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/ RECONSTRUCTIONS

Jakub Skrzywanek’s Theatrical Reenactments

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The main purpose of the article is to examine the reconstruction method as one of the most important features of Jakub Skrzywanek’s theatrical language. His own model of reconstruction of reality, placed against the background of Rebecca Schneider’s theory of reenactment, appears to be a tool for social intervention. An analysis of Skrzywanek's performances that use reconstruction – *Opowieści niemoralne* (Immoral Tales), *Spartakus. Miłość w czasie zarazy* (Spartacus. Love in the Time of Plague) and *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (co-directed with Justyna Sobczyk) – confirms the thesis of the political nature of reenactment and shows an evolution of the method of reconstruction as well as the various strategies for replicating reality employed by the director. The article also attempts to find common featuresand – to chart a certain poetics of reconstruction. This reconstruction consists of the use of archival documents in the performance, collaboration with groups of experts and specialists, exposing the corporeality of the archives, affective influence, Brecht's V-effect and framing stage action with media and text indicators. The method of reconstruction, additionally equipped with a strong exposure of meta-theatricality and the entanglement of theatre in media negotiations, finds its most perfect development in Skrzywanek’s latest premiere, *Zbrodnia i kara. Z powodu zbrodni Rosjan, których nie potrafimy zrozumieć* (Crime and Punishment. Because of the Russian Crimes that We Cannot Understand).

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Reenactment–reconstruction

In *Performing Remains*, the fundamental work on the theory of performative repetition, Rebecca Schneider builds her definition of reenactment on existing and everyday semantics:

> ‘The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives us the verb form ‘re-enact:’ to ‘reproduce, recreate, or perform again’ but offers only the term ‘reenactment societies’ and briefly describes ‘an association whose members re-enact events (often battles) from a particular historical period, in replica costume and using replica weapons…’ As the OED definition makes clear, we are still most familiar with the term reenactment as applied to historical societies.’ (2020, pp. 68-69)

The linguistic case cited by Schneider shows that, in Polish terminology, the meaning closest to reenactment is *rekonstrukcja* (reconstruction). The term carries a similar semantic resonance; after all, when speaking of a ‘reconstruction group,’ every language user thinks of history enthusiasts committed to recreating past events (particularly battles, as is the case with reenactment).

The notion of reconstruction entered the Polish theatre discourse with new force through the performance works of Jakub Skrzywanek, who turned theatrical recreation of reality into one of the most important tools of social intervention. Therefore, with Schneider’s idea of reenactment in mind, I propose to look at the objectives of adopting the idea of reconstruction in theatre, its structure and constituent features, as well as the various strategies and tools that Skrzywanek chooses to use in his ‘reconstructive’

performances. The director's latest production, *Zbrodnia i kara. Z powodu zbrodni Rosjan, których nie potrafimy zrozumieć* (Crime and Punishment. Because of the Russian Crimes that We Cannot Understand) (premiere: 16 June 2023, co-produced by the Henryk Tomaszewski Wrocław Pantomime Theatre and the Polish Theatre in the Underground), is a multi-layered reconstruction, at times a reconstruction of reconstruction and a reconstruction of simulation, is where I begin to follow the strategy of theatrical replication. It is the state of play now; one cannot deny the thirty-one-year-old artist his forward innovation and refinement of this method or even its abandonment altogether. Nor do I suggest that Skrzywanek is categorically programmed to be anti-literature, but I purposely skip here his productions based on or somewhat inspired by literature (for example, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in Opole and *Kordian* in Poznań). The artist himself admits: 'Literature in itself is of little interest to me. I am more interested in the reality that surrounds me. It is here and now that excites me' ('Teatr nowej widzialności,' 2023).

Returning to Schneider's concept — from the point of view of theatrical reconstruction, the essence of reenactment rests on two fundamental factors. The first is the temporal relationship between enactment (understood as the act of 'creation') and the cited identification of repetition. 'Reenactment,' unlike other terms for replication (imitation, mimesis, appropriation and the like) is the only one that contains a clear temporal aspect, distinguishing between past and present, 'before' and 'now' (2020, p. 69). The second basis is the idea of embodiment of the archive, the past returning in performers' bodies as 'biological machines for the transmission of affect,' which dictates 'physical actions to be treated as tools of cognition' (ibid., p. 88). From Schneider's multi-faceted narrative, one can distinguish several functions of reenactment; the most obvious one, heavily accentuated

in analyses of Civil War battle reenactments and seen as an American foundational myth, I would call the 'conservative-nostalgic function.' Reconstructionists, when asked by Schneider about the purpose of their activities, often emphasised a perverse desire to travel back in time, to faithfully recreate the way things were, to 'keep the past alive' (ibid., p. 31). In such cases, reconstruction becomes a form of remembrance, a commemorative practice and a kind of ritual repetition of ancestral gestures. A different face of reenactment is revealed when it is functionalised for the working through of past traumas. Schneider, citing Freud's *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*, observes that, in psychoanalytic trauma theory, what has happened can be simultaneously ahead of us and behind us — in the past when something has been missed, forgotten or not fully seen, but also in the future when that something that was repressed can (re)appear in a (re)encounter, (re)discovery, (re)relation and/or (re)enactment and seem only now to be experienced for the first time because it is now being experienced the second time around (ibid., pp. 53-54).

