

JULIE TAYMOR'S *TITUS* (1999): FRAMING VIOLENCE AND ACTIVATING RESPONSIBILITY

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This essay argues that Julie Taymor's film *Titus* (1999) offers a successful deconstruction of the violence in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), thus continuing the debate on the film's explicit violence. The essay begins by analyzing the added scenes that correspond to the visions and flashbacks of the protagonists, arguing that Taymor does not deconstruct violence by subverting its values and then pointing out alternative discourses or new patterns of interaction, but by reproducing it as a symptom of a larger, cultural reality. However, she also wants to actively implicate the audience in imagining alternative paths of conflict-resolution to the violence portrayed, and she does so by introducing the figure of the witness, with which the audience must identify. The witness characterizes itself by being able to empathize with difference, and this quality is visually represented by his androgynous look, as well as by his non-hierarchical mode of relating. Strategically, the witness's experiences are shown in a fragmented manner, thus, if the audience wants to provide closure, it must recreate the hidden story from these unconnected elements of repair. Finally, this exercise on the part of the audience acquires the same character of solitary responsibility as that of the witness with which it identifies.

Key words: identity, testimony, violence, media, intertextuality

We may begin this essay with a question: is Julie Taymor's film *Titus* (1999) a stylistic exercise which aims at deconstructing violence? David McCandless claims, for instance, that her off-Broadway stage production of *Titus Andronicus* (1994) was more successful in achieving a deconstruction of the violence in Shakespeare's text than the subsequent film: "the film, by contrast, uses violence as much as it interrogates it and grants the audience a significantly greater degree of control over contemporary anxieties" (2002: 490). He further states that "exceeding their function as post-traumatic visions, the three penny-arcade nightmares such as Lavinia's become merely extravagant exhibitions" (2002: 502). Taymor's off-Broadway production, indeed, used the device of a theatre-within-a-theatre to create a space where "strange, abstract tableaux depicted violated and transmogrified bodies ... de-familiarizing the use of violence as entertainment" (2002: 493). This article affirms, on the contrary, that Taymor both questions and deconstructs the discourses of our contemporary society which legitimate, or contribute to perpetuate, violence, and she does so through cinematic means. Indeed, Taymor portrays violence first naturalistically and then in a stylized

manner, deliberately eliciting a “masochistic gaze” from the audience that identifies with the bodies maimed by violence, with the “form-altering physical trauma” of the protagonists (McCandless 2002: 488, 494). She does so particularly in a series of scenes which are not in Shakespeare’s text, where she undercuts realism by means of flashbacks and visions of the experiences of violence the protagonists undergo. In these flashbacks, violence is portrayed in an hyperbolic, stylized manner, sometimes by making use of kitsch aesthetics, other times, as McCandless points out, by “overdressing and embellishing them” (2002: 490), and still other times by making use of the grotesque. In all instances, though, violence is de-familiarized and the audience’s expectations are subverted as scenes of deep trauma are turned into what seems to be an apology of violence. As Elsie Walker has expressed in an article that comments on the film’s naturalistic and stylized use of violence, “Titus prompts a more complicated response [than the one some critics have attributed to it], hovering between detachment and engagement” (2002: 197).

At moments such as these, where violence seems most out of control, Taymor freezes the frames, renders them in slow motion, and creates a tableau where violence is recognizable as a cultural phenomenon. These scenes point at cultural discourses and spaces, such as video games, media and cinematographic icons. The violence on screen is then like a tableau which remits, like a symptom, to a cultural space where violence is justified, legitimated, and even dealt with apologetically. *Titus* is, in this sense, a postmodern exercise, yielding, as Frederic Jameson puts it, “social information primarily as symptom ... it tells of contradictions as such, which constitute the deepest form of social reality” (1991: 151) standing in for the referent, as he deems it, for a long time to come. On the whole, Taymor creates spaces for self-reflexivity and uncanny recognition, interstices of thought whereby the audience may question the kind of ideology and gaze it is participating in. And indeed, in Eileen Blumenthal’s *Playing with Fire*, Taymor argues that “stylizing an act of violence distances the audience from the event and thus potentially enables them to receive it on many different levels” (1999: 184).

