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The Male Body in Romeo Castellucci's

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concepts around the body's image have become even more central in fomenting the debates regarding society's traditions and values. More specifically, the male body has converged into its arena some of the most significant ideological disputes because of its hegemonic power. In other words, as the dominating figure of the established patriarchy, the male body is the most conspicuous vessel carrying the signs of power and dominance. Moreover, although hegemonic masculine traits have altered throughout modernity, what holds still and stronger than ever is its main carrier – the male body. Authoritarian governments and fascist regimes comprehend well this concept and have been using it recurrently since their origins.

In alignment with these debates, Romeo Castellucci, founder of Societas Raffaello Sanzio, described as one of Italy's most radical-thinking contemporary theaters, has recently embarked on an artistic journey that confronts the intricacies of masculinity and fascism. In his most recent production entitled *BROS*, twenty anonymous men - called in without previous knowledge of the play – are made protagonists, where they are given a police uniform and a device, from which they carry out strict orders. One of these men called in to be part of this production is the same one who writes this essay. Thus, sometimes I will draw from an insider's perspective and, at others, I will distance myself to favour an analytical standpoint.

The main object of analysis in this essay is the male body in Romeo Castellucci's theatrical performance of *BROS*, presented at the Dublin theater Festival in October 2022. Using the perspectives of gender studies – particularly the ones developed by R. W. Connell in his book entitled *Masculinities* - this essay aims to examine the core values embodied in *BROS*'s twenty-five actors onstage, used by Castellucci to expose how authoritarian minds deify the male body to perpetuate fascist values.

Additionally, this study provides insights into the contemporary tensions between masculinity ideals and fascist regimes, holding intrinsic values of power, domination, and nationalism. Supplementary theoretical support for this essay is pinned on the ideas of the “new fascist man”, developed by George L. Mosse in his book *The Image of Man*. Lastly, I argue that Romeo Castellucci creates *BROS* to depict how authoritarian regimes have deliberately been using the male image as their ultimate pinnacle, forging their ideals and purposefully reinforcing a dominant masculine aesthetics. Making use of these aesthetics, Castellucci, in *BROS*, casts masculinity as a prop and relies on an ancient hegemonic model, so rooted in every male body that it needs no rehearsals for the show.

THE ANALYSIS

It is of extreme importance for the analysis proposed in this project to establish the core notions that will serve as pillars of this debate. One of the central concepts concerns gender structures, and the affirmation that it is a social construction and a practice, as R.W. Connell establishes in his book *Masculinities* (Connell 2005, 71). Secondly, the assertion that there is a “firm distinction between biological sex and the cultural construct that is gender” (Connell and Wolf, 73) is also essential when analyzing the interplay between masculinity, aesthetics and authoritarianism in the show.

The cast of *BROS* is made of 25 people – 20 called in without any previous attachment to Castellucci’s theater company – and 5 other actors from the company. In the show, some of the artists involved were only amateurs, others dancers, some of them were non-actors, other acclaimed professionals, many of them were from different nationalities, others had different sexual orientations, and some were assigned a different gender at birth. But what every single person had in common and was decisive for being part of *BROS* was the fact that they all define themselves as men. Being a man, with all that it encompasses, was the casting prerequisite of the show. Moreover, not only these people need to recognize themselves as men, they needed to have the ability to perform some forms of masculinities. To say that is to distinguish the intricacies around performing gender when analyzing Castellucci’s *BROS*, and the role that the social construction of manhood plays in his production.

It is hardly a coincidence that 25 men are joined together onstage to tackle a production called ‘BROS’ – as in ‘brothers’, alluding to a collective, a brotherhood. This collective of people performing masculinity is a clear image of what R. W. Connell regards as a ‘social organization of masculinity’ (Connell 2005, 71). But the title of Connell’s book in itself already hints at the vast spectrum of nuances and traits comprised in the term. That is to say that there is not a coherent consensus around masculinity, hence the use of the plural in the title - as there isn’t only one form of it. But before depicting the spectrum of masculinities Castellucci toys within *BROS*, let us understand that ‘the concept of masculinity’ Connell explores “...is also inherently relational. Masculinity does not exist except in contrast with femininity” (Connell 2005, 68). In saying that, before trying to investigate what masculinity in *BROS* is, perhaps it is useful to discard what it is not.

For the theatrical production in question, Castellucci did not necessarily need to cast twenty men. What he needed were twenty bodies that would be able to perform a specific model of masculinity, as well as able to discard – at least for a moment – the traits of what is assumed to be unmasculine/feminine. In the early efforts to describe masculinity in his book, Connell also uses

this strategy of ruling out its opposite. He writes that:

In its modern usage, the term [masculinity] assumes that one's behaviour results from the type of person one is. That is to say, an unmasculine person would behave differently: being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth. (Connell 2005, 67)

By ruling out women from his cast, Castellucci also symbolically discards the traits and values usually associated with them, similar to the ones mentioned in Connell's excerpt above. Instead, the Italian director chooses the male body – the one that is historically trained, allowed, and expected to perform violence, domination, sportsmanship, and sexual desire – which are central themes in the show. That is the reason why Castellucci is able to make 20 unrehearsed male actors the protagonists of *BROS*; because their bodies, inexorably, bear the signs explored in the production.

