

The Theatre of Dissent in Non-aligned Slovenia and Yugoslavia from the 1950's until the Fall of the Berlin Wall

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Abstract

The aim of the essay is to throw some additional light on the politics of dissent in the Slovene and Yugoslav theatre of the 20th century. It focuses on the specific Central and East European area of non-aligned Yugoslavia as a Second World cultural model in the period of socialism and post-socialism. It thus outlines the alternative culture that emerged after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948 and continued with neo-avant-gardes and movements of dissent in the postmodern era marked by a severe crisis of self-management socialism. The essay starts from the definitions of the political in the post-dramatic by Hans-Thies Lehmann, and the theatre of opposition or dissidence and theatre of consensus by Valentina Valentini. It outlines the specific character of the Slovene theatre and the ideology of mild socialism that continued to define many aspects of the political within the one-party system of the former Yugoslavia. Thus, it maps a new geography of this specific East European theatre of dissent from the experimental theatre of the 1960's and 1970's until the retro-avant-garde subversive theatre of the Neue Slowenische Kunst.

Keywords

dissent theatre; theatre of consensus; retro avant-garde; post-dramatic; politicised art

The Theatre of Dissent in Non-aligned Slovenia and Yugoslavia from the 1950's until the Fall of the Berlin Wall¹

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Dissent in non-aligned Slovenia and Yugoslavia

In my reflections on the politics of dissent in the second half of the 20th century I will concentrate on Slovenia and non-aligned Yugoslavia, and its specific character within the context of Eastern Europe as a Second World cultural model in the period of socialism and post-socialism. I will outline the specific alternative culture that emerged after the Tito-Stalin split of 1948 and continued with neo-avant-gardes and finally the movements of dissent arising in the postmodern era marked by a severe crisis of the Yugoslav type of self-management socialism.

Let us start with some statements that Herbert Blau quotes in his outstanding book *To All Appearances, Ideology and Performance*:

«It is very hard to know what is political and what isn't». Jerzy Grotowski in an interview. (Blau 1992: 22)

«I am truly sorry that Marshal Tito did not imprison our playwrights». Jovan Ćirilov, the artistic director of the Bitef Festival in a colloquy at the Festival of Avignon, 1990. (*Id.*: 24)

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«Today our theatres are half-empty. Since last October (the fall of the Berlin Wall), the public has left the theatre for the street. Very few of them have returned. The large majority have rather made the trip to the supermarkets of the West». Eva Walsch, dramaturge of the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin in a colloquy at the Festival of Avignon, 1990. (*Id.*: 13)

Blau applies the statements as deconstructive tools in his book on ideology and performance. He supplies them with his own statement about the situation after the fall of the Iron Curtain and other events of the 1990's: «Meanwhile [...] nothing recent in our given circumstances – from deconstruction to *perestroika* [...] suggests that the situation of crisis has in any way abated. [...] At best, we might be able to say, [...] that the situation of crisis has been put into the subjunctive» (*Ibid.*).

Today, twenty-five years later, we have to agree with him. Manifestations of power remain as risky as at the time after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist USSR and socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990's. New ideological practices and new political contexts demand new forms of politicised art. Even in Baudrillard's postmillennial world of the transpolitical, transhistorical and transeconomic, art returns to the tactics of the political and politicised. With less certainty about the possibility of their usage and with stronger consciousness of the utopic and marginalised nature of its own being, but nevertheless.

Together with Grotowski, we are hardly in a position to define the borderline between political and non-political art. Together with Ćirilov, we cannot say we are truly sorry that Marshal Tito did not imprison our playwrights. Historical fact shows that imprisonments did take place even in the soft version of Yugoslav self-management socialism. This apparently cosy story about non-aligned socialism ended in a terrifying war. And we can agree with the East Berlin dramaturge that the public still prefers supermarkets to theatre. In spite of the fact that they are both politicised, in one way or another.

The starting point for our reflections on the tactics of dissent theatre will be the fact that in the First and Second World of today it is very rare

to speak about the classical forms of political theatre. Within this scheme we can refer to the epic theatre of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht and within the same period, the early 1920's, first the Russian Avant-garde with its restaging of revolutionary events and – after its suppression by Stalin's regime – agit-drama and agit-prop.

