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/ RECONSTRUCTIONS

‘Ladies Are Looking for Problems’

An Attempt to Reconstruct Marcelina Grabowska’s Drama ‘Children Do Not Want to Live’ and Its Staging and Reception within the Framework of Creating a Feminist Archive

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The paper is an attempt to reconstruct the content of the drama *Dzieci nie chcą żyć* (Children Don’t Want to Live) by Marcelina Grabowska as well as its staging and reception. Using the methodology from the field of philosophy of history (Benjamin), theory of performance (Rebecca Schneider) and anthropology of memory (Michel-Rolph Trouillot), the authoress analyses the collected archival material. She thus problematizes the notion of a silent archive and an archival gap. The archives concerning probably the first and only staging of Grabowska’s play (May 1938) and the sociopolitical reality turn out to be the subject of reflection upon the materiality of history and recurrence of time. The crisis of psychological support for children and adolescents of the 1930s comes into dialogue with the (re)current appearance of this issue that happened during the pandemic. The paper contributes to the feminist archive production as a consciously political and architectural gesture that supports non-hegemonic narratives of the history of Polish theatre.

Keywords: feminist archive; interwar period; historical materialism; silent archives; Polish drama

As flowers turn toward the sun, what has been strives to turn – by

> *dint of a secret heliotropism – toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history.*
>
> *Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History'*

1.

The mysteriousness of tropism in the past that Walter Benjamin wrote about in *On the Concept of History* (1996) lies, inter alia, in the unpredictability of the discursive movements of that which is gone. The moment of the emergence of elements of the past in the field of the present appears as a phenomenon of unclear source, operating within a dispersive temporality. The formation of disappearance goes hand in hand with the formation of residues (Schneider, 2011, p. 102), which turn to the 'sun of history' at various moments, resistant to projections. It is in setting history in motion, according to Benjamin, that the task of historical materialism lies (1996, pp. 389-396). That which is gone makes itself known within a framework of constant updates. I understand Benjamin's historical materialism as a stance that is, firstly, critical of the concepts of continuity and totality and, secondly, that also focuses on the figure of the female and male historian, the individual, corporeal entities embedded in the present, but constantly looking backwards. In light of Benjamin's thought, learning about the world through the writing of history is an attempt to collect traces and remains without the hope of achieving a coherent picture. Connected to this view of the present as a material reality constantly updating itself through the movements of the past is Rebecca Schneider's proposed view of time as a syncopated composition in which the production of narrative is identical to the production of blank spaces, leaps and circulations. In the final section of

this essay, I will also demonstrate that Benjamin's conception of historical materialism is also in dialogue with the approach to archives presented by Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In his view, the silent omissions in the process of writing history are active and causal factors rather than simply transparent places between the fragments that make up the archives. Therefore, I see the methodological framework of this essay as a triad combining philosophy of history, performance theory and anthropology of memory.

The headlines from the daily press published in Poland in the 1930s sound as if they could fit into the current media coverage of the crisis of psychological support for children and adolescents. An analysis of the press from the 1930s shows that the problem became most acute in the last years of the decade in question. Already in 1935, concerns were raised about a wave of suicides among school-age children.[1] In 1938, the frequency of news items on this subject seemed to suggest that the crisis was entering its most acute phase. Articles and notes on the subject carried alarming, sometimes clearly emotionally charged headlines, such as 'things are not going well for children in Poland,'[2] 'society should take care of young people,'[3] 'childcare is not sufficient, crime is on the rise, juvenile suicides are increasing,'[4] 'things are bad for our children.'[5] An important, if not crucial, background to the press coverage is the economic crisis, also known as the Great Depression, which lasted in Poland from 1929 until at least the mid-1930s and drastically worsened the living situation of children and young people (Jamrożek, 2012).

The statistics confirm the relevance of the press releases quoted above. In 1935, more than twenty-six thousand juveniles were sentenced, i.e. three thousand more than in the previous year (2012), and there were twenty-one cases of suicide by children between the ages of ten and fourteen.[6] A year later, there were already twenty-eight such cases.[7] Press reports of suicides

by adolescents between the ages of fifteen and nineteen also show a dramatic increase in cases in this age group, up to a dozen times that of children aged 10-14, adding up to over two hundred and fifty attempts resulting in death.[8] This situation led to the convening of the first Polish National Child Congress in 1938, initiated by the Association of Participants in the Struggle for Polish Schools under the patronage of President Ignacy Mościcki.[9] The congress was conceived as the first of a series of regular national meetings during which parents and educators, as well as doctors, clerics, paediatricians, columnists, and social activists, would work together on a project to improve the situation of children and young people in Poland.[10] Participants in the Congress conducted deliberations within the framework of five thematic committees (devoted to the relations between children and adults, child health, the youngest ones' leisure time, relationships in the family and the condition of schools).[11] However, the proposals developed during this several-day-long meeting did not live to see full implementation (Jamrożek, 2012), and the radical disruption of the efforts to improve the fate of children in the Second Republic turned out to be, of course, the outbreak of the Second World War less than a year away.

