

Bartosz Frąckowiak

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Challenges for New Political Theatre

<http://mbmh.pl/development/ptjournal/index.php/ptj/article/view/34/49>



Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego

Bartosz Frąckowiak

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The stake in political theatre is freedom.

And the method is: to identify power relations and transform them.

People are surrounded and infiltrated by processes and products (also from the symbolic realm – after all, even today's economy is becoming increasingly symbolic) which they created but which are now beyond their control. Capital, for example, which Marx and Engels wrote about in *The Communist Manifesto*: 'In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality'.¹ If anyone is in doubt as to whether the words of Marx and Engels are still correct and apply today, let them follow Internet forums about the stock exchange, the comments of market analysts or the mythological terminology used in their (apparently strictly scientific and mathematical) 'technical analysis'. A proliferation of anthropomorphic forms and formulas used to describe capital can be observed there, as well as the complete subjugation of people, their will and decisions, to vast global economic processes which no financial institutions, including central banks, can control.

Creations have taken control of creators. Yet creators, long immersed in a world full of such creations, are rarely aware of how greatly they impede them, how they diminish their freedom. They see them as natural and eternal but they are random and historical. Political theatre aims to banish these restrictions to freedom, an endeavour in which it finds solidarity with the New Left.

A considerable role in this process is played by aesthetic experience and the attempt to find new modes of perception – different from those favoured by the mass media – in theatre's 'politics of perception' as postulated by Hans-Thies Lehmann. A much smaller role is that of theatrical representation and the staging of roles and conflicts transplanted from social drama which plays out in the world outside theatre. Political theatre should designate new lines of demarcation between positions and stances, undermining those set in stone. If theatre merely represents social phenomena then it reproduces, strengthens and legitimates the existing order. Unfortunately political theatre has for too long been a theatre of representation. There is an urgent need for writing critically about those political or critical strategies which, for various reasons, no longer appear effective, that is, they do not lead to any desirable change in the social and symbolic space. We should not allow them, however, to

1 Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>, [accessed: 1 May 2015].

be completely forgotten or to fully abandon their potential application in artistic practice. First and foremost, it is important to understand their limitations and their accompanying dangers. It is only in their context that we can articulate accounts of the emancipatory potential of different techniques, means and methods which I consider to be the most effective for a new political theatre.

Against a Representative Theatre: a Theatre of Disillusion versus the 'Society of the Spectacle'

In speaking of politics, I do not refer merely to those with formally hold power. Politics in its broadest sense concerns principles according to which individuals coexist, the manner in which collective life is organized and the ethical debate which forms its basis. It is a game in which one vision of the world is at stake, at the cost of all others. Political action is therefore not limited solely to government and parliamentary organizations. It also includes activity in the symbolic realm, into which active political players introduce new categories or means of conceptualizing the world, which they use to underpin their attempts to introduce legislative change. Politics is a game – conflict and antagonism are its central components – which also takes place outside of parliament. It plays out in the media, in the street, in fashion, daily life and ultimately also in theatre, which as a fundamentally social art form is perfectly equipped to play the game.

Post-Lacanian political theorists suggest that in order to reinforce socio-political identities – without which political activity is impossible – mere symbolic cohesion will not suffice. Another essential ingredient is a specific form of fantasy which forms the basis for the creation of a type of ecstasy particular to a given form of identification. This carries the greatest danger, that is, the emergence of nationalism or different forms of fascism, as the consequence of the fear of losing the ecstasy as a result of the operations of other interest groups: the 'others' we shape our 'we' in opposition to. But without fantasy and ecstasy there can be no politics. This is why one of the tasks of theatre's politics of the imagination – as suggested above – could be to work within the space of the audience's imagination. It does not necessarily entail the destruction of all permanent identities, as is required by the deconstructivist tradition, but work on the imagination in order to develop new forms of collective identification.