At the same time, though, and taking Jane Howell’s BBC production of *Titus Andronicus* (1985) as an intertext, Taymor develops the figure of the witness, a young child and an external instance to the violence of events.¹ In Taymor’s production, this figure, who is not informed by the same ideological regime as the rest of the characters in the story, performs acts of restoration and repair of physical and psychological damage. This figure challenges the audience to imagine alternative ways of conflict-resolution to the ones presented, thus breaking the cycle of violence to which the characters seem inevitably subject. However, since the boy’s story remains hidden, and we cannot know his version of events, what he has seen and, ultimately, what has led

¹ It is worth mentioning that, in Howell’s production, the witness is not only present but emphasized through the huge glasses he uses, foregrounding not action but observation. Furthermore, Osheen Jones, the young actor who embodies the witness in Taymor’s film, played a similar role in Adrian Noble’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1996), as he watches the events unfold from his bedroom. By using in *Titus* the same actor as Noble did in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Taymor establishes an intertextual relationship between the two films, presenting the witness not as a singular, concrete individual, but as a dramatic entity that is universalized.

him to act as he does, the audience must recreate the witness's view of things, the kind of processes he has engaged with through empathy, if it wants to understand his acts of restoration.

The film links the witness with Lavinia, suggesting that both, because of their marginal position as woman and as witness, initiate a different process of dealing with the other. Instead of engaging in a hierarchical relationship with difference, excluding it and dominating it in order to build and reinforce one's identity around notions of privilege, both Lavinia and the witness blend with each other. In order to supply her loss after having been raped and having had her hands mutilated by Tamora's sons, Taymor portrays Lavinia as initiating a different process of subjectification, as she blends as much with objects as with animals. Also, encouraged by the need to find solutions and alternative ways of relating, the witness's subjectivity becomes a site where binary oppositions dissolve, as his androgynous look reveals, initiating a process of including alterity. The film ends with an act of restoration that the witness carries out as he decides to spare the life of Aaron's mulatto child, yet at the same time, it avoids displaying or setting as an example any specific, explicit solutions to violence. In the absence of any neat, coherent closure, it is the spectators who must carry out the final deconstructive process, fill in the blank spaces that the witness does not make explicit, as they instinctively seek to give the movie a closure by explaining the witness's reaction, and thus they set in motion alternative strategies of relating, in a utopian, creative move.

Inside and outside the events

The essay analyzes two critical added scenes where violence is both exhibited and then framed, or called attention upon: the first one has to do with Lavinia's remembrance of the rape and mutilation Chiron and Demetrius perform on her. The scene reminds us to Hollywood cinema and media discourses, since she appears as a glamorized victim; as a Marilyn Monroe that fearfully and passively accepts the siege to which she is submitted by the exacerbated masculinity of Tamora's sons. The second one is Titus's dinner of apparent reconciliation, which ends in a series of grotesque killings, and where violence is again de-familiarized. The scene uses the same *mise-en-scène* techniques as a video game. Particularly the slow motion screening that emphasizes the violence of the event and the glamour of the hero, in this case Lucius's, as he fires a gun at Saturninus. Both scenes are inscribed in a logic of violence as a phenomenon that is consumed, both in the private sphere and in the public sphere. They are subjective, traumatic visions, which appear from the very beginning as ideologically distorted and mediated. Lavinia has incorporated in her own subjectivity the images of womanhood and of the beauty myth that are expected from her in a post-capitalist society. In the same vein, Lucius, as well as the guests who uncritically applaud the spectacle they have attended, has ingrained the cultural expectations which associate masculinity with violence. The two scenes reflect an ethical positioning that Walker describes as being "as much about violence as about how we experience violence as entertainment. In a world where the media and movies present a desensitized view of violence, Taymor wishes to reinstall a sense of shock at violence" (2002: 197).

In the first added scene Lavinia recreates the rape and mutilation Chiron and Demetrius carry out against her, encouraged by their mother Tamora, in order to enact revenge on Titus through her daughter's body. Both in the film and in the play, Marcus, Titus's brother, gives Lavinia a stick so that she may write her attackers' names on the sand. While writing those names, in the film we are given access to her remembrance of the rape through an added scene. Lavinia appears as a frail teenager icon on a pedestal, or as Marilyn Monroe, producing an intertextual link with *The Seven Year Itch* (1955). Chiron and Demetrius become two enraged tigers and Lavinia is metamorphosed into a doe, with a doe head and doe arms, shying away from the tigers' pure impulsivity as she pulls her skirt down. The fact that Lavinia may be entertaining such a surreal vision of herself as her own, as the most faithful representation of herself highlights her own precariousness as a subject. Taymor supplants Lavinia's subjective voice and vision by its media and cinematic representations in order to point to some women's precarious positions and invisibility; their being spoken for by media discourses, or their having their subjectivity distorted by the ways in which they are represented. Lavinia's vision is, in this sense, an "extravagant exhibition" (McCandless 2002: 502), but one which aims at denouncing the extravagance of discourses on gender which we take as natural. Like a symptom, the flashback mirrors society's extravagance.