The recursiveness of time as a movement of that which is past towards that which produces history nowadays is revealed, inter alia, in the effects, appeals and rhetoric relating to public affairs. Benjamin's thought provides encouragement to look at the re-emerging discourse of crisis, in this case, the crisis of psychological support for children and young people, not as a return, but as an update of that which is past. This changes the perception of history; it is not simply a 'pile of ruins' – according to Benjamin, this pile grows skyward, and the traces accumulate, and the past, revealing itself in the present, 'explodes the continuum of history' (2006, p. 262). The coronavirus pandemic crisis, which began in March 2020 and officially

ended in July 2023, generated public discussion about psychological and psychiatric support for children and adolescents in Poland. Forced home isolation, radical reduction of contact with peers and other components of the global epidemic crisis were among the reasons for the increase in suicidal behaviour among children and adolescents in Poland (Ruszel et. al., 2022).[12] In 1938, an intervention from the field of art and a reaction to the crisis affecting children and young people was an essay with the blunt title *Dzieci nie chcą żyć* (Children Do Not Want to Live) by Marcelina Grabowska, later directed on stage by Ziemowit Karpiński.

The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the content of Marcelina Grabowska's drama *Children Do Not Want to Live*, the circumstances of its staging and reception and, as a consequence, to produce another component of the archive that fits into feminist research on theatre. Following Ewa Majewska, I treat the latter objective as a fulfilment of the 'methodological and political task of joining in the construction of herstory' (2018, p. 35) and a form of mounting weak resistance to the hegemonic orders of making and preserving history in the name of uncovering 'the fissures that can burst the archive' (p. 46). I treat the practice of building an archive precisely as a gesture of an architectural nature - as a conscious and active participation in the creation of new structures of knowledge. A review of the state of research offers the conclusion that Marcelina Grabowska's drama *Children Do Not Want to Live* has not been the subject of a wider scholarly discussion before. In specialist publications, the title has only been mentioned in the context of feminist interwar dramaturgy and engaged theatre along the lines of the German *Zeittheater* trend (Adamiecka-Sitek, 2021; Hernik Spalińska, 2006). I see the attempt to reconstruct the drama and its staging, and its critical reception precisely as a practice of uncovering archival gaps.

2.

On 22 May 1938, as part of the Theatre Workshop of the State Institute of Theatre Art (PIST) in Warsaw, the premiere of the drama *Children Do Not Want to Live* by Marcelina Grabowska took place, directed by Ziemowit Karpiński with stage design by Wacław Ujejski. The stage production presented at the Nowy Theatre, the studio stage of the National Theatre, was at the same time the graduation work of Karpiński, a student of the Department of Directing Art of the PIST, and a show inaugurating the activity of the newly established association Młody Teatr (Youth Theatre) under the direction of Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński (additionally, this was the show with which Wacław Ujejski, who prepared the scenery for the play, crowned his studies at the Department of Directing Art of the PIST). Established on 4th January 1938, the Youth Theatre was meant to provide support for young playwrights and dramatists and save their works from 'mouldering away in theatre administrative offices' (Podhorska-Okołów, 1938) by recommending the most interesting ones for staging (primarily on Warsaw stages). The constitution of the association can be seen as a kind of critical intervention in the interwar theatre production system within which it was extremely difficult to gain visibility as a young playwright or author. The plays submitted to the Youth Theatre were evaluated by a reading committee,[13] which then prepared a recommendation bulletin to be sent to theatre managers. One of the works that gained approval was the drama *Children Do Not Want to Live* by Grabowska,[14] a prose writer, reviewer, playwright and columnist. Established in 1936, the Theatre Workshop was an endeavour that allowed those graduating from the directing course at the PIST to create and present their first performances, primarily those in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree. In total, the Theatre Workshop

formula resulted in twenty-four productions. They were usually presented on Sundays at noon on the studio stage of the National Theatre. In the case of *Children Do Not Want to Live*, the play was not submitted to the PIST as part of a recommendation bulletin, but was recommended to Ziemowit Karpiński, who approached the Youth Theatre in the first months of its operation while preparing his graduation work and asked them to recommend a play by a young Polish author, and Grabowska's piece particularly drew his attention (Winklowa, 1998, p. 179). An analysis of the archives allows the conclusion that the May 1938 production was the only staging of *Children Do Not Want to Live* in the history of Polish theatre; it was also the first and last case of direct collaboration between the Youth Theatre and the PIST Theatre Workshop (Wilski, 1971) and the only contemporary Polish drama produced within the framework of the Workshop (1971).

3.

The text of the play, unlike that of *Sprawiedliwość* (Justice)[15] by the same author, which was staged four years earlier, has not survived to this day. However, its content can be reconstructed quite accurately with recourse to critical texts published in the press. The most useful source, i.e. the one that provides the fullest summary of the plot of Grabowska's drama, turns out to be the Catholic monthly *Pro Christo: wiarą i czynem!* (Pro Christo: with Faith and Deed!)[16] And its article with the polemical title *Children Do Want to Live* (1938) by Tadeusz Dworak.[17] This paper cites the summary contained in Dworak's article, being aware of where it was published and of the selective nature of the narrative, the polemical value of which is a separate issue. At this stage of research, it is impossible to directly access the text of the drama; hence, the reconstruction of its content and key themes is the result of collecting and arranging uncertain, distortion-prone traces. At the same

time, the awareness of the source does not allow one to present a synopsis of *Children Do Not Want to Live*without a clear indication of the source and a mention of the author's political views; the fact that the article was published in Pro Christo supports a clearly defined agenda after all.

