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/ TRAPS OF REPRESENTATION

Against Representation and Other Traps. ‘Black Skin, White Masks’ by Wiktor Bagiński

Jowita Mazurkiewicz

In her article, created on the basis of her master’s thesis *White Skin, Black Masks. Selected Representations of Blackness and Whiteness in Polish Contemporary Theatre* (*Biała skóra, czarne maski. Wybrane reprezentacje Czarności i białości w polskim teatrze współczesnym*), Mazurkiewicz reflects on contemporary representations of Blackness and whiteness in Polish theatre using the example of the performance *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Czarna skóra, białe maski*) directed by Wiktor Bagiński. The author defines the key concepts of the argument, i.e. Blackness and whiteness based on the work of researchers Michelle M. Wright, Reni Eddo-Lodge and Emma Dabiri, and provides a local context to these concepts by applying to them the categories of centre and semi-periphery drawn from the writings of Maria Janion, Dorota Sajewska and Andrzej W. Nowak, in search of answers to the questions of what specifically characterises Polish racism and what the scope of the Polish anti-racist discourse is. In a detailed analysis of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the author examines the story within a story structure of the play and the representation of ‘race’ that is actuated by Bagiński as a performative construct. She cites the peculiarly semi-peripheral story of the visits of Black slaves to the courts of the Polish nobility, which is staged in the first part of the performance, and summarises the self-theatrical discussion of the ‘Racists Anonymous group’ moderated by the stage porte-parole of the director in the second part. When interpreting Bagiński’s role, the author concludes that the artist consistently strives for his own individuality and seeks to resign from representing Black Poles despite his unique position as the only Black Polish theatre director. The author critiques the tools that Bagiński uses to achieve this goal, i.e. misogyny and the affective reproduction of violence against women. She proposes an intersectional view of racism.

Keywords: Blackness; whiteness; semi-periphery; racism; sexual violence

When Zygmunt Hübner decided to stage Jean Genet's *The Blacks*[1] at the Ateneum Theatre in Warsaw in 1961, the playwright wrote a letter to the Polish translators to protest the idea. 'I wrote this play – I am white myself, as you know – so that real Negroes[2] could shout their anger and hatred in the faces of real whites. It was written for Negroes. It is therefore not up to Whites to decide whether or not they are allowed to feign on stage the perfidious relations between victims and executioners' (Genet, 1961a, p. 5) we read in the programme of the Polish premiere, which was staged despite Genet's objections. In the postscript, the playwright states: 'Apart from miners, there are no blacks among you. And this is not a play about miners' (p. 6). The programme also included a rejoinder by Jerzy Lisowski, in which the translator expresses the creator's conviction that it is the whites'responsibility to deal with the stereotypes of Whites about Blacks presented in the drama,[3] because the prejudices most concern the prejudiced. The author of the letter defends the universality of theatre, believing that the authenticity Genet calls for is not only unnecessary but also limiting.

> Since they are supposed to be real Negroes, why should they speak on stage the language of Racine or Mickiewicz, and not the dialect of Baluba? If we were to accept such a limitation of authenticity, then we would have to forbid, for example, a Negro troupe from staging Shakespeare or Sophocles, to be consistent (Lisowski, 1961, p. 7).

Lisowski argues that Genet's drama does not need 'real Negroes' to resonate fully, and the play's anti-racist message should not be constricted: 'In our country, we only know from newspapers the news from distant Alabama or the Congo about what racism can be in relation to the black race. […] Unfortunately, there are more such people in our world, whom racism genuinely condemns to death. […] This play is about them' (p. 8).

In *The Blacks*, inspired by, among others, Jean Rouch's film *The Mad Masters* documenting the West African ritual of Hauka in which native Africans immersed in a trance impersonate White colonial officials, Jean Genet divided the Black actors into two groups – the court of European colonisers in white masks and the colonised African people. The colonised execute a grotesque performance perpetuating stereotypes about themselves in front of the colonisers, and to their delight.

In the course of the action, it turns out that they are performing this stunt to camouflage a real trial and execution of a member of their community who killed a White woman. The Black performers, as self-conscious projections of White people, engage in a game of mimicry to divert the attention of the oppressors from their own interests, and the subversive fiction they create is constantly mixed with the reality of the presented world.

In Hübner's staging, both groups were played by White actors with their faces painted black, with the courtiers wearing additional, caricatured white masks. 'These are no longer floors, but skyscrapers of convention. Because whites dressed as blacks pretend to be black actors who are playing a conventional and schematic play about blacks for blacks dressed as whites, played by white actors dressed as blacks pretending to be whites…' commented Stefan Polanica (1962). The remaining reviewers held the actors accountable for their ability to capture the 'characteristic features of a

black's behaviour' (Grodzicki, 1961) and looked for a 'Negro' musicality and sense of rhythm on the Ateneum stage. Most, like Polanica, despite their sincere trust in Hübner, pointed out the incongruity of the Polish performance with the realities in which the play was written.

> The African question is indeed shaking the whole world, but it has a different impact on the life of Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. The spasms shaking the societies of colonial empires concern us only indirectly. They do not mean our abdication; on the contrary, they even open up perspectives for our industry, while our average theatregoer knows them only from newspapers, radio and films. Analogies with other manifestations of racism known to us are also artificial and distant. We saw the fascist explosion of racism with our own eyes, but only as spectators and opponents

– Jerzy Zagórski distanced himself from *The Blacks* (1961), while Edward Csató soberly stated: 'But the Negroes are missing not only on the stage, but in a sense also in the audience. That is, not so much the "physical" Negroes themselves, but the Negro issue in the viewer's consciousness' (1962), which seems to perfectly sum up both the Warsaw staging and the dispute between its creators and Genet.

Hübner's production of *The Blacks*, together with the accompanying correspondence and reception, not only gives an idea of the political and social sensitivity of Poland in the 1960s, but also encourages its examination in contemporary Poland. Sixty years ago, Blackness seemed so distant to Polish theatre artists that they were unable to recognise the consequences of the radical negation of Genet's guidelines and the decolonising foundations

of his work. What has changed since then? How does Blackness manifest itself in Polish theatre in the 21st century? I tried to answer these questions in my master's thesis *White Skin, Black Masks. Selected Representations of Blackness and Whiteness in Polish Contemporary Theatre*,[4] of which this article is an extensive fragment. By examining selected representations of Blackness and Whiteness on stage, I investigated what reality they create, by what means they are called into being, and what they say about the current political consciousness of Polish society.

The subject of my analyses, in addition to stagings by White creators, including *Dziady*[5] (directed by Radosław Rychcik), and *In Desert and Wilderness. From Sienkiewicz and from Others*[6] (directed by Bartek Frąckowiak) and *The Blacks*[7] (directed by Iga Gańczarczyk), were performances by the only Polish Black theatre director, Wiktor Bagiński. *Black Skin, White Masks*[8] and *The Heart*[9] turned out to be crucial for my research work as artistic statements by a Black Polish creator on the subject of his own ethnic identity. Half a century after the premiere of Hübner's *The Blacks*, Black people finally appeared on stage and in the consciousness of Polish viewers — no longer only represented, but also representing.

Blackness and Whiteness, centre and semi-periphery

'But what does Black mean? And what colour is it anyway?' asks Genet in the motto of his play (1961b, p. 77). There are many answers, and each one may be equally true. Blackness is a feature of a population with dark skin pigmentation. Blackness is a complex social identity, dependent on geographical and cultural coordinates. It is a set of experiences of members of the African diaspora, together with its representations and expressions. It

is an affirmative subjectivity based on pride in one's own history and heritage. It is a conscious attitude shaping politics, social organisations, customs and traditions, adopted by people identifying as Black, who fight racial discrimination. It is being perceived as the Other and as being exotic. 'This strange experience, this double consciousness, this sense of constantly looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul against the yardstick of a world that looks on with amused contempt and pity' (Du Bois, 2015, p. 5).[10] 'It can be a network of strategies for self-assertion and radically imagining new social relations' (Rasheed, 2016).[11]

Each of these definitions of Blackness leads to simplifications and stereotyping, which is why they need to be multiplied, fluidified, and contextualised. Researcher Michelle M. Wright postulates that the concept of Blackness, always moving between extremes, should encompass the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora and at the same time unite them into a community.[12] She considers it necessary to study Blackness as a social category that intersects with others – an intersectional view of the relations between Blackness and gender, sexuality, and class, which guarantees access to a multitude of experiences, perspectives, and attitudes. Each of these experiences, complementing or cancelling out the others, equally defines a pluripotent and heterogeneous Blackness in the process of constant conceptualisation. Attending to its flickerings can be considered a contemporary strategy for redefining 'race' – a construct that in previous centuries was the (pseudo)scientific foundation of racist ideology, and which today, completely discredited as a biological system of human classification, remains an important social determinant that requires critical analyses and contexts, as well as reliable observation of the conditions in which it is produced and reproduced.

Blackness understood in this way exists in close relation to Whiteness, a concept that is just as complex, though not usually subject to as much thought. Whiteness is not just about belonging to a light-pigmented population. According to critical Whiteness studies, it is a naturalised racial identity with its own history, culture, and epistemology, considered the norm by which all other ethnic groups are defined. Whiteness, as an ideology based on beliefs, values, behaviours, and customs, provides access to power and systemic privilege. 'White privilege is the fact that if you are White, your race will almost certainly positively affect the course of your life in one way or another. And you probably won't even notice it,' writes Reni Eddo-Lodge in her essay *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2018, p. 115). The journalist argues that there is no point in talking to White people about racism until they learn to recognise and acknowledge the systemic benefits of being White. Emma Dabiri in her essay *What White People Can do Next*[13] postulates that anti-racist activism should be based not on solidarity, i.e. empty declarations made on social media, but on joint action toward an equal society, bringing benefits to both Black and White people.

Critical studies of Whiteness and interracial relations, however, primarily cover areas where Black communities are numerous and highly visible – the United States with a history of slavery and Western European countries with a colonial past. Most of the anti-racist strategies and solutions proposed by researchers do not therefore directly correspond to the Polish reality. In the world-system,[14] Poland, geographically and symbolically situated between the East and the West, plays its specific semi-peripheral role. 'A semi-peripheral identity is suspended, torn between two ordering principles: the dominant narrative from the centre and potential voices of resistance or submission from the periphery,' diagnoses Andrzej W. Nowak in his text *The*

Mysterious Disappearance of the Second World. On the Difficult Fate of the Semi-Periphery (2016, p. 90). Maria Janion also analyses Poland's ambivalent identity in *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna* (*Uncanny Slavdom*):

> The processes of the aggressive colonisation of Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries and Sienkiewicz's opposing dream of colonising others have created a sometimes-paradoxical Polish postcolonial mentality. It manifests itself in a sense of helplessness and defeat, inferiority and peripherality of the country and its stories. This fairly common feeling of inferiority towards the 'West' is opposed within the same paradigm by messianic pride in the form of a narrative about our exceptional suffering and merits, about our greatness and superiority over the 'immoral' West, about our mission in the East. (2006, p. 12)

In recent years, researchers and historians have begun to restore the memory of Poland's involvement in various colonial projects — primarily the aristocracy's colonisation of the East in the 16th and 17th centuries and the fantasies of Polish society about overseas colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries. 'Polish historiography is reluctant to expose Poland's place in the context of the colonial regime,' notes Dorota Sajewska in her article *Perspectives of Peripheral History and Theory of Culture* (2020), which reports on Poland's specific semi-peripheral struggles with modern form. It is commonly claimed that Poland never participated in the colonial expansions conducted by Western European states, but only fell victim to them. In fact, in the years 1569–1648, the Polish nobility colonised Ukraine and exploited the labour of Ruthenian peasants under the feudal system. In *Fantomowe ciało króla* (The Phantom Body of the King), Jan Sowa analyses

the noble policy of this period as a local equivalent of global colonial actions, a ‘peripheral integration with the economic and cultural centre of the capitalist world’ (2011, p. 183). Sarmatian mythology played a huge role in constructing the noble identity at that time – the belief that the Sarmatians were a group ethnically and nationally different from the peasants and the bourgeoisie, descended from foreign, ancient tribes that invaded and colonised the lands inhabited by the Slavs between the 4th and 6th centuries, and therefore predestined to rule Poland and the eastern lands of Europe and to collect serfdom from their inhabitants, whom from the 17th century the Sarmatians called ‘czerń’ (‘Blackness’) (see Sajewska, 2020; Pobłocki, 2011).

Racialisation discourses, present in numerous texts from the period, have inspired some historians to trace similarities between the living conditions of Ruthenian serfs and Black slaves in America. This research perspective was adopted by anthropologist Kacper Pobłocki in *Chamstwo* (2022) and publicist Przemysław Wielgosz in *Gra w rasy* (2021). The latter juxtaposes the development of slavery in the North Atlantic basin with the racialisation of the peasantry and working class in Polish lands, analysing racism as the basis and bond of international capitalist exploitation. Comparing the Polish history of serfdom to American slavery is a popular, although controversial, rhetorical device in discussions about the folk history of Poland, and one of the strategies for seeking analogies between global and local histories. The tools of postcolonial discourse sometimes require adaptation to semi-peripheral conditions, but they are necessary to place Poland on the map of global dependencies and influences.

The ‘dream of colonising others’ (which was dictated in the 19th century by the desire to acquire new territories for the then non-existent Poland, and in

the interwar period by the desire to expand the newly regained independent state), resulted in Polish research expeditions, plans to settle Poles in Africa and South America, and political interference, which Sajewska interprets as a kind of mimicry of Western imperialism. The cultural studies scholar uses this concept coined by the leading philosopher of postcolonialism Homi K. Bhabha to draw attention to the hybridity of culture typical of the semi-periphery and manifested in the colonised society's partial adaptation and imitation of the mechanisms of the repressive authorities in order to defend itself and achieve self-determination. The colonial ambitions of the Second Polish Republic, detached from reality and persistently fuelled by the Maritime and Colonial League and the editorial staff of the magazine *Morze* (Sea), never came true, and Poland did not catch up with the Western powers – it remained distant, but dependent on the global centre.

Contemporary Polish society can hardly be called multicultural or multiethnic – this was determined by both the country's history and its current migration policy. The African diaspora in Poland, although constantly growing, is still small, and its presence in the public space can be considered negligible, similarly to the presence of other non-White communities. Critical studies of Whiteness do not cope well in environments with a homogeneous ethnic structure, which leads to fundamental questions: does a semi-peripheral variety of Whiteness exist? What is Whiteness like in an ethnically undifferentiated country? What is Polish racism specifically and how does it differ from the racism of the global centre?

The answers have not yet been established, and research on Polish Whiteness is still in its infancy.[15] This is evidenced by the deficit of a native anti-racist language. There is a lack of a Polish equivalent of the term 'People of Colour', affirming belonging to non-White communities, or a

consensus on the correct way to refer to Black people (‘Black’ coexists in Polish with ‘black-skinned,’ ‘dark-skinned,’ ‘African-American’ [used regardless of actual origin], and the only-recently recognised as pejorative ‘Negro’), as well as people identifying as multiracial (the terms ‘mixed race’ and ‘mulatto’ are usually frowned upon, but it would be hard to find better ones). Linguistic incompetence seems to be one of the manifestations of racism characteristic of the semi-periphery. Others include naturalising Whiteness through exoticising and symbolically excluding people of colour from the national community, spreading stereotypes and prejudices that cannot be confronted with reality due to the small representation of minorities, imitating the discourses of the centre without taking into account their local specificity or ignoring the discourses of the centre, justifying them with their groundlessness in the local context, taking advantage of Whiteness in the case of travel and emigration, or propagating xenophobia, closing borders and fear of the absent Other, typical of the ethnic nationalism that is gaining popularity. The humanitarian crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border, especially when compared with the reaction of society to the outbreak of war in Ukraine, has proven that Whiteness can be an important condition for Polish hospitality. The different situations on the two Polish borders seem painfully symptomatic of the local entanglement in Whiteness, as do the slogans that regularly appear at Independence Marches: ‘Poland will be White or depopulated,’ ‘White Europe of brotherly nations,’ ‘It’s okay to stay White’ (see Mikołajewska, 2017).

‘The semi-peripheries themselves reinforce racist division, treating it as a form of advancement, but paradoxically this strategy means that not only are the residents of the semi-peripheries ethnicised and racialised, but they are also accused of racism themselves,’ writes Nowak (2016, p. 102), trying to characterise semi-peripheral racism. Similar explorations in the text

Perspectives of Peripheral History and Theory of Culture gives Dorota Sajewska (2020) concluding:

> This ambivalent position of Poland, questioning the easy division into the centre and the periphery, can be perceived both negatively – as a place where xenophobic attitudes, behaviours and phobias are shaped in detail, and positively – as a decentralised confrontation with Western culture. This ambivalence also conceals the possibility of political intervention: recovering from history what could have happened and a critical stance towards what really happened.

The need to explore this possibility of political intervention and the complex relations between Polishness, Whiteness, and Blackness eventually led me back to the theatre. I believe that theatre, as a vibrant cultural institution, has the power to reflect the social and political moods of the 'here and now,' to diagnose the state of public awareness of the topics it addresses, and the potential to practice dominant discourses and concepts by illuminating important cultural phenomena and finding performative expression for them. It can therefore use its resources to represent members of the society in which it functions and to respond to their current problems. The tension between Blackness and Whiteness is currently one of these problems, and analysing Polish performances that address the topic of 'race' has the potential to provide insight into the local processes and contexts of its design.

Wiktor Bagiński

In Polish theatre, the representatives of Blackness are currently most often actors and performers, both full-time and hired for individual projects on the subject of 'race.' They form a small but diverse group, characteristic of the Black community in Poland – the colour of their skin unites them more than their roots or social class, declared identity or common political activity. Those who identify as Afro-Poles have relatively rarely had the opportunity to explore their own Afro-Polishness in their work on performances; their Blackness on stage usually refers the audience to the global centre. For director Wiktor Bagiński,[16] the experience of Blackness specific to Polish coordinates and its semi-peripheral identity resistant to universalisation have been the main subject of theatrical exploration, especially at the beginning of his creative path. In performances based on original scripts, once written together with playwright Paweł Sablik, Bagiński explored various forms of racist violence and his own entanglement in stereotypes concerning Black people. He collaborated twice with the Zimbabwean–Polish performance artist Sibonisiwe Ndlovu-Sucharska, gaining access to her perspective and struggles with Afro-Polishness. In his reflections on the situation of Black Poles, he also drew abundantly on the work of prominent Black philosophers, most notably Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, and the writer James Baldwin. After George Floyd's death, he published a dense essay in *Dwutygodnik*, *The Birth of the Negro* (2020), in which he wrote:

> While the history of colonisation and racial segregation is not my story, the skin archive also receives this document. I did not want these stories in my body, but they were already there before I knew it. I learned that I had to listen to my body to see its story.

In numerous interviews given on the occasion of the premiere, he willingly spoke about private experiences and events from his life, somehow mythologising them and leading critics to biographical interpretations of his own performances. It is difficult to avoid them in the face of the artist's consistent self-creation on and off the stage. Bagiński was often asked about Blackness in the theatre and Blackness in Poland, so he spoke on behalf of Black Poles: he demanded a more diverse representation and more voices in the discussion about Blackness, diagnosed the condition of the Afro-Polish community and urged White Poles to recognise racism in their beliefs, behaviours and language. When asked by his colleagues about the monothematic nature of the performances he was preparing, he replied: 'And when was the last time you staged a text by a non-White author? It is always if not Słowacki, then Mickiewicz, if not Ibsen, then Chekhov' (Bagiński, 2019). He has often lamented the fact that there is no other Black director in Poland who could argue with his vision. Thanks to his position and performances, the topic of Blackness in Poland, supported through reading texts by non-White authors, could be taken up and developed by people who are directly affected by it – here and now, not only there and then.

Wiktor Bagiński's work and character also began to function in a different context, when in early 2023 his former collaborators, Bartek Prosuł, Krystyna Lama-Szydłowska, Aleksandra Pajączkowska and Paweł Sablik, published a statement (2023) revealing the director's violent practices, including manipulation, fits of rage, groundless accusations of racism and sudden termination of contracts with female directors. In response, the director wrote on Facebook: 'Since October, I have been a victim of harassment by former collaborators. This harassment has been ongoing since October and its source is racism' (Bagiński, 2023). And further: 'I do

not refer to the accusations made by the above-mentioned persons [Paweł S., Bartek P., Krystyna S., Karolina S. and Aleksandra P.] because all the allegations are lies. This is a fiction prepared by a group of racists whose goal is to remove me from Polish public life' (2023). The statement was signed by 'Ahmad Ali,' because at about the same time Bagiński announced that he had converted to Islam and changed his name. In March 2024, the post about the name change had already been deleted, and the director is once again listed on his social media as 'Wiktor Bagiński.' On the website of the German Theater Freiburg, where his adaptation of Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*[17] premiered in June 2023, 'Ahmad Ali' is added in brackets next to the director's name, and I will use this official name in the text. The director is currently abroad. His last performance in Poland was made at the end of 2022. The conflict between Bagiński and his former collaborators remains unresolved.

Black Skin, White Masks

The walls and stairs to the mezzanine of the cavernous Modelatornia of the Opole theatre are covered in white tiles. Cables, speakers, and tripods are piled up in the corners. On the wooden parquet floor, on the left, there is a piano, in the centre an ornate chair, and on the right – a golden bathtub. Near the scenographic objects, there are posed figures in rococo costumes and 18th-century wigs: a pianist in a tailcoat is frozen at the instrument, on the throne a lady in a flared blue dress and a footman in a patterned frock coat watching over her, next to the bathtub a young woman and an older man taking an elegant stroll. In front of the tableau vivant stand Sibonisiwe (Bonnie) Ndlovu-Sucharska and Wiktor Bagiński in jeans and sweaters. The performers introduce themselves and greet the audience at a meeting of anonymous racists. Bagiński announces that a show about the fate of Black

slaves at Polish courts in the 17th and 18th centuries was created as part of the meetings. Bonnie announces a scene about the genesis of European racism, in which she will be responsible for the Enlightenment philosophers' leisure. The director adds that the White participants of the meeting play Black historical figures on their own initiative. The hosts step off the stage, the courtiers come to life, the stage lights go down, and spotlights pick out the pianist, the countess, and the footman from the darkness.

Sitting at the piano, Aleksander Dynis, the Black servant of the 17th-century Kraków bishop (Karol Kossakowski) becomes the narrator of the prepared show, placing the existing scene in time and space – it is February 1752 in Biała Podlaska. The pianist recounts the passage of a convoy of twelve Black slaves through the streets of the city, which aroused great interest and excitement among the inhabitants. The lady on the throne then puts theatrical binoculars to her eyes and looks out at the procession somewhere in the audience, then hands them over to the footman, who waits obligingly at her feet. From the conversation between Prince Hieronim Florian Radziwiłł (Michał Świtała) and the Austrian actress Sophie Schröder (Joanna Osyda), who is a guest at his court, and who are strolling nearby, it emerges that the woman in the blue dress is Magdalena Radziwiłłowa née Czapska (Karolina Kuklińska) with her Black servant, Pierre (Kornel Sadowski). Under the influence of the gaze of the strollers, the couple freezes for a moment in the painting African Page Passing a Basket, which Radziwiłł had given his wife a year earlier. This is not the only expression of the host's fascination with Black bodies – the prince boasts to the actress about buying Pierre in Paris for twelve hundred ducats, and then orders the servant to bring his favourite exhibit from the home cabinet of curiosities, namely the head of the Black man in a jar of formalin. Sitting down on a chair, he pulls a blackface mask with white skin peeking out from a glass container and

kisses her lips almost lasciviously. He then takes Sophie by the arm and leads her to the theatre for a performance of 'Negro ballets,'[18] leaving Magdalena alone with her favourite servant.

The reconstruction of episodes and customs from the life of the Polish nobility on the Opole stage is dense and slightly distorted from the very beginning – despite the narrator's chronicle-like accuracy, events from the 17th and 18th centuries coexist on stage, as well as characters whose paths could not have crossed in reality, and documented facts are mixed with the creators' imagination. This technique is used by the director and playwright to quickly remind the audience of a little-known practice by the Polish magnates – acquiring Black slaves for their courts as proof of their status and wealth. As Dynis tells, the Black newcomers, bought for huge sums, led a life in Poland at that time different from the slaves in the Atlantic trade triangle, because instead of working on plantations, they served as court mascots and local attractions. In this way, the director indicates at the very beginning Poland's semi-peripheral position in the global system of supply and demand for slave labour, only to reveal it in full in a game of stark contrasts a moment later.

History is successfully condensed by consistently piling up theatricality. Here, the contemporary participants in their meeting of anonymous racists take on the roles of historical figures, while the noblemen they play fill their time with theatrical performances. Playing with convention within the world of the performance reveals its infinite performativity and unmasks Whiteness as a set of traditions and habits rooted in material and cultural status. The box-like structure of the performance and the melange of stage identities and realities create space for shifts in the representation of Blackness and the search for new meanings through courtly images. By casting White

actors and actresses in the roles of Black servants, Wiktor Bagiński makes Blackness one of the constructs, possible to be invoked on stage through the power of performativity. In his performance, ‘race’ is not essential – it can be played, just like any other identity on stage. The director sees the essence of the experiences of Black slaves in Polish courts in performance; their work consists primarily in presenting an exotic appearance and performing the role assigned to them in the noblemen’s theatre of everyday life.

After her husband and the actress leave, Magdalena states that the hour of her daily concert has come and asks Pierre to bring her a microphone. The servant tries to resist, because he is afraid that he will not be able to endure another vocal display by his mistress. In response, the noblewoman affectionately pats his head and promises him a bath in milk and honey in exchange for the microphone. Pierre agrees to the offer, although his disgusted face shows that he is doing it only at Magdalena’s request, not for his own pleasure. He hands him the microphone, and Magdalena Radziwiłł abruptly sits him down at her feet and, with her hand in his hair, performs the song to the accompaniment of the piano, while the page reluctantly repeats some phrases of the piece:

> If I didn’t have you, Heart, as a page, I could not longer live.
> I’ve met, I can sing to, an angel, as if I’d
> gone to heaven.
>
> You’re not my son, because you’re a Negro.
> – I am a Negro.
> You're not my brother, because you bring tea.
> – I bring tea.
> You won't be wild anymore, you newcomer from Africa, you won't

be wild anymore, oh no.

Sadness and fear are far from you, you have plenty of bird's milk,
no one
hurts you, no one beats you, oh, how
good life is in Podlachia.

At the end of the piece, Pierre prepares for a bath, undresses down to his underpants and steps into a golden bathtub in a cap. Magdalena sits down next to him and pours milk from a jug over him, noting that Piotruś is living in the lap of luxury with her. And it is hard for Piotruś to disagree, although he is clearly dissatisfied with his mistress's caresses. Perhaps because, although he does not do backbreaking work, he has been completely objectified and racialised as a salon pet to be occasionally pampered. Magdalena's treatments quickly take on an erotic tone – the magnate looks at the page lasciviously and sighs, runs a sponge close to his crotch, and finally vigorously pats his exposed buttocks. Her fascination turns Pierre not only into an infantilised mascot, but also into a helpless sexual object, completely at the mercy of his owner.

Suddenly, the bath is interrupted by screams; Magdalena leaves, and the light dims. Behind the smoked glass on the mezzanine at the back of the stage, the shadows of a woman tied to a stake and a man in a tall wig whipping her are now visible. Pianist Aleksander Dynis approaches the page in the bathtub and explains the image to him: it is John Locke, an outstanding Enlightenment philosopher who believed that having Black slaves does not conflict with the idea of freedom that was constitutive of the era. When the light on the mezzanine brightens, Locke (Katarzyna Osipuk)

recites a fragment of his writings devoted to slavery and the principle of private property, and the eyes of the audience – both those in the audience and those on stage – are shown the bound, half-naked Black body of Sibonisiwe Ndlovu-Sucharska. The performance of violence involving the Black performer seems to be intended for Pierre as a pang of conscience and a lesson in racial solidarity. Dynis continues his insistent lecture, forcing the page to look at the theatre of cruelty that, under different circumstances, might have met him too.

In the blink of an eye, Bonnie disappears, and Locke's place is taken by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Leszek Malec), a romantic philosopher and famous author of the dialectic of master and slave, insensitive to the contemporary suffering of real slaves under the yoke of real masters. The irritated thinker also takes his anger out on the now invisible Black slave, and from offstage we hear her broken screams. Pierre interrupts Dynis's lesson because, as he says, he is aware of the suffering of his brothers in other parts of the world, though it does not befall him. Suddenly, he begins to sound like a typical Polish patriot denying historical facts that are not very honourable for the fatherland – he states that there have never been such words as racism, imperialism or colonialism here, which exempts him from responsibility for these phenomena in the West. These are arguments that return in contemporary debates on Polish racism, but after a few suggestive scenes in the play, it is already clear that they are not true. Racism in Poland not only exists, but also has its own history – it simply manifests itself differently than in the global centre.

Bonnie Sucharska steps down from the mezzanine in a White, bloody petticoat and announces another instalment of the play within a play: the outstanding Viennese actress Sophie Schröder will play Queen Maria

Kazimiera in a ‘beautiful love story about her feelings for a negro servant’ who served King Jan III Sobieski at Vienna. The page Pierre will play Joseph the Dutchman in love. The Black servant, summoned to the stage, recites a love monologue like a 19th-century actor from the era of stage stars. Having learned of the death of his beloved Queen Maria Kazimiera, Joseph plans to fight for her honour in the upcoming battle. When he leaves, his place in the spotlight is taken by the queen, who has just received a letter from Sobieski announcing that the Dutchman has fallen in battle. Schröder begins to shed theatrical tears, but before he fully devotes himself to mourning, Pierre returns to the stage as the queen’s beloved. A wonderful and completely counterfactual union of lovers takes place. An overjoyed Maria Kazimiera and Józef Holender fall to their knees and embrace tenderly. The Black footman asks the queen to marry him, and she accepts. However, the fantastic wedding will never take place, because Michał Świtała, a participant in the meeting of anonymous racists, who has been impersonating Radziwiłł until now, interrupts the reconstruction.

The meeting of anonymous racists

‘Wait a minute, what’s going on here? What are you playing here? What is this? It’s not true, it doesn’t fit with the historical record! I will never allow it!’ Michał thunders, wagging his finger in the semi-darkness. The other participants of the meeting start arguing with him, leaving their previous roles, and the director of the play takes advantage of the confusion to set up chairs on the stage. Wanting to explain the situation, he finally asks for the lights to be turned on and takes his place in a semi-circle with the actors. He opens the discussion by asking Michał why he ended the performance. Michał states that he cannot play the owner of the Black slaves, since the actors who are playing them are White, because such an assumption

contradicts the truth of the stage and history. The participants of the meeting raise their voices of protest again, defending the conventionality of the performance, announced at the beginning by the director.

When Michał suggests that the actors playing the Black characters wear black makeup, they react with outrage: most of them are aware that blackface is a racist practice. Leszek, who, in addition to Hegel, was supposed to play Father Jan Chlewicki, explains why White performers cannot be portrayed as Black people and draws attention to the prevalence of this phenomenon in contemporary Poland, especially in schools and theatres. It quickly turns out that, contrary to initial declarations, the opinions of the rest of the cast are not as radical. Karolina, who previously played Magdalena Radziwiłł, admits that as a child she painted herself black to perform Makumba by the pop group Big Cyc in a school competition and sees nothing wrong with that, because her make-up was not combined with stereotypical gestures and behaviours of Black people. Bagiński sarcastically congratulates her on winning and tells how, at a kindergarten song review, the teacher forbade him from singing Enrique Iglesias' song, insisting on a hit by Boney M., which in her opinion was more appropriate for the boy's skin colour. However, the director decides to absolve Karolina of her past mistakes, stating that the responsibility for her blackface lies with the teachers, who were unable to see the problematic nature of the racist costume.

The debate initiated in this way could be considered spontaneous – the actors regret that they will not be able to finish the show, they perform under their own names, their lines sound natural and sometimes overlap in the tumult of voices, and the arguments seem unstructured, a free exchange of ideas not covered by a script at all. In fact, the performance was not

interrupted, but only stripped of several layers of theatricality. The discussion is meticulously led by the director present on stage, who moderates the meeting, gives the floor, asks questions and summarises the answers. He has complete control over the theatrical situation as the key creator of *Black Skin, White Masks* and the representative of Blackness among White actors. Thanks to this devised structure of the performance, Wiktor and Bonnie will have the opportunity to discuss the source materials of the show with the actors, talk about their private experiences and reflect with the rest of the cast on the representation of Black people in Polish theatre. Some of their actions and statements resemble the strategies of auto-theatre: they speak on their own behalf as experts on Polish Blackness, called up for the needs of the performance, and their experiences paint an image of a group that is undervalued in the public space on a daily basis.

