

Robert Wilson's *Danton's Death*: The Language of a Dream

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In 1992 Gregory Boyd, artistic director of the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas, invited renowned designer/director Robert Wilson to stage Georg Buchner's *Danton's Death*. With a creative tour de force, including a new translation by Robert Auletta and costumes by John Conklin, Wilson crafted visual and aural imagery that uncovered meanings in Buchner's play heretofore undetected or unrealized in production.

Set in 1794 during the French Reign of Terror, written in 1835 and first produced in 1902, Buchner's play is seminal in the western canon of modern drama. Despite its general critical recognition, however, productions in the United States have been rare.

Before Wilson's 1992 revival, there have been only two notable American productions of the play, the first staged by Orson Welles in 1938, and the second by Herbert Blau in 1965, and one significant German production brought to America in 1927 by Max Reinhardt. None of these productions was accorded serious critical attention, but contemporary reviewers give us some idea of what they "meant" at that time. Whereas the Reinhardt production, a study in pictorial realism, was seen as a spectacle of pageantry, both the Welles and Blau productions were perceived as political statements about current world issues: Welles' about the turmoil in Europe that led to World War II, and Blau's about the U. S. involvement in Viet Nam. Wilson's approach, in keeping with his postmodern and anti-realistic aesthetic, furnished the stage with suggestive and abstract stage pictures, requiring audiences to "read" his theatrical imagery as, and in juxtaposition to, the verbal text. In contrast to earlier American versions of *Danton's Death*, Wilson's non-realistic treatment was notable for its failure to "mean" anything to

late 20th century reviewers still conditioned by expectations of narrative logic and realistic representation of “real” events.

In a recent historical survey, Freddie Rokem deemed all three of these major American productions (Welles’, Blau’s, and Wilson’s) as “interesting and important failures,” citing mostly negative critical response to support his conclusion. Regarding Wilson’s abstract visualization, Rokem cites influential Wall Street critic Melanie Kilpatrick, who found Wilson’s theatrical language illegible:

Well call me a hick, call me a philistine, but to my mind, the Wilson *Danton’s Death* falls more in the category of theatrical fad than theatrical genius. To be sure, Mr. Wilson has created many striking images, as he has in his other productions. Visually the show is arresting. But he has also turned a powerful play into an inaccessible, even dull, one.

Rather than dismissal, however, Wilson’s effort to communicate through visual and aural imagery deserves more thoughtful analysis.

Writing in 1974, critic Richard Gilman asserted that with this play Buchner reinvented dramatic form:

There is no traditional “development” and no observance of the Aristotelian unities of time and place. In lieu of the narrative compulsion which ordinarily drives dramas forward and sustains the viewer’s interest, Buchner fashions a steadily expanding and deepening **system of consciousness**, a universe of **feeling** and **expression** whose internal arrangements are closer to the order of **poetry** and **music** than to the conventional linear and expository constructions of the theater.

Gilman also considered *Danton’s Death* generically and thematically, perceiving it as a play “about history” rather than a historical epic. “It is Buchner’s rebuke of the deterministic forces of history that render the individual powerless under the tyranny of powerful men, put in place by powerful men before them – and a rebuke of the moral coercions that grow out of the tyranny of social culture.”

Gilman's interpretation would seem to suggest that a more abstract and expressionist production style, such as Wilson offered, might lend itself to revealing the play's essential themes and deeper meanings. Reading Wilson's theatrical imagery as, and in juxtaposition to, the text, might open the play to new, more philosophical and psychological interpretations- in a way that Reinhardt's pictorial realism, or Welles' and Blau's specific political allusions, did not.

I have therefore undertaken to offer an analysis of Wilson's production that relies on aesthetic theatrical theory, psychological theory, and semiotics as tools with which to extract possible meanings and connotations for his visual mise-en-scene. More specifically, I am interested in exploring the relationship between Wilson's visual and aural imagery and Richard Gilman's explication of Buchner's "system of consciousness" and themes of determinism vs. individualism and "moral coercions that grow out of the tyranny of social culture."

