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in the Early 21st Century

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Writing about revolutionary art, Boris Groys¹ mentions two main ways of understanding the political role of contemporary art. The first of these is critique of the dominant political, economic or artistic systems, and the second is mobilization of the audience to change these systems with the promise of a social utopia. The former function is related to the mechanisms of representation: in order to be able to criticize something, one must first reproduce, analyse, recreate and deconstruct the language used to discuss matters of social importance. The latter concerns the performative aspect in art, emphasizing relations with viewers, stimulating them to act, and attempts to achieve a permanent change in reality.

In terms of theatre, this division will more or less correspond to the division into the Bertolt Brecht line and that of Antonin Artaud, as proposed by Jacques Rancière in his famous lecture 'The Emancipated Spectator'.² Of course, these lines will constantly meet, intersect and weave together. Any attempts at pigeonholing artistic phenomena meet with understandable resistance, such is the risk of far-reaching simplifications and omissions. Perhaps, though, it is worth forgoing analytical subtlety in favour of creating a synthetic model and examining how in recent years Polish theatre and German theatre have sought, both similarly and differently, to employ political strategies.

Generations

There is undoubtedly a generational aspect to political theatre. This periodization is particularly evident in Germany, where the first wave of politically engaged theatre (in the modern sense of the word) arrived in the 1920s. What its creators, headed by Erwin Piscator, had in common was their experience of the trenches of the First World War,³ contacts with the representatives of left-wing movements, and involvement with turbulent changes in politics, the economy and social mores. The second most important generation which came to the fore last century was that of the mid-1960s. Its first wave was that of documentary theatre, directly inspired by the wave of dealing with Germany's fascist past (dominated

1 Boris Groys, 'Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich', e-flux journal, 9 (2013) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/becoming-revolutionary-on-kazimir-malevich/>, [accessed: 25 October 2014].

2 Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', <http://members.efn.org/~heroux/The-Emancipated-Spectator-.pdf>, [accessed: 14 September 2015].

3 Dorota Sajewska mentions this in her book *Pod okupacją mediów* (Warsaw: Książka i Prasa, 2012).

by people in their forties and fifties who had as adults actively participated in the events of the Second World War, such as Heinar Kipphardt and Peter Weiss, as well as older artists, like Piscator who in 1962 became director of the Freie Volksbühne in Berlin). The second wave was characterized by rebellion against the bourgeois world order, and was dominated by those in their thirties, who had been small children during the war – contemporaries of the Red Army Faction such as Claus Peymann, Peter Handke and Peter Stein. This was also the time when Heiner Müller began to face censorship in the East Germany, while gaining increasing popularity in West Germany.

In Poland it was a similar story: the generations making political theatre were closely connected to historical turning points. The First World War did not really bring a generation together, although of course in the inter-war years several eminent personalities dealing with political theatre in theory and practice appeared – Leon Schiller and Witold Wandurski among them. It would be a different case with the thaw of 1956, when playwriting and directorial debuts came to a head (Sławomir Mrożek, Tadeusz Różewicz, Jerzy Jarocki, Jerzy Grotowski and in a certain sense also Konrad Swinarski), and in 1968 (the members of the ‘young and talented’ who were most interested in the political dimension of the theatre were Helmut Kajzar, Izabella Cywińska and Maciej Prus).

The similarities of the chronologies would result from the similarities in the two countries’ histories (particularly in the case of socialist East Germany), as well as the fact that Polish artists (who often had an excellent command of German, especially in the case of those born before the war or raised in the borderlands), as they have from at least the times of Schiller and Mickiewicz, would carefully follow developments on the other side of the River Oder, and often also study or work in Germany. This fascination could explain such things as the speedy ‘import’ of 1960s documentary theatre to Poland (the highly controversial world premiere of Rolf Hochhuth’s *The Deputy*, directed by Piscator, took place in 1963, with Kazimierz Dejmek’s Polish premiere following three years later).

After 1989 (and especially 2004, when Poland became a member of the European Union), the politics and economy of the countries of Central Europe would be to a great extent a common matter; scant trace would remain of the previous borders, and international festivals, co-productions and creative scholarships would facilitate exchange of experiences. Yet the dynamic of the changes of theatrical generations in the two countries would progress quite differently.

