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Bleak Futurism

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The paradox of Krystian Lupa's theatre stems from the fact that despite his increasing engagement that could be described as civic and giving expression to his need to comment upon public matters, he is nevertheless constantly accused of ignoring the common good and avoiding commenting on realities. And if any of his comments are noticed, then it is those that are expressed in interviews and in direct comments concerning current political and social events, rather in his theatre productions. In his work, political commentary is immediately rendered insufficient, as an artist of his calibre is expected to ooze advice and provide answers instead of questions. This unjustified expectation is perhaps the product of indolence and ideological confusion on the part of audiences. Unjustified, though, does not mean that it is non-existent.

For that reason, the premiere of Kafka's *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*) turned into an uncanny scandal. A far cry from what was expected, it was an evening of disappointment; anticipated and projected as an evening of civic reawakening, it was supposed to have been a play after which we would pick up our scythes, set the blades upright and take to the streets as insurgents. Yet the performance primarily attacked its audience, particularly their passivity towards the violence practiced by the authorities and their indifference to the radical sacrifices of some individuals. The play clearly transcended what we might call the territory of tacit agreement, or the apparent zone of rebellion, which forms between the audience and actors who are, after all, converts to the same cause. This veneer of rebellion results from our condescending attitude that we, as enlightened and prominent consumers of culture, know what the world should look like, but "they" prevent us from acting on our idealist, or indeed righteous, principles. And so, on 15 November 2017, the day of the premiere, prominent members of the opposition elite descended upon the New Theatre in Warsaw for reasons unknown, although it soon transpired that they certainly had not done so out of interest in Lupa's new play. Their general disappointment was deepened by the fact that the play, as is often the case with Lupa's work, was still very fresh, and thus its rhythms and tempos had yet to find their groove while its running time tested the endurance of the specially selected audience. The near seven-hour performance resulted in an anti-climax

and an aggressive outburst of animosity.¹ The play is still performed today, including at top European festivals, but its current incarnation lasts approximately four and a half hours. Let us, however, begin with a set of mishaps that befell Lupa's *The Trial*. It is worth acknowledging them so as to understand the reality experienced by hard-hitting iconoclast artists in a country governed by conservative authorities fixated on a patriotic discourse and on the restoration of the historical glory of Poland, while remaining doggedly in opposition to critical art in all its forms. It is also worth considering the fact that the growing support for the said authorities testifies to the futility of anti-establishment activities. The right-leaning electorate does not attend plays by Lupa, Frljić or any other socially committed theatre director, but information about shows offending, for instance, religious sentiments, do reach conservative voters through propagandist media, producing reactions contrary to what was intended. Conservatives then harden their stance. They do not revise their own beliefs, but rather internalize a siege mentality and become all the more reluctant towards artistic endeavours, perceiving themselves as the targets of attacks by progressive museums, galleries, and theatres. Thus, transcending the territory of tacit agreement is impossible. Most messages fall on the deaf ears of the converted. Yet, in the case of *The Trial*, it was different.

Originally, the play was to have been produced by the Polish Theatre in Wrocław, one of Poland's leading theatres. It is here that Lupa staged his ideas for twenty years, particularly following his departure from the National Old Theatre in Kraków in 2012 when Jan Klata was its artistic director. Thus, he staged his new ideas increasingly in Wrocław, which was also where some of his favourite actors and regular collaborators were based. The rehearsals for *The Trial* commenced on 10 March 2016 and the premiere was planned for the autumn. However, the tension that had been building for a long time between the theatre and the authorities reached a critical point. Krzysztof Mieszkowski, the long-time managing director of the theatre, was elected to the Polish Parliament as a member of the Nowoczesna [Modern] opposition party in 2015.² Prior to that, Mieszkowski had frequently accused the local authority responsible for the theatre, the Marshal Office of Lower Silesia, of providing insufficient funding and stifling its development opportunities. November 2015 was to have seen the premiere of *Death and the Maiden*, a play by a young director, Ewelina Marciniak, based on the texts of Elfriede Jelinek. The marketing campaign mentioned the involvement of Czech porn stars. Piotr Gliński, recently appointed as Minister of Culture and National Heritage, threatened to resort to preventive censorship and stop the premiere. This marked the first gesture directed at culture on the part of the new

1 At this juncture, it is worth mentioning the comments of Krzysztof Varga, a writer and a journalist for *Gazeta Wyborcza*. At the time, he believed that plays exceeding 90 minutes are a clear indication of a "lack of respect for audiences." This is proof positive that the sensitivity of recipients of culture has in fact been eroded and that they have turned into impatient consumers. Lupa attacks them in *The Trial*, calling them aficionados of films in which cars set ablaze fall into an abyss.