How to understand power, if not as the space of formal politics? Where is it situated if not in government institutions? The answer is provided by Michel Foucault in *The Will to Knowledge*: 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere'.² It is not something external to a given territory, it does not control it, but rather infiltrates it, plays within it and represents at the same time an effect and a condition of internal divisions and diversity. Power, to return to the subject as discussed by Foucault, does not persecute sexuality, for example, so much as it is responsible for a specific method of ordering that sexuality. One might say that there is no sexuality without power. Without power there is no perception, no art, daily life, charity, play, religion or media either. We should forget the old

² Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, 1: Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 93.

model based on relations between rulers and subjects. Power relations effective in small territories only translate into social-class division and diversity at the macro scale. Authority has its own aims, but these do not necessarily depend on the decision of the individual. 'Let us not look for the headquarters that presides over its rationality',³ suggests Foucault, without promoting passivity. According to him:

Neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in a society (and makes it function).⁴

This rule is best seen in the bureaucratic system and in modern trans-national corporations, although according to Foucault it applies to the entire sphere of cultural and social life, even inner life. In this system, the tasks are always fragmentary – not only is there nobody who controls an entire process but there is not even anyone who can grasp its entirety. Responsibility is spread over many individuals, effectively reduced to the function they fulfil, making it difficult to pinpoint those responsible for unjust and unethical activities. Institutional procedures override individual choice.

At this point, a fundamental problem arises for theatre. Since there is no sense in attacking the headquarters, the governing caste, the shady characters responsible for all the evils of the world, how then to build dramatic conflict in the theatre? The answer is that we should forget about building it: forget about representing enemies, and marginalized groups, with their identities accurately targeted and defined. The point is not to construct theatrical fables from the lives of gays, or show the problems of homeless children and the fate of workers wronged by political change, present the problems of Muslim immigrants, spin yarns about the love of a black boy for the daughter of a right-wing politician or show how our cynical rulers in their shadowy offices hatch plots to help them take over the world. This form of action will be ineffective primarily because of the complex and distributed nature of power. One should not target specific individuals or identities but the entire system. Yet this requires a more refined approach. Additionally, the naive representation of social divisions on stage means that we forget that theatre is also an apparatus within which centres of power are at work and that there is no such thing as an innocent performance. We should begin by examining not that which is shown on stage, but the way in which it is shown. Lehmann puts it even better in *Postdramatic Theatre*:

That politically oppressed people are shown on stage does not make theatre political. [...] It is not through the direct thematization of the political that theatre becomes political but through the implicit substance and critical value of its mode of representation.⁵

Which form of perception is privileged by a given set of means, what is the network of dependencies with other institutions within which the theatre which we practice operates, and are we not reinforcing

3 Foucault, p. 95.

4 Foucault, p. 95.

5 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 179.

stereotypical images or legitimating the multifarious forms of power?

Identity politics is equally problematic. It privileges different types of particularism, frequently linked to an 'aggressive self-affirmation of cultural group identities'.⁶ A political game is played based on these, instead of concentrating on the creation of a new universalism (advocated by Alain Badiou, among others), beginning the work of global emancipation, transforming the entire system of social relations. In fact, identity politics co-operates very well with neoliberal thought: its consequence is the illusion of the coexistence of different groups in a harmonious and consensual pluralistic idyll. In reality neoliberalism, although it would like to appear otherwise, is not inclusive. It is hegemonic, like every other form of social order, and is therefore based on exclusion. It is also worth noting that identity politics is a starting point for the creators of marketing strategies in targeting their campaigns or new products, which is why it is so easy to adapt this political campaign, which appears emancipatory on the surface, to serve the aims of the free market. To annex and exploit it.

Since we are in the process of abandoning the theatre of representation, which regularly shows social conflict on stage and creates a theatrical illusion of the world, perhaps the solution to the problem of political theatre should be a theatre of disillusion? It could neutralize different social fictions and deconstructed mythologies. The theatre of disillusion the ways in which the media image of the (un)reality of the world is created through parodical transformations, pastiche, de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation critiques. In other words, it shows the removal of semiotic tissue from various orders and mixing them together, sampling elements of reality to reveal its stitching and construction, introducing strategies transplanted from other media to theatre, which are governed by different rules, forcing through a different type and rhythm of reception to reveal the unnatural nature of the world images it produces.