In this precisely directed panel, actor Michał Świtała is cast as the devil's advocate; his extremely conservative stance provokes the others to nuance their own beliefs and share their experiences and knowledge gained during rehearsals. As a result, Michał becomes a medium for the most banal and ignorant commentary from public and online disputes about political correctness – an embodiment of the normative White culture that Black creators in Poland must navigate.

Bagiński returns to the question of what moments of the show led the actor to interrupt the performance, and Michał becomes incensed that in 1683, the wedding of Queen Maria Kazimiera to a Black butler would not have been possible. Leszek then points out that the first Polish–African wedding had taken place fifty years earlier on the Krakow market square. During the debate, as during the reenactment, little-known facts are juxtaposed against the historical mainstream, forcing the participants to revise common beliefs

and ideas about Poland's connections with Blackness. To give them a performative dimension, the director asks the actors playing the roles of the newlyweds to perform a previously prepared song. Katarzyna Osipuk, in a wedding dress and with a clearly outlined pregnant belly, approaches the piano with Karol. The actor starts playing and they both sing a love ballad with the following refrain:

> This fair girl loves a Negro
> Because love is not black
> Because love is not white
> For love, I would give everything I have

After the song, some of the performers leave the stage to change, and the director, in exchange for an unfinished show, proposes a conversation about nano-racism. Michał demands an explanation of the term, and the director explains that nano-racism is a soft form of stigmatisation related to skin colour. Bonnie then mentions the constant feeling of threat caused by unfriendly glances on the street. Kornel points out that this type of racism can also manifest itself in jokes and rhymes, such as Murzynek Bambo. Michał immediately defends the popular text, so the other cast members point out the racist clichés contained in Tuwim's seemingly innocent poem. When the older actor insists that the rhyme has a positive connotation, Bonnie explodes in anger and talks indignantly about her friends' Black children who tried to scratch their skin off because their peers at school told them they were dirty and afraid to take a bath.

Katarzyna then reminds her of their joint visit to the bar and the licentious comments made by men to Bonnie about her exotic appearance. However,

the attention does not focus on the Black performer for long, because Wiktor asks Katarzyna to share her own experience of nano-racism, which she had previously mentioned in their private conversation before the performance. At this point, the host begins to reveal his directorial over-knowledge and skilfully manipulates the situation on stage – he subtly forces the actors to confess things they supposedly said outside of rehearsals. This technique creates the impression that the meeting was organised to clear up misunderstandings that occurred between the actors during the two months of preparations for the premiere and it intensifies the sense of genuine tension between the participants. Most of them have already taken off their baroque costumes and nothing now shields them from the audience and the inquisitive director, ready to hold his White collaborators accountable for their racist transgressions.

At Bagiński's request, Katarzyna tells how her ex-boyfriend from Senegal used to point out cultural appropriation to the actress, which he believed she was committing, by making a gesture of retort (a snap with an accompanying sarcastic mm-hmm) during a conversation, which belongs to the Black community of South Carolina in the United States, i.e. to his 'race.' The cast immediately takes the side of their colleague, considering her behaviour to be universal, but the director defends the Senegalese. He recalls his White ex-girlfriends who made similar signs in his presence and calls them 'insensitive morons.' At that moment, Michał bursts out laughing with satisfaction, and the other actors and actresses are momentarily silent in shock. Katarzyna turns Wiktor's chair towards her and suggests that he tell her straight to her face that she is an insensitive moron. The director seems embarrassed; he is unable to look at the actress, he casually says, 'Sorry, Kasia,' and when the actress leaves, he tries to turn the situation into a joke and move on to the next item on the programme.

The cast members are somewhat bewildered by the director's behaviour, but they allow him to continue the meeting. It is impossible to unequivocally assess Wiktor's on-stage behaviour, remembering that it was planned by Bagiński – the sexist comment did not come out of his mouth by accident, and the reactions of the actors and actresses were certainly subject to the director's control. Bagiński made a conscious decision that the character he played, seemingly very close to the director and representing the Black community in Poland and on stage, would not arouse sympathy or full trust among the cast and the audience. The director's impertinence makes it difficult to trust him as an arbiter of the debate and uncritically accept his vision of the world. Perhaps Bagiński undermines the authority of the persona he has created, deliberately not meeting the viewers' default expectations of a representative of a minority. He does not present himself as a humble, polite and patient agent of Black Polishness towards White colleagues, nor does he seek the sympathy of those around him. In this way, he seems to encourage the audience to reflect on the conditions that an Afro-Pole must meet in order for his experiences to be considered worthy of consideration and compassion. It is a pity, however, that he has started playing with the prejudices of White viewers by means of a sexist comment.

After the altercation, the director asks the actors to start the previously prepared reconstructions related to the identity of ruin – a term he coined for the purposes of discussions about Black Polishness, describing the uprooting and disintegration of Afro-Poles deprived of political agency and their own culture. The crew moves to the sides, leaving three chairs in the middle. They are occupied by Wiktor, Leszek and Karol. The actors begin to harass the director: they surround him and hurl racist insults and vulgarities at him. When Wiktor tries to stand up, they first hold him in place and yank

him, and then pin him to the ground. Suddenly, Bonnie, who has taken control of the meeting for a moment, intervenes in the scene and asks them to start the reconstruction again, this time ‘with kissing the cross,’ referring to the offstage conversations with the person in charge of the recollection. The actors and director, out of breath, return to their chairs and repeat the scene, and when the attackers overpower the victim, Karol orders Wiktor to kiss the cross hanging around his neck.

The director, out of breath, returns to his seat. Bonnie asks him what the identity of ruin means to him in light of the scene he has just played. Bagiński then tells us in a breaking voice about the racist violence he regularly experiences as a Black Pole: racial profiling, insults, teasing, spitting, beatings. When he was twelve, he recalls, ‘death to the nigger’ was written under his window and a swastika was drawn, and the police did not initiate an investigation. The director confesses that the wrongs done to him have made him hate White people, at one time even his closest family members. Once again, he reveals himself to the actors and the audience as a far from exemplary representative of a minority, filled with anger and resentment, and therefore an irrational and biased commentator on reality. However, the suffering that Wiktor has just recreated in the reconstruction protects his confession from being easily discredited.

In the etude entrusted to the actors, there was a highly affective reproduction of one of the acts of violence against the director. The veristic brutality of the reconstructed event seems to blur the boundaries between theatrical fiction and extra-theatrical reality. At his own request, the director gives himself into the hands of White actors playing the attackers. He is insulted and attacked in front of the participants of the meeting and the audience. The impression of the reality of the attack is intensified by the

sweat, shortness of breath and trembling voice of Wiktor, as despite the theatrical mediation, his body reacted to the simulated violence. Such a procedure can make the audience aware of the enormity of the pain experienced by Afro-Poles and justify their negative emotions towards Whites, but it can also unnecessarily reproduce violence culturally and historically linked to the Black body, as happened in the scene of Bonnie's whipping. The director's provocative behaviour before the etude leaves one with the impression that the attack scene is also an attempt to reveal the racism dormant in the participants of the meeting. The reenactment clearly unsettles and disorients the actors watching it. They smile nervously, look away, or grimace, clearly unwilling to participate in the reproduction of racist violence.

Fortunately, Bonnie momentarily relieves the tension by testifying that not everyone has had the same experiences as Wiktor. She recalls a lesson about Africa that she attended as a teenager, and the respect and curiosity she aroused among the students when she spoke about Zimbabwean society. She says that the birth of her son stopped her from returning to her homeland and her beloved parents. When she begins to explain the complicated procedures leading to attaining Polish citizenship, Wiktor suggests another reconstruction, this time with Bonnie. Karol plays her husband, and Joanna and Kornel play the officials conducting the standard check on foreigners.

The bureaucrats are haughty and suspicious. They have difficulty pronouncing the Zimbabwean woman's full name. First, they ask Bonnie and her husband for documents, then for interviews in private. The couple turn their backs on each other, Joanna asks Bonnie questions, and the men's conversation becomes inaudible. The official asks the future Polish citizen what her husband drinks in the morning and what colour his toothbrush is,

whether they plan to have children, and how often they have sex. Bonnie does not answer intimate questions, and the official informs her colleague that the husband himself does not know what colour his toothbrush is. Joanna asks the performer if she has thought about returning to her homeland, since it is warmer there than in Poland. When the officials receive almost no answers, they say goodbye to the couple and end the reconstruction. The short study, both oppressive and humorous, provides an insight into the everyday lives of foreigners applying for Polish citizenship: constant state surveillance, hostile questions, and complicated procedures. However, Wiktor argues that the concept of the identity of ruin presented in Bonnie's scene should not be limited to the experiences of Black Poles. He then asks Karolina to speak.

The actress agrees to share her own experience that fits the director's intent and begins her story, nervously clenching her hands between her thighs. When she was a freshman, seven years earlier, a friend introduced her to a boy in a Krakow club. Karolina liked the boy. They danced and drank a lot, first at a party, then at a mutual friend's apartment. Eventually, the drunk actress felt like sleeping, so the boy took care of her, took her to the bedroom and undressed her for sleep. Then he lay down next to her and started touching her body, despite her resistance, and then raped her. Karolina recounts these events, choosing her words with difficulty and gesturing frantically. After a while, she adds that she doesn't want to think that every Black man is a rapist, but she can't help it that Wiktor reminds her of that boy, because they have the same skin colour.

The director asks the actress to tell her story again, this time in the condition she was in during the rape. When Michał asks if Karolina is supposed to be drunk, Wiktor clarifies that the actress should take off her

clothes. When Karolina asks why she has to do this, he replies that it is for the purposes of therapy. Concerned, Karol wonders what the limits of this reenactment are and whether someone is supposed to rape the actress, to which the director replies that the rules from the previous etudes apply and that he himself will play the rapist. The actresses protest and emphasise that the decision to participate in the reenactment must be Karolina's, but she silences them, claiming that she can follow Wiktor's orders because she has already worked through her trauma. When she starts to undress, all the participants of the meeting except Wiktor turn away or look down. The actress remains in her underwear, but the director asks if she was wearing it then. Karolina reluctantly admits that she didn't, takes off her panties and covers her crotch with her hands. She starts repeating the words she said a moment ago, with tears in her eyes and a breaking voice, wiping her face with her hand every now and then. In her emotions, it's hard for her to remember exactly what she said, but eventually she finishes the story and asks if she can get dressed, and the director agrees. Unfortunately, the recording doesn't show what Wiktor does during the monologue as a rapist; he's probably just watching the actor. While Karolina is getting dressed, Bonnie asks for a statement on the identity of ruin from Katarzyna, and she begins to dance.

Fanon's Masks

Karolina's scene is not summed up in any way. Kasia performs a choreography based on jerking to the rhythm of reflective electronic music, and the stage lights give way to white spots cast on the dance floor by spotlights. In the semi-darkness, the rest of the actors assemble a huge model of blackface on the proscenium, resembling the mask that Radziwiłł kissed at the beginning of the performance. Suddenly, they also start

dancing, almost invisible, until they finally find each other, lie down in front of the installation and intertwine into a ball of bodies. The last sequence of the performance was probably supposed to translate the emotional states associated with the identity of ruin into the non-verbal language of theatre, to express the inexpressible and radically break off the debate that had been going on for several dozen minutes. Does a meeting of anonymous racists really bring about catharsis? The final impression suggests that the participants of the meeting did experience that, but most of the tensions built up during the performance were not released at all.

The first part of the performance is a condensed anecdote from the life of Polish nobility, in which Blackness and Whiteness are exposed as constructs with an enormous performative charge. In less than twenty minutes, Bagiński revises Poland's position in the global system of dependencies and the history of slavery, examines a semi-peripheral version of racism, and undermines mimetic representations of Blackness, prompting reflection on the possibilities and principles of presenting 'race' in Polish theatre. The show of anonymous racists is interrupted because restoring the memory of Black slaves in magnate courts and Polish connections with Blackness turns out to be too iconoclastic for one of the White participants. Because of his doubts, the announced Polish–African weddings and reconciliations do not take place. Those remembered and invented episodes could have laid the foundations of a new, multicultural community, but they do not materialise on stage. Instead, the director initiates a discussion to clarify contentious issues and resolve conflicts in the cast.

The seemingly casual and non-judgmental conversation between Wiktor and Bonnie and the actors quickly turns out to be a game precisely conducted by the director, consisting of exposing the racist beliefs of the White

participants in the meeting and confronting them with the painful experiences of the Black performers. The symbolic division into Black victims and White perpetrators is reinforced by reconstructions based on strong affects, which destabilise the presented world, momentarily blurring the boundaries of the spectacle, the show within the spectacle, and reality. The antagonistic relations between the White and Black participants of the meeting are nuanced when the director, who until then had been the Black arbiter of the debate on racism, reveals his own antipathies towards and intimate experiences of the actors, deepening the conflicts that have arisen in the group and gradually losing their trust. Thus built, the tension culminates when Wiktor asks the White actress to recount the rape committed by a Black man and takes on the role of the perpetrator.

Contrary to the director's belief, the reproduction of sexual violence then does not serve to help the actor therapeutically. It is instead Wiktor's performative confrontation with a cruel racist stereotype and the exposure of Karolina's prejudices rooted in traumatic experience. It is unclear whether her story is true, but it is made credible by the assumptions of the discussion panel – the actors' private names, spontaneity and freedom of expression, and the autobiographical nature of the reconstruction. The audience is not supplied with the tools to interpret the rape scene. They see a Black director who conventionally torments a White actor. Even if we consider the meeting of anonymous racists to be completely fictional, and Wiktor's behaviour to be conscious self-creation, his power and relations with the actors go beyond the world created in the performance. It was Bagiński, as the creator of *Black Skin, White Masks*, who decided to make the painful reproduction of rape the climax of the performance, in order to extract from the characters their most shameful and complicated racist beliefs. While recounting violence against Black people, it also resorts to violence against women –

fictional in the reenactment at the meeting of anonymous racists and symbolic in the production of the play.

The misogyny inherent in some of Bagiński's behaviours and decisions, as well as his stage porte-parole, seems to be a trap set for the director by the author of the text that was the starting point for the performance in Opole. The title of the performance was taken from the essay *Black Skin, White Masks* published in 1952 by Frantz Fanon, an outstanding psychiatrist, anti-colonial activist, and philosopher who, in his work, examines colonialism as the cause of the collective mental illness of its victims and politicises the symptoms it has developed, giving them a cultural dimension. His work is widely considered innovative, groundbreaking, and still painfully relevant, but cultural studies scholars who conduct feminist revisions of his argument show that the author consistently places men at the centre of his analyses. Furthermore, by examining the position of Blackness as the Other, he actually makes women the Other (see Yukum, 2022). In Fanon's work, women, both Black and White, are above all objects or subjects of desire, completely subordinated to the rules set by psychoanalytically understood sexuality and race relations. There is no denying that gender and 'race' strongly influence each other, as can be found in Angela Y. Davis's *Women, Race & Class* (2022). In her historical essay, the Black Feminist devotes considerable attention to accusations of rape made by White women against Black men as a tool of power, a manifestation of White supremacy and gendered racism, but her thorough and nuanced critique of this phenomenon never leads her to misogyny or the objectification of women. A reading of Fanon can remain valuable, but it should be provided with appropriate commentary and supplemented with the voices of Black women whom the psychiatrist omitted from his work. Wiktor Bagiński uses *Black Skin, White Masks* as a starting point for discussion, to outline its philosophical and

ideological context, but he clearly did not undertake a critical reading of the text, imposing on himself the limitations and blindnesses of an author of eighty years ago. Perhaps that is why Bonnie's role turns out to be marginal compared to Wiktor's – the performer perceives violence in the reenactments and sometimes comments on the events on stage, but her perspective loses significance in the face of the dominating spectacle, the growing conflict between the director and the cast.

The climactic scene of the play may seem like a symbolic revenge on the racist characters embodied by Karolina. The contractual rape of the White actor by the Black director would be, in this approach, a mirror image of Pierre's bath, during which Magdalena Radziwiłłowa objectifies the Black butler as an erotic toy. In both scenes, Blackness is closely linked to sexual violence; in one, it is completely deprived of agency, while in the other, it regains agency through an act of cruelty. The character of the director exposes the racism of the actors entrusted to him, so that the real director can expose his staged porte-parole's hatred of Whites. In *White Skin, Black Masks*, Bagiński ponders not only the realities of life of Black Poles in a White society that has still not learned the lesson of its own racism, but also whether violence can be responded to with violence. Are White Poles ready to face the hatred of Blacks born of years of systemic discrimination? What emotions do they feel when a representative of Blackness does not arouse sympathy, is not guided by humility and is not ashamed of his resentment? Are they ready to listen to him?

By posing these questions, Wiktor Bagiński examines the mechanisms and unwritten rules of representing Blackness – he not only produces them, but also considers how they can be produced.

Against Representation and Other Traps

The reenactment of the rape of a Black man on a White woman crowned both *Black Skin, White Masks* and the later Heart[19] – in the Warsaw performance, the account of the act of sexual violence against the mother of Bagiński's porte-parole was carried out using deeply psychological acting and explicit language, and the absent father/attacker was played on video by the director himself. It can be assumed that Bagiński confronts in this way the cultural scripts triggered by his 'race' and that he is entitled to do so as a Black director – his identity, clearly thematised in both performances, sanctions the implementation of a racist stereotype, which in the performance of a White director could be considered unfair and harmful. Is it truly different in the case of Bagiński's performances? What representation of Blackness emerges from his works and the director's self-creation that complements them?

The images of Black masculinity evoked by Bagiński – clearly negative, entangled in violence and resentment – may be considered bold. The director strives for ambivalent and uncomfortable representations, disregarding the fact that native Polish culture still lacks a positive and accustoming attitude to otherness. This does not mean that they should be avoided. A Black director should not be obliged to represent other Black people only in accordance with the expectations of the audience and with the greatest social benefit of the images created on stage in mind, even if he is the only Black theatre director in Poland. Or maybe he should not be obliged to represent anything at all?

The belief that Wiktor Bagiński speaks in his performances on behalf of the Black community, reinforced by the director's strong self-creation on stage

and in the media, is a trap, most likely consciously set for the audience by the artist. Bagiński knows that he is expected to speak out on the issue of Blackness and seemingly meets this expectation, but a careful analysis of *Black Skin, White Masks* shows that the director essentially represents himself only. In doing so, he seems to conclude that one, isolated (auto)biography of a Black man cannot testify to all the others. Therefore, it is difficult to consider the stage image of Wiktor Bagiński, embodying this (auto)biography in his performance, as fundamentally harmful – after all, it refers only to the character of the director, not to Black men in general. The identity of ruin, and thus semi-peripheral Blackness, explored in the performances is based on loneliness, not only of the creator's porte-parole on stage, but also of himself in the theatre environment; a loneliness that prevents any representation of the collective. It is not the representation, or rather the anti-representation of Blackness in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that requires criticism, but the means used by the director to play it out on stage.

In order to confront the racist stereotype and root it in biographical particularity, Bagiński reproduces violence against women. In the Opole performance, a White woman is presented as a potential victim of a Black rapist, and the director realises this potentiality using a theatrical machine that emotes efficiently. The actor plays her ordeal as if reliving it, without any formal mediation or guardrails. The experience of rape is reinforced by off-stage reality: the audience is fed the impression that Karolina is recounting her actual memory. The brutal reproduction of violence on stage, combined with the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and truth, can lead to (re)traumatisation – both of the actress playing in the performance and of the viewers watching it. Theatre has the resources for non-violent, non-oppressive talk about violence, but Bagiński does not use these. In his performance, anti-racist discourse is symbolically contrasted with the

#MeToo movement, and equally important phenomena unnecessarily come into conflict, instead of complementing each other. Translating violence against Black people into violence against women is a trap, even if the goal is to undermine the White status quo and create multidimensional representations or anti-representations of Blackness. Both *Black Skin, White Masks* and the later *The Heart* lack an intersectional perspective that would protect the performances from harmful practices and open them up to women's experiences and their possible representations in theatre. It is hard to ignore this lack, despite the unquestionable value of Bagiński's performances.

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Footnotes

1. *The Blacks*, directed by Zygmunt Hübner premiered at the Teatr Ateneum in Warsaw on 2 December 1961.
2. The Polish word ‘murzyn’ (largely equivalent to the English ‘negro’) and its derivatives are currently considered racist — their pejorative connotations were confirmed by the Polish Language Council in 2020 under the influence of a petition submitted by the Black is Polish collective. In this article, I use the English word ‘negro’ only as a historical quotation, citing the statements of other people, most often from the time when a different language norm was in force.
3. There is no consensus among researchers on the issue of writing ‘Blackness’ and ‘Whiteness’ in upper- or lowercase letters, e.g. Audre Lorde in her texts considers capital letters to be affirming Black identity (this spelling has been preserved in Polish translations), and Emma Dabiri advocates lower case letters so that Black communities are not made an exception and not isolated. Polish publications are dominated by lowercase spellings, and uppercase letters are used by Christian Kobluk, Monika Bobako, and the Black is Polish activist collective, among others. It is worth noting, however, that the various decisions regarding spellings usually do not have racist overtones, and most often result from different interpretations of these two concepts. In this article, I have used ‘White’ and ‘Black’ to refer to cultural and ethnic identity and ‘white’ and ‘black’ to refer to colour, analogously to the capitalisation of such words as ‘East/east’ and ‘West/west.’
4. The master’s thesis was written under the supervision of Dr Weronika Szczawińska and was defended at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw in March 2024.
5. *Dziady*, directed by Radosław Rychcik at Teatr Nowy in Poznań, premiere on 22 March 2014; recording for TVP Kultura, directed by Józef Kowalewski, broadcast on 31 October 2014.
6. *W pustyni i w puszczy. Z Sienkiewicza i innych* (In Desert and Wilderness. From Sienkiewicz and from Others), directed by Bartosz Frąckowiak, Teatr Dramatyczny in Wałbrzych, premiere June 11, 2011; undated theatre recording by Black Cat Studio Pro.
7. *The Blacks*, directed by Iga Gańczarczyk, Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz, premiere 17 January 2015; undated recording of the show.
8. *Black Skin, White Masks*, directed by Wiktor Bagiński at the Teatr im. Jana Kochanowskiego in Opole, premiere 8 November 2019; undated recording of the performance.
9. *The Heart* (*Serce*), directed by Wiktor Bagiński, TR Warszawa, premiere 5 March 2021.
10. Cf. ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’
11. Cf. ‘Blackness is and can be a network of strategies for self-determination and radical imagining of new social relations.’
12. See Wright, 2004.
13. See Dabiri, 2021.

14. A term coined by the American sociologist and historian Immanuel Wallerstein, meaning a spatial entity that develops over time, encompassing various political and cultural units, and characterised by internal dynamics of economic and social dependencies. See Wallerstein, 2007.
15. Active studies on Polish Whiteness are currently being conducted by culture expert Monika Bobako, see Bobako, 2020.
16. Oliwia Bosomtwe writes about Wiktor Bagiński in the context of the experience of Polish Blackness in her book *Jak biały człowiek. Opowieść o Polakach i innych* (Like a White Man. A Story of Poles and Others), 2024.
17. *Der Steppenwolf*, directed by Wiktor Bagiński (Ahmad Ali), Theater Freiburg, premiere June 23, 2023.
18. All quotes from this performance are based on a transcription of the recording.
19. It is worth noting that the topic of rape and its reproduction was also the axis of the play *Othello*, presented by Wiktor Bagiński at the 9th Forum of Young Directors in Kraków, even before *Black Skins…* and *The Heart*, See Kwaśniewska, 2020.

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/ TRAPS OF REPRESENTATION

My Body, My Rules. ‘Carte noire nommée désir’ by Rébecca Chaillon in the Context of French Colonial History and Culture

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The article proposes an analysis of the performance *Carte noire nommée désir* (*A Black Card Named Desire*) by the Afro-French artist Rébecca Chaillon and situates it both in the sociohistorical context of France and in the intersectional theories of such scholars as Elsa Dorlin, Sander L. Gilman and Patricia Hill Collins. It demonstrates how Rébecca Chaillon highlights the overlap of oppressive systems, such as racism, sexism and heterosexism, and uses her own body to dismantle sexist and racist clichés. In her performance the body becomes not only a topic, but also a tool in the fight of black French women for their subjectivity and right to self-determination. The article also draws attention to other black French theatre directors and choreographers whose artistic works have been noticed on the French stage in the last 15 years. This permits the author to consider an emergence of a new type of spectacle of blackness in which race is not an ideological category (biological and unchanging) as it was in the case of the colonial spectacle, but a political and identity category (referring to a common history and experience of discrimination).

Keywords: postcolonial theater; blackness; Chaillon; intersectionality; race

The most hotly debated event at the 2023 Avignon Theatre Festival was

Carte Noire nommée désir (*A Black Card Named Desire*) by Rébecca Chaillon, a black director of Martinican origin. The performance, which addresses stereotypes about black women and their place in French society, provoked from the festival audience violent reactions which were considered racist; the dispute moved from the theatre to the streets and social media, and the festival organisers issued a statement taking the artist's side[1]. Six months after the Avignon screening, the work was presented at one of the most important French theatres: the Parisian national Théâtre de l'Odéon, where it achieved great success.

The staging at the Odéon is in this case a gesture of symbolic significance. *A Black Card…*premiered four years ago, and the play has been presented several times at the Mc93 Bobigny near Paris[2]. This is a theatre in the suburbs, where combining activism and art is a frequent curatorial strategy these days. Yet at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, performances as committed, provocative and uncompromising as *A Black Card…* are rarely seen. This venue generally respects the universalist ideal, whereas Chaillon's play focuses on a French minority experience. The performers, unconstrained by propriety, express their rage, their experience of exclusion, and loudly articulate their own right to self-determination. The show at the Odéon not only builds Chaillon's stature as a director, allowing her onto the mainstream artistic circuit, but above all presents the importance of the subject matter – the exclusion of black women, and a double exclusion at that – as black women and as women.

In this essay, I will refer to the history and culture of colonial France, as well as to historians and philosophers who have taken up the subject of race and gender, to show how the body becomes a space of the political in *A Black Card…*– a terrain of struggle for the right to self-definition, to agency, to be

seen and listened to. How does Rébecca Chaillon try to break the colonial and patriarchal bonds? And by exposing differences, is she not creating a new spectacle, no longer race understood as an ideological category (referring to supposedly innate and immutable traits), but a political and identity category (referring to a shared history and experience of discrimination)? In other words, are we not dealing with a new type of representation of blackness – a spectacle of racialisation? This is the word that is commonly used in France: a racialised person is a person subjected to discrimination because of the colour of their skin.

Frantz Fanon, the father of postcolonial studies, wrote in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* that the experience of being black is subordinated to the white gaze, which crushes the black person with its weight, enslaves the appearance, making 'the Black no longer black, but rather black in relation to the White' (2020, p. 121). As a result, 'the coloured person encounters difficulties in developing a schema of his body. Knowledge of the body is only negation. It is a knowledge in the third person. There is an atmosphere of uncertainty around the body' (p. 122). In Fanon's analysis, the gaze appears as an oppressive gesture, alienating the black body, because it defines the filter through which the black subject looks at themself and evaluates themself. How to reflect this appropriating gaze of the white man, to take over the gesture of violence, and liberate the body? This question determines Rébecca Chaillon's artistic path. 'I reclaim violence,' says the director, 'I make it mine, I exercise power over it, filtering and sublimating it' (2018, p. 21).

The artist points this out at the very beginning of *A Black Card…*: in the foyer, where the audience is waiting for the performance, an offstage voice invites all those who are Afro-American, non-heteronormative or transsexual

to take comfortable seats on sofas at the back of the stage; the rest of the audience is asked to take traditional seats in the audience, set up on the other side of the stage, on the principle of reflection. This solution deprives the white audience of their sense of self-confidence and puts them in a situation in which they feel watched. At the same time, allies are gained: the viewers sitting on the sofas become co-protagonists of the performance. The actors, performing under their own names and surnames and recalling their own experiences, speak out on their own cases. What is more, they formulate accusations from the safe position of the victim, which makes it impossible to offer criticism without risking being accused of racism. White viewers are thus deprived not only of the protection of theatrical illusion, but also of the possibility of reaction and defense, which, as the reception of the performance in Avignon showed, can provoke resistance and anger. In three of the five performances performed, white viewers showed the actresses the middle finger, shouted that they were at home, that the performance was a 'denial of democracy' (see Magnaudeix, 2023). In turn, Eric Zemour, the right-wing presidential candidate, and the right-wing media cited the division into two audiences as an example of a new form of apartheid[3].

Meanwhile, the entire performance is essentially a subversive reversal of the balance of power. Its very title suggests this. *A Black Card…* was an advertising slogan used in the 1990s by a corporation producing Carte Noire coffee, popular in France (besides, coffee was one of the main colonial goods). In Polish, the performance could therefore be titled *Coffee called Desire*. It can also be read as a play on the term *carte blanche*, which means the possibility of acting freely in a certain area. In the performance, black female performers gave themselves a kind of *carte noire* in expressing the socio-cultural situation of black French women, and in liberating themselves from the white male gaze that has subjugated the black female body since

colonial times. Male and female black bodies have been subject to different stereotyping. In the case of women, it was primarily associated with brutal eroticisation.

As the American cultural historian Sander L. Gilman writes, black skin has been associated with lust since the Middle Ages (1985, p. 79). Until the 19th century, however, painting and literature eroticised black women in a gentle way in creating their virtual image. The 19th century made this idea a reality through exhibitions available to the general public, where naked or semi-naked people were presented under the guise of science. Saartjie Baartman is considered to be one of the first black women to be publicly displayed in such a way, presented as the Hottentot Venus (Hottentots were the Khoekhoe people in the colonial period)[4].

She was presented first in London, then in Paris in 1810 and 1815, as an example of a different body, a departure from the norm – Baartman was characterised by steatopygia and hypertrophy of the labia minora, once called ‘the Hottentot apron’, because this feature was attributed to women of the Khoekhoe and Sān peoples (referred to in colonial times as ‘Bushmen’). Georges Cuvier, zoologist and founder of palaeontology, included drawings of her body in his *Natural History of Mammals* in 1815 as an example of a state between animal and human. Cuvier also dissected Baartman's body, carefully analysing the Hottentot apron that she had hidden from him during her life. The woman’s body was reproduced in a wax cast, body parts, including the genitals, were preserved, the skeleton was cleaned and the whole specimen was presented at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. (In 1937 it was moved to the newly established Museum of Man, where it was part of the permanent exhibition until the 1970s.)[5]

Baartman's body was presented in life and after death as an example of a

primitive and pathological body. As the French philosopher, Elsa Dorlin, emphasises in her book *La Matrice de la Race. Généalogie Sexuelle et Coloniale de la Nation Française*, the ideologisation of colonial domination was based on medical categories of health and disease – the same ones that theorised about sexual difference (Dorlin, 2009). In the 17th century, the need grew in the colonies to recognise differences between peoples (previously explained by religion, morality, customs, climate) as innate (ibid.). According to the philosopher, this became possible thanks to the concept of temperament, which had been used to justify the superiority of men over women since antiquity: the female temperament, cold and moist, is worse, and even pathological, compared to the male temperament – warm and dry. Prostitutes and lesbians were treated as exceptions to the rule; as overly masculinised, they served to construct the norm.

In the 18th century, the 'medical' conceptualisation of sexual difference became a theoretical vehicle for scientists of racial variety: it triggered the process of naturalisation of anthropological differences, which lay at the basis of the 19th-century ideology of race (for example, according to Linnaeus, Africans were phlegmatic, with a feminine temperament, and therefore abnormal, inferior[6]). Although the female body (the maternal, white and healthy body) was already beginning to be associated with the body of the French nation, valorising its reproductive and maternal potential[7], femininity itself was still perceived in opposition to masculinity and associated with, among other things, impulsiveness, irrationality, lack of self-control and with a sexuality that easily veers into pathology, as exemplified by prostitutes (Gilman, 1985, p. 107; Mosse, 1985; Mosse, 1999). Black women, just like prostitutes, were attributed with pathological sexuality – exuberant, uncontrolled and in this sense morbid – which was presented as evidence of their primitivism (a lower stage of development,

closer to nature and animality). This allowed for depriving black women of the symbolic benefits resulting from the role assigned to women, of mothers, wives, guardians of the hearth, and also for legitimising colonial rapes (Dorlin, 2009, p. 13). As Winthrop Jordan, who studied the attitudes of white people towards blacks in the period 1550–1812, wrote:

> By calling the black woman fiery, [men] provided themselves with the best possible justification for their own passions. The Negro woman's hotness not only logically explained the white man's infidelity, but, more importantly, it shifted the responsibility from him to her. If she was so wanton — well, one could hardly blame a man for giving in to something he had no chance of winning. Moreover, this image of the Negro woman was consistent with the ancient association of hot climates with sexual activity (Jordan, 1968, p. 15).