Shakespeare's text describes Rome as a "wilderness of tigers" (III, I, 55), referring to the quest for political power and the rivalry that exists amongst the men, and Lavinia is often described as a doe, following the Petrarchan myth of female chastity and unattainability. These gendered images from Shakespeare's text, when played out today, evoke contemporary discourses on femininity which, even if not based on the need for women to be chaste and unattainable, are equally damaging for the female. Taymor claims that she wanted "the effect of wind blowing up [Lavinia's] petticoat, causing her to use her doe arms to keep the skirts down. The famous image of Marilyn Monroe holding her dress down over the subway grate seemed an apt modern iconic parallel to add to this scene of humiliation and rape. I was interested in exploiting our store of not only classical, but also contemporary myths" (Blumenthal 1999: 188).

What Taymor may be suggesting, therefore, is that contemporary myths still perpetuate rigid distinctions between masculinity and femininity. The flashback dramatises both male and female social process of identity construction as distortion. Males are *authentic*, aggressive, and to unleash their libido to assert themselves on the other. Paradoxically, in being encouraged to become more faithful to their *inner impulses*, they experience a mutation into *something other*, - just as Tamora's sons become wild animals in Lavinia's flashback scene - since these impulses push them to the limits of their own resemblance and identity. Lavinia's shy, vulnerable, fragile behaviour suggests that a whole series of discourses such as the beauty myth still define femaleness as a goal, as something inauthentic yet which must be achieved. For a woman to be desirable, she must become, through dieting, make-up, and an acute self-consciousness, what she is not, an inauthentic form of herself. In the words of Naomi Wolf "women must aspire at personifying beauty and men must aspire to possess women who may personify it (1991: 15).² Indeed, at a time when women are beginning

² This translation of Naomi Wolf's *El Mito de la Belleza*, is mine, and so are the translations of Lipovetski (2000) and Baudrillard (1993).

to have access to power spheres, they are at the same time made aware of their bodies and of themselves as women, and are being redirected, on the whole, towards practicing narcissistic and individualistic values, which are designed to keep them self-centered, rather than politically or globally oriented. In Lipovetski's own words, "the fetishism of female beauty functions like a vector of docile work force, without solidarity, not very vindictive, in a moment when women begin to have access to power spheres" (2000: 139). Lipovetski goes on to argue that the contemporary beauty myth that Marilyn Monroe epitomizes is directly linked to the "manoeuvres of disciplinary programming of bodies" (2000: 134). The images of women distributed by the media accentuate "fear to signs of old age, engender an inferiority complex, shame of oneself, hate for one's own body" (2000: 128). Thus, women can succeed in the terrain of narcissism, achieving great self-vigilance and self-control, but are kept away from specific economic and political spheres.

This is what the repressed Lavinia suggests when she shamefully pushes her petticoat down with the doe arms. Yet at the same time, if we look closely at the image, we see Lavinia's lips are still swollen from the tongue cutting, which directly subverts the Monroe myth turning it into a grotesque body. Monroe, commodified and codified into her own image, betrays the simulacrum by showing signs of male violence, which is seen as a direct consequence of these female-objectifying discourses. Taymor unveils the signs of violence that the simulacrum attempts to mask, that is, the violence that discourses such as the beauty myth effect against women's subjectivities. Jean Baudrillard argues that the simulacrum operates by "supplanting the real by the signs of the real (1993: 11) ..., masking the absence of any deep reality" (1993: 18). Indeed, simulacra create an irreconcilable scission between what is and what is being represented, or a fact and its representation, showing the extent to which the identity of the affected character has been eroded not so much by the physical violence performed on her, but by the violence of the discourses on gender which contribute to portraying women as passive and objectified, and encourage a dominating, aggressive male behaviour. Thus, by evoking an image from the realm of cinema and propaganda instead of a traumatic vision, Taymor denounces not the specific perpetrators' violence but the unnoticed violence of the discourses that construct a disposable femaleness and an aggressive masculinity.