Furthermore, through the use of self-reference on stage it is possible to reveal the means of construction of social identities, to identify gestures, behaviours, glances and ways of using objects, wearing clothes or manifesting certain meanings which are part of the process of producing a particular identity; reveal that identity has a performative nature which is therefore sporadic, fragile and survives only as long as we repeat the actions which create it, revealing that to this end we use a cultural archive of embodied techniques and styles which, while vast, does not exhaust all the possibilities – thus at any moment normative identities can be broken with a gesture or a behaviour that does not fit a given convention. In this way, we exploit the subversive potential of theatre. The imagination – because here too it seems indispensable, revealing its new application – can help in theatre's creation of hybrid identities. Disabled, fractured, inhuman, non-normative, incredible, undermining the existing social and legal order and at the same time widening the perception of both spectators and creators to alternative, previously unknown forms of identity. Identity is a matter of invention. The theatre's politics of imagination can help to introduce new identities into public circulation.

Undoubtedly many strategies of the theatre of disillusion or critical theatre – which have grown out of the Brechtian tradition and draw

⁶ Lehmann, p.176.

substantially on Brechtian techniques with the distancing effect at the heart of it – allows for profound reflection on social, political and cultural problems. This theatre has also been, and continues to be, a place where a new stage language is carved out: more adequate to its subject matter, responding to the challenges of new media. In this theatre the performative dimension, more reliant on action than on the communication of meanings, co-exists with the semiotic layer. This theatre's productions seem more interesting and deserving of attention because they frequently allow for a critique of the global 'society of the spectacle'. If everything around us is turning into a spectacle – from political life through daily life and through the workings of the justice system to tourism – what can be the role of theatre? Increasing its appeal, magnifying its own 'spectacularity'? It has no chance of competing this way with other media and technologies. Instead, theatre should focus on what is specific to it, and on what is missing in other media, namely on the directness of its contact with the audience, on the 'real' presence of the actor; on the space that brings together viewers and actors and on the time shared together, on the (un)reality of the affecting bodies and on those which are affected by them; on its rootedness in a given place, which is the same as the source of the message and its perception, inaccessible to users of television or the Internet. If today the classical rules of drama are best put to use in creating soap operas, since that is where viewers sate their hunger for stories of cause and effect, with precisely composed caesura, should theatre still maintain its stranglehold on drama? I don't think that it should.

This conclusion is supported by an event which happened at the point of contact between business, the legal system and the executive branch – to use the rhetoric of the Fourth Polish Republic.⁷ A notorious press conference held by the Prosecutor General included the screening of a film with a highly dramatic plot, structured like a crime thriller. It used the visual conventions of closed-circuit television footage. Its principal characters: the Mighty Oligarch, the Member of Parliament and the Minister. There was also the chairman of a state-owned company, who took a secondary role. The prosecutor showed how to create a credible dramatic message, how to link cause and effect, culminating in an exciting story about a secret pact between shady characters. The problem was that the source footage could have been used to tell several alternative stories. Yet the one created by the prosecutor was the one which found

7 Editor's note: The Fourth Polish Republic (IV RP) was a political slogan postulating the need to introduce sweeping constitutional change in Poland. Originally invented by publicists, it was used as part of the 2005 election campaign by parties including Law and Justice (PiS) and one of its leaders, Lech Kaczyński. The party and its connected organizations were critical of the majority of governments in the 1989–2005 era, excluding the government of Jan Olszewski. According to PiS politicians, Poland was governed by a secret agreement between Polish Military Intelligence (WSI) and former agents of the country's Secret Service (SB) who blocked attempts to introduce decommunization and the widespread screening of a broad range of civic functionaries for involvement in the pre 1989 communist regime (including politicians and civil servants), while it also contributed to the spread of corruption. IV RP was to be the answer to these problems and was to be brought about through changes to the constitution. These changes ultimately did not take place as the parties did not win the necessary majority vote, thanks to opposition from the Civic Platform (PO) and Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) parties.

its way to the front pages of the newspapers, straight into the minds of millions of citizens, because it contained a dramatic connector and because it was made using a variety of dramatic devices that rendered it more credible. IV RP therefore teaches us to be suspicious of drama, which has relocated from the aesthetic space to the social field, where it is used for peculiar and spectacular machinations. The society of the spectacle – despite Lehmann's claims – continues to use dramatic structures and strategies. Theatre can critique drama.

