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EASTERN EUROPEAN THEATRE AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE BERLIN WALL (AS EXEMPLIFIED IN POLISH AND GERMAN)

The concept of Eastern Europe belongs to a category of so-called “mental maps”. Each individual constructs his own vision of specific spaces and locations on the basis of gathered information. The space commonly known as Eastern Europe is classified in various modes. The most popular criteria are geographical, cultural, and political in nature; and these were especially the latter, which had the decisive impact in this part of the continent and helped to strengthen its diverse image, quite different for the post-war and the contemporary generation.

The “iron curtain from Szczecin to Trieste”, as declared by Sir Winston Churchill in 1946 to divide the Soviet bloc from the West, did not comply either to the geographical division of Europe into its eastern and western part (i.e. the line from North Cape to Cape Matapan) or to the medieval division of Christian church into the eastern Orthodox and western Catholic branch in 1054. Although religious differences did not cease to exist, the above order was irrevocably blurred in 20th century. The new division agreed upon by the USSR and the Western coalition, during the Second World War – the so-called “post-Yalta division” – was based on the raw military power of the Red Army; at that time, any other considerations were negligible. In the opinion of Norman Davies, in the mentality of generation, which survived the war, the concept of Eastern Europe had two different meanings:

Firstly, this was any part of the continent lying on the Soviet side of the iron curtain. Hence, this meaning covered European countries

forced into the USSR and other countries located e.g. in Central or Southern Europe, such as Slovenia. On other hand, this was a synonym for USSR's satellite states in Central and Southeastern Europe, as opposed to the USSR itself¹.

Let us reconsider, why the Eastern Europe border which existed for merely 40 years is still a social and cultural phenomenon. Most likely, it would not be so strong, if the demarcation line had not found its real representation in form of a symbolic monument – the Berlin Wall. It was erected in 1961 and its length of 155 kilometers divided only the city of Berlin, but in the minds of the people it constituted the division of all of Europe. Today, at the 20th anniversary of tearing down of the Wall, the concept of “Eastern Europe” has another meaning. A new “mental map” was constructed in the minds of generation growing up in the period of cultural transformation. After 1990, the number of states in Europe – i.e. those behind the line of Bug River – increased; some countries in the southern part of the continent lost their homogeneity. Europe was no longer a two-dimensional, East-West structure, and new notions were called upon, e.g. the concept of “Central and Eastern Europe”, as postulated before the Second World War² and afterwards by emigrant communities of artists and scientists³. Today, Europe has no borders, but the cultural stigma of post-Communist Eastern Europe still remains valid.

The dynamic political constitution of this part of Europe has had its impact on the development of culture and arts. Lifting political censorship, opening borders and the sudden influx of various trends, fashions and products from Western Europe initially produced an utter chaos; the old patterns of classification of cultural phenomena rapidly became invalid and no new references were available. In many countries, this was also accompanied by problems defining society's self. Countries such as Poland or Germany (the new federal states) quickly embraced

¹ N. Davies, *Europa rozprawa historyka z historią*, trans. by Elżbieta Tabakowska, Crakow: Znak, 1998, p. 1161.

² O. Halecki, *Historia Europy – jej granice i podziały* Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 2002.

³ See the concept of so-called *Mitteleuropa* in the work of Czesław Miłosz, *Rodzina Europa* Warsaw: Czytelnik 1990 and on the basis of historical studies of Piotr S. Wandycz, *Cena wolności. Historia Europy Środkowowschodniej od Średniowiecza do współczesności* trans by Tomasz Wyrozumski Kraków: Znak 2003.

the newly-gained freedom; however, nations, which won their independence after 1990 and became sovereign states for the first time in their history, are still struggling to determine to determine their identity. As Krištof Jacek Kozak – drawing on Slovenian experiences – underlines:

[...] it is true that for Slovenians the connection between culture and identity is of seminal, existential importance. The question that arises is, how is it possible that the only emerging picture about the local population, that is Slovenians, from the mouths of foreigners, despite their temporary acquaintance with the country and its people, is so degrading? Furthermore, why is it so much more expressed through the opinion of the local populace than in the judgments of foreigners?⁴