In Germany, theatre in the new millennium is shaped above all by *Generation Mauer* or the ‘Wall Generation’ (to use the term popularized by Ines Geipel’s influential book⁴) – artists born in the 1960s who at the time of the political transformation were already trained artists, often already working for several years, and with a mature social awareness (René Pollesch, Christoph Schlingensiefel, Armin Petras, Michael Thalheimer, Stefan Pucher, Thomas Ostermeier, for example), and who began their activity in the mid-1990s. Most of them were associated with a specific place – the Volksbühne in Berlin, headed by Frank Castorf, who opened the stage to the most politically and formally radical artists (along with Schlingensiefel, Pollesch and Pucher, there were Johann

4 Cf. Ines Geipel, *Generation Mauer: Ein Porträt* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2014).

Kresnik and Christoph Marthaler). In Poland, one can compare with *Generation Mauer* to a certain degree with the 'younger and more talented' with Krzysztof Warlikowski at the helm. But only later would a real wave of socially engaged theatre arrive, mostly comprising directors and playwrights born in the 1970s (including Jan Klata, Maja Kleczewska, Michał Zadara, Barbara Wysocka, Paweł Demirski, Monika Strzępka, Michał Borczuch, Agnieszka Olsten, Wojtek Klemm) and launching their careers around 2003 in an atmosphere that suited political theatre. The factors that created this atmosphere were numerous: for example, the activity of *Krytyka Polityczna*, founded in 2002, and the Theatre Institute, established in 2003, as well as the new directorship at the Jerzy Szaniawski Theatre in Wałbrzych (Piotr Kruszczyński), the Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk (Maciej Nowak, who selected Paweł Demirski as artistic director) and the National Sławy Theatre in Kraków (Mikołaj Grabowski, supported by artistic director Grzegorz Niziołek and curator Agata Siwiak). Such new theatres and groups as Łaźnia Nowa in Kraków and komuna//warszawa (formerly Komuna Otwock) in the capital built bridges between mainstream and fringe, joined by projects like Teren Warszawa at Teatr Rozmaitości (later TR Warszawa) in 2003–2005. This all produced a unique atmosphere in which new political theatre was allowed to mature, inspired by Polish translations of works by Werner Schwab and Elfriede Jelinek, and performances by Frank Castorf and René Pollesch, Christoph Marthaler and Christoph Schlingensiefel, taken in at national festivals and on trips to Berlin. The influences of German theatre on its Polish counterpart are obvious, and the similarities too. Less evident are the differences. But this is what makes them the most interesting – which is why they are worth a closer look.

Deconstruction of Bourgeois Theatre

I don't know what Frank Castorf's plays have more of – theatre or politics. In any case both of them are equally interesting. His premieres are the latest edition of a satirical-interventionist daily newspaper, current as hell. [...] Castorf talks to the audience as if they're good friends, he is direct and literal. The desire to shock has been replaced by the need for honesty. The Volksbühne is a supposedly leftie and anarchistic theatre, but lefties and anarchists aren't spared here either. [...] Frank Castorf's idea for life and art is simple: the role of the intellectual is being against. Contesting the ruling system, exposing its deficiencies and confessions.⁵

In his review of Castorf's stage version of Tim Staffell's novel *Terrordrom*, Łukasz Drewniak came up with an extremely apposite definition of the phenomenon of the director's Volksbühne – a theatre whose aesthetics inspired practically all the major Polish directors who have debuted since the changes of 1989, from Warlikowski and Grzegorz Jarzyna, via Klemm (an assistant of Castorf), Klata, Kleczewska, Zadara, Wysocka, Strzępka, Michał Liber and Wiktor Rubin, to Radosław Rychcik, Krzysztof Garbaczewski and Michał Kmiecik.

Castorf creates an ostentatiously tasteless, silly, arrogant, incoherent and ugly theatre. The lyrics of Rolling Stones songs are worth more to him than all the classics rolled into one, although he has directed

5 Łukasz Drewniak, 'Mój przyjaciel Joschka Fischer', *Didaskalia*, 28 (1998), p. 94.