Confirmation of the hypersexuality of black women was sought in their physiology, which can already be seen in the texts of 18th-century British travellers to southern Africa, fascinated by the physical structure of women of the Khoekhoe and Sān peoples (Gilman, 1985, pp. 83-85). In the person of Baartman, this fascination transformed into an iconic image of erotic excitement. Under ethnographic and medical pretexts, not only could Cuvier draw Baartman naked, but so too could others, sometimes in an almost pornographic way, in an era when corporeality was hidden from view and sexuality was taboo (Peiretti-Courtis, 2019, pp. 257–266). The preserved paintings show Saartjie Baartman in the image of Venus Kallipygos: almost naked, with wide hips and shapely, ample buttocks. In the exhibitions, the woman was dressed in body-tight clothes, similar in colour to her skin, so as

to give the impression of nudity. The nickname ‘Hottentot Venus’ itself is a combination of a symbol of beauty and eroticism with exoticism, or even barbarism, because that is what the Khoekhoe people were associated with at the time. Saartjie Baartman appeared as wild, unfeminine and exciting at the same time.

Anna Wieczorkiewicz emphasises this complexity and ambiguity of Baartman's image in the article ‘The Second Life of Saartjie Baartman’, pointing out that the iconic image of erotic fascination and colonial exploitation, which functions today in the collective memory of the Hottentot Venus, is too unambiguous. According to the researcher, this is the effect of the 20th-century (feminist, anthropological or sociological) ideologisation of her history, which was regularly invoked because it ‘connoted certain expressive meanings, allowing the symbolic charge to be combined with the emotional’ (2012, p. 251). Meanwhile, even her blackness was not ‘objective’ at the beginning of the 19th century, because the Khoekhoe people were not yet automatically perceived as black (the above-mentioned Linnaeus instead classified them as a group separate from the African peoples).

Nevertheless, it is precisely as a symbol of racist and sexist objectification that Baartman has become the subject of many works of visual and performing arts in recent decades. In France, she has been referred to on stage by Bintou Dembelé in the performance *Z.H.* (2014), which directly referred to the phenomenon of the human zoo (*zoo humains* in French), as well as Latifa Labissi in *Self portrait Camouflage* (2006) and Chantal Loial in *On t’appelle Venus* (2015). In *Carte noire…* Rébecca Chaillon evokes her image in a scene in which she smokes a joint naked — Baartman’s attribute on stage, in posters advertising shows, and in other illustrations at the time was precisely a type of cigarette. The Hottentot Venus easily submits to

artistic practices of restoring dignity both to herself and to what she represents today: the black woman reduced to an erotic object.

Even if the reception of Baartman's exposed body was not limited to erotic fascination, it is a fact that in the 19th century nudity effectively broke through the fear of otherness and ethical dilemmas about the right to dignity, disrupting the norms of European sociality, which required women's bodies to be hidden. Under the pretext of being scientific, it became the norm at colonial or universal exhibitions (which featured exotic pavilions), which became popular in the second half of the 19th century. They were organised in Amsterdam (1883), Paris (1889, 1900), Barcelona (1896), Brussels and Vienna (1897), Hamburg (1907) and other European cities, as well as in Chicago (1893), St Louis (1904) and Osaka (1903). In this type of colonial spectacle, the distance between the presented and the spectators that characterised the shows of the beginning of the century was minimised (Bancel; Blanchard, 2019, pp. 409–410). African women (and, to a lesser extent, Indonesian women) appeared naked or semi-naked, in full view, becoming objects of a desire that could be realistically satisfied. The availability of their naked bodies, together with the myth of their sexual openness, were used in colonial propaganda, tempting future settlers with the promise of commitment-free sexual adventures.

These fantasies were reinforced by interracial pornography, which had been developing since the mid-19th century and additionally subjected naked bodies to sexist and racist domination (Boittin, Taraud, 2019, p. 399). In the interwar period, the book *L'Art d'aimer aux Colonies* (1927) became particularly popular. It contained sixteen photographs of women, naked and in erotic positions. They were accompanied by descriptions in which the author informed readers about sexual practices in individual colonies, giving

advice on how to behave and what to avoid. The book was translated into many languages, and successive editions sold out at lightning speed. The 1920s were the apogee of colonial culture in France. Numerous illustrated journals published photographs and articles depicting the lives of black people in the colonies, and adult novels described African or Antillean women as predatory females subordinated to sexual desire, and therefore easily tamed. Books and games for children and young people were also published, as well as postcards (often featuring naked women). The huge international colonial exhibition in Paris (specifically in Vincennes, near Paris) was visited by eight million people in 1931 (thirty-three million tickets were sold, as many people returned to the exhibition several times) (Bancel; Blanchard, 2019, p. 410; also: Coutelet, 2019, pp. 441–450). Western metropolises were also visited by private groups presenting 'exotic' villages. It was also a time of great dance performances – a new kind of colonial spectacle – such as *Nu, Nu… Nunette* (at the Concert Mayol, 1926), *Black Birds* (at the Ambassadeurs, 1926), *Black Flowers* (at the Porte-Saint-Martin, 1930) or *Revue Nègre* (at the Champs-Elysées, 1925 and the Folies-Bergère, 1926) with Josephine Baker hailed as the 'queen of the colonies'. As Lisa Gail Collins, an American art historian, points out:

> Baartman and Baker are, surprisingly, the two black women who appear undressed the most often in the archives of Western visual culture. The 'Hottentot Venus' and the 'Black Venus' were therefore the women whose bodies were most fetishised by Europeans. […] Both were supposed to be embodiments of exoticism and eroticism, and both were paid to prove their supposed otherness (2002, p. 112).

Baker, dressed in a banana skirt, entered the stage on all fours, jumped on the stage prop branches, moved her hips, made 'lewd' movements, shaking her buttocks. Reviewers compared her to an agile monkey, gazelle or panther, ascribing to her no longer the early-19th century notions of barbarism, but a passionate, wild sexuality (Bancel; Blanchard, 2019, pp. 415–416). At the same time, dancing the Charleston, Baker symbolised modernity, breaking the physical taboo and liberating the body. For the first time, a black woman became an independent star imposing her physicality and her own movement on the metropolis and the artistic community. However, this could only happen on the principles defined by the dominant, white and male gaze. Baker played it skilfully, creating an exotic and sensual aura around herself. Unlike Baartman, she had an influence on her own life; she was buried with military honours in Monaco, and in 2021 her remains were transferred to the Panthéon in Paris – the mausoleum of distinguished French women and men.

The medical categories of healthy/sick thus served to differentiate and naturalise power relations. They made it possible to ideologise colonial domination, while at the same time legitimising public nudity, making it a characteristic feature of colonial culture that exoticised and eroticised the black female body. It is to this culture that Rébecca Chaillon refers. Already in the very first scene of *A Black Card Named Desire*, the director compulsively, in an increasingly frenetic gesture, washes the floor with a detergent. First, she uses a cloth, and then her clothes, which she removes one by one, until she is completely naked. This initial sequence is long, devoid of lighting effects, of words, and without a soundtrack. There is nothing aesthetic about it. It is raw, simple, real, like the body of Chaillon herself, who is the only actress to function on stage naked from the

beginning to the end of the performance. Her full body is exposed in all its reality and organicity — lushness, abundance of folds, and sweat. The image of the stereotypical erotic icon is also disarmed by her face, deformed by white lenses and whitened lips. We see a body that undermines not only colonial clichés of the black female body, but also the female body in general, not fitting into the perfect frame imposed by the rulers of the contemporary iconosphere.

In the next scene, the actress washes Chaillon's body and begins to braid her hair, attaching long, rope-like extensions to it. More actresses join them, creating one braid out of many – so large and heavy that Chaillon will need a hospital IV pole (on which to hang the braid) to be able to move around the stage. In the finale of the performance, the braids woven at the beginning are attached to an installation of ropes, suspended high above, creating the crown of a tree, the trunk of which is the directo's body. One of the actresses enters this 'crown', naked, defenceless, fragile, as if seeking shelter there. The other women sit around the trunk, creating a community of women – mothers, daughters – connected by the experience of violence stemming from the colonial past. Chaillon assumes the position of a guardian of their dignity. The black body, long reduced to a pure object of desire, objectified and discriminated against, appears here as the Tree of Life; the Palaeolithic Venus, Mother Earth, a powerful force that carries a promise of renewal. The final image imposes itself on the audience in all its metaphorical and visual power.

The casting off of erotic clichés and the reclaiming of the body also takes place in the performance through words. After the first long sequence, when the performers weave a braid from Chaillon's hair, the director reads small ads from a magazine, all similar: a white man seeks a partner, preferably a

black one, with specific physical conditions, which reveals the erotic ideas about the black female body that still function in French society. The performers respond to this white male voice with their own ads: one by one they introduce themselves by name as black women, mostly homosexual, who are looking for partners (because they can, but do not have to), and ask (because they want to, but do not have to) people who meet their criteria to leave a message in the theatre café. The actors appear in this scene as a group, and at the same time as independent individuals, united by their experience of functioning outside the norm established on racist, binary, sexist and heterosexual principles. As Chaillon says, 'I weave my Creole memories into French, narrating bulimically the violence in the world of a fat young black bisexual woman from Picardy.' In this statement, the director points to the overlapping experiences of violence within her individual identity and the impossibility of separating them into single experiences. In the performance itself, discrimination based on race is also not treated monolithically, but intersectionally, together with discrimination based not only on gender (which, as Dorlin shows, are genetically linked) but also on sexual orientation and obesity. We are dealing here with a 'specific matrix of domination', to use the formulation of the American feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2009, 1st edition 1990), who is one of the pioneers of the theory of intersectionality. In her research, 'The term matrix of domination describes the overall societal organisation within which different forms of oppression arise, develop, and intersect' (ibid., p. 227).

After a long, silent introduction, the announcement scene in *A Black Card…* brings to life the audience, evoking laughter that compromises the sexist stereotype and subversively intercepts it. The 'scatological' meal scene functions similarly in the play, in which feelings of humiliation are transformed into an absurd wordplay on 'poop', evoking bursts of laughter

on stage and in the audience. This begins with a sequence that exposes (through mocking and hyperbolising the phrases of white employers) the white hypocrisy hidden in praises that make black women feel like ‘pieces of shit’.

The scene of a game of charades between two teams of cleaners is also conducted in a comic tone. This game is an ‘fun’. The slogans shown, often in a comical manner, include: *Bounty* (the word means someone who is black on the outside but white on the inside), *black friend* (a term referring to the sentence: ‘I am not a racist, I have a black friend’), *Mediterranean syndrome* (the belief that people of African descent exaggerate their ailments, which is why they are harder to treat), *white tears* (these are tears of white people suffering from revealing privileges they were not aware of before) … ‘You don't know what this is?’ asks the MC, ‘Well, check it out!’ The entries also include Saartjie Baartman, a wet nurse, the Brazilian Butt Lift, Josephine Baker and others. Although everyone tries to guess the riddles, the minority among the audience are in the lead. Once again, we feel that the balance of power has been reversed.

In Chaillon’s performance, it is not only white French society that is lambasted by the actors. Its black part is criticised for, among other things, their constant comparisons to whites, their patriarchal approach to women, and for skin lightening. The very beginning can be interpreted in this context: in the first scene, Chaillon is smeared white, in white clothes, which she slowly takes off; the white paint washed off her by another actor, as if to cleanse her body of ‘whiteness’. In one of the later scenes, coffee is served in excess, it spills out of cups, even gushes onto the stage. The performer immerses herself in whipped cream, makes hip movements which simulate a sexual act, pours milk into another woman's open mouth. The exposure and

interception of stereotypes is most often done in an exaggerated, grotesque way. However, there are moments of calm in the performance, subtle, even melancholic, such as the scene of the Caribbean *zouk*, danced and sung to the music played on the harp by actor Makeda Monnet, and the poetry scene, as well as the final image of the feminine 'tree'. They also challenge stereotypes, both of the sexually objectified black woman and the excessively angry one. Also moving is the text by Fatou Siba, an actor who withdrew from the performance after the events in Avignon. It was she who had had her wrist sprained by an audience member, whom another had shoved in the arm. During the day, when the actress was walking with her little son, a man ran up to her, shouting that this was *his* home where he was, and would file a complaint with the festival management. After the festival organisers published the statement in support of the artists, a wave of hatred poured out on social media. Traditional media also circulated photos of Fatou Siba with child dolls impaled on a stick attached to her chest and back, as if piercing her. The scene, which depicted a black nanny overburdened with childcare and commented on the statements of the white women who employed her, served as evidence of the murderous intentions of black artists. Éric Zemmour, a right-wing candidate in the 2023 presidential election, wrote, among other things, about the 'desire to genocide whites, starting with their children', about the new apartheid that can be seen in the division of an audience into two groups[8]. Two hundred posters against the performance appeared on the streets of Avignon. The case was commented on by right-wing mainstream media, including CNews, Vincent Bolloré's popular television channel. Fatou Siba was even singled out in her hometown.

Chaillon speaks openly about the reasons for the actor's absence, announcing a guest performance by black artists who, in a gesture of

solidarity, read part of Fatou Siba's text at the Odéon (each evening it was a different person, including writer Léonora Miano, journalist Rokyaha Diallo, professor Maboula Soumahoro, and film director Alice Diop). In this way, Fatou Siba's absence took on a symbolic dimension, and the events in Avignon were inscribed into the performance, confirming their relevance.

Does the fact that the actors focus on their blackness mean that we are dealing with a new display of blackness, or more precisely, a play about racialisation? As I wrote in my previous article in the 'Afro-peanicity' series, in France the word 'race' does not function in public discourse; it was even removed from Article One of the French Constitution, which talks about discrimination based on, among other things, origin or gender (Semenowicz, 2023). While the word 'race' refers to racist ideology, 'racialisation' points to race as 'a social construct, not a biological reality' (Fassin, 2012, p. 155). It is a concept that emphasises the cultural and social process of shaping race, accentuating the mechanisms that make people behave as if a biological race existed.

The question about a new kind of spectacle of blackness is worth asking, especially since many other directors and choreographers of the French African diaspora have appeared on the French stage deconstructing colonial fantasies about the female body. They are united by the subject matter and the use of body language. One of the most famous artists on the French stage today is Bintou Dembélé, a choreographer of Senegalese roots, the author of the aforementioned show *Zoo Humains.* In S/T/R/A/T/E/S (2016), built from broken sequences, she clashes together two urban dances that are examples of urban 'movements' of resistance against racism — the soft movement of hip hop and the aggressive expression of *krumping*. To a polyphony of jazz, blues and African sounds played and sung live, two

dancers, first one after the other and then together, move between yesterday and today, between tension and relief, rage and tenderness, revealing the body as a carrier of memory and a tool of liberation.

In 2019, Dembélé choreographed Jean-Philippe Rameau's opera *Les Indes Galantes* at the Opéra Bastille in Paris. Director Clément Cogitore read the French Baroque masterpiece in the context of European attitudes towards other peoples, and the choreographer introduced street and club dances such as voguing, house, break and flexing to the stage of the national opera. The staging celebrated the 350th anniversary of the Opéra national de Paris. Another example is the Ivorian Nadia Beugré, who combines themes of black and queer identity in her choreographic practice, presenting her performances at renowned European festivals; from the younger generation, the Afro-Brazilian Ana Pi, who lives and works in France; or Eva Doumbia in the theatrical field. By exposing their bodies, do not actresses, performers and dancers display their own uniqueness? In one of the scenes of *A Black Card…*, the performer, with a loudspeaker in her hand playing Aya Nakamura's hit song *Pookie*, invites people sitting on sofas to dance, clap, sing. Do they not feel like they are once again being put on display, to expose their differences?

In all the above-mentioned performances, although in different ways, the body is at the centre of the performance — the viewer's gaze is not limited to it, however. It is not the physical difference that is the subject here, but the social inequalities and historical injustices related to the black female body, which over the centuries was supposed to work, feed white children with its milk, reproduce slaves for work, constitute entertainment. A body disembodied, stigmatised and silenced, deprived even of the right to self-defence, as Elsa Dorlin writes in her book *Se défendre* (2017), the

completely alienated body has now become a tool for exorcising the past and restoring dignity. It serves to empower and regain agency over its own representation. The black female directors and choreographers mentioned above, in Lisa Gail Collins' words describing the work of African-American female visual artists:

> … allow the audience to reflect on the economies of the body and, equally importantly, propose a visual language that is still focused on the legacy of the past, but that gives the black body the possibility of defining its presence for itself (2002, p. 122).

In *A Black Card…* the body functions as an archive of cultural memory, but also as a tool for producing knowledge, as a space for critical, intersectional exploration, an engine of creation and transgression. Rébecca Chaillon reverses the traditional balance of power, imposes her black and female perspective on the white audience, intercepts stereotypes through laughter, making the white audience feel defenceless, ashamed or ridiculed. It is she who defines herself in relation to blackness, not the other way around. What is more, Chaillon does not flaunt suffering, does not evoke sympathy in the white audience that might allow them to feel 'better'. The director's strategy is harder to accept, because it uses various forms of comedy, kitsch, grotesque, irony, parody, and throws difficult experiences straight in the faces of the white audience. Some French reviewers have criticised the play for this confrontational approach, and even for its literalism and the patronising tone of the text (see e.g. Commeaux, 2023).

It is indeed difficult to find, in Chaillon's performance, analyses of the processes shaping racism or considerations of the epistemology of feminism,

although race clearly appears here as a cultural and social construct. However, what this is, is an emotional manifesto, based mainly on simple language, affective and visual impact, and the actors' own experiences. Their conviction about the rightness and significance of what they are doing and what they are saying gives their stage actions performative power. The actresses formulate their experiences in a way independent of the acceptance of the white and patriarchal rulers of the norm, in spite of universality, which values what is general but also ambiguous (open to a multitude of interpretations) and considers as irrelevant that which concerns too narrow a group of people. As I wrote in the article 'From Universality to Diversity', universality is no longer an idea defining the socio-cultural policy of the French state, or at least universalism in the old, hegemonising, unifying sense (Semenowicz, 2023). There is a dispute about its redefinition: as Aimé Césaire wrote almost eighty years ago, 'My conception of the universal contains the richness of everything that is individual, the richness of all particularisms. It is the deepening and coexistence of everything that is particular' (Césaire, 1956). Understood in this way, the new universality is often met with accusations of immigrants and their children creating closed communities ('communitarianism'), and thus dividing the French Republic. The presentation at the Odéon is an acknowledgment that even a minority part of French society, speaking about experiences inaccessible to white men and women, expressing itself directly, in its own aesthetic language, has the right to its representation in a national institution. This example clearly shows how aesthetics and politics are related. In the view of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, politics:

> … consists in reconfiguring the division of the sensual that defines what is common to a given community, in introducing new subjects

> and objects there, in making visible what was not visible, and in recognising as speaking beings those who were perceived as noisy animals (2007, p. 25).

A show in a national, mainstream institution allows us to draw attention to particularisms in opposition to totalising, normative narratives, to introduce a minority into the sphere of visibility and audibility. Of course, we can see in it evidence of protest taken over by consumer culture and capitalism. A theatrical performance is, after all, a product, which also becomes the subject it addresses – in this case, resistance, exclusion, black identity increasingly associated with the avant-garde and the independent. Only in this sense could we say that we are dealing with a new spectacle of racialisation — with a subject and artistic language assigned to it — entering the main European stages; a Debordian image-commodity, desired (because we see in it the authenticity we long for) and passively consumed (Debord, 2006).

However, everything depends on the position from which we look. Resistance in the world of capitalism and consumption will always be intercepted, which is why we have to be vigilant and reinvent it all the time. In my opinion, the most important thing today is that *A Black Card…* becomes a source of power for its actors, symbolised by the last image of the black female body: beautiful, strong and independent; freed from the colonial past, from the phantasms associated with it and from everyday, humiliating social practices. As if we heard the words ‘this is my body, which I will not allow to be colonised, submitting to the oppression of someone else’s gaze and someone else’s assessment’ (Krakowska, Duniec, 2014, p. 205). The performance serves their cause, while colonial performances served to entertain the white audience. For black women, *A Black Card…* is

a personal form of expression, not just aesthetics or an image. It is an expression of their being in the world. The actresses talk about experiences with which some of the French audience can identify today, even if it is a smaller part. The theatre audience in France is no longer homogeneously white. This is the result of changes taking place in the socio-cultural policy of France, which has begun to give voice to previously marginalised groups, to research and speak out about their long-repressed colonial past (Semenowicz, 2023).

Translated by Mark Hoogslag & Tim Brombley

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Footnotes

1. The statement appeared in the news on the festival's website, on its Facebook profile and was circulated to the French press.
2. Mc93 Bobigny is not located in the administrative area of Paris, but it is served by the Paris Métro, so, in practice, it is referred to as a theatre in Paris.
3. Éric Zemmour's post on his X profile: https://twitter.com/ZemmourEric/status/1684184220099309569 [accessed: 20.02.2024].
4. Exotic people were also shown in the 16th–18th centuries. However, these shows were not public. Saartjie Baartman's performances gave such shows a new dynamic. See Bancel; Blanchard, 2019, p. 407.
5. For more on the history of Saartije Baartman, see Wieczorkiewicz, 2011, pp. 253-273; Wieczorkiewicz, 2012, pp. 233-252.
6. According to Linnaeus, Europeans are sanguine, Asians melancholic, Americans choleric. To these four main groups Linnaeus added a fifth, in which he included all the 'monsters' including the Hottentots. See Dorlin, 2009, p. 229.
7. As Elsa Dorlin writes, in the 18th century, people began to realise that the population was decreasing, which influenced the change in attitudes towards the female body. It became a point of reference for this emerging idea of the nation: it appeared as the maternal body. This was connected with taking control over female reproduction and sexuality, Dorlin, 2009.
8. Éric Zemmour's post on his X profile: https://twitter.com/ZemmourEric/status/1684184220099309569 [accessed: 20.02.2024].

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/ TRAPS OF REPRESENTATION

The Mystery Is Looking

Alicja Żebrowska’s Art and Poland’s Political Transition

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The text was written in response to Alicja Żebrowska’s exhibition *The Mystery Is Looking: Works from the Transition Period* (*Tajemnica patrzy. Prace z czasu transformacji*) curated by Jakub Banasiak at the Gdansk City Gallery in 2024. The artist’s early works were presented as ‘the art of the new spirituality’. Her classic works belonging to the canon of feminist and critical art have been almost completely omitted. Thus, the experience of systemic transformation recorded in Żebrowska’s art was presented as a mystical mystery. By recalling interpretations of the artist’s works from the 1990s and 2000s, tracing how the feminist discourse was constituted in Polish art after 1989, as well as the changing views of the artist herself, the author tries to see what the mystery understood in this way actually hides. With the help of the non-representational theory, she proposes a reading of Żebrowska’s art that opens up the possibility of grasping transformation as an experience, and not only as images and meanings superimposed on it one by one.

Keywords: feminist art; feminism; transition; representation; obscenity

‘The Mystery Is Looking: Works from the Transition Period’,[1] an exhibition of work by Alicja Żebrowska curated by Jakub Banasiak, opened in March 2024 at the Gdańsk City Gallery, Poland. The show brought together a selection of little-known works of an artist considered one of the foremost exponents of

Polish critical and feminist art. In his curator's statement, Jakub Banasiak notes,

> The Transition tends to be discussed in social, political and economic terms. The title of this exhibition signals a different view: approaching the Transition as a period of the great unknown, an in-between state, an interregnum when the old order no longer exists but a new one hasn't yet emerged (Banasiak, 2024).

Banasiak contends that taking this view of Poland's Transition entails acknowledging new aspects of the context of Żebrowska's work. By excluding the artist's most famous works, such as *Original Sin* (1994) or *When the Other Becomes One's Own* (1999), and highlighting early work that is virtually never seen (with the exception of the eponymous video *The Mystery Is Looking* and a photograph from the series 'Onone'), the curator states he wants to '[…] place her body of work in a broader context: the art of the new spirituality from the Transition era' (Banasiak, 2024). He explains,

> At the core of the exhibition are works from the shows in Kraków (1986), Vienna (1992) and Orońsko (1992) in addition to videos made between 1992 and 1995. Most of these works were never exhibited again and eventually forgotten, as only a scattering of videos from the artist's extensive output were selected for public display, and they were read as 'feminist' and 'critical' in keeping with the hegemonic discourses of the history of the Transition-period art. Without nullifying these readings, this exhibition seeks to restore Żebrowska's early work to its historical context and bring

it in line with the artist's intentions (ibid.).

Strikingly, in the curator's view, it is not Żebrowska's art that necessities a new perspective on Poland's Transition, but it is a new perspective on the Transition experience that demands a restoration of a historical rather than feminist and critical context of the artist's work. Surprisingly, however, in order to present the Transition as a period of 'the great unknown' in which the 'art of the new spirituality' flourished, the curator does not offer a new reading of Żebrowska's most familiar works – he just leaves them out from his selection.

Intrigued by this ommission and its implications for thinking about the history of the period, I propose to revisit Żebrowska's 1990s work and its readings to examine what in fact lies behind the 'hegemonic discourses of the transitionist history of art' imposing 'feminist' and 'critical' readings (Banasiak, 2024). At the same time, by reflecting on Żebrowska's artistic practice, the evolution of her own understanding of her art and the historical and social context in which she worked, I want, as Banasiak proposes, to put forth a different perspective on Poland's political transition. This is because, in my opinion, Żebrowska's works (not) included in the exhibition are not another representation of the period experience but rather they work against unproblematized looking and the logic of representation and attribution of – even completely new or the original – meanings to images. Thus, they compel us to rethink watching in and of itself. I believe this practice of the artist, which I will seek to illuminate by drawing attention to the body and by drawing on non-representational theory, reveals the obscene secret of Żebrowska's art. Hidden behind a curtain and accessible only to visitors above eighteen years of age, 'The Mystery Is Looking' with a false eye in a living, pulsating, made-up vagina. I could structure this text

around the following question: what do we see when we reciprocate its gaze?

Polish feminist art

When discussing body representation in the art of contemporary Polish woman artists in her 2003 article ‘Feminin polylangue’, published in the English- and German-language journal *Praesens: Central European Contemporary Art Review* in an issue dedicated to Polish art, Agata Jakubowska cites Alicja Żebrowska as one of the foremost artists in this field. Explicating the meaning of Żebrowska’s art to foreign readers in her necessarily concise piece, the author discusses the feminist dimension of the bringing of female sexuality into visibility in the famous 1994 installation and video work *Original Sin*. Offering her interpretation of the close-up video footage of a vagina with a button between its labia making it look like a ‘blind’ eye, later penetrated by a vibrator before being subjected to mud treatment and, finally, ‘giving birth’ to a Barbie doll, Jakubowska notes,

> Initially, this work was recognized as transgressing boundaries and showing female experiences of the body that are absent from the dominant visual culture. However, it is clear that the artist did not look for an alternative to phallocentric manifestations of feminine sexuality; her strategy, rather, was to play with existing convictions, negative notions of feminine sexuality – not simply to reject or criticise, but in a way to deconstruct by magnifying (2003, p. 13).

Jakubowska explains Żebrowska’s use of a Barbie doll as signalling a shift of

interest away from feeling and experiencing the female body towards seeking to understand the cultural construct of corporeality and gender.

By doing this, Jakubowska places the artist's work in the context of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and the transgression of the binary division into feminine and masculine associated with Butler's notion of gender performativity. This is also how she interprets Żebrowska's 1995 'Onone: A World after the World', which features imagined human/non-human beings with vague, confused or exaggerated sexual traits. Populating large-format colour photographs, these half-mythical-half-cyborg creatures gaze in the mirror or lie on the grass or in an abstract space lined with aluminium foil, assuming poses commonly associated with femininity, which, for Jakubowska, signifies that we are both able and unable to liberate ourselves from the bounds of culturally constructed gender. Another work Jakubowska discusses, *When the Other Becomes One's Own* (1999), also reveals the paradox of pleasure linked with enacting femininity and reproducing a phallocentrically constructed sexuality. In it, Żebrowska records the transition of trans woman Sara. 'Onone and Sara seem to feel comfortable in that position, exposed by feminist art historians as subordinate' (Jakubowska, 2003, p. 15). Jakubowska holds that Żebrowska's work, premised not so much on a feminist understanding of gender difference but on its cultural and fluid nature as described by Butler, are typical of a broader strand of the work of Polish women artists. By showing gender as a role as oppressive as it is constructed, they open up a space for a takeover of the signs of subordination while affirming femininity.

I do not consider Jakubowska's text, written for an audience unfamiliar with the Polish art and context, as a new or debatable reading of Żebrowska's work. Rather, I regard it as an encapsulation of the readings of Żebrowska's

practice in the period of the political transition that dominated Polish art history at the time. Jakubowska follows in the footsteps of the likes of Izabela Kowalczyk, who, in her 2002 book *Ciało i władza* (Body and Power), in which she lays down the canon of the so-called critical art, notes,

> In her art, Alicja Żebrowska collapses the boundaries between visible and invisible, art and pornography, feminine passivity and masculine activity. Not so much does she represent that which has been hidden, repressed, as she shows the constructs of female sexuality that have brought about the subordination of women and their needs to male desires, plunging them into silence and invisibility (2002, p. 234).

In proposing this, the researcher predominantly refers to two versions of *Original Sin*, which she has reconstructed drawing on Marek Goździewski's piece from the catalogue accompanying 'Original Sin: A Presumed Virtual Reality Project', an exhibition of Żebrowska's work, staged at the Zderzak Gallery in Kraków in 1994. Goździewski describes the first version as an installation foregrounding a green apple.

> The video […] opened with a scene showing a girl who starts eating a green apple. In a space enclosed by two concentric cylinders built from semi-transparent green film, a small green lamp was lit and the smell of synthetic green apple lingered in the air. The third constitutive element of the work, green apples, sat on a wooden table. White slips of paper inscribed with text, reminiscent of newborns' name tags, were attached to the apples' tails. A few apple-eating scenes were followed by blurred scenes of a sexual

> act, featuring a penis (artificial or ‘natural’) and a woman’s crotch, which continued to the end of the video. A loudspeaker mounted inside a ‘tree’ played distorted sounds of ‘sexual pleasure’, some of which, inevitably, resembled closely the sounds of eating the apple (1994).

The second version of *Original Sin*, the one described by Jakubowska and included in the 1995 ‘Antybodies’ exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, where it caused a scandal even before the show opened, had little in common with the first. Gone were the apple, paradise and tree, replaced by the button (the tool of sexual pleasure first experienced with a childhood girl-friend), masturbation with a vibrator, mud treatments and the birth of a Barbie doll. Goździewski maintains that while the first version of the work showed ‘religious entanglements of sex and human sexuality (1994), particularly female sexuality, ‘in Western culture’, the second, in almost every frame of the video, takes issue with the words God speaks to women in the Bible: ‘I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you’ (after Goździewski, 1994). As the author concludes, Żebrowska wants a different world and a different role of women.

Kowalczyk, in contrast, notes that what changed in the second version mainly concerned the female elements, which became dominant. For her, the exclusion of men by a reference to erotic experiences with a childhood girlfriend, the use of a vibrator and hand, and the birth of a doll – which requires no fertilization – is tantamount to the liberation of the female body and female sexuality from male power and, at the same time, manifests rebellious shamelessness. When examining another of Żebrowska’s works, *The Mystery Is Looking* – in which a vagina, which enfolds a false eye, winks

with its labia lips, made up and fitted with false eyelashes, Kowalczyk probes the boundary between art and pornography. She believes that Żebrowska's images of the female body are not pornographic, because they at once arouse desire and provoke repulsion. As Hartmut Böhme, quoted by Kowalczyk, notes about his reaction to *Original Sin*: 'This process is so extreme that the male (and female?) observer feels an almost physical pain in [their] eyeballs as well as disgust, amplified by their own fears and hideous images. I must admit that this is an experience like no other' (1997, p. 75). The vagina appears as a 'carnivorous plant', arousing fear and disgust.

