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Cloud 9, Metadrama, and the Post-semiotics of the Subject

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate, through the example of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*, the way dramatic literature can address central problems of contemporary culture and cultural identity with metadramatic techniques. The interpretation relies on the critical apparatus of the postsemiotics of the subject. The *metatheatrical framework* of the play focuses on the question of subjectivity as cultural, ideological product. The metadramatic markers break the mimetic illusion on the stage, and the dislocated spectator gains a metaperspective on his or her ideological positionality.

"How could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself?" [1]

1 Drama studies and cultural studies

In this paper I am going to address problems of cultural identity and dramatic representation in order to demonstrate that dramatic literature is one of the most sensitive laboratories of cultural imagery, and I would like to show how a semiotic metaperspective can help us understand the logic of contemporary culture and the representation of cultural imageries in post-war drama. At the outset I will refer to my experiences in the teaching of drama and *theater* semiotics at the University of Szeged in Hungary.

Six years ago at the University of Sussex in Brighton I was pleasantly surprised to see that the course *Introduction to English Studies* included two lectures on the theories of the subject and their importance in cultural studies. In Hungary at that time we were just starting to work out our British Cultural

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1. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 182.

Studies curriculum which, by now, inevitably includes terms that the Hungarian students of English had been exposed to only in graduate courses before: interdisciplinarity, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, canon formation, decanonization, subjectivity. Indeed, an important change in the structure of new curricula will be the introduction of such terms right at the beginning of the program. It is impossible to approach the study of cultural practices without an understanding of the status of the subject in the semiotic mechanism of culture, and this naturally applies to literary texts as well. Literature as a social discursive practice participates in the simultaneous circulation and subversion of identity patterns that social subjects are compelled to internalize. From the perspective of genre theory, I think it is arguable that it is in dramatic literature and theatrical practice that the questions of the constitution of the subject and the cultural imagery of specific establishments surface most often with extraordinary intensity. Performance oriented semiotic approaches to dramatic literature have recently focused on how the dramatic text, because of the very nature of the genre, addresses the fundamental questions of subjectivity and representation. Through the performance of the actor, a dialectic is established between surface and depth, theatrical illusion and actual reality, role-playing and original identity, and this dialectic inevitably foregrounds the problems of subjectivity. At the same time, the theater as a thick semiotic context semioticizes every element of the stage, and the idea of representation is brought into the focus of attention by the ostension of the sign and the thematization of presence. From a semiotic point of view, this results in a *representational insufficiency* because it is impossible to establish the total presence of things that are absent, and for which the theatrical representation stands on the stage. When it is staged in the actual theatrical context of reception, or the imaginative staging of the reader, drama can either thematize and foreground, or ignore and conceal the representational insufficiency which is in its center. This idea of presence and this representational insufficiency have been the primary concern of drama and theater from the earliest mimetic theories up to the poststructuralist deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.

The unbridgeable gap between the role and the actor, representation and reality, have been handled in two basically different ways in theatrical history. It is generally thematized by experimental drama or metadrama, while it tends to be suppressed by the photographic tradition of the bourgeois, "classic realist"

theater. [2] Drama can aim at turning the spectator in the theater into a passive consumer of an 'authentic representation' of reality, or it can deprive the receiver of the expected, comfortable identity positions, in order for the theater-goers to obtain a metaperspective on their positionality in the cultural imagery. [3] It follows that the actual theater or drama model of a cultural period is always in close relation with the *world model* of the era, since the representational awareness, the 'high semioticity' of the theatrical space operates as a laboratory to test the most intriguing epistemological dilemmas of the specific culture. [4]

2 The postsemiotics of the subject

The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate on the example of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9* the way dramatic literature can address central problems of contemporary culture and cultural identity with metadramatic techniques. I will rely on the critical apparatus of the postsemiotics of the subject.