Sophocles and Shakespeare, Schiller and Goethe, Ibsen and Chekhov, Hebbel and Wagner. He takes the most burning current themes – the legacy of German history, deceptions of the ruling parties, perversions of capitalism, absurdities of art subjected to market mechanisms, hypocrisy in everyday life – and criticizes them without moralizing, but with venomous cynicism (which his less courageous imitators are generally lacking). Yet this cynicism springs from the director's absolute honesty himself – Castorf is well aware that most of the guilt shared with contemporary Germans is shared by him too, and sees a number of absurd contradictions in himself: he hates East Germany and yet misses it, is disgusted and also fascinated by America, mocks pop culture but takes delight in its consumption, defends the dignity of women yet treats them as objects. And all this in the marble-decked spaces of the Volksbühne, with the best actors in the country. Most of his plays finish having run amok and in total demolition of the stage, a small, dirty and ugly apocalypse to suit our time – absolutely without metaphysics.

Gerhart Hauptmann's 'roguish play' *The Weavers* (1997) was Castorf's first to be presented in Poland after the region's political transformation, and had a huge influence on the shape of new Polish theatre. Its subject was real and metaphorical hunger. Castorf dealt out blows left, right and centre, criticizing both capitalist exploiters (who had changed little since Hauptmann's time) and the proletariat (who since Hauptmann's time had changed only for the worse). In the play, the eponymous weavers were by no means in a rush to work, but they were masters at celebrating their 'entitled' approach. The most frequent conservative criticism of the Volksbühne is that theatre audiences want to watch beautiful and good people. But, asks the director rhetorically, did such people ever exist? And even if one did, then, as in the title of a book by Castorf's beloved Dostoevsky, unfortunately it was an idiot, slipping on a banana peel.

The closest that Polish theatre comes to Castorf's radical, constantly compromising and self-compromising position are director Monika Strzępka and writer Paweł Demirski (also columnists for *Krytyka Polityczna*). This team consistently work in public theatres (even – *quelle horreur!* – at the private Teatr IMKA in the capital), generally presenting their own paraphrases of classic literary works (from Adam Mickiewicz via Chekhov to Brecht). Critics writing about their work use such adjectives as 'anarchistic', 'rowdy', 'terrorist', 'shameless', 'over-the-top', 'subversive' and 'scandal-filled'. The team thinks nothing of the petty-bourgeois criteria of good taste and moderation, and are not afraid of exaggeration, simplifications and spelling things out. Demirski's scripts usually come about during rehearsals, reacting in real time to current political events – this is the new *Zeittheater*, no longer the era of the printed press but of independent, partisan Internet journalism. At the same time, although history is at the centre, it is always read 'against the grain' – whether it be as a negative of the tacky 'historical spectacle to rival Hollywood' (*Bitwa Warszawska* 1920 [*Battle of Warsaw* 1920] at the National Stary Theatre, 2013, inspired by Jerzy Hoffman's film), or as perverse political fiction showing what if... Germany had won the war (*Sztuka dla dziecka* [*Child's Play*]) (the Norwid Theatre in Jelenia Góra, 2009). It is hardly surprising that Strzępka and Demirski's hero is Dario Fo (second only to Brecht).

This would almost be propaganda theatre if not for one crucial fact:

both artists – in keeping with the rules of critical art – consistently and courageously nail their own colours to the mast and reveal their involvement in all possible systems. In *Tęczowa trybuna 2012* [*Rainbow Stand 2012*] (the Polski Theatre in Wrocław, 2011), they lampooned the champagne leftism of Warlikowski and attacked homophobes and rainbow-flag-waving, foppish and out-of-touch hipsters with equal passion. In the play *W imię Jakuba S.* [*In the Name of Jakub S.*] (the Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw, 2011), they posed an awkward question: ‘Why did you let yourself become part of an alien history?’, and with sadistic delight recreated on stage both dark noble and peasant legends, and the absurdities of the lives of today’s middle class, to which they themselves belong, meekly agreeing to join in a race with other rats baited by a mortgage and material goods. In *Courtney Love* (the Polski Theatre in Wrocław, 2012), amid songs by Nirvana, they told of a revolution absorbed by commerce and depression.

There is no utopia (except in party and Church manifestos), there is no community (except at rock festivals that are actually huge adverts for global corporations, or football matches). A furious cry will change nothing – but one may not be silent.