Can the strategies of the theatre of disillusion or critical theatre really prove effective? Among these strategies I would include revealing mechanisms behind the creation of social and media fictions, exposing the marked cards of media manipulation on stage, deconstruction of ideology by pointing out techniques and methods of its production, pastiche staging of methods by which historical facts are altered in the field of ideology into eternal and universal truths (or into common sense and the obvious) and, finally, laying bare principles by which roles are cast in social drama. When critical theatre sets itself the task of increasing the alertness of its audience, sensitizing them to ways in which their decisions and life choices are guided by more or less visible powers, the answer is yes. Ultimately all knowledge and education can prove liberating. At the same time, it is evident that knowledge can be taken advantage of in many ways. Does it set people free? Those who have it can use either to control or oppress others, or to do emancipatory work. Its direction is not theoretically defined, but the pressure of the free market and the limitations of the neoliberal imagination mean that we do not have equal freedom to move in all directions.

Unfortunately, knowledge is more often used for control than emancipation. It is no coincidence that today's advertising industry is staffed by discerning readers of Gilles Deleuze, Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, whose work focused on the analysis and critique of power relations. It is no coincidence that many talented students of the social sciences and humanities abandon their poorly-paid research (in Poland, a doctoral scholarship, if one can be secured, is around 1,000–1,200 PLN [£183–216] per month after tax) to take well-paid jobs in consulting firms (where starting salaries often exceed 8,000 PLN [£1,465] per month before tax) and there they develop their talents and potential.

Today's 'cynical mind' does not naively believe in the universal character of values, law and habit. It takes a somewhat tactical approach to public belief. It is aware that social facts are constructs and makes use of this awareness. Specialists in political marketing and public relations began by studying books about mass communications, new media, social psychology and cultural anthropology, often written with the intention of serious critique. Arthur Schopenhauer's *The Art of Being Right: 38 Ways to Win an Argument* (1831) – a catalogue of tricks aimed at maintaining the upper hand in a debate regardless of the truth of one's arguments – belongs to the basic canon of texts studied by every participant in public debate: the basic canon of manipulation. It is increasingly the case that the Right adopts the critical language of the Left, while critical discourse increasingly appears to be a collection of ritually repeated formulas instead of a space where new forms of order are created. Critical discourse often simply lacks imagination.

A Theatre of A(nta)gonism, the New Potential of Emotion and Shock

Perhaps the problem with political theatre when it is merely critical and only exposes the mechanisms of social, cultural and political phenomena is that, while it reveals that political practice makes use of irrational motives, managing emotions of the electorate and the technique of manipulation of affects, it still exists paradoxically in a world of naive convictions, as if politics was intended to be a space for rational actions and arguments. It is stuck under the illusion that it is enough to present a given phenomenon or problem from the right perspective and every rational person will know what to do. Perhaps it is enough to reveal the mechanism in order to neutralize it? No, this is untrue. Disillusion does not quell emotions because it does not invalidate conflicts of interest or values. But politics often deals with irreconcilable values, much like in economics, which does not so much discover the fixed, natural laws of the free market as play an active part in creating them. Neoliberal technocrats forget that the economics they subscribe to and worship is only one version of economics, which is based on a certain set of assumptions and world views.

Values should be the subject of passionate political debate which should also take place in theatre. As Chantal Mouffe⁸ acutely observes in her latest book, *On the Political*, there is an irreducibly antagonistic dimension of the political at the very foundation of politics. The exclusion from politics of vehemence, passion and desire is characteristic of liberalism and is the result of its erroneous identification of the essence of the political. Political theatre should return to caring about vehemence, passion, emotions and desire, and put them to use. It should not be confined to the cold and distancing exposure of truths, a sterile critique from afar, on the never-ending dispassionate work of disillusion.

But why, instead of the rational, argument-based debate postulated by many, in which we try to persuade our adversary to our views, also by making theatrical arguments, would we enter the seemingly irrational world of dispute, conflict, emotion and antagonism? Mouffe provides an answer: '[...] we live in a world in which there are indeed many perspectives and values [...], owing to empirical limitations, we will never be able to adopt them all [...]'.⁹ Social inequalities growing in many countries have awakened powerful emotions. They stoke the anger of vast human masses which have been only superficially included in a superficially inclusive public debate. Compromise and consensus are only for a minority. Liberalism pretends that it is not hegemonic by nature but is in fact a hegemony, though a more cunning one, which conceals its own hegemonic nature. The best proof of this is that election turnouts, on one hand, are in decline in many countries yet populist movements, on the other, are gaining power by effectively harnessing the emotions of their electorate. Both phenomena show post-political exclusion of emotion. Yet emotions are returning to politics. Ignored by political elites in the public sphere, they threaten the very foundations of democracy.

