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Maria/Medea/Ulrike:

Figures of Destituent Power in the Feminist Theater of Franca Rame

ABSTRACT: This essay engages with Franca Rame’s re-writing and performance of the myth of Medea through the lens of an Agambean theoretical framework. More specifically, I put Rame’s *Medea* in dialogue with two of her other “obscenely tragic” monologues, *Maria alla croce* (from Dario Fo’s *Mistero Buffo*), and *Io, Ulrike grido*, to show how the Italian playwright/actress envisions the destituent power of a female subjectivity that she re-imagines as a “perpetually construed and constructable” process.

Keywords: Franca Rame, Italian political theater, feminist theater, destituent power, performativity

1. Introduction: Franca Rame’s Feminist Theater

In a public lecture given in Athens in 2013, Agamben argued that “the unspoken principle which rules our society can be stated like that: every citizen is a potential terrorist” (Agamben, 2014a). This principle brings about a radical shift in the relationship between the state and its citizens, a relationship now “defined by suspicion, police filing, and control” (ib.). This new paradigm, which Agamben labels “Security State”, requires a new model of political conflict, one that replaces the “constituent power” of the revolution with the “destituent power” of anarchy, rejecting any form of the arbitrary use of power.

This essay engages with Franca Rame’s re-writing of the myth of Medea through the lens of this theoretical framework. More specifically, I put Rame’s *Medea* in dialogue with two of her other “obscenely tragic” monologues (Fo, Rame, 1989, p. 243), *Maria alla croce*, and *Io, Ulrike, grido*, to show how the Italian playwright/actress envisions the destituent power of a female subjectivity that she re-imagines as a “perpetually construed and constructable” process (Günsberg, 1997, p. 213).

In discussing Rame’s re-writing/staging of the myth of Medea, we must first address the issue of authorship, i.e., the relationship between Rame and her work and life partner, Dario Fo, and their creative process. Dario Fo has explained in several interviews and writings how the couple collaborated in the production of their plays. For instance, in the *Introduction to Venticinque monologhi per una donna* di Dario Fo and Franca Rame - an introduction notably written by only Dario Fo -, we read: “Spesso è successo che Franca mi proponesse un’idea, io stendevo il ‘trattamento’, si discuteva più o meno vivacemente e poi toccava a me il compito di

sceneggiare il tutto. Altre volte era Franca a propormi un canovaccio da leggere, io le opponevo le mie considerazioni e lei concludeva la stesura” (Fo, Rame, 1989, p. I)¹.

Once the scripts were brought to fruition, they underwent constant revision to incorporate changes made on stage during the performances in a process reminiscent of the tradition of *commedia dell’arte*². Although an in-depth discussion of their creative process is beyond the scope of this essay, the nature of their collaboration invites scrutiny into the gender and power dynamics within the couple and the associated risk of undermining the revolutionary potential of the feminist message of their work³. Who is speaking in these plays? How can the audience trust and be inspired by the message if the voice expressing it is that of a woman who has yet to gain full autonomy and agency? Certainly, the nature of this collaboration and the attention drawn by Fo’s charisma and celebrity status leave the reader wondering about the relevance of Franca Rame’s contribution. However, the fact that the scripts were not set once and for all but were constantly rewritten based on the changes improvised during the performances on stage brings to the fore the role played by Franca Rame the actress. As Maggie Günsberg points out:

The important implication here is that Rame the actress, rather than just Rame the writer and producer, has an input into her collaboration with Fo [...]. In other words, the female characters in the Rame and Rame-Fo plays [...] are very often the descendants of a line of female parts (based on characters) that have been shaped and reshaped by Rame (Günsberg, 1997, p. 207).

Another question we face when engaging with Rame’s plays revolves around the nature of her feminism when considered in the historic context of the women’s movement in the seventies. Only marginally informed by feminist theory, albeit aligned with the activist slogan of “the personal is political”, Rame’s engagement with the women’s movement stems mostly from her encounter with the lived experience of ordinary women and her personal struggle in her relationship with Fo. This relationship oscillated between, on the one hand, shared awareness of an unequal balance of power in the couple’s dynamic and a lack of public recognition of Rame’s role in their productions, and, on the other, the persistence of sexism and

¹ “It often happened that Franca would suggest an idea to me, I would set out its ‘treatment’, we’d discuss it either more or less vivaciously and then I got the job of dramatizing it in its entirety. On other occasions it was Franca who would hand me a plot outline to read, I’d give my opinion, and she’d conclude the writing out” (my translation).

² On this see, for instance, Farrell, 2001, Farrell and Scuderi, 2000.