Documentary

‘Wherever One Looks: Documentary Theatre Everywhere’ – this was the provocative title the late doyen of German criticism, Martin Linzer, chose for one of his articles.⁶ In it, Linzer recalled the great years of documentary theatre, the 1960s, when these texts, staged by the greatest directors, were played in Germany’s top theatres, encountering furious protest from bourgeois audiences. Much has changed since then – with a few exceptions, documentary theatre takes place in repertoire venues as depoliticized, serial ‘petty realism’, while true documentary theatre is made independently, without the participation of professional actors and a foundation on literary texts.

The best-known makers of this type of theatre in Germany and Poland are without doubt Helgard Haug, Daniel Wetzell and Stefan Kaegi, who since the start of the new millennium have been creating shows, performances and dramas under the banner of Rimini Protokoll. They have no permanent association with any institution (although sometimes they use the spaces of repertoire theatres), and do not work with any theatre ‘professionals’. Florian Malzacher and Miriam Dreysse defined their output as follows:

(unlike most television documentaries) they are not crudely affirming a reality but presenting a complex world in which the individual is fundamental and the truth is always a narrative. War, global market economy, capitalism, unemployment, old age, dying, death; all are Rimini Protokoll’s themes. They stake a claim for the particular, concrete person against the politically generalised, in the way that documentary material is confronted with subjective experiences, the social and the individual are combined, and information about subjective perception is expanded. While clear-cut theses, messages and opinions are avoided, Haug, Kaegi and Wetzell make, to quote Godard loosely, theatre political

⁶ Martin Linzer, ‘Wo man hinschaut: Doku-Theater’, *Theater der Zeit*, 1 (2014), p. 69.

rather than political theatre.⁷

The artists work collectively, defining their method modestly as ‘searching for what exists’ rather than a proud directorial *creatio ex nihilo*. The material from which they create their projects is biographies of people they meet: lorry drivers, politicians, call-centre workers, grave-diggers. Hours of recorded conversations allow them to compile material from which they then extract the most interesting topics and issues, and from these assemble a script. The material is used in the play in all its wealth and diversity: on stage appear the play’s protagonists (‘experts of the everyday’), who will voice their own issues – albeit dramatically edited – and excerpts from recordings, unrefined props that are both *objets trouvés* and material evidence in an investigation on the trail of reality.

Although the artists employ methods similar to journalistic ones in their work, they stress that they are not interested in seeking the abstract ideal of ‘the truth’. They do not check whether their ‘experts’ are honest with them, or invent and embroider; the most important thing for them is how they talk about themselves and their experiences, what narratives they create, and what relations the various narrative streams form with each other.

Rimini Protokoll often give a voice to the excluded, whose stories are not heard in the public space (Bulgarian lorry drivers in *Cargo Sofia*), and are frequently deliberately drowned out (employees of the bankrupt airline Sabena in *Sabenation: Go Home and Follow the News*). In this way, following Brecht’s proposal, they teach viewers to look, and not to stare, to be suspicious of the official narratives and the media’s ways of creating an image of reality.

In Polish theatre, a working method close to that of Rimini Protokoll remains a rarity. The Szybki Theatre initiative in Gdańsk, heralded as ‘the first Polish documentary theatre’, used the verbatim method taken from practices of the Royal Court Theatre in London. Demirski, the main playwright of the project, used his journalistic experience to collect stories of the excluded (homeless people, migrants from the east, widows of Polish soldiers, women who have had abortions), yet the histories that emerged in this way were pronounced from the stage by professional actors. It is a similar story with the work of the Sopot Non-Fiction workshops, organized for several years by Roman Pawłowski and Adam Nalepa (among their themes have been apostasy, paedophilia and female criminals).

