

“RECONSTRUCTING TRICKERY”: SCANDAL AND THE MANIPULATION OF EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES IN DARIO FO’S ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST

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Introduction

Scandals, by their very nature, disrupt the established order, peeling back layers of carefully constructed façades to reveal uncomfortable truths about power and its exercise. In the chaos that follows, those in charge will typically perform a fine dance of damage control, attempting to restore public trust and reestablish their hold.

A central ingredient in this game is the strategic manipulation of emotional narratives, drawing on shared fears and aspirations to influence public opinion and divert blame. Dario Fo’s groundbreaking play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), offers a satirical critique through which to view this process. Against the turbulent background of late 20th Century Italy, with its political instability and threat of neo-fascist terrorism, the play focuses on the actual scandal of the death of anarchist railway workers Giuseppe Pinelli during police custody. The official ruling of his death as suicide was greeted with general suspicion, a rich soil for Fo’s biting critique of state power and its manipulative machinery. Through the deconstruction of the absurd efforts made by the police to construct a plausible story, Fo reveals the intentional “reconstruction of trickery uses by authorities to silence outraged citizens and hold on to power.

In Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, the scandal surrounding Giuseppe Pinelli’s death becomes the focal point through which Fo satirically exposes the systematic “reconstruction of trickery” by state authorities, who employ the manipulation of emotional narratives, including the instillation of fear and the promise of order, as a calculated strategy to obscure their own culpability, deflect public outrage, and ultimately consolidate their political power in a climate of social and political unrest

The Scandal and the State’s Engineered Reality

The genesis of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is rooted in a harsh and disturbing fact: the 1969 Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan and the death, following it, of Giuseppe Pinelli. As Malik says in his foreword to the play, it was a point-“suspect” whose death the Italian police had attempted to claim as suicide”. This attempt to quickly frame Pinelli’s death as a suicide was not merely a matter of ineptitude; it was a deliberate act of narrative control, an effort to contain a burgeoning scandal that

threatened to expose potential complicity or, at the very least, gross negligence on the part of the authorities. The play vividly portrays this clumsy yet calculated attempt to engineer a palatable version of events. The first setting, which appears to be a run-of-the-mill police interrogation room, “very ordinary, minimal decorations and boring”, presents a misleading background for the exceptional and tainted behavior that the Madman relentlessly exposes. Inspector Bertozzo’s own initial confidence in his authority is immediately dented by the Madman’s

convincing reasoning and doubtful credentials, illustrating how facilely authority can be corrupted when its own grounds are founded on deception. The States's urgent requirement to offer a closed narrative, a suicide, illustrates a dread of the volatile public response a more candid explanation would possibly generate. This constructed reality sought to pre-empt the emotional disturbance and call for responsibility that too frequently accompany such controversial incidents

The “Strategy of Tension” and the Orchestration of Fear

The Pinelli death scandal was not isolated. It was situated withing a larger socio-political environment marked by the “strategy of tension”. Benhan expounds on the strategy, arguing that the state sough to leave the impression that “the left was responsible, and if the bombs kept happening, they would call for a clampdown on the left.” This calculated creation of fear used as an extremely useful tool of influencing public opinion, deflecting from possible state sponsorship of right-wing terrorism and lending legitimacy to more and more authoritarian actions. “*Accidental of an Anarchist*” expertly mirrors such manipulation of emotional narratives. Through the representation of the police not only as bumbling but actively involved in fabricating fictions, Fo destroys their imagined status as upholders of order. The viewer if faced with the disconcerting threat that the institutions which were supposed were supposed to provide security and justice are instead institutions of chaos and lies. The play implies that fear which was spread by the “strategy of tension” was politically exaggerated to manipulate the masses into believing the official narrative, even when this went again treason and fact. As Horn argues in the context of South African theatre, such ideological drama often seeks to stress the pliability and resilience of dominant institutions, ultimately leading to the conditioning of the audience to insensible acceptance. In Fo’s Italy, the fear of escalating violence and instability was exploited to foster

a similar “insensible acceptance” of the official narrative surrounding Pinelli’s death.