The third function of reenactment refers to its subversive and critical character, to what Dorota Sajewska called 'the profanation of the archive, a kind of cognitive theory activity, subjecting media, strategies and practices of memory to reflection' (Sajewska, 2017), and Schneider herself referred to it as 'temporal drag.' Repetition becomes a form of negotiation between 'then' and 'now;' it also contains the perspective of concern for the future, and has the potential of becoming a tool for social intervention:

> Is there political efficacy in temporal drag? The act of revolving, or turning, or pivoting off a linear track, may not be 'merely' nostalgic, if nostalgia implies a melancholic attachment to loss and an

> assumed impossibility of return. Rather, the turn to the past as a gestic, affective journey through the past's possible alternative futures – the ghost jump if you will – bears a political purpose for a critical approach to futurity unhinged from capitalist development narratives of time and secular investments in Progress as strictly linear. (Schneider 2020, p. 359).

The function, let us call it 'interventionist,' is clearly opposed to the conservative-nostalgic function. I attribute this function to Skrzywanek's theatrical reconstructions, except for the play *Śmierć Jana Pawła II* (The Death of John Paul II), the reconstruction process of the Pope dying, which I would place closer to the second function — that of working through collective trauma (which is why I devote the least attention to this performance). Skrzywanek himself admitted that his aim was to 'check,' to confront the audience with the image of 'the pope in a diaper,' the purely physiological process of a dying body, and thus to visualise what had 'not been fully seen.' The fact that this reworking aimed at the Polish collective happened and was effective is confirmed by how the performance was received outside of Poland — at foreign theatre festivals it is often perceived as a glorification of the suffering of John Paul II ('Teatr…,' 2023).

When juxtaposing Skrzywanek's reconstruction and Schneider's idea of reenactment, another important aspect needs a mention, namely the short distance in time. The director embodies the archives, but the events he reconstructs in his performances are encompassed in the communicative memory or, simply, are an element-exemplum of a more current social problem. Hence, Skrzywanek' s reconstruction (which draws on the traditions of factual montage, stage reportage and documentary theatre) is closer to Hamlet's 'brief chronicles of the time and the Zeittheater.

Reconstruction falls within the framework of what Carol Martin called the ‘theatre of the real’ (though, in my view, the term ‘the real’ is more universal and somewhat avoids the problem of temporal distance echoed in Schneider’s discourse in the term ‘history’). In the researcher's terms, it is theatre that wants to ‘get to real essence of things,’ be part of a theatre of the real community, creating ways to understand personal, social, and political phenomena’ (Martin, 2019). Reconstruction seems to correspond with these assumptions: the ‘now’ taken up is a visualisation of the phrase: It is one thing to know and another to see.[1] Socially engaged theatre has often been accused of engaging in cheap journalism and living off cheap thrills; for Skrzywanek, the method of reconstruction is a form of ethical engagement with reality:

> I wish I lived in a different time, in a different world, and could do theatre about something else. But I can’t… Anyone who knows me, who follows my endeavours, not only in theatre but also in activism, knows that is who I am, and I have to talk about what's most important to me at the time.
>
> I hear voices that I use these topics because they are loud. If someone wants to think so, that’s their business, but the truth is that I simply can't do anything else. (Jakub Skrzywanek: Kara i zbrodnia…,2023)

Preliminary diagnosis

To begin, let us try to see how the reconstruction method was arrived at. The first stepping stone—the directorial debut. Jakub Skrzywanek made his

debut in the Jerzy Szaniawski Theatre in Wałbrzych, a special place renowned for its openness to critical language. The production *Cynkowi Chłopcy* (The Tinker Boys), premiered on 22 January 2016 and, based on a reportage by Svetlana Aleksievich (2015 Nobel Prize winner in Literature), indeed had a certain reconstructive potential. The play was preceded each time by a several-minute-long film projection in the theatre foyer that referred to the historical context of the war in Afghanistan, and was a compilation of video footage, images and statistical data. The interviews conducted by Aleksijevich are in fact recorded accounts of participants in the events; but for the literary reportage frames, being a buffer of sorts between stark testimonial and theatre, one could have simply produced a verbatim performance. Instead of reconstructive literalism, however, Skrzywanek took a completely different strategy, emphasising the parenthetical spectacle. *The Tinker Boys* was crammed into the grotesque convention of the Military Song Festival in Kołobrzeg. Gruesome tales of Afghans, a bucket of fake blood and tin coffins were intermingled with choreographic arrangements, a compere and daring renditions of military songs.

The second stepping stone was the dramatic debut. Skrzywanek's drama *Pogrom alfonsów, Warszawa 1905* (Pogrom of Pimps, Warsaw 1905), was published in the January 2019 issue of *Dialog* entitled 'Theatre and Reality.' The playscript of the 'reconstruction,' based on press reports of a lynching perpetrated against a Jewish community of pimps and prostitutes, somehow promises attachment to reality (past and present), while playing around with the theatrical form in which reality is dressed. In this case, it is the textual convention of the lesson plan that is familiar to all teachers. In an interview with Justyna Jaworska, Skrzywanek thought that an 'alienation effect' was achieved by this procedure: 'it's great language, precisely because it's so

completely out of step with the content' (*Znajdź i porównaj*..., 2019).