Ever since the 'linguistic turn' and the fusion of psychoanalytical and semiotic approaches, the central realization of poststructuralist critical thinking has been that a theory of identity and subjectivity must be based on an understanding of the constitution of the speaking subject. [5] Developments in critical theory since the 1970s have shared the common objective to theorize the subject, working to establish a complex account of the material *and* psychological constitution of the human speaking subject as positioned in a socio-historical context. Mov-

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2. I employ here Catherine Belsey's term, which she primarily applies to the narratives that disseminate the ideologically conceived representability of reality, a basic tenet of bourgeois ideology. As opposed to this, the interrogative text deprives the receiver of safe identity positions. I maintain that the typology also holds for the history of the theater, and one marker in this typology is the agency of the metaperspective. See *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1990).

3. I think it possible to work out a typology of theaters on the basis of the representational techniques in the theater that either create a comfortable identity position for the spectator, or try to unsettle this subject position, bringing the identity of the spectator-subject into crisis. Employing Kristeva's typology of signifying practices, I will call the first type *pheno-theater*, and the second type *geno-theater*. Cf. Julia Kristeva, "Genotext and phenotext," in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), I.12, pp. 86–89.

4. Epistemology being in the closest relationship with the question of the representability of reality.

5. Cf. Julia Kristeva, "The system and the speaking subject," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 24–31.

ing beyond the Cartesian and phenomenological limitations of structuralist semiotics, the *postsemiotics of the subject* aims at *decentering* the concept of the unified, self-sufficient subject of liberal humanism, the Cartesian ego of Western metaphysics. It should be noted here that it is this concept of the unified, homogeneous subject which served as a basis for the 'project of modernism' and its belief in universal, institutionalized neutral knowledge and truth, which, in turn, resulted in the *intellectual imperialism of colonialism*, a central theme in *Cloud 9*.

The postsemiotic critique of Western metaphysics investigates the social-historical *macrodynamics*, and the psychoanalytically informed *microdynamics* of the constitution of the subject. Socio-historical theories of the subject map out the technologies of power which establish an economy of power in society, operating with a specific *cultural imagery* that circulates identity patterns for the subjects to internalize. Psychoanalytical approaches conceive of the subject not as a homogeneous and abstract entity, but rather as one element among the unstable productions of a heterogeneous signifying *process*. This subject-in-process is a heterogeneous structure in conscious and unconscious modalities simultaneously informing and determining the process of signification. Since subjectivity is the reflection upon the experience of being separate from the exteriority of the Real, the constitutive element of this subjectivity is the signifier that works as the mirror, the medium for this reflexivity. The signifier enters the subject's psychosomatic structure as a stand-in between the subject and the lost objects of primary demand, articulating that desire for the lost real, the Mother, the Other which will serve as the battery, the propelling force of signification. The experience of losses is stored in the unconscious through primary and secondary repression, and the signifier emerges in the site of the Other as the only guarantee for its re-capturing. That inaccessible Other, in relation to which the subject is always defined, will be the energy supplier of our unconscious modality, that lack and absence which our consciousness will never be able to account for. This is he dark, mysterious and never-subdued *colony* of our subjectivity.

3 The colonial Other

The above concepts of the postsemiotics of the subject can be related to the semiotic typology of cultures and cultural identities. In terms of the constitution of the subject, the history of Western civilization moves from the Medieval world model of high semioticity through the Enlightenment paradigm of modernism,

rationalism and reduced semioticity, up to our current age of postmodernism, which, in many aspects, corresponds chronologically to the beginning of *post-colonialism*. I argue that the theoretical questions revolving around the post-modern subject are greatly parallel with the issue of the *postcolonial subject*: a subject which can no longer define itself in opposition to the separated, abjected Other, that is, the colony.

I would like to repeat the metaphor I introduced earlier: the unconscious is the mysterious, uncanny colony of our psychic apparatus. How can we translate this psychoanalytical formula into the semiotics of postcolonialism and postmodernism, the subject of which finds itself without that Other which has always served as a comfortable basis in opposition to which the Western identity could be secured?