³ As Marie Carrière points out : “L’ambiguïté même de la paternité littéraire des Récits de femmes semble accentuer l’incertitude du rapport de Rame au féminisme” (Carrière, 2012, p. 88).

macho posturing on Fo's part. In this sense, Rame openly talked about Fo's affairs and even made direct reference to her experience in her monologues, such as in the following passage from *Medea's* prologue:

Per una donna è assai difficile, quando non è più giovane, rifarsi una vita... e quindi ti attacchi disperatamente a quella che hai, e poi ti vien addosso l'umiliazione, la frustrazione di essere respinta, sostituita con un'altra più giovane e bella: non vuoi accettare, non ti vuoi rassegnare. Dura mettersi da una parte e fingere di non esistere più! Quanta disperazione ho visto, conosciuto! (Fo, 2003, p. 1015)⁴.

This bitter realization inspires Franca Rame to “unmask traditional assumptions concerning gender relations in a fundamental set of mostly everyday social spheres (sexuality, work, and the family), spheres whose interaction is inflected by historical, political, and socioeconomic issues” (Günsberg, 1997, p. 203). She usually accomplishes this through comedy (although the laughter is veiled by bitterness and disillusionment) that represents women whose lack of awareness makes them unable to stand up to the daily oppression and injustices they endure⁵. But comedy is not the only lens through which Rame tackles the woman's condition. In a series of monologues that Rame labels as “obscenely tragic”, the reflection on the issue takes a more dramatic and emotional turn. The three plays at the center of this essay belong to this series of tragic monologues.

2. Figure I: Mary or Challenging the Paradigm

Maria alla croce is the first monologue of the three chronologically and the one in which the authorial voice of Dario Fo is the strongest. Like all the pieces making up *Mistero Buffo* (1969), the theatrical performance universally considered to be Dario Fo's masterpiece, this monologue is presented as a rendition of a medieval mystery play and is performed in a *koine* of regional dialects as reimagined by Fo⁶. Faithful to the tradition of these religious popular performances, the play retells the story of the passion of Christ through the eyes of his heart-broken and all too human mother. The scene begins with a chorus of women desperately trying to prevent the Virgin Mary from seeing her son dying on the cross. The pity shown by these women, while it

⁴ “It's tough for a woman who's not so young anymore to rebuild a life... and so you desperately hold on to what you have, and then you face the humiliation, the frustration of being rejected, replace with a younger, prettier woman: you can't accept it, you can come to terms with it. It's tough to stand aside and pretend you don't exist anymore! So much desperation I've seen, I've known!” (my translation).

⁵ See, for example, *Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia* or *Una donna sola*.

⁶ On the “supposed” origin of the play, see Fo's prologue to the monologue (Fo, 2003, pp. 365-367).

cannot change the course of events, sets a pathos-infused atmosphere and invites the audience to empathize with the inconsolable grief of a mother. Incapable of accepting the reality, Mary first tries to climb a ladder to care for her son, and then begs a soldier to let her take home her ailing child. In the end, Christ himself intervenes, making his mother realize there is no hope. Crazy with despair, Mary swears at the archangel Gabriel, who she accuses of betraying her. In fact, in announcing the birth of the son of God, the angel had told Mary that she would become a queen; instead, she is in the most painful position possible for any woman, as she must endure the terrible spectacle of the crucifixion of her own son. At the end of the play, the angel appears to Mary, but she refuses to listen to him, and in an emotional crescendo, she implores him to return to the sky, because the world with all its ugliness and suffering is not the right place for a creature who belongs to heaven.

Gabrièl... Gabrièl... torna a slargàt i ali, Gabrièl... torna indré al to' bel ziél zojóso... no' ti gh'ha niénte a che far chilòga... in 'sta sgarósa tèra... in 'stu turménto mundo.

Vaj Gabrièl... che no' te se sburdéga i ali de plüme culuràde 'e zentìl culüri... no' ti vedi fango e sangu e buàgna mèsta a la spüsénta d'partüto?

Vaj... che no' te sbréghi i uréghi tant delicàt co' 'sto criàr desasperàto e plàngi e ploràr che crésse in omnia parte... (Fo, 2003, p. 377).

Gabriel... Gabriel... spread your wings again, Gabriel... go back to your joyful sky... you don't belong here... on this dirty earth... in this troubled world.

Go away, Gabriel... lest your wings painted with gentle colors get stained... can't you see mud and blood all mixed up with stinky shit everywhere around you?

Go, Gabriel... lest all this yelling in despair, and the cries and the begging coming from every corner hurt your delicate ears...⁷

The monologue ends with dramatic intensity, leaving the audience without a resolution, in a state of diegetic suspension.