2 The selfsame election brought the right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] party a sweeping parliamentary victory, securing a majority government.

government; it was unsuccessful in having a direct impact, as the minister does not have any legal remedy at his disposal in this matter, but at the same time it was a strikingly effective measure in having a “chilling effect” that triggered mechanisms of self-censorship. Work on *The Trial* ran parallel to the selection of the new managing director of the Polish Theatre in Wrocław. When the job opening was announced, Mieszkowski did not apply. However, a candidate supported by the staff entered the competition, while the selection board included, among others, Krystian Lupa. The selection process was completed in August 2016 and Cezary Morawski was chosen for the post. He was a mediocre actor with no experience of managing such a high-profile arts institution, and – to make matters worse – burdened with a host of disastrous financial decisions taken in his capacity as treasurer of the Association of Polish Stage Artists, which generated millions of zloty in losses. Lupa refused to sign the selection document, suspending his work on *The Trial* the following day. Over the course of three consecutive seasons, Cezary Morawski brought the Wrocław stage to its knees. He also filed a lawsuit against Lupa, demanding the return of assets invested in the production and even the refund of ministerial subsidies that were never granted. Eventually, he was dismissed, leaving the theatre heavily in debt, without any actors or a repertoire. For a few months, *The Trial* seemed beyond repair and forever lost.

It is also important to note, however, that Lupa is not only the Master of Polish Theatre, its undisputed guru and mentor to several generations of younger artists, but also someone who works in long cycles, with new works a rarity. His new plays emerge every two years or so. Taking into account the oppressive mechanisms that led to abandoning work on *The Trial*, as well as the potential that the text chosen by Lupa carried, it was an irrecoverable loss. The Polish Theatre in the Underground [Teatr Polski w Podziemi], a collective created by the homeless artists formerly of the Polish Theatre, was founded in Wrocław. But it was impossible for them to take over such a large-scale, costly and technically demanding production. Gradually, the idea of making *The Trial* a co-production involving four Warsaw-based theatres with financial assistance from the Municipality of Warsaw emerged. Pre-production work commenced, which involved securing funding from international co-producers and securing production capacity. After the resumption of the production of *The Trial*, Lupa declared that he wished to continue working with his original cast. Eventually, the preparatory process was wrapped up. Rehearsals resumed on 23 August 2017, and the play premiered on 15 November 2017.

This summary of the unusual genesis of *The Trial* makes it easy to imagine the scale of expectations generated before the premiere. Before it had been performed, the play was already an event. Before audiences had a chance to experience it, they had already projected their desires onto it, imagining it as some kind of paramilitary event that would strengthen the opposition in its struggle against the right-wing authorities. Meanwhile, Krystian Lupa did not make the mistake of preaching to the converted. *The Trial* attacked not only the Polish political system but also – if not predominantly – the opposition, as represented by the audience. The play turned out to be an unpleasant statement on

helplessness and the dearth of communal thinking. Furthermore, the very critical agency of art as such and its ability to change the world was also challenged. Until then Lupa had remained steadfast – even dogmatic – in his belief that artistic mechanisms could impact upon the very social fabric by appealing to audience's souls and spirituality.