Reconstructive know-how

In his statements, Skrzywanek calls the method of reconstruction a way of establishing 'factual status,' a remedy for the constant narrative disputes that are so embedded in our public and media space: 'I create these reconstructions today because to me it is super interesting on a philosophical, ontological level to search for truth itself, to show it and contextualise it' ('Teatr...,' 2023). The method of reconstructing reality and producing a referential illusion has its variants: a director uses various tools to achieve it, manoeuvring between realism — literalism and metaphor — a mental shortcut. Despite the variants, the method has its own poetics of the ethical process of developing a script, teamwork, staged encounter with the audience, and theatrical form.

1. Embodying the archive: the sources

According to Schneider, the process of 'embodying of archive' already begins when gathering materials: the very act of 'examining the documents in the library' engages the body — it is 'the material act of acquisition, the material acts of reading, writing, studying' (2020, p. 219). Skrzywanek's reconstruction scripts are indeed based on 'documents,' 'records,' 'evidence,' which intuitively have high credibility status. The central, reconstructive part subtitled *Bestia* (The Beast) within the play *Opowieści niemoralne* (Immoral Tales) (Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, premiere: 25 September 2021, co-scripted with Weronika Murek), is based on documents whose ontological status is indisputable, including on a legal level, i.e. the transcript of a court hearing (State of California vs. Roman Raymond

Polanski trial, March 1977). In the case of *Spartakus. Miłość w czasach zarazy* (Spartacus. Love in the Time of Plague) (Teatr Współczesny in Szczecin, premiere: 13 May 2022), the primary archive was a reportage, whose premise is the collecting and categorising of facts, a certain search for truth, an interpretation between reality and reconstruction. In his text *Love in the Time of Plague*, published in 2020, Janusz Schwertner told the story of a transgender teenager Wiktor and the horrifying realities of the Polish child psychiatry system, the appalling conditions in institutions, everyday life in the Warsaw hospital on Żwirki i Wigury Street and the ward in Józefów near Warsaw, and the terror and indifference suffered by patients and their parents.[2] *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Teatr Współczesny in Szczecin, premiere: 25 February 2023, co-directed with Justyna Sobczyk), which used the reconstruction method, was inspired by a Facebook post by Anna Alboth, where she shared her thoughts on a trip to Brussels with her disabled brother Kuba. The aim was to visit a sex worker — the sexual needs of people with disabilities in Poland are a taboo subject. However, a post on a social media platform is nonetheless not an extensive archive from which any factual situation can be established. This is why Skrzywanek and Sobczyk do not actually reconstruct, but construct, the possible course of the brother's (Roman Słonina) visit to the sex worker. Thus, we are dealing with a borderland, a space between enactment and re-enactment, what I would call a 'speculative reconstruction' (more on this further down).

2. The reconstruction process: experts and specialists

In an interview published in *Dwutygodnik*, Skrzywanek described his approach to the process, which tarnishes the image of a brilliant artist, ready at any moment to 'sit down and write a story of a particular group, relying only on his imagination' ('Dramaturgia doświadczenia,' 2022). 'We

artists have to listen carefully to the reality so that we can tell you a story about it. (...) Our first expert group I currently work with are the actual people about whom I want to tell a story. I invite them to collaborate with me because I believe the stage is a space for representation' (ibid.). On the one hand, we are dealing with the theatre as a medium for expanding recognition of social issues (following the principle of 'nothing about us without us'). This is what happened in the work on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Spartacus* (legitimate co-creators of the script are people with disabilities and their families, intimacy assistants, patients of children's psychiatric hospitals and their parents, members of the Lambda Szczecin association). On the other hand, reconstructing reality must be based on precision, reliability and honesty. The specialists assisting the process were described by the director thus: 'These are the people without whom I cannot understand and develop certain moments/aspects of a play that are important to me. If I want to talk about some fragments of reality on stage, I must be very well prepared to do this' ('Dramaturgia doświadczenia,' 2022). Thirdly, there are times when yet another specialist steps in to ensure the well-being of the ensemble. While working on *Immoral Tales*, Skrzywanek and Murek invited — probably for the first time in the history of Polish theatre — intimacy assistants, Yevgenia Aleksandrova and Agnieszka Róż. The reconstruction of actual sexual violence required concern for the safety and comfort of all participants in this creative process.