In the case of Poland, the new federal states in German as well as other post-Communist countries, raising the “iron curtain” increased the inflow of mass culture to an extent never before experienced. Previously, contact with Western cultural products was limited by censorship and cost factors; thus in practice, popular culture (e.g. Hollywood cinema, American TV series, or Western European films) was elitist in nature. Previously screenings were held in specially-selected small venues or within annual events. Mass art was not consumed by the masses, but rather by elite groups. At the same time, it is difficult to discuss the presence of any native popular art prior to 1989. First of all, it is questionable what the criteria for such art would be; secondly, the basic condition, i.e. an unlimited media access was impossible because of the absence of a free mass media. Until 1989, the era of mass culture was sequestered behind a curtain – however not an iron one, but rather a glass curtain: the awareness of its existence was common, but it remained largely inaccessible.

The first years of freedom were marked by uncritical fascination with any goods arriving from the West, regardless of their value. The mass phenomenon of the first years of transformation was film art distributed – in violation of all copyrights – on VHS cassettes. This was an easily available, common entertainment serving as a substitute for true movie-going experience, which massively developed only in the first years of the 21st century with the appearance of multiplex movie theaters. The

⁴ K. J. Kozak, ‘*Culture as Identity: the Case of 1821*’, *Kakanien Revisited* 5 (2005), p. 1-6.

beneficiary of the early 1990's freedom was the youth, described by Gerd Dietrich as "generation left to themselves"⁵. At the of the transformation, the members of this generation were 18-25 years old, i.e. at an age, when human being develop personal concepts of the world. The experience of these young people was double in nature: firstly, childhood and early adolescence in post-Soviet countries, and then the break-through, freedom, democratic revolution and social transformation. Such experience enables them to face psychically both systems - presuming the given individual is willing to do so. When describing this generation, sociologists comment that neither the educational system nor the parents were able to offer any valid directions for the young people; they had to find their way through the world by themselves. After the break-through, members of the generation could really start a new life and make their paths in situation of brand new opportunities. This thesis does not allow one to talk about the lack of a basis for popular or elite art. The problem lies in the devaluation of most directional signs as an effect of the transformation.

As this paper discusses the problems of art in the 20th and 21st century, the limitation introduced by restraining it to the concept of "Eastern Europe" allows for a conscious distance from the notion of post-modernism. I assume that even though the multiple phenomena described here belong to the style of post-modernism, it is not a tendency immanently connected to or widely applied in the post-Communist bloc, i.e. contemporary Central and Eastern Europe.

The concept of Eastern European art is quite undefinable. On the one hand, the multiplicity of "mental maps" of the area offers no univocal references; on the other hand, determination of paradigm for this art is problematic. A quite popular criterion for the art is its didactic tone - i.e. the Eastern European art is basically political, just as the concept of Eastern Europe is political, not geographic. Strictly speaking, political art has been present in Europe since the 1920's, when it appeared in Germany as a tool used by leftist political parties. Undoubtedly, at that times this was a mass art - the spectacles drew thousands of supporters of the Communist Party (KPD). The successful creator was Erwin Piscator. Jacques Rancière, a contemporary philosopher researching the convergence of art and politics, believes that art at the time of Piscator was a politically-engaged art. Politics and art were:

⁵ G. Dietrich, '*Die Erfahrung der Freiheit*', <<http://www.goethe.de/ges/pok/dos/dos-mau/ges/de4234152.htm>> [accessed 24 Sept. 2008]

two separate, well defined spheres⁶,

but it was assumed that those two should interplay. As Rancière writes:

We believed that “the higher consciousness”, which will be formed through art – through the particularity of artistic form – will produce a public activity. An artist displaying [...] the contradictions of capitalism will mobilize the minds and bodies for the fight⁷.

