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Infinite Signs
Alberto Kurapel and the Semiotics of Exile

"Las luces se apagan
sólo queda una zona atrás
junto al desfiladero
donde tendré que reventar y maquillarme
maquillarme y reventar
reventar
y
maquillarme"

"Les lumières s'éteignent
derrière, il ne reste que cette zone
près de la falaise
où je devrai crever et me maquiller
me maquiller et crever
crever
et
me maquiller"

"The lights go out
there is only the space in the back
next to the chasm
where I will have to burst and put on my make-up
put make-up on and burst
burst
and
put on make-up"

ALBERTO KURAPEL, *Pasarelas/Passerelles* 1991[1]

The 1987 edition of one of the best known international theatre festivals in Canada, the festival de théâtre des Amériques,[2] brought to Montréal some of the greatest talent in the Americas and the rest of the world in a program which included The Wooster Group, Meredith Monk, Carbone 14, Eduardo Pavlovsky and Denise Stoklos and in which among the many highlights was the Canadian premiere of one of the most acclaimed productions ever to come out of Latin America, Antunez Filho's *Macunaíma*.[3] In the midst of the excitement created by such a powerful

international line-up in a festival which was still young and faithful to its mandate of bringing the best of theatre in the Americas, there was room to celebrate the discovery of a voice which had not come from afar, a voice of the Americas which long before 1987 had already found its home in Québec.

When Alberto Kurapel presented his original production *Off Off Off Ou Sur Le Toit de Pablo Neruda, La presse*'s theatre critic Jean Beaunoyer hoped the event would serve to bring Kurapel out of the confinement of his small alternative space in Montréal in order to have him recognized by international critics and audiences. "It is unthinkable"—Beaunoyer argued—"that such a creative force had remained confined, limited and ignored by the 'greatest' in theatre for such a long time" (C8). Unthinkable as it may have been, Alberto Kurapel's "creative force" has been often confined, limited and ignored, even after his debut at the festival de théâtre des Amériques. A highly original and versatile voice in the Quebecois cultural milieu, Kurapel—a Chilean songwriter, poet, playwright, director and actor, founder and artistic director of La Compagnie des Arts Exilio—has lived and worked in Montréal for twenty-one years experiencing a most unusual combination of acclaim and oblivion. Admired and respected by many, ignored by others—including many official granting agencies—Kurapel is a controversial figure who has learnt to live and work in a sweet and sour world with just the right doses of personal and professional struggles and of critical acclaim and international recognition.[4] These circumstances are hardly surprising given the nature of his work, which poses great difficulties to any attempt of classification or cultural decoding.

Kurapel's bilingual (Spanish/French) multi-media performance pieces, a form which he has come to describe as "Latin American Performance of Exile," are highly stylized productions in which he encodes every performative sign—from the use of bilingual texts to that of film and video—with multi-layered meanings, often extremely difficult to decode. His is a style of performance in which scenic signs are foregrounded in order to transmit to audiences not only an intellectual reflection on uprootedness and exile but also the feeling and experience of exile itself. In other words, Latin American Performance of Exile is not meant to offer audiences a vision of exile but to make them become subjects in the re-creation and re-production of exile itself, not just observing it but experiencing it; a proposal which is bound to encounter resistance in a society which has yet to recognize exile as a possibility within its realm of experience.

Alberto Kurapel left his native Chile in 1974, after the military coup-de-etat which in September of the previous year had left the country immersed in political chaos, an event which has become a world-wide symbol for disappearances and torture. A graduate of the Theatre School of the Universidad de Chile, Kurapel combined his work as an actor in theatre, film, radio and television with his other talents as a songwriter, poet and director.