Certainly, the end of the story is universally known, but no cathartic release is provided; instead, space is left for the audience to reflect and become aware of the injustice that the downtrodden constantly suffer. As Dario Fo explains in the prologue, the “umiliati e sottomessi, urlano con la voce della Madonna la loro rivolta

⁷ All translations are mine, when not otherwise specified.

contro ogni supina accettazione, quasi evocando le parole dell'Apocalisse che promettano l'avvento di un mondo migliore" (Fo, 2003, p. 367). Notably, here Fo makes no specific reference to women and the oppression and injustice they suffer at the hands of men. From a feminist perspective, however, and in light of Rame's future works on the "woman question," *Maria alla croce* acquires a particular relevance. The rebellion that Mary embodies on stage can be read as a first attempt to break out from the mold of submission that the patriarchy has designed and normalized for women. At the same time, the solidarity connecting the mother of Jesus to the chorus of women can prefigure the building of an alternative community of care outside the perimeter of the *polis*, the political space reserved for "male domination" (Bourdieu, 2001), which has condemned her son to an unjust death. By tearing apart the veil of "mystified consciousness" (p. 41) surrounding the role of women in society, Mary's desperate cry calls into question the traditional order of discourse epitomized by Gabriel's annunciation.

The announcement of the gospel, the news of the *logos* of the Father becoming the living flesh of the Son⁸, also sanctifies the patriarchal paradigm of the heterosexual family, with the Virgin Mary in the role of a selfless, caring, and passive mother, embodying the perfect model of femininity. As universally known, religion and the institution of the church have historically played a major part in establishing the traditional notion of masculinity and femininity:

Masculinity and femininity [...], are conceived through relationships of domination organized around active and passive roles. The well-known Christian theologian [...] Clement of Alexandria (150–215 ACE), neatly summarizes the point: "to do is the mark of the man; to suffer is the mark of the woman." This is an assumption that grounds much of what Manne calls "the logic of misogyny" (Mercer, 2018, p. 197).

Around such roles, a system of social norms and practices is built to reinforce the structures of domination. These structures are not operating only on an intellectual level, nor are they simply affirmed once and for all through (Gabriel's) speech act, but they are, in fact, "the product of an incessant (and therefore historical) labour of reproduction to which singular agents [...] and institutions - families, the church, the educational system, the state - contribute" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 34). A complex system of divisions and exclusions, of social control and punishment, of knowledge and taboo, draws a line between masculinity and femininity even inside men's consciousness. This line takes the form of a "magical frontier between the dominant and the dominated," a frontier unconsciously accepted and internalized by its victims to the point of driving their

⁸ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος, καὶ ὁ Λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος (John 1:1).

“*bodily emotions* - shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt - or *passions* and *sentiments* - love admiration, respect” (p. 38). Surrounded by this magical frontier, excluded from the public sphere of the *polis*, women are tasked with the primary role of caregiver, responsible for carrying out the set of activities falling under the rubric of what in ancient Greece was often referred to as *ἐπιμέλεια*⁹. In the first half of Rame’s monologue, Mary, in a gesture reminiscent of Antigone, tries desperately to assert her right and duty to perform the role of caregiver against the invasion of the domestic space perpetrated by the *polis*. The dominant’s act of trespassing on the magical frontier separating male and female roles raises the dominated’s awareness of the structural injustice of the system and reveals the arbitrary nature of the separation of roles.

Ohj, che m’han tradita. [...] Gabrièl, Gabrièl... Gabrièl... zóvin de dulza figüra, pól prim ti, ti! M’hàit tradit de malorgnón [...] E ti... ti ol savévi in del purtârme ol nünzi desliguént, de fam fiurí in t’el véntar ol fiolín, col sarès ’gnüda a ’sto bel trono reinal! [...] Parchè no’ te’ l m’hàit dit avànte ol segn? O mi, te sta següro... mi no’ gh’avarìa gimàì vorsüdo vès pregnída... no! (Fo, 2003, p. 375)

Ah, I was betrayed! [...] Gabriel, Gabriel... Gabriel... sweet-looking boy, you were the first to betray me! [...] You knew this... when you made the sweet announcement that made this creature blossom in my womb, you knew I would come to this sort of throne! [...] why didn’t you warn me? Oh my, I can assure you that I would have never wanted to be impregnated, no!

Far from being neutral, perhaps capable of addressing the “woman question” from an objective and fair point-of-view, as suggested by de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, the angel is here a vehicle of the oppressive order that casts women as the Other, segregating them to the private sphere of motherhood and caregiving. It is only when she is deprived even of this domestic role, reduced to an impotent spectator of her son’s death, that Mary realizes her absolute lack of agency and powerlessness. This awareness, and Mary’s rebellion, however, are still confined within the realm of the “symbolic strategies” that Bourdieu deems incapable of overturning the patriarchal order because “the apparatus of symbols and mythic operators that they implement and the ends they pursue [...] are rooted in the androcentric view in the name of which they are dominated”¹⁰ (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 32).