For Monika Bakke, it is disgust, or rather the abject as described by Julia Kristeva, that is the central interpretative key here. Bakke, following Hal Foster, in her well-known 2000 book *Ciało otwarte* (The Open Body), describes the 1990s art as abject art, and considers Żebrowska's art to be the most engaged in 'direct contact with the abject' (Bakke, 2000, p. 50).

> Her artistic creations actually directly reference the three types of *abjection* [oral, anal and genital – DS] described by Kristeva. They seem to be driven by a desire to reveal the regressive or archaic domain of our existence, and are also attempts to capture a traumatic experience. This artist's works are often no less than shocking, and many viewers find it virtually impossible to engage with them' (ibid., p. 50).

Bakke approaches a photograph from the 1993 series 'Gender' as exemplifying oral abjection. It shows a close-up of a boy in a white shirt, with a chunk of raw meat hanging from his mouth. The anal abject is present in

Żebrowska's *With Mother* (1993). Bakke describes it as depicting the naked artist squatting with her back to the viewer and defecating in front of a photograph of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. In fact, however, the photograph is not of Botticelli's painting but of Żebrowska's mother. For Bakke, *Original Sin* is a representation of genital abjection.

Kowalczyk follows Bakke by referring to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject and discussing *With Mother* from a perspective explicitly defined as feminist,

> Żebrowska's defecating body represents the abject – that which is rejected from our subjectivity upon transition from the realm of the semiotic to that of the symbolic. Perhaps it is an attempt to regain the lost unity with her mother, which is attained here through defiling (2002, pp. 236-237).

Kowalczyk argues that, in the spirit of Luce Irigaray's theory, Żebrowska reveals femininity, the female body and female sexual organs as collapsing the boundaries underlying the disgust impulse: between inside and outside, object and subject, self and other, living and dead (defecated). The sex act or childbirth, just like the defecation, become a radical opening up of the body, erasing its subjectivity-forming boundaries.

Kowalczyk reconstructs the political significance of this transgression, which is fundamental to recognizing Żebrowska's art as feminist, by following Paweł Leszkowicz, who in his 1997 text 'Grzechy Alicji Żebrowskiej: Sztuka a aborcja' (Alicja Żebrowska's Sins: Art and Abortion), published in 2001 in *Artmix*, notes,

> In 1994, at Kraków's Zderzak Gallery, Alicja Żebrowska presented

> her video installation *Original Sin*, which remains to this day a rather peculiar but significant work on the Polish artistic and socio-political scene. Exploring female sexuality, childbearing and religion, *Original Sin* was a strongly feminist and engaged statement. This came less than a year after the introduction of a new anti-abortion law in March 1993, which made abortion illegal in a country travelling a bumpy road to decommunization and democratization. A testament to the halting and reversal of the process of progressive change, this law sparked political discussion and a moral crusade that stirred the Polish public for about four years (2001).

Leszkowicz links the anti-abortion law with the activities and political interests of the Catholic Church in Poland. Like Poland's Concordat with Vatican and the introduction of religious instruction in schools or the law enshrining respect for Christian values in the media, the abortion ban is a tool for exercising power. Żebrowska's work, which presents sex and childbirth in the context of the rhetoric of sin, demonstrates, for Leszkowicz, how Catholic doctrine works: how the criminalization of non-reproductive sexuality and abortion is inalienably associated with an imagination infected by the images of paradise, the forbidden fruit and the subordinate role of women. The anti-abortion law, treated as a pretext to reduce the awareness of contraception and human sexuality in general, is actually used as a tool to organize citizens into heterosexual marriages whose primary role is to conceive, bear and raise children. Leszkowicz notes,

> The AIDS problem and the role of condoms give way to the rhetoric of marital fidelity and true love, undoubtedly noble ideals but out of

> step with the complex reality of our lives. The efforts of non-governmental educational movements are obstructed by cutting off financial support (ibid.).

Crucial to Leszkowicz's analysis is the recognition that this stance, this 'restrictive, moralistic, antisexual rhetoric' (ibid.), has become coterminous in Poland with decommunization and the triumph of traditional values, and a symptom of the Transition, which included the emergence of a political dimension of sexual identity and gender difference. The only political difference in communist Poland, argues Leszkowicz, was the one between society and the authorities. Gender difference and gender conflict only became political with the advent of democracy, competition, the labour market and civil rights.

What used to be private and personal began to matter in public life. Leszkowicz concludes,

> Alicja Żebrowska's feminist work represents a tendency in Polish art – one that has been present in Western art since the 1960s – grounded in the recognition and critical analysis of the fact, typical of contemporary life, that the intimate is political. The artist also explores contemporary feminism's staple theme of female corporeality and sexuality and the forms of their representation, which constitutes the most subversive part of her work (ibid.).

At the cost of 'desublimating' the image of the body and exposing the 'lurid nature of physiology', Żebrowska 'cuts through the language of ideology, stripping femininity of the body' (ibid.). The author states,

> There is a method it this visceral literalism. It has been repeatedly pointed out that women's voice is disregarded in discussions about abortion. Women have become an absent, disembodied object of contention. Their protagonist was the unborn child, 'suspended' in an ontological vacuum. The perverse imitation of childbirth gets to the crux of the problem, to the place where a true miracle happens, the miracle of fertility and motherhood but also of sexual pleasure and desire (ibid.).

Leszkowicz points out (and Kowalczyk echoes his point) that Żebrowska's feminist politics are closely linked to the historical moment of Poland's political transition when sexuality and gender, both due to pressure from the Catholic Church and under the influence of Western emancipation movements, became political. In this context, works like *Onone* and *When the Other Becomes One's Own*, read through the lens of Judith Butler's theory, seem to continue the strategy of 'visceral literalism', revealing an ignored, denied, forbidden corporeality of otherness oppressed by the state and the Church.

It thus becomes apparent that the reading of Żebrowska's art as feminist art, which emerged as early as the 1990s and became entrenched in the early 21st century, related to the lived experience of the social shifts and conflicts of the era of Poland's political transition. As Marcin Kościelniak points out, in the light of Żebrowska's work one can challenge, to a large extent, the popular contention about the reluctance of artists of the so-called critical art of the early 1990s to offer direct socio-political commentary. He notes,

> The absence of current-commentary emphasis is compensated for

> by openly militant and polemical forays into the space of the Christian sacrum and the associated rules of social life and subject constructs (2018, p. 53).

Therefore, Żebrowska's art, particularly *Original Sin*, 'zooms in on knowledge coupled with symbolic power, which are crucial to Polish patriarchal culture' (ibid., p. 54), reifying Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, pivotal for the definition of critical art and later utilized by Piotr Piotrowski and Izabela Kowalczyk. I believe that the artist's works played a similar role for feminist theory in Polish art. As Goździewski argued in 1994, not only did they open up the possibility of a 'different definition […] of the role of the woman' (1994) in relation to power and social norms and establish a field of desire that the author defines along the lines of Rachel Kaplan's desire for another way (ibid.) but also, in later readings, they became vital for a cultural translation of Western feminist thought. This need to assimilate, or rather develop, a feminist discourse in Poland, reflected in the cited readings of Żebrowska's work, can hardly be understood in terms of hegemony, especially if one recalls what Jolanta Brach-Czaina, an acclaimed philosopher and author of *Szczeliny istnienia* (The Cracks of Existence), writes about the situation of Polish women after 1989. In *Progi polskiego feminizmu* (Thresholds of Polish Feminism; 1995), she emphatically states,

> When the communist system collapsed in 1989, it came to light that there were women in Poland […] The discovery of women was made by the Catholic Church, which tabled a restrictive anti-abortion bill (signed by many MPs from the Polish United Workers' Party) in the Sejm in liaison with the communist authorities. The freshly

> discovered femininity was defined by the reproductive function (2023, p. 114).

Żebrowska's body, with its obscene, abject and shameless practices, as well as other non-normative bodies in her art, beholden as not conforming with the reproductive femininity imposed by the law and the Church, have also become, in the readings cited above, bodies from the theories of Irigaray, Kristeva and Butler, 'reborn' in a different socio-political context. In Żebrowska's work, as in the 1990s realities described by Brach-Czaina, 'the body of the Polish woman is the site of fierce political struggle' (2023, p. 114), as best evidenced by the contemporaneous press reviews of the shows featuring the artist's work, in which it was often described as norm-defying or even criminal and unworthy of being exhibited in institutional venues, i.e. faecal, repulsive, gynaecological, pornographic and trite. The feminist and critical discourse assimilated from the West was to serve as a tool enabling oppressed bodies to gain agency, especially in the face of deep resistance against the proposed recognition of women's (reproductive) rights and the rights of sexual minorities in a new, capitalist, democratic Poland, which manifested itself, for example, in the contemptuous use of the word 'feminist' in public discourse (Graff, 2021, pp. 193-215).

But let's come back to the questions raised by the Gdańsk exhibition 'The Mystery Is Looking'. Can it really be said that the feminism that was taking shape in Poland at the time was not the original context of the creation of Żebrowska's art but an interpretation imposed on it? What does it mean to restore to the artist's work the dimension of the 'new spirituality' or, as a matter of fact, to replace the extensively described works with unknown ones?

Leftist hegemony

In 1998, in a conversation with Łukasz Guzek published in *Żywa Galeria*, Alicja Żebrowska said,

> If we accept that the vagina seems to be the most personal thing for a woman, and childbirth the most intimate experience a woman can have, why does the state impose a series of restrictions on the vagina. I am referring here to the abortion right, where the most intimate concerns of a woman are subject to manipulation and cynical political games. The most personal place becomes the most public. The state, which should serve to protect my privacy, brutally interferes with it. I don't want my body to serve the state (after Kowalczyk, 2002, pp. 242-243).

Żebrowska thus positioned her art, as Marcin Kościelniak notes, as a voice in public debate. In 1999, in the feminist magazine *Ośka* (Axis), Żebrowska stressed, 'The video *The Mystery Is Looking* was a deliberately planned feminist action […] The Divine Eye, present in the Christian tradition, watches people and judges them. In particular, it stigmatizes women's sexuality. It views the female body as an impure, forbidden, sinful site. I consciously reversed this principle' (Żebrowska, 1999, p. 43). When discussing her participation in the 3rd Feminist Group Meeting in Poznań, themed around 'Constructing Women's Identities', Żebrowska said,

> I first came here three years ago. Now I decided to come again aware I've been labelled a feminist. The works viewed as feminist are only a part of my output. Their feminist message does not stem

> from my ideological statements. My works are read in the context of feminism, because they are linked with my individual liberation, with my search for my own identity as a woman caught up in a number of conflicts. I've experienced Polish Catholicism first-hand. My father was a bastard son of a priest, I was sexually harassed by a priest. Later, I tried to process it all intellectually, I read a lot about it, tried to make some sense of it (Żebrowska, 1999, p. 44).

While confirming the paramount importance of the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' for the impact of her work and its firm rooting in the experience of the female body, Żebrowska distanced herself from the idea that feminism defined her political identity and the objectives of her practice. The comments she made in the years that followed attested to the artist's increasing dissociation from feminism. In a 2001 conversation with Piotr Niemier, she said, 'If critics describe me as a feminist artist, it is based on one work, which proves their ignorance of my whole body of work' (Żebrowska, 2001, p. 24). In a 2002 interview with Izabela Kowalczyk, prompted by the exhibition 'The Dangerous Liaisons between Art and Body', she said, 'my work *Original Sin* has been appropriated. It has become a feminist work and I have to accept this. I don't entirely agree with this reading, my explanation of it is different. By the way, I don't shy away from feminism. But I don't think I'm a feminist artist, because feminism is a social movement you need to engage in. […] But I don't need to take on the mantle of feminism to express my identity!' (Kowalczyk, 2002a, pp. 60-61). She thus sought to stress her autonomy with regard to the discourses applied to her art. In 2007, Żebrowska was asked by curators Magdalena Ujma and Joanna Zielińska (exgirls collective) to create a work for an exhibition of feminist and politically engaged art, 'The Struggle Goes On!'. The artist said she

responded with a proposal for a 'pro-PiS'[2] work, explaining 'that the policy of the incumbent government was the best solution in Poland's situation' (Ujma, Zielińska, 2007). Commenting on this four years later in a conversation with Łukasz Białkowski, Żebrowska said that she was being contrary and wanted to undermine the ideological unequivocality of the curators' proposal, who expected her to produce an anti-Catholic work. She commented that since she had been a feminist artist for so many years, she could now be regarded as a leading right-wing artist, before adding, 'We have to remember that there's a certain dominance of the left. Art is seen through the lens of an artist's ideological affiliation. I strongly believe that if a right-wing artist produced a great work of art, his or her views would impinge on the reception of the work. We live in a time of left-wing hegemony' (Żebrowska, 2011, p. 33).

Żebrowska distanced herself from feminism in the most emphatic way in a 2008 conversation with Roman Bromboszcz. Asked about the various readings of her work, she said,

> It was my big mistake to permit Paweł Leszkowicz to use the work *Original Sin: A Presumed Virtual Reality Project* in his abortion essay. A false interpretative path was also paved by Marek Goździewski, who narrowed down the message to feminist and religious concerns. This was picked up by others and they forced the work and me, its author, into a bag labelled 'feminism'. The pivotal point in this process was the exhibition 'Antibodies', at which Robert Rumas, in my absence, presented only the video and photographs instead of the installation he had received straight from the Berlin exhibition (Żebrowska, 2008).

She goes on to say that *Original Sin* was never intended to be critical of religion or politics. Instead, it was meant to touch on the pitfalls of social life in which it is crucially important which ideologies – that is, virtual realities – we embrace. Adopting this perspective, she said of her Transition-period work, 'Indeed, in the 1990s, a search for 'oneness' […], harmony, a kind of consensus, was a very important thing for me' (Żebrowska, 2008).

This spirit of a mystical search for 'oneness' and a desire to 'reach the objective truth' pervaded Jakub Banasiak's presentation of Żebrowska's work in 'The Mystery Is Looking: Works from the Transition Period'.

Art of the new spirituality

Importantly, the exhibition was in fact Banasiak's second curatorial vision of Poland's political transition. The first, 'Tectonic Shifts: On the Artistic Symptoms of Poland's Transition'[3], shown at the turn of 2023 at the Łódź Museum of Art, was premised on a belief that the Transition should be viewed as a process rather than a watershed moment – as

> two systems persistently colliding and interpenetrating, the old order fading away and a new one emerging. In the 1980s and 1990s, the tectonic plates of East and West pressed against each other until they produced a new rock formation – a periphery of global capitalism. Before this could happen, however, things were in a state of flux, ambiguous, delirious, sometimes abrupt, always fraught with subcutaneous tensions (Banasiak, 2022).

In the introduction to his book *Proteuszowe czasy. Rozpad państwowego*

systemu sztuki 1982–1993 (A Protean Time: The Collapse of the State Art System 1982–1993), published in 2020 and offering the intellectual undergirding for both exhibitions, Banasiak explains that his account of the Transition as a process is premised on the titular timeframe, which does away with the impact of 1989 as the start of the contemporary period, and on abandoning what he refers to as 'Transition narrative', or transitology. He notes,

> As important as recognizing the temporal nature of the Transition is seeing that Western and then Polish 'transitology' developed, as Boris Buden brilliantly demonstrated, an ideology of post-communist transition, one holding that the process of exiting communism has a definite and inevitable destination – the neoliberal form of capitalism and the liberal version of democracy. The transition-era discourse naturalizes this development model while creating the image of an 'evil' communism and, more broadly, of a backward East. This model is underpinned by the fantasy of a 'new beginning', completely rejecting the pre-1989 order (2023, p. 50).

Banasiak argues that recognizing 1989 as marking the start of our contemporary period requires significant interventions into social memory. For a start, the Round Table narrative becomes a contested field. In Banasiak's view, its two different versions – the first, in which the communists were willing to cooperate and the principle of sealing off the past with a 'thick line' was adopted, and the second, presenting the event as a political conspiracy behind the back of the Polish people – will generate two competing models of memory. Even if there's tension between the two,

they concur on the direction of the changes that had to take place, so both can be considered as transitologic. Similarly, the memory of Polish 1980s art has come to be read through the same transitologic lens. The author contends that the recognition of 1989 as a triumph of the underground circles of political activists is closely tied to the emergence of what he terms a 'totalitarian model of art history', in which the communist era artists are judged not by the quality of their work and their efforts within the art community but by their stance towards the regime, which results in nullifying all institutional, social and aesthetic achievements of the period. Since the People's Republic of Poland is regarded within this framework as unequivocally evil, and democracy and capitalism as victorious, Banasiak sees the totalitarian narrative as transitologic too, as it naturalizes the Transition and the neoliberal model. When discussing the Transition archive, Banasiak provides a key argument that makes it possible to link these diagnoses with his curatorial choices in both exhibitions. He contends that we urgently need to revisit the archive to conduct basic research, as all studies of the social and institutional history of the People's Republic of Poland are afflicted by a transitologic bias. The responsibility for this state of affairs lies not only with the conservative historiography founded on the heroic struggle against communism but also – the author claims – with post-structuralism and the New Art History (NAH), which have contributed to entrenching the Transition ideology. Banasiak argues,

> […] after 1989, there was a common desire among humanists to transcend the materialist understanding of the relation between society and power. Ewa Domańska notes that this desire was driven by a vision of a 'new beginning' in scholarship, also through the proposition to link it up with the Western, particularly American,

> system. In other words, it was a transitologic project *par excellence* (Banasiak, 2023, p. 56).

This means that also the notion of power/knowledge, which, for Banasiak, is ‘central to the domestic applications of the NAH’ (2023, p. 56), became, in his opinion, another factor contributing to the entrenchment of both the totalitarian art history and transitology by totalizing the concept of power.

The consequences of this insight, as evidenced by the Banasiak’s curatorial choices, are far-reaching. His rejection of the criticized notion of power/knowledge and the model of art history rooted in post-structuralism entail a rejection of the visions of the art of the People’s Republic of Poland and the 1990s art developed within its framework and, most importantly, a discarding of the category of critical art, described by Izabela Kowalczyk as resistance acting bodies to generalized power and knowledge. Further, as Banasiak argues in his text accompanying Żebrowska’s exhibition, he considers this discourse, along with feminism inspired by Western theories (including poststructuralism) – just like Żebrowska herself – as hegemonic, one that suppresses the original – non-transitologic, as I understand it – context of the Protean time. So instead, he proposes a different perspective on the art of Poland’s Transition.

A key aspect of Banasiak’s narrative is doubling or splitting. He argues that the multiplied bodies, dualisms, binary categories, twin figures and mirror images of the art of the late 1980s and 1990s are manifestations of a clash between matter and spirit, or of a split into an awareness of political, ideological and economic changes and a desire for a spiritual search. Invoking the artist’ interest in Gnosticism, New Age aesthetics, alchemy, cultural anthropology and ritual, Banasiak traces the emergence of a

spirituality alternative to Catholicism and even of a ‘new sacral art’. In ‘Tectonic Shifts’, the curator included, in the ‘New Spirituality’ and ‘Primal Energies’ sections, Alicja Żebrowska’s little-known works from the 1980s and early 1990s: sculptures, drawings, and footage of the artist’s performative actions staged in her native region, the Tatra Mountains – a testament to her interest in ritual, her mystical imagination and explorations at the interface of nature and culture. These same works, brought from the margins to the centre of the artist's oeuvre, set the tone for the narrative of ‘The Mystery Is Looking’.

The following works are presented to viewers as coming from the Transition period: *Hypermistic* (1992), a form made of bronze embedded in epoxy resin, reminiscent of both a body and a temple; a recreation of an Orońsko installation entitled *Physical Phenomenon* (1992) featuring neon elements emerging from sand; a 1982 woodcut entitled *Cogito ergo sum: Distincto* showing two figures, one with male and one with female characteristics, with their backs turned to each other, each holding a red heart in one hand, as if about to tear it apart; and a photograph from the ‘Onone: A World after The World’ series (1995) entitled *Synchronization*, which, in the curator’s statement, is interpreted as follows: ‘In the photograph on view, the artist and Onone are recumbent against a sheet of silver foil, conflating the grey of Saturn with the silvery glow of the Moon. Saturn is the god of time and of agriculture, a set of practices aligned with the cycles of the calendar. The Moon symbolizes the feminine principle and circular time – the eternal return of the same’ (Banasiak, 2024). Inspired by a dream, the series features Onone, an androgynous figure with uncanny, exaggerated sexual characteristics, capable of sexual self-gratification, and seeks to show ‘an infinite transition, a mythical being preceding the human race – the whole

before the division' (Banasiak, 2024). The interpretative key is alchemy and the transmutation (conversion of base metals into gold) it describes (Banasiak, 2024). The next room contains three 1992 black-resin sculptures, *Reconstruction of The Libido*, *Portico* and *The Worldseer*, featuring organic and architectural motifs, and a set of 1987 charcoal drawings combining bodies and architectural items. These works, described as mystical explorations inspired by freemasonry, are presented as unprecedented in Polish art. 'The male and female intermingle in the different figures, forming an inseparable whole: a hybrid of reason and instinct, body and spirit. The frame is architecture: a testament to the perfection of creation' (Banasiak, 2024). In contrast, the early 1980s woodcuts and linocuts, *Outer Space*, *Kaleidoscopic Nebula*, *Mummy*, *The Extreme*[4] and *Universes*; *Self-Portrait (with a Rumen)*, featuring the artist's face combined with the face of a figure resembling the figures in the woodcut *Cogito ergo sum*; and a documentation of the artist's projects staged in the Tatra Mountains, *Identified Artistic Phenomenon* (1993), *Identified Object of Art* (1993) and *Trans-Fero* (1993) have been described as inspired by the mountains, which symbolize 'the eternal order of nature, the reality before time and history began', fragments of an 'outer space landscape' (Banasiak, 2024). *Onone* and *The Mystery Is Looking* (1995) are the only works from what Banasiak refers to as '"feminist" canon' included in the show. The leaving out of *Original Sin*, with its reference to childbirth, a work that directly inspired *The Mystery Is Looking* and remains closely tied up with it,[5] enables the curator to see the made-up vagina that winks with an artificial eye as a representation of the experience of a transition of consciousness that fits his vision from 'A Protean Time' and 'Tectonic Shifts' rather than a representation of the politicized, female body.

> The dominant reading is that the video's central motif – the eye in the vagina – represents opposition to patriarchy. Thus, the vagina, a kind of *pars pro toto* for the woman, is presumed to gain subjectivity rather than be the object of an appropriating gaze. This restores the original meaning of Żebrowska's video. In the 1980s and 1990s, the artist, like many of her contemporaries, developed an interest in mysticism and esotericism. A transition of consciousness is at the core of most mystical traditions. *The Mystery Is Looking* is an original interpretation of this motif. In her video, Żebrowska brings together the motif of Gaia – the first mother – and the third eye – a symbol of mystic awakening. The birth of a new consciousness is thus depicted as humanity becoming one with the universe. In this way, the validation of femininity that is undoubtedly present in this work goes beyond the immediate political dimension to gain a transcendent aspect (Banasiak, 2024).

Intended as an alternative to the feminist reading of Żebrowska's work, the mystical, esoteric reading, for Banasiak, is an account of Poland's Transition that goes beyond the transitologic ideology. Interestingly, however, as he himself admits, this renders the Transition a 'mystery', 'a time beyond time, the eternal now' that, surprisingly as it might seem, loses its historical and experiential character. Most importantly, however, this selection of Żebrowska's works and this reading of them rid her art of the body that acts, as I will try to demonstrate, primarily through its obscene irreducibility to representation. Significantly, it is the undermining of the power of representation – both in an aesthetic and political sense – that seems to be a key aspect of Żebrowska's art, which I believe is in evidence in the video

work *The End of My Century* included in both exhibitions curated by Banasiak.

The End of My Century

Installed on a small-screen, *The End of My Century 92/93* is a video chronicle composed of low-quality footage. Let's take a close look at it, as the work, which has not previously been shown and is otherwise unavailable to the public, offers an interesting perspective on Poland's political transition and, I believe, is key to understanding Żebrowska's artistic strategy.

The camera moves through the streets of Kraków, recording departing buses, passers-by, an open-air market, a bus station. The unsettling purples, reds and yellows of the adverts and clothes creep into the grey landscape of the winter-shrouded city. This string of unspectacular images is seemingly random. Long-distance buses pull away from their stop on a slush-covered street. A large mural advertizing Miraculum cosmetics looms in the background. Two women, one wearing a bright purple winter jacket, the other a blue jacket, make their way through a market. The younger one carries a doll. Now and again, she pulls the older one close to her, grabs her hand, leans into her ear and speaks. It is clear that the older one is looking after her. They embrace as they walk away from a cart selling Pepsi, Sprite and other items. The artist makes us look closely – the video stutters and a few frames are repeated three times in a row. We see an arm of the girl in a blue jacket embrace purple arms, and a purple arm embrace the girl's blue waist. The video stutters again as we see a man in a fur cap and sheepskin coat gently kicking a concrete lamp post while waiting for a bus. We are made to look closely again. Next, we see a young woman sitting by a dirty

windowpane and asking for charity. A female voice from behind the camera asks,

> ‘Can’t you go to Monar?[6] Can’t they help?’
> ‘I’ve been there, I’ve already been to Monar, I met Kotański twice.’
> ‘When?’
> ‘In the spring.’
> ‘Any luck? Can’t Monar help you?’
> ‘They were having money trouble, why should I go to the rehab if I’m not a drug addict?’
> ‘They didn’t find another way?’
> ‘No. Nobody was interested, I just stayed for a few years and then didn’t stay.’
> ‘An AIDS conference is on in Kraków.’
> ‘I know, I heard.’
> ‘These people are helping with it. Is there no shelter that can help? Do you have to … like this until the spring?’

The young woman goes on to say that she prefers to live alone and has no other option (no job or benefits) than to sit and ask for money.

Cut to two men in white shirts, black ties and visors cleaning a tiled floor. The space they are cleaning is decorated with green plants: potted palms and conifers. People sit at tables, eating, and drinking from large paper cups through straws. There’s a glass door in the background. People stop and wait until they can pass through the section where the cleaners are at work. The camera is at floor level, showing their legs. Cut to the bus station. Departure announcements are heard in the background. We see a bench

with two huddled-up people wrapped in multiple layers of clothes, surrounded by bundles. One of the people leans forward, barely keeping its balance. The person remains in this position as if they're asleep. A third person, covered with a sleeping bag, lies with its head on the bundles at the foot of the bench. The three are accompanied by a black dog curled up close by. The camera circles the group, watching them as if they were a sculpture, a wrapped object leading us to redefine the space it occupies.

Cut to the street. An elderly man in a black coat and flat cap stands still. The picture is rotated by ninety degrees, causing or perhaps showing confusion, and the viewers have to tilt their heads to the side. The video slows down, showing that the flow of time has also been disrupted.

Back to the normal view. The camera picks two nuns out of the crowd before focusing on the face of an elderly man with a shopping cart on a packed tram, looking straight into the camera. The picture jerks back and we see the man's gaze again. He turns to the window and flinches with a nervous tic or reflex. The next thing we see is the tram's empty interior. Cut to a coffee shop with three grey-haired suit-wearing men sitting at a table. A waitress in a red apron brings them glasses of steaming tea and vodka. They sweeten the tea. One tries to pour some of his vodka into the glass of another, but the offer is rebuffed. After making a toast, they lean towards each other and talk. The word 'Coca-Cola' is emblazoned in red on a glass pane in the background.

Two young girls – one dressed in blue, the other in red – sit on a line-18 tram, facing each other. One has got a tube in her hand, perhaps a rolled-up poster. They notice the camera, start giggling, lean towards each other.

The camera turns round and captures the face of a woman and the blurred

lights of the night city and the cars going in the opposite direction.

We're back indoors. In the crowded coffee shop. We see the faces of a young man and a woman. They sit opposite each other. At one point the man reaches for a hand of another woman. She also faces him but remains out of view. The one whose face we see turns to the camera.

The man kisses the hand, which seems independent of the rest of the body before pressing it gently against his face. The hand retreats and then reaches back towards the man's face but does not touch it. After hanging helplessly for a moment, the hand is withdrawn again. Żebrowska gives prominence to this sequence of hand movements – the slowed-down picture jumps back and forward, the face and hand meet and miss each other twice. There's another cut and we see the artist's face and the line 'Alicja Żebrowska, 8 December 1993'.

In *The End of My Century*, Żebrowska lingers on nervous tics, facial expressions, surprising colours and cuts of clothes, on strange reflexes producing a rift or rupture, also apparent in the stark contrast between the space of the bus station and the space of the restaurant, and defining the bodies in these spaces as normal or disruptive. She observes the dynamic of the abnormal appearing and disappearing in urban spaces. An embrace, an act of kicking the lamp post, a flinch, a clumsy movement, an oddly moving hand are sudden ruptures in the picture of reality, all of them disclosing its underpinning, which is fully revealed in the condition of the bodies of the three people roughing it at the bus station.

It is clear that *The End of My Century* is a chronicle of Poland's political transition.

What anchors the video it in a particular moment of collective and individual biography is not only the title but also the medium: the VHS tape with its colours. The footage recorded by the artist in the streets of Kraków in early 1992 and late 1993 documents a state of transition, the co-presence of colours, signs, clothes and bodies defined as belonging to the old, communist reality and to the new, capitalist one.

However, Żebrowska's work is not only about the realities of the turn of 1993 but also about what defines our understanding of the images produced by these realities and the bodies captured in these images. This is particularly in evidence in the part of the video in which the picture is tilted, underscoring the confusing traits of visual representation. The disruptions in the form of multiple repetitions of gestures emphasize the moments when the work of the gaze is unsettling. The video reveals how the reading of images is enmeshed with the process of attributing meaning to bodies moving in time and space. This dimension of the work of the gaze becomes apparent in the bus station scene and in the conversation with the HIV-positive girl who asks for charity.

This is when a body defined by its appearance, movement and behaviour in relation to other bodies emerges as a person with an individual history. By holding a piece of cardboard saying that she is HIV-positive, the girl defines her body and social position through a health condition. By constituting herself as excluded and talking to the artist, she reveals for a moment the rich life of the urban background, an existence that eludes the everyday gaze and is not included in representation: neither political nor that which conditions the memory of the political transition.

Beyond representation

Non-representational theory draws on performance studies and investigates that which tends to elude the gaze. Developed primarily by cultural geographer Nigel Thrift in the 1990s and early 2000s, non-representational theory assumes that a linguistic and visual model of culture based on the interpretation of the meaning of phenomena, that is, on representation, is inadequate for neither the scholarly nor the political objectives set for cultural studies at the dawn of the 21st century. Turning to everyday practices, atmosphere, bodily habits, and affects hitherto considered as cultural background, Thrift argues for extending the existing concept of knowledge to include the non-discursive and for redefining the subject, which, in his view, includes a complex constellation of bodies, things, affects, natural and unnatural processes, gestures and tools, habits and mistakes. As Thrift proves, the space beyond the realm of representation is inhabited by actors that elude discourse, have no assigned identity or individual biography, and practise space, the city and culture, permanently suspended between subject and object.

The Thrift method, described by him as ‘the art of producing a permanent supplement to the ordinary, a sacrament for the everyday, a hymn to the superfluous’ (Thrift, 2008, p. 2), like *The End of My Century*, turns its gaze to the street, to surprising gestures, spatial divisions, circulating and circulation-disrupting bodies, it identifies tensions, emotions and affects, it reconstructs movement. Considering Żebrowska’s video from this perspective, it becomes clear that the jumps, the rotated picture and the conversation with the HIV-positive person all serve to stress the fact that the constructed image of reality eludes the logic of representation, that it is based on the disruption rather than the construction of clear meanings. The

image neither replaces the real nor interprets it. When walking about the streets of Kraków, Żebrowska herself becomes part of the ‘unmarked’. And it is the unmarked that she seeks to record.