In 1981 Kurapel founded La Compagnie des Arts Exilio in Montréal, with which he has had seven major productions in the last thirteen years, all of them exploring different aspects of exile: *Exilio in pectore extrañamiento* (1983), *Mémoire 85/Olvido 86* (1986), *Off Off Off ou sur le toit de Pablo Neruda* (1986), (the three of which have been published under the general title *3 Performances Teatrales de Alberto Kurapel*), *Prométhée Enchaîné selon Alberto Kurapel* (1988), *Carta de Ajuste ou Nous N'Avons Plus Besoin de Calendrier* (1989) and *Colmenas en la sombra ou l'espoir de l'arrière-garde* (1992). The latter, which premiered in Santiago de Chile and which is Kurapel's only play never produced in Montréal, is the first part of a trilogy under the general title of *America Desvelada ou Mon Nom Sera Toujours Aupres de Vous* which also includes *Círculo en la luna ou Jamais C'est Assez* and *Antes del próximo año ou Autour du Soleil*, both of them still to be produced. In September of 1994, la Compagnie des Arts Exilio will present its latest production, *La bruta interférence.*

During his early years in Montréal, as he saw the many faces of cultural shock in a city whose body and soul were far removed from those of his native Santiago de Chile, Kurapel searched for ways to bring together his knowledge of different artistic forms in order to explore the theme which would become his inspirational force for years to come: exile.

Kurapel defines his work not as theatre **in** exile but **of** exile. Theatre **in** exile, he argues, is any kind of theatre produced by a person forced to flee his/her country, whether or not it deals with exile itself. Theatre **of** exile, however, is a theatre form in search of scenic signs and symbols which are able to express the very experience of exile. Theatre of exile seeks to perform the "aesthetics of uprootedness," the "theatricality of exile" (Kurapel, "La encrucijada...," 339), that is, to impregnate every scenic sign with the essence of exile, heightening broken actions and fragmented scenes to give a sense of split consciousness (340).

As the focus of the performance moves away from the text, other factors

come into play. The use of a bilingual text, of an alternative "non-theatrical" space, of masks and costumes, of multiple media, is both heightened and semioticized.

Language is, clearly, one of the first issues which a theatre of exile must contend with, as exile forces the creator to work in two different languages or risk ghettoization. Defying all possible social pressures to choose between Spanish or French in order to achieve membership in a particular "community" by virtue of the language spoken, Kurapel writes and performs *bilingually*. In his performances every text is spoken in Spanish and French without transition.

But bilingualism in exile is much more than the use of two languages. A bilingual statement is the manifestation of a split thought which must be communicated in two different languages because it contains within itself two different realms of experience. Thus bilingualism refers both to the fragmented consciousness of the individual and to the process of "translation" (cultural and linguistic) which must take place for him/her to live in those two realms at once, a "schizophrenia" every exile has come to accept as a "normal" experience.

The environment in which theatre of exile takes place must be a space of "rupture" (341), challenging the notion of "natural" space as we know it. "Exiled from our theatre buildings"—Kurapel says—"we couldn't look for similar spaces in different landscapes" (341). In 1984 Kurapel found a home for his performances in an old warehouse in the heart of the Montréal Harbour, a poorly-kept space in which rehearsals took place in the midst of factory noises and which could only be called "Espace Exilio." In this "non-theatrical" space, performances were meant to recreate the notion of exile, as they became "artificial" acts in which both performers and audiences felt they were in "no man's land" (342). "No man's land" is the space of exile, a state of mind in which an individual belongs neither to the country s/he abandoned nor to the one in which s/he is forced to live. The sculptural installations made out of garbage which function as the only set design express the poverty and marginalization of exile. "No man's land" became much more than a symbol when Kurapel and his actors were forced to leave Espace Exilio. Since then, the company has had no permanent home.

Exile is also symbolized by the use of multiple communication media, which create "a succession of rapid images" (345), reconnecting "disjointed images and circuits" (345). All signs ultimately converge in the actor,

embodiment of exile itself, essence of *transculturation.* Actors *of exile in exile* are performers of rejection, who create *in a state of rejection* and *with rejection,* for they are exiles in a foreign land. Their costumes are "the suits of the unknown, the icons of the foreign" (344).