A Catalyst for Unmasking “Reconstructed Trickery”

At the heart of Fo’s satirical deconstruction of the state- constructed reality is the Maniac. Described as a “clinically diagnosed mentally ill patient who himself claims to be and takes great pleasure in impersonating various authority figures. Alla accurately describes him the “archetypical giullare,” comparing him to the medieval jester who possessed a “fool’s license to critique institutions with little respect”. The Maniac’s apparently chaotic behavior and constant changes in persona serve as a rhetorical ploy to expose the inherent contradictions and absurdities in the police’s narrative. His expertise in impersonation enables him to manipulate the inspectors into constantly revising and reconstructing their story in increasingly farcical ways. Through this process, the essential “trickery” at the core of their official account is laid . As the Maniac takes on different authoritative roles, he exposes the performative nature of power and how easily narratives can be manipulated through carefully constructed and crafted roles and declarations. His actions serve as a stark reminder, echoing Machiavelli’s observations on the importance of appearances in maintaining power, that those in authority often rely on the public’s willingness to believe the roles they inhabit, even when those roles are demonstrably false. The Maniac, then, serves as a catalyst, forcing both the unfortunate police officers within the play and the viewers to confront the constructed nature of the “truth” the authorities put forwards.

Subversive Laughter and the Defiance of Closure

Fo’s skilfull use of farce and subversive humor is not merely for comedic effect; it is an integral part of his political satire. By employing humor, Fo keeps the audience engaged in a potentially serious and controversial political subject matter. But this is not laughter that

provides release or catharsis. As Malik observes, Fo brilliantly blends critical politics with strands of storytelling, pantomime, satirical songs and ballads and grotesque farce in a comedy of experience that is both enjoyable and disturbing. Fo deliberately doesn't give a neat resolution or emotional catharsis in the conventional theatrical sense. Instead, he aims for a laughter that would stay in their throats as the tragic reference that overtopped every sarcasm would strike on them. This supports the Brechtian principles of the alienation effect, having the audience engage in critical detachment from what goes on stage as opposed to passively experiencing the emotions of the characters. By preventing emotional release, Fo aims to keep the audience's "anger within them, and not be freed of it, so that they can take act on things and become involved in the struggle" against the injustices exposed in the play. This active denial of catharsis is a emotionally powerful tool in avoiding the audience from being emotionally pacified and instead creating a sense of critical awareness and a call for transformation.

Adaptability and the Enduring Relevance of Reconstructed Trickery

Accidental Death of an Anarchist, while grounded in a specific historical moment, has remarkable adaptability and enduring relevance. The play's central themes of scandal, power abuse and manipulation of emotional narratives after a crisis continues to resonate in modern societies. In an era of rapid dissemination of information and the spread of "fake news," the strategies of "reconstructing trickery" are still effective. Authorities, political, corporate, or institutional, tend to turn to manipulation of narratives by calling upon and appealing to emotions like fear, insecurity, or national pride to manage public perception after a scandal. The play's farcical portrayal of incompetent and corrupt officials trying to cover up in the play is a warning to the viewers to be critical of official declarations and to question the emotional

appeals that often accompany them. The play could be readily adapted to reflect contemporary scandals, from political corruption to corporate misconduct, by simply changing the specific facts while maintaining the fundamental dynamic of hegemonic groups who attempt to control the narrative and perception through deception and emotional manipulation. The Maniac's role as a disrupter of well-constructed realities is especially relevant in an era where individuals and groups can use media and technology to challenge hegemonic narratives. The play's lasting power comes from its capacity to provoke critical thinking and to encourage viewers to resist the power of emotionally charged and deceptive narratives.

Conclusion

Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is a classic and trenchant satire on the workings of power and the insidious ways in which emotional narratives can be manipulated following scandal. Using the farcical lens of Giuseppe Pinelli's death and the haphazard attempts of the police to fabricate a convincing narrative, Fo systematically exposes the "reconstruction of trickery" adopted by state authorities. Through the deliberate use of subversive laughter and withholding catharsis, from the audiences, Fo compels critical thinking and creates a resistance to emotionally manipulative narratives. The relevance of the play lies in its strong reminder that vigilance, scepticism, and a rejecting the temptation to be swayed by fear or false promises are essential in navigating a world where the powerful often seek to control the truth and maintain their authority through well-constructed and emotionally charged narratives. Finally *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is a constant reminder to question the narratives we are presented with, to go beyond the manipulation of our emotions, and to fight for the pursuit of truth and accountability when confronted with power.

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