Thus if the political is inextricably bound in its friend-enemy relation and every collective identity is not so much an expression of some specific essential feature preceding identification but is created relationally,

⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁹ Mouffe, p. 10.

we must forget about consensus. Antagonism is a necessity. But how to reconcile it with a democratic viewpoint? After all, 'they', our enemies, can only be seen as a threat to our identity. Then the natural impulse is to rise up in its defence, which can escalate into armed conflict aimed at eliminating the enemy, as was the case in the Balkans. How to avoid armed conflict, maintaining an agitated emotional state while neutralizing aggression? Mouffe suggests that antagonism should be replaced by an agonistic relation: '[...] agonism is a 'we/they' relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents'.¹⁰ The recognition that the other side is not the enemy or a competitor with whom we might negotiate to reach a compromise but an opponent: this is a state toward which democratic procedures should lead. To reach this aim, democracies must create new institutions. Mouffe declares: 'What I want to suggest is that, understood in an agonistic way, democratic institutions can contribute to this disarming of the libidinal forces leading towards hostility which are always present in human societies'.¹¹ Mouffe, in citing specific instances, makes no mention of theatre. Yet which institution is better equipped to become a space for agonistic conflict than theatre?

Theatre is capable of sublimating antagonism. It may transfer it to the symbolic level. However, crucially, theatre as a space for agon cannot merely represent agon. When seeing representatives of different standpoints and worldviews and different collective identities fighting each other, the audience is not supposed to join one of them on a projection-identification basis, activating their emotions on one side of the conflict and at the same time defusing its dangerous potential, which as a result will not be activated in the extra-theatrical world. Theatre should rather create agon on a line dissecting the stage and the audience, and perhaps the social space too. It should not only gently stimulate the audience towards reflection, but also stimulate its dissent, awaken its latent political passion. It should mobilize the audience to make a choice, to declare itself, but without the affectation of innocence and neutrality.

Art is a powerful assault, not a realm of gentleness, which creates only a contemplative space for the spectators, the opportunity to observe their own perceptions. The point is not only to open the viewer's perception towards a rhythm and an experience different from that with which they are familiar in daily life and in the reception of an excess of images and information from the media. This excess cannot be exchanged for a respite of minimalism, the peace of theatrical contemplation, a slowed and direct perception. Its change and emancipation requires shock, association with intense emotions. One might argue that shock has long lost its transgressive character, becoming the basis of all reality in the society of the spectacle. Shock shocks no one and cannot therefore change anyone. Today, silence can change people. Point taken, but the shock and emotion in question are not those which are served up daily by the media. It is not the shock of attraction. Theatre must find a new aesthetic and new means to find new shock potential. Shock does not need to be loud, dreadful or blatant. I can imagine the shock of silence. Calamities are always preceded by a deadly silence the deadness of which soon turns out

¹⁰ Mouffe, p. 20.

¹¹ Mouffe, p. 26.

to have been the potentiality of eruption. Such theatre can be described as the theatre of new emotionality.

The theatre of new emotionality is not afraid to be accused of using symbolic violence. It never pretended to have renounced it. It tells of symbolic violence and its mechanisms, revealing them but at the same time putting them to use. Theatre is also terror, a terror which it sublimates. Today, perhaps more than ever before, we need an exhumation of Antonin Artaud. This poet of the theatre manifesto should be read again by those who believe in antagonism in politics and theatre. The theatre as a plague, one which is not only a physical but also a symbolic materialisation of conflict. It is worth hearing his passionate entreaty:

[...] we can admit that outward events, political conflicts, natural disasters, revolutionary order and wartime chaos, when they occur on a theatre level, are released into the audience's sensitivity with the strength of an epidemic. [...] There is both something victorious and vengeful in theatre just as in the plague [...]. The plague takes dormant images, latent disorder and suddenly carries them to the point of the most extreme gestures. Theatre also takes gestures and develops them to the limit. [...] A real stage play disturbs our peace of mind, releases our repressed subconscious, drives us to a kind of potential rebellion (since it retains its full value only if it remains potential), calling for a difficult heroic attitude on the part of the assembled groups.¹²