The simulacrum, indeed, contributes to perpetuate a scopophilic way of looking, as Laura Mulvey calls it. Scopophilia is a cinematic strategy, used particularly by mainstream Hollywood cinema, in its overt manipulation of visual pleasure, which elicits from the specifically male audience a controlling and curious gaze, associated with taking other people as objects. Mulvey explains the two most common types of visual pleasures in cinema, which correspond to the male and female types of identification. One has to do with the empowered look, the other with the narcissistic, passive identification with the image that is seen: "the first one arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen ... through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like" (1989: 18). On a general level, the image of Lavinia would provoke a scopophilic gaze on the part of the male audience, derived from the fact that Lavinia is constructed as a female sexual icon. However, Taymor seems to progressively

undercut this type of gaze as the image displays itself on a more detailed level. Indeed, we observe that the unconscious male fantasies of control and domination implicit in the scopophilic gaze are made explicit through Lavinia's swollen lips (a result of male violence and control) and in the form of doe arms (the Petrarchan sign of vulnerability and unattainability). Thus, male fantasies of objectification of the female become uncannily explicit before the male audience. Men's unconscious is played out as real, made literal, and subverted by this literalizing. The scene turns a potentially pleasurable look on the part of the male audience "to passionate detachment, highlighting the way in which film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms" (Mulvey 1989: 26).

The second traumatic, added scene is initiated by Titus himself as he prepares a dinner in order to enact revenge on Tamora and Saturninus. After Titus has killed her sons, he bakes a pie with their meat and he holds a "reconciliation" dinner in which Tamora must "devour" her own sons. Subsequently, a series of grotesque killings begin to take place which, by their grotesqueness, undermine Titus's dedication to revenge as a justified cause. After sacrificing Lavinia, Titus stabs Tamora in the neck. Then Saturninus jumps on Titus, hastily grabs a candelabrum, bites the burning candle out of the holder and plunges the candle spike into Titus's abdomen. Ironically, it culminates with Lucius – the "good man," and with whom the audience most readily identifies – shooting the emperor in the head, terminating violence through an imposition of violence. So, at the moment when the audience runs the risk of actually being desensitised because of the grotesqueness of the scene – the grotesque serves to detach the audience from the suffering involved in an act of violence; when suffering is not emphasised as real, the audience experiences the movie as being less violent (Prince 2000: 23) – and when we are set in the position of voyeurs, Taymor suddenly paralyses the scene and turns it, with an accelerated background rock music, into a scene which no longer seems to belong to the terrain of cinema, but to that of video games, as Lucius's T-bird gun points aggressively at Saturninus.

Through the use of slow motion and the framing of the scene into a video game tableau, the spectator perceives he/she has been engaging in a celebration of violence, and we can easily perceive the film has become something else – a video game. In this dislocation, or collapsing of the film narrative and the imposition of violence as spectacle, Taymor manifests her critique of the titillation of violence as it is repeatedly evoked in videogames: as a sign of self-control, glamour and status.

Indeed, after this critical moment, the scene zooms out to reveal that the *banquet* has been taking place in the Colosseum, in Pula, Croatia, a site that epitomises the use of violence as spectacle. As Lucian Ghita states, "the seats are occupied by spectators of different nationalities, ages and races, looking silently ... they watch with their own eyes, 'they are we'" (2004: 19). As the German director Wim Wenders pointed out, violence appears in many contexts "where you cannot reflect on it any more, where you cannot experience it any other way than consuming" (quoted in Prince 2000: 33). And indeed, as McCandless puts it, even the guests at the table are portrayed as passive consumers, "soulless figures exhibiting an automaton, culturally conditioned, vacant aesthetic appreciation for violent spectacle" (2002: 496). These spectators approve of Titus's killing of Lavinia unquestioningly, as they toast to it in a synchronized way. Our presence is replicated, echoed by the Colosseum's audience from all nationalities, and

also by the guests who toast to the crimes. Thus Taymor leads her audience to occupy a position of passive consumers of violence and, right at this moment, she produces a video game tableau and leaves it critically before our eyes in order to undermine and call attention to, precisely, what she has been portraying. Thus, she puts us in a situation of voyeurs - which Wenders argued has become widespread in our contemporary society - but she asks us to reflect on our passivity and numbness, eliciting a questioning gaze from the audience.