What is Franz K. accused of? This is probably the most important question posed by Kafka and one that every single director adapting *The Trial* is obliged to tackle. This sentence instantly gives rise to a second major question: what does it mean to “adapt” Kafka's text for the stage? How is it possible to enter the hidden narrative structure that seduces us with its realist, or even quotidian, events yet leaves its undercurrent beyond reach? And how can we be sure that this fabled subterranean level actually exists and is not merely a figment of the imagination, an instance of interpretative wishful thinking? Lupa's adaptations of novels far exceeding Kafka's text in size have so far been typified by the director's expert selection of excerpts and coupling this with his own brand of “pausing” the script, in whose chasms one can glean the uncertainties derived from the encounter of the actor and the on-stage persona. In the case *The Trial*, which happens to be obligatory school reading meaning that it has been read ad nauseam and deadened by supposedly correct interpretations while declaring that Kafka had prophesized the impending Holocaust – one has to break through the carapace of fallacies and clichés. There is thus no point in following Kafka's plot. Instead, the director immediately has to emphasise their authorial presence in the text, taking ownership of the text, in order to attain one's own truth through it. The first palpable gesture to this effect, even if it is derived from the Kafkaesque universe, is the doubling of the protagonist and erasing his identity. Two actors, Andrzej Kłak and Marcin Pempuś, interchangeably play the roles of two characters: Joseph K. and Franz K. The play's programme features not one but two Franzes K. In fact, Joseph K. disappears before long – from now on he is called “Franz.” The switch of actors in subsequent performances adds to the already confusing mix: who is the person playing the protagonist of *The Trial*? A fictional character? A fulgent alter ego of the author appearing on stage dressed in white? Or perhaps the emanation of the common energy generated by two actors playing mirror roles: a literary figure and his real-life author?

Turning the author into the protagonist – Franz K. rather than Joseph K. – enormously enriches the potential interpretation. Correspondingly, the performance almost instantly begins to escape the tasks imposed on theatre by literature. It thus becomes an autonomous investigation of guilt. And it is not just the guilt of the protagonist of the novel but also of its author who is put on trial by the fictional figures and by real-life people who played a part in Kafka's life. The search for guilt also involves the actors, who do not even try to hide the duality of their on-stage existence. According to Lupa:

Kafka maintains that everyone is guilty, that nobody is innocent, that the innocent are merely a product of the law, that everyone is tainted and destined to lie in the light of the letter of the law, and innocence is just an illusion. These are peculiar paths, on which our protagonist and author is simultaneously a deeply mysterious instance of the

disease that affects humanity, its carrier and expression through an act of creation.

The director continues:

We identify with the protagonist, which is peculiar, yielding to a strange unity with his fear and survival instinct, which is engrossing in its own animalistic way. We participate in this novel as though it were a dream, in which we are persecuted but this protagonist is neither pleasant nor intelligible. He is pathologically egotistic, fails to examine his conscience and remains a strangely hypocritical human being, who follows only his self-interest and as a result becomes a cog in the mechanism of deception.³

We thus follow the protagonist who constantly strives to evade us and deceive even himself. Yet, he is apprehended right at the very beginning. In the play, his arrest is steeped in the grotesque, pointing to Kafka's real-life experience: when read excerpts from his work aloud to a group of friends, he was given to bursts of laughter. The on-stage re-enactment of the scene is suffused with similar levels of the grotesque: the people who came to imprison Franz ate his breakfast. They are rude but in a way that reveals the protagonist's ludicrousness. The day-to-day hustle and bustle of Frau Grubach is juxtaposed with the commotion in the streets that we hear outside. An act of violence is also taking place outdoors. Somebody is attempting to beat somebody else up, deprive them of their liberty, compel them to do something. This is after all the most disturbing form of violence in the entire play: unclear, unnamed, indeterminate, and subcutaneous. This is a familiar situation in Poland, where violence is again permeating the social fabric – as it is wont to when the approval of brute force is on the increase. Here lie the roots of evil. On the surface, Franz seems exempt. His arrest comes from a different dimension; it comes out of the blue and without any clear reason. But if there is an arrest, then there must be guilt. Alas! When they arrive at your doorstep to take you into custody, you will feel guilty even though you went to sleep last night blameless. They come in the early hours. In Kafka's novel and in today's Poland. About six in the morning. Even if the transgression was dubious (for instance, distribution of the portrait of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa with a rainbow halo round her head⁴), the arrest would befit a suspected war criminal.