This is a description of the challenges, status and power of theatre. Let all those who want theatre to conform to flat, grey middle-class reality fall silent! Diminishing the role of theatre, and all art in general, in the task of transforming reality is an attempt, be it conscious or unconscious, to place constraints on creative freedom: an attempt to marginalize the artistic voice and to transplant this effective tool from the social and political field to the dead end of pure and immaculate, innocent and holy unengaged art. Ultimately this represents depriving theatre of influence over the fate of the world.

The ambition of entering into a dialogue with the audience has always been an unrealizable utopia. A theatre should spark conflict mobilising the political passions of the audience! This is a theatre of conflict.

This is why it is vital to once again undertake the task of destroying the wall between the audience and the stage. This venerable postulate still seems relevant (and in any case many of the postulates of various theatre reforms and valuable ideas from avant-garde manifestoes have yet to receive proper consideration and be applied theatre). The quest for new principles of both communication and performative impact on the audience and drawing it into the game, not necessarily by involving their physicality or new techniques for interaction, remains the fundamental task of theatre.

Things are not as Lehmann would like; the politics of perception are not only possible in theatre, which completely neutralizes power relations (which seems a kind of communications utopia) and escapes all that is political. Lehmann postulates as follows:

¹² Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, pp. 17–19, available online: http://www.almaclassics.com/excerpts/Theatre_Double.pdf, [accessed: 1 May 2015].

What still attains an intuitable quality, by contrast, is the momentary suspension of normative legal and political modes of behaviour, i.e. the plainly non-political terror, anarchy, madness, despair, laughter, revolt, antisocial behaviour (...).¹³

To label the above-mentioned methods and standpoints non-political represents a grave error. They hold not only political potential, but are political in themselves. And they are capable of subverting normative and legal behaviours, but also of working in the service of introducing a new symbolic universe.

Theatre is a place and medium of agon which does not merely hark back to old divisions and symbols. As a space for invention, experiment and potentiality it allows new forms of order and symbolic configurations to be tested. Artists working in the field of imagination, often following the voice of intuition, have the ability to produce unique knowledge – the production of which is impossible in other fields, namely in science, philosophy or religion – which can be applied in extra-theatrical practice. This knowledge is deserving of discussion, its inclusion in extra-theatrical debates and conflicts, and its application in social and political practice. This is why it is so important to organize debates or projects around performances, to reinforce them with artistic multimedia campaigns and various publications, to co-operate with both independent and mainstream media, efforts which may help with the translation of specific theatrical knowledge into other fields. Creativity in the production of knowledge is strictly linked to what I call ‘the politics of the imagination’. It is the imagination which allows us to break through fossilized forms, petrified styles, poorly mobilized ideas or reproduced models. It allows, in line with my most important emancipatory postulate, to become free of the overpowering web of artefacts that we devised for ourselves. Aesthetic hybrids break up the banality of standard figures. Potential and possible worlds reveal that the divisions and institutions within which we function in extra-theatrical reality are indiscernible, at the same time intensively promoting rather than merely proposing alternative forms of symbolic order.

There is no contradiction between the agonistic role of theatre and a theatre as a space for creativity and the politics of imagination. After all, resistance supported by imagination may transform into antagonism / agonism, intrinsic to the phenomenon of power. All powers have their revolutionary spaces. To some extent they exist within the field of power, which is why it is naive to think that it might be possible to transcend this field. Even carnival is only a flip side of power. Yet resistance does not have to constitute a B side. It tends to be somewhat distributed throughout the field of power, it is dynamic, it can pursue the reconfiguration of this field, it can change the positions and, above all, it can alter the rules of the power game.