⁹ On this, see Castelli, 2019.

¹⁰ Bourdieu further explains: “These strategies, which are not strong enough really to subvert the relation of domination, at least have the effect of confirming the dominant representation of women as maleficent beings, whose purely negative identity is made up essentially of taboos each of which presents a possibility of transgression. This is true in particular of all the forms of soft violence, sometimes almost invisible, that women use against the physical or symbolic violence of men, from magic, cunning, lies,

3. Figure II: Medea or the Birth of a New Woman

In his discussion of the symbolic strategies that women have historically employed against men, Bourdieu includes magic. This reference is of particular interest here because of the well-known association between Medea and witchcraft. This association, along with her status as a foreigner, conjures the image of otherness so essential to Euripides' version of the myth. The practice of magic, whether for good or evil, represents a transgression of the domestic sphere within which women's practice of care was traditionally confined in Greek society. Such trespassings were accepted under a (limited) number of circumstances. It was, for instance, acceptable and expected for a woman to serve as a midwife in case of childbirth (Castelli, 2019, p. 35). However, even though midwifery entails a set of medical skills not commonly associated with the *oikos*, childbirth still falls within the space of care reserved for women. Magic, on the other hand, violates the limits of that space and for that reason, women practicing witchcraft inhabited a space of radical otherness both because they were barbarians, coming from faraway and exotic lands, and/or because of their semi-divine nature. That was the case of Medea, who was the daughter of the king of Colchis (a region outside the boundaries of the Greek world), and the granddaughter of Helios, the sun god. In Euripides' tragedy, the otherness of Medea is essential to make sense of her behavior, otherwise incomprehensible within the patriarchal mores of Greek society. Her otherness is also motive for the audience to feel empathy; we feel compassion for the pain of a foreign woman who gave up everything for the love of a Greek man and ends up betrayed and abandoned for another woman and in the name of the *raison d'état*¹¹.

As Fusillo summarizes: "Eros, magia e barbarie (tre forme diverse di alterità) sono dunque i tre nuclei tematici basilari del mito [di Medea], che possono essere dosati con diverse dominanti e che corrispondono comunque ai tre momenti principali nella storia della sua ricezione" (Fusillo, 2009, p. 97).

Medea's otherness is present in Rame's rewriting of the myth as well. In fact, from the prologue, the playwright introduces the protagonist as a witch: "Chi era Medea? Una giovane di grande fascino, una donna

or passivity (particularly in sexual relations) to the possessive love of the possessed, that of the Mediterranean mother or mothering wife, who victimizes and induces guilt by victimizing herself and by offering her infinite devotion and mute suffering as a gift too great to be matched or as a debt that can never be repaid" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 32).

¹¹ On this, see the introduction to Clauss and Johnston (1997), where it is noted how: "in the fifth century, shortly after the production of Euripides' *Medea* (431 bc), artists began to emphasize Medea's role as a foreigner within Greek society by portraying her in oriental clothing rather than the dress of the normal Greek woman: visually she became the paradigmatic outside" (Clauss, Johnston, 1997, p. 8).

d'oriente con poteri magici. Era una stregal!" (Fo, 2003, p. 1014). Her role as foreigner and exiled then comes to the fore, as Carrière points out:

La signifiante de l'exil – toujours celui d'une apatride et d'une « étrangère » –, entre encore en jeu. Exilée de sa terre d'origine et désormais de son foyer et de ses enfants, Médée se trouve une fois de plus confrontée à sa dépossession culturelle, sociale et filiale, comme le signale le chœur de femmes dès le début du monologue : « Il n'est raison qui tienne pour lui faire quitter sa maison et abandonner ses enfants » (Carrière, 2012, p. 90).

However, Medea's otherness in this monologue represents first and foremost the "universal" otherness of women. In Rame's re-writing, Medea becomes the paradigmatic *exemplum* of the condition of subjugation and abuse women suffer at the hands of men. As mentioned above in my discussion of Rame's feminism, in the prologue to the play, Rame draws a direct parallel between the story of Medea and the experience of many women, including herself, who are cheated on and abandoned by their husbands chasing after younger women. That is Medea in Rame's view: a woman no longer in her prime, who has sacrificed everything - her family, her homeland, her independence - out of love and has been paid back with betrayal and tossed aside by her husband. Like *Maria alla croce*, this monologue opens with a chorus of women trying to console and "bring some sense" into the protagonist. Medea has locked herself into her house, and the women fear she will take some desperate action.