3. The body, oppression, affect and trigger warning

Reconstruction is a form of embodiment of an archive; according to Schneider, in reenactment, the messy and 'disappearing live' gestures and actions of a human body are given privileged position over documenting. Affect,[3] seen as the result of negotiation between the bodies of actors and

spectators, is characterised by what Schneider, citing from Sara Ahmed, referred to as 'stickiness' (2020, p. 82). One can argue that the central theme of reconstruction in Skrzywanek's performances is the physically oppressed body, which automatically programmes this viscosity. Violence against the 'biological affect transmission machine,' amplified by awareness of the person's real experience, intensely affects the spectator's body and triggers strong affective reactions.[4] Theatre based on performative repetition seems an ideal tool for designing stickiness — Ahmed, writing about the performativity of disgust, pointed to the role of the contact zone in the stickiness of affect. This is not only based on literal contact with the skin's surface, but also on 'risky proximity' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 177) that makes the subject want to distance themselves, to move away. The risky proximity of performers' and observers' bodies inherent in the course of theatrical reconstruction is, as it were, an 'experience on one's own skin' — hence the concern for the spectator's wellbeing so as to prepare him or her for the encounter. The strategy of trigger warnings, although often viewed by critics as a feature of sensational marketing promotion, accompanies all Skrzywanek's reconstructive performances.

To support the thesis of the oppressed body as an axis of reconstruction, I will refer to *The Death of John Paul II*, which shows the dissonance between the real and the 'phantom body of the king — a human being subjected to physiology of death, who is drooling, has difficulty with basic functioning, but even the head of Church must endure it till the very the end.[5] The repetition of bodily oppression is also the clou in *The Beast*. The reconstruction, as part of a triptych inspired by films by Walerian Borowczyk, is underpinned by a deep reflection on how that culture presents sexual violence, disenchanting the pseudo-romanticised 'beautiful rape scenes;' a dominant male lets himself be swept away by the 'frenzy of

passion’ to which the female body must submit. A *Midsummer Night's Dream*, leaving aside the theme of Alboth's post, subjectifies and valorises the non-normative body in the theatre space — actors with disabilities are not just seen, they actually take control over the show and, forming an army of Pucks, they thwart the plans of the Guardians of Morality. What is striking about the play *Spartacus* is the real-life system of physical punishment and stigmatisation — patients’ bodies are subjected to a constant psychosomatic drill — from the routine morning exercises on the ward, having to put on pyjamas when told, to overcoming shame and undressing in a shower that does not even have a curtain. The second scene of bodily oppression uncovers gendered identification of body, physicality and gender. The main character, Wiktor, is transgender — reconstructing his physicality on a literal level was therefore impossible. (The problem of physical preferences of the Polish training system for actors and actresses needs to be addressed.) The role of Wiktor was given to an acclaimed actress of Teatr Współczesny, Anna Januszewska. The reconstruction, also in scenes of nudity, of the transgendered body of a young boy by the body of a mature woman thematises and reflects this incompatibility.

4. The alienation effect

The spectator, while observing actions and mechanisms on stage that are familiar to him or her from real life is empowered and motivated to evaluate and logically analyse what is separate from — or rather, complements — affect. Theatrical reconstruction becomes a tool for a refreshing conceptualisation of the intellect–affect relationship: it is not ideologically transparent, yet the idea of presenting the factual, the ‘how it is,’ triggers the need to refer to the most universal ethical principles, to explicitly qualify an act as good or evil. This Brechtian critical-analytical outlook is triggered

automatically in *Spartacus* — any common-sense observation of it elicits compassion for the patients. The medical staff stick to procedures and use the tools they have at their disposal—they don't allow parents to enter the ward, they tell patients to be good and eat their breakfast, they shuffle patients from unit to unit. When the father of one boy patient requests to see a doctor, he hears ‘later,’ which actually means ‘sometime this week.’ The spectators can relate to it from their own experience, know how Polish healthcare works, see ‘evil but refuse to pass judgments on individuals. They see the source of evil in the dehumanised notion of ‘the system;’ it is the system that is to blame. The system is responsible for the shortages of specialist doctors, the overworked staff, the state of facilities — all regulated by the system and politics.

5. Media and multimedia: indicator and negation

Screens complement each of Skrzywanek’s reconstruction performances, displaying photographs, video footage and, above all, lots of text. Recorded interviews with Poznań folk (representing various age groups with a full cross-section of collective and individual memories of John Paul II) making this realistic reconstruction of the Pope’s last days a bit more relaxed; they enrich it with flickers of personal recollections and micro-stories that get diluted in the official, grand narratives. Just like the interviews of the mothers of the patients whose story is reconstructed in *Spartacus*, those too not only have an authenticating function, but they introduce a certain polyphony to the message, giving voice to those who stood in the background of stories that dramatically changed their lives as a family. The famous photograph of the young girl Geimer in a swimming pool (projected as a backdrop in *Immoral Tales*) taken by Polanski during the reconstructed evening and reproduced repeatedly by media, is now restored to its original

context. Once again, it becomes evidence in the case, rather than just an image from TV news and front pages of tabloids chasing Polański's trials and tribulations. In terms of the text accompanying the reconstruction — its diversity and function show that Skrzywanek does not usurp the right to create the only true version of the narrative: the reconstructions are built up with fragments of indictment acts, archival testimonies of people witnessing and participating in the events, all documenting social life. The text is a medium of negotiation: it sometimes acts as explanation and deictic to what is occurring on stage, or it gives the lie to and unmasks the illusory character of the reconstruction; the latter will be taken to extreme in *Crime and Punishment*.