We can furthermore trace some signs of utopia in the theatre of Augusto Boal in its opposition to the tradition of European theatre, as well as its focusing on the binary model *theatre-performance*. Its wish to surpass the dichotomy between the stage and the audience by creating a theatre as a process, which enables society to objectivise the forms of repression in order to overcome them. What remains is nothing more than politicised art and politicised theatre in its various incarnations. «The discourse on Ideology» (Blau 1992: 28), that – according to Herbert Blau – was initiated by Bertolt Brecht's critique of the bourgeois theatre, is today transformed and marginalised in a specific feature of theatre, as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann (in his Ljubljana lecture):

It is impossible to overlook the fact that compared to earlier times, theatre no longer has the function of a centre of Polis, as a place of communal reflection on fundamental questions facing society. It can also no longer be a tool for confirming a national, historical, or cultural identity, and it simply does not work well and efficiently as political propaganda. Mass media are more efficient in all these matters; at least they are faster as actuality is concerned. (Lehmann 2002: 74)

Thus, the very notion of political theatre has to undergo some changes, becoming (according to Lehmann) the post-dramatic, an art that «can deconstruct, suspend, and question the very notion, logical and teleological structure of the political itself» (*Id.*: 76).

The 1960's - The theatre of consensus versus the theatre of the opposition, dissidence

Let us plunge into the layers of history, into the specific Slovene and Yugoslav sphere of theatre and ideology of a mild version of socialism that defined many aspects of the tactics and manifestations of the political within the one-party system of the former Yugoslavia. To avoid the danger of a monologic investigation, I will try to define the specifics of the political during the first decades of the second half of the 20th century in a dialogue with Italian theatre theoretician Valentina Valentini, specifically with the assumptions elaborated in her lecture *Aesthetics and politics in East European Theatre*.

Valentini proposes a thesis about two types of the Eastern European theatre:

- *The theatre of consensus* with the text and the actor as its dominant tools. The first being socialist-realistic or classical, the second a perfect incarnation of the political activist faithful to the powers from which he emanated.
- *The theatre of the opposition, dissidence*. Its protagonists being the author and the director, the space and the body its tools.

In a brief overview of the history of the Slovene and other Yugoslav theatres of the 1950's and 1960's we would not come across terms like the theatre of consensus and dissident theatre. But nevertheless the typology of Valentini would hold. In the theatre of the period, we can clearly see the two distinguishable poles:

- A repertory and amateur variant of the political and agitational theatre controlled by a soft version of the prolet-cult ideology and (according to communist party ideologists) designed as a special tool of defence from the Western, capitalistic propaganda of authors like Tennessee Williams, existentialist theatre, the drama of the absurd.

- The so-called *other theatre* consciously staging existentialist and absurd plays and along with them contemporary Slovene drama. This theatre did not name itself as political, but experimental, a theatre of research: Eksperimentalno gledališče [Experimental Theatre] of Balbina Baranovič (1955), Gledališče Ad Hoc [Theatre Ad hoc] of Draga Ahačič (1958) and Oder 57 [Stage 57]. In parallel with introductions of new European and American texts, this theatre examines new directing and acting principles and generates the new Slovene (politically committed) drama (Ionesco, Beckett, Sartre, Albee, Anouilh; Smole, Božič, Kozak, Zupan, Rožanc, Zajc, Strniša).

The tactics of the political in the theatres mentioned above were primarily linked to the boldness of the repertoire; but they were nevertheless linked also to the new theatricality, new concepts of acting, the autonomy of *la mise en scène*, the demolition of the barrier between the stage and the auditorium. However, Oder 57³ was part of a broader underground intellectual, cultural and political contestation movement adopting its artistic-literary strategies as a form of dissent.

The history of Oder 57 is thus not just the history of the Slovene theatre, but also the history of the struggle of Slovene culture and consciousness against totalitarianism and a struggle for the autonomy of free practice, for a civil society. And the political repression of Oder 57 was linked to its contestation and political activities, more specifically the theatre enacting its decision to «put the actors in the middle of the audience, which has to actively participate in the play and accept a

³ Oder 57 (Stage 57, 1957-1964), which began by introducing the theatre of the absurd but later focused on the production of Slovene contemporary plays, was the most influential and the strongest group. During its relatively short existence, Oder 57 presented several contemporary plays by seven young socially critical Slovene playwrights. The last of them, *Topla greda* [The Greenhouse], produced in 1964, was banned by the courts and the theatre closed.

conflict situation, taking a stand in it» (Tomše 1975: 175). However, loud shouts from the public of «Let Rožanc (the dramatist) milk the cows!» interrupted the opening performance. Moreover, the newspaper *Delo* wrote that the interrupted performance (that was banned for years) «depicts country life in an inappropriate and deceitful way and furthermore deeply insults the emotions of the WW2 partisans».