The women use two main arguments to convince Medea to accept Jason's new marriage: the well-being of her children and the *law of nature*. On the one hand, the women plead, accepting the new arrangement will secure a better future for Medea's children, as they will be allowed to live with their father and have access to all the benefits of the royal court:

[...] Non a te, ma a li figlioli tòj hai da penzàre! Co' 'sto nòvo sponzàle in casa migliore assai s'en vanno astare, e panni piú fini avranno a vestire... e pane sicuro sopra la tavola sempre terranno, e nome piú degno se porteranno... e respècto della gente maggiore pe' la famiglia nòva, che in casa dellu re vanno ad alloggiare. Pe' l'ammore che teni a 'sti figlioli Medea, te, de' sacrificare! Che de matre degna, non de donna orgogliosa hai penzàre... (Fo, 2003, p. 1017).

[...] Think about your children, not yourself! Thanks to this new marriage, they will live in a better house, wear better clothes... and they will always have bread on their table, and their name will be honored more...and the new family will receive more respect because they will live in the king's house. Medea, you must sacrifice yourself out of the love you feel toward these children of yours. You need to think as an honorable mother, and not as a prideful woman...

If the love for her children is not reason enough to submit to her husband's will, then Medea should find comfort in knowing that she is not alone, that she shares the fate of many, if not most, women, that this is the universal law of nature dictating her fate:

[...] L'omo nostro de carne nòva, zòvane e fresca sen'vada a cerca. Da sempre, è la legge de lu monno! [...] ... è lo naturale: l'ommo dure piú lungo a invecchiare... lui, l'ommo, col temo staggiona, noi ci si appassisce... [...] Noi potere si perde e lui n'acquisice. Da sempre, è la legge de lu monno! (p. 1018).

[...] our men go after young and fresh meat. That's the law of the world forever! [...] ... it's nature: man takes longer to grow old... he, the man, ripens with time, we wither... [...] We lose power, and he gains it. That's the law of the world forever!

Medea, after first attempting to rebut the women's arguments, seems to acquiesce, especially when Jason arrives. For a moment she returns to her role of doting wife and mother. But this is just for show. Once it becomes clear that she will not win back her husband's love, Medea's resolution becomes strong and unwavering. Her mind is made up. She will sacrifice not herself, but her role as a mother. She will kill her sons so that a new woman can be born:

E penzàvo che 'sta gabbia deréntro la quale ci avvete imprigionato, con alligàti, incatenati li figlioli, come basto de legno duro alla vacca, per meglio tenerce sotto a noi femmene, manzuate [...] È 'sta gabbia che te vòj a spezzare... è 'sto basto enfame che te voj schiantare! [...] Necessità è, che 'sti figlioli ammia abbino a morire perché tu, Giasone e tue leggi infami abbiate a schiattare! Armate... amiche... 'sta mano méa... spigni Medea desperata lo ferro nella carne tenerella delli figli [...] E no' tremare quando crieranno: "Matre!, pietà! Matre!, pietà!"... e fora della porta tutta a gente: "Mostro! Cagna! Scellerata! Matre for de natura! Zozza! Pottana!" Ed eo, me dirò chiagnèndo: "Mori! Mori! Pe' fa' nascere 'na donna nova...Mori! Mori! Pe' fa' nascere 'na donna nova! (p. 1021).

And I thought that this cage you put us in, tied up, chained to our children, like the cow's tough wooden harness, to keep us women meek and under control [...] I am going to break this cage... and I will smash this hateful harness! [...] These children must die so that you, Jason, and your infamous laws perish too! My friends, arm my hands.... And you, hopeless Medea, push the sword into the tender flesh of your children! [...] And don't shake when they will cry out "Mother! Have mercy! Mother! Have mercy on us!"... and outside the door, all the people will yell at you: "Monster! Bitch! Wicked! Degenerate mother! Filthy! Whore!" and I, will tell myself in tears: "Die! Die! So that a new woman can be born!... Die! Die! So that a new woman can be born!"

Medea's notion of motherhood as a cage or a harness is reminiscent of Wittig's attack on the mythical status attributed by the patriarchy to motherhood¹². There is nothing "natural" in the role of the mother in our society. The "law of nature" that the chorus of women invokes to try to appease Medea is nothing more than the law of men, the "leggi infami" that must perish with their creators. Medea's infanticide thus becomes a ritual involving all women ("Armate... amiche... 'sta mano méa") in a symbolic act of rebellion that brings the performativity of the gender role to the extreme limits of its complete subversion. As Carrière points out:

Selon la théorie de la performativité identitaire et sexuelle des Troubles dans le genre de Judith Butler la monstruosité incarnée verbalement par la Médée de Rame désigne ici les limites de ses représentations mythiques, voire leur excès, qui est l'espace même de la subversion et de la transformation sociale (Carrière, 2012, p. 92).