If we interpret culture as a semiotic mechanism which defines itself in opposition to non-culture, that is, the non-signified, the non-signifiable or that which mustn't be signified, we find that the logic of the Symbolic Order always separates out a territory that is coded by taboos and is considered to be untouchable, un-penetrable: *abject*. The abject is the radically other, the opposite of that symboliza-tion within the structural borders of which the subject can predicate a seemingly solid and homogeneous, fixated identity for itself. [6] Yet, it is the abject which has a lot to do with the unconscious modality of the subject and of signification, and it is this unconscious disposition which contains the motilities, fluctuations and drives which provide the psychosomatic energy for the desire to signify. The subject sepa-rates itself from the abject, but at the same time secretly, unconsciously feeds on it. Structuralist anthropology showed a long time ago how the abject, let it be sacred or despised, serves to mark out the borders of culture. In a political sense, this becomes most visible in totalitarian systems, such as fascism or communism, which are strongly grounded in defining themselves as the opposite of the abject Other (be it the homosexual, the gipsy, the Jew or the capitalist).

As the postmodern subject finds itself to be a heterogeneous system without a core around which it could center itself, it perhaps learns to respect Otherness, since the subject itself is other, non-identical to itself, and cannot define an iden-tity expect in interpersonal and intercultural, historically specific social interac-

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6. For the concept of the abject I rely on Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). For an interpretation of the abject as a representational technique see Attila Kiss, *The Semiotics of Revenge: Subjectivity and Ab-jection in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Szeged: JATE English Department, 1995).

tions. Similarly, postcolonial society needs to redefine itself, without relying on the abjected colony, against which the Empire engaged in brave missionary work to expand the borders of the one and only unified homogeneous Western culture. But this is not as easy as it seems. What happens to a society if it loses its unconscious, its 'uncanny colony'? What will be the borders within which it can mark out its identity? The answer is difficult to find, especially if we consider that postcolonialism in no way means the end of colonizing practices. The ideological colonization of minds through the massive binarisms and the commercialism of mass media, or the capitalist colonization of new international markets indicate that this logic of exclusion is still constitutive of current politics.

4 Colonized subjectivities

I would now like to turn to a literary example from my experience in teaching Post-War British and American drama at the university. The example is Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*, which equally brings up questions of subjectivity, postcolonialism and postmodernism.

On the surface, the first part of *Cloud 9* is an almost didactic representation of the way identity is constituted according to the logic of the colonial mission. The Victorian family lives in the African colony according to the rules of cultural binarisms, and these rules define the native African as the abjected Other, the supplement of the big white Father, in opposition to which the privileged pole of the binarism, the white colonizer receives its heroic and 'civilized' quality. "I am father to the natives here," says Clive (2),[7] the Victorian patriarch, who brings the Union Jack into the jungle to save the aboriginals from the darkness of heathen ignorance. However, as Churchill herself says in the introduction, it is not only the imperial politics of exclusion that we find working here. Besides the socio-political aspects of the macrodymanics of the colonizing/colonial subject, a perhaps even more important sexual politics is also at work. This articulates the colonial establishment as a patriarchal system in which the phallic position is wielded by the male, a representative of virile health, honesty, and intellect. This cultural image of the male finds its grounds of definition, its abjected Other in the figure of woman, representative of disease, lust, corruption, and threat.

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7. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Caryl Churchill, *Cloud 9* (revised American edition, New York: Routledge, 1988).

Churchill is careful to interrelate the concept of the colony and the concept of the feminine through a systematic imagery of darkness, fluidity, and mystery. The natives, the colony are to white culture as woman is to man. It follows that, on the level of the microdynamics of the subject, the cultural imagery of the modernist, colonial mission invites the subject to define itself through the suppression, the colonization of the feminine, the heterogeneous Other. "You are dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous," says Clive to Mrs. Saunders (23). "Women can be treacherous and evil," he says to Betty, his wife. "They are darker and more dangerous than men. The family protects us from that . . . we must resist this dark female lust, Betty, or it will swallow us up" (45). The family protects the subject from the female just like the Empire protects the nation from the colony. Even better, the white nation sets out to eat up, to contain the dark territory in order to prevent any dangerous attack.