This comment shows us that the experimental theatre in Slovenia and Yugoslavia was thus – as in other Eastern European countries – at least during its initial period, from the mid-1950's to 1970, dissenting and in opposition in the wider sense of the word. In opposition to the repertoire-driven, socialist-realist, traditional theatre of consensus, the experimental theatre consciously staged contemporary, existentialist and absurdist drama, including contemporary politically engaged Slovene plays, and revolutionised the stage in the sense of Artaud and re-theatralisation. This basic situation does not neglect the fact that in Slovenia and Yugoslavia to some extent even institutional theatres were important in promoting new playwrights and searching for new ways of representation. Thus the national theatre SNG Drama Ljubljana [SNT Drama Ljubljana] announced an anonymous call for new plays in 1956. The awards went to *Povečevalno steklo* [The Magnifying Glass] by Jože Javoršek, *Potovanje v Koromandijo* [Travels to Neverland] by Dominik Smole and Igor Torkar's *Delirij v dvoje* [Delirium in Two]. All three texts were written by dissident authors and followed Western trends (existentialist drama, poetic drama and drama of the absurd). But only two of the plays were immediately staged, the play by Javoršek was withdrawn from the repertoire after only six performances and the play by Torkar was not staged until 1959. The dramatists were not “socialist” enough⁴.

Taras Kermauner, one of the founders of Oder 57 and a highly influential critical intellectual of the time, states that for the young «critical generation»⁵ theatre was not an aesthetic pleasure, a lively

⁴ For further details, see Troha 2015: 38-39.

⁵ The “Critical Generation” was a group of Slovene intellectuals and artists (Taras Kermauner, Dominik Smole, Dane Zajc, Primož Kozak, Veljko Rus,

movement in space, but a moral, ontological mission to pronounce the truth, including at the margins of political truth. Ethical, certainly: even though tragic, cruel, bitter, scornful and desperate:

It was no coincidence that we established Oder 57. We did not want to go to the official theatre; we wanted to create a competitor to it, the first one. And to defeat the national theatre SNG Drama Ljubljana, saying that it showed the world of the withered, non-inventive, clerical, morally subservient, spiritually sterile generation, whilst we brought truth into the world and into theatre, and freshness, penetrative force, a stance of honesty, courage, the Spirit (Kermauner 2002: 293).

The Slovene experimental theatre of the 1960's thus combined aesthetic challenges with political opposition. The example of the banned performance illustrates the drawing of the limits for experimental theatre by politics. Two days after the banning of the play *Topla greda* [The Greenhouse], representatives from Oder 57 (Kermauner, Smole, Kozak, and Dušan Jovanović) met with Bojan Štih, the director of the Slovene National Theatre Ljubljana. Štih, who had had no problem restaging *Antigona* by Smole just three years before, rejected a highly political text by Marjan Rožanc as weak and Dominik Smole reproached him that "such explanations are typical of UDBA" (the Yugoslav state security service at the time, author's note) (Bibič 2003: 379). Again, it was all about the repertoire tactics of a political theatre. The play was not staged again until nearly a decade later. The consensual theatre set the limits of "democracy".

Janko Kos, Jože Pučnik, Veno Taufer) that fought in 1950's and 1960's against the fake perceptions of the bureaucracy and middle classes, the Communist Party. They published several journals, such as *Revija 57* and *Perspektive*, which challenged the cultural policies of the Titoist system in the Socialist Republic of Slovenia.

Dissent in non-aligned Slovenia and Yugoslavia

In her lecture, Valentini proposes a thesis that in East European experimental theatre «aesthetic challenge coincides with political opposition». This holds true also in the case of Slovenia, where (as in other Second World countries) «experimentation with new languages has always been reabsorbed and reintegrated by the dominant system» (Valentini). Because of this, the trespassing of dramatic texts and theatre directors from the field of the experimental into repertory theatre was also marked by a mitigation (transition) of the aesthetic challenge, as well as political radicalism. Throughout its history, experimental theatre produced ever new attempts to liberate new micro-spaces for its research. This research has been always interpreted by the political authorities as political theatre, as something the limits of which have to be clearly defined and marked. A possible consequence of this was political suppression of the theatre concerned.