There is this really important passage by Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*:

Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary,

¹³ Lehmann, p. 175.

improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. [...] more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society— that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds.¹⁴

These words can serve as a useful recap. Theatre does not work alone against a single centre of power. Power and theatre both function in diffusion. Theatre is one of the points of resistance. By channelling aggression it is itself a part of distributed agon. Theatre can be: possible, necessary, improbable, spontaneous, savage, solitary, congenial, meandering, violent or unforgiving. More importantly, the theatre of agon and the politics of the imagination do not adhere to a single formula or aesthetics. Instead, it opens itself to new experiences and new languages of expression and influence rather than closing itself off in a semiotic ghetto. It is transitory, every evening it disappears in order to reappear again the next day in its ephemerality. It is moveable like the floating islands of Eugenio Barba. It displaces social divisions, motivates communities, redraws the lines of division, and bridges existing boundaries and differences to create new worlds. Also, ultimately, it changes the individual, their perceptions, it leaves a mark on their body and interferes with spiritual processes, assigning new regions of corporeality and spirituality, if we are to cling to this dichotomous division. It is just like the plague.

Foucault continues his train of thought thus:

And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.¹⁵

Theatre cannot change power relations by itself. It is however part of a complex web of points of resistance and its aggregate can become the number that completes the code, the element that completes the process of change. That is why the cooperation of various disciplines and fields and the transgression of their existing divisions and free transfer are so important. Because these boundaries and divisions serve power and uphold the existing order.

The Potential of Profanation: A Theatre of New Utility

Theatre is also a place in which there is a chance for truly post-secular thought to form, one which would allow us to discover the frequently repressed and invisible role of religion in various social and political phenomena. The identification of secularization with modernization, characteristic of the Enlightenment, proved erroneous, even at the empirical level. Such phenomena as fundamentalism and new religious movements in all shapes and forms demonstrate that the process of secularisation is of a superficial nature. This discovery was also made by Carl Schmitt, who showed in his work on political theology that seemingly secularised political notions in fact have theological origins. It is not coincidental

¹⁴ Foucault, pp. 95–96.

¹⁵ Foucault, p. 96.

that Schmitt's work is an inspiration today for authors attempting to form a new left-wing discourse, avoiding the dead ends of the left-liberal project of pluralism and diversity and of identity politics. It is also significant for veteran political practitioners, and we can see numerous instances of inspiration from Schmitt in the approach of Poland's PiS party leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, to practicing politics. If we also accept arguments made by Walter Benjamin in his work *Capitalism as Religion*, in which he compares capitalism to a religious cult which has no fixed body of dogma, then where if not in theatre can we best reveal its nature? This revelation must involve a pure act of profanation. Its result, the separating effect of rituals transformed into a permanent capitalist spectacle, will disappear, allowing the invention of new applications and utility of previously trapped objects or practices in the framework of these rituals.

Theatre must subject the spectacle to continual criticism. The basis of the spectacle is specifically religious, which is why theatre must take on the task of profanation, although this is a difficult project so far as capitalism in its current phase is attempting to make the world 'unprofanable'. This is a phenomenon described in detail by Giorgio Agamben in his essay 'In Praise of Profanation':

If, as has been suggested, we use the term 'spectacle' for the extreme phase of capitalism in which we are now living, in which everything is exhibited in its separation from itself, then spectacle and consumption are the two sides of a single impossibility of using. What cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition [...] the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable.¹⁶

Agamben concludes by postulating: 'The profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation'.¹⁷ To adapt Agamben: The profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of emerging theatre.

But how to profane? First, it can be done through the negligence of separation, by recklessly ignoring the fact of the sacred quality of things within the space of the spectacle, and through their inappropriate and non-canonical usage. Here, theatre has a vast spectrum of possibilities: changing the context and function of objects and symbols, their inappropriate application. If every prop on stage, every object, can become literally anything, depending on how it is defined on stage by the actor with his gestures and words, then the possibilities for uses which will represent an act of profanation are limitless. Sacred theories and sacred symbols of consumption, sacred values, sacred canons of political correctness, sacred idols, the sacred canon of the mundane, 'sacred cows, sacred dogmas', in the words of the Polish punk band Pidżama Porno, 'a sacred parliament of facelifts, miracles, streets like stigmata', sacred myths of national tradition, sacred gestures and finally a sacred theatre with its public rituals and those concealed in rehearsals, dressing rooms, reviewers' offices: we must make all this the object of profanation.

Second, besides negligence another method of profanation is play. Thanks to play, that which has been appropriated and surrounded by

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 82.