The Ósmy Dzień Theatre (inmates in *Osadzeni. Młyńska 1* [*Prisoners. 1 Młyńska Street*]) and directors collaborating with Łaźnia Nowa in Kraków (children in Iga Gańczarczyk’s *Piccolo Coro Dell Europa* and *Najwyraźniej nigdy nie był pan 13-letnią dziewczynką* [*Obviously You’ve Never Been a 13-year-old Girl*]) opt to give the floor to experts, yet these plays are more dramatic than epic in structure. The production that came closest to the formula developed by Rimini Protokoll was *Transfer!* (2006), produced at the Współczesny Theatre in Wrocław by Jan Klata. The director dealt with a topic that remains vivid and politically

7 Miriam Dreysse, Florian Malzacher, Foreword, in: *Rimini Protokoll: Experts of the Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*, ed. by Miriam Dreysse, Florian Malzacher, trans. by Daniel Belasco Rogers (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2008), p. 2.

controversial in Wrocław (before the premiere, the play met with protests from the political right): the resettlement of Poles and displacement of Germans, with stories collected from a group of Poles and Germans by four playwrights writing in Polish- and German. Except for one of the 'experts', a young writer, all of them had participated in the events in question as children, but their stories did not always have the status of bearing witness: very personal recollections were combined with narratives of parents inherited as post-memory, as well as various manifestations of collective memory (for example, political jokes). As Mateusz Borowski wrote:

[...] in *Transfer!* the past was represented as an absent, un-reconstructable reality, to which referred, like an index, not so much the verbal account as the very presence of living witnesses. After all, each of them was presenting on stage not only their own history, but also their own unique personality and body, in which the experiences from their whole lives had been put away. So it is hardly surprising that in Klata's play the past was attested to on equal terms by stories about the operations of the Home Army military unit [Polish underground combatants] and old German jokes about the leaders of the Third Reich. Memory took on a material form not only as some of the witnesses were speaking in their native language, i.e. German. Their stories were also often accompanied by authentic objects and characteristic gestures associated with some crucial moment in the past, and also at a certain point by songs, sung a capella, by evidently untrained voices. Klata therefore wanted to show recollections of the past captured in a moment when they had not yet become part of the official, ordained memory. The material trace of it, which does not differ from other objects, testifying with its presence here and now to times past.⁸

The power of the stories of 'experts' was underlined by the presence on a platform over the stage of professional actors impersonating the unholy trinity of the Yalta Conference: Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. The clash of their hyper-theatre with the anti-theatre of amateurs brought great tension. Klata's storytelling strategy allowed him to question the official historical narratives that are frequently instrumentalised by certain political parties. And also to demand a history that is not only a common issue, but also – and above all – a private one.

Media

Among the principal guidelines of the education system at the famous Institute for Applied Theatre Studies at Giessen University (whose graduates include René Pollesch, Stefan Pucher, Boris Nikito and members of the collectives Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, She She Pop, Showcase Beat Le Mot and Hofmann&Lindholm) has from the outset⁹ been the thesis about pervasive mediatization of the world in which we live. The media is no small element of reality, and consequently not an optional

8 Mateusz Borowski, 'Nakazana przeszłość', in: *Zła pamięć. Przeciw-historia w polskim teatrze i dramacie*, ed. by Monika Kwaśniewska, Grzegorz Niziołek (Wrocław: Instytut im. Jerzego Grotowskiego, 2012), p. 71.

9 Cf. Andrzej Wirth, *Byle dalej. Autobiografia mówiona i materiały*, ed. by Thomas Irmer, Polish trans. by Mateusz Borowski, Anna R. Burzyńska, Małgorzata Leyko, Małgorzata Sugiera (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Z. Raszewskiego, 2014).

ornament in theatre productions. Everything is a medium (including theatre). According to the ideas of Bruno Latour¹⁰ and Samuel Weber,¹¹ humans function in a dense network of media connections to other people, living beings, ideas and objects, between technology, life and science. Traditional theatre was unabashedly anthropocentric and logocentric; in today's work, this type of approach is increasingly anachronistic and at odds with reality. One of the most important groups seeking a new language for theatre in the media world is the German-British collective Gob Squad. For close to two decades, the group's artists have been experimenting with looking for new ways of combining new media and performance, creating urban actions, theatre productions, plays and video installations. In their theatre, post-dramatic through and through, they attempt to do the impossible, joining opposites: longing for real things with a mistrust towards all forms of mimesis (both traditional, Aristotelian and that of film/television/computers/Internet). Using video cameras, improvisation and diverse forms of enticing the viewer into the action of the play, Gob Squad produce an effect of (hyper-) reality and also transgress it, exposing the technological secrets of their productions.