From Dworak's article, we learn that *Children Do Not Want to Live* is a work called 'melodramatic' by the author, based on a three-part structure. The first part, entitled *Konflikty* (Conflicts), is set in a school context. The protagonist is the teenage girl Marysia Kilianówna, who opposes the oppressive and coercive system of education that stifles individuality. According to her, one of the problems is that pupils are assigned numbers at school like impersonal parts of an institutional machine. She also draws attention to the issue of patronage; a pupil whose father sits on the board of the parent committee is granted reduced school fees. In the final scene of the first part of the play, the figure of Włodkówna appears, a gifted school graduate who is denied a position at the school by the management who offers it to another person who does not show similar abilities, but who enjoys patronage. Kilianówna's anger prompts her to leave the school. The second part of the drama is (most likely[18]) entitled *Szukanie w ciemnościach* (Searching in the Dark) and presents the family background of the rebellious schoolgirl. During a conversation between her mother and her form teacher Wierzbicka, the teacher suggests that Kilianówna is overexposed to the 'bitter truth about life' (1938). The point is that Marysia's mother works as a clerk and is a victim of exploitation; she also constantly fears being sacked and loss of income. As Dworak writes, Wierzbicka warns her mother that 'a child prematurely initiated into the mechanism of social wrongs may fall under this burden' (1938). At her mother's request, Marysia returns to school, where she befriends a pupil identified as 'number 3,' also identifying herself as a victim of the oppressive school system. Together, they play

truant. The third and final part of the drama, entitled *Ślepy tor* (Blind Track),[19] reveals the behind-the-scenes work of female teachers; those working at the school are overwhelmed by their responsibilities and embittered by their low salaries. The condition of female teachers then affects the mental state of children and young people, resulting, inter alia, in a higher suicide rate among this age group.[20] In the meantime, Marysia and 'number 3' sink into anxiety and bitterness; the last straw is a press release found by Marysia about Włodkówna being arrested for communist activities. The girls decide to take their own lives by running onto the railway embankment straight under the wheels of a train.

4.

In an article from the series 'Nad czym pracują scenopisarze polscy?' (What Are the Polish Scriptwriters Working On?) published in the magazine *Teatr*, Grabowska admits that it was press reports of youth suicides that prompted her to place the school and family realities within the framework of the drama (Grabowska, 1937). The author also writes that *Children Do Not Want to Live* is her first stage play while *Justice* is her second (although it was staged four years before *Children…*). It is, therefore, easy to conclude that *Children Do Not Want to Live* had been lying in a drawer for several years, waiting for its chance (in this context, the Youth Theatre fulfilled its task flawlessly, giving visibility to a previously unnoticed piece of work). Another conclusion may relate to Grabowska's motivation for launching the dramatic part of her writing activity; turning to this form was a reaction to press reports on the social situation. Thus, she must have considered the theatre as an appropriate place to take up a subject combining moral, political-social and economic issues as it can be assumed that she wrote her work with a view to a stage production). At the same time, Grabowska points out that her

plays ‘are not social in nature,’ but are conceived as ‘an artistic illustration of one of the many realities of life [sic] picked up and fixed in art’ (1937). Emphasising the artistic character of her dramatic work may suggest that Grabowska considered situating her dramas in the domain of social critique as depreciating or weakening the position of the work in the sphere of art. However, the reviews of the staging of *Children Do Not Want to Live* cited later in this article will show that both female and male critics perceived this drama precisely as interventionist and politically engaged content, and rated its artistic qualities low, pointing rather to Grabowska taking advantage of the dramatic medium in order to manifest her convictions concerning the social and economic reality.

5.

The synopsis of *Children Do Not Want to Live*, published in Pro Christo, makes it possible to identify Grabowska as an author involved in the political, social and economic spheres even without knowing her earlier achievements. What is important, however, is that the aforementioned drama *Justice*,[21] most clearly included in her creative biography, tells the story of a woman punished with imprisonment for infanticide who has an abortion under pressure after beeing impregnated by the son of the prison warden. This play can be called a stage reportage (Poskuta-Włodek, 2015), which is in line with the perception of theatre performance as a method of political representation and a laboratory for social transformation, and theatre not as a medium of artistic expression, but a kind of discursive agora and sense-making mechanism (Krakowska, 2016, p. 9).[22] In her work *O zmianę polityki teatralnej* (For a Change of Theatre Policy, 1935), published three years before the staging of *Children Do Not Want to Live*, Grabowska expounds her vision of theatre as a medium of artistic expression, but also as

an institution embedded in a material reality. In her opinion, the economy of the theatre's functioning deserves no less attention than the creative issues, and for her, the two main problems of contemporary theatre are low attendance and poor artistic quality. She sees the reasons for the first of these problems in the detachment of the theatre from issues close to the audience's everyday life ('Poor attendance proves the lack of contact between the work of the theatre and life,' 1935). Grabowska consciously makes use of economic terminology pointing to the 'unproductivity of the work input'[23] as a result of the 'split between production and consumption.'[24] She thus argues that the material well-being of theatre depends on the ability to attract audiences by offering a theatre that is close to their issues, problems and experiences of everyday life. In other words, in order to operate, theatre must be an engaged theatre:

> The Polish stage got out of touch with the Polish audience. It has lost the only possible attraction that cinema would not take away from it, i.e. the connectedness with the Polish reality. … Offering serious things is not enough. To make them interesting, they must also be topical; they must be a mirror of our lives.[25]

The perception of theatre as discourse and performance as a method of communicating public issues and a gesture of joining the discussion about them (a gesture coming more from the field of rhetoric than art) (Krakowska, 2016, p. 8) puts the researcher in the position of having to set a drama or its staging in a broader socio-political context and subjecting a dramatic or theatrical work to a synchronic analysis. To define Grabowska as an engaged artist, it is necessary to look for an answer to the question of what specifically the object of her engagement was – which contemporary

structures aroused the anger and disagreement that sublimated into her dramatic activity.

6.

The discursive nature of theatre as part of the public sphere is revealed forcefully, inter alia, in moments of censorship intervention. Following the acceptance of the text by the PIST authorities and Karpiński's consultations with the author about creating an abridged version, the decision of the Government Commissariat to prohibit the staging of the play reached the institution. In defence of the play and the stage production, Boy-Żeleński himself, one of the conceivers of the project, spoke out publicly in the pages of the *Kurier Poranny* daily. In the note, 'Not too zealously?' (1938), Boy-Żeleński presented arguments relating to the content of the play, stating, among other things, that 'the oversensitivity, the dark tone is the only thing (from the point of view of censorship!) that this play could be blamed for' while also pointing to the special circumstances of this production which, like other productions of the Theatre Workshop, was a one-off show for a small group of theatre professionals, enthusiasts and loved ones. In his opinion, such a situation was indicative of the potentially small 'impact' of the work based on *Children Do Not Want to Live*, and therefore, Boy viewed the measures taken by the censor's office as too severe.[26] Less than a week later, Boy returned to the subject in the *Kurier Poranny*, this time bringing good news for the producers of the play. In the small note 'Repeal of the Ban by Censorship,' the author reports that the Government Commissariat has reversed its decision, and Karpiński can get down to work.

7.

Six press reviews of *Children Do Not Want to Live* were published (of which I was able to access five), in addition to the two notes by Boy-Żeleński quoted earlier in the *Kurier Poranny*, two mentions in articles by Karol Irzykowski included in the fourth volume of his *Pisma teatralne* (Theatre Writings, 1995), and a mention in Bohdan Korzeniewski's essay on two productions based on the plays of André Birabeau. Grabowska's drama and its staging were also mentioned in Irzykowski's lecture as part of the Holiday Courses in Wisła in the summer of 1938 (1939).

Considering the nature of this production, directed by a future graduate, being an adaptation of the first piece of writing by the author, who at the time was primarily a reviewer and a columnist with just one novel and one staging of her drama to her credit, and above all, the fact that the production was only presented once (and to a small audience) outside the repertory system, the number of reviews of Karpiński's play and press and literary mentions of it may seem surprising. There are probably at least two reasons why *Children Do Not Want to Live* received such a reception despite its strongly 'professional' nature; firstly, the shows at the Theatre Workshop had their regular, close audience, and these were predominantly people professionally involved in theatre; and secondly, as Boy aptly pointed out in his article 'Repeal of the Ban by Censorship,' the attempt by the authorities to stop the show meant that the venture attracted increased press attention.

The author of Boy-Żeleński's biography Barbara Winklowa states in her book that the show *Children Do Not Want to Live* 'enjoyed great success according to reports in the press' (1998, p. 179). In coming to this conclusion, Winklowa must have relied solely on the statements of the

protagonist of her book because the performance was severely criticized, even though it received relatively numerous reviews; of the five reviewers, none assesse the performance unequivocally positively. The literary mentions also testify to the authors' negative attitude towards the performance. In each case, the object of criticism is primarily the text itself. It is its discursive, engaged nature that poses a problem for the reviewers because, in their opinion, the blatant social criticism is not accompanied by literary and artistic qualities in this case.