It is my hope that this study will enhance our understanding of the artistry of Robert Wilson, who is both celebrated and chastised for his "avant-garde" aesthetics, as well as this important work by a similarly "avant-garde" playwright who was incomprehensible to his own generation and whose significance and influence remain largely unrecognized.

Using Robert Auletta's translation and adaptation of Buchner's text, Wilson presents the events and characters of the play as dream sequences in which each character represents one or more aspects of the dreamer's personality. His vision may be interpreted as a Freudian dreamscape, in which the id (the source of our instinctual energies and desires), the superego (the source of internal judgment, criticism, morality)

and the ego (the aspect in us that struggles to reconcile the demands of the id and the superego, and to adapt the individual's desires to the realities of life) advance and recede in domination from one moment to the next. Through this symbolic social world, Wilson breaks down the façade of the waking world and reveals the interior world of the mind.

[akin to Gilman's phrase "system of consciousness"]

Danton's antagonist, Robespierre, leader of the radical faction of the revolutionaries, questions how fully aware we are, even in our most lucid moments:

Night slithers over the earth, luring us into desolate sleep. Thoughts and desires scarcely imagined now come forth, like the dead reborn, in this house of dreams. Desires made flesh; their breath upon our necks; their hands touching us. And in our wakened state, are we really anything more than dream walkers, pretending to be awake and functioning in the bright light? . . . And there, amidst it all, buried deep in the fabric of thought, sin waits patiently. And whether the body embraces it, allowing it to grow into fact, is purely a matter of chance.

According to Freud, each object in a dream, animate or inanimate, represents some aspect of the dreamer's personality or internal struggle. Our desires, fears and conflicts are exposed on the battlefield of a dream. All masks are ripped off revealing our true nature, both our unbridled desires and our inescapable fears. We experience dreams in the surrealist's sense of free association – in snapshots, stop-action, glimpses of abstracted shapes and sounds, heightened sensations of emotion and movement – a world unlike our waking moments, but informed by our waking experiences. Freud referred to this fodder-for-dreams as "day residue," the waking experiences of feelings, conflicts and fears. Buchner's play has provided the day residue for Wilson's dreamscape.

Wilson uses the stage space to connote the world of the mind of the dreamer, using the upstage area to represent the subconscious activity of the mind, and the

downstage area to create scenes that express the “day residue” or memories of activities of the waking moments of the dreamer. Wilson creates his mise-en-scene using either or both of the areas. The upstage area is hidden and revealed by means of a multi-shuttered iris or orifice that can open and close in infinite parallelograms of size and shape, and an area downstage of the iris, most often presented as a black void, within which most of the action takes place.

When Wilson uses the upstage area, it is usually infused with color and vivid imagery to reflect or enhance in some way the action occurring in the foreground. He uses this combination of color and image to create a visual link for the audience to the emotion being experienced by the character. Such a link or cue can be used later in the production to communicate to the audience a re-emergence of that particular emotion. Through these associative links, including aural as well as visual components, Wilson builds his scenographic vocabulary.

Wilson prefigures the events of the play and introduces the audience to the style of the production by staging a symbolic foretelling. Upstage center, a rectangular opening of the iris reveals a floor and a back wall bathed in cool blue light. The blue space seems to be floating in a black void. In front of the upstage space, center stage, is a tall slender black chair. Connected to the base of the chair, lying downstage is a black shadow-like reflection of the chair back. Stage left of the chair and upstage in the blue area stands a thin rod-like torch – in which a flame, connoting eternity dances on a flat disk of metal. All is silent. We are walking in on something that is in progress.