In a sense, Gob Squad explore both the political streams highlighted by Boris Groys, highlighted at the outset of this essay. They test and deconstruct situations, systems, ideas, myths and languages – but at the same time create a certain utopia, starting from the collective working methods of the seven-person group (whose members, with a background in theatre studies and video art, are not ashamed to take on the roles of playwrights and directors, actors and cameramen, choreographers and dancers, MCs and editors), and finishing by engaging the audience, who in their performances have the right to join in, refuse to participate, influence their course and even cut them off. So it is no surprise that the group's most famous project-show, *Gob Squad's Kitchen* (2007), is an attempt to repeat Andy Warhol's gesture of making the film *Kitchen* in his Factory. As in Warhol's production, Gob Squad's also had no plot, script or roles, but just improvised dialogue and real/unreal actions, while the camera following the action allowed viewers to infinitely multiply the levels of fiction and reach ever deeper layers of reality. The tension grew out of the dialectic of repetition and difference. It was a similar case with the production *Western Society* (2013), in which randomly selected viewers were invited onto the stage and asked to recreate the situations of a boring family party recorded in a short film on YouTube, whose sole virtue was the lowest number of hits. Between the protagonists of the film, their likenesses in the recording, the performers of Gob Squad, the viewer-actors on stage, their reflection on screen and the rest of the audience, a web of complicated references developed; the joint attempt to reconstruct the party evolved into an intriguing and dangerous game, whose participants were forced – like in a psychodrama – to play out private relations and answer very personal, difficult questions ('mother or father?', 'Catholicism or Islam?', 'love without sex or sex without love?').

Although in Polish theatre, thinking about the medium as a technologically more advanced set design continues to be dominant, efforts are

10 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

11 Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, transl. by William Lovitt (New York: Fordham Press, 2004).

increasingly common to go beyond such simplifications. Non-standard thinking about media and experimenting with a post-dramatic formula has for years been a trademark of the work of the group *komuna//warszawa*; their RE//MIX series (2010–2014) was an unprecedented artistic event, in which directors and choreographers were invited to present multidisciplinary projects inspired by the memory (one's own, 'living', or mediatized, with recordings as a go-between) of important accomplishments from the archive of avant-garde performative art.

The RE//MIX series was opened by Wojtek Ziemilski with *Poor Theatre: remiks* (2010), which invoked both Jerzy Grotowski and Józef Szajny, as the makers of the play *Akropolis*, and the Wooster Group, as authors of the project *Poor Theatre* that referred to *Akropolis*. Ziemilski's path to the theatre has been a circuitous one – on the way, he was a video artist, critical commentator on contemporary art with his own blog, and attentive observer of contemporary dance. In an interview about new media in theatre, Ziemilski declared:

I think that theatre doesn't need to be derivative. Art is not afraid to enter the performative field. Nobody asks themselves whether relational aesthetics is still art or not. Theatre could learn to be so brazen. It seems to me that this is a brilliant moment for theatre – visual arts are heading towards the performative side, looking for another way of defining what an aesthetic experience can be. And theatre has brilliant tools for that. Video processed by the scenicality, the 'liveness', could be one of them.¹²

In his productions, Ziemilski is constantly redefining the medium of theatre and the relations between actor (or rather performer) and audience. He cannot stand theatrical pretence, and is fascinated by the process. In his version of Philippe Blasband's *Zapomniana wioska za górami* [*The Forgotten Village beyond the Mountains*] (Teatr Studio, 2010), he gave the actors the task of reading the text, while works in progress by three sculptors were presented on two screens suspended over the stage. During the reading, the sculptors – Alicja Wysocka, Wojciech Pustoła and Karol Słowik – worked from various objects (sugar cubes, toothpicks, nails). The entire show was recorded by three video cameras, and Ziemilski assembled a picture in real time, using the methods of Real Time Composition and devising theatre.

Some of Ziemilski's projects grew out of a fascination with a specific technology (*Mapa* [*Map*], produced at *komuna//warszawa* in 2010, in which viewers followed the picture from portable mini-projectors), and others from a desire to test the potential concealed in a theatre audience (*Prolog* [*Prologue*] at the Ochota Theatre in 2011, in which participants were forced to answer a series of indiscreet questions regarding the nature of their relationships and expectations from the theatre, so that after 'completion' of the questionnaire a kind of living diagram could be made in the space of the stage, specifying the audience profile).