6. Multiplicity in unity and strategies of reconstruction: empty places, *Yoke* and speculative practice

The reconstruction scene of Polański (played by Michal Czachor) raping Geimer (Natalia Lange) bears no hint of naturalism; the closest to realism is Czachor's initial look — a shirt, Hollywood-style trousers and a wig recreating Polanski's distinctive hairstyle. In the background, a bird's-eye view image of Jack Nicholson's villa is projected onto a screen. The stage action relies on aesthetics of void and open-endedness — Czachor first gives Lange stolid instructions to pose for photographs, then mechanically manoeuvres her body, rearranging and placing it in different positions. There are no realistic thrusting movements, the actors freeze in violence, in agreed paralysis. There is no nudity—the actors remain clothed in leotards. No screams or sexual auditory layer is heard—the scene is played in silence. I would call this strategy, based on a certain shortcut, a synecdoche, a negation of the literal, the reconstruction of a void; more frightening and inducing affective paralysis is the suggestiveness of what actually *is not*

there.

In *Spartacus*, the reconstruction (an extract from Schwertner's text and patients' experiences), proceeds realistically in terms of recreating relationships between the character-actors. This precise reenactment of actions and interpersonal relationships is placed in an imaginative, symbolic space (only the ubiquitous metal bars and the metallic clack of closing doors and gates are realistic). Daniel Rycharski's set design previously functioned as an autonomous work of art; the installation *Jarzmo* (Yoke) speaks of 'the ease of changing someone else's experience into an aesthetic object, usually viewed not by those whose lives and work it depicts' (Rycharski, 2022). The artist, committed to the 'verity of material,' used metal coops obtained from farmers from Mazovia and West Pomerania to build the walls of the children's psychiatric ward.

The floor strewn with hay and straw, pieces of furniture and medical equipment clashingly intermingle with agricultural objects like pitchforks and buckets. The barn used for commercial animal breeding, often associated with cruelty towards animals, is closely related to descriptions of patients in child psychiatric wards that we heard while working on the performance (Rycharski, 2022).

Inviting Rycharski to collaborate was a remedy for the cognitive problem Skrzywanek struggled with while working on *Spartacus*, namely of the viewer being unable to give credence to the reality, as this reality is beyond imagination. The photographs depicting the ward in Józefów (smeared walls with paint peeling off, dirty mattresses and blood-stained, unwashed bedding) are projected for a moment as a strong, flashy impulse, thus authenticating the stage-reflected reality. A realistic replica of the psychiatric ward would paradoxically be made fake, a symbolic mock-up —

hence the idea to use the eponymous yoke that exposes the aestheticisation of violence and strips human and non-human beings of their subjectivity. The strategy of reconstruction in *Spartacus* is thus a combination of realism (the human relations level) and metaphor (the creative space level).

In a stage cubicle recreating the enclosed, intimate space of a cosy room, a brother and sister (played by Barbara Lewandowska) plan a trip, pack a suitcase, pick a shirt which the man will wear when meeting the sex worker, talk about dreams and expectations. Then the meeting takes place in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and comfort, clearly defined boundaries and tender touch. I have pointed out earlier that this elaborate scene of human actions and relationships, which Skrzywanek and Sobczyk have created–recreated based on Alboth's short post, lies somewhere between enactment and reenactment. The post here acts as this mini-archive, failing to provide a satisfactory amount of information and details of the sex worker's visit. By allowing for 'errors and omissions' (2020, p. 36), Schneider opens the gateway to speculative practices as if they were tools for emancipation of reconstruction; fiction here becomes the method[6] and the body its tool. The potential course of past events, rationally reconstructed, is not so much possible as probable.

A reconstruction of reconstruction, or a media image in a theatrical frame

The method of reconstruction in *Crime and Punishment* consists of most of the elements already mentioned in this paper—the document-based script is the result of a collaboration with specialists. The performance consciously sets an intellectual and affective trap for spectators, who watch something

they ‘cannot understand’ and logically reason with, by bombarding them with the Brechtian alienation effect. It creates a story about a body subjected to violence, an annihilated body, one reduced to a theatrical and media prop; the reconstruction owes much to the actors of the Wrocław Pantomime Theatre who bring a new quality to the embodiment of an archive, building a choreography of war and death on stage. It utilises text projected in the stage space, such as snippets of materials of the Slidstvo collective that document Russian war crimes.