Stefania Podhorska-Okołów, the only woman among those whose reviews are available in the archives, wondered in the pages of the *Bluszcz* weekly why it was Grabowska's play that the Youth Theatre recommended for staging as part of the Theatre Workshop. In her opinion, it might have been 'the reformist streak Boy himself that was at play here, after the well-worn theme of "conscious motherhood," sniffing out a new social sensation, i.e. the suicides of schoolchildren' (1938). The author's nasty remark is thus, at the same time, an accusation of Boy's opportunistic approach to social themes and of his privileging of discursive qualities over literary qualities. According to Podhorska-Okołów, social and institutional criticism within a theatrical performance has a raison d'être only where theatre 'does not cease to be theatre, and a high theatre at that' (1938), and all social diagnoses should be exchanged for 'the jingling coins of drama' (1938). The reviewer's reflection on the motivations of Marysia Kilianówna and her friend for the decision to commit suicide, presented in the drama, is significant in the context of her stance on the relationship between society and the individual. According to Podhorska-Okołów, the decision is motivated 'meagrely' omitting the whole 'rich field of erotic awakening,' crucial to adolescence, in which Grabowska could have sought the reasons why the heroines decided to take such a radical step. The existential, social, institutional and political reasons were

thus, in the reviewer's understanding, too weak to drive the schoolgirls to suicide. The review thus confronts two positions: Grabowska's belief in the social and systemic embedding of mental crises and Podhorska-Okołów's view of individual, emotional experiences as the source of mental breakdowns. This is another point in the process of making the archive of *Children Do Not Want to Live*, where the past, within a syncopated temporality – where, as Schneider writes, different 'times touch' (2011, p. 35) - is reflected as a remnant in the current reflection on therapeutic discourse and the causes of mental disorders and illness, situated in the realities of neoliberal capitalism. Within this same reflection, critics of capitalism recognize and analyse the systemic nature of mental crises while at the same time treating individual-centred therapeutic discourse as a tool to sustain the harmful system by obscuring the true sources of mental problems (Fischer, 2009). The confrontation between Grabowska's and Podhorska-Okołów's positions is reminiscent of contemporary tensions between the atomistic and the collective visions of society.

A similar opinion on Karpiński's performance and Grabowska's play was expressed by Zdzisław Broncel in the 'Chronicle of Poland and the World,' arguing aggressively, in the context of Boy's intervention with the censorship authority, that 'there was nothing to fight for' (1938). He calls the drama 'a misunderstanding in terms of both the content and the form', seeing it as schematic, trite and literarily weak. In contrast to Grabowska's declared demands of bringing theatre closer to the audience's everyday life, Broncel claims that her play is not reflected in reality. In all the reviews and articles that mention Karpiński's performance, basically, the same opinions expressed in different words are repeated. For Roman Kołoniecki, the reviewer of the *Pion* weekly, the performance by the Theatre Workshop was also a disappointment. Above all, Kołoniecki states that 'discussing the so-

called social ills alone does not give artistic credit' (1938). The author dissects Grabowska's drama without mincing words; he calls it, among other things, a 'weak journalistic feature' with 'wretched and ineptly edited dramatic staffage' for which he sees a place in a newspaper rather than on stage (1938). Gentler language was used by Jan Parandowski, who, in the pages of *Gazeta Polska* daily, describes Grabowska's drama as admittedly touching on socially significant topics, but doing so in a naïve and one-sided manner (1938). The author also claims that the attitudes of the schoolgirls portrayed are unrealistic as 'a normal child finds immense resilience in the innate optimism that comes from the function of a healthy and fresh organism.' At the same time, Parandowski appreciates Karpiński's staging itself (which he describes as 'careful and full of restraint'); the simplicity of Ujejski's set design and the skills of the young acting ensemble.

In a lecture entitled 'On contemporary dramaturgy in Poland,' delivered in the summer of 1938 as part of the Holiday Courses of the Art Institute in Wisła and published a year later in the *Ateneum* magazine, Karol Irzykowski put forward the thesis that Grabowska's drama, alongside the works of Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska and Leon Kruczkowski, is an example of Polish dramaturgy being infected by the 'Soviet doctrine' which he defined as follows:

> The Soviet doctrine has made our drama shallow for two reasons: 1) by demanding a flamboyant, open tendency, a so-called bright face, it destroys shades, subtleties and obscurities; it destroys that old thesis that the sense, the idea of a drama, is to be derived by itself indirectly from its premises, is to be suggested, not shouted out; 2) by negating the importance of the individual, and exaggerating the importance of the collective, it deprives drama of

> its main terrain, i.e. the relations and situations between individuals (1939).

This was, incidentally, another example of Irzykowski's criticism of Grabowska's creative stance; in 1937, he commented on the premiere of *Justice* at the Słowacki Theatre in Krakow, writing: 'I always get an ungodly burst of inner laughter when I see that this or that author "raises a social issue." I immediately imagine this raising visually, something like plucking pickets from a fence' (1965, p. 103). Irzykowski often expressed his opinion about Grabowska's play staged by Karpiński in an ironic tone, emphatically proving his condescending attitude towards the author and her work. He also stated, inter alia, that *Children Do Not Want to Live* is a 'cold and programmatic' drama in which the author 'gives vent to her anti-teacher resentment' and which belongs to 'accusatory literature' (1965, p. 684). In his opinion, the author illustrated certain theses about social reality in her drama, presenting a clearly defined worldview with which she could 'only preach to the converted' (1939). A similarly ironic though overtly chauvinistic opinion on *Children Do Not Want to Live* was expressed in Bohdan Korzeniewski's essay. The author referred to Grabowska's drama as part of a review of two adaptations of André Birabeau's plays (1966) in the context of the methods of dramatically depicting the problems of young people. Korzeniewski compared the method adopted by Grabowska and other female authors to a 'hysterical scream:'

> With this scream, the ladies most eagerly looking here for 'problems' covered their lack of dramatic power and often lack of a firm stance on the wrongs and misfortunes of the youth. (An example of this is Marcelina Grabowska's pathetic *Children Do Not*

Want to Live at the Theatre Workshop).