The plan worked: Franz immediately got caught up in the topic of guilt, walking straight into the trap. The question arises: Who set the trap? Without further ado Lupa offers an answer typical of his theatre and his own rationale: by the writer, the author, Franz Kafka, the artist. Thus, the presence of the protagonist's doppelgänger on stage becomes crystal-clear and justified. Guilt lies at the artist's doorstep, it stems from his responsibility for the audiences of his play. The theme of the artist is a staple of Lupa's theatre, so it is no wonder that it returns in *The Trial*, where there is assumption of guilt and,

3 Krystian Lupa, 'Zatrzymani: My', interview by Piotr Gruszczyński, *Proces. Lupa/Kafka*, programme accompanying *The Trial*, New Theatre, Warsaw 2017, pp. 143–144.

4 See Robert Kowalski, 'Policja zatrzymała Elżbietę Podleśną za Matkę Boską z Tęczową Aureolą. Brudziński: Bo sprofanowała', *Oko.press*, 6 May 2019, <https://oko.press/podlesna-zatrzymana-matka-teczowa/>, [accessed 12 June 2019].

subsequently, an accusation. In his *Diaries*, Lupa notes:

The elite of the avant-garde did not save the world; participation in the galloping process of progress produces its own elite, for whom involvement in the race becomes their *raison d'être*. Does – or perhaps did – this growth of artistic motives run parallel to the changes affecting our humanity? Is the cultural elite (artists, the creative sector) capable of referring to the dark and mysterious state that present-day society is embroiled in? This degeneration into infantilism, in which the cradling of the arts lasts as long as I – either out of my volition or not – confront them, allow them to accompany my formative years, my childhood, my school years. The impact of the arts is diluted by the influence of the contemporary virtual ludic world, which maintains the depths of childhood, into which we tumble through our games with mythical building blocks and gadgets. Up until now, the relationship of culture and the arts to ludic needs was associated with the standards of our group relations, with art acting as a process that galvanises our spiritual growth as the most serious and most profound process of self-creation and one's intuition, and one's metaphysical needs [...] As a result of intellectual – spiritual – fallibility, humanity falls into the abyss of war. [...] I cannot at this stage attune to the intuitions of THE ART OF THE FUTURE. I refuse to. It is necessary to return to the place to which reality has returned – at this juncture, this excessively accelerated, emaciated drive of the spiritual project becomes irrelevant.⁵

The author thus becomes the accused. But so do the audience who, absorbed in infantile gabble, are unable to generate demand for high culture. This calls for yet another quotation – this time taken from the script:

I am fearful, I feel apprehensive... This is the dawn of a terrible world, a world populated by humans watching action films, endless shootouts, cars falling into an abyss to be immediately engulfed by flames, people dying by the thousand... They then sit down at their desks and pass judgement on others...⁶

At this point, I think, we might begin to understand the disappointment of the audience attending the premiere as well as the earnest response to *The Trial* across Europe as it tours at the invitation of the largest festivals. I reckon that in Warsaw we expected an approach brimming with empathy for the community representing left-wing values and its martyrs, remonstrating against the actions of the ultra-conservative government. Instead, we joined the ranks of the accused. We are responsible for many failings that enabled the right-wing takeover. We watch too many films with cars falling off cliffs. We have become estranged from one another. We do not know the people we live among. And we refuse to acknowledge it all. We are like Franz, conducting suspicious erotic experiments – alone, cloistered in his own room, wrapped in asphyxia-inducing cling film. To what end? We will never know.

A product of the nightlong improvisation session carried out by the cast without the presence of the director, the scene in which

⁵ Krystian Lupa, 'Dziennik procesu', *Proces. Lupa/Kafka*, p. 42.

⁶ Krystian Lupa, *The Trial*, script, unpublished work, 2017, unpag.

Franz's doppelgänger – whom I identify with the author – becomes the accused in the eyes of novel's key characters, who – for the duration of the scene – step outside their roles specific to *The Trial*, becoming Kafka's closest contemporaries, is pivotal to the play. Felice Bauer, Greta Bloch, and Max Brod make an appearance. This is an additional scene, one that disrupts the narrative of *The Trial* and takes place in an odd dosshouse; it resembles a nightmare, in which characters found themselves in through an incomprehensible dream-like logic. There are conversations about Franz (Kafka's) failed, unwanted and toxic relations with women. Max Brod also reads out passages from *Twenty-Seventeen*, an utterly peculiar book that – in an Orwellian style – depicts Polish realities as they were in 2017 and which, since then, have only become harsher and more distressing.