Nevertheless, it was precisely a dramatist and theatre director of the new, performative turn generation, Dušan Jovanović (who had already had a bad political experience with his first play *Norci* [The Madmen] in the mid 1960's) that realised new tactics for political theatre. His role was that of a devised theatre director with the Pupilija Ferkeverk group in 1969 and the performance *Pupilija papa Pupilo in Pupilčki* [Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks], an iconic event of the Slovene neo-avant-garde theatre that introduced elements of happening, body art, performance, improvisation, contemporary dance, everyday life, pop culture, ritual theatre, cabaret and political protest. His turn to Artaud's theatre of cruelty, the ritual, were linked to the neo-avant-garde cult of primitivism, the Living Theatre, Richard Schechner and his Performance Group, particularly the performance *Dionysus in 69* with its ritual structure and orgiastic stress on the naked body and ritual dance. This was the theatre of the generation which linked the theatre of dissent to the sexual revolution. Thus, theatre transcended its borders and entered the domain of happening and performance.

A similar case was the Pekarna [Bakery], another experimental theatre of the 1970's and its first staging of Dane Zajc's poetic play

Potohodec [Pathwalker]. This play was directed by Lado Kralj, a Richard Schechner disciple, who linked his ideas to those of the Performance Group and Jerzy Grotowski, «the idea of social therapy as theatrical consequence and even goal», «the ideological stand that the group is not interested in the audience» (Kralj 1990: 6). This radical return of theatre to theatre was a political act provoking strong reactions from the audience and the critics. The tactics it developed were those of the neo-avant-garde, a mild shock liberating the spectator of his prejudices and therefore leading to therapeutic results for the performers as well as for the public, united in the act of ritual sharing.

The politicality of the 1970's neo avant-garde was primarily in its resistance to all forms of authority and not in the direct expression of political protest. Pupilija and the Pekarna distanced themselves, mocking and subverting the authorities, from the external (state, nation, party, church, market) to the internal (theatre and aesthetic). The participation of the public was understood as a political act, in which the spectators liberated themselves together with the performers. In the experimental theatre of the 1970's the tactics of the political moved from the field of repertory theatre and the textual to the very medium of the theatre, its process of self-liberation, leading (as in the case of Tadeusz Kantor) to what Valentini defines as an openness to the field of the visual and the plastic arts.

The political in the 1980's and the crisis of self-management socialism

The most evident apogee and crisis of the dissent political theatre as well as its passage to the postmodern politicised theatre occurred in the 1980's. This period introduced new aesthetic phenomena that led art and culture for the last time in the century to the zenith of the Polis at the time of the collapse of the Yugoslav and East European story of socialism and communist utopias. Parallel to this transformation and decomposition of the social *status quo* was another process of the transformation of the static culture and art.

The literature and theatre of this period were marked by various nuances of politicised aesthetics, as well as the first marks of the predominance of «ocularcentrism» (Jay). This predominance took place in a period of the decay of socialism and the development of post-socialist society in the Second World that combined in itself the logic of late capitalism and the decomposition of the socialist values and ideologies.

The return to tradition was firstly marked by a manic fixation with the history of revolutions that substituted part of the totality of the history of the Western civilisation with all its dilemmas. Within the predominance of the visual and a hyperproduction of images, theatre turned to history as a utopic period in which contemporaneity can be glimpsed. In the first phase of hyper-politisation, the theatre kept escaping the ideological barriers and lived in the faith that it was destroying these barriers and undermining the social norms.

The political theatre of the Eighties established itself at the crossroads of literature and spectacle. It developed from readings of tradition such as those by Brecht, Brook, Heiner Müller, and Arianne Mnouchkine (*1789, 1793: The Revolutionary City is in this World*). Textually it was linked partly to European drama (Mrožek, Bernhardt, Havel, Kroetz, Müller, Brešan), and to an even greater extent to Slovene drama productions by Dominik Smole, Rudi Šeligo, Dušan Jovanović, Ivo Svetina, Drago Jančar, Dane Zajc, Veno Taufer, Emil Filipčič and others.

Let us have a closer look at some examples. Dušan Jovanović's staging of *Hlapci* [The Servants] by the Slovene modernist classic dramatist Ivan Cankar in 1980 developed an understanding of drama almost as Barthes's writerly text and developed a documentary theatre inspired by Joseph Chaikin, Heiner Müller and Arianne Mnouchkine. Jovanović staged Cankar as a reactualisation with political connotations featuring fragments of various textual materials: lengthy abstracts from textbooks and schoolbooks of the period, flashes from geography, religious education, history, chemistry, physics and Cankar's article «How I became a Socialist».

As a second example of the dissent political theatre of the 1980's we will take Ljubiša Ristić, a Serbian director working in Slovenia. We will concentrate on probably his most influential performance *Maša v a molu* [Missa in A Minor] (1980): a highly individualistic montage of fragments from the text *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* by Danilo Kiš⁶, as well as various political proclamations by Lenin, Trotsky and Proudhon, anarchist manifestos by Mihail Bakunin, Pjotr Kropotkin and Eric Malatesta and so on.