A certain novelty in relation to Skrzywanek’s previous reconstructions is the stronger emphasis on two aspects of repetition: its mediality and its functioning within the convention of we are in a theatre. Mediality, understood as one of the basic components of human experience, is what Carol Martin calls the tool and subject of the theatre of reality:

> ‘The primary behaviours of everyday life – that is, life as lived ‘live’ – have become secondary, as these behaviours are quickly mediatised. Theatre of the real uses media in many different ways: as a gauge of truth, as a demonstration of the ways in which people's lives are permeated by simulation, and as an arrow aimed at a history of ideas that includes the disinformation and misrepresentations of popular culture (including what we call ‘the news’)… Sophisticated and affordable technology supports the tendency to blur the distinctions between what is ‘really happening,’ ‘made for the camera (or other media),’ ‘simulated,’ ‘reenacted,’ ‘ltreated,’ and ‘made consciously as art.’ What we understand as the ‘really real’ has its own continuum that includes the unmediated, the replicated, the staged, the reconstructed, and also, sometimes, the simulated.’ (Martin, 2019)

‘Stronger exposure’ of meta theatricality does not mean that this communicative tool was not used in previous productions. The most striking example: in *Immoral Tales* the reconstruction of rape is ‘bracketed,’ the theatrical illusion is shattered (like in the theatre of ‘the hanger generation’),[7] when Czachor turns into a beast in front of the audience, puts on its pastel clothes and grapples with a groomed wig *à la* Polański.

The reconstructions (which are different in each of the three parts: ‘Prologue,’ ‘Crime,’ and ‘Punishment’) bring about some cognitive dissonance in the viewer, forcing the question: ‘What am I actually watching?’ The overlapped media and theatrical order thwarts perceptions, triggering the need to search for the original source, to find and identify some kind of ‘primal image.’

The only part of the play that explicitly refers to Dostoevsky's study is ‘Prologue.’ There is practical dimension to the reconstruction and its formula brings to mind police investigative processes — a police visit to a crime scene that may help reconstruct the possible course of events. The all-knowing narrator is Dariusz Maj, who sits to the side and answers questions from Michał Opaliński and Michał Mrozek, reporting on what went on. The prologue introduces the first level of medialisation and plays with verity of image—the investigation happens under the watchful eye of a camera sweeping the crime scene from various angles and transmitting live images to a screen upstage. The lens is often directed at the audience, who see images of their own doubles in the background. They are pushed into the dual role of passive onlookers, bystanders to the reconstruction. Their presence is registered and recorded, and the experience is transformed into a post-experience or testimony — they are now ‘fully authorised’ to report on 'how it was' and 'what was'. In order to reconstruct the course of the crime,

live bodies are needed, hence a quick casting that Mrozek conducts among five simulacrum actors before he proceeds with the reconstruction. Those five, clad in flesh-coloured leotards and fabric masks, resemble crash test dummies — they have no detailed features, their task is only to mark out body movements. Those more able are selected to play the leading roles — Raskolnikov, Alona Ivanovna and Lizaveta. The other two play a stand-in for a laundry line. There are props typical of an investigation (yellow numbered markers), and there is also an axe, the prop-instrument of the crime. Mrozek, as the *spiritus movens* of the reconstruction, ensures the impersonators accurately recreate Maj's narrative and is anxious to get as accurate as possible — he counts how many axe blows should fall and, timer in hand, times precisely the two minutes that Raskolnikov spent tearing the bundle from the usurer's neck. The crime reconstruction implodes when it becomes clear that the objectified dummies have huge acting ambitions and prefer to play Stanislavski instead of just methodically to recreate. The sham actors turn into genuine pantomime actors, who argue among themselves about who can more realistically play the fall from the axe blow and accuse each other of being too psychological in the creation of the characters. The reconstruction of a horrid crime transforms into theatre and for the first time strongly thematises the presence of an artistic, even ludic frame.

Part Two, ‘Crime,’ contains the most evocative scenes of reconstruction based on material gathered by the Slidstvo collective. These show crimes against individuals, selected out of the magnitude of misery, named, described and documented. ‘Crime’ is a series of five reconstructive études, complemented by improvised acting—each with somewhat different poetics and titles displayed upstage: Murder, Detention/Torture, Mass Grave, Rape, Justice/Sacrifice of Victims. These are linked together by a degree of unrealism, a subtle sign of theatrical parenthesis — most of the actors

remain in the unifying crash test dummy costumes, and a voice modulator gives them a robotic sound. Snippets of journalistic testimonies projected upstage explain the actors' actions; through these indicators, the viewer learns that the actors pantomiming a race (with starting blocks and a gunshot signalling the start) are actually reconstructing an escape from their persecutors, and the muffled screams interspersed with Maria Callas' singing recreate torture. The mass grave of an entire family is a deliberately positioned tangle of bodies, an overhead projector additionally projects this image on the stage screen. As Agnieszka Kwietniewska and Igor Kujawski inspect the corpses, her eye is fixed on an ever heart-wrenching image and eye-catching frame of reportage — a baby shoe left behind, a little foot sticking out of the grave. The actress puts on a fur coat and, now as a foreign politician, begins her media spectacle over the grave, while complaining at having to walk in stilettos in the mud. She brings a teddy bear, laments, wipes away tears and apologises in several European languages to the victims for not intervening, relishing the most in the pathetic-sounding Spanish ‘Los siento!’ Finally, she wonders, ‘What can be done with these bodies, so they don't go to waste?’ Meanwhile, the actor Michał Opaliński performs a pacifist performance running around the grave, Olympic torch in hand, eventually reaching for a ‘Stop Any War’ banner. He is joined by Elloy Moreno Gallego of the Pantomima ensemble and performs 'moving' choreography to Abba's ‘SOS’. The spectacle of this cynical hypocrisy reaches a crescendo as the bodies from the mass grave are being arranged in the peace sign. A clash of form and content, this self-ironic theatricalism of crime gallops on: the reconstruction of rapes, documented by the Media Initiative for Human Rights (*Medialna Inicjatywa na rzecz Praw Człowieka)* is maintained in the poetics of unreal, anti-violence mutual consent; in reality, a perpetrator never asks, ‘Will it be OK for you if…’ and

will not agree to swap places in an oppressive arrangement.