The scene culminates in the following sentence: "A human being set himself on fire in Central Square. We cannot take it any more..." Lupa refers to the self-immolation of Piotr Szczęsny, who on 19 October 2017, shortly before the play's premiere, killed himself by setting himself alight in the vicinity of the Palace of Culture in Warsaw. Szczęsny did so in protest against Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice], the ruling party. Engaged in rehearsals at the Studio Theatre located in the Palace of Culture, the cast were near the site at the time of the incident. The dramatic gesture of a desperate citizen did not, however, win the hearts and minds of the Poles. The same day, a columnist for *Gazeta Wyborcza* on her Twitter account ruled out the possibility of classifying Szczęsny's gesture as political, suggesting that it was the act of a mentally ill man, a private gesture resulting from depression⁷. The Polish language offers a beautiful expression denoting futility of combat effort: "to spill blood in vain" [literally, "blood into the sand"]. This is precisely what transpired. Piotr Szczęsny was not arrested; he was not to blame but he pointed his accusatory finger at us – both in the audience and on stage. He arrested us. *Twenty-Seventeen* abounds in passages on the dictatorship of the small, insignificant person, on unbridled greed and the hubris of the authorities, on the merciless drive towards the one and only goal that is power itself. But the guilty are sitting in the auditorium – we are to blame for having allowed it all to happen. From the stage we hear the words:

- Perhaps what happened before was just a whopping great lie; we convinced ourselves that it all made sense. Perhaps that's how it was?
- How it was, I don't quite understand...
- It was peaceful, there was stillness, we believed in our hallucinations and considered them reality. Nobody bothered us...

This intimate scene touches also upon the complicity on the part of actors. The figures coruscate with fully-fledged personalities and on-stage presence encompassing the protagonist of the novel, the protagonist of the play, a person from the private life of Kafka, and the actor. This is one of Lupa's typical and favourite directorial devices, one that he has employed since *Factory 2*, which offered a peculiar form of re-enactment of events in Andy Warhol's milieu. I chose the word

⁷ Dominika Wielowieyska, post on Twitter, 19 October 2018, <https://twitter.com/DWielowieyska/status/921049925848326144>, [accessed 12 June 2019].

“peculiar” as neither Lupa nor his actors attempted to replay or represent the life at Factory, but instead sought to transpose the New York experience onto their Kraków one, onto the pure possibility or potentiality that the that situation might bestow upon the present, located in a disparate geographic and mental reality.

The identity of the on-stage persona remains forever fuzzy, balancing between privacy and the theatrical material (for it is no longer literary). Directing the actors in this fashion results in a more emphatic address to the audience – at this juncture – still attempting to follow the protean shifts on-stage while being deprived of the security of any sense of conventionality. In light of this, conducted on the margins of Kafkaesque strands, the discussions relating to the actors’ responsibility – whether and how the theatre can impact the outside world and change it, whether the theatre possesses any real political (or at least critical) potential – are all the more intense.

In this scene, the actors very much approximate the position and stance of the viewers. They do so by conventionalising the political nature of theatre as a medium, reducing it to a tool of propaganda, manipulating the spectators’ attention and presence, thus concealing its crucial political potential. Toward the end of the scene – and in the latter-part of the five-hour performance – they decide to collectively write a letter to humanity. This is an idea consistent with the enfeebled and dispersed Polish opposition, in keeping with the weakening of liberal-democratic circles all over Europe: petitions, manifestos, appeals, and protests. How many have we produced? How many have we signed, convinced well beforehand of the futility of our actions and their absolute ineffectiveness? A letter to humanity written by the cast of *The Trial* is tantamount to such lofty and hollow activities: “Don’t kill each other!”.