Because Latin American Performance of Exile seeks to explore the idea of exile not only in its content but also in each of its scenic signs, these signs have to be "foregrounded," that is, the audience's attention has to be brought to them and their theatricality rather than to their signifieds or their dramatic equivalent" (Elam 9). The process of "foregrounding" thus serves for the spectator to take note of the "semiotic *means*" of the performance, becoming aware of the signifiers or signs and their operation (17-18).

Technological media, for instance, foregrounded as semiotic signs, become theatrical in their own right. "Framed" in such a way as to be marked off from the rest of the text (Brecht 203), they create two levels of meaning: the most obvious one is produced through the transmission of images which must then be decoded by the audience; the least obvious but equally efficient is produced by the media themselves as signifiers. In *Off Off Off ou sur le toit de Pablo Neruda,* Mario (Kurapel) is passionately seeking the woman he loves. When he finally finds her, it is only in the cold reproduction of a slide. She appears in a white and black medium close-up frame as her voice is heard in a recording. Mario turns to look at her, walks upstage to face her and talks to her with his back to the audience. The fragmented focus and consciousness of the blocking creates a particular meaning for the audience, as they experience the triangle created by the woman's image, her voice coming from outside and Mario's body. But the fact that the woman's image is reproduced in a slide (as opposed to being played by a live actor) makes the audience experience her as a cold, distant, grey figure which exists only in the diffuse form of a dream, an effect intensified by the fact that her voice comes out of a tape recorder not less cold and impersonal than the slide itself. Even more importantly, the fact that Mario is facing a slide has a further "cinematic" effect, for Mario's presence acts as a liaison between the woman and the audience, in a similar role to that of a camera in a film. Because Mario's gaze comes from the same direction as the audience's and is facing a frame, spectators are encouraged to assume a subjective position in the same way a point-of-view shot would do to the audience of a film.[5] In this way, the audience is not just offered a vision of split consciousness but is brought into the action to experience that rupture from the subject position.

Bilingualism as a scenic sign follows a similar process of "foregrounding," as the linguistic utterance (signifier) is brought to a level of importance unusual for language in this kind of theatre performance, based as it is in action rather than text. Meaning is decoded not only from *what* is said but also from *how* it is said. In the same performance, *Off Off Off,* Mario uses a tape recorder to express a number of ideas which he calls "Consciences" (Conciencias, in Spanish; Consciences in French), reflections on life and art written by European, Latin American and Quebecois intellectuals, from Pier Paolo Passolinni to Jorge Enrique Adoum. Mario records each of his "consciences" in Spanish, concluding all of them with the question: "¿Donde está?" ("Where is she?). When he plays the tape back, the text is heard in French, with the final words being: "Où est-elle?" The French version of the text (the "translation") is heard through the impersonal and cold tape recorder rather than in the personalized and passionate sound of Kurapel's natural voice.

A first level of meaning is created by the content of the "consciences," heightened or "foregrounded," as it were, by the repeated use of the final question, where is she?, which takes the audience back and forth in a journey of intellectual reflection on exile and the concrete experience of a passionate search for completeness with another human being. A further level of meaning is created by the French-language versions of the "consciences" which are, first of all, reproduced in a tape recorder—and therefore perceived as cold, strange and foreign, just as an exile would experience a second language—and, not least importantly, are uttered using Spanish intonation, a tactic which rids the French language of its distinctive personality to turn it into a linguistic hybrid, a symbol for the psychological experience of an exile.

Kurapel also experiments with the actors as semiotic signs, making them undergo a similar process of "foregrounding." In semiotic analysis, actors are often seen as "icons," that is, signifiers which represent their objects mainly by similarity (Elam 21), in a process in which the audience loses the awareness that what they see "is not the thing itself" (Peirce 363). In Kurapel's performances, however, audiences are not encouraged to surrender to this process of identification. Instead, performers hide behind a "mask" of costumes and make-up. The "mask" is stylized and foregrounded to contain the symbol for the character, while performers hide behind it, avoiding identification with the character they represent.

