The Symbolism of Light in the Play *Lait* by Magdalena Barile

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**Abstract:** Magdalena Barile is a young, but already appreciated and well known playwright, some of her work being translated and performed outside Italy. Her play *Lait* was played in Italy and then translated and played in England. The symbolism of light, heralded *since* the title, marks the whole text which can be interpreted as a metaphor of talent, of the creative energy we all possess in various degrees and shapes. Sometimes it is so pronounced it is hard to disguise, some other times it is so flimsy, it is almost unrecognisable. The purpose it is put to and the way it is used make the real difference.

**Key words:** Magdalena Barile, *Lait*, text analysis.

Magdalena Barile is a young, but accomplished Italian playwright. She was born on November 19, 1978; she went to classic highschool and then to Paolo Grassi Drama Academy – playwriting - which she graduated in 2001. She currently lives in Milan and works as text writer for the Swiss Italian Television and collaborates in the writing of a range of drama and comedy programmes for the Italian television: *Albero Azzurro* for Rai due, *Camera Cafè* for Italia uno and *Bye Bye Cinderella* for La 5.

As a playwright, her texts prove originality and are favourably appraised by the audience and the *critique*. They have been played in many private theatres and by many theatrical companies, among which Accademia degli Artefatti of Rome, Animanera of Milan, as well as Charioteer Theatre in Scotland, which are known for their experimental and contemporary bias. She is a drama teacher at Paolo Grassi Academy and Holden School in Torino.

About the playwright’s trade, the author asserted: “Speaking from experience, writing for the theatre is different from writing television or film
scripts, being a more intimate process and for me personally, extremely enticing/seductive. This happens because playwriting is done with a view to the presence of the bodies within and without the stage. Opting for a minor territory, which is not necessarily endeared by the commercial logic, the play becomes itself a political gesture: colonising the mental and non-mental spaces, the design and the search for words and actions, all are subjected to the potentiality of a genuine exchange, of a correspondence between the playwright and the one who enjoys it. On the stage, as in real life, things happen all the time: the playwright’s job is to decide on the side of reality or on the side of fiction in order to tell new stories, which sometimes happen to resemble life.”

Barile had her debut in 2006 with the play Manuel & Miranda, performed the same year at the Litta Theatre in Milan. The next play was In tumulto played in 2008, Piombo in 2009, Lait in 2009, followed by a new play each year. Her play Lait was translated in English in 2014 with the title Light Killer and was played in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and a year later at Piccolo theatre Melato studio in Milan. Of her latest plays, we are mentioning here One Day (2010), Lait (2011), Fine Famiglia (2011), Senza Famiglia (2012), Piombo (2013), La Moda e la Morte (2014), Il Migliore dei mondi possibili, inspired by Voltaire’s Candide (2015). She also wrote the text Raffiche - together with Luca Scarlini- for the Motus company, inspired by Jean Genet’s Splendid. The public and the critics’ appreciation led to the translation of her texts in English, French, German, Catalan, Swedish and Russian.

One of her most well-known and acclaimed plays is Lait o delle pontenzialità luminose del corpo umano (Light or On the Luminous Potentialities of the Human Body). The introduction presents the experiment of an American scientist, Arthur Aron, who has proved that two complete strangers could fall in love if they follow a certain course of answering 36 questions. At the end of the experiment, if successful, the interlocutor will become radiant to your perception. Moreover, if the

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love is mutual, both will become radiant. *Lait* explores a series of exercises and the dynamics of the human aura: what lights is, what brings it to life, what makes it go out. In the Introduction, light seems to be equivalent with love, more precisely with a light in the eye of the beholder which modifies reality. Frank Weigand wrote that in *Lait* we witness an extreme distancing from reality, a view that is supported by the author herself.

There are four characters, Mikail and Calda, the two luminants, and Lait Killer 1 and 2, the light-killers. The plot is set in an unspecified time and space. It begins with an excerpt from Francois Truffaut’s *Le Cinéma selon Alfred Hitchcock* where in a short dialogue between the two, Hitchcock is explaining how he managed to draw the audience’s attention on the milk glass in the scene in which Cary Grant is climbing the stairs, by focusing a light on it. The interaction of light with matter is thus introduced in the zone of creation, the creative process, the performance.

The play then continues with Mikail’s monologue telling about his meeting with Greco, the one who has become his sponsor because of the former’s capacity to illuminate. The theme of light is present everywhere, even in small details, as for example in their meeting in front of a beverage vendor, where they start speaking about light starting from a Coca Cola Light can. Greco intuits Mikail’s capacity to illuminate and invites him to come live with him in exchange for his luminous presence in a role in one of his plays. The soliloquy continues with Mikail’s thoughts on his decision to control his light-production; on Greco’s project for Mikail to illuminate his work, a sort of Cappella Sistina, but in ironical mode; on the moments spent with Greco when the latter comes over to his room, all these scattered with light-control exercises. The character Greco seems to embody another kind of matter than Cary Grant’s milk that takes advantage of and thus spoils the elemental purity of light - the economic, commercial kind - but which, at the same time, is unavoidable in the coming to life of a work of art.

There follows Calda’s soliloquy, a girl who can herself illuminate. Unlike Mikail, Calda illuminates effortlessly, sometimes too much and so profusely that she needs to stay on her own to be able to quench her light. The companionship of people makes her illuminate, while loneliness scares her.
She frequently experiences nightmares and for safety she needs another person’s presence close by. In one of these nights she turns up at Mikail’s door and they meet. It is the beginning of their relationship, a relationship that Calda wants more personal, closer on all levels, but which Mikail sees as only professional. The exercises of illumination that they do together, trying to reproduce La Pieta, bring them together eventually. But in spite of all her efforts, Calda does not manage to persuade Mikail to leave his room.

In Barile’s play, light could be a metaphor of a creative energy all humans are endowed with and the two protagonists represent two of the most frequent hypotheses: Mikail, who feels and knows he has something special to offer, but does not feel comfortable to share his gift and makes up for it with harder work: he represents that category who only succeeds by hard work; and Calda, with a name suggestive of warming light, who is a solar person with profuse talent, who does not need much effort to produce it, but who, on the other hand, is addicted to human contact, even though prolonged exposure puts her in a state of over-heating and consumes her. Her way of going out is by being left on her own. The problem is loneliness makes her panic.

Greco is omnipresent and absent at the same time in that he does not appear onstage, but is mentioned by the other characters all the time. He epitomizes people without the gift of creation, but who are part of the art industry – critics, curators, promotors etc – or even the postmodern creator who often produces questionable art. He is here the provider of decent living in exchange for the free use of Mikail’s gift. Some, like Mikail, see his offer as a rescuing hand for a good life, others, like Calda, are harder to buy. They have the intuition of what their gift is worth, but are not as happy to give it up.

Light in the play stands for talent, creative energy, of everything that is special and unique in us. Sometimes it is as strong as a blaze, consuming even the producer; some other times it is only a spark that needs to be kindled and maintained by effort, work, perseverance; sometimes it does not exist, or it has gone extinct, as with the Light-killers, the characters who have nothing good and beautiful and want to destroy the good and the beautiful – the light – all around them. The Light-killers are a grotesque presence in the play and provide an intermezzo, a welcome rhythm rupture to diminish the tension.
The play is extremely rich in meanings and satisfying in this respect for both director and readers, giving the freedom to choose our own interpretation according to experience and propensity: we could identify with Calda, the talented, but people-dependent and suffering; we could be Mikail, the less talented, but hard-working and ambitious; we could identify with Greco, the seemingly giftless mecena, who uses the others but is also important in today’s art world.

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