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/ KRYTYKA INSTYTUCJONALNA

# Self-Censorship Between Self-Ridicule and Self-Reflection

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***Self-Censorship Between Self-Ridicule and Self-Reflection***

This essay investigates the notion of humour as a tool used to highlight the acts of self-censorship in theatre and performing arts and its subversive potential. By referring to the examples from the process of working on the *Imaginary Europe* performance directed by Oliver Frljić, the essay problematizes the acts of self-prevention committed by artists who decide to withdraw a certain figure of speech in order not to cause harm towards minorities or underprivileged groups. I revisit theories that tackle humour and reveal its complexity (Billig, McGowan and Zupančič), and I refer to the work of artists who combine humour with self-reflection in the process of undermining and questioning theatrical hierarchies and mechanisms of power.

Keywords: self-censorship; theatre; performing arts; Oliver Frljić; humour

## Introduction

This chapter sets out to investigate the constitutive potential of self-censorship within the realm of performing arts and contemporary theatre,

dedicating special attention to various approaches introduced by theatre makers towards the usage and handling of humour and jokes performed on a stage. I focus on two different examples from performances to which I had access both as an audience member and as an observer of the creative process. My purpose is to unpack the relationship between self-censorship understood as an act of producing speech (which indicates its constitutive potential, following the argumentation of Judith Butler and Michael Levine) and self-censorship perceived as a radical mode of internalizing socio-political forms of control and oppression that remain characteristic of regulative acts of censorship. By shedding light on the political potential of humour in theatre, I will address the issue of engaging in and succumbing to self-censorship by theatre makers, understood as an act of reinventing the relationship between the performance and the audience. The examples I investigate apply self-censorship as a tool to avoid reproducing sexist, racist, or classist clichés.

In my definition of self-censorship, I address the approach introduced by Helen Freshwater (2016), who points out that rather than analysing censorship as a separate act we need to acknowledge its character. As Freshwater indicates, most of the critics tackle the question of censorship by recognizing its effectiveness as an aftermath of an act of expression, while its occurrence and potency often do not have an interventional constitution. Especially in the case of self-censorship, the act of editing material for performance is the result of an ongoing process preconditioned by a set of decisions, tensions, and recognitions occurring in the production process. Freshwater asserts that censorship is ‘realized through the relationships between censorious agents, rather than a series of actions carried out by a discrete or isolated authority’ (2016: 217). This argument can be applied to self-censorship in theatre and performance for two reasons: the position of

authority is often relocated and, within the micro-structure of a theatre institution, the process of censoring is dependent upon the shifting relations between censoring mediums.

While many critics have investigated the area of censorship in the realm of art, the notion of self-censorship remains an under-researched territory, mainly due to the fact that without access to a creative process it is difficult to evaluate artists' self-censoring processes. Therefore, I analyse examples of self-censorship by theatre makers whose creative process I have observed in rehearsals or through interviews. In my analysis, I treat the whole creative team involved in the work as creators who are exposed or subjected to self-censorship. Thus, the responsibility for an artistic outcome will not be attributed to a single person (which is usually more difficult to analyse, as it relies upon the personal experiences of an individual) but to a task shared by a team.

My first case study is a project undertaken by a team working on the performance *Imaginary Europe* (2019) directed by Oliver Frljić in the Schauspielhaus Stuttgart. In early 2019 Frljić was invited by Schauspielhaus Stuttgart to run a curatorial programme under the label European Ensemble — he was expected to organize a semi-institution at the intersection of four theatre houses: Schauspielhaus Stuttgart, Nowy Theatre in Warsaw, Zagreb Youth Theatre, and the National Theatre of Greece. European Ensemble consists of six people: Tina Orlandini, Adrian Pezdirc, Jan Sobolewski, Jaśmina Polak, Tenzin Kolsch, and Claudia Korneeva, who come from three different countries — Croatia, Poland, and Germany. The purpose of the ongoing project is to revisit and redefine the complex notion of European identity. Throughout the process, set to span two years, six performers are to participate in six shows directed by six different directors from more than

four countries (as of 2019, the countries include Greece, Poland, and Croatia; for 2020, productions by Serbian, Slovenian, and Polish directors are scheduled). Performances are developed in Stuttgart, Warsaw, and Zagreb, and after their premieres they are to be shown in all of the theatres involved in the programme.

*Imaginary Europe* premiered on 10 April 2019. Previously Frljić worked in Schauspielhaus Stuttgart in 2018 on the production of *Romeo and Juliet*, but with *Imaginary Europe* it was the first time in Stuttgart that he had devised a text for a performance that was not based on a classical text. The script was created from text improvised by the actors and from excerpts of works by Walter Benjamin, Peter Weiss, and Heiner Müller. Frljić's work became popular and acclaimed in Germany following his success in Slovenia (*Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland*, 2010), Croatia (*I Hate the Truth*, 2012), and Serbia (*Zoran Đinđić*, 2012). In Germany Frljić has worked in major theatres in Munich (Residenztheater, *Balkan macht frei*, 2017), Berlin (Maxim Gorki Theater, *Gorki — Alternative für Deutschland?*, 2018), Düsseldorf, Mannheim, and Dresden. The director works from classical texts as often as he develops original, site-specific material based on experiences of the performers and their improvisations, but his German work tends to derive from classical texts (*Anna Karenina* [2019] and *Metamorphosis* [2018] in Gorki Theater; *Mauser* [2017] in Residenztheater; *Fatzer* [2019] in Schauspiel Köln) rather than using a process based on open dramaturgy — a strategy that does not rely on a theatre script prepared in advance and is more dependent on the theatrical process, the outcome of rehearsals and improvisations. Therefore, *Imaginary Europe* might have been perceived by the audience and critics in Stuttgart as an innovative approach for Frljić although he had worked with similar strategies outside of Germany.