Ziemilski (another *Krytyka Polityczna* columnist) makes plays largely about political questions: memory, responsibility, symbolic values and

12 'Medium czy gadżet? Wideo w teatrze'. Discussion between Mateusz Borowski, Mirek Kaczmarek, Bartek Macias, Wojciech Puś, Małgorzata Sugiera and Wojtek Ziemilski, *Didaskalia*, 107 (2012), p. 47.

the nature of community. *Mała narracja* [*Small Narration*] (2010) is a kind of performative lecture in which the artist makes use of press clippings, quotations from philosophical reading, photos, video recordings and finds from YouTube to carry out a lustration of his grandfather, who was accused of collaborating with the SB – the Polish secret police – in so doing also subjecting himself to an uncompromising self-lustration. In *Pokrewni* [*Relatives*] (Malta Festival, 2012), in the form of a performative installation, he intersects stories of Chinese women living in Poznań (the home of the Malta Festival), his own commentary, video projections, the results of Internet searches, meticulous bookkeeping making it possible to imagine the vastness of the Chinese Huang family, and a speech by President Lech Kaczyński addressed to the Polish diaspora in the United States detailing what it means to be Pole – or, in Ziemilski's version, what it means to be a Huang. Ziemilski proves that the character of identity is that of an exceptionally complex network in which the counterpoint for words and media images is the material presence of the body. Whatever happens in this network has an effect on all the other remaining components of it. Everything is a medium and everything is politics.

Chorus

The time after 1989 in German theatre is a time in which community become a key concept. On one hand, one longs for it, like for a paradise lost or an imagined utopia, by analysing the mechanisms that led to the atomisation of society into isolated, unneeded individuals who can only unite in the vacuum of the deserted waiting room of a station from which no more trains will depart – this was the devastating picture painted by Christoph Marthaler in *Murx den Europäer* [*Kill the European*] (Volksbühne, 1993). On the other hand, terrifying after-images of the *Massenmensch* return – that automatized, submissive and yet threatening human marching in a crowd of unified citizens of a totalitarian state. Such images – mass choreographies, bringing to mind shots from Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, repeated tirelessly for many hours by a crowd of several dozen actors – would become typical of the theatre of Einar Schleef and his productions such as Elfriede Jelinek's *Ein Sportstück* [*Sports Play*] (Burgtheater in Vienna, 1998).

In his dramatic and theoretical texts, Schleef often referred to theories of Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche and René Girard; his approach to the community could be called anthropological. In his theatre, the chorus is a tight group of characters who stay together out of fear, but at the same time hate each other, smother each other and are disgusted by the proximity of another person. When the tension becomes too much to bear, they choose a victim, a symbolic 'enemy', to be subjected to ritual destruction.

In her book *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, Erika Fischer-Lichte speaks of the 'rebirth of tragedy out of the chorus' in the German (but not only) theatre of the 1990s. She cites examples of productions by Robert Wilson, Jan Lauwers, Jossi Wieler and Volker Hesse, and discusses Marthaler's and Schleef's work. On the choruses in Schleef's plays, Fischer-Lichte writes:

[...] the members of each chorus not only wore identical clothes but also moved their bodies in seemingly the same rhythm, performing the same movements and speaking, whispering, shouting, roaring, howling, screaming,

whimpering and whining the same words in what appeared to be unison. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the chorus acted as a collective body, in which the individuality of the different chorus members dissolved and merged with the others. Rather, the chorus appeared to be a permanent battleground between individuals who want to join the community while maintaining their individual uniqueness, and the community, which strives for total incorporation of all its members and threatens alienation to those who insist on their individuality. Thus, a permanent tension existed in the chorus between the individual members and the community which they formed; a tension which caused an incessant flow within the chorus, a dynamic of transformation in terms of the individual's position in, and relationship to, the community. This tension never vanished; the chorus never transformed itself into a harmonious collective, but rather the tension intensified. It made itself felt as an act of violence done on the individual by the community as well as on the community by the individual, over and over again.¹³