The effect of foregrounding the "masks" and not the performers might seem to be occasionally effaced by the fact that the actors' real names are often revealed in the course of the performance, apparently bringing the audience's attention to the performer's true self and away from the mask or character s/he is embodying. In *Prométhée Enchaîné selon Alberto Kurapel*, Prometeus (Kurapel) calls the stage manager (a character in the play) by the actor's name, screaming: "¡Susana! ¡Suéltame para poder continuar! Susana!" ("Susana! Release me so that I can continue! Susana!) (86). In *Off Off Off*, Kurapel (as Mario) recites a long list of well-known historical figures from Henry Kissinger to King Juan Carlos I of Spain as he speaks of their (sometimes real sometimes fictional) deaths, only to end speaking about his own death: "¡Alberto Kurapel, maldito de exilio, muere asesinado en exilio!" ("Alberto Kurapel, damned by exile, killed by exile!")(104).

Although the revelation of true names makes the audience identify with the performers themselves, it also serves to deepen the alienation gap between the performers and their masks. In Kurapel's performances, characters are often symbols of ideas; Kurapel himself has spoken about his Prometeus as a symbol for the unscrupulous search for power; as well as Mario in *Off Off Off* can be seen as the symbol for the human search for completeness in the midst of uprootedness, all of these ideas symbolizing different aspects of exile. As exiles, as "performers of rejection," actors are portrayed as human beings who have the potential to experience these many different facets of exile. The characters they represent, however, symbolize *one of them*. Having disclosed their true names, these "performers of rejection" can be shown as what they are: people who actively choose to initiate a process of self-exploration by putting on a character, which in turn acts as the symbol for the idea they want to explore. In this case, the audience is not encouraged to identify with the performers as if they were "the thing itself," that is, the idea they represent. Instead, spectators are brought into the performer's role (again, a subject position) and encouraged to undergo the same internal process of characterization, eventually experiencing too the same state of split consciousness, of exile.

The foregrounding of scenic signs ultimately depends on the spectators' ability to decode meaning. Latin American Performance of Exile, however, powerfully challenges the resources audiences normally have to "undercode" what they cannot decode. Keir Elam has explained "undercoding," a

term originally coined by Umberto Eco, as "the formation of rough and approximate norms in order to characterize a phenomenon which is not fully understood" (55). Difficulty arises when the range of cultural codes normally used by spectators to decode dramatic signs turns useless, for the social factors which are thought "to determine historical changes in the function, nature and meaning of particular sets of signs" (Alter 13) will not necessarily include the experience of exile in a place like Québec. This might be the case because, as Jean Alter has argued, often there is a tension between a changing social reality and a "lagging adjustment of ideology" (16)—ideology understood in this case as the manifestations of that social reality—usually resulting in the "obsolence of the society's system of signs" (19). When this is the case, Alter suggests that fiction no longer offers a "mediated. . . picture of a state of affairs acknowledged. . . to be true. . . but a *disguised picture of a state of affairs that has not yet been acknowledged to be true*" (18; emphasis mine). This is certainly the case of the Latin American Performance of Exile, a form whose system of signs creates hitherto unknown meanings which defy both theatrical and cultural decoding. In this way, the function of this kind of performance becomes "to provide a vehicle for communicating information about History that historical discourse has not yet diagnosed" (18). Thus the Latin American Performance of Exile creates codes and ideas which society has not yet recognized, and which are therefore "foreign" to its system of cultural codes, to its ideology.

But it is precisely this sense of "foreignness" that Kurapel seeks to create, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship of estrangement between the performers and the audience. For it is not only that the performers are "exiles" in this land (Québec or Canada). It is also that Québécois and Canadian audiences are "foreign," but not only to the notion of political exile—for that happens simply by virtue of their lack of personal or collective experience—but also "foreign" (indeed exiles) in ways which may remain unknown to them. Thus the difficulty in understanding the meaning produced by the foregrounding of scenic signs is itself the most efficient tool to bring audiences to confront their own personal experience of exile and uprootedness.