Furthermore, *Imaginary Europe* is rooted in another strategy, which Frljić was implementing while working in theatres of former Yugoslav countries and which often remained in the background in his work in Germany. The European Ensemble project is an attempt to create a semi-autonomous institution within other institutions — an organism characterized by a unique self-reflective dynamic, which emerges on the margins of a bigger system of a theatre house or, in this case, theatre houses. The actors participating in the project were chosen by Frljić either on the basis of acquaintance and mutual working experience or because they were suggested by a collaborating institution. Due to the specifics of the project, six of them were asked to undertake a time-consuming task involving constant mobility, which in this case resulted in the creation of a group of performers in their late twenties and early thirties representing a young generation of Europeans not bound by family or professional responsibilities who were able to travel frequently and for sustained periods of time. Therefore, the perspective they propose on Europe is partly predetermined by their specific social status and professional background that may be common among freelance theatre performers but does not necessarily reflect a wider social group in Europe. Even if members of the ensemble grew up in different countries with incomparable pasts, their cultural references are often shared; their access to technology and information create a platform of mutual understanding; and their middle-class backgrounds enable them to situate themselves among similar economic challenges and to make analogous social observations. Consequently, they share a similar sense of humour.

## Problematic Sense of Humour and Its

# Discontents

‘Why do Jews…?’. So begins the unfinished question Jan Sobolewski poses in one of the initial sequences of *Imaginary Europe*. The scene tells the story of five people standing at the gates of a theatrical utopia. Each one of them is asked to leave one precious thing behind them, so that they can enter the utopian haven. While some of them bring material items — pieces of clothing, a suitcase full of shoes — Sobolewski admits that the only thing of value he possesses is his sense of humour. Before leaving, he wants to tell one last joke, beginning with three words: ‘Why do Jews’. Obviously, it is not the beginning of an innocent line but the prelude to a joke of a racist nature. Not many non-racist jokes begin with an explicit mention of an ethnic or religious group, and if anyone in the audience has any doubts concerning the character of Sobolewski’s statement, they are immediately dispelled by Sobolewski’s stage partner, Tenzin Kolsch, who says: ‘Leave your racist sense of humour on the doorstep of theatrical utopia.’[1] Sobolewski drops the jest immediately after Kolsch’s rebuke and its narrative is not developed. As a result, not only does the audience have no access to the punchline, they also never learn the joke’s content or flow.

This short sequence pinpoints one of the most significant inquiries to appear in the performance. Starting with one unfinished joke, the artists working on *Imaginary Europe* are raising a noteworthy question: what constitutes a joke, especially a racist one? One of the premises of a racist joke is the intention to cause harm to a member or members of a certain community. Following Judith Butler’s argument in *Excitable Speech* (1997), the constitutive element of a racist joke should be based on reception, on the presence of a subject exposed to the injurious character of the speech. Butler argues: ‘The problem of injurious speech raises the question of which

words wound, which representations offend, suggesting that we focus on those parts of language that are uttered, utterable, and explicit. And yet, linguistic injury appears to be the effect not only of the words by which one is addressed but the mode of address itself, a mode — a disposition or conventional bearing — that interpellates and constitutes a subject' (1997: 9). In the sequence opened by Sobolewski, the process of constituting a subject by the mode of address is suspended. Had the joke found its punchline, the ones who are addressed by it would have been identified, but it remains unfinished and undefined. It was deprived of its effect which relies not only on evoking laughter but also on evoking laughter by offending a certain group of people; thus, the injurious power of a racist joke was eliminated.

*Imaginary Europe* has a clear structure: divided into four chapters, the performance circulates around four paintings — works of art that remain fundamental for European perception of art and, at the same time, for European ideals of community and togetherness. The choice of these paintings indicates the perspective from which the creators of the performance decide to speak about Europe — Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–1819), Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), and Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) belong to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century of European art history, they were all painted by male artists, and all have been identified as inspirational masterpieces by art critics, viewers, curators, and artists. Moreover, their status often posed an obstacle in understanding the founding gesture that inspired the painters or belittled the initial controversies that accompanied the creation and reception of these paintings. In *Imaginary Europe* the artistic team gives attention to those aspects of the paintings that have been either ignored in conventional reception or concealed in the accompanying

discourse.

To outline this strategy, I will focus on the tactics used by the team of *Imaginary Europe* to tackle Malevich's *Black Square*. Contrary to the joke told by Sobolewski, which remains unfinished, European Ensemble unfolds another example of a problematic sense of humour at the start of the performance. Starting from Malevich's *Black Square*, they unveil a hidden inscription that is a testament to racism in the cultural landscape of France at the turn of the twentieth century. The stage is covered by a huge black cloth. Dressed in black, Tina Orlandini enters the stage with small, contrived, mime-like steps and starts to tell the story of a famous painting by Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*:

> We chose Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* for this performance because it can be seen as the utopia of Modernism. After our fingers touched its surface, our nails were itching to scratch it, to find what had already been there — *White on White*. With this painting from 1918, Kazimir Malevich pushed the limits of abstraction to an unprecedented degree. Reducing pictorial means to their bare minimum, he not only dispensed with the illusion of depth and volume but also rid the painting of its seemingly last essential attribute, colour.[2]

What starts as a mere academic description ends taking a more unexpected turn. In the final portion of her speech, Orlandini says:

> In late 2015, after examining *Black Square*, researchers from Russia's State Tretyakov Gallery found a handwritten inscription

> under a topcoat of black paint. It is a racist joke and reads: *Battle of Negroes in a Dark Cave*.