Invoking the notion of ‘the unmarked’ advanced by Peggy Phelan, one of the foremothers of non-representational theory, I want to signal a close link between undermining the power of representation and attempts to liberate the body from the construct of gender, or rather femininity, because there is only one gender according to the psychoanalytic underpinning of the unmarked. As Phelan argues in her 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, the female body is marked and functions as a representation constructed by the male gaze. The male body is unmarked, and therefore universal. Some of its political power derives from the fact that its gender is invisible, disappearing under social identity. Femininity does not share the same privilege. To be marked means to be visible as gender. This is the reason why Phelan attributes immense power to invisibility, transparency and to evasion of representation, which, in her understanding, can be referred to as performance. As Żebrowska has repeatedly stressed, what interested her in the 1990s was the reversal or undermining of the meanings attributed to the female body. She treated these meanings, which included the female body’s sinfulness, impurity, status as a source of evil and clear link between gender and identity, as constituting a ‘virtual reality’, i.e. an ideology that imposes meanings on directly experienced materiality. For Thrift, who frequently refers to the notion of virtuality, this is a description of the impact of representation. Tilting, disrupting the production of meaning and practising rather than representing female corporeality, Żebrowska employs irony to create a rupture between the ‘virtual reality’ and the body – the alive and pulsating body that becomes obscene when captured beyond representation. If one adopts this perspective, Żebrowska,

by walking about with a video camera and disrupting rather than recording the images of Kraków's urban life – in the same way as she recorded herself with a false eye in a vagina or filmed the birth of a Barbie doll – performs, practises her body and its societal position, creates images which, as Dorota Sajewska proposes in her definition of obscenities, are non-representations and thus conceal no secrets:

> Obscenities […] are the radical otherness needed for our identity to constitute itself, but they are intrinsically unrepresentable in the realm of representation. Moreover, obscenities are always outside the frame of representation. They are not, therefore, what was hidden but is now revealed. They are not a secret to be revealed. Obscenities exist here and now, they are ever present but […] in a blind spot (2012, p. 169).

In a conversation with Barbara Limanowska, Alicja Żebrowska says of *Original Sin*:

> I wanted to use a specific example like this to show that, regardless of their origin, all kinds of ideologies, myths and cultural norms are merely virtual realities that a community embodies at different times in history. Some people see *Original Sin* as rebellion and negation, but what I tend to do is contest visions rather than negate them (Żebrowska, 1999, p. 45).

It seems, then, that for Żebrowska obscenity is a tool for contesting meanings rather than producing them, for rejecting representation rather than constructing it. Likewise, when she creates the obscene *Onone*,

defecates in front of a photograph of her mother, photographs a boy with a bloody chunk of meat in his mouth, chronicles Sarah's transition process and walks about the streets of Kraków with her camera on, she keeps on undermining the power of representation, capturing bodies, matter, practices, movement, activity, change, atmosphere, affects, the unmarked.

This perspective on Żebrowska's art remains anchored in feminism, which has always been interested in representation and its failings, as Agata Jakubowska reminds us (2004, pp. 32-33). At the same time, it allows a different framing of the political dimension of her art than the 1990s and early 2000s interpretations I have examined. By shifting the focus from images of the female body, even transgressive or abject ones, to a constant disruption of the relationship between body and image, gaze and perception, it reveals a new perspective on the experience of the Transition.

Perhaps at odds with Żebrowska's contemporary position but in line with the history of the reception of her art, I do not see in it a mystery, oneness and the new spirituality, which, as Jakub Banasiak argues, would define the Transition as the eternal now, a moment of suspension between two orders, a kind of liminal phase in an extended process of metamorphosis. Following Żebrowska's gaze – turned to the street or to her own body, taking in the invisible and the obscene – I see that the very notion of transition works as a 'virtual reality', treating the life in the street and in the body as a backdrop to changes defined by the language of economics and politics. Further, as Croatian researcher Boris Buden argues, the post-communist transition is a symbolic representation that hides the emptiness of the event itself (2012, p. 17). The transition is only a representation. Turning to non-representation, to that which eludes discourse, the unwatchable, insignificant, obscene, corporeal – like the Eastern European experience of HIV/AIDS, giving birth

to a plastic doll, or defecating in front of a photograph of one's mother – is thoroughly non-transitologic, whereas attributing meanings to these practices, explaining them through symbols, images and discourses, even if these do not come from critical art, remains, surprisingly as it might seem and contrary to what Banasiak argued, part of a transitologic narrative. The notion of critical art may be due for a rethinking but replacing it with another term, such as 'the art of the new spirituality', does not seem to avoid the transitology trap as defined by Banasiak. This is because, as Thrift points out, a growing interest in ritual, mysticism, Eastern religions or New Age ideas was also a distinctive part of the Westen experience of the 1990s and early 2000s (Thrift, 2008, p. 66). Thus, a clear-cut line between eastern and western proves elusive, and any attempt to draw it would reveal itself as part of the transition discourse, just as the eastern/western division is part of a transitionist mindset. Further, it makes one realize that substituting meanings, or even restoring the original senses and discovering unknown artworks, will not be enough to avoid the logic of the transition, as it is impossible to escape representation while remaining within its realm. As 'empty meaning and its symbolic representation' (Buden, 2012, p. 17), the transition structures our thinking, absorbing every image and text to ultimately render it – like capitalism as theorized by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello does (2005) – part of its meaning, naturalizing it as an element legitimizing a neoliberal conservative order.

By following the non-representational path and choosing to refuse to read Żebrowska's work and, instead, recognizing it as a constellation of body practices will reveal something that the discourse of the transition conceals and that, as Boris Buden has demonstrated, goes against its logic.

A wave of throat-gripping, stomach-churning revulsion that washes over the

viewer of *Original Sin*,*With Mother* or *Gender* can be seen as a reaction to a scene of violence. Felt as ‘physical pain in [one’s] eyeballs’ (Böhme, 1997, p. 75), the harrowing nature of Żebrowska’s images makes one realize how strongly the condition of the body subjected to the pressures of meaning, social norms and political identity is tied up with the experience of violence – not only symbolic but also, often, physical, such as the violence mentioned by the artist, who admitted she had been sexually harassed by a priest. The Transition was experienced as violence against their own bodies by many groups of people, including the HIV-positive individuals thrown out of Monar-run shelters and attacked by local communities, the women denied the right to abortion by a 1993 law, the sick homeless people sleeping at train and bus stations, the gay and trans individuals attacked in public, as well as the farmers protesting against the government’s financial policies or the workers of factories that were being shut down. The installation of capitalism and democracy did not just mark the end of communist oppression and the advent of freedom and emancipation but involved a certain brutality shaping the bodies and the atmosphere of the 1990s. This experience of violence, in my view, is the mystery of the Transition in Żebrowska’s art, peaking from the obscene body and looking into the viewer’s eye. In this sense, then, there is no mystery at all, only a blind spot and the experiencing female body that constantly challenges the regime of representation in all its forms, even those that reject critical art or feminism itself.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

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Footnotes

1. ‘The Mystery Is Looking: Works from the Time of Transition’ was the English-language title used by the show organizers.
2. PiS (Law and Justice) is a Polish right-wing nationalist, conservative party, often described as populist.
3. ‘Tectonic Movements: On the artistic symptoms of the Transition’ was the English-language title the organizers opted for.
4. Also known as *Extremum*.
5. The artist talks about this explicitly in an interview with Barbara Limanowska published in *Ośka*: ‘This video [*The Mystery Is Watching*] is a consequence of an earlier work, *Original Sin: A Presumed Virtual Reality Project*, which includes a video that opens with a button in a woman’s vagina’ (Żebrowska, 1999, p. 43).
6. Initially a social movement, later an NGO dedicated to treating addictions and promoting drug addiction awareness, Monar was founded by Marek Kotański in the 1980s. When the HIV/AIDS epidemic hit Poland in the late 1980s, Monar and Marek Kotański set up Poland’s first residential homes for HIV-positive individuals. Monar and Kotański became an emblem

of care for seropositive people, especially in the Polish media.

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/ CRIPPING PERFORMING ARTS

Horizontal Aesthetics and Bed Activism: Pandemic Subversive Horizontality

Magdalena Zdrodowska | Jagiellonian University, Kraków

The article was written as a response to the call for papers *Cripping Performing Arts*, edited by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska and Monika Kwaśniewska. The series is published from issue 178.

During the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, artists without disabilities resorted to tactics considered as emblematic for disability art and activism. They cripped artistic practice using strategies that had been developed for years by artists and activists with disabilities. The main aim of this essay is to analyse examples of such cripping practices taking the categories of horizontal aesthetics and bed activism as a starting point. The tension between temporality and chronicity is also explored as a decisive feature in the context of the cripping of art (and other activities in public space). Finally, the article argues that the creative strategies in question have deeper roots going back to 20th century neo-avant-garde practices.

Keywords: disability; crip; art; activism; COVID-19

Katarzyna Żeglicka's manifesto 'Who Gives Me the Right to Be Crip' begins with the following insight:

> I may be wrong but cripping has become fashionable in Poland. It seems to be bandied about left and right […] The non-disabled, heteronormative, neurotypical majority is cripping the mainstream before the disabled community has done it. I read about it in articles and event descriptions […] Cripping has been colonized (2023).

I interpret Żeglicka's words as a critique of appropriating cripping as an aesthetic and identity category and of applying the term to non-disabled artists. Żeglicka's critique is not accompanied by specific examples of such appropriations, as the author focuses on her own experience.

I concur with Żeglicka's observation that elements of the crip artistic practice of people with disabilities are seeping into the mainstream (in art, performance, activism and the academy) and that the history and legacy of people with disabilities and their communities are being bypassed in the process. My reading of this process, however, is different from hers. Instead of defining it as appropriation, I regard it as re-invention of crip strategies by people without experience of disability. Some forms of crip artistic practice were already to be found in the twentieth-century counterculture, and it can be argued that they correspond in character with the current turn towards slowness and rest, both involving resistance to capitalist productivity and monetizing diverse embodiments of slow culture. This turn was apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I consider the related quarantines and lockdowns as the cause of the trend of artists and arts organizations adopting cripping practices.

In this article I focus on selected practices I regard as important in the cripping of the arts and the theoretical propositions used to analyze them. I

argue that contemporary arts practice is being cripped by artists with disabilities as well as artists without personal experience of disability who, however, have no desire to take over crip strategies. Both groups adopt similar tactics arising from lack and restriction. What distinguishes them, however, is the temporal span of the restriction. While for people without disabilities it tends to be temporary (as it was the case with pandemic lockdowns), for many people with disabilities it is chronic.

What is cripping (the arts)?

Disability art is transgressive since it entails the transgression of the prevalent ideas of who can be an arts practitioner and who has actual access to the public sphere, public space, education and the institutions that validate artistic work as professional. It also challenges the established divide between art work recognized as critical artistic expression and art work considered as an element of therapy.

Another reason that makes disability art transgressive in that it is often designed not so much around an end product, be it an artwork, theatre work or performance, but around a creative process conducive to interdependence, relationality, collectivity and collaboration. A prime example is the portraits of people with disabilities by Riva Lehrer, an American artist with disability. Her work is reminiscent of the Renaissance tradition of depicting subjects surrounded by objects reflecting their interests, values or social status. For Lehrer, the finished products (portraits) are important (they are exhibited in galleries, reproduced and analyzed), but equally important is the process of their creation.

The artist refers to the process as ‘circular and collaborative’ (2022a),

describing her method as follows:

> For decades, my portrait collaborators have come to the privacy of my home studio and participated in intense, profound live sittings. I believe that the true product of a portrait is not the object, but the exchanges between artist and collaborator. Intimacy is the very foundation of what we do (2022b).

Lehrer repeatedly meets and talks with her sitters, shares her space with them, invites them to stay at her home. When discussing her work, she foregrounds relationality and communalizes the creative process by defining her subjects as collaborators who are not just models and interlocutors but also guests at her home.

Importantly, Lehrer's practice strongly foregrounds an intimate, domestic space, temporarily and cyclically shared with her sitters as part of the creative process, which distinguishes it from the studio as a space located outside home, associated with professionalized artistic production.

Technology-mediated online interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted Riva Lehrer's working mode. Due to pandemic restrictions, her portrait-painting sessions were held in front of computer screens. This mode of collaboration resulted in the creation of a portrait of Alice Wong, an American disabled essayist and activist. In it, Wong sits in an electric wheelchair, wearing a mask attached to her ventilator tube, both the wheelchair and the mask being integral to her daily life and serving as hallmarks of her media persona. She is portrayed within the video chat interface among other desktop screen items. This is how Lehrer summed up the period of her work during the Covid pandemic:

> After several panicky months, I developed methods that allowed me to persist. I began by doing portraits over Zoom, drawing my collaborators framed in the rectangle of my laptop screen. There were good conversations, but not quite what happens when we are together; just the slightest bit less fluid and honest (2022b).

Lehrer considers the experience as disruptive to her relational and hospitable working mode, although, as she told Wong, the pandemic made her realize that her previous working method excluded some people – her lift and bathroom, which were inaccessible to electric wheelchair users, would prevent Wong from visiting and staying at her home.

The successive lockdowns disrupted the normative cycles of cultural endeavour, forcing them online. Audiences and arts funding bodies adopted and accepted relationality and the use of private spaces as legitimate work environments. In their work, artists turned to their own bodies, intimate settings and widely available tools such as smartphones and webcams. The strategies, tactics and means they adopted are reminiscent of the relational artistic practice of people with disabilities, rooted in the body and its condition and involving domestic spaces and inexpensive tools.

Artists with disabilities, many of whom have to navigate permanent scarcity, lack and inaccessibility outside of pandemic restrictions, develop strategies and modes of action that involve individual and communal support. This applies not only to artistic practice but also to everyday survival strategies in a world governed by scarcity rather than abundance. Arseli Dokumaci, an ethnographer and disability studies scholar, writes about shrinkage, defining it as ‘a lessening or diminishing in relation to the scope or range that was available before’ (2023, p. 18). As one’s health deteriorates or disability

progresses, the opportunities offered by the environment shrink.

But as challenging and traumatizing as limitations may be, notes Dokumaci, they also inspire creativity: ‘when the environment’s offerings narrow, and when its materiality turns into a set of constraints rather than opportunities, the improvisatory space of performance opens up and lets us imagine that same materiality otherwise’ (2023, p. 7). Dokumaci describes examples of daily improvisations developed by people with disabilities (she conducted research among people living with rheumatoid arthritis and chronic pain) to help them navigate a reality whose offering of opportunities is diminishing. As she notes, in the face of the climate crisis, pollution and wars, opportunities shrink for both those with and without disabilities. And this prospect looms before many of us. In this context, the daily improvisations of people with disabilities chart potential strategies for coping with a shrinking pool of resources and opportunities.

I regard COVID-19 lockdowns as marking a radical, traumatic shrinkage of opportunities. In the fields of education, work, activism, art and performance, they entailed the adoption of solutions that had long been used by people with disabilities. Excellent examples of this process are described in the online document ‘COVID E-lit: Digital Art During the Pandemic’ (2022), a collection of online interviews conducted by Scott Rettberg, Ashleigh Steele, Søren Pold and Anna Nacher with artists working in the field of electronic literature, i.e. literary practices in the digital environment.[1] The interviewees recount their pandemic experiences of containment, isolation and professional precariousness. They note the role of the yearning for face-to-face interaction and for being in public spaces, of seeking new creative strategies and ways to reach audiences, and of disrupting the boundary between private and public. Those working in the

field of electronic literature must have expertise and tools, but some of the pandemic projects discussed in the document pivot on the physicality of the creators, the use of simple and accessible tools, and practices that can be pursued in one's immediate environment. Notable, too, is the relationality inherent in these projects. In *I Got Up, Pandemic Edition* 2020, Xtine Burrough references *I Got Up* (1968–1979), a mail art project by the Japanese artist On Kawara, who sent daily postcards rubber-stamped with the time he rose from bed to two of his friends. Burrough reprised On Kawara's gesture using her mobile phone. She noted down the date and time of her getting up on various surfaces – her hands, paper or paving slabs (while walking her dog), or composed them out of her dog's treats (which the dog then ate) – before filming them. As Burrough points out, some of her daily acts of noting down were performed while playing with her children, who she was taking care of full time after the closing of schools and kindergartens. Kawara's self-referential gesture was transformed into a diary of family life in which Burrough disclosed communal activities and acts of care such as cooking for others or looking after her children or dog.

In the projects discussed in 'COVID E-lit', the turn towards the body and its functions, primarily breathing, is clearly visible. The artists' recording of their breathing was a meaningful gesture in the context of COVID-19 symptoms and a political gesture in the context of the murder of George Floyd and global inequalities addressed by Achille Mbembe (2021). Whilst Annie Abrahams recorded her own breathing as part of *Pandemic Encounter*, Anna Nacher and Victoria Vesna launched *Breath Library* (2021), a project comprising a breath repository (to which anyone can submit a recording of their breathing) and online community meetings/workshops/meditations focused on care. This recourse to the artists' own bodies and the prominence accorded to quotidian, trivial or so-common-that-almost-unnoticeable

activities was the outcome of the temporary shrinkage of possibilities and of the practice of joining together into care-based collectives. All this correlates strongly with the permanent lacks and limitations experienced by artists with disabilities and with the ways these lacks are navigated.

Horizontal aesthetics and bed activism

In this section I discuss two theoretical notions that can be used to describe and analyze disability-related activities playing out at the interface of art and activism, particularly in the conditions of pandemic containment: horizontal aesthetics, proposed by Noa Winter in their articles ‘Aesthetics of Horizontal Access – An Ode to Lying Down in Art Spaces’ (2020) and ‘Aesthetics of Pain, Fatigue, and Rest: Working Methods of Chronically Ill Artists within Disability-led Performances’ (2023), and bed activism, as proposed by Noemi Nishida in her book *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Desire*(2022). Noa Winter, a curator, theatre-maker and accessibility expert, note:

> in a traditional Western theater setting, the most common and unquestioned requirement for attending a performance is the capability to sit quietly for at least one hour without a break. The vertical positions of sitting, walking, or standing seem to pervade all kinds of attending artistic work […]. Verticality seems to imply being open, public, and creative (2020).

Winter argue that the opposite of verticality, horizontality, is commonly associated with privacy and sleep and, in public space, with homelessness, intoxication and, occasionally, holiday-time relaxation. It is thus linked to an

absence of productivity or attentiveness. Winter's claim 'lying down seems to violate the rules of what it means to be a "good" audience member' (2020) holds true for both the arts field and the academy. Identifying with queer, disabled and chronically pained people, whose queerness, disability and pain affect their engagement with artistic work, particularly in institutional settings, Winter point out that horizontality has long been present in the history of art, invoking the example of Frida Kahlo, who painted lying down and had her bed moved to the gallery to attend the opening of her 1953 exhibition.[2] Proposing horizontality, Winter primarily discuss accessibility of diverse arts spaces to audiences. They speak of their own discomfort and pain when they had to stay in a position dictated by the auditorium chair at a show by Claire Cunningham, an icon of disability performance and dance. Winter stress that 'even our understanding of access [...] is still highly influenced by ableist norms' (2020) and they point to the aesthetic potential of horizontality, not only in relation to creative strategies or artistic practices but also with regard to the way an artwork, theatre show or performance is engaged with. Winter describe how their lying down on the floor during the Cunningham show affected their perception and reception of it. Their perspective changed – not only did they see differently the performer's body and the way she moved and handled objects, such as her crutches or the upturned cups she walked on, but their perception of the sounds changed too. Winter stress that (2020) 'being horizontal is the gateway to a whole new world of aesthetic experiences' (2020).

Akemi Nishida investigates another dimension of horizontality, bed activism, defining it as 'resistance and visioning as well as bed-centred critique of social oppressions emerging from people's bed spaces – and particularly the beds of disabled and sick people' (2020, p. 159). Providing examples of bed activism, Nishida invokes mechanisms of building online care and support

communities through blogging (or content creating, as we would say today), writing and signing petitions, as well as exerting pressure on politicians (organizations and companies).[3]

The researcher also frames the practices of art, storytelling, and love-making – particularly the love-making of people from marginalized groups who are often denied the right to it – in terms of bed activism.[4] Importantly, for her, bed activism and bed-born wisdom apply not only to activists and artists who stay at their homes but also to people who stay in bed at establishments such as hospices, hospitals and nursing homes. I consider it particularly important to recognize the experience of these people in terms of knowledge and competence.

The horizontality proposed by Noa Winter and the bed-related practices discussed by Akemi Nishida stem from the bodily experience of disability, chronic fatigue or pain. These activities are predicated on allowing modes of corporeal public participation (in the arts, the academy and, more broadly, political activity and representation) other than those customarily acknowledged and accepted as reflecting the ideals of independence, productivity and efficiency.

A notable example of making art and exercising agency from bed is *Culicidae*(2022), a short film directed and produced by the Australian artist Greg Moran, who is a quadriplegic. Moran is also the script-writer and plays the lead (and only) role in the film. His protagonist battles the titular mosquito throughout the six-minute film. We watch him from above, in close-up, lying in a medical bed. He’s wearing an oxygen mask to help him breathe and is surrounded by medical instruments and everyday objects which are within easy reach of his mouth. Using his mouth, he efficiently manages his

environment: he drinks, covers himself, makes telephone calls, turns on and off the lights and operates his bed by deftly moving a plastic stick he holds in his mouth. His fight with the mosquito, which puts one in mind of cinematographic sword duels, is a masterclass in using the tool. After several suspenseful and humorous attempts to kill the insect with the end of the stick after it alights on various objects, the protagonist triumphs and breathes a sigh of relief, only to hear the hateful buzzing again. The film is a testament to Moran's mastery of the tools at his disposal. The auteur nature of the picture, of which Moran is producer, director and writer, also demonstrates his prowess and competence in managing the complex process of film production.

The Other Side of Dance (*O outro lado da dança*, 2022) by Diana Niepce, a Portuguese dancer and choreographer with a mobility disability, is a perverse variation on horizontality and verticality. The performance begins with the performer being dragged onto the stage. Crawling and pulling herself up, Niepce moves across the floor – with difficulty, slowly but efficiently, exploring the possibilities of her body. Niepce's horizontal choreography poses a counterpoint to her verticalization as the dancer becomes attached to a crane operated by her stage partner. Supported by the machine, Niepce's body 'stands' on the stage before rising up and circling in a fast-paced flight which the artist seems to have no control over and which, by her own admission, is brutal and painful. The autonomous horizontality, which corresponds to the condition and dynamics of Niepce's body, is juxtaposed against a coercive, violent and out-of-control verticality.

One must remember, however, that horizontality and staying in bed as artistic or resistance practices are not exclusive to the arts and people with disabilities. Mark Twain was a champion of writing from bed. Lying down,

reclining and bed were also an important part of the work and social life of the Polish poet, writer and playwright Miron Białoszewski (*Polegiwania/Lyings*, 1961), a vital component of which was his 'bunk'.[5] In the field of art, artists associated with the twentieth-century neo-avant-garde movements such as the Fluxus, including Milan Knížák (the performance *A Walk Around Nový Svět: A Demonstration for All the Senses*, 1964) or Yoko Ono, practised various forms of lying down in public spaces. One of the most famous examples is Yoko Ono's and John Lennon's peace protest held in 1969. The couple stayed in a hotel bed for a fortnight. The photographs of Ono and Lennon lying in bed against the backdrop of an impressive urban view, dressed all in white, entered the canon of 20th-century pop culture as their media visibility brought them wide media exposure. The horizontality of the body in public space was also explored by the French performer Orlan, once briefly associated with the Fluxus. In her 'MesuRages' performance series (launched in the 1970s) Orlan would lie down and crawl on gallery floors measuring the space with her own body.

In Paisid Aramphongphan's book *Horizontal Together: Art, Dance, and Queer Embodiment in 1960s New York* (2021), horizontality is a significant element of the author's examination of queer embodiment in the art, dance and performance work of three 1960s New York avant-garde artists: Andy Warhol, Jack Smith and Fred Herko. Aramphongphan looks at lying down, reclining and staying in bed as both the subject of art and the target mode of engaging with it. He discusses performances taking place in private apartments with audience members reclining on the floor. The researcher quotes the words of the artist Harold Stevenson concerning his large-scale canvas *The New Adam* depicting a reclining naked man: 'the best way to view the painting is by lying on the floor – therefore unable to see the limits of the canvas, lost in it, as it were' (2021, p. 4). Aramphongphan treats

horizontality as a useful tool for visual analysis of works of art. He also sees it as conducive to attaining non-hierarchicality in making and writing about art. Horizontality provides an essential language for describing non-authoritarian collaboration and care strategies that do not rely on one-person leadership.

Artists and performers have used the transgressiveness of public horizontality as a tool of institutional critique by practising public horizontality outside galleries or transgressing the institutional norms of artistic production and reception.

It is also worth mentioning activist lie-ins, which can be traced back to the tradition of *satyagraha*, the tactic of non-violent resistance that Mahatma Gandhi turned into a tool of political action. *Satyagraha* entered into dialog with and influenced Western traditions of civil disobedience and passive resistance.

Lie-ins, which are predominantly held in public spaces (with rare exceptions such as Ono's and Lennon's protest), have become the staple of resistance in the fields of politics, ecology and health policies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They have spawned a number of variations, such as 'die-ins', including the early 1980s New York protests against the US authorities' denial of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, during which protesters lay down in churches and in the streets pretending to be dead or unconscious, and 'sit-ins', or chain-ins (or similar forms of protest), in public spaces resorted to by climate and environmental protesters (e.g. 'Just Stop Oil' campaign). During radical lie-ins, public spaces are occupied for extended periods and transformed into temporarily domestic, intimate spaces, including places of rest and sleep (such as the tent cities of #occupymovement or the activities of the Polish She-Wolves/Wilczyce collective in defence of the Carpathian

Primeval Forest). The practice, in its various incarnations, has been adopted by people with disabilities to occupy government buildings (e.g. Federal Offices in Philadelphia in 1977 or the Polish Parliament in 2018) or to paralyze public transport by lying down in front of inaccessible buses (e.g. ADAPT groups' protests across the USA in the early 1980s).

The Polish influencer couple of Wojciech Sawicki and his wife Agata Tomaszewska, known online as Life on Wheelz, represent an interesting way of practicing horizontality and bed activism. Sawicki, who has a disability, gives prominence to his bed setting in his YouTube series 'In Bed with Wojtek Sawicki'. The perverseness of the title seems intentional – the influencer duo has made their name by publishing content that breaks stereotypes and upends prejudices against the sexuality of people with disabilities. The couple have advertized Durex condoms and appeared on the cover of the acclaimed weekly opinion magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny* in a photograph referencing Annie Leibovitz's famous portrait of Lennon and Ono, with a naked Sawicki and a fully dressed Tomaszewska looking directly into the camera.[6] Explaining the title of the YouTube series, Sawicki says that 'first […] I am in bed, and second, I invite you into my intimate world'.[7] The videos' opening sequence is a montage of photographic portraits of Sawicki that show him making faces, all taken from above and capturing Sawicki lying in bed. All videos follow the same format: the influencer lies in bed and speaks for several minutes, filmed in a single shot by a camera placed over his bed. Sawicki, positioned in the centre of the frame and gazing directly into the camera, delivers a narrative focused on his experiences and emotions. In this respect, the series fits perfectly into the vlog format common on YouTube and other social media platforms except it crips it with its evident horizontal form and its content: Sawicki discussing his disability and his fears and anxieties about his future, health or death.

The Facebook page of Life on Wheelz contains a post documenting the making of ‘In Bed with Wojtek Sawicki’ with the caption ‘This is my home recording studio.’ The photograph shows, in side view, the influencer lying on his bed and recording. He is looking up into the camera of the smartphone clipped to a shelf-mounted plank structure, which also supports a computer. His breathing tube, always present in his videos and photographs, can be seen, as can the wires of his recording/streaming equipment. It should be noted that the duo has only recently begun exploring horizontality. Previously, on their social media they emphasized the mobility, activity and verticality afforded to Sawicki by his electric wheelchair. Other influencers/activists with disabilities produce content that is similar in tone, bringing to the fore the potential and possibilities of people with disabilities. In his online content, Sawicki has been videoed in various locations (urban, beachfront, forest). The influencer’s verticality and mobility were on display, but he repeatedly stressed that this came at the cost of great effort by him and his team.

The public reception of lie-ins has been mixed. The protests of Ono and Lennon met with ample criticism levelled not only at the pair’s doing nothing but also at the fact that they were attended to by hotel staff for a fortnight.

Whatever emotions they have provoked, the public lie-ins held to elicit AIDS-prevention steps or aimed against environmental damage did not tend to attract similar criticism. A lie-in in and of itself, therefore, cannot be regarded as elitist and self-focused or, conversely, communal and non-hierarchical. The response to it seems to be predicated on the liers-in’ self-denial of comfort (absent in the Ono and Lennon case) or rest, which, as Winter point out, is integral to sleeping or lying on the beach. Another factor affecting the response and impact of such protests is whether protesters expose themselves to the risks attached to subversive horizontality in public

spaces, such as peace-disturbance charges.

Horizontality has been present in the arts and activism in the 20th and 21st centuries. The representation of reclining and sleeping works differently in different fields of art – it is one of the traditional motifs of painting and sculpture, but it eludes the canon in the case of Andy Warhol filming long periods of sleep in an effort, apparently, to counter the perception of film as a story about events. What appears to unite horizontality-oriented art and activism (treating the two separately is becoming outdated) is the conspicuous and rule-upending transgression inherent in lying down when it occurs outside its customary niche of staging, convention, safety and temporary personal rest. In the section that follows, I look at a different tension, that between disability-grounded practice and practice rooted in other experiences. I believe that at the core of that tension lie the temporality and chronicity of horizontality, which were thrown into relief during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Temporality/Chronicity

I regard the difference between chronicity and temporality as crucial in the cripping practices employed by artists with disabilities, and which, during the pandemic-related quarantines and lockdowns, were increasingly adopted by artists who did not identify with disablity art. During COVID lockdowns people without disabilities experienced temporary isolation, reduced mobility, limited face-to-face interaction and anxiety about their health and life, all of which are the everyday reality for many people with disabilities. The widely held expectation was that the unpleasant predicament would end and things would return to ‘normal’. This perspective is far less common, if at all present, in the spectrum of experiences of people immobilized at

medical and care establishments.

Kateřina Kolářová points out the tension between temporality and chronicity in crisis situations and the social injustice they exacerbate. The researcher uses this dichotomy as an analytical tool to explain the change that occurred over time in the discourses around willingness to sacrifice and the recognition of pandemic vulnerability (2023). Kolářová notes:

> The binary juxtaposition of two temporal regimes (the acute, which was articulated to govern the epidemic threat of viral exposure, and the chronic, which pre-existed and outlasted the exceptionality of the acute) has been crucial for articulation of another distinction: the shared vulnerability of the collective on the one hand, and the individualized identity of the vulnerable on the other (2023).

Critical of the representation of chronic pain in the performing arts and of its absence in disability studies, Noa Winter take a slightly different approach to the dichotomy of temporality and chronicity: ‘acute pain fascinates performance makers, audiences, and scholars alike – but while self-inflicted pain has the ability to engage the spectator, the seemingly unincorporable and undesirable experience of ongoing chronic pain disengages the audience’ (2023, p. 238). They point out: ‘chronic pain and fatigue are often glossed over or omitted in favor of representations that emphasize artistic capacity or a certain playfulness with authenticity and failure’ (2023, p. 233).

Both researchers added the notion of tension between temporality and chronicity to their analytical toolkits in 2023, which may lead one to conclude they did this in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting lockdowns limited the space accessible to artists, activists and

performers (as well as other population members) to their homes, interrupted interpersonal interactions and created a demand for practising and communicating care for self and others. While for most people the situation was only temporary, people with disabilities, including artists, activists and performers, had faced confinement, restricted personal freedom and limited access to public spaces long before the pandemic, some of them chronically, and they navigated these restrictions by adopting practices such as creating art and building care-based collectives.

COVID-19 lockdowns

One can problematize the tension between temporality and chronicity by juxtaposing two Polish online arts projects. In April 2020, during lockdown, Teatr Studio and Komuna Warszawa invited collaborators to join their newly launched ‘Lockdown Project’. The initiative offered financial support to creatives who had lost their income overnight due to lockdown. Participants were invited to create and record performance work in their lockdown locations – domestic, intimate spaces, often shared with others. They were expected to adhere to clearly defined rules in the spirit of minimalist low-tech, making use of everyday objects and their own bodies and to forgo editing. The resulting recordings were then published on YouTube together with a description of the project tenets and the organizers’ statement: ‘Once upon a time Komuna Warszawa launched a project called Microtheatre (Mikro Teatr), urging artists to radically self-restrict, minimizing stage means. It seems now the time has come to take this practice to the next step’ (2020). It was expected that the conditions of pandemic confinement would encourage (or force) the embodiment of this creative philosophy. The recorded performances vary in duration, theme and format. Whilst some of them reflect the trickster spirit, others are a testament to the frustration and

fear of the early weeks of lockdown. Most of them are not dissimilar to one another in terms of choreography and what we actually see on screen. Most performers sit relatively still behind a table (they were required to include a table and use it as the stage), singing, reciting or telling a self-referential story.