Ultimately Kurapel is not speaking only about political exile. As a man who fled his native country to escape death and torture, he might have first understood exile as a political experience. As his exploration evolved, however, he began to understand that exile was as well an existential question. "Exile is a word which means many different things"—says Kurapel—

"something which manages to move what is deeply hidden inside a human being." To him, it does not matter whether or not audiences are able to understand the experience of political exile. "I want to touch every person's unhappiness"—he argues—"the unhappiness produced by social or political oppression, by the experience of a majority being exploited by a minority. . . that is universal. . ." (interview).

The fact that Kurapel perceives his message as "universal" is not in contradiction with the obvious difficulty found in decoding the signs in his performances. He expects his audiences to receive this "universal" message through a dialectical process, one in which meaning, far from being one-sided and readily assimilated, has multiple forms and faces, being able to take audiences into different journeys which are not always intellectually understood. Audiences are not only encouraged to understand exile in their own personal ways but to take with them questions, doubts, recollections of broken statements or images, which they might not be able to process mentally but which will make them be moved by an unknown feeling, which will then take them into an intellectual process, however fragmented or incomplete.

In this postmodern view of experience, the process the artist follows to encode signs and the audience's process of decoding them follow similar patterns. Kurapel offers a fragmented experience of reality, a vision of the human split consciousness which does not "uncover for us any metaphysical or ideological center. . .[to] serve our understanding" (McGlynn 139). The final experience of "understanding" is as non-linear, fragmented and volatile as the performances themselves.

This is so because theatre of exile does not simply offer a theory or a vision of exile; it is a recreation of exile in which both performers and audiences must assume the role of protagonists, the subject position. Audiences are challenged with abstract and fragmented ideas which are meant to take them into the experience of exile, whatever that might mean for them, in a never-ending, infinite range of possibilities.

Exile is, ultimately, all that is left. Latin American Performance of Exile reproduces it for its creators, its critics and its audiences. It brings the experience of personal, artistic and professional uprootedness right into the heart of Montréal's theatre community. This desire, more than a symbolic gesture, is truly an infinite one, best expressed in Kurapel's own poetry, for "el gesto nunca ha sido inútil cuando entrega lo infinito", "a gesture is never useless when it offers the infinite" (*Pasarelas* 60).

NOTES

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1 Original poem from *Pasarelas/Passerelles*, published in Spanish and French. The English translation for this essay is my own. All other translations from French and Spanish into English are also mine, including statements from a personal interview with Alberto Kurapel, conducted in Spanish.

2 Le Festival de théâtre des Ameriques was founded in Montréal in 1985 with the goal of bringing together the diversity of theatre practice from all countries in the Americas. Since then, it has been held every second year, although participation from Latin America has been uneven and there has been a stronger presence of European companies.

3 Macunaima was produced in Sao Paulo (Brazil) in 1978 by the acting company of the Centro de Investigación Teatral del Servicio Social de Comercio e Industria (Centre for Theatre Research of the Social Service for Commerce and Industry), directed by Antunes Filho. The production was based on the classical work of Brazilian literature of the same name, written by José de Andrade, which dealt with some ever-present conflicts in the Latin American continent, among them the confrontation between indigenous cultures and 20th-century civilization. Filho's production, with an imagery and lyricism hitherto unknown to Brazilian theatre, combined a primitive sensuality and a universal "pathos" which challenged dominant theatre aesthetics and made it a landmark of Latin American theatre. European critics have called it one of the greatest theatre creations of all times.

4 In general, Kurapel's work as a theatre artist, poet and singer has been well received and strongly supported by the written media in Quebec and the rest of Canada. Most Montréal daily newspapers have had favourable reviews of his work, especially during and after Kurapel's debut at the Festival de théâtre des Amériques. Articles by or about Kurapel have also been published in national magazines and journals such as *Canadian Theatre Review, Cinema Canada,* or *The Canadian Composer,* and in international journals of Latin American Theatre such as *Diógenes* or *La Escena Latinoamericana* [The Latin American Stage], published in the United States and Canada respectively.

5 A point-of-view shot is a shot taken with a camera placed approximately where the character's eyes would be, showing what the character would see; usually cut in before or after a shot of the character looking. See Bordwell/Thompson.

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