The performance made active use of political ideology, towards which it seemingly adopted an entirely serious approach, with a cathartic effect upon the audience. Extensively using various visual and acoustic attractions, the performance created a typical postmodern «opera aperta» (Eco), that undermined the basis for any kind of interpretation. The performance kept the polyvalence of the writerly fragments or texts and came dangerously close to the binary approach (Erjavec) as a special means of the political subversion which was deftly employed by the NSK group some years later. Ristić thus created the first performance of a specific form of the postmodern political or even politicised theatre, characteristic of the Second World.

Political theatre was produced at the Mladinsko theatre in the period when the Yugoslav system of self-management and socialism were breaking up. The rhetoric of space used by this theatre can be linked to that of the Russian historical avant-garde: in many respects, it crossed the line between art as an autonomous social phenomenon and art as a stepping stone into the realm of life as a social utopia. In the

⁶ *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (Гробница за Бориса Давидовича) is a collection of seven short stories, written in 1976, based on historical events and dealing with themes of political deception, betrayal, and murder in Eastern Europe during the first half of the 20th century. The characters are caught up in a world of political hypocrisy, which ultimately leads to death, their common fate. Although the stories Kiš tells are based on historical events, the beauty and precision of his prose elevates these ostensibly true stories into works of literary art that transcend the politics of their time.

“occupied space” of Plečnik’s building on the outskirts of Ljubljana, the utopian social practice and the utopian artistic practice met.

When Ljubiša Ristić created and premiered *Missa in A Minor* in 1980, the Mladinsko was a somewhat marginal cultural institution on the periphery of the semiosphere of the Republic of Slovenia and Ljubljana as its capital. In *Missa in A Minor* a specific politics of the stage emerged, which powerfully linked the post-dramatic theatre of images and political theatre. With this performance that won the Grand Prix at Bitef Festival in Belgrade and was praised in *Theater Heute*, the Mladinsko became one of the most popular theatres in Yugoslavia and in Europe.

Ristić claimed: «Theatre must fight for a status equal to that of the world. It must take part in the production of the world. Theatre either has this status or it is only a service station of the state, just like traffic police, a hospital, or a school» (Jovanović 2006: 31). And in this sense we can see the Mladinsko of the 1980’s as a public space on the margins of society within an enclosed space, already separated from the centres of political power in Ljubljana as a capital of the late socialist Yugoslav society. Moreover, it was as precisely this specific rhetoric of space that enabled this theatrical organism on the very borders of the cultural and political semiosphere to establish itself as a centre of the performative and political “revolution”. This made the Mladinsko considerably more subversive than any dissident theatre that deliberately went against ideology.

As an example of the dissent theatre of the period we could also cite *Šeherezada* [The East-West Opera Scheherezade] by Ivo Svetina, directed in 1989 by Tomaž Pandur for the Mladinsko Theatre. Svetina’s text relies on a broad referential scope, among which we can state Alain Grosrichard’s *Structure of the Seraglio* and his analysis of despotism. The parallel staging of the fairy tale atmosphere of *The Arabian Nights* and an analysis of Eastern despotism breaks free from the orbit of the aestheticism and collective spirit of current political theatre, and establishes its own, specific, autonomous theatre organism. The staging of *Scheherezade* thus gave rise to «an interpretation which is new text, within which the elements of the interpreted basis are inscribed, with every interpretation being a contextualisation of the object text» (Helbo *et al.* 1987: 121).

From the 1980's to the 1990's: retro avant-garde and the NSK State

A new intensity of ideological controversy and subversiveness was introduced into the Slovene and East European theatre space by Dragan Živadinov. If Ristić's, Jovanović's and Jančar's opposition and criticism were still comprehensible or at least partly explicable to political power as their target, the subversive tactics of Dragan Živadinov, his Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre⁷ and Neue Slowenische Kunst⁸ collective became impossible to understand due to an ideological inability to recognize the means employed in the double coding system of the retro-avant-garde. From today's perspective it seems clear that NSK had its own political agenda, but it kept it offstage, strictly separating its artistic programme from its clandestine guerrilla actions. The first two performances of this retro avant-garde collective, the *Retro-garde Event "Hinkemann"* (1984) and the *Retro-garde Event "Marija Nablocka"* (1985) took place in private apartments before very small audiences. The third and last performance, the *Retrogardni dogodek "Krst pod Triglavom"* [Retro-garde Event "Baptism Below Triglav"] (1986) "occupied" the biggest and newest

⁷ The Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre (Slovene: Gledališče sester Scipion Nasice; abbreviation: SNST) was founded on 13 October 1983 in Ljubljana by Eda Čufer, Dragan Živadinov and Miran Mohar. The founders also wrote a manifesto ("The Sister Letter"), setting this theatre group a time frame of operation—four years—and described its stages from formation to self-destruction. The name refers to Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica Corculum, a Roman Republican politician who passed a decree in 151 BC ordering the destruction of the first Roman theatre. The Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre (1983–1987) constituted—along with Laibach and IRWIN—one of the three pillars of the Neue Slowenische Kunst retrogarde movement. In 1987, the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre performed self-destruction.