This situates Taymor's movie at a great distance from what Stephen Prince calls, in his book *Screening Violence*, the "social disconnect of many contemporary filmmakers" (2000: 33), who use violence as an easy way to reach the viewer emotionally and to solve narrative issues. The device of slow motion to frame violence began to be used during the 1960s, particularly by filmmakers such as Arthur Penn and Sam Peckinpah, who initiated stylized portrayals of violence, as in *The Wild Bunch* (1969) or *Straw Dogs* (1971). This became one of the dominant aesthetic forms of ultraviolence, or the stylized presence of violence on screen. While, in Prince's words, this particularized and stylized showing of violence served to legitimize "the in-your-face bloodletting" that made the movies so notorious, he adds that Penn and Peckinpah were "both radical social critics ... who wished to deglamorize movie violence in order to show how ugly and awful real violence was" (2000: 13). Showing violence on screen is, therefore, an ambivalent act, since violence must first be framed, and thus, partly legitimized, in order to be subsequently questioned and deconstructed. Following Walker's reflections, what Taymor wants to convey by mixing modes of representation is that "no single approach [to violence and rape] is adequate: illusionist, 'naturalistic' cinema is deceptive, suggesting that such a devastating 'reality' can be 'captured' on film; 'theatrical' stylization which works on stage may distance a film audience simply because it is so unusual in cinema" (2002: 198).

Hearing with our eyes

What the three slow-motion scenes suggest is that public violence is intimately connected with private, or gender violence, since both are produced by notions of privilege, and rejection of class, gender or racial difference. Media and cinema discourses reinforce patterns of masculinity and femininity which, as we have seen, correspond to those of a disciplinary society that aims at controlling bodies and inscribing very specific meanings on them, which serve to perpetuate, precisely, established hierarchical relations. Guy Debord argues that "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (1983: 4). And he continues, referring precisely to its power to create docile bodies, passive consumers, that "spectacle is the guardian of sleep" of modern society (1983: 21). Indeed, media and cinema discourses seek to reach society at large, because they are, so to speak, a mass spectacle. However, video games are directed to more particularized targets, namely, each specific and isolated individual. And indeed, Taymor portrays Chiron and Demetrius at the court's leisure room not as interconnected but interrelating separately with a different video game screen, achieving, each of them, a separate state of excitement. Virginia Vaughan argues that, wearing "the punkish garb,

they are identified with England's and America's contemporary youth culture" (2003: 73). Media discourses, in being directed to the masses, is more homogenizing yet less specific; however, video games are a private spectacle through which violence, instead of homogenizing a social group, is interiorized by each individual. It is easier, therefore, that this continuous, individual exposure leads to particular acts of gender and sexual violence such as the one the two brothers carry out against Lavinia.

Through Chiron's and Demetrius' hyper-stimulated state, Taymor shows that video games produce a type of masculinity that is hyper-violent. Indeed, Tamora's sons are portrayed as surrounded by culturally mediated images of masculinity which reach them through video-games, television advertisements, and music videos, and which mix the titillation of violence with that of sex, producing a type of masculinity intimately connected with dominance, which ends up with the dispossession of Lavinia. Most of the time, they appear surrounded by brands of beer and by Coca-Cola, which suggest the dominance of capitalist icons, as well as the fact that they have learnt their codes of behaviour through media and propaganda discourses, which portray a dominant masculinity as bearing particular status and prestige. But they also appear with accompanying loud rock music, tracking down all traces of dialogue and suggesting they learn their codes of behaviour from music videos as well, a space where woman is the rock star's possession and, in her beauty, signifies only his status as opposed to that of other males. And after Lavinia's rape, indeed, Tamora's sons "flee the scene like rock stars" (Reynolds, Lehmann and Starks 2003: 226). Lehmann, Reynolds and Starks argue that "Chiron and Demetrius are clearly presented as boys whose digital mastery of virtual beings is inseparable from their desire to decimate, even as they inseminate, real bodies. Indeed, the culture of video games, as Haraway observes, is a potent incubator for the production of 'high-tech, gendered-imaginings ... imaginings that can contemplate destruction of the planet and a sci-fi escape from its consequences'" (2003: 225).

The figure of the witness, which was already present in the BBC version of *Titus Andronicus* of 1985, and which Taymor chose to keep, is the alternative, albeit silenced, version of the events, as well as an alternative mode of constructing identity and social relations. The movie opens in a 50s-style kitchen, with a boy immersed in the cultural discourses of violence that come from T.V. He is wearing a mask that externalises his non-identity, or the absence of any contesting, empowered subjectivity that may counteract the forces of his environment. Suddenly, a clown kidnaps him and takes him to Titus's world, and his soldiers become Titus's soldiers, moving in a toy-like, synchronized manner. Taymor explains: "but it is like he conjures up the violence. It's coming from T.V. violence, the sounds of the *Three Stooges*, then it escalates into real war in 30 seconds" (2005: 1). In the Roman Colosseum the boy is raised in midair and celebrated, applauded, as a future warrior; thus, he enters Titus's society as a warrior, which is what our contemporary toys were preparing him for.