The 'Punishment' section is not a reconstruction *sensu stricto*, but instead a simulation. The course of proceedings of the International Criminal Court for Russian crimes in Ukraine was designed in cooperation with Professor Monika Płatek from the Department of Criminology at the Institute of Criminal Law, University of Warsaw. The court convention brings to mind historical-theatrical contexts (the convention of German documentary theatre of the 1960s) and contemporary contexts (Sasha Denisova's *The Hague*, Michał Zadara's *Sprawiedliwość* (Justice)*, Odpowiedzialność (*Responsibility) and *Cisza* (Silence) and the activities of the Institute of Performative Law that he co-manages/co-runs).

The actual proceedings are not symbolic but, rather, an attempt to show the disproportion between idealistic faith in justice and enraging helplessness. The rhetorical clash between Igor Kujawski as prosecutor and Agnieszka Kwietniewska as devil's advocate takes place against the backdrop of a ticking clock and a mock bomb sitting in the judge's chair. The methodical, logical, truthful and morally correct accusations made against Russian criminals are immediately refuted by the defence; as Kwietniewska argues, 'the findings of the International Criminal Court are of no significance to the Russian Federation and What's taking place here is a grotesque spectacle.' The defence lawyer's sophistic argumentation leads to the relativisation of the crime: what is the difference between a 'special operation' and a 'stabilising mission'? Why does the international community want now to prosecute crimes against Ukraine, but in the past did not object to those committed against the Iraqi people? What is the value of — citing Didi-Huberman — 'images in spite of all,' material evidence in the form of photographs and videos available on the Internet, since the images from Abu

Ghraib did not bring on tribunal action? The prosecution insisting on punishing all guilty parties brings an even-higher-level juggling act to bear on the arguments — the evil is made banal (as in Hannah Arendt) and responsibility dispersed among thousands of soldiers who also have mothers, wives and children to support. The evidence in the form of media images does not amount to much; neither do witness accounts of reconstructionists, producers of yet another intermediary portrayal within the framework of this 'grotesque spectacle.' Called as a witness, Izabela Cześniewicz (an actress in the Wrocław Pantomime Theatre), must testify that she had to play a fatal fall from a gunshot, such was the job assigned by the director; in the process, she reveals the ins and outs of the theatrical craftmanship of faking, gives a talk on what arrested motion is to mimes. She is asked to fabricate the evidence once more and act out the fall. Also summoned to the audition is Janka Woźnicka, who plays Olena Zelenskaya in part two, 'Crime,' speaking at the United for Justice conference in Lviv. Her aim was to move the audience; she sees her performance as a contribution to the anti-rape movement and has more energy and passion for acting than Ukraine's First Lady. The defence cynically exploits the difference between 'real' and 'reconstructed' suffering, inaccessible to the audience, and, as evidence, presents a transcript of a theatrical rehearsal in which the actors instructed by the director simulate screams and sounds of torture. The final witness is Dariusz Maj; he is supposed to repeat an improvised act he had once rehearsed while he 'fantasised' about bringing Vladimir Putin to justice. He ties the imaginary criminal to a coat stand and, with gusto, plays out a series of tortures, a macabre retaliation for all the evil. The category of sympathy is not for Putin, it is for the victims. But can it also concern the international community and the Poles (suffering because of 'petrol at eight zlotys') since it is 'not our war'? Kwietniewska has had enough of this theatrical game of

reconstruction and clearly thematises its artificiality and helplessness; all she can do is dance out her dream death scene. Kujawski, a guardian of justice repeats, like a mantra, lofty phrases about justice as a guarantor of our future, about appealing to fundamental values; he is interrupted by Michał Opaliński, who delivers a brutally honest monologue of what many people probably feel but are afraid to say openly: how the war pisses him off, and how he has to tackle it, even at work as an actor.

In terms of temporal dimension, this more than two-hour performance dramaturgy is designed to be an encounter with the audience. After 'The Crime,' there is an interval that somewhat traps the spectator—it shows how affect is a universal tool of manipulation. The viewer leaves for the interval without closure, but with a sense of disagreement with the theatricalisation of war and the appropriation of other people's suffering. The next act does not rid them of this notion of powerlessness but redirects and reprogrammes it in some way. The actor's self-talk and the clear outlining of meta theatricality (straight out of Weiss's strategy from *Notizen zum dokumentarischen Theater* [8]) in 'Prologue' and 'Punishment' remind the viewer that this is only a reconstruction and theatrical play that can comment on reality but is not the reality. Skrzywanek thoughtfully doubles the discursive orders and recreates media reconstructions. The performance is actually about images of war, about what we (witnessing it from the outside) have access to. Those viewing the images depicting the aftermath of Russian crimes do not want to be swayed by propaganda and assume that it is fake but, on the other hand, they activate a defence mechanism reminding us that these are only media messages. How are we affected by the readily available photos of Bucza on the Internet; how do we react — as Susan Sontag has put it — to the photographed 'pain of others'? Are we affected by performance of compassion for show by big politics manifesting their