The new woman born through this act of subversion defies the constraints set by the androcentric logos but remains un-defined and un-spoken as Rame leaves the audience with no indication of what the new paradigm of femininity will look like. We know, for certain, that this paradigm requires the breaking away from the economy of care that has innervated the masculinity-feminity dynamic since its inception. We also know that this will entail the overcoming of the system of exclusion-inclusion of women within the patriarchal political order. By tearing apart the myth of motherhood and rejecting the role as designated "domestic" caregiver assigned to her by men, the new woman is free to create new "forms of life". Still, the ambiguity that the audience is left with risks triggering the need for what Sedgwick calls "paranoid readings"¹³.

Leaving the question of "what is to be done?" unanswered is at the same time liberating and unnerving. The audience is tempted to seek refuge from the discomfort caused by this uncertainty and contemplative freedom within a system of programmatic political goals and a revolutionary course of action. To avoid this risk, we can turn to Agamben's concept of "destituent power" as a form of "reparative" practice when engaging with Rame's text.

¹² "Instead of seeing giving birth as a forced production, we see it as a 'natural', 'biological' process, forgetting that in our societies births are planned (demography), forgetting that we are ourselves programmed to produce children, while this is the only social activity 'short of war' that presents such a great danger of death. Thus, as long as we will be 'unable to abandon by will or impulse a lifelong and centuries-old commitment to childbearing as the female creative act', gaining control of the production of children will mean much more than the mere control of the material means of this production: women will have to abstract themselves from the definition "woman" which is imposed upon them" (Wittig, 1992, p. 11).

¹³ In Sedgwick's essay, paranoia is intended as an "anticipatory and retroactive" way to avoid negative feelings, in particular, "the negative affect of humiliation" (Sedgwick Kosofsky, 2003, p. 145).

In Agamben's view, destituent power is never the product of a revolution, which is always as constituent as it is destructive (it "destroys and always creates new forms" (Agamben, 2014b, p 71). Instead, in line with the "anarchist tradition and the twentieth-century thought" (p. 72), destituent power does away with any mandate to establish a new order. It opens a space of potentiality by suspending labor and deactivating "operativity in form-of-life" (p. 73). This suspension of labor, in my view, necessarily includes "the labor of care" which defines the space of femininity in patriarchal society. Medea's symbolic act of dismembering the social body to the very core of its most sacred ties (the mother-child relationship), suspends the economy of care and creates a communal space for women to create new ethics and "politics-to-come" outside the perimeters set by the androcentric logic of the "straight mind". Rame's monologue ends with this suspension: the silence, lights off, and curtains down prescribed by the stage directions in the script.

4. Figure III: Ulrike, From Revolution to Destituent Power

The messianism of this "coming community" (Agamben, 2001) is not just an intellectual gesture for Franca Rame; it intersects with her active engagement in politics. Her work for *Soccorso Rosso*¹⁴, for example, testifies to Rame's activism in the field of the Italian radical left and her leadership in the fight against what she (with many others) considered to be the oppressive and authoritarian response of the government to the wave of political violence and terrorism plaguing Italy, like many other countries, in the seventies. While Fo and Rame condemned the violence perpetrated by terrorist groups and their "murderous ideology" (Fo, 2003, p. 1081), their criticism of capitalism and liberal democracies is nonetheless scathing as is their attack on the "special laws", such as the 1975 legge Reale or the 1980 Legge Cossiga on "pentitismo"¹⁵, implemented by those democracies to fight terrorist groups.

This is the political and ideological background of two of the most controversial monologues Franca Rame wrote and performed: *Io, Ulrike, grido*, and *Accadde Domani*. The plays tell the story of two women, Ulrike Meinhof and Irmgard Möller, who were among the founders of the German left terrorist organization RAF (*Rote Armee Fraktion*)¹⁶. Both women died of apparent suicide under suspicious circumstances while they were detained in the infamous Stammheim prison. Although the two monologues are closely connected, I focus

¹⁴ On Soccorso Rosso and Rame's involvement with this organization that provided legal support to members of radical left organizations (including terrorist groups) on trial for "political crimes," see Malatesta, 2012.

¹⁵ The so-called "Penitence Laws" made it possible for terrorists who provided the Italian authorities with relevant information to receive reduced sentences.

