challenging Western tradition and looking for new hybrid or composite alternatives.



Fig. 5: *Medea material* [video recording], Heidi Abderhalden, Rolf Abderhalden, Isauro Pinzón and Mapa Teatro. Photogram of the end of the performance, Hemispheric Institute archive, © Mapa Teatro Archives

5. Conclusion: the aftermath of *Medea material* and the Heiner Müller Cycle

Throughout this article, I have attempted to give an overview of Mapa Teatro's performance *Medea material* regarding its aesthetics, as well as the dramaturgical work with Müller's text. To which extent can we speak of decolonial resonances in this performance? On one hand, Mapa Teatro acknowledges Medea as a colonial subject matter, especially through Müller's re-writing: while Müller introduces Medea as Jason's subaltern in a postcolonial setting, Mapa Teatro focuses on the figure of Medea, insisting on the destruction of Colchis from the barbarian's perspective. This creates resonances between Western narratives, the downplaying of colonial violence and the persistence of violence in the specific Colombian context. On the other hand, following Müller, Mapa Teatro interrogates Western canons and their relevance, especially in non-Western contexts. Said otherwise, the performance attempts at challenging a texto-centred dramatic model by refusing to illustrate the text, instead reconfiguring textual material through fragments in a transdisciplinary performance that resists the established readings of the Medea myth, let alone a straightforward interpretation. Despite its innovative aesthetics and dramaturgy, *Medea material* can be perceived as defeating for a Colombian spectator of 1991 that tries to understand the performance according to Euripides' plot, failing to find, on stage, an intelligible link with reality.

Nonetheless, the fall of the fabrics that leave the theatre walls uncovered was a foundational step for Mapa Teatro:

Were we sufficiently aware of the effect of the theatre itself, *Teatro Colón*, of this *Italian* architecture made for a local theatre elite, on the *dramaturgy of the spectator*? This question, which places the spectator at the very heart of the theatrical event, not as a passive receiver but as an active agent that organises the totality of signs [...] into a sensory, perceptual, affective and cognitive experience from which he himself *produces* the performance, will be problematized by [Mapa Teatro] in a much more sensitive and radical way in the future (Abderhalden, 2014, p. 101, my translation).

In fact, the creation of *Medea material* made the way into a bigger project, as it would become the first part of Mapa Teatro's Heiner Müller Cycle. Just as Müller deconstructs canonical texts and contaminates them with his personal and political reality, Mapa Teatro's subsequent work with texts of Heiner Müller pushes further the irruption of reality into theatre by expanding the participation of actors and spectators. In other words, actors and spectators project their realities and collectively create the performance: the artists and other actors by working from their subjective experiences, and the spectators by connecting the signs on stage to their experience. For their next project, *Horacio* (1994), the company organizes workshops with a group of interns of *La Picota Central* penitentiary. The group works from Heiner Müller's *Horatio*, where the twice-murderer Horatio embodies contradiction by being simultaneously victor of Rome and murderer of his own sister. Mapa Teatro creates an imaginary third space in between the prison and the theatre, which has a counter-part in the material world: the room where rehearsals take place inside the prison. Through the mental transposition into another space, the project allowed the prison interns to explore being something other than killers. Unlike Müller's re-writing of *Medea*, his *Horatio* doesn't tackle colonial frictions in the text's subject matter. Nevertheless, Mapa Teatro creates a dialogue between Müller's text and a specific reality, acknowledging the historical and colonial fractures, and revealing the structures that hide underneath violence.

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Programme of the performance *Medea material* by Mapa Teatro (© Mapa Teatro Archives)

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