I think, however, that the real point of the first part is on an even more subtle, linguistic level. *Cloud 9* shows how the identity patterns in this cultural paradigm are enforced and circulated in discursive practices, in linguistic norms and clichés that we unconsciously internalize. The entire language of Act I is patriarchal, male dominated. "Come gather, *sons* of England . . . . The Forge of war shall weld the chains of *brotherhood secure*" (3, 5, my emphasis), goes the song at the very beginning of Act I, setting up the discursive *technology of gender* which aims at desexualizing the human being and engendering it as a male subject. All the cultural values are defined in terms of the male as well (Betty to Edward): "You must never let the boys at school know you like dolls. Never, never. No one will talk to you, you won't be on the cricket team, you won't grow up to be a man like your papa" (40).

Only homosexuality is considered a perversion greater than being girlish. "I feel contaminated . . . A disease more dangerous than diphtheria" (52), says Clive to Harry, enveloping the unnamable, the unutterable in an imagery of sickness and deviation from the norm, the 'original,' supposedly healthy state of being. We find a similar occurrence when Betty is asked by Clive to give an account of the vulgar joke Joshua played upon her. She is unable to verbalize the event, because she just cannot violate the linguistic norms she is subject to. The words Joshua used should not form part of her vocabulary. In the world of the drama, just like in the cultural establishment of modernism, sexuality is something to be taken care of; it is the most important topic for the constant self-hermeneutics

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we need to exercise in the regime that Foucault called our Western 'society of confession.' [8]

Identities are constituted here in an environment of incessant surveillance and self-surveillance, and this is especially manifest in the puppet show atmosphere of the first scene which can be felt if we stage the lines of the drama in our imagination. Clive, the patriarch presents the characters of the drama as if he was the director and the presenter of a theatrical performance. The *metatheatrical framework* of the play even more strongly focuses our attention on the question of subjectivity as cultural, ideological product. Betty and Edward are played by a person of the opposite sex: the submissive wife is played by a man, the doll-minding son is played by a woman. [9] The self-reflexivity of the drama is perhaps even more powerful in the cross-racial structure than in the cross-gendering: the black servant Joshua is played by a white man. [10] These metadramatic markers become really obvious to the spectators in the theater, who will see that these characters are totally blind to their identity, since they do not see, they have no metaperspective from which they could see that ideology has already turned them into the thing they would so much like to be. This inversion breaks the mimetic illusion on the stage, the spectator clearly becomes aware that the theatrical representation does not simply want to be the replica of an absent reality, and the concentration on the theme of identity is created and maintained right

8. Cf. Jane Thomas, "The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Essays in Refusal," in *The Death of the Playwright? Modern British Drama and Literary Theory*, ed. Adrian Page (London: Macmillan, 1992), 160–185. "Seen from a Foucauldian point of view, Act I becomes a series of confessions couched in both monologic and duologic form which interweave to form the network of power relations which constitute Victorian colonial society" (p. 172).

9. Cf. Frances Gray, "Mirrors of Utopia: Caryl Churchill and Joint Stock," in *British and Irish Drama since 1960*, ed. James Acheson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 47–59. "Churchill refuses to permit the 'male gaze' which renders man the subject and woman the (sexual) object. Betty is played by a man. He makes no attempt to disguise his maleness, nor does he make any parodic gestures of femininity; rather he incarnates the idea that 'Betty' does not exist in her own right. She is a male construct defined by male need" (p. 53).