This anecdote is not a made-up story. The case of a newly discovered inscription shook the art world in 2015 — the value and character of Malevich's work was called into question and a new genealogy of his avant-garde gestures needed to be established (Shatskikh 2017). In her essay *Inscribed Vandalism: The Black Square at One Hundred* (2017), Aleksandra Shatskikh analyses the possibility of Malevich being an author of the inscription and the response of the art world towards the discovery of the handwritten words 'Battle of Negroes…' (the rest of the sentence is impossible to decipher) written on the front of the painting. Shatskikh claims that the inscription was by no means authorized or allowed by the Russian artist — on the contrary, she remains convinced that Malevich had nothing to do with the vulgar comment. She writes:

> Concerning the orgiastic frenzy that took place on the hundredth anniversary of *The Black Square* after the discovery of the sensational inscription 'A Battle of Negroes …', I wish to affirm with absolute conviction that Kazimir Malevich had nothing at all to do with it — the Russian avant-garde artist's most important picture was vandalized by some 'jolly and quick-witted' individual, who left a graffito on it.

Nevertheless, it was not necessarily the authorship of the inscription that baffled and outraged the art world but the mere fact of its existence.

An additional context to this discovery is offered by Noam M. Elcott, who

sketches a vivid history of black squares exhibited in gallery rooms in the introduction to his book *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (2016). He describes an exhibition of the satirical art group Les Arts Incohérents held by Jules Lévy on 2 August 1882, 35 years before Malevich created his famous painting. One of the works presented in the show was Paul Bilhaud's painting entitled *Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel*, which depicted a black monochromatic canvas. Bilhaud's controversial gesture inspired another artist, Alphonse Allais, to create a series of monochromatic paintings: *First Communion of Chlorotic Young Girls in the Snow*, *Band of Greyfriars in the Fog*, and *Apoplectic Cardinals Harvesting Tomatoes on the Shore of the Red Sea*, which were collected in his *Album primo-avrilesque* (*April-Foolish Album*) (Elcott 2016). Apparently, series of monochromatic paintings with racist titles were not uncommon in the late nineteenth century and even if Malevich remained unaware of this 'witty' movement, which found its way into French galleries, the fame and recognition gained by *Black Square* were rooted not only in the innovation of abstract art but also in the infamous shows of the Incohérents organized at the end of the nineteenth century.

What is more, the practice introduced by Paul Bilhaud found even more artistic allies. Elcott describes an animation created by Émile Cohl in 1910, *The Neo-Impressionist Painter*:

> The artist presents one monochrome after another. Intertitles announce their content — for example, 'A cardinal eating lobster and tomatoes on the shore of the Red Sea', whereupon the film cuts to a red-tinted animation in which appear said cardinal, lobster, tomatoes, and seashore. The gag is reprised with a 'Chinaman' transporting corn on the Yellow River, a Pierrot on a pile of snow,

> and so forth, such that ‘witty’ — and frequently racist — intertitles precede tinted sequences of animated line drawings. The collector becomes progressively more agitated until a black monochrome sends him into a buying frenzy. The black monochrome, we are told, represents ‘Negroes making shoe polish in a tunnel at night’. The film cuts to black leader and, in contradistinction to every other sequence, begets no animation. The screen — and auditorium — remains a uniform black. (2016: 2)

Considering how often artists inscribed racist titles on monochromatic images, the fact that said inscription was discovered under the topcoat of Malevich’s *Black Square* is not surprising. What is more startling is not that these words had ever appeared on the painting but that the title *Battle of Negroes* had been erased and covered with a layer of paint. The author of this erasure is unknown; however, the gesture of covering racist tracks on a European masterpiece serves as a significant example of a specific category of censorship. This kind of censorship does not serve as an instrument of introducing power; its purpose could be to defend the powerless — those who are affected by certain remarks and offended by reproduction of stereotypes. However, in this case, censorship also protects cultural assets from falling into disgrace. Due to the fact that little is known about the origins of and reasons for this erasure, I can only speculate on the process that led to the covering of the inscription. I would venture to say that it was connected with the realization that seeing the aforementioned words at the bottom of a historically significant painting would undermine its value and meaning. The juxtaposition of a major abstract artwork with a racist slogan can create a feeling of shame, especially among representatives of a cultural milieu which would prefer to dismiss the complicity of art in reproducing

racist clichés. According to Elcott, not very long after Lévy's exhibition, artists started to detach the usage of darkness from its racist connotations: for Man Ray, Georges Méliès, and Oskar Schlemmer, darkness became a medium for creating new aesthetics instead of telling racist jokes, and the initial gesture of Allais fell into oblivion (4). At the beginning of *Imaginary Europe*, European Ensemble offers the audience information that calls into question conventional admiration for Malevich's artwork, evoking the uncomfortable feeling stemming from the unfortunate beginnings of the artistic existence of black canvases.

Obviously, in the performance the information concerning the inscription on *Black Square*is limited and adjusted to the dramaturgy that relies on creating suspense rather than on providing the viewers with academic insight. Frljić and European Ensemble are not dealing with the origins of the racist inscription; neither are they analysing the aftermath of the discovery. This information is delivered after a profound and elaborated description of the painting and, as it is in stark contrast to the solemnity of the introduction, it turns the textbook description into a joke. I argue that this perspective, established in the first minutes of *Imaginary Europe*, defines the approach, adopted by Frljić and members of European Ensemble, that recuperates or recovers unwanted or erased historical references. On one hand, Frljić and European Ensemble are dealing with the surface understood literally — the actors perform on a stage covered by reproductions of famous paintings. On the other hand, they are scratching the visible layer and turning it upside down to reveal what lies beneath European values and artistic myths. At the same time, they interrogate senses of humour and their relativity in an effort to expose a problematic layer of what had been perceived as amusing in the past, such as the inscription on *Black Square* and the artistic accomplishments of Paul Bilhaud, Alphonse Allais, and Émile

Cohl. I argue that these jokes have never been innocent but they were embedded in the racist attitude present in European culture at the time. By highlighting the problematic case of Malevich's artwork, the creators of *Imaginary Europe* are reversing the direction of laughter. While at the end of the nineteenth century the joke was pointed at people of colour, now European Ensemble and Frljić recall an embarrassing case of a masterpiece inscribed with a racist note to ridicule European values and the need of the artistic milieu to suppress the most disconcerting artistic gestures.