Significantly, both Irzykowski and Korzeniewski address their criticism of engaged drama almost exclusively to women. The latter, incidentally, supports the image of a woman as a hysteric who exaggerates, amplifies things and looks for problems, while at the same time being unable to control her language (which is one of the things that the allegation of unskilful construction of drama refers to). Women may well have been an easy target here since, as noted by the researchers, investigative and engaged dramas were only created by female authors in the interwar period with a few exceptions (Michalczyk, 2021), shaping the soc-feminist current of drama (Hernik Spalińska, 2006). Soc-feminism (or socialist-feminism) is a term used for the first time in the field of theatre studies by Jagoda Hernik Spalińska and refers to the artistic output which, in her opinion, was a response, constructed by Polish female playwrights, to the *Zeittheater*, the 'theatre of social concern' (2006) and at the same time the most progressive manifestation of theatrical expression of the interwar period.

Tadeusz Dworak, the author of the aforementioned article 'Children Do Want to Live' published in *Pro Christo*, similarly to the other reviews quoted above, does not refer to the theatrical shape of the play, but to the text itself, which provides him with a motive to engage in a polemic against the author's 'sharp criticism of social relations' (1938). This criticism, according to Dworak, grows out of views characteristic of 'Marxist socialism' and bears the hallmarks of 'philo-communism.' Further on in the article, we are confronted with an attempt to assess the degree of similarity between the world described by Grabowska and the extra-textual reality. The author admits that 'the poverty of the so-called professional intelligentsia' and the exploitation of workers by employers[27] is a fact; she also notes the reality of

the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s and describes the phenomenon of patronage as ‘the gangrene of our lives.’ Significantly, he also quotes Walenty Majdański, a precursor of the protection of conceived life in Poland and a staunch opponent of abortion, a promoter of the large family model, and author of such essays as *Polska kwitnąca dziećmi* (Poland Blooming with Children) (Majdański, 1947, p. 10):

> For in order that the ordinary man, not the hero, may always live a Christian life, he must also always be economically independent, at least to the extent that he can give himself a minimum of food and clothing. The condition increases when one is family-oriented and intensifies with the birth of each child.

Dworak uses this quotation to support his position, within which he considers livelihood issues to be crucial insofar as they serve as the basis for the formation of Christian morality and the preservation of the large family model. He, therefore, agrees with Grabowska’s view concerning the importance of the material dimension of existence, but for him, the satisfaction of subsistence needs is not an end in itself, but is the basis for the elevation of life according to the tenets of Christianity and with a sense of patriotic duty. He criticizes Grabowska’s portrayal of the characters on the grounds that they ‘show absolutely no national instinct, do not think at all about the homeland, do not intend to play any civic role and, most bizarrely, have no religious feelings whatsoever.’ The allegation against the author regarding the fact that she presents a one-sided, materially determined perspective could, therefore, be modified and reversed, and its edge could be pointed towards Dworak himself, who demands, from a firmly based Catholic-nationalist position, the inclusion of what he considers to be

the most salient features in the portrayals of the heroines of *Children Do Not Want to Live* as he fails to imagine that national instinct and religious feelings might not be part of the teenage girls' identity, or at least not the primary ones. According to the author, the fact that adolescents are deprived of ideals is the direct cause of their deteriorating psychological condition resulting from a sense of meaninglessness in life. He places the responsibility for the crisis above all not on those who shape the socio-economic system and are responsible for the shape of institutions, but on those who 'do not want to or do not know how to bind the pupil to God' and 'are unable to develop the strength of character in the boy and girl and prepare them to serve their homeland with their work.'

The reviews and mentions cited above have several things in common. Firstly, they are unanimous in their negative attitude towards Grabowska's play and their criticism of placing discursive and critical social values above the artistic and literary ones. Secondly, they are essentially devoted solely to the content, structure and meaning of the drama, not to the staging directed by Karpiński. In the context of the way in which the play *Children Do Not Want to Live* came to life on stage, we can extract some scanty information from the critical texts; the visuals were characterised by an almost ascetic simplicity (Parandowski, 1938), part of the scenery was a model of a railway embankment giving an illusion of perspective (Kołoniecki, 1938) and curtains (Podhorska-Okołów, 1938). Based on these reviews, we can also reconstruct the cast of the performance (or at least a large part of it).[28] Although the authors criticise social engagement as a dominant feature of Grabowska's drama and, more broadly, the treatment of theatre as a medium of public discourse and a place of intervention, their reviews almost completely ignore issues of staging, visuals, musical setting (if there was any), lighting or (apart from Parandowski) acting. These are reviews that

could be written without seeing the production, having contented oneself with just reading the play.

8.