⁸ The NSK art collective based their production on a specific method that the groups interchangeably called «retro-avant-garde» (Laibach), «retro-grade» (SNST) or «retro-principle» (Irwin), and which was part of a broader artistic action of the collective. In sum, «retro» was «a method of writing that mobilises existing texts and images of art and culture as building material».

Ljubljana stage in front of a sold-out audience of 1,500 spectators in the newly built Cankarjev dom Arts and Congress Centre.

In a severe polemic after the premiere of the performance of *Baptism Below Triglav*, the philosopher Tine Hribar defended the performance's principles and noted that:

The performance by no means represented an artistic performance in the traditional and classic sense. Not only did it reach beyond the dramaturgy of Aristotle and Lessing, but also beyond Brechtian and Artaudian theatre. At the same time, however – definitely through the experience of Peter Brook, Bob Wilson, Jerzy Grotowski and Pina Bausch – it returned to Artaud and further back even, to ancient liturgical procedures (Hribar 1990: 288).

Baptism Below Triglav can be interpreted as a result of “other grounding concepts” of logocentrism (Philip Auslander), namely the director's or visual concept. These are a result of a specific crisis of “theological stage” (Derrida), its structure comporting with elements of the author-creator regulating it. Premiered in 1986 as a retro-avant-garde happening conceptualised as an example of explicitly non-dramatic or (to use Lehmann's terminology) post-dramatic structure, *Baptism* was a result of the deconstruction of the dramatic theatre and a replacement of the textual with increasingly visual and spatial forms (Eda Čufer). The performance also deliberately distanced itself from the explicitly ideological sphere of the political theatre of the 1980's and turned to the aesthetic sphere. The tactics of «other grounding concepts» of logocentricity, were established by intertextual references to well-known images from the history of modern art: from Romanticism to the historical and neo-avant-garde, namely Appia, Caspar David Friedrich, Mayerhold, Marinetti, Tatlin and two constructivist Slovene avant-garde artists from 1920's, influenced by both Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism: August Černigoj and Ferdo Delak. The performance made extensive use of the deconstructive tactics of mapping, using and reappropriating the past.

Ristić's *Missa in A Minor* built a communication model, which facilitated the identification of the audience, but *Baptism Below Triglav* no longer did so. It offered only its visible and audible physicality and existence. However, it inscribed an order and ideological meanings, enabling and disabling the identification at the same time.

Within the history of specific Slovene and Yugoslav dissent culture under socialism, *Baptism Below Triglav* represented (as described by Eda Čufer) «a moment of seismic shift, a moment when the doors briefly opened to allow a monumental work of alternative culture and radical structure to occupy a central position in Ljubljana's cultural arena. True to their word, the founders of the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre held a press conference shortly after their *succes de scandale* announcing the end of their experiment. In September of 1986, at the BITEF international theatre festival in Belgrade, they declared the death of their theatre» (Čufer 2003: 394-395).

The *Baptism* truly radically established the dramaturgy of the Wilsonian landscape play. Within this structure, the Lacanian Real suddenly did not appear on the set but became that around which the symbolic and the imaginary appeared on stage with all the strength of the Central European illusionary melancholy of expression and «the zeal of the Balkan desire for something to be expressed and offered: a simultaneous vision of the avant-garde, totalitarianism and heterogeneity» (Šuvaković 2001: 230). NSK's retrogarde theatre of images, in comparison to Wilson, also did not nurture a pure and accidental play of signifiers without the signified, but a play of denotations and connotations, a specific, politicised art of late-socialism, a clear voice of dissent.

Nevertheless, the self-extinction of Scipion Nasice Theatre declared at Bitef was but a starting point for a new incarnation of retro-avant-garde theatre, this time named "Red Pilot" after the historical avant-garde magazine from the 1920's. Similar tactics were explored in its highly unusual performance *Dramski observatorij Zenit* [Zenith Drama Observatory], which took place in a transformed railway carriage-rocket as a fragmentary restoration of T. S. Eliot's *Death in the Cathedral* and used, as Aleš Erjavec points out, «motifs from Slovene Catholic

tradition, alluding to issues of political and religious authority etc. The audience, crammed into the carriage, continually attempted to find meaning in the goings-on. What they sensed, however, were occasional fragments of it» (Erjavec 1995: 200).