Schleef's anthropological vision might clash with the sociological formula of the chorus developed by the director Volker Lösch in collaboration with his chorus master Bernd Freytag. Lösch's theatre is often described as agit-prop – it provocatively throws an ostentatiously, intentionally black-and-white picture of reality at the eyes (and ears) of the bourgeois viewers. The audience are accused of selfishness, greed and intolerance not by the artist, but entirely indirectly by victims of social mechanisms: the unemployed in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Staatsschauspiel in Dresden, 2003), Turkish immigrant women in Euripides' *Medea* (Schauspielhaus Stuttgart, 2007), prostitutes in Wedekind's *Lulu* (Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin, 2010), single mothers in Hauptmann's *The Rats* (Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, 2014). Those who usually have no voice regain it in Schleef's plays – working with the chorus master, they learn to control it so that it has even greater power.

Interest in choruses is a recurring theme in Polish theatre – in Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* directed by Maja Kleczewska (National Theatre in Warsaw, 2009) or Bożena Umińska-Keff's *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie* [*A Piece on Mother and Fatherland*] directed by Jan Klata (Polski Theatre in Wrocław, 2011). Certainly the most interesting, artistically excellent and intellectually profound expression of this comes in Marta Górnicka's productions at the Theatre Institute in Warsaw. Górnicka is a singer, actor, director, conductor, composer and librettist who, like Lösch, works with amateurs, but the high degree of formalization of her choreographed choruses is closer to Schleef. Yet this is an entirely separate phenomenon that arose without any direct influence from those I have cited in German-speaking theatre (albeit based in a way on the same expectations, tensions and desires). The best evidence of this is the 'individual' literary formula of Górnicka's productions. The first two plays, performed by a female cast ([*hu:r kobjə+*] I: *Tu mówi CHÓR: tylko 6 do 8 godzin, tylko 6 do 8 godzin* [*This Is the CHORUS Speaking: Only 6 to 8 Hours, Only 6 to 8 Hours*], 2010; [*hu:r kobjə+*] II: *MAGNIFICAT*, 2011), brought together Sophocles' *Antigone* and Stanisław Moniuszko's opera *Halka*, Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* and Lara Croft, Marilyn

13 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 244–245.

Monroe and Elfriede Jelinek, recipes and biblical passages, advertisements, press articles and statistical data. On the lips of the mass chorus, over two-dozen strong, she placed countless discourses to show that, paradoxically, women in Poland still do not have their own voice.

Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska wrote of the two productions:

The most important and fundamental thing in the project is the choral form. But surprising, built anew. Great power comes here from reforming it and giving it (restoring?) a social function. Marta Górnicka calls this form 'post-operative', and I understand this to mean not only a change in the way the musicality (sonicity) is conceived, but above all building a production entirely on the activities of the chorus: there is no orchestra or soloists, just the chorus does everything itself. It plays with body and voice (this is its own orchestra: it can sample, murmur, snort); when necessary, it appoints a soloist or group for a moment. But not for a second does it cease to be a chorus: the women are like one body, their breathing ideally aligned, their movement precise, all their words vocally harmonious and nailed, the conductor oversees them and adds tempo. Yet at the same time not for a moment is it a chorus, because it does not create a unified 'collective form' – on the contrary, it exhibits the choristers' individuality, giving the impression that they all speak in their own name, acting in this female community as 'I'. This also changes the meaning of the conductor's participation, as it is not a relationship of dependence, but of partnership; the audience too is not excluded, since the conductor stands among the viewers in the first row, so almost 'among us', and her energy is imparted to both sides and brings both groups (audience and choristers) closer together.¹⁴

Górnicka's theatre works bring together the two political streams written about by Groys very well. On one hand, she criticizes the dominant political, economic and artistic systems, as well as the languages used to reinforce them; on the other, she engages, activates and mobilizes the audience to change these systems, restoring for one theatrical moment the sense of a theatre community as a promise of a social utopia.

Translated by Benjamin Koschalka

Originally published in *Faktomontaże*, ed. Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Z. Raszewskiego, 2015).

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14 Ewa Guderian-Czaplińska, '[hur:a]', *Didaskalia* 2011, 105, p. 95.

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