¹⁷ Agamben, p. 92.

the aura of the sacred and inaccessibility can once again become useful. When play happens in theatre, it is mediated by theatre and when theatre becomes its object, new applications can be devised. Play is a space for invention, engagement, awakened senses and imagination. It is imagination that suggests new uses for objects. Perhaps imagination, before it can become truly creative and open, also requires a gesture of profanation. After all, imagination – like our feelings, desires and intimacy – has been colonized by an expansive, intensive neoliberal torrent, which gouges new formations not only in public and media space but in our minds. These have become one of the many products of appropriating marketing strategies. Myriad advertising slogans contain the word ‘imagine’. Self-profanation of imagination, its removal from the canonical openness of the free market, is the point of departure for future theatrical profanation practices.

Agamben points out that:

Children, who play with whatever old thing falls in their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to think as serious. All of a sudden, a car, a firearm, or a legal contract becomes a toy. What is common to these cases and the profanation of the sacred is the passage from a *religio* that is now felt to be false or oppressive to negligence as *vera religio*. This, however, does not mean neglect (no kind of attention can compare that of a child at play) but a new dimension of use, which children and philosophers give to humanity.¹⁸

Political theatre, one which is socially and politically engaged, can become a form of play and use playing as a resource. Enough of pretentious pomposity of theatre prophets who do not know how to laugh at themselves, enough of impassioned pseudo-responses of reviewers written with flaming and bloody ink, defending tradition, style and probability. Enough of old values, enough of bombast and the serious tone which conceals ignorance. Today, humour and comedy are back in favour, different forms of play with theatrical styles and conventions which can translate into the invention of new practices of social life, such as parody, pastiche, laughter, cabaret and even farce. All of these can activate the emotional potential of the viewer, generate and channel conflict and political engagement, but primarily profane and help to find new applications.

The responsibility for creativity in the work of profanation could fall to the dramaturge: a new role and function in political theatre. His job is to transplant fresh ideas into the theatre, a continual examination of everything, repeated (re)invention, translating forms of order, searching for friction and axes of conflict, the reform of language as much within the institution and environment as within the theatre. His job is also to change ways in which we discuss theatre, (re)negotiate the position this is accorded in social space, places occupied by knowledge created as part of theatre practice. At the same time, dramaturges free up currents and rip down dams. So too do they ensure that new dams and blockades are created in other places. It is worthwhile to open theatre to philosophy, sociology, politics, audiovisual art, experimental music, the digital world, ecology and economics as areas of knowledge in which symbols

¹⁸ Agamben, p. 76.

and values count. Meanwhile, it is worth blocking the overly intensive relationship between theatre and the free market. The dramaturge looks after the (re)distribution of symbols and values in the institutional network.

We should consider again – and should profane – the entirety of the Polish theatre system. We could start with the director's hegemony, which defines and subordinates the elements of the theatre institution and its practice, and without limitations frequently culminates in pathological forms of psychological manipulation as well as ethical and physical violation. Justifications and alibis always take two forms: the first is stage fiction, the second is necessity and artistic gain. We should expose the power relations used to influence the audience and theatrical communication with the viewer and inside the theatre, while pointing out their effects. Who has a voice and who merely gets to act as a 'prompter' or 'viewer'? And what is the outcome? Power can never be eliminated from such a socially intensive area as theatre. Nevertheless, it is best to be aware of it, to protect ourselves from its excesses and manipulations in theatre practice. We should make theatre practice more democratic. It is also best to tell the viewer about power and not to perform the role of bigot, as then one can admonish and criticize while maintaining a clear conscience. In speaking of manipulations of politicians and the media, we can begin by confessing where our reliable knowledge of manipulation originates. Of course, this does not imply that theatre is about everlasting atonement and compulsively renewed remorse for our sins, a never-ending self-reflection. Theatre is a mighty tool of power, a place filled with power, with all of the accompanying benefits and opportunities, dangers and curses.

On the other hand, we might begin by reminding ourselves that work in theatre could be and should be an excellent form of play, by which I mean engaged and effective. So is the watching of theatre. A form of play that liberates, if only through profanation. Play, with imagination.

Translated by Aleksandra Sakowska

Originally published in the journal *Notatnika Teatralny* 2007, 45–46, pp. 42–55

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