The message of Lupa’s play is primarily determined by the new scenes and texts written specially for the performance and once referred to by the director as apocrypha. Of these, the most emblematic and alluding directly to the state of free culture in Poland and to the situation of the Polish Theatre in Wrocław is the one depicting a tour of the corridors of the court. Franz is shown around by the court usher. It is a thoroughly unpleasant and unwanted excursion – its *abject* itinerary being both domineering and irresistible – and takes place mainly in the wings, far away from the stage where the cast sit in chairs arranged in a row, like the titular “chaired” in Andrzej Wróblewski’s paintings. This is the court’s waiting room. Sitting motionless, the actors are gagged with thick tape. They thus repeat the gesture from the final performances at the Polish Theatre in Wrocław just before Morawski formally took over and the plays, together with the actors, were removed from the theatre, when the actors bowed to the audience with their mouths taped over. Looking at them, Franz is baffled and petrified. This wait is interminable, in vain, desperate and devoid of any subjectivity. This highly metaphorical image soon morphs into a large-scale overhead projection. We see the cast on-screen, standing in a line somewhere outdoors, the surroundings grey, autumnal and leafless. In a moment, a short machine gun burst will resound and all the actors will spasmodically fall onto the ground. Shot dead. Now we know

what verdicts are in the offing. In a flash, the grotesque element of Kafka's novel vanishes into thin air. Thus, the definitive nature of the finale comes as no surprise. In the novel, Joseph K. is murdered "like a dog." In the play, the entire cast rally round on stage, which – thanks to the on-screen projection – has now turned into a cavernous cathedral, an edifice taken straight from the book's conclusion. The court messengers, who at the beginning arrested Franz / Josef, have now, in the presence of speechless and motionless witnesses, internalized the capacity to kill. When the tension becomes unbearable, Lupa abruptly breaks off the performance. We hear the final sentence: "You know full well what follows..." The lights go out immediately.

Krystian Lupa has long been regarded in Poland as an artist reluctant to discuss social and political matters. Since the right-wing government came to power, he has become an increasingly visible commentator on ongoing changes. In his interviews and in texts-manifestos he does not conceal his critical attitude to anti-democratic and anti-liberal practices. *The Trial* brings such gestures to the stage. Interestingly, Lupa did not avail himself of any text by Thomas Bernhard, his kindred spirit. Rather than adopt the stance of a veridicus indiscriminately dropping truth bombs and castigating the world of middle-class rules that inevitably result in the neo-fascist right-wing radicalisation of social life, he instead opted for a disparate text (one that was left unfinished by the author and posthumously edited by Max Brod). He inserted himself into his glum structure, effacing any platitudes and hateful conclusion. His is a meandering statement, as – given the current state of Poland and Europe at large – there was no other option at hand, when we are progressively losing our grip on the balance of power and we are feeling increasingly guilty, accused, and almost ready to be handcuffed. There is no more room in Bernhard's armchair, one offering a safe vantage point to observe the surroundings and comment on the proceedings (even letting off a couple of volleys at the world. We are on show, like in the theatre. Let us return to the mirror phase, in the Lacanian rather than Shakespearean sense. Let us judge ourselves.

Translated by Bartosz Wójcik

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ABSTRACT

Piotr Gruszczyński
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The article analyses Krystian Lupa's staging of *The Trial*, an adaptation of Franz Kafka's novel *Der Process*, highlighting the complex political and institutional conditions surrounding the work. The author examines why the Polish audience responded to the play with considerable reservations, manifesting their disappointment and disapproval, while internationally it met with understanding and was considered a profound work. The author argues that Lupa, who in recent years has been deeply involved in public debates and has criticized the anti-democratic activities undertaken by the current right-wing government of Poland, has opted in his play to give voice to a painful critique of his own liberally-minded audience, people who appear oblivious to the shallowness of their own stance, helpless and baffled by the present-day balance of power, and thus devoid of genuine communal thinking. The article also discusses the critical capacity of art and its ability to change the world. Until the work on *The Trial*, Lupa had remained steadfast in his belief that artistic mechanisms could impact upon the very social fabric by appealing to audience's souls and spirituality. *The Trial* offers painful evidence to the contrary.

Keywords: Krystian Lupa, *The Trial*, political theatre.