Political theater at Piscator’s time was a weapon of political struggle for power against authority. Its mass appeal was supported by a novel form, suitable for the masses, it was a theater using revues and spectacles oriented at the widest audiences and utilizing the latest technical developments: film fragments, conveyor belts and machinery. Mass theater absorbed the new forms of expressions and technical novelties made Piscator’s theater more attractive and competitive against the increasingly popular cinema.

However, such a model of political theatre – and political art – was possible in conditions of peace. The situation is incomparable with the underground currents of politically-engaged art oppressed by censorship, i.e. art created under the conditions of war – it was a war against the totalitarian system. This type of art – alternative theater or literature printed outside official venues – was alive and in demand in times of censorship, e.g. in 1960’s and 70’s the informal university theaters in Poland emerged as a significant political movement. Due to a very vague poetic of theater, the censorship was unable to foresee the reaction of the audience and permitted public presentations. Nonetheless, the demand for such art dwindled shortly after the outbreak of media freedom. Political art was valid only in a limited context.

The next phase of political art commenced after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and inarguably had more to do with the Piscator’s tradition than the underground art created under the oppression of communist censorship. Many artists proposed that the art created after the collapse of the “iron curtain” needed to reestablish its connection with life. This was equivalent to finding a new means of communication, ap-

⁶ J. Rancière, *Estetyka jako polityka* Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007, p. 150.

⁷ J. Rancière, p. 150.

appropriate for the society living under different conditions. Similar new forms of communication in 1929 made Piscator's theater a mass event, but in 1989 they also helped to change or blur the traditional paradigms of high and popular art. Things commonly seen as "high art" were increasingly degraded to the status of popular entertainment; when theater struggled to remain elitist, it plunged into the doldrums. Total creative stagnation was strengthened by the rules of the free market. There were no new re-interpretations, and no references to the current situation. It was expected that many of the old masters would open their drawers and present their previously banned masterpieces, to which Jacek Sieradzki writes:

Is it a surprise that after 1989, when the communist censorship was lifted, all hopes for those alleged genial pieces hidden in the drawers turned out to be futik? The drawers were empty. It could be said – even shockingly empty⁸.

However, a vacuum cannot exist in nature and it was quickly filled with popular art. The biggest event of early 1990's was musical *Metro* which was staged in one of Warsaw's dramatic theaters; it was immensely popular and massively frequented – and today has cult status! When analyzing the situation of Polish theater in the first years after the transformation, Sieradzki writes:

Our biggest success in the first years of independence was musical *Metro* (1991), Warsaw's first truly "Western" entertainment production, an attempt to establish the first commercial theater. The success of the spectacle was built on modern design, frenetic dynamism of the young performers and a fillip on the nose of the grumpy elites of the artistic circles. However, also the libretto had its appeal: a simple and, as a matter of fact, silly story about a group of young people, who – rejected by the establishment – go to Paris, play in metro make a record and have a dazzling success. Young spectators traveling in thousands from distant parts of Poland to see the musical were seeking their own myth, a confirmation of their new identity. It can be assumed that they would also accept a message on a higher intellectual level than the primitive libretto;

⁸ J. Sieradzki, 'Trudna wolność. Dramaturgia po 1989 roku', *Ade Teatro*, 9 (2002), p. 16.

the trouble is that both the theater and playwrights were unable to offer anything⁹.

High art was perhaps expected to confront the political problems of the last years and to update the observed reality. Unfortunately, independence of art assumes that the time of its creation cannot be planned. The topics of martyrology and struggle for liberty had already been exploited at the time when they were prohibited. After 1990, the mission of the artists was basically concurrent with the line of the government; no one protested against the freedom, but conversely no one saw its dark sides. Ryszard Kapuściński (2007) referred to this as an underground level of globalization, where crime, violence and aggression were developing.

Until the mid-1990's, Polish playwriting rested upon the shoulders of creators referred to as emigrant writers (Janusz Głowacki published *Antygona w Nowym Jorku* in 1992, Sławomir Mrożek wrote *Mitość na Krymie* in 1993, but the play was staged much later). At the same time, a tsunami of young, unrecognized authors from the "generation left to themselves" entered Western European theaters via Berlin.