From stage right a dark-robed figure slowly emerges in black silhouette feet invisible under robe, perhaps a priest, a ghost, but with a decided evocation of death,

ritualistically moving in some, unknown to me, time-honored way, across the blue stage. He turns downstage walking toward the audience, face obscured by shadows. As the figure moves downstage the upstage area changes from blue to red, gradually building in intensity. The top surface, the tip, of the black chair remains a cool blue. When the color changes to red, electronic organ sounds begin - tuneless, chord-less, mysterious, ominous, building. The figure moves to stage left of the torch – the background fades from red through ice blue to blue/white, presenting a black and white stage picture of judgment – the black chair, the torch, the figure silhouetted against the white background. Only the flame of the torch has color. Slowly, gravely, the right hand of the figure rises to the side of his shoulder, holding a square flat object the size of an outstretched hand – held perpendicular to the face of the audience. Slowly the square tilts over the top of the flame and is lowered, extinguishing the flame. Silence reigns for a few seconds, then we hear the crash of glass breaking. Elsewhere throughout the production Wilson repeats the sounds of objects breaking or crashing or burning – to suggest the brokenness that exists within the character(s) and/or a situation.

In this symbolist prelude Wilson sweeps the audience into the dreamscape of his production. Symbolic objects are presented without explanation in a space that, as yet, gives little clue to its geography- A solemn pace is established, unhurried, formal, contemplative.

Sensuality pervades the play. Danton and his friends value the freedom for each man to live the life he chooses, and call for the government to allow unbounded freedom of expression. His friend Camille captures their spirit in this very sensual call:

Let the constitution be a transparent veil, clinging close to the body of the people.
Let the body be ugly or beautiful; but let it be seen for what it really is. . . We

want our gods to be naked, and our goddesses to be free and easy with themselves. Let them sing of wicked love that sets the body free.

Wilson evokes the unbridled sexual desire of the id through visual and aural symbols of the sea. These images proliferate in his staging of Danton's encounter with Marion, Danton's favorite prostitute. Danton, the epicurean, is driven by his desires, and connects with his world and women through his senses. The upstage iris opens from the floor revealing the floor and back wall washed in cool blue light. Danton stands stage left and down from the iris space. Down stage right from Danton, Marion, dressed in a flowing gossamer gown, reclines on her stomach on a marble chaise, the top hard surface of which is rippled like the waves of the sea - the curves of her body echoing those of the chair. She completes the sculptural image of undulating energy, like that of the sea - rise - fall - ebb - flow. The sounds of ocean waves underscore her soliloquy, which she also delivers in an undulating rhythm. As she speaks the wall of the iris area deepens to a vivid sky blue and the floor become emerald green like the sea. Danton moves to her and touches her hair. The entire iris stage area shifts slowly to blue as the light on Marion changes from blue to white.

Completing the picture of the embodiment of unbridled desire - total and consuming, Marion's voice rises and falls like the sea, full of sensuous intensity. As she speaks, her body similarly undulates on the chair. The green sea of light behind her in the iris space intensifies the effect. Marion is not a person to Danton; she is the essence of his unquenchable, and ultimately fatal, desires. an icon of eroticism.

For Wilson, Robespierre embodies the superego, the judgmental moralistic aspect of personality. Wilson exposes a desire coursing through Robespierre, an urge unacceptable and perhaps suppressed. Cloaked in denial, Robespierre hides from the

freedom of sensual expression that Danton cries for, threatened by the consequences that would befall him if his secret were revealed. Wilson's portrayal suggests that this self-proclaimed vanguard of virtue rails against the vice in others to mask and repress urges in himself that contradict the pious image he has created. The setting description for the scene between Robespierre and Danton in both the Auletta and Schmidt translations is simply "a room," not suggestive of anything more than a space in which the two antagonists meet alone for the only time in the play. Wilson locates the scene in a bathroom, with Robespierre in a bath- a site of intimacy, vulnerability, and, in its allusion to David's 1793 painting, *The Death of Marat*, danger.

The scene opens. Robespierre, in the bathtub, is center stage in the black area. The interior of the tub glows in golden light. In the black area, directly upstage of the tub, the torch burns, in this context, symbolic of Robespierre's desire. Danton is standing up center stage right of the tub, his eyes diverted from Robespierre in his bath. Far upstage, the iris opens to create a narrow horizontal slit, shimmering in multicolored lights.