support but essentially not doing much? On the opposite end, we have a moving performance-demonstration, reconstructed as a show (the commemoration ceremony for a fallen soldier, the notorious Chernoknizhnyj who committed multiple rapes during the special operation but according to the Russian narrative is a hero). Theatre is a medium caught up in this circulation of images and war on narratives, but is at least equipped with a kind of critical, ironic self-awareness that it has no real influence on reality.

Instead of a summary: reconstruction and overflowing reality

The reconstructions described above, despite their shared use of poetic license, materialise their components in different ways, balancing between mimetics and condensed and complicated theatrical symbols. Despite this, they all work under the interventionist umbrella function of reenactment, granted with metapolitical agency of sorts based on a past–present–future timeline. For Schneider, who has repeatedly emphasised the subversive potential of reenactment, this subversiveness is based precisely on the complicated temporal contingencies.

> Can we call *back* in time? Across time? What kind of response might we elicit? When does that which has sounded – deferred as an invocation or an appeal, a plea or a prod for 'future' action 'now' – ultimately occur? What are the limits of this future? What are the limits of this now? (Schneider, 2020, p. 356)

Invoking the etymological meaning of theatre as a 'place to look' and using the linguistic semantics of the gaze; the repetition of a slice of reality

characterised by violence, exclusion, manipulation and ethical relativism, reenactment played out in a theatrical frame expands the field of social visibility. It changes the optics of disillusionment with the past to a perspective of concern for the future, by acting in the present. Skrzywanek's critical reconstructions, annexing reality inwardly, provoke a blurring of the boundaries between spectacle as a medium and reality and 'pour' the potential for social intervention outwardly. This is the case with *Spartacus*: after the reconstruction, a performative space is brought to life in which ‘real’ non-heteronormative couples, who do not belong to the order of the show, can take their marriage vows. This is what happens in the case of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: after every performance at the Contemporary Theatre in Szczecin, famous for its long flights of stairs and inaccessibility to disabled people, a banner is displayed saying ‘Stairs of shame’ or ‘Sorry’. And so it goes in the finale of *Crime and Punishment*, when Michał Opaliński, as himself, openly admits that ‘this war pisses him off.’

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Footnotes

1. Skrzywanek used this phrase expressing the essence of reconstruction method in the recording ‘Nikt sam by sobie tego nie wybrał – reportaż do spektaklu ‘Spartakus. Miłość w czasach zarazy’ (Nobody would choose it themselves: a reportage on *Spartacus. Love in the Time of Plague)*. Audio available at the website of Teatr Współczesny in Szczecin: https://wspolczesny.szczecin.pl/spartakus-milosc-w-czasach-zarazy/ [accessed: 12.08.2023].
2. The contact between Skrzywanek, Schwertner and the patients of children’s psychiatric hospitals, established while working on *Spartacus*, led to the creation of another reportage ‘Pyjamas,’ devoted to the bizarre and humiliating punishment system in place at the neurosis treatment centre in Garwolin. In 2022, Schwertner produced an entire volume together with Witold Bereś: ‘Szramy. Jak psychosystem niszczy nasze dzieci’ (Scars. How the psychosystem destroys our children).
3. Here I use a definition of affect that is broad and extremely fertile for humanities, proposed by Brian Massumi, built on Deleuze’s and Guattari’s considerations; Massumi emphasised the autonomy of affect — understood as a body rendered force, precognitive, extra-linguistic, unconscious and unintentional — in relation to emotion, belonging to the subjective and functional order. See Massumi, 1995.
4. On the affective reception of *Immoral Tales* and *the Death of John Paul II*: Tabak, 2022; Chaberski et al., 2022.
5. The role of a dead and dying body, only touched upon here, definitely deserves a separate study on necro-performance, or a comparative analysis with, for example, passion plays and dogmatics of depiction of suffering in the Catholic Church.
6. I refer the reader to two interesting books exploring the operation of speculative and counterfactual practices in art, science and social discourse: ‘Performanse pamięci w literaturach i sztukach,’ 2020, ‘Fikcje jako metoda,’ 2018.
7. See Kościelniak, 2009.
8. Mateusz Borowski, while analysing strategies for constructing truth in documentary theatre, referred to texts of Rolf Hochhuth, Heinar Kiphardt and Peter Weiss, as well as Weiss’s theoretical statements from Notizen zum dokumentarischen Theater. ‘Weiss

stressed the importance of emphasising a theatrical frame, an aesthetic parenthesis of the stage, so that the artistic form that organises factual material is not a mystery to the audience, for only in this way will the persuasive power of documents contained in it be preserved. There should be no doubt that what they are watching is not reality itself on stage, but only its replica consciously constructed for the specific purpose,' Borowski, 2007, p. 216.

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