There is currently no direct access to Grabowska's drama. In the context of a Benjaminian understanding of historical materialism, the lack of a source in the form of a manuscript of the drama (or possibly an adaptation thereof) does not prevent work with the archive or undermine the process of making a new repository. Instead, it opens one up to experiencing history in the process of exploration, in the small states of research euphoria when a clue turns out to lead to an important trace. In this sense, reconstruction is an effective task that strengthens the researcher's relationship with the object of research. The process of the feminist archivist's searching for the fissures that can burst the archive is a process that bears the characteristics of a curator's work: a situated selection of content that forms a new piece of the map, a further part of the atlas. (I use a geographical metaphor precisely because of the issue of location and entanglement; every utterance – archival, curatorial or theoretical – always comes from a place and is shaped by what can be seen from that place). Such a distribution of the sensible (in the sense of Jacques Rancière), which reveals phenomena and persons relegated to the margins of the hegemonic order of theatre history, has a strongly ethical dimension as it gives visibility and rank (Majewska, 2018), restores proportion, and adds value to that which is seemingly peripheral, insignificant and faint.

Initially, the methodological framework of this article was to be different. While conducting preliminary recognition of the object of research, I realized

that I was dealing primarily with a gap in the archives, and that the silence of the archive would be my dominant theoretical point of reference. I understand the concept of an archive gap not only as the absence of the text of Grabowska's drama, but also the absence of a wider study of this case, of the text itself, the stage production and the critical reception. What changed over the course of my research was not only the extent of the archival material that I managed to collect, but also my own perception of the 'archival silence' or absence in terms of gaining knowledge about the past. The more the archive of the play *Children Do Not Want to Live*, its staging and reception expanded, the more clearly I shifted from the theoretical elaboration of absence towards methods of historical analysis and discourse analysis. At the same time, I began to understand the concept of archival silence in the way proposed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, a key text for postcolonial studies relating to the practices of silencing narratives about the Haitian Revolution. The author states that every historical narrative carries a set of silences that enter into the process of making historical knowledge at four key stages: the making of sources, the making of archives, the making of narratives and, finally, the making of history (Trouillot, 1995, p. 33). In the light of such thinking, it is, therefore, impossible to conclude that some archives are silent and others are not. Undoubtedly, however, 'not all silences are the same' (1995), and their analysis and deconstruction require different approaches, perceptions and tools. I cite Trouillot's ideas not with a view to creating an analogy between the Haitian Revolution and Polish interwar theatre, but as part of a methodology that reveals the interpenetration of ideas and their non-obvious alliances. This methodology, which is inspired by Benjamin's thought, is directed towards using existing concepts in new contexts to track traces. In doing so, I benefit from a methodological proposal developed

through the analysis of a different phenomenon, but one that opens up new insights into the context of archives and the power relations revealed within making them. Thus, thanks to the reading of Trouillot, for me, the archival silence has become a figure in the shape of an intrusive agent who will always find a way to become part of the process of gaining knowledge about the past. I treat the gap in the archive and in the historical narrative not as a silent element in the structure of knowledge, but as a significant and causal element, indispensable in the context of historical materialism. A disappearance or a gap leaves a traceable residue; each archival remnant coexists with its own silent reflection.

In writing this article, my aim was to attempt to reconstruct the content of Grabowska's drama *Children Do Not Want to Live*, as well as its staging and reception. In the context of this attempt, the understanding of archival silences proposed by Trouillot as differentiated and multi-sourced is linked to the category of the feminist archive. The nature of non-identical archival silences, inherent in the making of historical knowledge, is also indicative of the unequal nature of the control (1995, p. 53) that subjects of history possess over the whole of the several-stage activity culminating in the creation of history as an institutional representation of the past. In the case of the subject of this research, this control would be undermined to a similar extent by the institutional background (a one-off show within a school 'incubator' for future graduates) as well as the gendered context. Indeed, there appears the question of why the interwar social-feminist current, of which Grabowska's work is a part, is a side issue in mainstream theatre historiography, and why the figure of Leon Schiller is mainly associated with the Polish interpretation of the *Zeittheater*. The concept of the feminist archive contains a redefinition of what is important in writing history, a redefinition that shifts the research focus towards what has hitherto

functioned on the periphery of the historical and theatrical discourse due to its unsupportive (or even threatening) position towards the hegemonic, masterful order of spectacularity. (I am referring, inter alia, to the fact that, in the context of, e.g. the question of the representation of abortion in Polish interwar theatre, one usually cites Leon Schiller's 1930 production of Friedrich Wolf's *Cyankali*, and less frequently the later productions of *Justice* from the 1930s). Trouillot also uses the concept of two kinds of historicity: the first would refer to the materiality of the socio-historical process (as a set of facts and tangible documents), and the second to the way in which history locates itself in narratives on the ground prepared by this materiality (1995, p. 13). I regard the research work done in writing this article as a movement that precedes the heliotropism of that which is past. It is a movement that claims the past and allows a new materiality of the socio-historical process to emerge. This, in turn, becomes the substructure of the stage on which a new component of theatre history can emerge.