DANTON: *You make me sick, Robespierre. You and your incessant virtue.*

When the word "virtue" is spoken, Robespierre lifts his right leg out of the tub, letting it rest over the edge, inviting/opening himself to Danton's gaze. Danton does not look. Robespierre hides his eyes with his right hand.

DANTON: *You take no bribes, you run up no debts . . .*

Danton's head turns, looking at Robespierre

DANTON: *. . . you've never slept with a woman in your entire life! You're always stone sober, virtuous and erect in your worn but decent coat.*

Auletta's translation contains the word "erect," a much more overt reference to phallus, which replaces "upstanding" in the Schmidt translation.

Danton hides his eyes with his hands and continues:

DANTON: Aren't you sick of that self righteous expression stuck on your face? You've lived between heaven and hell for thirty years – and for what reason, Robespierre? - simply for the perverse pleasure of finding other people worse than yourself.

Danton turns, facing Robespierre who continues to hide his eyes.

DANTON: Isn't there something in you, the merest whisper, possibly, that says: you lie, Robespierre, you lie!

ROBESPIERRE: My conscience is clean.

He removes his hand from his eyes.

After Danton exits the room St. Just emerges from stage right dressed in gold, His head/bust lit in blue white light, ghostly. He conspires with Robespierre (still in the bath) about the fate of Danton, Lacroix, Herault-Sechelles, Philippeau and Camille. Throughout the exchange, the sound of a crackling wood fire is heard. The sound grows louder as St. Just hands Robespierre an article written by Camille. The image of Robespierre reading a document in his bath reinforces the allusion to David's painting.

Robespierre urges St. Just to deal with the men tomorrow. The flame of the torch goes out. As St. Just slowly exits, we hear the sound of dripping water.

Wrapped in a towel, Robespierre stands and steps out of the tub. As he does the lights turn red on the floor around Robespierre, and he stands facing downstage with arms outstretched from his sides, his body creating the shape of a cross. As he speaks he makes a 180-degree rotation and faces upstage, arms outstretched, buttressing the textual evocation of Christ:

ROBESPIERRE: *For the Son of Man is truly crucified within us all; and each of us condemned to his own Gethsemane, wrestling in blood-soaked agony in his dark garden.*

Cool white light frames the back of Robespierre's head, shoulders and arms. Sounds of laughter, organ music, metal-scraping-on-metal: sounds of derision and dissonance connoting Robespierre's moral breakdown and the conflict within his soul.

The futility of life as a thematic concept drifts like smoke throughout Buchner's play, leaving its residue on everything. For Danton even sensual pleasure becomes part of the descent toward oblivion, but in Act II we find Danton still hopeful of delaying the inevitable. Wilson creates in Danton's soliloquy one of the most stunning visual images of the production: Marion symbolically portrays Death, establishing for the audience an association between sensuality and death. The Auletta translation refers to death as "her" instead of "him" as found in Schmidt's translation. Wilson takes full advantage of that divergence. By using Marion to embody the convergence of Danton's greatest pleasure, eroticism, with the thing he fears most, death. This imagery complements and extends Buchner's association of sexuality and death as manifested in Lacroix's statement to Danton, "Good night, my friend. Now I'll leave you to be guillotined by a lady's thighs."

During this scene, the iris is open to a wide rectangle –the wall and floor are blue. Marion is far stage left in the upstage iris area. She is swathed in a diaphanous gown. Her figure, backlit by the wall light, is visible through the fabric; a panel of fabric from her gown, wrapped around her torso and flowing down to mid-calf, extends offstage left, creating a panel in its full width suspended parallel to the floor. As the scene progresses she moves stage right slowly, delicately, seeming to unwrap out of the panel of fabric as soft pink light engulfs her.