In response to this 'lockdown challenge', four dancers, performers and activists with disabilities (Filip Pawlak, Katarzyna Żeglicka, Tatiana Cholewa, Patrycja Nosowicz) recorded a witty and subversive version of it before publishing it on social media as *beyond #lockdown* (2020). Żeglicka, Cholewa and Nosowicz – each in their own home – crafted complex, well-considered, impressive choreographies in accord with the guidelines of the 'Lockdown Project'. Their performances are in stark contrast to the motionless participants of the project, most of whom deliver their lines from behind tables. Monika Kwaśniewska-Mikuła, a theatre studies scholar, emphasizes that the performers interact with their home environments and assistive technologies in an intentional way (2022). Instead of using them or other objects as props or witnesses to their restrictions and lockdown predicament, they incorporate them into their performances in relational and partner-like ways. A montage of their recorded performances is accompanied by Pawlak's powerful and uncompromising off-screen message to the project organizers, participants and all those complaining about their lockdown-induced plight, confinement and radical limitation of possibilities: 'Let's be honest: what do you actually know about self[!]-restriction? Not even a month has passed since you got stuck at home', before adding: 'Dear artists, we stay at home professionally.' Reeling out a witty list, Pawlak reclaims the experience, practice and expertise for people with disabilities: 'We, the titans of self-restrictions, specialists in problem matters, professionally unemployed, woe experts, heroes of social distancing […]

acrobats of ineptitude.' He plays with paradox, combining seemingly distant, or even opposite, concepts that code professionalism, prowess and proficiency in what is generally perceived as negative and unwanted. The experience of shared misfortune and hardship during COVID quarantines and lockdowns united and, to some extent, placed on an equal footing people with and without disabilities. What differentiated the two groups, however, was the expertise people with disabilities had due to their experience, and that differentiating factor was predicated on the temporal perspective – the temporality or chronicity of confinement and radically reduced educational, professional, artistic and social opportunities of the two groups.

The scarcity associated with chronic containment and inaccessibility can inspire creativity and promote interdependent relationships with other people and everyday objects. This is demonstrated by Żeglicka's, Cholewa's and Nosowicz's masterful choreographies and Pawlak's brilliantly written and spoken commentary. We must remember, however, that they are people with disabilities who are active, mobile and have agency. Do they speak about their own experience of disability when they speak about being trapped on the fourth floor? And to what extent their experience of lockdown coincides with, say, the one in residential care homes, which was extreme and far more extended than lockdown for other citizens?[8]

In conclusion

Some practices related to arts production and reception, now associated with practices resulting from the corporeal, cultural and social experience of disability within disability and crip studies, are rooted in artistic and activist strategies known from the 20th-century avant-garde and counterculture. Nowadays they are increasingly being used within mainstream arts by

people with no experience of disability or exclusion. This conjunction of inspirations, revisited tactics and shared creative practices is multi-directional and multi-layered, and it is seen in the work of artists with and without disabilities. It is worth considering the extent to which these practices, and the meanings attached to them, evolve as they are adopted by successive generations and groups of artists. A host of questions arise around horizontal practices and practices pursued from bed. Are they a formal choice outside the received canon or the only mode available to artists, activists and audiences? Are they the product of excess or of scarcity? Are they temporary or chronic? Do they build communal, non-hierarchical relationships?

Pandemic confinement, limited social interaction and a radical cutting off from services and from free access to diverse goods – all of which are part of the daily experience of seniors with limited mobility and people with disabilities and their companions (usually family members, predominantly mothers) – have become an experience shared across the population. The experiences of isolation, scarcity, lack and anxiety about the health of oneself and one's loved ones have become common. This has been accompanied by the amplification of the discourses and practices of care so typical of excluded communities, including the queer community and the community of people with disabilities. Perhaps this temporally commonified experience of trauma, isolation and fear catalyzed the use of similar expressive means and forms of activity. Nevertheless, the capital of experience, action scenarios, inaccessibility-coping mechanisms, mediatized communality and of artistic practices and other forms of artistic creation available to people with disabilities has not been tapped into. The legacy of disability, even if not unprecedented, contains not only projects that are interesting artistically and knowledge-wise but also ready-made scenarios

for activism and artistic practice in situations of lack and crisis.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

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Footnotes

1. For more on electronic literature, see: https://eliterature.org/.
2. Henri Matisse, who became disabled, worked in bed too, as did Salvador Dali, who, however, had no disability.

3. Activities of this type are, rather dismissively, referred to as slacktivism, that is, political or social engagement manifested through online practices such as commenting, liking, sharing or signing petitions, which, while offering a pleasant sense of agency, is safe and undemanding. It is worth remembering that for people for whom other forms of political engagement are inaccessible due to architectural, communication or mental barriers, online activism may be the only form of activity available. Due to the physical state of some online activists and the way they use electronic equipment, it may not come as easy or effortless to them.
4. Heidi Andrea Rhodes (2023) discusses this in the context of (medical) colonialism.
5. Other authors '*writing from bed*' include Aurora Levins Morales, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Johanna Hedva.
6. The photograph is by Renata Dąbrowska.
7. See *Life on Wheelz*, *W łóżku z Wojtkiem Sawickim (In Bed with Wojtek Sawicki)*, https://youtu.be/Va0oAlWnRUM?si=Y4Chb4bz2NBxYeNJ&t=34 [accessed: 20 May 2024].
8. This subject is explored in the documentary *Fire Through Dry Grass* (2022), directed by Andres 'Jay' Molina and Alexis Neophytides.

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/ CRIPPING PERFORMING ARTS

From Plant-Diagnosis to Plant(other)ness: Around the Performance I’m Not a Plant

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In this text I take Aleksandra Skotarek’s performance *I’m Not a Plant: A Stream of Consciousness* (*Nie jestem rośliną. Strumień świadomości*) as my starting point for considering how reflection on the relationship with the vegetal can contribute to understanding disability. Can we think of these kinds of relations – which, following Haraway, I refer to as relations with significant otherness – as cripping the received semantic field and ideas by activating a perspective combining critical plant studies and Haraway’s or Braidotti’s feminist materialism? This perspective corresponds with the notion of plant(other)ness invoked in the text. At the same time, Skotarek’s performance makes us consider the barriers that reflection on posthuman relationality runs into in confrontation with identity politics that seek the recognition of subjectivity, and how a specific experience of disability reconfigures the field of performance that explores relations with the non-human.

Keywords: plant-diagnosis, plant(other)ness, disability, relational feminism, performance

Shown in early February 2023 at the Centre for Inclusive Arts, Warsaw, Miya Masaoka’s installation *When I Was a Plant* featured a large broad-

leaved monstera hooked up to an EEG machine. A suite of sensors recorded the plant's movements and inner impulses in response to contact such as touch. Each touch/movement was transposed into sound. Cards with brief notes lay scattered around the plant. Were the notes intended as records of words 'spoken' by the plant? The sounds generated by the machine were indistinct, contingent on the movements of the plant's stems and leaves, prone to interference, fickle. Unlike the physical contact, however, the words did not seem important. Touch and movement, including the plant's hidden inner flows and impulses, represented the primary form of communication. Only then came the next layer, an attempted translation of contact into sound, which could potentially take verbal form. Thus, Masaoka played not only with our ideas about plants and our relationship with them but also with how we approach communication. Is verbal language always a prerequisite for communication, even if it is purely fictional, imposed? What is language as opposed to what we call noise? Does imagined language inevitably lead to the anthropomorphization of the non-human, to the imposition on plants of terms and notions from outside the realm of vegetation? Or, rather, does the plant's purely speculative speech direct our attention to potential communication forms whose starting point would be a relationship with the non-human, to the possibility of imagining other shapes and new forms of subjects, bodies, matter?

In her performative talk accompanying the installation, Masaoka referenced her other works fuelled by her fascination with plants and with the body and voice. Her artistic explorations and experiments are a form of research into the relations between matter, movement and voice (such as her research into sounds produced inside the body), interrogating the forms of agency generated at the interface of movement and stillness, action and passivity, body and language. The provocative statement in the title of the installation

(*When I Was a Plant*) aptly conveys the speculative, imaginative nature of these questions and of possible stories that can be derived from them. Who says these words? The artist, who seeks new forms of subjectivity? Or the monstera hooked up to the machine? Or perhaps someone interacting with the plant via both touch/body and technology? It seems that the story beginning with the words 'When I was a plant…' could be situated in an in-between zone: at the interface of the human and the vegetal, in the imaginary sphere of plant(other)ness.[1] Can we imagine being like a plant? Or being a plant? What does this image presuppose? What does it open up? What does it lead to?

During a discussion with the artist after her talk, her speculative words 'when I was a plant' were contrasted with a firm statement by Theatre 21 actress Aleksandra Skotarek, 'I'm not a plant'. A few months later, this sentence-manifesto took the form of a solo performance, which premiered on 23 April 2023 at the Centre for Inclusive Arts. I read it both as a kind of artistic response and as a personally and socially embedded statement about relations with plants, plant(other)ness and subjectivity.

In 'Crip Kin, Manifesting', Alison Kafer, drawing on the work of Sunaura Tylor, Lisa Bufano and Sandie Yi, interrogates the unorthodox artistic strategies involving the use of technologies stereotypically perceived as compensating for disability-related lacks (such as wheelchairs, leg prostheses or diverse orthoses). In the creative use of these technologies, Kafer sees the potential to explore a singular intertwining of bodies, identities and things, which she perceives through the lens of the notion of 'crip kin'. Drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of 'kinship', she reflects on its potential to research relationships with the non-human based on the experience of disability (Kafer, 2019). I would like to alter this perspective

slightly and, taking as my starting point Aleksandra Skotarek's performance *I'm Not a Plant: A Stream of Consciousness* (*Nie jestem rośliną. Strumień świadomości*), to consider how reflection on our relation with plants can contribute to understanding disability. Can we think of these kinds of relations – which, following Haraway, I refer to as relations with significant otherness – as cripping the received semantic field and ideas by activating a perspective combining critical plant studies and Haraway's and Braidotti's feminist materialism? At the same time, Skotarek's performance makes us consider the barriers that reflection on posthuman relationality runs into in confrontation with identity politics that seek the recognition of subjectivity, and how a specific experience of disability reconfigures the field of performance that explores relations with the non-human.

However, rather than begin my reflection on the relationship between the vegetal and the human, between plant(other)ness and disability, by describing the artistic event that provoked this reflection, I will address the theory that the event pointed me to, and which first appeared in my sights in connection with Masaoka's earlier performative installation; the theory that has now reappeared and demanded a reconsideration. The order and temporality of engagement with a work of art and its interpretation is not always clear. Perhaps it was not the performance that pointed me to certain concepts in my search of a theoretical framework for its interpretation. It might have been the other way round: certain notions and theoretical perspectives of post-anthropocentric reflection and new feminist materialisms may have shaped my attitude, affecting not only the kind of questions I asked after engaging with the performance but also my affective response. The latter involved feelings of uncertainty and dismay as well as fascination, prompting a close look at the points of intersection where these emotions arose: the interface of performance and discourses external to it.

So perhaps – starting from the end, which sometimes precedes the beginning/event – it is worth examining the intertwining of the two and what follows from it for the order of interpretation regarding the plant(other)ness question in the context of disability.

There is a reason why I frame this problem like this – pondering the relation between the theoretical and the affective, between speculation and experience, between the position of knowledge and one's own position in relation to someone else's words and experience. Proceeding from the end, I will start by invoking Ariel Modrzyk's proposition made in the context of the relation between humans and plants. Drawing on the notion of care derived from the domain of the emotional and corporeal rather than the rational and intellectual, Modrzyk reflects on the relation between emotion and theory and between body and knowledge (see Modrzyk, 2020). Asking a question that engages issues of plant ethics, or perhaps ethics related to our relation with otherness, 'Do we need theory and knowledge in order to care for the other?', he points out that 'it is emotions that can cause us to want to express something, naming it aptly' (2020, p. 223). The idea is not to privilege one domain over the other or to establish a chronology of knowledge and experience but to differentiate the sources of the two, to show the flows and interrelationships between affective stimulation and its discursive ordering. This gesture, however, entails a broadening of the field of reflection and a reclamation of some sources of knowledge that have at times been depreciated:

> Becoming a plant, that is, blurring the boundaries between the human and the vegetal, might require an appreciation of elements of our functioning such as intuition, emotion and non-discursive corporeal experience, which are not highly valued in sciences. That

> which is excluded from them or behind the scenes might need to be revalued to appreciate modes of vegetal existence (p. 223)

At the same time, a theoretical re-evaluation of the relation between humans and plants enables making the above shift in the domain of knowledge and affective-corporeal experience. On the one hand, Modrzyk seems to say that too much theory can obscure the relation in question. On the other hand, it is a search for a new conceptual framework and its origins that enables co-constituting this relation rather than expressing it.

The reflection on the relation between the human and the vegetal set in motion by Modrzyk resonates remarkably well with the kind of questions set in motion by Skotarek's performance. I will have a closer look at them, according special attention to the elements that best resonate with the artist's performative statement, which provoke one – paradoxically, by revealing deep layers of negativity, which I will address later – to attempt a similar re-evaluation within a specific mode of this relation that includes the experience of disability.

As the author states, 'a multidimensional framing of human-plant relations is in keeping with a processual and relational approach to identity' (2020, p. 214), a clear reference to post-anthropocentric perspectives developed by new materialisms.[2] It is worth noting here that identity so understood is performative in character, as it is not so much given as it is becoming or happening within a certain relation. The processual framing of identity allows the author to remodel the framing of the human–plant relation, shifting away from a perspective foregrounding a fundamental inequality, a hierarchical power structure and domination of humans over the vegetal world towards a more diversified and nuanced view incorporating the aspect

of the human–plant relation linked to the notion of fragility. At the same time, Modrzyk does not seek to deny the devastating impact of humans on the natural world resulting from the adoption of certain ways of classifying and valuing various modes of life, but wants to reflect, on the one hand, on what lies at the root of the desire to control and dominate the natural world, and which manifests through various forms of fear and, on the other, on what may result from a re-evaluation of this relation for the understanding of the process of becoming an other and with an other in the experience of interdependence. Modrzyk distinguishes three types of phobias related to the human–plant relation: the fear of being grown on, the fear of the desert and the fear of vegetation, that is, of becoming plant-like or even becoming a plant. His proposed response to these forms of biophobia, one based on a re-evaluation of our relation with vegetal life forms, is to 'allow ourselves to be grown on' (2020, pp. 223–225). This proposition translates into specific practices that involve, for example, foregoing or partially foregoing the building of tight barriers between the built environment and the natural environment and reducing the temptation to completely control plant growth and spread. It also means accepting the emergence of transitional, hybrid spaces, adopting a different perspective on wasteland and weeds. The proposition to allow oneself to be grown on also has an identity dimension and potential, as it entails rethinking the boundaries of the subject, the very concept of subjectivity and the conditions of the subject's functioning. Instead of thinking about, for example, continuous growth, productivity and efficiency inherent in the idea of controlled cultivation by an active agent (the human being in this case), one can imagine the potential of foregoing total control, of embracing a passivity that enables noticing other forms of activity and agency specific to what used to be perceived as residue of passivity. As Modrzyk puts it, '"Allowing oneself to be grown on" or

“allowing spread” does not necessarily mean doing “more”. It would suffice to do “less” and forego certain fencing practices’ (2020, p. 225). This stance ‘would not […] mean relinquishing boundaries *per se* but changing their status to more negotiable, permeable, contextual and contingent, allowing for more hybrid links and intertwinings of different forms of life’ (ibid.). The identity dimension of this stance involves not only allowing thinking about more processual and hybrid types of subjectivity that derive from relations with otherness but also moving away from the dualist subject/object position typical of a post-Enlightenment perspective. This entails rethinking and deconstructing dualist pairs of notions such as activity and passivity, autonomy and dependence, movement and immobility, as well as life and absence of life, which, in the context of disability, can be recast as living life to the full and living like a plant, ‘vegetating’ as a form of mere survival.

Let’s pause for a moment here, because while the proposition to allow oneself to be grown on, to dare forgo controlling growth and putting constant limits on proliferation, seems to be a response to the first of the biophobias distinguished by Modrzyk, it is not clear whether it is equally relevant to the fear of vegetation, and whether the strategy of negotiating boundaries between humans and plants will have the same potential for re-evaluating the category of identity in the context of that fear. This question seems particularly relevant when dealing with the experience of disability. How relevant is the proposition to allow oneself to be grown on, understood also as tapping the potential of vegetal life forms, for the vegetation–disability relationship? It seems that this proposition reveals all its theoretical and affective potential in situations in which the fear of being like a plant is not only linked with the fear of a potential threat of loss of control and of degradation to a lower life level, which stems from ideas about plants, but with the experience of facing a refusal to have one’s full

subjectivity and humanity recognized. For, theoretically, the proposition of allowing oneself to be grown on, associated with the recognition of the self-existence of plant life forms, may help us take over the derogatory phrase ‘you are a plant’ and crip it in a biodiversity-affirming gesture. On the affective level, however, this may require confronting a tangled web of dark negativity. Aleksandra Skotarek’s performance, whose very title does not convey an affirmation of plant-like forms of existence but a rejection of the plant comparison in a gesture of defending one’s subjectivity, leads the audience through an experience of negativity towards seeking strategies for the emancipation of a disabled identity. Gradually emerging from the initial territory of denial, rejection and negation of the vegetal, however, is what led me – in confrontation with an artistic statement exploring a particular experience – to seek the potential of a rethought human–plant relation for dismantling derogatory stereotypes of disability.

The performance *I’m Not a Plant: A Stream of Consciousness*, directed by Justyna Wielgus, has so far been staged at the Centre for Inclusive Arts in Warsaw. The venue, which used to house a grocery shop, is quite special: it is long and narrow, which imposes limitations while posing a challenge and offering some opportunities. Its size generates (or imposes) an intimate perception owing to the proximity between the audience, seated along the longer sides of the rectangular performance area, and the performer, Aleksandra Skotarek. All artefacts used in the performance, as well as the plants co-present in the space, are right in front of the audience too. In addition, the viewers who face each other are within personal distance of each other. When describing the performance, I consult my memory of that intimate experience as well as video footage and the script written by the dramaturge Justyna Lipko-Konieczna who incorporated the material

improvised in rehearsal by Aleksandra Skotarek and excerpts from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, one of the first inspirations for the piece.

The shorter sides of the performance area are delimited by screens. For most of the performance, one of the screens shows a looped video of an empty white space with a metal hospital bed on which lies an oxygen-mask-wearing female actress hooked up to an IV drip. A similar IV drip stands near the huge monstera in the performance space. Moving in the opposite direction to the screen displaying the image of the body, our gaze lands on the green tangle of the plant's body. At one point, another video starts playing on the other screen, featuring an actress wearing a long skirt and a white lacy brooch-adorned blouse, an outfit akin to those worn by Virginia Woolf. With a mysterious smile, Skotarek saunters among buildings, many of which are surrounded by or overgrown with lush vegetation. At first, we mostly see white walls, neo-classical sculptures, noticeboards and the actress stopping by them. Gradually, however, the camera follows Skotarek towards the leaves and flowers growing on the buildings, showing up close the coexistence of architecture and vegetation. The vegetation is exuberant without seeming rampant or wild. Tended by the human hand, hence subject to control, it is tenderly touched by the actress approaching the leaves and creepers. It seems to have a living presence. This relationship through touch problematizes not only the presence of the plants but also that of the actress who engages in a direct relation with them. This relation is juxtaposed against her relation with the gaze of the passers-by she chances on in front of the gate leading to the building- and plant-filled site seen earlier – the grounds of the University of Warsaw. At the back, opposite the university building, we see another gate, opening onto the courtyard of the Academy of Fine Arts. Superimposed on the footage is projected text from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The first excerpt ends with the telling words

‘Strolling through those colleges […] As I leant against the wall the University indeed seemed a sanctuary in which are preserved rare types which would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement of the Strand.’ (Woolf, 1929) Woolf’s words, which have an ironic ring in the context of her thoughts on men’s and women’s unequal access to education and creative work, and target patriarchal institutions and social organization, take on added significance here. One is struck by the notion of ‘preserved rare types’. Who or what is protected in this particular sanctuary? Who or what is excluded? Are the curious stares that escort the actress to the university gate attracted by her outfit from another era or by the fact that a person with Down’s syndrome is a rare sight on the campus? The limits of accessibility are unclear here – the campus remains open,[3] but Skotarek does not enter any of the university buildings. She walks around the campus, interacting with the surroundings. She touches the plants, which, as we’ve just learnt, touch her in a special way.

Each of the spaces evoked here is weighted with meaning, both symbolic and institutional. On the one hand there’s the hospital, on the other the university. Stretching between them is the zone of theatre and play where the relation with plant(other)ness is being negotiated. Before seeing the spaces in the videos, we look at the space of the performative actions performed among the plants dotted around, immersing ourselves in the stream of words spoken her actress, which we hear in our headphones throughout the show. The titular stream of consciousness begins even before the actress enters the performance space:

> When a baby is born with a genetic defect, does it grow shoots and roots? When my professor saw me, did he pick up a book and open it to a page about vegetation? He’s published over a hundred

> papers and academic textbooks… I can imagine him walk up to my mother and say: ‘The baby I’ve just brought into the world has a genetic defect, the baby will be a plant’, ‘a plant unaware of anything’, the baby has Down’s syndrome…, mental retardation, a closed mind. The baby won’t be mentally functional… (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

We are immediately plunged into the midst of the fear of vegetation, of being like a plant, of being a plant, which Modrzyk recognizes as one of the main forms of biophobia. Skotarek ushers us into a story where this fear takes root in a specific body, but the response is not the passivity stereotypically associated with plants; rather, it is a firm resistance and a complex process of negotiation with plant(other)ness in the process of constituting one’s identity.

The fear of being a plant is not visually represented by an image related to flora: it is neither rampant weeds nor a solitary specimen of a species struggling to survive in the desert. The fear of being like a plant, of being a plant, is distinct from the fear of being grown on and of desertification, of excess and lack. Its status is different, although, in a sense, it reflects both excess and lack at the same time. The performance includes the most pervasive projection of this fear, which has social roots: the image of the body lying in the hospital bed shown on the first screen (to fully convey the stereotyped fear, I should have written ‘the image of the bed-bound body’). Complimenting this image, seen on the screen for most of the performance, is the oxygen mask on the actress’s face, the IV and the empty and sterile white interior. This makes the image extremely evocative, even though the actress remains still and silent, or perhaps because of this: it amplifies the affective message, which invokes the fear – rooted in stereotypical ideas – of

both excess of matter and scarcity of life. This ambivalence pertains to the ideas of vegetal life and thus in the fear of vegetation evoked here.

Such ideas have a long pedigree in Western culture. ‘The assumed lack of complexity characteristic of higher life forms positions plants on the lowest rung of the ladder of life, between the inanimate world and the animal world’, notes Magdalena Zamorska (2022, p. 200), adding that, according to Aristotle,

> the tripartite human soul (the psyche means spirit, soul, life, vital energy, potency, power) is composed of the plant (or vegetal, or nourishing) soul marked only by its capacity for unlimited growth and multiplication, the animal soul, endowed with the ability to feel, experience and move, and the human soul, capable of thinking, speaking and reasoning (2022, p. 200).

Derived from Aristotle’s concept, this hierarchy of life forms invokes the category of consciousness, which is differentiating in character and intertwined with the capacity to think, speak and reason, which thinking, speaking and reasoning regarded as activities of the self-conscious self.

‘This baby will be a plant, a plant unaware of anything’, the audience hears the actress say in their headphones, quoting the words of the doctor present at her birth. The same voice adds,

> Are plants in the Himalayas different? Do plants in the Himalayas have retardation in their minds?
> Professor Lech Korniszewski, my professor, my Himalayan climber. The first to teach genetics in Poland, at the Medical Academy in

> Warsaw. He went on ten climbing expeditions in the Himalayas. What kind of plant did he see in me? Naked? I was born naked. Did he see naked plant life?

The first sentences the audience hears in their headphones at the start of the performance, which open the titular stream of consciousness, seem to refer to facts from the actress's life but at the same time have a phantasmagorical side to them, amplified by the somewhat dream-like nature of the images evoked by what Skotarek does on stage. She enters the performance space dressed in a flowery dressing gown, a long striped black-and-white scarf, a winter cap, and ski goggles over her eyes. Wearing cross-country skis on her feet, she moves slowly but steadily along the narrow space, right past the audience seated on either side, carefully navigating around the numerous potted plants placed all over the floor. She then lifts one of the plants off the floor before carrying it towards a stylized sofa located under the screen displaying the image of the hospital bed. The sofa is covered with a fabric featuring generic painting scenes against a background of lush vegetation. The actress takes off her winter clothes and accessories, stands with her legs wide apart and places the potted plant between them. She tilts her head back and starts taking deep breaths. This image echoes the birth scene mentioned before, but Skotarek does not so much invoke her mother as becomes at once the one giving birth and the one being born, while the plant, which she removes from between her legs to stroke it, cuddle and hold to her breast, is both her and not her. The plant is the unwanted, rejected diagnosis and the part of her self that demands care and tenderness. However, the journey from the plant-diagnosis to the relation with one's own plant(other)ness is neither easy nor straightforward. What might be the purpose of this journey and what is at stake in the effort involved?

Referencing feminist plant studies, Zamorska notes,

> The philosophical practices that model human thinking on vegetal modes of being are, from the perspective of the feminist ethic of care, less relevant than a concern for the visibility and well-being of specific, material and embodied beings. The starting point of feminist plant studies is to recognize the ontological and political status of plants (2022, p. 203).

Can such an essentially feminist rethinking of the status of plants, which takes into account their specific ontology and politicity, lead to the development of not only a new ethics of care for vegetal beings but also a new ethics based on relationality and interdependence with otherness conceived no longer in terms of binary differences but as a spectrum of diversity? And can this be done based not so much on 'model[ling] human thinking on vegetal modes of being' but on remodelling our thinking on our relation with plant(other)ness and all 'otherness'? This is the direction in which Zamorska's argument is going. She notes,

> from a critical and feminist perspective, new stories and new speculations are needed from which a different multi-genre politics and ethics can emerge, one based on care and thoughtfulness. In keeping with the proposition to craft new stories for a new world, storytellers and listeners propose narratives and ideas going beyond what was acceptable and conceivable in the modern paradigm. Only thinking differently enables one to act differently. (2022, pp. 209-210)

Then she reaches her main conclusion:

> Plant(other)ness offers a model for thinking-differently, being-differently. […] Other stories enable us to ask other questions about how to act; questions about what action will be the best for all beings involved in a particular situation (2022, p. 210).

I consider Skotarek's performance as this kind of feminist story, a feminist action that sets in motion narratives going beyond what has been conceivable. Her perspective, however, is special – it interweaves feminist elements with the experience of disability, so that plant(other)ness can be framed as a model of thinking-differently and being-differently in a process of cripping the stereotypical notions of plant(other)ness-and-disability that manifest in the form of the plant-diagnosis.

Skotarek's stream-of-consciousness heard in the audience's headphones accompanies the actresses' next performative actions. She leaves the performance space for a few moments to take a shower. Then she returns with her hair wrapped in a towel before wiping her wet hair with it. Her movements are calm and precise, her gestures combine into a choreography that is accompanied by words increasingly revolving around the body, taking care of it, perceiving and experiencing it. Various forms of phrase 'I'm not a plant' crop up. At times her words are emphatic and tinged with irritation stemming from defiance: 'I'm not a plant. Plant, you've got holey leaves. Plant, give me a break. Don't torture me' (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023). At other times they take the form of firm yet patient explanations of difference: 'Plant, this is my life. Plant, don't take away my rights, I won't let you shape me, I am of human needs' (ibid.). This repeated attempt at

differentiation is a struggle for the recognition of one's autonomy. It plays out in the performance space and through performance, in both action and language, with theatre as its medium:

> I can see my body, I can see my hands, my arms, I can see myself, I can see my emerald hair, I can see my legs, my feet, I move my body in different ways, I dance in front of the mirror, I shape my hands in movements, my arms move, my whole body celebrates itself in front of the mirror… I move my head in different ways too, I have a body that is soft, agile, capable of stage movement. […] I'm not a plant. Plants don't perform in the theatre, their movements are not stage movements… (ibid.).

The actress speaking to the plant and indirectly addressing it with her actions (the actions are the primary platform for difference building) is an ambiguous element of this struggle/play. The culturally entrenched opposition between action and passivity inherent in the human–plant relation is revisited here. Skotarek variously shows that she can move, dance and act whereas the plant cannot dance and remains still. This difference is repeatedly stressed but often breaks down. Its underpinning has to be recreated time and again. This is evident in the persistence with which the actress rejects the vegetal, which she hates, fears and regards as a source of shame and loneliness. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the I–plant opposition is not so clear-cut, that what the actress rejects about plants is mostly society's ideas about them, which take the form of the plant-diagnosis:

> Plant, you hurt my words. I just avoid you. You were my diagnosis. I

> don’t want to be you. I live my life my way. It’s a strange situation, that plant. People don’t need plants. They only have plants at home because they look nice. I don’t have plants at home. They bring me fear, shame (ibid.).

The words describing the negative affects invoked by the plant-diagnosis are accompanied by gestures made near the potted plants or involving them, most of which express care and tenderness, as in the metaphorical birth scene or the numerous moments when the actress waters the plants, touches their leaves gently, strokes them or buries her face in the leaves in the crying scene. The plant (in the general sense of the word) inhabits the space of negation, but it also becomes a kind of partner in a play the artist engages in, in which the question of identity is at stake. At one point, the actress voices a provocative, pained indictment of a society that cultivates the vision of the plant-diagnosis, which ensures its persistence:

> What do you think of me, my society?
> You see Down’s syndrome. You see what I cannot have. You see a broken mind that doesn’t think, full of delusions. A mind that is boggled. A mind-moron. A mind-crap. A mind-fuckwit. A dumb mind. A loony mind. […] You’ve got everything made up about me. But my mind is only mine – personal. Should I be ashamed of myself?
> Plant, why do you break my peace? Why do you disturb my life? (ibid.).

The plant becomes a byword for stereotypical disability. Is it possible to somehow include it in the process of constructing an identity with disability

as an essential part of it? ‘How might those who have experienced medicalized technologies as forms of neglect, intervention, and surveillance begin to cultivate alternative relations to technology?’, asks Alison Kafer (2019, p. 1)[4]. Can this question be transposed to make it relevant for the questions of vegetation? Let’s try. How can those who have experienced comparisons to plants in the form of negation, influence and control cultivate alternative relations to vegetation? The idea is not to compare the technology world with the vegetal world but to try to frame a question centred on imagining relations with various forms of otherness in the extra-human realm that are capable of countering the negativity with new visions of subjectivity.

On another level, however, the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible elements that emerges from this transposition: medical technologies or medicalized interventions versus linguistic operations involving comparisons to plants, i.e. symbolic interventions, unveils something unexpected, which is revealed in the light of Skotarek’s performance. ‘This baby will be a plant’, says the doctor in the actress’s narrative, and these words are not a mere comparison or metaphor but a paramedical diagnosis. The vegetal diagnosis, or the plant-diagnosis, produces the fear of being like a plant, of ‘vegetating’. In Skotarek’s performance the fear is reflected in the vision of the hospital bed and medical apparatus to which a body-plant is hooked up. In this vision, the fear of being like a plant is inextricably linked to the fear of dependency on life-support technology. Being a plant overlaps with being a cyborg. But as we have known since Donna Haraway’s famous essay, the cyborg is a highly ambiguous figure, and its ambivalence and hybridity have the potential of undercutting stagnant, ossified meanings and dualist oppositions.

Alison Kafer reminds us that Haraway's cyborg has not only become a figure associated with feminist emancipation but has also significantly contributed to reflection in the domain of the body and technology in disability studies (2019, p. 5). As the author points out, however, it is reasonable to ask to what extent the cyborg still remains a viable emancipation figure. In lieu of the cyborg, Kafer proposes another notion of Haraway, which recurs in Haraway's later writings and manifestos, that of kinship, and she reflects on its relevance for the relations the artists she discusses build with inanimate matter and technology, which, in the light of their work, are not so much meant to fill the presumed 'lack' associated with disability but to expand and reconfigure the understanding of the body and matter in their mutual relation.

The notion of kinship, which refers to close relationships of choice and to relations not based on biological kinship, is situated close to Haraway's other notions, such as companion species or naturecultures. Nor is it far removed from the figure of the cyborg. In her 'Companion Species Manifesto', Haraway points out that the cyborg of her early manifestos has not been displaced by other figures but has become one among a number of modalities of hybridized relations that can emerge between the human and the non-human (2012, pp. 4-5).