The relations between German and Polish theater became quite distinct. In late 1990's the theaters of both countries were similar. The old generation of directors, which Thomas Ostermeier called the theater "feeding on fantasy of the directors"–, was fading. This was confirmed by the success of Ostermeier's off theater, which opened in the fall of 1996 and addressing its spectacles to young people with a new aesthetics–the so-called "new realism"¹⁰.

Thomas Irmer – a critic from *Theater der Zeit* – wrote that,

"the wave of the new ones" arose; in years 1996–97 the young generation (left to themselves) was mature enough to start caring about the social problems, the decline of the Communist block or war in the former Yugoslavia. The impulse was originated in Great

⁹ J. Sieradzki, 'Trudna wolność. Dramaturgia po 1989 roku', *Ade Teatro*, 9 (2002), p. 16.

¹⁰ Thomas Ostermeier in years 1996–1999 directed the Baracke theater associated with Deutsches Theater in Berlin, where he was one of the first directors to stage the plays of "in-er-face" current. In 1999 he published an artistic manifesto "Theater im Zeitalter seiner Beschleunigung". *Theater der Zeit*, 7 (1999), p. 10–16. Since 2000 he is an artistic director of Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin.

Britain in new plays of Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane. – [commonly described in Poland as “brutalist”–and in the history of drama referred to as “in-yer-face” dramas ¹¹.

Regardless of these influences, there were already numerous German plays dealing with similar matters, e.g. social pathologies, family violence, and the threat of social exclusion. Those plays were published in *Theater Heute* magazine and staged. For instance, the first two dramas by Thomas Jonigk *Von blutroten Sonnen, die am Himmelzelt sinken* and *Du sollst mir Enkel schenken* premiered in the fall of 1994 in Cologne and Bonn. At that time, these did not win much recognition, and the reviews were limited to contemptuous slogans.

It was only Ostermeier's success, awards for Baracke theater and the escalation of controversial spectacles (1996 – Nicky Silver: *Fette Männer im Rock*, Baracke am Deutschen Theater Berlin; Thomas Ostermeier: *Recherche Faust/Artaud*; 1997 – David Harrower: *Messer in Hennen*, Baracke am Deutschen Theater Berlin; 1998 – Mark Ravenhill: *Shoppen & Ficken*, Baracke am Deutschen Theater Berlin), which called for the need to change the generation perceived as the main current of German speaking theater.

As Ostermeier believes, the aesthetics of this theater was adopted to perceptive abilities of the generation of transformation, soon to be called the “generation of commercialization”. This is an example:

Whom do you meet during consultations for theater school exams?
[Ostermeier asks immediately answers] Spoiled middle-class kids, seeking in show-business for something, which is hidden by the barren West Germany reality¹².

He concludes that his “new theater” should be made by such kids, for such kids. The youth of the late 1990's is a generation raised in front of a television, easily absorbing the poetics of music videos, but unable to endure ninety minutes of a long shot – which is offered by theater. Ostermeier believes that it is not his task to educate this generation – let us note how the relation is significantly changed – this generation is not raised to accept and absorb the literary theater – (theater of the long shot

¹¹ T. Irmer, ‘10 punktów na temat: dlaczego na przełomie lat 1996-97 nowy dramat niemiecki dojrzał do zmian i jak od tamtej pory szuka swoich dróg’ *Teatr*, 1(2001), p. 4.

¹² T. Ostermeier, ‘*Teatr w dobie przyspieszenia*’ *Didaskalia* 4 (2000), p. 15.

and of high art), theater referring only to itself – as Ostermeier calls it. For this young generation, a so-called “new realism” theater should be created.