¹⁶ On this organization and the Baader–Meinhof Group, see Colvin, 2009.

here only on the first one, *Io, Ulrike, grido*, as it is more relevant to the present discussion. In particular, I will draw a parallel between the protagonist of this play and Medea to explore whether and to what extent Ulrike can be considered an embodiment of the new woman announced by Medea's ritual murder.

Io, Ulrike, grido begins with the protagonist stating her personal information as if participating in a police interrogation:

Nome: Ulrike

Cognome: Meinhof

Sesso: femminile

Età: quarantun anni

Sì, sono sposata.

Sì, due figli, nati con parto cesareo

Sì, divisa dal marito (Fo, 2003, p. 1083)

Even from this first introduction, we see stunning resemblances between the character of Ulrike and Medea: both mothers, both separated from their husbands, both condemned for terrible crimes¹⁷. Not unlike Medea, whose identity is defined and enclosed by her otherness, “sujet emmuré par l'autre” (Carrière, 2012, p. 52), Ulrike is physically walled in (“emmuré”) in a prison cell and thus deprived of any real agency. From within this prison, where everything is white and silent (“bianca la cella, bianche le pareti, bianchi gli infissi, di smalto bianco la porta, il tavolo, la sedia, il letto, per non parlare del cesso”; Fo, 2003, p. 1084), the protagonist denounces the security apparatus that is controlling, limiting, and punishing her dissent. Aware that her *j'accuse* will not be heard by the German people, who she describes as zombies (“abitatori di un cimitero”; p. 1085) trapped in conformism and the fake wealth of capitalistic society, Ulrike finds solidarity in the downtrodden, the marginalized. This includes both the immigrants, who are exploited and discriminated against, and the women, who have finally understood their condition of subjugation and therefore will be able to understand and sympathize with her: “tutte le donne che hanno capito la loro condizione di sottomesse, umiliate, e sfruttate, loro capiranno anche perché mi trovo qui e perché questo Stato ha deciso di ammazzarmi... proprio come una strega” (ib). Here again, we hear an echo of Medea's monologue. Both

¹⁷ A more daring comparison between Ulrike and the Virgin Mary was suggested in the writings of Ulrike's foster mother, as reported by Sarah Colvin: “Riemech [...] propound[s] a sentimental vision of her foster daughter that is somewhere between avenging angel of justice and *mater misericordiae*”. Colvin also noted how “for *konkret* columns, Meinhof [...] used her full name Ulrike Marie; the connotations of purity inherent in that middle name may well be what led biographers to reiterate it in accounts of her life”. (Colvin, 2009, p. 5).

protagonists are associated with witchcraft, and both proudly reclaim their identity as “witches” in an act of defiance against the patriarchal order they strive to subvert. In the case of Medea, this defiance entailed taking the monstrous, albeit symbolic, action of dismembering the social body by killing the paradigm of ideal femininity, the caring mother and submissive wife, against which their radical otherness was cast. For Ulrike, instead, defiance is an act of resistance, the resistance of the self who refuses to be dismembered and dispersed into madness and self-destruction. Instead, by unveiling the absurdity of her “fake suicide”, Ulrike turns the Foucauldian apparatus that is surveilling and controlling her every move into a mirror that reflects the oppressive nature of our so-called democracies: “Carcerieri, giudici, politicanti vi ho fregati... non riuscirete mai a farmi uscire pazza, dovete ammazzarmi da sana... in perfetta salute di mente e di spirito... e tutti capiranno, sapranno con certezza che siete degli assassini, un governo, uno Stato di assassini” (p. 1086). Ulrike’s monologue marks an important moment in the evolution of Franca Rame’s feminism, as it directly addresses the question of the intersectionality of gender, class, and race. If the previous feminist monologues focused on the issue of femininity and motherhood and the betrayal perpetrated by the patriarchy against women - even though already in *Medea* we see how race contributes to the otherness of the protagonist - with *Io, Ulrike, grido*, the “woman question” is intrinsically linked to the multidimensional structure of exploitation at the core of the capitalistic mode of production.