## Offense and Ridicule

After *Black Square*, the Ensemble explore three more paintings undertaking a non-chronological journey through the history of European art and the concepts of freedom, togetherness, community, and equality: each chapter of the performance, inspired by a different classical painting, opens a space for reimagining European ideals and juxtaposing them with singular experience and artistic practice. The second painting — *The Raft of the Medusa* (1918–19) by Théodore Géricault — is hidden under the black-square cloth that was used to depict Malevich's canvas. This time the floor is covered by a number of painted square-shaped plates that altogether create a huge image, as if they were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The narrative referring to the second painting is taken from Peter Weiss' *Aesthetic of Resistance* (1975) and from an account of two shipwreck survivors in Corréard's and Savigny's *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal in 1816* (1816). The author of this classical Romantic painting has never concealed its grim background: Géricault drew inspiration from an actual event that happened in 1816. A frigate named the Méduse collided with a sandbank near the coast of Mauretania and its four lifeboats could only accommodate 250 out of 400 passengers on board. Around 147 people left on the Méduse were put on a

raft that could barely hold the load. After 13 days, the raft was rescued by another ship, but only 15 of its crew survived. Corréard's and Savigny's account describes the gruesome journey during which the passengers of the Méduse fought for their lives by killing the weakest of their lot and consuming their bodies. The third painting — *Angelus Novus* (1920) by Paul Klee — is not shown; the performers only describe it using Walter Benjamin's words. During the interval the audience is asked to help the actors to construct the fourth painting. The elements are sketched on the other side of the squares that depict *The Raft of the Medusa*; once turned upside down and put in order, they create *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) by Eugène Delacroix. Although the dramaturgy is refined and the wide spectrum of references could suggest that *Imaginary Europe* is an example of bourgeois theatre, the language and temper of monologues accompanying the deliberations on European painting contradict this assumption. In his opening monologue, Adrian Pezdirc says:

> Fuck you and let me introduce to you the one and the only European Ensemble! A theatre that creates utopia in the midst of realpolitik! A unique flower on the Eurocentric market of political correctness! A place where you can measure the refinement of your theatrical taste! [sic] We are here to entertain you! Tonight, you are about to see a shipwreck of Sprechtheater! You're gonna see Europe falling apart and coming together again! You're gonna see our pubic hair, penises and vaginas in excellent lighting! So open your eyes and wax your ears! Open your hearts and kill your ratio! Burn your expectations and swallow whatever is spit on the stage. […] Everything you're gonna see here tonight stands for Europe: something we all know, but no one really knows what it is.

‘Eurocentric market of political correctness’, as named by Adrian Pezdirc, is one of the recurrent motifs of the performance — in the final sequence of stand-up comedy by Jan Sobolewski and Jaśmina Polak political correctness even becomes the central point of reference. At the very beginning Pezdirc invites the audience to let themselves be carried away with pure entertainment, even though it is marked by a more serious reflexion on Europe. Pezdirc’s exhortation is a mash-up of elements that are conventionally associated with postdramatic and political theatre — his ironic words indicate that he is depicting these features in a manner characteristic of sceptics of modern theatre aesthetics. The constituent elements of postdramatic practice include loosening the bonds with precise depictions of reality, and abandoning standard patterns of representation (Carroll et al. 2013: 6). In *Imaginary Europe* these elements are applied and undermined at the same time (which is also characteristic of a postdramatic approach, as it has a self-reflective and meta-theatrical character). Nevertheless, Pezdirc’s monologue not only plays with the conventional image of postdramatic theatre but also mocks the expectations of audiences accustomed to experimental and political engagement in theatre. According to his words, audiences of *Imaginary Europe* are supposed to witness everything that can be expected of contemporary theatre: nudity, political statements, fun, and emotional responses. Additionally, they will find themselves in the ‘Eurocentric market of political correctness’, a term that indicates that the notion of ‘political correctness’ has been commodified and monetized. Despite the confrontational language, Pezdirc’s monologue is delivered in a humorous manner; viewers’ expectations are satirized rather than ridiculed, which is not characteristic of Frljić’s theatre. Rather, Frljić usually tries to overcome irony and create a narrative frame that purposefully blurs the line between fiction and reality.