The early 1990’s was an occasion to observe the change of paradigm of the high art and popular art. As an effect of expansion of popular art after the raising of the iron curtain, it was adopted as a valid canon. This is supported, for example, by the Polish success of *Metro* musical or the interest of theatrical artists, e.g. into poetics of music videos. During the transformation, German – and later also Polish – theater feed upon mass art; sociologists diagnosed, that this happened because of the lack of any other references. A “generation left to themselves” found its identity in art, which needed to be defined from scratch, based on offering of popular culture and the remaining relics of the so-called high art.

In Germany Ostermeier prophesized the death of the traditional literary theater, claiming that it has nothing to offer anymore:

The next generation, except for visits in the theater with mom and dad, has already switched to cinema. I also go there, when I want to learn something about life. I gather experiences there which may question my lifestyle, encourage me to think differently, to form different opinions, to act differently, to live differently, to be differently¹³.

It is a lucky situation that despite the above, Ostermeier – with a wave of so-called brutalist dramaturgy – decided to transfer those experiences into the world of theater and founded the theater of shock. For instance, in 2000 the Schaubühne staged David Giesemann’s *Herr Kopert*. The *Tagesspiegel* compared the play to Tarantino’s screenplays – or even more, “it is something that Tarantino combined with Ayckbourn would not come up with. Liberation of inner drives, which turn bored middle-class citizens into *natural born killers* is not amusing for anyone”¹⁴. However, it turned out that the spectator expects something else from the film than from the theater. In cinema, the identification with characters and the situation is not as complete as in theater. Therefore, transition of the

¹³ T. Ostermeier, p. 16.

¹⁴ M. Matthes, *Ayckbourn meets Tarantino: David Giesemanns*. Farce in der Berliner Schaubühne Der Tagesspiegel 15.12 (2000), <<http://www2.tagesspiegel.de/archiv/2000-12/14/ak-ku-10627.html>> [accessed 4 Mar. 2001].

scenes of violence, rape, and cruelty to theater will upset even those young people willing to identify with what they see.

In Poland, the “brutalist” aesthetics was very eagerly adopted; in times of free market economy the shocking, scandalous theater drew crowds of mostly young audience. The press commented that Polish theater is only reproducing the “fashionable bullshit” from the West; critics and some members of the Parliament protested against the spectacles of Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopper & Ficken* in 1999:

[...] due to excessive number of vulgarisms in the text and multiple indecent situations¹⁵.

The wave of criticism brought a new generation of directors – the so-called “younger and more talented” in the persons of Grzegorz Jarzyna, Krzysztof Warlikowski, or Anna Augustynowicz – to public awareness. This group brought middle-class plays with plots of family terror, incest, and murder to numerous Polish stages. Except for the shocking content, a novel form was also adopted: the spectacles were organized in cameral spaces to have the audience as close as possible to the hyper-naturalist scenes; electronic music, bright lighting, scenes flashing before the eyes of spectators as film frames were the main features of the new poetics. Polish reception of such theater was not too complex – an entire group of renowned creators and artists manifested their distance for this current, but the “new realism” theater educated its own audience, which was growing along with the theater. This is the positive influence of the current, which expressly emphasized its political involvement into social transformations. After 2000, original playwriting in Poland also developed. One of the first collective volumes is entitled *Porn Generation and Other Distasteful Pieces for Theater* (edited by Roman Pawłowski). The volume contained ten dramas and included biographies of the authors. These ten writers shared no common platform – topics, characters, or writing style. The only common expression for the group, by paradox, was the title of one of the plays: *Porn Generation*. This nickname defines the association to the same generation of debuts (around 2000) – young people, who started their adult life in free capitalist Poland of the 1990’s. The generation “left to themselves” or “the generation of transformation” found its own form for the surrounding contents. The primary point of interest of the young playwrights were

¹⁵ J. Minałto, ‘Kronika wypadków cenzorskich’ Notatnik Teatralny 39/40 (2008), p. 5-22.