10. Cf. Joseph Marohl, "De-realized Women: Performance and Identity in Churchill's *Top Girls*," in *Contemporary British Drama, 1970–90*, ed. Hersh Zeifman & Cynthia Zimmerman (London: Macmillan, 1993), 307–322. "Multiple casting and transvestite role-playing . . . reflect the many possibilities inherent in the real world and conventional ideas about the individuality or integrity of character. The theatrical inventiveness of Churchill's comedies suggests, in particular, that the individual self, as the audience recognizes it, is an ideological construct" (p. 308).

from the beginning. The drama becomes a representation of how subjects subject themselves to the roles of the dominant cultural imagery. From a theoretical point of view, Churchill's play thus functions as *geno-theater*, which dislocates the spectator from the conventional identity-position in order to gain greater metaperspective on his or her ideological positionality. [11]

This metadramatic perspective is present throughout the entire drama. In the second part it is only Cathy who is played by a man, but the mimetic illusion is again broken by lines such as those of Lin to Cathy when the girl tries on her beads: "It is the necklace from Act I" (72). Later on the Edward from Act I comes in (99). The defamiliarizing effects encourage the spectator to approach the world of the play from a metaperspective. This self-reflexivity, which is encoded in the dramatic text, might not challenge the reader so much. When reading the play, we continuously need to make an effort to create the *representational logic* and the semiotic space of a potential staging, since the available textual information is not sufficient to build up a possible world. It is only the staging that fills in the gaps of indeterminacies and information shortage, of which drama has much more than narrative fiction. [12]

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Early, predominantly feminist readings of the play celebrated *Cloud 9* as an allegory of (female) sexual liberation. Act II takes place in the postmodern English society of the late 1970s, but the characters are only 25 years older. This cultural establishment seemingly does away with the taboos and codes of suppressed sexuality, and it may appear that the play becomes a celebration of the freedom of the postcolonial, postmodern subject.

This is, however, only the appearance. Homosexuality and bisexuality become accepted or tolerated practices in the London of the 1980s, but only on the

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11. In the concept of the *geno-theater* I bring together Kristeva's typology of genotext and phenotext and Belsey's typology of the interrogative and the classic realist text. The self-reflexive geno-theater interrogates the receiver through the problematization or deconstruction of presence, and through the foregrounding of the nature of representation by metatheatrical perspectives. Cf. note 3.

12. For a summary of the idea of theatrical metaperspective see Marie Lovrod, "The Rise of Metadrama and the Fall of the Omniscient Observer," *Modern Drama* 37.3 (1994) 497–508. For the performance-oriented interpretation of dramatic texts see: Alan Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

surface.[13] Homosexuals are still afraid of losing their jobs, bisexuals practice their sexuality as a political program, and masturbation towards the end of the play appears in Betty's monologue as the only authentic strategy of self-discovery and of becoming a 'separate person.' However, these practices, under the cover of liberalism, are still enveloped in a general discursive technology of power, which disseminates the idea of sexuality as the central issue of our subjectivity, and through this they tie subjectivity to culturally articulated patterns of sexuality. The metaphysical binarisms seem to disappear, polymorphous sexualities and identity types replace the antagonism of the white culture and the colonial supplement of Act I. At the same time, these new identities are more instable than authentic, more fragmented than self-defined. The image of the Colony, the abjected Other is no longer present in opposition to which they could define themselves, but without this they become desubstantiated, hollow. These characters think they are freer than they were in Act One, but a more subtle cultural imagery infiltrates them even more completely than before. "Paint a car crash and blood everywhere," says Lin to Cathy. Images of violence, immobility, mental stagnation dominate the consumerist world of Act II. The play does not grant us a happy vision of the 'postcolonial subject': the two Cathies embrace at the end of the drama, turning into a *metadramatic allegory of the subject* which is no longer a mere supplement, but will never become self-identical either in the network of cultural images of identity. Nevertheless, the subversive and critical capacity of the drama comes to light through a postsemiotic approach when we disclose how the self-reflexivity of the play explicates the representational technologies of ideology and their operation in the constitution of the subject.

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13. "Churchill's stage practice strongly resists the reading 'one woman triumphs,' and she rejected alterations in the first American production which put Betty's monologue at the end precisely because it encouraged this" (Gray, p. 52).