While the 1980's were marked by «tectonic ruptures in the relationship between literature and society» (Juvan 1994/5: 26) as well as strong ruptures between theatre and society, the 1990's were marked by at least two political moments that took place in the beginning of the decade. These were the attainment of independence of the Republic of Slovenia and the end of the socialistic self-management system. Within the field of contemporary art, a withdrawal of the political coincided with a specific hyper-politisation of Slovene society.

Let us look at some specific cases. Firstly, *Uganka korajže* [The Courage Riddle] (1994), a performance written by the playwright Dušan Jovanović and directed by Meta Hočevar: a personalisation and transformation of the political epic theatre, the formation of which the director described in the following words:

I have been interested in Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* for some years, mostly its theme of a woman in wartime, the theme of a mother, who cannot decide between her children and profit. However, the closer the theme was to me, the more I felt distanced from the text. Suddenly Brecht did not function any more. It was because of this that I asked Dušan to write his own version of the play (Hočevar 1994/5: 7).

Jovanović as the playwright paraphrased Brecht as material that enabled a basic reflection about the state of the world and theatre today. Meta Hočevar used his text in a specific interaction with the space, the visual. She created a story about a contemporary *Mother Courage* in the time of local wars, specifically the slaughter in Bosnia.

A political dimension of the spectacle function was used as a deliberate homage to Brecht also by Matjaž Berger⁹, who developed it with reference to the field of theoretical psychoanalysis (Lacan, Žižek). His performance *Kons 5* can be interpreted as a conscious homage to Brecht and the Russian historical avant-garde, whilst also being theoreticised theatre exploring Lacanian psychoanalysis. Berger is interested in the theatre as a «three-part structure: absolute theatre, artistic action and big rituals, dedications» (Berger 1997: 10). He combines different disciplines: theatre, performing arts and sports, stages unusual spectacles in unusual environments, exploring Suprematism, Cubism, Dadaism, Cubo-Futurism, Expressionism and materialist Conceptual art.

In his staging for the official celebration of five years of independence of Slovenia in 1995 (its title *Kons 5* being a quotation from a poem by the Slovene 1920's constructivist poet Srečko Kosovel), Berger practices a deconstructive reading of the Slovene historical avant-garde. He combines this reading with an eclectic reading of big open-air avant-garde events. A reinterpreted avant-garde thus regained a part of its former political power and indirectly led to a political crisis that spoke about the state of Slovenia in the post socialism of the Nineties.

Let us have a closer look at the structure of this specific appropriation of the form of the official celebration by the procedure of dissent. The title *Kons 5* refers to a famous constructivist poem by Srečko Kosovel. Performed by actors, musicians, athletes, members of the Slovene army, mountain climbers and others, the performance was a specific deconstructivist reading of the Slovene historical avant-garde. It deconstructed and paraphrased three poems by Kosovel, the poem *Electric Saw* by his contemporary Anton Podbevšek and texts written by

⁹ Matjaž Berger (1964), director and scenographer of more than 30 performances, celebrations and events, and long term collaborator and program director of the Mladinsko Theatre, has since 2006 been the director of the Anton Podbevšek Theatre in Novo mesto, the youngest professional Slovene theatre.

Vladimir Bartol, which were included in the eclectic reading of the great avant-garde events in the open, particularly the following two:

- Nathan Altman's celebration of the first anniversary of the October Revolution of 1917 in St. Petersburg with its decoration of the central obelisk of the great square in front of the Winter Palace with huge Futurist abstract paintings and
- Leni Riefenstahl's films *Triumph des Willens* [Triumph of the Will] and *Olympia* [Olympiad].

It thus produced a specific, unusual rhetoric of space: performed in a symbolic location within the capital, Republic Square, this large-scale event confirmed and subverted the cultural identity of the community. Its centrifugal structure puzzled the spectators as well as the politicians, with inserts from Slovene films combined with a flyover by Slovene air force planes, a ballet-like performance of parachute jumps, and a military parade, combined with a parade of American veteran cars. In spite of the fact that the performance structure was sufficiently non-theological, the political discussion accompanying it was not triggered by the postmodernist eclectic structure of sliding signifiers, but by the title itself or, rather, the unspoken Kosovel poem, particularly the following verses in it:

Dung is gold
and gold is dung.
Both = 0
/.../
Whoever has no soul
doesn't need gold.
Whoever has a soul
doesn't need dung.