problems brought about by the Western culture and the new media. The protagonists of many of the plays are young people enjoying a financial success, but devoid of any higher spiritual life, raised by television or other products of the mass culture. They wait in the St. Peter's Square for the death of the Pope or murder each other in a monastery reformatory before the eyes of helpless monks. The motifs of rape, incest, or infanticide are often only minor sequences in extensive dramas. Polish theater of the late 20th century became, to some extent, "documentary"- and responded to the need to connect closely with the reality, which permeates the entire culture. In reaction to the invasion of fictitious world, the artists seek contact with the real world. The editor of the first volume of the new playwriting *Porn Generation* annotated the book with a motto from the second act of *Hamlet*: "Drama - an abstract and brief chronicles of the time". The supporters of the old paradigm of high art and generation of 1981 did not accept this form of artistic expression. What is especially painful for the older generation of critics is the probability of events described in those plays, the dramas of facts and TV news. The question of the sense of such writing remains open. As Elżbieta Baniewicz writes:

Registration of the displays of cruelty and violence, the degradation of family and human ties does not bring any deeper knowledge than a social report article, because it is not based on autopsy. The authors are usually writing dialogues and situations on the basis of things they have read and watched on television. However, do those poorly-written texts full of inept thinking, which reflect only the media-created reality, indicate any road for the theater? Should we not remember that the contemporary condition and the truth of theater are established by the rules of the art, and not of life?¹⁶

With time, the poetics of "new realism" got exhausted both in Germany and in Poland. In 2004, in an interview for a daily paper, the head of Berlin's Schaubühne, Thomas Ostermeier, recalled the 1990's as the time,

when everybody was supposed to be sexy, potent, have a beautiful body, despite the fact or due to the fact that they were taking drugs. Everybody should be dancing all night long, and - the next day - work all day long in their offices, order a pizza and feel as a team

¹⁶ E. Baniewicz, 'Nie opowiadaj mi swojej historii' Rzeczpospolita 9.9 (2003) <<http://www.teatry.art.pl/felietony/nieopowiadaj.htm>>[access 5 Apr. 2009].

member. These were dreams from the basis of commune or collective living, which only seemingly discover some relationships in workplace, governing the market. This has nothing to do with a romantic meeting of the youth – wandering spirits, generation of the 1920's, or the protesting generation of the 1960's. I believe that the concept of youth is related to the market, because young people have always been a product, [...] we, as a generation, were understood, and we have time and space for articulation [...] our opinions are discussed¹⁷.

It is quite natural that the “generation of transformation” changes its interest and became mature enough to accept a different art. Therefore, is it necessary to change the paradigm of art, or does life experience and growing up produce enough distance to name and evaluate it? Or perhaps, will the on-going homogenization of opinions, which is also reflected in art, force us to renounce any paradigms? In light of the devaluated model of Eastern European art model, perceived as political, post-Communist art and in light of the new mental map defining the new borders of Europe, it is only possible to look for new definitions. One important thing is that those should be built upon a certain collection of data, and not authoritatively determined by circles of critics, artists or politicians.

ABSTRACT

In the twentieth century, the concept of Eastern Europe gained strong political connotations. Therefore, the question arises, if its culture and art are also performed in this manner? Marked by the Warsaw Pact and the Berlin Wall, the art became political, allusive, and ambiguous. This, however, lasted only until 1990. What changes have appeared after the fall of the eastern bloc? Has the art, so far hidden behind the Iron Curtain, opened itself for Western Europe and the rest of the world? How has it begun to derive from and use the past myths in order to analyze the present situation? Polish and German theater of the last eighteen years, which influence one another in a resonance manner, in my opinion serve as examples of political art. My presentation aims at showing the mechanisms of functioning of contemporary political theater that is not propaganda, but rather a part of contemporary aesthetics. The research made by French philosopher, Jacques Rancière, proves that nowadays we do not separate political and art sphere, but we treat them as concurrent. Politics has a significant aesthetic dimension and provides a common background to what is given and possible also in theatre.

¹⁷ I. Glicher-Holtey, D. Kraus, and F. Schößler, *Politisches Theater nach 1968*. (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2006), p. 240.