Quoting Roach, W.B. Worthen describes each adaptation as a surrogation: "an act of memory and an act of creation from that memory" (1998: 1101). Given Taymor's theatrical background, which she, furthermore, uses throughout for her *stagey* representation of violence, it is possible that she might have been familiar with Sarah Kane's text *Blasted*, which she wrote five years earlier, in 1995. Kane dramatised, by making a war erupt into a hotel in Leeds where an unequal, exploitative gender relation

was taking place, the idea that private, gender violence is intimately connected with public and larger scale violence such as that of war and war terrorism. Worthen claims that a performance or adaptation is not uniquely “a performance of a text” (1998: 1102), but it “uses a palimpsest of texts ... to perform a new iteration” (1998: 1102). And indeed, Taymor also juxtaposes apparently unconnected spheres through the device of the “Alice-in-Wonderland time warp” (Ghita 2004: 9) in order to engage us in issues of gender construction and violence. Titus’s world could represent the boy’s subconscious of war and terror, just as it has been argued that the soldier in Kane’s play may stand in for the male protagonist’s subconscious as he constructs his male identity through exclusion and domination of the other.

It is, however, through Young Lucius, the witness, that the movie develops a different approach to violence since, contrary to the rest of the characters, he manages to refract the violence around him instead of absorbing it. Stephen Prince argues that “filmmakers cannot control the reactions of their viewers;” therefore, “filmmakers who wish to use graphic violence to offer a counter-violence message, that is, to use violence in a way that undercuts its potential for arousing excitatory responses in viewers, may be working in the wrong medium” (2000: 29). Prince suggests that “a critique of violence may be best pursued on screen in its absence, that is, by not showing” (2000: 32). This comment is very much in agreement with McCandless’s statement that Taymor “uses violence as much as she interrogates it” (2002: 290). However, by not showing violence, by simply showing alternative ways of solving social conflicts, we run the risk of neglecting the extent to which violence is culturally rooted as a way of solving these conflicts, and of losing sight of the conflicts to which non-violent ways of interacting are an alternative. In this sense, Taymor gives voice to this marginal figure in order to suggest the extent to which these alternatives are relegated to the margins, and thus, to suggest the need for them to become more central. In literary and artistic manifestations of the twentieth century, the witness suggests the marginalisation to which alternative discourses or resolutions to those of violence are relegated. The degree to which witnesses are forced to be silent and marginal suggests the degree to which violence takes up space in our contemporary society, and this sense of violence being overpowering is certainly a feeling *Titus*’s audiences must leave the cinema with.

Walker argues that “we are aligned with Young Lucius in viewing events beyond our control” (2002: 202). But as he takes on a more active role, in his transformation into active participant, he “represents the possibility of restitution, faith, resilience and tenderness” (2002: 202). Indeed, the figure of the witness represents values of caring, attention to vulnerability and identification with the other, expresses our contemporary society’s contempt for alternative discourses to a dominant, aggressive masculinity, its passivity towards unequal power relations and a sanctioning of a violent, consumerist society, and the marginality, in short, to which discourses foregrounding empathy, nurturing and care for the other are relegated. The witness is a figure of empathy throughout the film, as we observe how shock and horror register on his face when Titus chops off his own hand, as well as at diverse moments of violence. Most importantly, after Lavinia has been raped we are immediately shown his reaction, in the next scene, as he looks from a window at the rainy street. His face appears framed by the window, producing an icon of empathy and sadness. And indeed, Young Lucius tries to restore Lavinia’s lack, and to comfort her by giving her, in the form of a present,

a pair of prosthetic hands. This last scene both frames the witness as a silent and contemplative figure, and shows his first act of repair.