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Footnotes

1. *Robotnik: organ Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej*, 1935, no. 156.
2. *Dzień Dobry*, 1938, no. 211.
3. *Mały Dziennik*, 1938, no. 219.
4. *Głos Poranny*, 1938, no. 214.
5. *Dobry Wieczór! i Kurjer Czerwony: ilustrowane pismo codzienne*, 1938, no. 214.
6. *Nowy Dziennik*, 1936, no. 216.
7. *Dzień Dobry*, 1938, no. 211.
8. *Nowy Dziennik*, op. cit.
9. The congress took place from 2 to 4 October in Warsaw. It should be emphasized that this was not the first congress of its kind in the history of Polish pedagogy; the interwar period was a time of intensive development of pedagogical thought, with congresses being organized as early as the 1920s.
10. *Pierwszy Ogólnopolski Kongres Dziecka: Warszawa 2, 3, 4 października 1938 roku: cel i charakter Kongresu, program i rozkład prac*, Warszawa 1938, p. 4.
11. Ibid.
12. 'Between the beginning of January and the end of December last year (2021), 1,496 children and teenagers aged 7-18 attempted suicide according to data provided by the Police Headquarters. This is over 650 more attempts than for the whole of 2020. Compared with 2020, we see a 77% increase in suicidal behaviour among young people,' (Ruszel et. al., 2022, p. 357-365).
13. It consisted of: Tadeusz Breza (secretary of the association), Jerzy Hulewicz, Jan Lorentowicz, Zofia Nałkowska, Arnold Szyfman, Kazimierz Wierzyński and Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński; *Kamena. Miesięcznik literacki*, 1938, no. 5 (45), p. 102 (back cover).
14. Marcelina Grabowska – born on 24th December 1912 in Lviv, MA in history and PhD in Polish philology (she graduated in both fields of study from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Lviv). She debuted as a prose writer in 1934 with the novel *Żółty dom* (A Yellow House), and in the same year, her drama *Sprawiedliwość* (Justice) appeared on the stage for the first time (premiered on 15th September 1934 at the Pohulanka Theatre in Vilnius). During the Nazi occupation, she took part in conspiratorial activities; she was, among other things, the secretary of the Union of Polish Syndicalists and collaborated in the creation of underground magazines. She was a participant in the Warsaw Uprising, during which she was wounded. After the war, she continued her journalistic and literary activities. She joined the Polish Workers' Party (from 1948, Polish United Workers' Party, PZPR). She died on 13 May 1986 in Warsaw.
15. The drama was published in the volume *Rodzaju żeńskiego. Antologia Dramatów*, ed. A. Chałupnik and A. Łuksza, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Teatralnego, Warszawa 2018.
16. At the time, the monthly was published by the Congregation of Marian Fathers, and the editor-in-chief was Fr Jerzy Pawski, a supporter of the Catholic totalitarian system (totalitarianism based on the Catholic religion).
17. As a Catholic author and supporter of 'modern nationalism,' Tadeusz Dworak published,

inter alia, in the weekly *Myśl Narodowa*, in the daily *Dziennik Wileński* and in the series *Biblioteczka Akcji Katolickiej*. Dworak wrote about 'modern nationalism' in an article published in May 1937 in *Dziennik Wileński* on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the death of Bolesław Prus, in which he focused primarily on anti-Semitic themes in the writer's work, using them to propound his own nationalist views.
18. Most likely because Dworak does not define it precisely. Unlike the previous part, for the next part, he does not use the phrase 'bears the title' or a capital letter, which may suggest that it is a kind of synthetic definition ('Part II begins: *searching in the dark*,' op. cit.).
19. As with part two, Dworak does not make it clear that the lowercase phrase 'blind track' is the actual title of the drama's third component, but this can be assumed with a high degree of probability.
20. Dworak constructs the narrative in such a way as to suggest that the comments on the mental condition of children and young people and the suicide statistics appear in the opening conversation of the third part of the drama (rather than being interpretive remarks by the author).
21. The premiere of *Justice* took place in 1934 at the Vilnius Pohulanka Theatre. The play was directed by Mieczysław Szpakiewicz. The drama was also known under the title *Woman No. 14* (premiered in 1937 at the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Krakow).
22. The understanding of theatre as discourse has been complemented by Grzegorz Niziołek (2021). The author proposes a correction to the definition of theatre as discourse, adding after Michel Foucault that it (discourse) can also be 'a threat to performance, a way of establishing power over it' and noting the existence of extra-discursive reality. Niziołek, in the context of the said performance by Jan Peszek in the 1981 staging of Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantic* directed by Mikołaj Grabowski, focuses on the affective dimension of the theatrical event, 'shattering the coherence of the performance,' (Niziołek, 2021, p. 58).
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. At the same time, Boy, for a reason that is not entirely clear, stated that Grabowska's work 'would not stand a chance in the regular repertoire,' so working on it at the workshop was the only chance for the text to see the light at all.
27. In pro-labour circles it is correctly point out that employees are in fact 'labour-givers' while employers are 'labour-takers' – they obtain the labour of others and live off it.
28. The performance featured: Irena Borowska, Stanisława Kawińska, Jerzy Michał Kordowski, Lucyna Kownacka, Jadwiga Kuryluk, Wanda Leśmian, Zofia Małynicz, Janina Pollakówna, Stanisława Stępień, Irena Tomaszewska, Zofia Wierzejska, Helena Zahorska and Maria Zarębińska.

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