The shift from the figure of the cyborg to the notion of companion species, naturecultures and kinship, however, marks a shift in thinking from the realm of technology towards broadly understood environments and ecosystems, matter and materiality. New feminist materialism on the one hand, relational ethics on the other. Both these currents are developing within the post-anthropocentric movement and both stress the need to rethink the categories of subject and object, the boundaries between them,

and the questions of representation, agency and autonomy. This requires a rethinking of the human, the non-human and the more-than-human, and thus a reconfiguration of the notion of ‘the human being’.

In her performance, Aleksandra Skotarek invokes a classic figure of the human, a vision of the human body and its position (physical position and position in the world). She enters the performance space carrying a yoga mat, which she spreads between the plants and performs breathing exercises while making sweeping movements with her head, sending her wet hair aflutter. A moment later, she gets up and stands with her legs wide apart, her arms outstretched to the sides. She remains in this position for a long time despite the effort involved. Skotarek superimposes the image of the well-known *Vitruvian Man* onto her yoga practice, provoking complex reflection about the human body. The voice in the audiences’ headphones says,

> The circle is a collection of all body parts, of different psychological, sociological and professorial attitudes. Everyone has their own circle. In my feminine circle I have my proportions, the proportions of my body and my identity, you cannot break free from this circle. I’d like to raise banners up high, but one has to stand still! (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

The final words in this excerpt invoke a scene from another production of Theatre 21, *The Revolution That Wasn’t*, in which actors raised banners and placards brought from a protest of people with disabilities and their caregivers in the Polish Parliament in 2018. The protest in that show involved a similar effort to that made by Skotarek in her performance and

included the chant ‘Rise your arms, strong legs’. In *The Revolution That Wasn’t*, the stillness was a gesture of protest, but here it represents a body trapped in a certain position/pattern. Is it possible to break free from it? We hear Skotarek’s voice saying,

> Leonardo Da Vinci created this circle and put the human being in it. Each one of us has their own circle, drawn with various elements in it. A circle must be drawn around plants, around different shapes of plants. Plants can be encircled too. I see Leonardo draw this circle and encircle it (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023),

Her vision is evocative and alluring: instead of a single model it offers a multiplicity of geometric figures around various forms and shapes, which encompass diverse bodies, including plant bodies. Then the actress sits down on her mat, assuming a new yoga pose, which is more comfortable than the previous one and can be held for an extended period of time:

> The hands can be linked together, meaning closed, like my body – my body with its plantness, though I’m not a plant.
> The body is closed in a circle, you sit, stuck for the rest of your existence (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

Was it then that the stark difference between the plant-diagnosis and plant(other)ness first struck me? The thought then gradually evolved as the show unfolded.

In her essay on posthumanist relational subjectivity, Rosi Braidotti points to the moment of challenging the classic quasi-universal figure of the human

being represented by the normative image of the male white body-and-subject as key for the construction of new identities and affirmative politics. 'Hardly a universal position', she reminds us, pointing to the posthumanist turn as marking a significant shift in thought towards the hybridization of genres (Braidotti, 2013, p. 5). For her, the shift away from classic anthropocentrism means a turn towards relationality and interdependence, which makes it possible to redefine the very category of life (*zoe*), including the nonhuman and non-personal in it (Braidotti 2013, p. 15). On the one hand, Braidotti calls attention to the entire field of necropolitics, which makes us realize that we are all humans, though some are definitely more mortal than others and we share this vulnerability with animals and plants' (ibid.). On the other hand, she seeks to develop a new affirmative politics capable of transcending the experience of negativity (including negative affects) to focus on building new, creative links.

> What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative affects can be transformed.
> This implies a dynamic view of all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning. […] Affirmative ethics puts the motion back into e-motion and the active back into activism, introducing movement, process, becoming. […] Negative passions do not merely destroy the self, but also harm the self's capacity to relate to others – both human and non-human others, and thus to grow in and through others (2013, p. 15).

Can a shift towards an affirmation of relationality with the other, both human and non-human, occur in light of the experience invoked in Skotarek's performance?

Let’s return to the *Vitruvian Man* scene. In its conclusion, the actress quits her pose, crawls out of the ‘circle’ area and ‘gets out of herself’ getting down on her hands and knees with her head lowered and hair covering her face. She weaves her way slowly among the plants, swaying her hips and making ape-like noises before getting up, with her face still covered, approaching the largest plant and beginning to stroke its flower. While she does this, the light pulsates and the music responds to her movements. The audience hears the following words, repeated twice, in their headphones: ‘To break free from a structure ill-suited to a body outside the norm, a body that has shaped my life, even though I’m not a plant’ (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023). On the one hand, the actress invokes cultural stereotypes: the human-animal appears alongside the human-plant. On the other, her transgression of normativity takes place on Skotarek’s terms, being fully aware of the connotations of the evoked images and without shame. While the actress shows what the society has ‘made up’ about her, she takes over these images through choreographing and creative transformation.

The impact of this gesture is reinforced in the final sequence of the show in which the actress, covered with loose sheets of paper, sits at the table and begins writing in response to the extensive Woolf quote about women’s artistic work. The quote was displayed moments before, superimposed on the footage of the actress strolling through the campus, while Skotarek lay on the chaise longue with the monstera at its head. The actress then takes the tube of the green liquid IV and tapes it to her hand. From my seat, the plant seemed to be hooked up to the drip as well. When the quote disappears from the screen, Skotarek unhooks the drip and moves to the opposite end of the space, near the other screen, pushing the monstera on a moving platform. She buries her head into the plant’s leaves and begins to sob loudly, while the audience hears the words ‘please understand, I am of

human needs'. Then, the crying stops and Skotarek sits at a small table with a smaller plant on it, the one she stroked in the Himalaya birth scene. She scribbles something on paper sheets before tossing them away. The verbal stream in the headphones continues. The following words stand out:

> I'll be a plant, piss off, fuck you all. I can cry alone. I can sit in a room alone. Fuck what you want, what you know of me, what you know of my imbecility. […] I'll be a plant because my thoughts about you overwhelm me, I'll be a plant because I've got more in common with them than with you. Plants feel lonely when they are alone in a room, without water, without life. I am lost in solitude with my plantness (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

The scene that involves writing and female creativity is bizarrely in sync with the scene in which animal and plant otherness was performed. The actress steps up the strategy of the creative takeover of cultural norms and images in a gesture that has both a feminist dimension (previously explicitly expressed: 'In theatre, I deconstruct the woman taboo without censoring, without sanitizing, without a model, without a body that needs to be protected AGAINST HURT'; Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023), and a crip one (she dismantles the social fiction about herself and her disability, exposing the gaze of those who have 'everything made up' about her). Yet this play with restricting norms does not result in a straightforward subversion or an unproblematic affirmation of the relation with otherness. It does, however, suggest that the relation is possible by creatively rejecting the hurtful on the way to building a person's feminine and disabled identity on her own terms. Can this be attained through a new relationality with the other, with the vegetal? This would certainly require taking a huge effort

and surpassing the Himalayas of negativity. And it will not happen unless we reconfigure our ideas of otherness and our relation with otherness in the social realm. I regard Skotarek's performance as a laboratory of this sort of transformation of the social realm – she seems to be saying: society, now it's your turn to work on your imagination to dream up new subversive images, new relations, new identities based on relations of interdependence and co-responsibility for building affirmative fields of diversity.

Ultimately, Skotarek finds an answer to the harmful plant-diagnosis:

> My wanting to be a plant, to be, to last, to feel the pleasant touch of leaves. We are so similar, really. That doctor didn't understand plants and he didn't understand people. I hated plants because of that doctor. For a long time, I wasn't able to live because of those plants. I wasn't able to love because of those plants (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

At the same time, Skotarek's answer is an artistic response to Masaoka's performative talk: 'I will write a book on plant sexuality', she says, prompting a series of questions about how plants feel and engage in relationships and then a series of actions involving one of the plants, which ceases to be a mere diagnosis and begins to be treated like a part of Skotarek's self. However, to engage in a new relation with the plant-oneself, one has to reject not only the socially constructed stereotype that forms part of the image of the plant-diagnosis but also a certain part of oneself related to the idea of the human, which is sometimes regarded as the essence of humanity: human consciousness:

> I want to say goodbye to my consciousness of what you think of me, of what you know about me, of what you've made up about me. I can't believe that I can say goodbye to it, to my consciousness, that I have to stop living by my ideas. Should I be ashamed of my desires? You are pretty, with multi-colour stripes. You are beautiful in these colours, all the colours of your subtleness, femininess, plantness. To say goodbye to all consciousness, to what I've got inside … Goodbye my consciousness… Hello plantness… (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

Can this declaration be taken as an affirmation of plant(other)ness? Not really. Skotarek does not give clear-cut answers, because what is at stake here is a quest for new formulas of identity as well as an ongoing play with ideas and expectations. For just when it seems that Skotarek is opening the door to a rethinking of the question of identity in the spirit of post-anthropocentric relativity, she once again provocatively evokes the images of the plant-diagnosis and a plant-like, 'vegetating' body. Her farewell to hurtful stereotypes is accompanied by a farewell to her former self. Does this have to mean giving up? Or accepting the negative formula of non-being that seemed to have been surpassed? Having said goodbye to everything and everyone, the actress lies down in the middle of the performance space among the plants, puts on an oxygen mask and assumes a pose reminiscent of that seen in the hospital-bed video. The gesture seems to say: you wanted to see a plant in me, so here it is. But this image has already been surpassed. Or perhaps it has only been countered by other images – the possible, potential, sought-after alternatives that can only come about through new stories. Stories in the spirit of relational feminism.

Reflecting on the herbarium in Luce Irigaray's feminist thought, Katarzyna

Szopa reminds us that the philosopher

> emphasizes that plants can teach us how to live together without taking away from each other the air (and other natural resources), space, freedom, the unrestrained right to appear and to articulate the peculiarities of one's corporeality (Szopa, 2024).

And, referring to Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, in which the thinker refers to the plant world too, she adds,

> the mutual recognition of sexual difference makes it possible to cultivate life and respect the worth of other living beings without the need to renounce one's subjective economy, which in practice opens the door to any underrepresented entities and minorities and expands the 'framework of recognition' that offers a political structure to an arena of representation, and decides what life is and what it is not in keeping with certain norms, enabling the flourishing and appearance of various forms of embodied othernesses (Szopa, 2024).

The feminist perspective adopted here is informed by vegetal metaphors deployed in order to rethink difference and affirm diversity, while a rethinking of the question of difference makes enables a new perspective on various forms of otherness, including extra-human otherness.

In the last sequence of the footage featuring the hospital bed in *I'm Not a Plant*, the actress is seen entering the space dressed as Virginia Woolf, bringing together two opposite images, two different views of the body.

Skotarek/Woolf reads another excerpt from *A Room of One's Own*while standing right next to (the footage of) herself lying motionless in bed. The excerpt concerns the prospect of the coming of Shakespeare's sister:

> As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while (Woolf).

These words, which are the last words of the performance, take on a new meaning in light of the story about self-consciousness and plantness. What is at stake here is an identity intertwined with creative freedom. An identity that has a social dimension but can be negotiated in the creative realm. At its centre is the human being – the woman – the creative subject – the artist. The actoress, as Skotarek likes to call herself. An identity that is processual and open. One that goes against cultural stereotypes but also demonstrates that surpassing them can offer more than just a sense of autonomy and agency, even if this occurs only within the theatre. The human self is at stake here, but the play triggered by Skotarek opens up questions about other potential forms of relational identities. Perhaps the starting point on the way towards diversity should be to forgo limited metaphors and ideas about plants, animals and other others used as a negative point of reference. Let's revisit Zamorska's words on plant ethics again: 'Only thinking differently enables one to act differently'. Undoubtedly, a feminist view of plant(other)ness, which resonates and sometimes clashes with Skotarek's performative statement, supports the work of undercutting stereotypes and

can potentially open up new ways of thinking about disability in creative relations with otherness. Except that, in the theatre, the process of change moves in the opposite direction: only acting differently enables one to think differently.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

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Footnotes

1. I take the Polish term *rośl-inność* from Magdalena Zamorska, who notes that she has borrowed it from a cover title of the magazine *Czas Kultury*, 2008, no. 5 (Zamorska, 2020, pp. 43-62). *Roślinność* means 'vegetation'. *Inność* is Polish for 'otherness'.

2. The author makes an explicit reference to Donna Haraway in a footnote, but I think this reference can be extended to include other new-materialist accounts of the relation with significant otherness, such as the one proposed by Karen Barad.
3. As I finish writing this article, the campus of the University of Warsaw is no longer as open as it used to be. The head of the university, Alojzy Nowak, has made it obligatory for students to present a student ID on entering the university grounds. The decision came on the back of pro-Palestinian student protests.
4. Kafer, A. (2019). 'Crip kin, manifesting', *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 5(1), pp. 1–37

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/ CRIPPING PERFORMING ARTS

A Play on Words and Looks: ‘PokaZ’

Anna Piniewska | Doctoral School of Humanities, University of Warsaw

The article was written as a response to the call for papers *Cripping Performing Arts*, edited by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska and Monika Kwaśniewska. The series is published from issue 178.

The article offers a poetological analysis of *PokaZ* (*ShoW*), a performance directed by Justyna Wielgus that references the practices of freak show. Piniewska discusses the compositional strategies used in *PokaZ* to subversively crip the oppressive freak show genre. Adopting the perspective of critical disability studies, the author reflects on the popular cultural images of disability (a victim, a hero, an eternal child, and a medical specimen) and discourses thereof (discourse of pity, medical discourse) referenced in the performance. The analysis centers on the ways of talking about and looking at disability that shape artistic communication with an audience.

Keywords: show; freak show; disability; discourse; gaze

A word of introduction

Disability in the field the arts often opens representations to reality and provokes one to verge beyond the world of the stage. A disabled body evokes questions concerning how one looks (or used to look) at it and what one says (or used to say) about it. In general terms, it prompts reflection on the

socially, historically and politically conditioned relations between the stage and the audience. Considered alongside these topics should be their emancipatory possibilities and, by extension, the practice of cripping the arts.

Following the struggle for equality in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement of persons with disabilities embraced the term *crip*[1] (*cripple*), which has incidentally also seeped into academic discourse; a similar gesture of 'perverse appropriation' (Zdrodowska, 2016, pp. 400-401), reclaiming a pejorative term routinely used as an invective,[2] concerns its Polish equivalent, 'kaleka.' I am interested not so much in the sociolinguistic aspect, but in the gesture or mechanism of interception, for I believe a similar principle permeates the composition of Justyna Wielgus's *PokaZ* (*ShoW*). In this sense, a cultural reflection on the potential for cripping the arts can arise from formal and poetological considerations of the organization and construction of specific scenes and the mechanisms in play in these discursive interceptions. For it is the play on words and looks that sets the stage for *PokaZ*. And I regard the stage not only literally (as a physical space), but also metaphorically: as a place where communication plays out (verbal and non-verbal, always bilateral; Ubersfeld, 2002; Świontek, 1999), conditioning the relationship between the observer/speaker and the observer/listener in the arts. 'Stage' is also a concept at work in the analysis of communication and social behavior (Debord, 2006; Goffman, 2008), which is not without significance with regard to the subject matter of this article.

In *PokaZ*, the de facto starting point is the current social situation (the 'social stage'):

> What images does a cityscape reject or marginalize? What and who do the citizens and residents of Warsaw refuse to look at? In June and July 2019, sociologist Bogna Kietlinska, PhD, and Aleksandra Zalewska-Królak, MA, conducted qualitative exploratory research for [the] Teatr 21 [company] on the theme of "rejected images in public space […]. The[ir] research and graphic arts have inspired the performance *PokaZ* (Drzewiecki, 2020).

It is not merely about the image itself, but rather about the entanglement of images and words; only an analysis of the play on words and looks will fully expose the social oppression played out in the show at multiple levels, at the same time demonstrating what the strategy of cripping the art involves, especially with regard to *freak shows*. In turn, an analysis of the (historicized and socialized) images of disability and discourses on disability activated in the performance, conducted from the perspective of critical disability studies (Schalk, 2017), along with an examination of the ways in which they play out, will enable reflection on the 'social stage' and the relations of broadcasting and receptive nature. *PokaZ* is an extraordinarily important performance not only because of Teatr 21's invaluable collaboration with today's recognized artists (Diana Niepce, Helena Urbańska, Katarzyna Żeglicka) or the correspondences between the piece and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's book *Staring*, published and publicized at the time, but also (and above all) because of the composition and stage organization in *PokaZ,*[3] which warrants investigative attention.

Freak show

In addition to the actors of Teatr 21 (Michał Pęszyński, Aleksandra

Skotarek), the authors of the performance (Justyna Wielgus – direction and stage movement; Justyna Lipko-Konieczna – dramaturgy; Wisła Nicieja – stage design) invited several contributions from outside the company (Diana Bastos Niepce, Maciej Kasprzak, Wojciech Stępień, Helena Urbańska and Katarzyna Żeglicka). The cast features a majority of performers with both physical and intellectual disabilities, eye-catching bodies, and queer makeup sported by some of the characters.

The title of the show lays down its framework as a display of oddities and a freak show.[4] Suspended above the stage is a neon, lit up throughout the performance to highlight the letters that form the words 'show,' 'specimen,' and 'eye,' as if to mount tension with respect to the central concepts behind the show. A quick disclaimer is due here: I am well aware of the complexity of the freak show genre, narrated using a variety of tools, methodologies and points of view. For the purposes of this analysis, I merely wish to operationalize the category of the freak show and venture an interpretation of the stage-audience relationship (rather than its historical reconstruction). In doing so, I embrace the perspective proposed by David A. Gerber, recognizing the violence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century freak shows, interpreted as (yet another) historical practice of objectifying people with disabilities (Gerber, 1996). Gerber's perspective seems to correspond with that adopted in *PokaZ*.

Persons with disabilities – along with other bodies deviating from the accepted 'norm'[5] – were put on display for entertainment and profit (Bogdan, 1990), primarily in museums, circuses, amusement parks, and during carnivals. The theatrical and visual potential of the freak show manifests itself in the encounter of the observed and the observer, staged within the framework of meticulously directed shows (in circuses and dime museums),

and featuring ‘bizarre’ scenery and ‘provocative banners’ (Garland-Thomson, 1997, pp. 51-52),[6] as well as elaborate makeup, including in photographs and postcards.[7] Among others, these aspects of the freak show aim to construct intelligible and easily reproducible meanings through schematic modes of presentation. Robert Bogdan distinguishes two basic strategies in the freak show: the exotic, used primarily to emphasize the racial and ethnic difference of persons identified as ‘wild’ and juxtaposed with animals; and the aggrandized, which emphasized the extraordinary skills or high social status of ‘freaks,’ in spite of their physical difference (Bogdan, 1990).[8]

Paraphrasing Michael M. Chemers, every disabled body on stage (in theater, and socially) enters into a dialogue with the freak show tradition.[9] From a historical perspective, it is impossible to consider disability in theater without recognizing the years of oppression associated with ‘staging stigma’ (Chemers, 2008). I purposely refer to the body in the context of freak shows, because the stage in such displays is limited to corporeality;[10] What attracts the viewer is precisely the body that deviates from the accepted ‘norm,’ which is intended to engage the audience affectively: to stir emotions, perhaps revulsion, disgust, curiosity. It is only around this body that an appropriate (schematic) narrative can be constructed, showcasing specific skills of the performers, embedding them in an appropriate mode of representation.

In opposition to the Aristotelian principle of catharsis and mimesis (wherein a character similar to the viewer is supposed to arouse pity, and the structure of the stage seeks to bring the viewer closer to the world being viewed), it is the difference and the impossibility of identification that is vital here. Viewers do not desire to be similar to the one(s) being viewed; they mere wish to take visual pleasure at a distance, so as to assert, ‘That’s not

me.' Thus, the freak show perpetuates the division between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal.' The perpetuation is not only metaphorical but also literal, in that it produces a space that places/exposes the 'freak' in the visual field. It is the staging of a particular relationship between the one who stands on the stage and the one who stares that lies at the heart of oppression towards the one that is put on display. Embedded in the frame of the show, this body is stripped of performative power, if not downright reified. Garland-Thomson points out: 'the body envelops and obliterates the freak's potential humanity. When the body becomes pure text, a freak has been produced from a physically disabled human being.' (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 59). Therefore, one can hardly speak of full-fledged stage communication here, as the two sides of the stage are at a distance from each other. When asked what draws audiences to his shows, Lew Graham, a manager associated with one of the most popular circus troupes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Sideshow), answered, 'an abnormality.'

While the freak's body – placed in an appropriate context and suitably directed – is crucial to the reception of a freak show, the spectators bodies, and therefore their points of view, their chronotopes, are not indispensable in this sense. In the relationship established by the stage, the spectator functions as a Cartesian 'disembodied eye/I;' the one that engages in 'just looking.' The reference to the term coined by Maaike Bleeker (2008), a scholar of visuality in theater, is not accidental here. Bleeker's claims regarding Bentham's Panopticon as interpreted by Foucault (2009) are reminiscent, albeit by means of a nonobvious juxtaposition, of the workings of a freak show stare:

> In the Panopticon, a disembodied all-seeing subject of vision is

> opposed to a body as object; subject and object are strictly separated. The disembodied subject appears as master over the body seen. This power is closely related to knowledge. The body/object cannot escape being known and mastered in its entirety by the subject seeing. It is this seeing, dissociated from the body and the other senses, that provides the subject with its power and knowledge (2008, p. 164).

This juxtaposition refers not only to the discussed relationship between the body, the object, and the disembodied spectator, but also (and above all) to the metaphorical spatial separation, expressed through the projected and indelible distance between them.

Artists with disabilities (and their associates) have deliberately referenced and appropriated the freak show formula. They dismantle the stage, originally construed in oppressive terms.[11] They provoke the audience to regard disability on their own terms. *PokaZ* is but one example of such artistic practice with subversive potential. The piece premiere at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw.[12] Thus, the museum space conveys additional semantic potential, stabilizing the frame of representation.

Viewers take their seats on chairs and on the floor around the performers, with the latter set up as living exhibits. Before the observers sit down, they can look at the ‘exhibition,’ only in this case the ‘exhibits’ reciprocate the gaze, provocatively maintaining eye contact. Their costumes, unusually skimpy and revealing of their bodies, encourage onlookers to stare.

The stage design also reinforces the frame of the show: the performers stand on rectangular mirrors that multiply the images, while a cameraman,

present throughout the performance, follows and projects their every move on a screen. Though we are not in a theater building, we nonetheless deal with theater here. However, this is not meant to be a passive viewing experience; the audience learns the rules of the show at the beginning. Urbańska enumerates them, with Kasprzak interpreting them into English:[13] one can extend and reduce the distance, sit where one wants, take the floor and, most importantly, stare at the performers. Thus, the show – directly and indirectly (for more on this, see the latter part of the article) – projects an engaged, active spectator, who, unlike in a freak show, not so much is not, but rather cannot, be a passive observer.

The first question addressed to the audience, 'What do you see?,' shatters the distance, as the actors and actresses hand microphones to the audience, intimidating some viewers. I assume that the social stage on which staring (at disability) plays out is originally grounded in visual, Foucaltian violence. Those who stare are to conceptualize what they see in language, with the discourse on disability naming and characterizing the object-subject of the gaze in a violent way. Thus, the onlookers may walk into a trap, especially since the person who first asks the above question is an 'able-bodied' individual (i.e., one without a disability); it is only then that a person with a disability reiterates it.[14] The question 'What do you see?' could thus be followed by another: 'What will you say you see?' During the performance I watched, no one thematized disability. After all, disability should not be the defining factor. But then again, on the other hand, one may wonder whether it should be acknowledged. Perhaps pretending not to see disability, not to notice it, is also inappropriate? Perhaps we lack the adequate language? In any case, it was easier for the audience to answer the question by simply recounting what the actresses were wearing.

This seemingly simple, in fact provocative question makes one uncomfortable, perhaps even reminds one that looking at disability on stage is historically loaded. The freak show functions as a backdrop for images of bodies crammed into specific patterns of stage presentation; bodies were referred to in a specific mode. In *PokaZ*, the show functions as a frame that activates: first, the memory of the violent history of freak shows; and second, the very issue of cultural clichés and stereotypes of disability, partly associated with the freak show, partly a product of subsequent times. It is through this frame, and incidentally within it, that a deconstruction of social perceptions of disability is possible.

Victims and hero(in)es

'Thanks for the pity,'[15] says Aleksandra Skotarek in one of her interactions with the viewers. As a brand of discourse on disability, the discourse of pity—rooted in its charitable model—materializes in two stereotypes. Polish studies in the social imaginary of disability invoke the figures of the 'helpless victim' and the 'brave hero' (Leonowicz-Bukała, Struck-Peregończyk, 2018). In Anglo-Saxon disability studies, the problem seems more multifarious, with these two figures referred to using established terms: the supercrip and the poster child. It would seem that these stereotypes are disjunctive, since one can reduce them to a victim-hero relationship; however, underpinning them are the same semantic structures and assumptions.[16]

Stereotypes produced by the discourse of pity correspond to figures of oddity displays, pointing to the historical continuity of narratives on disability and the cultural models of its representation. The stereotypical supercrip (as an apotheosis or a 'superstrong' character) corresponds directly to the 'aggrandized' representation (to invoke Bogdan's term again).

Garland-Thomson also references a photograph of Charles Tipp (‘Armless Wonder’), pictured surrounded with household objects, holding a knife and a piece of wood that he whittles with his feet (‘freaks made from people with congenital disabilities usually performed mundane activities in alternative modes choreographed to amaze audiences’ [Garland-Thomson, 1997, pp. 51-52]). This example would fit the bill as a usual supercrip narrative. In the cases of the ‘freak’ (considered as a staged and directed character) and the supercrip involve the same representation mechanism: the person with a disability is meant to inspire and amaze the audience with their (both ordinary and extraordinary) abilities. Inherently designed to evoke pity in the viewer, the poster child demonstrates that while the purposes behind representing disability may vary, the mechanism at work remains the same. Staged in a particular way, the body and its (mandatorily) visible disability are to affect the audience through the sense of sight, performing a host of functions. Moreover, one can interpret the visual presentation itself, as seen on posters, as an extension of postcards, photographs, and brochures, integral to the freak show.

In her ironic monologue, Diana Bastos Niepce, a wheelchair-bound dancer and choreographer, unmasks the stereotype of supercrip (thus, she dismantles the socially perpetuated image it at the very level of presentation formula [Skwarczyńska, 1953]). The story concerns walking the dog in the park: as the performer cleans up after her dog, she is addressed by a woman who is impressed by Niepce’s conduct. The story ends with the punch line, ‘It is so inspiring to see you pick up your dog’s shit!’ Reducing this situation to a direct phrase exposes the absurdity of the regular supercrip narrative.

When the passerby requests to take her picture and share her story on Facebook, Niepce refuses. The performer resists being confined to an image.

Her refusal to be photographed by a normate (and for the normate's purposes) is a significant gesture: an act of defiance against the visual violence embedded in the history of disability, perpetuated through photographs, brochures, and freak show postcards.

Thus, the stage in *PokaZ* subverts the visual order of stereotypes of disability, along with the discursive order per se. The performance explicitly stigmatizes the stereotype of inspiring cripple, rooted in the discourse of pity, is stigmatized explicitly, at the same time questioning its very rationale: 'I could tell you my story, but I won't – I don't want to be a part of your inspiring fairy tales' (note the ironic opposition between the phrases 'my story' and 'your fairy tale'). Refusing to tell one's own story (much like refusing to be captured in a photograph) is one strategy for dealing with the discourse of pity; the other is to caricature it, to perform the stereotype to fulfill one's purpose while satisfying the interlocutor by visualizing their assumptions about disability. Niepce enacts (doubly: while on stage, she enacts a practice enacted in real life) the deliberate induction of pity at a public office; thus, she becomes a victim in order to comply with her interlocutor's notions, as if in a masquerade of disability, as dubbed by Tobin Siebers (2008). Bent over in a caricatured posture of humility, the performer delivers a monologue in Portuguese with an emotionally charged, trembling voice. The soliloquy is not interpreted. Yet, it is not necessary to understand it at the verbal level, as Niepce's gestures and facial expressions are sufficient to convey the message. By leveraging and subverting the social expectations that she regularly performs in everyday life, Niepce is able to accomplish her goal.

Moments later, her demeanor and manner of speaking shift dramatically. Her exaggerated facial expressions and gestures, calculated tone of voice,

and mischievous smile, all point to the irony triggered by the stereotypes imposed on the artist.

Perpetual children

Another stereotype exposed by the actors and actresses is the image of perpetual child, which may relate to the representation of the poster child. It is the "childification' of disability, intended to affectively influence audiences, that contributes to the perpetuation of, in particular, the stereotype of intellectually disabled or little person, frequently staged as perpetual children in freak shows (Garland Thomson, 2009, p. 173). *PokaZ* engages and challenges this cultural cliché by addressing the sexuality of persons with disabilities. One can distinguish three ways of addressing this issue: group scenes, direct confessions, and conversations/interviews. The starting point of the first practice is the question of what it means to be a woman. For, in light of the stereotypical vision, actress Helena Urbańska is not one (at least according to her university instructors, who suggested that she was 'not feminine enough'). Urbańska's story prompts a number of caricatured and satirical impressions of women whom patriarchal society regards as synonymous with femininity, e.g. Marilyn Monroe and Kate Moss: wearing high heels, with a cigarette in hand, rhythmic hip movements, and coquettish laughter. What this scene also demonstrates as Skotarek (a woman with a disability) joins the lesbian actress on stage, is the dual normativization of the stereotype: the male gaze always projects the woman as able-bodied and heterosexual. Skotarek obeys a series of commands: 'Touch your cleavage, but not like that, you're not a slut […] Try to laugh as if you wanted to say "Thrust me on the table and have sex with me, John!"' It is easy to overlook, to disregard the rather silent partner in this scene, to whom the actress directs her words. Onstage is Stępień, a middle-aged man

with an appearance, posture and attire that one would consider as 'normative.' In the subversive world of *PokaZ*, where the stage is populated by persons with disabilities and queers, it is the 'normate' who becomes the Other. However, the audience learns about the sexuality of Urbańska – whose appearance might otherwise be considered stereotypically canonical – through the words written on her legs, such as 'queer' and 'love is love.' Urbańska also addresses her sexuality directly, asking the audience whether she 'looks like a lesbian,' thereby raising the issue of the visibility and invisibility of identities deviating from the 'norm.'[17]

Within the performed scene, there is nothing unusual about a woman with a disability directing such a message toward a man – unlike in everyday life, where the sexuality of people with disabilities remains a taboo subject. Joining the actresses are the fellow performers in a dance scene set to the tune of Beyoncé's *Single Ladies*. The image is simple, albeit rare: a group of diverse persons having fun together, dancing, fooling around.

The laughter accompanying the group scene is contrasted with the seriousness of the next sequence (intended as a direct confession), which addresses the widespread infantilization of persons with Down syndrome. This arrangement of the two scenes, as well as the transition from 'we' to 'I,' amplifies the words of an actress with Trisomy 21: 'It wasn't nice when you called me a child.' It is not only with the message but also with the form that the scene challenges the stereotype of perpetual child. In a monologue addressed *ad spectatores*, the actress transcends the imaginary framework that society imposes on her, thus regaining her own voice. In addition to addressing an unspecified yet specific addressee, Skotarek also delivers a simple message from the stage: 'My body is sexual,' she exclaims emphatically, while simultaneously baring her breasts. The message, along

with the accompanying image, has an affective impact on the viewers, primarily through the sense of sight; the stereotype of child assumes its asexuality, and it is this assumption that the viewers must confront, as they behold a new image that defies their preconceptions. The actress explores her body, exposes her breasts, takes a close look at her hands, experiences her physicality, examining it on stage. It seems as though she gazes at her body as something alien, despite the subjective exclamation about its sexuality. The sense of estrangement or unease expressed by Skotarek does not negate her body's autonomy; rather, it is precisely through an acute awareness of her own body and careful self-observation – in opposition to external narratives that infantilize people with disabilities – that Skotarek is able to boldly proclaim her sexuality. This theme is also explored in *Libido romantico* and the video performance *Body to Body with Marilyn*.