The witness is also the figure who externalizes and makes visible the conflict between using violence or searching for alternative, non-violent discourses that Taymor wants the audience to feel and to attempt to resolve. Crucial ideas regarding the validity of violence are debated in Titus' family dinner with Lavinia, Marcus, Titus himself and Young Lucius. In this scene Young Lucius sees a fly and stabs it impulsively. When Titus sees it, (and Titus at this point has begun to lose his sanity, which further situates his discourse as marginal) he tells Young Lucius that the fly might have had a family, people who loved it: "But how if that fly has a father and a mother? How would he hang his slender gilded wings and buzz lamenting doings in the air! Poor harmless fly/ That, with his pretty buzzing melody, Came here to make us merry! and thou hast killed him" (Shakespeare III, ii, 67-70). In other words, he sets into motion a discourse of identification with difference and attention to vulnerability. Yet Young Lucius, enticed by the desire to please his father and uncle, uses culturally available discourses of revenge and racism in order to regain Titus's approval: "Alas! my Lord I have but killed a fly" (Shakespeare III, ii, 63). Thus, he argues he has killed the fly because it reminded him of Aaron, picking his differential element, his being black, as a justification: "Pardon me, sir. It was a black, ill-favoured fly, like the Empress' Moor. Therefore I killed him" (Shakespeare III, ii, 72-3). Titus, then, immediately switches sides and is trapped into a discourse that legitimizes violence. Walker argues that this scene expresses Taymor's concern with the ways in which children are initiated into an ongoing legacy of violence: "the moment is horrible because the child suddenly puts on 'the antic and monstrous disposition of the revenger'" (2002:202). Young Lucius, therefore, externalizes the conflicts Taymor wants the audience to feel. Indeed, she has claimed that she wanted the audience "both to suffer with the images of violence and at the same time to bear the dilemmas in their minds" (Blumenthal 1999: 184). It seems clear that the conflicts she dramatises are those between dividing or blending, an act of exclusion of difference, or an act of love through incorporation of the other, of difference, or the abject.

On the other hand, it is this marginal position that grants the figure of the witness a degree of power, because in operating from a position of apparent inactivity or passivity, detached from the urgency to act and intervene, and by not being directly implied in the scene, or informed by the same ideological regime, the witness works out alternative discourses. Thus, his inherent marginality grants him a platform towards social change. Indeed, not feeling compelled to act and to participate in the violence, he remains an observer who does not confront the other but, as many critics put it, can blend with the other. Thus, Taymor's witness is the space that, geared by a different regime of signs, "connects the spectator to this space of potential allegiances and metamorphoses" (Reynolds, Lehmann and Starks 2003: 230) that Lavinia, as a woman, and thus as even more marginal and excluded from the male construction of identity, also exemplifies.

Critics such as Lehmann, Reynolds and Starks have observed potential regeneration in Lavinia's representation. They argue that the film employs abjection "paradoxically, as a means of going through and beyond victimisation" (2003: 225), the victimisation it simultaneously exposes and attempts to transcend. The fact that Lavinia is portrayed as

half doe and half tree in the image immediately following her off stage rape or, later on, as she is attached to the prosthetic hands the witness gives her, suggests that Lavinia opposes the rest of the characters' need for a stable, unitary subjectivity, as she blends and hybridizes continually with difference. Vaughan affirms that Lavinia refuses to become a symbol of lack or dispossession through mutilation and rape by blending into something else. This leads Vaughan to state that Taymor uses the image of blending in order to suggest empowerment at critical and recurring moments in the film. Quoting Bakhtin, Vaughan states that the "surreal intervals that depict Lavinia as part tree ... epitomise the grotesque: 'The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects'" (2003: 73). In Lehmann, Reynolds and Starks's words, "Lavinia's body becomes a borderland in its own right" (2003: 229). The disciplinary apparatuses which operate on women's bodies, and which thrive on establishing boundaries such as animate/inanimate, life/death, animal/human, beauty/abjectness are suddenly made to dissolve, threatening to erase the conventional meanings by which we read the world and by which we build notions of purity and impurity, normalcy and abnormality, exclusion and privilege, etc.

Because the witness is not compelled to participate in the violence, he does engage in the restoring and inclusive process of blending with the other, with the abject, instead of excluding it. Just as Lavinia blends with the abject, with nature or with objects, in order to escape her condition as victim and as lacking, and to reconstruct her otherwise mutilated subjectivity, the witness is also a site where a series of binary oppositions dissolve and collapse, giving way to a different understanding of the self and of social relations. Indeed, his androgynous presence already signifies a blending of male and female qualities, and his embracing of Aaron's and Tamora's child, who is a racially blended child, suggest Taymor's desire to blur traditionally opposed categories which are claimed in order to perpetuate privilege. "Both Lavinia and the witness refuse to respect borders, positions, rules ... [disturbing] identity, system, order" (Reynolds, Lehmann and Starks 2003: 228). That's why some critics like Walker have identified the scene of contact and repair between Lavinia and Young Lucius (as he gives her a pair of prosthetic hands) as being very significant; precisely because the wooden hands are the site where opposites converge: "manufactured and human, wood and skin, still life and life, inhuman and human, the sinister and the beautiful, fragmentation and wholeness, the inflexibility of wood and the flexibility of the hands that are perfectly fitted for Lavinia" (2002: 203).