In the falsely colorful world of our consumeristic societies (“il vostro mondo fradicio e grigio l’avete ridipinto a tinte sgargianti, perché nessuno se ne accorga, e costringete la gente a consumare tutto a colori”; p. 1084), everything is turned into a commodity, including women, who are reduced to a product to be consumed: “No, non voglio essere una delle vostre donne confezionate sotto cellophane, e frustrata e sfruttata e materna e al tempo stesso puttana” (p. 1085). The reference to the maternal role of women in this passage is of particular relevance. Motherhood is no longer only a trap - the “harness” that patriarchal society has devised to keep women under control and relegate them to the domestic space. Instead, the most sacred of myths becomes a function of the market economy, one of the many features of a product (the woman) designed to make it more appealing and profitable. More so, the exploitation of women, their bodies, their work, and their affective labor is revealed to be a condition of operativity for the capitalistic order, as demonstrated by the fact that Ulrike’s refusal to take part in that system and her denunciation of its injustice is punished by denying her voice, her agency, and even her unified self. What makes the unveiling of this mechanism of exploitation possible is, again in Agamben’s terms, the suspension of all operativity brought about by a destituent power. It takes the suspension of labor to “neutralize the reduction of the political to the economic and the economic to the political [...]. [And in so doing the destituent power] creates openings for rethinking

politics and ethics” (Bird, 2016, p. 149). Significantly, once again the audience is given no answer to the question of “what is to be done?”. Precluded from taking any action and aware of the “death by suicide” sentence pending over her head, Ulrike can only share her testimony and invite the audience to join her in a “community of witness”¹⁸.

Partaking in this shared experience raises awareness of the reality of the “Security State” and the political paradigm “defined by suspicion, police filing, and control” Agamben warned about in the Athens lecture referred to at the beginning of this essay. Ulrike’s testimony and her tragic death force us to confront the risk of being like her and the reality of a social order that treats every citizen like a potential terrorist.

Ulrike’s political and intellectual trajectory also interrogates the experiences of Franca Rame (and Dario Fo) themselves. In one of her most famous columns, “Kolumnismus”, appearing in the magazine «Konkret» at the end of 1968 and marking a crucial moment in her process of radicalization, Meinhof criticized her work for being ineffective and nothing more than a distraction for her bourgeois readers. In the same article, she attacks columnists and refers to them (and herself) as “court jesters” (Colvin, 2009, p. 43). A year later, as Dario Fo and Franca Rame leave the theatre group *Nuova Scena* and form a new collective, *La Comune*, whose mission was the production of a revolutionary theater to be performed for the working class in working-class venues. The couple justified their decision by expressing the intention to give up their role as “jesters of the bourgeoisie” and take up a new role as “jesters of the proletariat” instead (Valentini, 1997, pp. 7-8). But the parallel between the two stories is more than just lexical and chronological. It involves a similar struggle in dealing with the limitations of language, which fails to bring about real political and social change. In the case of Fo-Rame, that struggle motivated the research about and experimentation with regional dialects, as well as the invention of a made-up language (*the Grammelot*), while in the case of Meinhof it spurred reflections on the tension between language and action and her decision to participate in political violence (Colvin, 2009, pp. 69-75). More generally, both Meinhof and Fo-Rame condemned what they saw as the repressive policies of the democratic states and the pervasive exploitation underpinning the capitalistic system. They both experienced dissatisfaction with the institutional left-wing parties in their respective countries (SPD in Germany and PCI in Italy), and they both became involved with the radical extraparliamentary left. They both interpreted their work as a means to raise political awareness in the downtrodden and mobilize them into revolutionary action. Ulrike brought this vision to the extreme logical consequence of embracing violence and actively partaking in terrorist actions as a way to resolve the

¹⁸ For an interesting interpretation of this concept in Derrida, see Morin, 2007.

contradictions and the limits of her intellectual work, a fatal decision that condemned her to prison and tragic death. Fo and Rame, on the contrary, openly condemned terrorism and violence. Nonetheless, the familiarity that Rame undoubtedly saw in the story of Ulrike might have allowed her to reflect on what could have happened to her, too, had she made different choices.¹⁹

The decision not to forgo language and embrace revolutionary violence is also reflected in the state of suspension and ambiguity in which this monologue ends. Once again, in *Io, Ulrike, grido*, there is no resolution, no call for action, no constituent power in the making. Instead, the audience is left with the discomfort of realizing the fragility of the privilege they enjoy at the expense of the Other, the victims of exploitation and injustice; the presentiment of the ubiquitous control that the “power of capitalism” exercises on our everyday life; and the potential for alternative communal experiences and new “politics-to-come” provided that we all break free from the oppressive system of labor and care that entraps us in its alienating mechanism. If *Maria alla croce* tests the limits of the role patriarchy has assigned to women and brings awareness on the contradictions and injustice characterizing the economy of care within the androcentric order, with Ulrike the universal nature of this system of exclusion and exploitation is brought to light. In the space of freedom opened by this awareness, there is no course of action set for us, no revolution to join, but perhaps another Medea, another ritual act of destruction is yet to come.

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¹⁹ Franca Rame was kidnapped and raped by a neo-fascist gang in 1973; she later told the dramatic story in one of her most powerful monologues, *Lo Stupro*.

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