The other aspect worth paying further attention to in *BROS* is the type of masculinity it makes use of and depicts. As Connell's studies will state, acknowledging different types of masculinities is not enough; it is also essential to “unpack the milieu of class and race and scrutinize the gender relations operating within them” (Connell 2005, 76). The image of 25 men dressed in American police uniforms, carrying batons and guns, hints and hits us with such strong signs. In effect, the entire aesthetic experience of *BROS* is committed to pointing out a specific type of hegemonic masculinity. It is a familiar type, one that claims to have all the power, and insistently promotes its leading position in social structures. Men performing physical torture, executing extremely violent acts against others, firing guns, drawing blood, walking in bunches bullying, and exalting the collective in the sacrifice of the individual, are all traits exemplifying this form of hegemonic masculinity. As Connell explains, “hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men [...]” (Connell 2005, 77).

Beyond the male bodies, Castellucci also creates an environment of fear and oppression, which mirrors the symbolic terrain of authoritarian governments. It is not about one place, country or era specifically, but it is the perfect visual soil in which this model of hegemonic masculinity thrives and blooms. In other words, it is important to understand that “masculinity is not an isolated object, but an aspect of a larger structure” (Connell, 2005, 67). The social structures in society, the relations of power, and the state all have a direct influence on shaping the traits related to gender. As Connell points out, “because gender is a way of structuring social practice in general, [...] it constantly interacts with nationality or position in the world order” (Connell 2005, 75). The social structure that Castellucci creates and tries to critically expose is what *The Irish Times* mentions in its review as “a structure of aggression, an anthropology of violence” (McCormack 2022), which we could suggest strongly flirts with *Italian fascism*. Therefore, we could advocate that the ‘new Italian man’ of the fascist era is the hegemonic male model employed by Castellucci in *BROS*.

***BROS* AND THE FASCIST MALE MODEL**

As stated earlier, it is not difficult to recognize that there is a specific model of masculinity being portrayed, critically exposed and glorified in *BROS*. Moreover, the whole aesthetics of the show draws attention to familiar social organizations of men in power. But the one regime that has a distinct presence and representation in Castellucci's show is Italian fascism. The exaggerated way in which the director depicts manliness and glorifies its traits and forms onstage immediately triggers an analogy to the classic fascist era. In the 20 years of Italian fascism, there was a strong call for a 'new Italian male' who could represent Italy's new ideals, with Mussolini allegedly embodying the values of such a man (Champagne 2016). As George L. Moose also puts it, "never before was masculinity elevated to such heights: the hopes placed upon it, the importance of manliness as a national symbol and as a living example played a vital role in all fascist regimes" (Moose 1996, 155).

By highlighting masculinity so strongly in his show, Castellucci terrifies the audience into questioning the ties between gender roles and authoritarianism. He purposefully triggers a dormant trauma to warn that the male body still carries the flag of fascism in its veins. This terror evoked in the show is what I believe causes so many members of the audience to leave in the middle of it. Some of *BROS*'s scenes might feel so uncomfortable to the audience because, although it draws from an "old" form of authoritarianism and violence, it is still so familiar to how so many institutions in the world still perform today. It seems to us the director himself is shooting questions, screaming, as if to say: "Is fascism gone? Don't we all carry some fascist traces in our bodies as inheritors of these regimes?"

To further elucidate this point, let us consider some backstage practices along with specific scenes of the show and the main aspects pointing to the core values of Italian fascism.



Figure 1
Photo/Carlos Darzé

In figure 1, a backstage picture of *BROS*, twenty-three of the actors are waiting to go onstage. For forty minutes, while the audience is entering the theater and one other actor is delivering a monologue, the remaining actors had to stay in complete darkness, and silence, in a tiny damp strip in the back of the theater. It was said that it was the only way to have everybody ready in one place to start the ear device that would give the commands in the same second. As one of these actors in there myself, I could witness various colleagues having to deal with claustrophobic symptoms but nobody complained because we believed we were sacrificing for the sake of something bigger, for the sake of art. After all, we had proudly made a vow, amongst all members of the show, that we would strictly follow all the commands even when we did not understand why or what to do. We were made to believe that the suffering together made the bond of the group stronger, therefore, creating a better show.



Figure 2 – Photo/Luca Del Pia

That was not the only “suffering together” the actors had to deal with in the show. Five actors in the shooting scene – firing real gunpowder as seen in Figure 2 – had their hands bleeding during the performance due to the residues from the guns. In another violent scene, an actor dislocated his shoulder and had to be removed from the production permanently. Once again, we consoled each other as one’s sacrifice was for the good of the whole group. That environment certainly brought the actors closer together, as they had no other choice but to bond. The image of figure 2 also relates to the spirit of sacrificial camaraderie that Castellucci forges in his play, making a parallel, in fact, to one of the pillar ideas inherited from wartime to the fascist men. As Mosse argues, “Wartime camaraderie was for all of fascism the paradigm of society and state. [...] a camaraderie of males, and such male bonding was considered the foundation upon which the state rested” (Mosse 1996, 158). In *BROS*, Castellucci questions his own actors inside the play: “How far can we go in the name of the collective?”