Danton is downstage left in the black area in front of the iris. Before he speaks he flails around the stage in erratic movements, accompanied by sounds of crashing- metal objects. These discordant movements and sounds are external manifestations of Danton's inner struggles as his drive for sensual pleasure plunges him to the point of death – an example of the desires of the id overpowering other aspects of the personality. It is in this sense that Danton is “flirting with death.” His sensual self leads him to destruction.

DANTON: *I won't go on anymore, crashing about, heart beating, panting, disturbing all this stillness.*

They say there's an illness that causes you to lose your memory. Death may be something like that. But I hope that it does more, wipes it all out, everything totally out. My memories are my sworn enemies. . . With some luck, the grave will kill memory. But back in Paris, memory is killing me.

He runs downstage. The blue in the iris intensifies.

DANTON: *It's interesting . . . flirting with death; rather erotic and amusing, ogling her from a distance. (He looks at Death/Marion) It all makes me laugh. I'm too healthy really; my sense of permanence tells me that the day after tomorrow will be just the same as today. On and on. They're just trying to frighten me. (He pauses!) They wouldn't dare!*

Marion/Death slowly exits.

Three set pieces in Wilson's mise-en-scene serve as emblematic devices that help create and manifest the personality of the characters who use them: Robespierre's chair, Marion's chaise, and Danton's chaise. Robespierre's chair was introduced in the prelude. It sat erect center stage, seemingly holding court, a tall slender black phallus rising from the floor. Marion's chaise is a horizontal form, accommodating the function of her profession – its rippling, curving surface echoing the shape and activity of her body. Danton's chaise, also an expression of the id, is redolent with sexual connotations: a dark, smoothly upholstered projectile shape – a classic Freudian symbol of male genitals – a

crystal ball, also suggestive of male anatomy, also reads as the unknown Danton, a puzzle Julie tries to solve and understand.

Danton's physical placement, sitting *inside* the iris area as the scene opens, in front of a green wall, suggests a sexual encounter between Danton and his wife Julie, who is dressed in a sea-green gown. As Danton speaks the iris slowly opens vertically, and he stands. Julie is reclining on her stomach on the chaise, gazing at a crystal ball on the headrest above her head, searching it for meaning. Throughout the scene, Julie and Danton gaze into the crystal ball as if searching for understanding of each other and of life.

The ball glows, its brightness intensifying to represent Danton's desperate search for purpose in his existence. It is at this point Danton directly confronts the futility he feels. He kneels over Julie, looking into her eyes as he speaks:

DANTON: We're all puppets, manipulated by unknown powers. We're nothing at all in ourselves; but we are the swords that the spirits fight with, like in fairy tales; but no one can see them, the hands of the demons and the gods manipulating us.

The futility Danton feels is compounded by Julie's final act of despair, her suicide. Wilson's portrayal of the suicide draws on the previously established connotations of sensuality and death: the sea-green color of her gown, the sounds of the sea, the final closing of the iris, forever-closing her off from Danton's body, the only part of him she has ever truly known.

By adding a sculptural iteration of one of the scenic shapes formed by the open iris, Wilson's treatment of Danton's execution builds on the vernacular of the visual language that has evolved throughout the production. He expands the shape of a square into a cube and adopts it as a metaphorical guillotine, a transitional element from life to

death. His choice of a cube reinforces his use of Freudian symbolism as Freud has interpreted a cube or box as representations of the womb. In the execution scene a cube, taller than a man, slowly glides onstage in the iris space and stops in the center – the downstage side of the box is in shadow, its top illuminated sea green, a final reminder of the sex/death connection. One by one Danton and his compatriots climb to the sea-green top of the box, and through a narrow opening, sink to their deaths, symbolically consumed by their sensuality – returning to the sea, the womb.

This dream, like most, ends without a resolution, and without the mediating influence of the ego to strike a balance between the rules imposed on the dreamer's behavior and his wanton lust. Through his imagery Wilson lays bare the inner conflict between the fulfillment of desire and the obstacles that prevent us from indulging them.