In many of his performances Frljić uses the strategy of 'subversive affirmation', practiced by theatre maker Christoph Schliengensief and popularized by artists and artistic collectives such as 0100101110101101.org, NSK, and the Orange Alternative. As Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse explain, subversive affirmation is rooted in a practice characteristic of Eastern European art of the 1960s and served as an answer to repressive and limiting political systems. After 1989 it was deployed by artists in Western Europe and commodified by Western markets of artmaking. Subversive affirmation goes together with over-identification, both of which are 'forms of critique that through techniques of affirmation, involvement and identification put the viewer/listener precisely in such a state or situation which s/he would or will criticise later' (Arns and Sasse 2006: 445). The ensuing act of distancing oneself from a certain ideology often comes as a result of practicing it, and the starting point of applying subversive affirmation is strictly connected with over-identifying with a chosen standpoint and following all the steps recommended by followers and ideologists of a selected frame of reference. Arns and Sasse attribute the origins of the term 'subversive affirmation' to Moscow Conceptualism and the work of Vladimir Sorokin, whose 1980s novels re-enact the style of nineteenth-century novels so precisely and in such a detailed way that at one point the narrative becomes unbelievable (Arns and Sasse 2006: 445). Sorokin exaggerated the mode of naturalism and social realism and copied the narrative style characteristic of totalitarian governments — through over-precise re-enactment of this narrative frame, the mise-en-scène started to seem scarcely credible (445). Though Arns and Sasse focus on artists from the Eastern Europe of the second half of the twentieth century, the artistic activity of the Situationist International bears resemblance to practitioners of subversive affirmation — their classic *detournement* 'combining

subversive irrationality and caustic political topicality' (Bishop 2013: 84) could be seen as another forefather of this artistic strategy.

Oliver Frljić often employs the strategy of subversive affirmation (*Zoran Đinđić*, 2012; *Alexandra Zec*, 2014; *The Curse*, 2017; *Gorki — Alternative für Deutschland?*, 2018), especially when working on separate monologues performed by actors. From what I have witnessed and worked on while collaborating with Frljić as a dramaturg, his starting point is the use of rhetoric that is widespread among opponents of a certain discourse, for example highly nationalistic ideology, and the creation within the narrative of a monologue of a fictional figure who over-identifies with a stated viewpoint. For this strategy to function, the arguments firstly need to be convincing for both sides of an ideological debate, so that at the very beginning it is difficult to situate the chosen chain of reasoning within one system of beliefs. By expanding on the argumentation, the performer reveals its absurdity, although they never question themselves. The ridiculousness of the monologue remains an additional feature, overwhelmed by the engagement and energy of the performer, who exaggerates the arguments and triggers the disintegration of the inner logic of his or her speech. For example in Frljić's *Aleksandra Zec* (2014), one of the actors (Jelena Lopatić) offends the audience by invoking all the arguments that appeared in the press before the opening night — she asks the spectators whether their main motivation for seeing the performance was to badmouth Croatian veterans, she suggests that they found themselves in the theatre due to their eagerness to be part of in a scandal, she indicates that the performance is nothing more than a provocation. She accuses Frljić of exploiting the problematic and painful case of the murder of the Zec family as a career move and she recalls the examples of Croatian victims of war who should be commemorated in the performance instead of the Zec family. Her monologue

is a compilation of the arguments presented in various media when the performance was in its development stage, however, the accumulation of her statements reveals their absurdity. Nevertheless, it is not Lopatić's performance that demonstrates the incredibility of this reasoning but the build-up and editing of the arguments that undermine their reliability and reveal the ideological agenda behind them.

In one of his most important performances, *Damned be the Traitor of His Homeland* (Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana, 2010), Frljić dealt with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which was reflected in the individual narratives of the performers participating in the project. Ten actors present on the stage were encouraged to relate to their memories concerning the death of Josip Broz Tito (1980), the breakup of Yugoslavia (1989–1992), and their attitude towards the idea of belonging to one nation after 1992. Their discussions, conflicts, and arguments became the material for a performance hinging on the assumption that artificially imposed borders and divisions lead to real, dangerous combat. During the process it became clear that the complex and turbulent past of former Yugoslav countries remains a hotbed of controversy even 20 years after Slovenia declared independence from the Yugoslav federation. At one point one of the performers, Slovenian actor Primož Bezjak, takes on Serbian nationality and says a monologue addressed to the Slovenians present in the audience:

> What you lookin' at, you Slovenian pussy? What, y'all [want]? What, you Austrian minions? Are we amused? What's so funny? Come here, you fuck! Wiping your asses with euros?! You're Europe and we're shit? Where were you during the war? 400 kilometres south there was slaughter and what were you doing? Drinking

> cappuccino. Where were you during the Srebrenica massacre? Why didn't you come, play humanitarian and stop us? Well? Why? When NATO was bombarding Belgrade, you were kissing its ass. When bridges were falling, you were sucking its dick. Just like you sucked Bush's and Putin's dick at Brdo Castle to get on the world map. But it's all your fault, yours, you Slovenian pussies. You started the war, you Austrian minions! You broke Yugoslavia apart, you frustrated pieces of shit. When was the last time you were at war? We dealt with everything in World War Two. We've been at war for 500 years! Fuck you! Yugoslavia was too big and you were too small. And now you're in Europe. You're way bigger now! What? What, you Slovenian pussies? What's so funny? What?[3]

Primož Bezjak is a Slovenian actor and he speaks Slovenian even when he appropriates Serbian nationality. The arguments and style he is using resemble the rhetoric of Serbian critics of Slovenian politics during the Yugoslav wars and before the outburst of the conflict (Dragović-Soso 2002). At the same time, what resonates in the monologue is Bezjak's reaction to the amusement caused among the audience, as even in the moment of a particularly vehement verbal attack on Slovenians, viewers often respond with laughter, at least this was the case during two shows of *Damned be the Traitor* at the Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana (2015, 2019) and one show at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw (2015). This reaction was foreseen by Frljić who, when preparing the monologue, included ripostes to laughter, a reaction that does not necessarily stem from the feeling of being amused but often serves as a defence mechanism. According to Michael Billig, laughter cannot be perceived as a homogenous phenomenon. In *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards Social Critique of Humour* (2005) Billig argues that

laughter contains contradictory elements due to the fact that it can serve to create a social platform of mutual understanding while at the same time it may work as a tool of ostracism and exclusion; while laughter can be found in the majority of societies, it remains particular and dependant on social circumstances and individual backgrounds (Billig 2005). Humour and laughter do not always have a positive resonance, even under the circumstances that would suggest the socializing and unifying power of laughing together:

> Since laughter is held to be such a good thing, we want to believe that we possess a 'good' sense of humour in all aspects of the term. In consequence, we may ignore the more problematic aspects of the funniness that we enjoy with family and friends or as part of a mass audience of strangers. If this collective laughter has a shameful, darker side, then there is much that we may wish to hide from ourselves. Because the task of critique is to question common-sense beliefs, it must also ask what, if anything, such beliefs overlook and even conceal from the believers themselves. (Billig 2005: 2)

The belief that laughter shared with an 'audience of strangers' is a symptom of creating a community does not always hold true for theatre audiences, who frequently laugh to conceal the awkwardness of a theatrical moment or to avoid a confrontation in a moment of theatrical interaction. From my experience as a viewer of *Damned be the Traitor of His Homeland*, the reaction of laughter does not match the message of Bezjak's monologue. When I watched the guest performance of *Damned be the Traitor…* in Warsaw in Teatr Powszechny in 2015, the monologue attacking the audience had been rewritten according to the political situation in Poland: Primož

Bezjak was speaking from the position of a critic whose sense of moral superiority, in his words, was shared by Polish society who, after the crash of the government airplane in Smoleńsk on 10 April 2010, voted for the ultra-right-wing party Law and Justice that is strongly connected to the omnipresence of Catholic discourse in the country:

> The worst clerical homophobes, antisemites rule your country and you do nothing because you are actually happy that Poland is so white and so Catholic. […] You don't even react to pseudo-patriotic marches in Warsaw, you don't react when they shout kill the Jew, fuck the Islamist. You call them economically excluded, fighting working class. […] This is what you want! To have fun, to laugh at the jokes about Jews, to be told from the stage that your antisemitism is not a pure irrational hate towards others but just a class struggle. You just want to see nice costumes on the stage, esthetics, patriotic allegories. Is that what you want in theatre? In Famous Polish theatre. The theatre of Kantor, Grotowski! Big Polish art! It is ridiculous.[4]

His monologue did not address any nationalistic tensions between countries, nor did it refer to the relationship between former Yugoslavia and Poland. Its resonance derived from different premises than the ones in Ljubljana, but the reaction of the audience was similar to that of the Slovenian viewers who can be heard on the recording from the Mladinsko Theatre. I, too, together with most of the audience, laughed at the fierce attack on Polish identity. Judging from my own experience and discussions with other spectators after the show, this laughter was the result of a feeling of hopelessness: while we could not reply to the arguments presented on stage, we felt embarrassed

that the political situation in Poland, even from an outside perspective, presented itself as a knot of resentments and animosities that is impossible to untangle. Confronted with an explicit description of national grudges and prejudices, we were laughing at the absurd accumulation of them, knowing that this depiction does justice to the amount of hatred and division in Polish society in 2015.

In both monologues — in *Imaginary Europe* and in *Damned Be the Traitor* — the attack on the audience is straightforward and implicit, the difference being that Bezjak's performance does not aim at evoking a comic effect while Pezdirc's monologue is intended to sound amusing. Both employ subversive affirmation as a strategy, but while in the case of the attack on Slovenians the text is based on nationalistic biases and prejudices, Adrian Pezdirc in *Imaginary Europe* is playing with the expectations of audiences accustomed to postdramatic theatre. The points of reference and subjects of these speeches have different validity — mocking theatre aesthetics may be a reason for a conflict within a theatre milieu, while addressing patriotic feelings from the perspective of a nationalistic opponent can serve as a trigger for a clash on a wider scale. In the Slovenian performance, the process of over-identification of the narrator of the monologue touches on the issue of belonging to a certain nation and taking over arguments characteristic of the most radical points of view represented by a portion of its citizens. In the Stuttgart performance the theatre language used in the monologue is much more self-referential and the process of self-identification with a discourse seems to be easier to accomplish, as all members of European Ensemble are familiar with the mode of postdramatic theatre, avant-garde practices within theatre, and strategies of performance art. By ridiculing the language describing these practices and audience expectation, they undertake a self-reflective task of increasing their

detachment from their actions and lines on the stage. Pezdirc's monologue empowers the audience with tools that enable them to apply ironic parenthesis — the actions on stage are situated on the side of fiction, speculation, and ironic self-reference.

## The Antisemitic Joke and Its Consequences

Pezdirc's monologue has an ironic character and the ironic attitude remains present in the sequence that contains the beginning of Sobolewski's problematic joke. The ironic frame has often served as a justification for introducing controversial sense of humour on television in recent years, as the case of Louis C.K.'s or Sarah Silverman's stand-ups has proven. Both comedians are keen on supplying their audience with an ironic parenthesis that makes it impossible to distinguish reality from fiction and within this frame they introduce jokes that are balancing on the edge of political incorrectness — and they often deliberately problematize and cross this edge. I will return to stand-up comedy in the following chapters; here I would like to focus on the paradoxical character of irony in *Imaginary Europe*. On one hand, European Ensemble encourages us to play with the notion of 'political correctness', while on the other hand they censor a problematic joke within the context of German theatre. A racist joke does not fit with contemporary European theatre's uses of irony for several reasons, but, as many examples from a variety of performances demonstrate, a racist sense of humour has been present on German stages for many years.