Figure 3 – Photo/Andreas Simopoulos

In figure 3, the tableau seen above was created after the actors received a command that was somewhat like ‘gather around for a sports team photo and look at the camera’. In it, we can pinpoint other important principles analogous to the fascist model - the emphasis on discipline, sportsmanship and virility, in order to fight. As Mosse highlights, “Mussolini’s new man [...] lived in a state of permanent war. The constant wearing of uniforms, the marches, the emphasis on physical exercise, on virility, were part of the battle against the enemy” (Mosse 1996, 160). The men’s “team” in the show constantly engage in scenes where they show signs of strength and glorify virility. These traits, likewise in fascism, were made assets and placed upon men to fabricate the type of hegemonic masculinity that served their purposes. This is corroborated by Counsell and Wolf’s (2001) arguments of gender as a performance when they state that “such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Counsell and Wolf 2001, 73).



Figure 4 – Photo/Luca Del Pia

Accordingly, the enactments of extreme violence performed in BROS also prompt us with this type of masculinity forged and used by Mussolini. As Moose mentions, the new man representing Italy in all its glory should possess the virility of a warrior, “they must fling themselves at life in a sober, unromantic manner. They must have the courage to become more brutal, more bestial, more barbaric” (Moose 1996, 157). The torture scene in figure 4 illustrates that well: a collective of men courageously suffocating one single man, for whatever reason, in the name of higher cause.



Figure 5 – Photo/Luca Del Pia

One last aspect of great relevance in *BROS* pointing to fascist values and its ideology – which glues together all the others previously mentioned – is the political adoration. The scene that captures this concept had a name amongst the crew of the show. It was called the “idol scene”, which can be seen bellow in figure 5.

In the scene, the unified bundle of men performs a piece of choreography in adoration for an idol, which has the image of a white man. The idol in the show does not assume a clear correspondence with any historic personality, a particular politician per se, nor with a religious god. However, this ambiguity serves Castellucci’s criticism and allusion to authoritarian regimes – in particular, fascism – just well. The idol can symbolize the values themselves, the myths created, the civic religion people were made to believe, or even all the “greater causes” worshipped by men and served to justify so many barbaric acts throughout history. Another option would be to identify this idol as Mussolini himself or the Duce – the Man of Destiny – the new Italian male model, which “people were asked to ‘Believe, Obey, Fight’ in the name of faith” (Gori 1999, 28). In either case, it is the male body’s image that Castellucci transfigures to represent these values.

CONCLUSION

The project of *BROS* created by Romeo Castellucci and presented at the Dublin Theatre Festival, as well as in other cities in the world, is not easily digested by its audience. It touches on issues that are very traumatic and sore to our society today. The Italian director creates an imagetic aura and environment for *BROS* that strongly resemble authoritarian governments and fascist regimes, especially Italian fascism. Twenty-five men are cast to represent its ideals, embodying the signs of an era that deliberately used the male figure as a symbol and model, to perpetuate its dominance and hegemonic power.

As seen in our analysis up to this point, the gender construction around the fascist male model is only a type of masculinity, one that stayed in power for a limited time. Nevertheless, as argued by Connell, other forms of masculinity have succeeded the fascist model nowadays, and those forms have constantly been changing through time (Connell 2005, 77). Therefore, the question of why Castellucci has chosen to depict an “outdated” form of masculinity in his so-called ‘avant-garde’ theater may arise.

The answer to the latter question, I believe, can be somehow illustrated by the recent anti-democratic acts from the ultra-conservative right in both Brazil and the United States. What former presidents Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, in both their countries, have been doing could be interpreted as a resurrection of the ‘fascist man’. Their figures as authoritarian male leaders and the enactments they foment – although in democratic environments - are very similar to Mussolini’s model. The claims for the invasion of the US Capitol building in 2021 and the recent attacks on Brazil’s Congress are comparable to the ones of the ‘new Italian man’. They were supposed to “save” their countries. And these are only two examples around the world. Therefore, Castellucci insists on exposing this “old-fashioned” model in his production because its representation of men is atemporal. By doing that, he links a past form of hegemonic masculinity to the present and alerts the audience to a dangerous future. Meticulously orchestrated, the stage of *BROS* serves as a runway to showcase the present “revival” of fascist manliness in society.

Lastly, despite the aesthetic beauty Romeo Castellucci manages to create onstage, the experience of *BROS* as a theatrical event is bittersweet, because it points towards problems that our society has yet to overcome. By elevating the figure of man to such heights as seen in Italian fascism, Romeo Castellucci artificially recreates an authoritarian prototype right before the audience’s eyes. The director risks employing unrehearsed anonymous men because he is positive that they all carry the essential hegemonic traits they need for the show. It works as a dangerous theatrical experiment that the Italian director dares to endeavour and manipulate in front of his audience. The outcome is an audience in shock at Castellucci's courage and ability to mirror the spark of fascism that every person carries within themselves.

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