Identity, and particularly male identity, has traditionally been construed upon an understanding of the subject as stable and unitary, and as excluding difference, or that which is abject -that which the subject must detach itself from in order to form a separate identity. The abject is thus the division that underlies the subject's fragile sense of identity. Diana Fuss, in *Essentially Speaking*, argues that "to the extent that identity always contains the specter of non-identity, or otherness, within it, identity is always purchased at the price of the exclusion of the Other, the repression or repudiation of non-identity" (1989: 103). Thus, "woman is produced in social signification as the other on which the very existence of man depends, as much as other asymmetrical relations: that of exploitation, privilege and patriarchy" (1989: 70). Chiron and Demetrius exemplify this type of masculinity particularly as they enter their room with Aaron and

talk about Lavinia, describing the female as a disposable object, against which their masculinity is reinforced. Indeed, they play with a pillow simulating phallic signs as they replicate Shakespeare's lines: "she is a woman, therefore may be wooed, she is a woman, therefore may be won, she is Lavinia, therefore must be loved" (Shakespeare II, I, 85-87). A series of power inequalities is foregrounded as well as a mode of relating with the other based on exclusion and exploitation.

In contrast, the movie ends with Young Lucius approaching Aaron's interracial son, and taking it up in his arms. As he approaches the child, his once faint cries, which nobody from Lucius's new government wants to hear, become louder and louder. The cries of the child multiply into many babies crying, so that the voices of the powerless, the vulnerable, so far so easily manipulated, become increasingly audible. He takes Aaron's child from the cage in which he's been put –and which de-humanizes him as Other- and takes him away towards a digital horizon. The witness is the figure who hears and sees, as opposed to the members of Lucius's government, who will retaliate any former member of Saturninus's court. Also, after Lavinia is raped, she produces a silent wail, which is voiceless (her tongue has been cut off) but speaks visually because of the bleeding wound. As Lehmann, Reynolds and Starks put it, by expelling it directly to the camera, Taymor forces us to "*hear with our eyes*" (2003: 229). It is only Young Lucius, who feels compelled to offer Lavinia a pair of new hands, who also accepts this burden of "hearing with his eyes." Felman argues that "the burden of the witness –in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses- is a radically unique, non-interchangeable and solitary burden ... To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude" (1992: 3). And indeed, the solitude with which the boy carries the hope that is embodied in the mulatto child is a correlate of the solitude in which, culturally and historically, the witness takes responsibility for its burden. In Taymor's film, just as Felman describes it, the audience is encouraged to inspect its own responsibility in front of violence and to bear the solitude of striving for non-violent solutions.

The fact that the blank, unwritten horizon towards which the witness is heading is a digitally produced horizon seems to self-reflexively point, on the part of the director, to its nature as fantasy, as wish. In the words of Lehmann, Reynolds and Starks, it is "too ambiguous to provide neat closure" (2003: 237), that is, to produce relief in the audience. The scene, however, remains for a long time before our eyes, and is rendered in slow motion, eliciting the audience to recreate the witness's view of events, to work through possible solutions, to activate a creative move toward utopia. Taymor has pointed out her need to find solutions to the violence, not just to portray its devastation: "I had to acknowledge the positive and the hopeful in this movie" (2005: 1). She reflects on the fact that she needed to create an "openness" in order to include the possibility for change: "unless you have that openness, it won't happen" (2005: 1). However, Taymor makes it clear that she only wants to suggest this openness, not to provide closure or set forth an explicit alternative, and thus make the audience work out possible solutions. The witness, with his different values and understanding of identity, functions like a riddle that the audience must unravel in order to understand the film, to give it closure and to make it coherent, and Taymor makes the audience build towards solutions, carry out the deconstructive process while they watch the movie, and particularly in the final scene.

Taymor's film does not deconstruct violence by subverting its values and then pointing out alternative discourses or new patterns of interaction; that is, by directly proposing alternative models of conflict-resolution, but, instead, it reproduces violence as symptom of a larger cultural reality, and then she calls attention upon it by freezing the camera and framing this violence into a recognizable tableau, so that the audience may question the kind of gaze it is participating in. Yet the audience must also build the discursive connections that might explain the witness's acts of atonement, thereby engaging in a creative act that assumes the position of the witness and takes responsibility for what it has seen, thus leaving its previous role as passive consumer of this violence. This creative move of imagining alternative, holistic visions of society - the move towards utopia - implies a deconstruction of violence and demonstrates that a different conceptualisation of identity and social relations is being set to work in the audience's mind.

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