EE-AW¹⁰

Most representatives of the Slovene right-wing political parties interpreted the use of Kosovel's title of the poem for the large-scale performative event celebrating the fifth anniversary of the independent Republic of Slovenia as an insult and boycotted the event. They took the poem literally and made the equations: If gold is dung, then all the struggles to obtain Slovene independence are equated by Matjaž Berger and his artistic team with dung. Thus the historical avant-garde, reduced to empty aesthetic pleasure in which all its political aspects were supposed to be lost, produced through the deconstruction tactics of *Kons 5* a specific rhetoric of space. This gave to the performance at least some of its political power and indirectly led to a political crisis that produced a discussion of the political situation in the post-socialist, 1990's Slovenia.

Conclusions

Baptism, *The Courage Riddle* and *Kons 5* are just three cases of a specific postmodern politicised art, which flourished in most of the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. They depict East European history while paralleling two historical periods: the period of socialism and post-socialism. This problematisation does not lead to a Brechtian arousal of the observer's capacity for action but to the deconstruction of theatrical and social sign systems. The performance is a reaction to utopianism. It perfectly suits Mikhail N. Epstein's idea of postmodernism and its approach to history:

Postmodernism, with its aversion to utopias, inverted the signs and reached for the past, but in so doing, gave it the attributes of the

¹⁰ Translated by David Brooks, http://www.saltpublishing.com/saltmagazine/issues/01/text/Brooks_DFavid_02.htm, accessed on 26 July 2019.

future indeterminateness, incomprehensibility, polysemy, and the ironic play of possibilities (Epstein 1995: 330).

In the three performances – to paraphrase Epstein’s analysis of contemporary Russian culture – the Yugoslav and Slovene communist future became a thing of the past, while the present approached in a decontextualised and recontextualised condition from the direction where we had expected to meet the future.

In the 1980’s and 90’s the politicised art of the late- and post-socialist world dealt primarily with its own history and reality, whereas a considerable part of the political art of the First World closely occupied itself with reflections and questions about what Gómez-Peña calls the terrifying post-democratic era of globalism. Its themes were a collapse of all binary models of understanding the world, a new ethical crisis in a world of transcultural business, translating each artistic gesture into the logic of the possibility of exploitation on the part of the transpolitical, globalistic economic and political lobby.

However, in both cases artists deliberately place themselves in a position defined by the scepticism of Guillermo Gómez-Peña. I will conclude this essay with some of the statements and arguments he elaborates in his paper “The New Global Culture”, published in 2001 as an indirect commentary on the possible tactics of the politicised theatre of today:

We are entering a new, terrifying era. All our ideological parameters and political certainties were crisscrossing under our feet. Suddenly, binary models of understanding the world were no longer functional- us/them, right/wrong, progressive/reactionary, local/global, Third World/First World, alternative/mainstream, centre/periphery, etc. were constantly shifting fault lines in an ever-fluctuating landscape. /.../ In this unprecedented ‘post-democratic era’ /.../ humanism has become either a mere corporate ‘interest’ or ‘goal’ or a trendy marketing strategy for computer firms (Gómez-Peña 2001: 7, 11).

A postscript. In this bizarre context of a post-democratic society of cyberspace and simulacrum, artists transformed themselves into what Gómez-Peña calls performers in the role of «decorators of the omnipresent *horror vacui* and entertainers of a new and much more cynical consumer class ...» (*Id.*: 11). Art in the era of the post-racial, post-racist, post-sexist, post-ideological etc. globalism of the multinationals after modernism had to face a new globalist ideology, «a new transnational multiculturalism that is actually devoid of 'real' people of colour, true artists, outcasts and revolutionaries» (*Id.*: 12). The omnipresent spectacle has replaced content, form is heightened, more stylised than ever, as «'meaning' (remember meaning?) evaporates, or rather, fades out, and everybody searches for the next 'extreme' image or 'interactive experience'. /.../ TV specials on mass murderers and the obsessive repetition of 'real crimes' shot by private citizens or by surveillance camera, we are all becoming daily voyeurs and participants of a new *cultura in extremis*...» (*Id.*: 13).

Theatre and art have to live and survive in an era of post-modernity in which the aesthetics of the Telicity and its pure, technically perfect surface became a substitute for ethics. Politicised art is an attempt at a response to this state, a highly marginalised attempt. Piscator's and Brecht's utopic projections into the future no longer exist, but politicised art persists nevertheless. And this is good.

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