Although a discussion on antisemitism and racism on German theatre stages is conventionally associated with the reality of the nineteenth century and pre-Nazi times (Bonnell 2008), the issue of racial insensitivity is a recurring topic in current debates on German theatre. In 2012, in the magazine

*Exberliner*, Nele Obermueller described the vivid presence of blackface on German stages. According to Obermueller's research, many theatre houses had in their repertoires comedy performances with actors having their face painted black. A case in point is the play *Ich bin nicht Rappaport* (*I Am Not Rappaport*, 2012) at the Schlosspark Theater in Berlin. The comedy, directed by Thomas Schendel, became controversial even before its opening, when the director of the play, together with Evangelia Epanomeritaki representing the Schlosspark Theater, published a letter of explanation. In it they stated that the decision to resort to the blackface solution stemmed from the lack of black actors in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and that this lack was connected to the fact that German theatres did not have enough parts to offer to black actors to justify them being fully employed. This statement caused even more controversy (*Ich bin nicht Midge*).

Cases of usage of blackface launched a discussion after Bühnenwatch, an online network created after the case of Schlosspark Theater became notorious, publicly protested against featuring actors in blackface in *Unschuld* (*Innocence*, 2011) in the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. In Dea Loher's play directed by Michael Thalheimer the use of blackface was actually intended to be a comment against racism, but a member of Bühnenwatch attended the performance and left the audience when the actor in blackface appeared on stage (Bruce-Jones 2016). While these controversies concerned the insensitivity and lack of awareness in tackling the issue of race (and racism) in general, reproducing antisemitic discourses on German stages does not seem to be that common and, if it does occur, it is approached mainly from a critical point of view. Antisemitic jokes rarely appear in German theatre and if they are performed, they are delivered within a frame that justifies their presence. For example, *Kommtein Pferd in die Bar* (*A Horse Walks into a Bar*) staged in the Deutsches Theater in Berlin

by Dušan David Pařízek in 2019 was based on a David Grossman novel. The main character of the play is a Jewish stand-up comedian who tells a lot of jokes usually connected with his own life experiences and related to stereotypes concerning his nationality, making a comment on each joke (Hayner 2019). Clearly, it would be unreasonable to ascribe antisemitism to a performance that critically examines the issue of reproducing antisemitic clichés. While a debate on ethnic diversity in German theatre is ongoing and theatres in Berlin and Munich have undertaken the task of creating an inclusive platform for refugees and they actively tackle racism (Goldmann 2018), there are areas that remain problematic to challenge, such as the grey zone of antisemitic humour present among German youth (Schönborn 2019). Similarly to the antisemitic jokes that are spreading among youngsters and remain difficult to tackle or problematize, the example from *Imaginary Europe*shows that it might be safer for creators of a performance to drop a certain discourse than to confront it explicitly.

The three words 'Why do Jews' spoken by Sobolewski in *Imaginary Europe* do not necessarily mean that the joke exists. Typically, the words mark the beginning of a joke, but here they lead to a dead end, so it can be assumed that the joke might have been invented for the purpose of the performance, as a provocative opening. Nevertheless, through interviews with the creative team I discovered that (a) this joke exists and (b) the audience are not given the opportunity to hear it for a very specific reason. The idea of saying it out loud was dropped due to the fact that several members of the creative team found the punchline offensive. Here is the joke in its entirety, as told in rehearsal: 'Why do Jews watch porn backwards? Because they love the part when the hooker gives the money back.' Without any doubt, both the background and message of the joke are racist — they rely on racist stereotypes and attribute negative traits to all representatives of a certain

ethnicity.

On the other hand, European Ensemble and Frljić decided to retell the story of the racist inscription on the *Black Square* without abbreviating the sentence revealed on the painting — in fact, they filled in the missing words (X-ray analysis revealed the fragment 'Battle of Negroes […]', the rest of the words were illegible) and claimed that the whole sentence read 'Battle of Negroes in a Dark Cave'. The choice made by the team concerning Sobolewski's racist joke was the result of the reaction of the director's assistants, who opposed retelling the punchline after hearing it during one rehearsal. In a conversation after the opening, Sobolewski told me that he agreed with the decision and that the joke might have caused harm to spectators. The questions that remain open are: Why is one racist joke more appropriate than another and what makes it harmful to the audience? I argue that the difference lies in both the context and intention. First and foremost, the antisemitic joke told by Jan Sobolewski (in rehearsal) was intended to cause laughter and confusion and was left without a dramaturgical comment, whereas the racist inscription on the Malevich painting was not presented as a joke per se but was part of a lecture performance that shed light on the racist implications of European art history. Therefore, in analysing the resonance of racist/antisemitic jokes, I will now refer only to the example of the joke told by Jan Sobolewski, as its intention was to induce laughter in the audience (contrary to the Malevich example that aimed at reflecting upon the racist background of artistic heritage in Europe).

The phenomenon of humour has been repeatedly classified, categorized and divided into different types. One of the most common divisions concerns its political potential. Michael Billig posits a distinction between two types of

humour: disciplinary and rebellious, suggesting that the former ridicules rule-breakers and therefore maintains the social order. For this reason, disciplinary humour remains inherently conservative, while the latter type points at social rules themselves and is thus a radical approach to contesting social order (2005). Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič divides comedy into conservative and subversive, calling the former 'false' and the latter 'true' (Zupančič 2008). Zupančič argues:

> It is not a question of *what* (which content) is subjected to comical treatment — Mother Teresa, Lenin, machismo, feminism, the institution of the family, or the life of a homosexual couple — it is a question of the mode of the comic processing itself. False, conservative comedies are those where the abstract-universal and the concrete do not change places and do not produce a short circuit between them; instead, the concrete (where 'human weaknesses' are situated) remains external to the universal, and at the same time invites us to recognize and accept it as the indispensable companion of the universal, its necessary physical *support*. (2008: 30)

In *The Odd One In* Zupančič follows Hegelian logic in adopting the division between the universal and the concrete and applying it to the structure of comedy: 'false' comedies do not undermine the universal, but at the same time they offer a possibility of identification with human weaknesses that are present in comic narratives about heroes and authorities. As an audience of conservative comedy, we can sympathize with protagonists' flaws, 'yet their higher calling (or universal symbolic function) remains all the more the object of respect and fascination (instead of being the object of comic

laughter)' (2008: 31). Despite the fact that a conservative comedy can be effective in terms of evoking laughter and amusement, it does not undermine social order and it praises the status quo, reinforcing the reproduction of stereotypes that guarantee that socially privileged people do not lose their position.

Though neither Billig nor Zupančič assume that these categorizations have a definitive character, Zupančič favours 'true', subversive comedies and dedicates more attention to their rebellious potential than to conservative comedies. As American film theoretician and philosopher Todd McGowan points out, the issue with conservative comedy tends to be much more persistent and more difficult to dismiss. As an example of the complexity of the strategy applied by authors of conservative jokes and their responders, McGowan analyses antisemitic Holocaust jokes and their effectiveness as entertainment. He points out that despite their offensive nature, they often work as a source of amusement and that it may be misleading to subject them to qualitative assessment, as it is not the 'true' or 'false' character of a joke that should define its comic nature. McGowan claims that Zupančič's approach towards comedy as an act of incarnating concrete into universal is limiting, as there are comedies that do not incarnate the universal at all but remain effective in terms of evoking laughter (2017). Therefore, conservative comedy is not 'false' and should not be undermined or dismissed as lacking a comedic quality but should be analysed in terms of whether it involves a different short-circuit than the one suggested by Zupančič.

Billig also refers to the arbitrariness of the distinction between 'true' and 'false' jokes. Instead of privileging the effectiveness of a joke, Billig proposes to focus on the intention and purpose of the act of telling it. When analyzing Freud's approach to comedy, Billig argues:

> There is no reason for believing that ‘our’ jokes are ‘true jokes’ in the sense of being truly or objectively funny and that the jokes of our opponents indicate no ‘real’ sense of humour. Anti-racists should not object to racist jokes on the grounds of technical quality. That would imply that such humour would be acceptable if only it were a bit funnier. The reason why racist humour is not funnier has little to do with the joke-work. It is offensive because it is racist. By the same token racists do not become any less racist on account of telling jokes or by turning racism into a joke. (Billig 2005: 161)

Billig implies that it is not the effectiveness of a joke that is decisive for its character — a racist joke told with the intention to offend the feelings of anti-racists or to cause amusement among racists is unacceptable due to its purpose. An effective joke, a joke that evokes an intended reaction, can at the same time be a racist joke, and it is not its affiliation with the genre of comedy that determines its value but its offensive overtone, which should make the author of the joke reflect on its appropriateness.

Interestingly, in *Only a Joke Can Save Us* McGowan quotes an antisemitic Holocaust joke — ‘the most offensive joke we can imagine’ (2017: 63) — as an example of effectiveness combined with inappropriateness. Likewise, I cite the joke told by Sobolewski, the only difference is that the joke in *Imaginary Europe* does not refer to the Holocaust. I justify quoting the joke by the need to evoke the context — without referring to the content of the joke, it would be challenging for me to lay out the process of self-censorship that occurred during the production of the performance. On the other hand, I cannot exclude that in this way I am contributing to the popularity of this joke — I may assume that some of the readers find it amusing enough to disseminate it without academic context despite its antisemitic resonance.

Nevertheless, the limited reach of my writing and the context I offer make it more difficult to extract one joke from this chapter and reproduce it without providing its background.

Though it is always dependent upon the context, I argue that it is possible to determine whether quoting a certain joke or statement under a specified circumstance within the realm of theatre is a productive move. Rather than invoking a conventional definition of censorship as 'the act or action of refraining from expressing something (such as a thought, point of view, or belief) that others could deem objectionable' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), I would like to address Magda Stroińska's and Vikki Cecchetto's claim that self-censorship is 'the act of censoring one's own written or spoken words, usually out of fear of punishment or loss of face but sometimes also out of respect for the feelings of others' (2015: 177). In the case of *Imaginary Europe*, where a decision was made to cut the punchline following feedback from several members of the team assisting the production, I contend that this choice situates this act of self-censorship as an expression of respect for the feelings of others. Therefore, this form of self-censorship has little to do with internalizing a mechanism of power or acting out of fear of the opinion of others but rather relies on the presumption that there are cases when the decision to use a certain type of language is not justifiable enough and may cause unnecessary harm.

Taking into consideration that the notion of feelings is questionable and blurred and that it has often been used as a false premise — for example when talking about 'religious feelings' and blasphemy in art — I argue that even in times of the radicalization of nationalistic and fascist tendencies in Europe, artists commit acts of self-censorship for various reasons, not necessarily because of fear of authorities or superiors or for the sake of their

own political safety. Instead of perceiving self-censorship as a mechanism of limitation or internalized submission to the discourses currently in power, it can be productive to look at self-censorship as an exercise in practising the awareness that some figures of speech and modes of thinking are harmful to certain groups of people, and to realize that self-censorship can help diminish this harm and that artists should remain alert to the vulnerability of others.

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## Footnotes

1. All quotations from the script of *Imaginary Europe* come from the version the author received from Jaśmina Polak (August 2019).
2. All quotations from the script of *Imaginary Europe* come from the version the author received from Jaśmina Polak (August 2019).
3. Excerpts from the script of *Damned be the Traitor of His Homeland* are quoted from the version the author received from Tina Malić, Mladinsko Theatre (September 2019).
4. This version of the monologue was prepared for the purpose of the guest performance of *Damned be the Traitor of His Homeland* by Joanna Wichowska, to whom I owe access to the text.

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