Another stage mechanism is at work in the case of Niepce and Pęszyński's conversation about sex. Two persons with disabilities (physical and intellectual) discuss their respective experiences, favorite sexual positions and first times, shattering social taboos. The conversation resembles an interview, which makes the viewer acutely aware of the absence of such statements in mainstream media, at the same time emphasizing that the performative format selected seeks to give voice to the interviewees and their statements. These three sequences concerning the sexuality of individuals with disabilities allude to different conventions: cabaret-style humor and laughter; the gravity of direct confession and interpellation; and the curiosity-driven interview or conversation. Despite the varied forms and aesthetics, they serve the same purpose: this time, the portrayal of a disabled person's sexuality is shaped by the individual themselves, not by others. The sexuality of people with disabilities has been (and perhaps still is) discussed in two primary contexts, both of which effectively deny it. The

first is the aforementioned infantilization, where the erotic needs of disabled individuals (especially those with intellectual disabilities) are overlooked, since the latter are reduced to ‘perpetual children.’ Second, if one reconstructs the historical ways of addressing disability, one will find that they have involved sterilization, forced isolation in women’s and men’s centers, and mass murder. Although the play does not portray this most brutal slice of history directly, every time a person with a disability – both on and off stage – raises the topic of their sexuality and reproductive rights, they inevitably revisit the specter of eugenics, marginalized on the pages of history.[18]

The ironic interaction between the actors and actresses and the audience can serve as a metatheatrical commentary on the discussed scene. Niepce concludes the interview with the words, ‘I’m sorry for these questions, I’m sorry for this conversation, I know you weren’t prepared for it;’ she and Pęszyński are soon joined by the other actors, who run through the audience, issuing direct apologies to selected viewers. One actor says, ‘We’re sorry for dragging you to the theater on a day like this and for taking up space here. Our bad,’ thus raising the issue of the absence and invisibility of people with disabilities in theater and public spaces. Again, the tension between comedy and seriousness mounts as Skotarek delivers her lines: ‘I’m sorry you think I’m retarded,[19] I’m sorry, I’m sorry I have Down syndrome.’ While the actress begins the monologue in a solemn manner, she soon transitions into an increasingly exaggerated howl (is she laughing? crying?), collapsing onto the floor and continuing her round of apologies. The monologue abruptly ends with Urbańska stating, ‘Alright, Olka, just sit down already!’ This time, the scene—underpinned by irony, caricature, and hyperbole—causes the audience discomfort.

Medical specimens

Petra Kuppers contends that one of the reasons for the termination of freak shows was ‘the rise of the medical system […] as bodily difference becomes a matter of medical discipline, and displays become confined to the medical theater’[20] (Kuppers, 2003, p. 37). Nevertheless, it seems impossible to draw a clear-cut boundary between the freak show tradition and the medical gaze, nor between science, natural science, and entertainment, as evidenced by the work of P.T. Barnum (Goodall, 2006). Wieczorkiewicz recounts a type of bidirectional mediation, ‘wherein science influences narratives of the miraculous, and imagination fuels an empirical approach.’ Physicians and scientists were frequent spectators at oddity exhibits, observing and embedding the bodies on display into scientific and medical discourse. In turn, ‘scientific questions were again translated into stories that attracted audiences by stimulating the imagination’ (Wieczorkiewicz, 2019, s. 261). Thus, the invocation of medical theater practices in *PokaZ* becomes all the more intriguing:

> Most specifically, the ‘medical theater’ refers to the operating room, the operating theater. More broadly, the ‘medical theater’ is also used to refer to the places and practices that surround demonstration as a method of dissemination of medical knowledge. Patients, or corpses, were paraded or dissected in an amphitheater.[21]

Treating living people like medical exhibits may seem as a long-forgotten practice, and yet Żeglicka’s monologue contradicts this intuition: ‘I’m thirteen years old, I’m standing on a stage in an auditorium filled with

people […] I'm standing and I realize just how cold and ashamed I feel […] this was my first performance ever.' The teenager was asked to undress, which she refused to do, and so she was allowed to leave her T-shirt and panties on. This is yet another practice that objectifies the non-canonical body, put on violent display; a body reduced (in accordance with the medical model) to a given medical condition and disability (in the case of oddity displays, a body reduced to its 'freakish' qualities). Żeglicka's monologue sets in motion the problem of 'medical gaze' (Foucault, 1999). In *PokaZ*, the actress is also seen standing on the stage, surrounded by a host of people, and wearing a see-through outfit that reveals her naked body. It is not necessary to thematize the difference between the two shows, as the tensions between them can be conveyed by the notions of shame and pride (relevant for disability studies).

Żeglicka's statement follows Skotarek's aforementioned monologue on sexuality, and the juxtaposition of these two scenes exposes two distinct ways of looking at the disabled body; although representing different perspectives, they both rest on the same ableist assumptions: the first focuses on the medical condition, or rather its interpretation according to medical discourse, while the second highlights social conditioning (asexuality, dependence entailed in the stereotype of perpetual child). While the goals, circumstances, and functions of freak shows and medical theater were different, one can observe similarities in the staging mechanisms and the visual dynamics of the visual relationship, involving the power of the viewer over the passive viewee. In this context, the form selected by Żeglicka – that of a monologue, a direct confession – enables her to reclaim agency as an active subject. This is not the only instance in Żeglicka's body of work that comes to mind in relation to medical theater and artistic practices referencing medicalizing discourses. In *Contrast Resonance*, the

performer executes a choreography, with sounds characteristic of an MRI machine heard in the background, which – along with the projected images and the accompanying narrative – immediately sets off medical connotations.

Imagine that

I consider Niepce's two monologues to be the framing device of the performance. The first, delivered at the beginning of the show, opens with a request addressed to the audience, who are to close their eyes and imagine the following scene: 'One day, you wake up in a different body, one that you don't understand, and that doesn't understand you.' This direct appeal to the audience creates a participatory dynamic, removing the safety of the fourth wall. The performance engages the audience's field of vision: on the one hand, it features an invitation to stare (what do you see?) and provocations; on the other, a directive to overlook, to close one's eyes to the images of disabilities on stage – perhaps also to culturally ingrained images of disabilities. The actress's monologue testifies to the experience of identity transformation: the act of becoming a person with a disability. The audience is asked not so much to watch, but to imagine, to try to empathize with the experience of corporeal change, and by extension, life change. Moments later, the audience can open their eyes again and tune in to the actress's monologue, punctuated by commands the commands: 'Imagine that,' 'Try this, it'll be fun,' or 'You can feel it.' The statement is replete with visual metaphors, comparisons, epithets, and action verbs that dynamize the story. The text becomes increasingly abstract, if not outright surreal; the successive comparisons of the sensations experienced by the 'new' body are arranged as follows: like the body of a doll – like that of a chicken – an octopus – a mermaid – a paralyzed cat – a happy monster – a rock. The choreography accompanying the story is dynamic, with Niepce performing

each successive metamorphosis with gestures and movements. The monologue has a finite composition, as the first phrase is reiterated at the end, albeit in a different tone. To imagine being/becoming disabled is inaccessible to humans, as impossible as empathizing with a fairy tale character, an object, an octopus and, one might add, a bat (Nagel, 1996). Thus, I interpret the actress's words as an objection to theories of empathy and a provocation, a statement that makes the viewers realize that, despite being asked to do so – they are be incapable of imagining what it means to be a person with a disability. In the context of the monologue, the experience of the body is unimaginable; in the context of the performance as a whole, so is the experience of multi-level discrimination, of the various forms of violence (symbolic and other), but also of being part of this community. Imagine that in order to realize there are some things you are incapable of imagining.

The closing monologue is structured in a different grain. Niepce's personal story as a dancer discovering her body with an acquired disability intertwines with a reflection on the 'social body.' The actress directly addresses what had not been explicitly stated on stage, though it always remains present: 'the fascist gaze on the perfect body, one that aligns with the norm.' Her narrative on departing from self-hatred towards a recognition of the 'beauty and virtuosity' of her own body, towards a redefinition of her artistic identity on new terms, intertwines with a reflection on being different in society. In Niepce's framing, however, difference is a source of liberation, not of violence. The fact that Urbańska reads out the monologue in English[22] (rather than delivering it from memory, as if to emphasize the role of mediation) makes for an interesting compositional device; from a technical perspective, this enables Niepce to focus on the demanding choreography. More broadly, it may suggest what things could be like if

statements on the need to accept diversity and recognize societal oppression were made *by* the Other rather than *about* the Other. As the monologue is read out, the actress, begins to undress, tenderly and attentively, slipping from her wheelchair onto the floor, exploring the boundaries of her body in a choreography that is completely different from the one accompanying the first monologue: less dynamic, profoundly sensual. The woman performs a subtle, slow-burning choreography; she does not move, but remains seated on the floor, arranging her legs into specific poses. This is not the type of movement the audience is accustomed to; this is the movement tailored to the capacities of a disabled body, executed on its own terms. This time, the actress's nudity is not provocative; it emphasizes the authenticity of her physical experience, fully exposed and thus profoundly vulnerable.

Looking at the fragile, individual female body, one hears about how it functions on the social and cultural planes, which leads one to an obvious conclusion, from which, however, one does not always draw conclusions: that the private and the public are inseparable, and that bodies – to paraphrase Kate Millett – are 'a status category with political implications' (Millett, 1970, p. 24). Significantly, making the closing statement in the piece is Niepce, who applies the final touches to its compositional frame: 'Imagine that, one day, you wake up in a society that does not understand you, a society that *you* don't understand. Can you imagine that?' This phrase differs from the one uttered in the opening monologue by one noun only, with society substituting for the body. For it is not the body that is the problem; it is the way society perceives it. Joining the dancer are the others, with each and every one of them asking the audience the aforementioned question.

Using communicative strategies that engage the audience, including

monologue, confession, and dialogue (interview) – all of which establish the subjectivity of the performers – as well as juxtaposed comedic and serious scenes, and the deconstruction of the social imaginary of disability, *PokaZ* both dismantles and reclaims the stage. The performers speak not only in their own voices but also appropriate social languages that reveal the historically embedded attitudes toward persons with disabilities. The audience is thus compelled to confront the persistent ways of speaking about and looking at disability. We are not merely watching the performers; we are watching ourselves, our reality. The stage acts as a mirror reflecting cultural images and discourses of disability. The composition of *PokaZ* underscores that those without disabilities cannot fully grasp what it means to navigate one's way in society as a person with a disability. At the same time, the performance contemplates whether persons with disabilities can carve a niche in the social order, and do so on their own terms.

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Footnotes

1. For more on the functioning of the *supercrip* stereotype, see below. The article features the terms *crip* and *freak*. The second notion seems to be much more historically loaded, since it refers to a particular spectatorial practice and the ways of directing (construing) the freak, entailed in its tradition, as discussed later. The text merely signals the problems entailed in the juxtaposition these terms, for it is an issue that requires a separate study.
2. For the record, back in the early twentieth century, this lexeme constituted "a basic concept of rehabilitation and special pedagogy, whereas now [i.e., in 2014, which is when the cited article was published - A.P.] it has a mostly negative overtone, and denotes someone who is inept, awkward" (Bełza, Prysak, 2014, p. 28). Even in the late twentieth century, notes Dorota Sadowska, *Słownik współczesnego języka polskiego* (the Dictionary of Modern Polish Language, 1998) offered two definitions of said noun, referencing a physically damaged body and the inability of "normal" functioning, on the one hand, and a dismissive designation of a person unable to perform an easy task (Sadowska, 2005, p. 89), on the other. In turn, Marcin Garbat (2015, p. 143) notes that, "in colloquial terms, a cripple is a symbol of social vulnerability and empathy, someone helpless." It is difficult to concur with this statement and to find it empathetic from today's perspective. This is especially true with regard to the negative image of people with disabilities, construed at the level of language, as Alicja Fidowicz points out with reference to the collocation "kaleka życiowy" (lit. "a cripple in life"), "which the dictionary defines as 'a person who is inept, unable to cope with life, impractical'" (Fidowicz, 2015, p. 149).
3. The English version of the title (*The ShoW*) does not fully convey the meaning of the Polish original (*PokaZ*). Read backward, the Polish title forms an anagram (*ZakoP,* "bury"); moreover, when separated from the uppercase letters, the lowercase ones form the word *oka* ("eye(s)"), crucial in the context of the subject matter, i.e., the way society perceives disability and what it sees in the process.
4. Hereinafter, I limit my discussion of the constructs of freak and freak show solely to the context of actresses and actors with disabilities; I will thematize the stage presence of Urbańska and Stępień in the subsequent section of the paper.
5. I use quotation marks to emphasize the conventionality of this concept; for more on the construct of norm, see L.J. Davis, 2022.
6. Unpaginated sheets between pp. 51 and 52 feature historic photographs documenting the freak show.
7. Accompanied by comments and reflections on the various modes of presentation, Robert Bogdan's book (2012) features historical photographs and postcards. During shows, audiences could also buy "souvenir life narratives" featuring an element of the miraculous, attained through hyperbolized accounts of freaks' lives, as well as medical language, intended to attest to the "authentications of the extraordinary body" (Garland-Thomson,

1997, pp. 51-52).
8. Drawin on Bogdan's diagnoses, Anna Wieczorkiewicz investigates examples of stage presentations based on the cases of Stefan Bibrowski, a Pole who, through a German entrepreneur, featured in the most popular American oddity displays as a "lion-man," and Krao, a Siamese girl known as "half-human, half-monkey," see Wieczorkiewicz, 2019, pp. 248-253. While Bogdan's thorough compilation of historical material and analysis of the ways in which freaks were presented is not objectionable, his "neutralizing [of] the problem of exploitation [of people with disabilities - A.P.]" does raise questions (Gerber, 1996).
9. In his analyses of the freak show, Chemers follows in the footsteps of other researchers and scholars of disability studies, including Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, invoking the phenomenon of stigma as defined by Erving Goffman, which he considers not in essential terms, but in the context of social interactions.
10. From a different perspective, concentrating on the body simultaneously raises awareness of the problem of invisible disabilities (intellectual, visual, hearing). The freak show featured only people with disabilities that engendered a perceptible difference.
11. Conversely, some researchers consider freak show artists as active and conscious performers, benefitting from the situation financially and artistically. See Chemers, 2008, p. 9; Davies, 2015, p. 12.
12. While *PokaZ* has also featured in other venues, the museum context of its premiere is crucial.
13. While performing in the show, Niepce does not speak Polish, hence the piece is (for the most part) performed in two languages, with Urbańska and Kasprzak typically acting as consecutive interpreters.
14. Importantly, the question recurs in Pęszyński's scene, who describes Żeglicka's body with intense focus in an exquisitely poetic manner; when two persons with disabilities talk, when a normate's gaze is not involved, the dynamic of their relationship is radically different.
15. All quotes come from a recording I have accessed courtesy of the show's authors.
16. Notably, the poster child refers to images of children on posters promoting fundraisers for the sick and disabled (this way of representation can also apply to adults, infantilizing their image). They are portrayed precisely in such a way as to arouse sympathy and pity, to put the audience under the moral obligation to help the "weaker." In turn, Sami Schalk identifies three types of supercrip narratives: regular (persons with disabilities become supercrips by merely performing everyday activities "in spite of" their "limitations"); glorified (those capable of exceptional achievements, both persons with disabilities and the so-called able-bodied individuals); superpowered (invoking the cultural imagery of superheroes with disabilities) (Schalk, 2016). While this article affords no space for a detailed reconstruction of the stereotypes referenced, they have been addressed extensively in the subject literature (e.g., Longmore, 2014; Falk-Allen, 2018; Hayes & Black, 2003).
17. Although queer individuals are also regarded as diverging from the "norm," Urbańska's presence in *PokaZ* demonstrates that as long as there is no difference and no possibility of visual verification of "otherness" (such as the inscriptions on the actress's legs), one can pass oneself off as normative, which seemingly reinforces the initial thesis of the "non-normative," visible corporeality that reinforces the freak construct.
18. For instance, when analyzing the social media of activists with disabilities addressing their sexuality and desire to have a child, one encounters comments that align with the eugenics discourse, advancing the same arguments as a century ago. A case in point can be

found in the Instagram posts by influencers-educators with disabilities such as Wojciech Sawicki (https://www.instagram.com/p/ClrJzxGI9VE/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D&fbclid=IwAR31tLPp_JuugtRKJ4NvcjA3UC4p12FG_ahHebcvGziryz8NbwFrE7YSM1w, accessed October 10, 2023) and Alex Dacy (https://www.instagram.com/p/CnTDN8WITV2/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D&fbclid=IwAR2rHVSL9LM9M_ozPm-pkNzHGmo973nUJDcT0aCKHU9gAQVGPmPPUhARspM, accessed October 10, 2023).
19. The original phrase as used in the piece reads, “Uważacie mnie za Downa” (lit. “You think I’m a Down”), wherein the full name of the genetic disorder (i.e., Down’s syndrome) is abbreviated and used as a derogatory term in order to stigmatize a person with said disability. (Translator’s note).
20. It seems that the term “anatomical,” as used in Polish literature on the subject, refers primarily to the theatricalization of autopsies. The adjective “medical” (medical) also refers to displays of persons with abnormal body structures or diseases before medical students-as-spectators, as well as surgeries observed by those students (in turn, in English, an operating room is also referred to as an “operating theater”).
21. Kuppers, 2003, p. 38. Anatomical/medical theater is a subject that requires a separate study; thus, in this instance, I merely signal its existence.
22. Interpreting the monologue simultaneously is Kasprzak.

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/ STANISLAVSKI

Stanislavski. New and Old Perspectives

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This article discusses the Polish edition of Maria Shevtsova's book *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) which has been published under the title *Stanisławski na nowo* (translated by Edyta Kubikowska, Instytut Grotowskiego, Wroclaw 2022). The critical part of the article is devoted to a polemic with the thesis put forward by Maria Shevtsova about the decisive role of the Orthodox religion in the formation of Stanislavski's worldview and its impact on his approach to acting and theatre in general. A number of biased or erroneous interpretations of some of the concepts of Stanislavski's 'system' are indicated, such as: 'Ja jesm' (I Am) or perevoploshchenie (trans-embodiment) identified by the author of the book with the religious notion of transubstantiation. The conclusion of this part of the article is as follows: while polemicising with the overly, in her view, materialist approach to 'the system', represented by Sharon M. Carnicke, and also with Sergei Cherkassky's overestimation of the importance of yoga to Stanislavsky, Maria Shevtsova interpreted Stanislavsky's attitude to acting in a one-sided manner, without identifying any sources in the artist's statements themselves that would support her argument. The following sections of the article outline the cognitive values of the book, such as a depiction of the vast cultural context in which Stanislavsky worked, a presentation of all the theatre studios he inspired, including the Opera Studio and the Opera-Dramatic Studio, an explanation of the importance of the Russian artist's discoveries for both dramatic theatre and opera directing, and finally, a brief discussion of the accomplishments of contemporary directors being Stanislavsky's heirs.

Keywords: Maria Shevtsova; Rediscovering Stanislavsky; Stanislavski's system; Eastern Orthodoxy

Maria Shevtsova, a British researcher, emeritus professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, author of numerous articles on the theatre of the second half of the 20th century, as well as monographs on Robert Wilson and Lev Dodin, has devoted her latest work to Konstantin Stanislavski. The book *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) found a Polish publisher quickly – by our standards – and in 2023 was published by the Jerzy Grotowski Institute, translated by Edyta Kubikowska, with a foreword by and under the academic supervision of Tomasz Kubikowski.[1] Both the English title and the Polish one, (*Stanisławski na nowo*), indicate the author's intention to present the achievements of the Russian artist from a new perspective – to present unexplored or poorly researched aspects of his work. The Russian origin of the Paris-born author, and at the same time her roots in the world of English-speaking cultures (the USA, Australia and, above all, Great Britain) are her great assets. Not all Western researchers who have studied Stanislavski have had the opportunity to study Russian sources in depth and not all have acquired sufficient knowledge of the cultural contexts in which the personality of the Russian creator was shaped. On the other hand, an outsider's look at a representative of another culture, assuming that this is a look armed with knowledge of the subject matter and unburdened by prejudice or resentment, sometimes allows them to see what escapes researchers accustomed to looking at their own heroes. We can therefore assume that a researcher who looks at Stanislavski from both these perspectives, taking into account both the Russian state of knowledge and Western research, will notice various distortions to which the legacy of the creator of the 'system' has been subjected on both sides, will shift emphasis, and will find original clues.

The book is not a biography of the artist; the facts from his life are not presented in chronological order; their mention serves to strengthen the

argument when the author focuses on individual issues important for Stanislavski's achievements. The first two of the five chapters are marked as 'contexts', while in the following ones the researcher addresses the most important issues for Stanislavski himself and his legacy, grouped into blocks: 'actor', 'studio', 'director'. The chapters are heterogeneous in nature. The first two, contextual, are encyclopaedic: dense with dates, names, terms, short descriptions of phenomena. On one page of the text, symbolism, futurism, and occultism coexist; Mikhail Vrubel, Marc Chagall, Vasily Kandinsky, Aleksandr Scriabin meet with futurist poets Aleksei Kruchonykh and Velimir Khlebnikov and the composer Mikhail Matyushin. One may get the impression that the author, who has experience as an academic lecturer, wanted the book to serve as a shortened compendium of knowledge about the theatre and art of Stanislavski's times.

The three subsequent chapters are of a different nature; the author returns – at different levels of reflection and in different constellations – to topics she considers key. Firstly, to the Russian Orthodox tradition, from which, in her opinion, Stanislavski's explorations arose; secondly, to the idea of teamwork, also founded on Orthodox culture, and at the same time influencing many areas of contemporary theatre to this day; thirdly and finally, to Stanislavski's role in creating the foundations of the art of directing, a role – in her opinion – not sufficiently appreciated by other researchers. In these chapters, certainly written primarily for people more deeply initiated into the issues raised, the author develops her thoughts, not avoiding polemics with other specialists.

In the introduction to the book, Maria Shevtsova emphasises that, contrary to the belief that everything is already known about Stanislavski, he needs to be rediscovered, 'or maybe even simply discovered' (p. 18).[2] However, her

approach does not stem from the currently widespread need to revise the past by applying contemporary criteria to it, both aesthetic and ethical. The latter, by the way, is much more common. Stanislavski emerges from the pages of this book as a giant who has influenced many areas of world theatre to this day.

When starting work on the book, the researcher probably had Western readers in mind, both students and researchers. And although they know quite a lot about the creator himself and his 'system' (the author consistently capitalises the word 'system' without quotation marks, contrary to the accepted tradition to date, including in Poland[3]), thanks to, among others, the translations of Jean Norman Benedetti (which she evaluates critically), the works of the American theatre scholar Sharon Marie Carnicke[4] (with whom she argues) and many other American and British researchers, scholars, and practitioners, this knowledge still has lacunae. Therefore, the author focuses on issues absent from Western works: primarily on the sources of Stanislavski's thinking about acting, which she discovers in Orthodox Christianity. According to her: 'Stanislavski's religious attitude shapes his worldview, and it includes the search for a natural actor-creator, with whom Stanislavski worked on his System until his death' (p. 19). The researcher lists the artist's other inspirations as the traditions of the Old Believers, the views of Leo Tolstoy, and the person of Lev Sulerzhitsky, about whom – as she writes – little is known (although the Polish reader may know a bit more – see Osińska, 2003).

The author also addresses the subject of the influence of Russian artistic circles on the formation of Stanislavski's personality before he founded the MChT. Thanks to this, the book contains information about the artist colony at Savva Morozov's estate, the famous Abramtsevo. About the Peredvizhniki

(Wanderers – in the translation proposed by the translator of the book)[5] and their successors, painters whose art shaped Stanislavski's aesthetic sensitivity, not to mention his later collaboration with some of them (such as Viktor Simov). About Russian patrons of art (apart from Morozov, another Savva – Mamontov – played an important role in Stanislavski's life), about the Russian Private Opera and the St Petersburg magazine *Mir iskusstva* (The World of Art), from which the set designers of the Russian Ballets came. In other words, about everything that constituted the Russian culture of the so-called Silver Age.

The presentation of the aforementioned figures and phenomena is accompanied by reflections on utopian communities, among which the author includes not only the Abramtsevo artist colony, but also the Old Believers (in addition to Morozov and Mamontov, the collector Pavel Tretyakov, founder of the famous Tretyakov Gallery, came from this religious denomination). The community, which the author defines through the prism of Orthodox culture, is linked to the idea of teamwork cultivated by Stanislavski. This theme forms a *leitmotif* throughout the book. The author has long been interested in this issue; in 2013, during a conference held in Moscow on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Stanislavski's birth with the participation of many world-famous directors, actors and theatre researchers, it was Maria Shevtsova who emphasised the great importance of the idea of teamwork in Russian theatre. Hence, in *Rediscovering Stanislavski*, she develops anew the subject of studies emerging in the MChT circle, assuming that the idea of community has its sources in the Orthodox tradition, which is characterised by the word соборность [*sobornost*], usually not translated into other languages (although Andrzej Walicki uses the Polish variant *soborowość* – Walicki, 2002, p. 207 et al., which makes sense because in both Russian and Polish etymology its root is *sobór*). This

word, which in Old Russian literature is the equivalent of the Greek καθολικός in the meaning of 'universal', in Russian religious philosophy generally means a community of people based on voluntary principles and on ethical, Christian foundations. It was introduced into the language of religious philosophy by Alexey Khomyakov, one of the classics of Slavophilia, and thus the utopia of communion rooted in the concept of *соборность* essentially refers us to Orthodoxy, and at the same time to the conservative trend in Russian religious and philosophical thought, which was Slavophilia.

The greatest contribution to building studiousness on community principles, deriving not so much from Orthodoxy as a faith, but from the utopia of a commune (i.e.: *obshchina*), not far from Slavophilia, was undoubtedly made by Leopold Sulerżycki – I wrote about this topic in *Monasteries and Laboratories* – a Pole by birth and a Catholic by upbringing, referring, like Leo Tolstoy, to the ethical guidelines of the Gospel. Regardless of the relations that connected Sulerżycki and Tolstoy with the official church (let me recall that in 1901 the Synod of the Orthodox Church separated Leo Tolstoy from the church community; this act was not equivalent to excommunication), due to the views they proclaimed, they commanded respect in Russian artistic circles, including in the circle of the Moscow Art Theatre. In her considerations, Shevtsova refers to a certain statement by Stanislavski himself, which is supposed to confirm not only his Orthodox roots, but also his perception of theatre in terms of holiness. However, there are problems with vocabulary here, which in Polish may be a result of the difficulties caused by double translation from Russian to English and then from English to Polish. The point is that some of the formulations quoted have been distorted in relation to the Russian originals, and they have a fundamental impact on how we interpret the author's intentions.

For Shevtsova, one argument in favour of Stanislavski's perception of theatre through the prism of Orthodoxy was his words from 1908 that function as an aphorism in Russia: that the theatre is a temple (храм), and the actor a priest (жрец). In the Polish translation of the book, these words refer to the Christian image of the world, because their author (Stanislavski) 'ponders the vital need for a "theatre-church"' and 'compares actors to priests' (pp. 32, 69). However, храм refers to a temple in the broad sense of the word (and therefore also a Christian temple), but in this case it is specified by the word *żriec*, or in its basic meaning – a priest, but a priest in the pagan world. In the figurative sense, a *żriec*can be a 'priest of art', but not a priest or other Christian clergyman. Therefore, when we read about the stage as a holy place and the actor-priest in Stanislavski's work, we do not have to look for religious content in these terms – contrary to what the author writes. Stanislavski, when he wrote about the temple of art and its priests, was motivated by something else, namely the desire to give theatre a high prestige – to recognise it as a domain of art rather than of entertainment (as theatre was commonly perceived at the end of the 19th century, especially in the landed gentry or merchant environment from which the director came). Stanislavski wanted to free stage art from triviality, to prove that it deserves the highest respect, and not to elevate theatre to the rank of religion. Besides, would he do this if he were as religious as the author wants? Especially when we consider that Orthodoxy has traditionally been distrustful of, and in some eras even hostile towards theatre and all kinds of performances (see Osińska, 2010).

Rediscovering Stanislavski – this is first and foremost Stanislavski the Orthodox, and not in the sense in which Russians are commonly thought of as Orthodox (or – more often – Poles as Catholics; such a cliché appears in Shevtsova's work in reference to Grotowski, about whom she writes that

Catholicism had entered his blood' – p. 236), but whom Stanislavski characterised as a 'pious man' (p. 91), 'religious by upbringing and habitus, but […] deeply religious in his blood and bones' (p. 89), and even 'a pious believer' (p. 110). Yet the author does not provide any sources that would attest to Stanislavski's piety. It is true that he was raised in Orthodox culture, but whether Orthodoxy was really the primary source from which he drew when practising, thinking and writing about acting – here I have my doubts.

The author devotes one of the subchapters to the formula *ja jesm* (which in Jerzy Czech's interpretation should be translated as: 'jam jest' (I am)– see Stanislavski, 2011, pp. 20–21). She writes:

> Stanislavski knew from church services, purification rites and other such religious observance, that 'ya yesm' means nothing less than 'I am in God and God in me' in spirit and body; and the attitude underpinning 'ya yesm' is 'I am attentive to my stated of oneness with God'. […] By saying (or thinking) 'ya yesm', the actor acknowledges his/her acceptance of the 'sacred task' of art […] (p. 101).

It is obvious that *ja jesm* references the Bible. However, Stanislavski left out one part of this formula, which was God's answer to Moses' question about His name (Book of Exodus, 3:14). This formula, in the Polish tradition, which reads: 'I am who I am', is written in the Orthodox Bible as *Ja jesm Suszczij*. This 'Sushchij' means *existing*, but also: *essential*, *true*. When written with a capital letter, it means the name of God. Stanislavski does not quote the biblical formula literally (in the case of a religious person, this would mean

at least an abuse). The issue of *ja jesm*, as understood by Stanislavski, was well explained by philosopher Oleg Aronson in an article devoted to *The Actor's Work on Himself* in the context of the relationship between the 'system' and cinema and film acting:

> When Stanislavski writes about the 'artificial stimulation of the periphery of the body,' this should be understood as introducing *randomness* into stage behaviour, in connection with which the randomness of the bodily reaction allows for the consolidation of a state *between* clichés. Consolidating this conditions the act of establishing one's own presence on stage as a real 'I am.' […] However, the problem is that the presence that Stanislavski captures in the words 'I am' and which constitutes a vehicle for the actor's emotion can be observed only with great difficulty even in life off stage. People generally do not pay attention to the 'ja jesm' moments in their everyday existence. In everyday life, our existence is subordinated to the mechanics of everyday activities, or to what Stanislavski calls 'trained habits' which practically eliminates the affectivity in the situation of presence. And it is affective precisely because it breaks the routine of standard actions, proceedings, judgments – of everything that is usually identified with life.
> The 'system' is a kind of school of mindfulness towards the weakest manifestations of presence in the world. In itself, this is as difficult as, for example, thought. And perhaps what Stanislavski means by mindfulness towards the everyday is precisely the proto-act of thinking, i.e. the provocation of the organism at the moment of inseparability of thought and feeling (Aronson, 2000).

Maria Shevtsova notes of the phrase ‘ya yesm’, that ‘its secularised usage in the acting profession was able then, as well as later, to maintain its religious connotations for those who recognised and accepted them, while acquiring the appearance of lay pieces of information, specifically tailored for actors […]’ (p. 101). The author suggests, therefore, the possibility of using this formula outside the religious context, in order to guide the actor on the path of stage presence – here and now. However, according to her, Stanislavski himself perceived the process of an actor working on a role as analogous to a religious experience.

In the author’s opinion, another term by Stanislavski, namely *pierevoploshchenye* (transformation), should also be considered in a religious context. In support of her diagnosis, she refers, among others, to the considerations of Anatoly Vasilyev:

> An Orthodox Christian himself, Vasilyev sees Orthodoxy in Stanislavsky’s very idea of ‘metamorphosis’ (Vasilyev’s word), that is, the transubstantiation of one substance into another, or, in the language of Stanislavsky’s theatre, that of an actor embodied in the not-oneself (which is a role) and of the role embodied in the actor. Embodiment (voploshcheniye) achieves transformation (perevoploshcheniye) when it crosses over – as indicated by the profix pere – into this highest form of actorly accomplishment. Pere, in Russian grammar, always indicates movement[6], which, in this case, signifies the action towards transformation as it is being accomplished. In other words, transformation is a process, not an end result. For Stanislavski, it is, indeed, part and parcel of the ‘creative process’ (p. 90).

The ‘transubstantiation’ cited by the author, summarising the artist’s statement, has its source in Catholic theology; in Orthodoxy, to which this concept came late, the emphasis falls on the mystery of the Eucharist. Vasilyev, as an artist, has the right to perceive the idea of the artist’s transformation into a character, or the act of transubstantiation in this way – in the terminology of the ‘system’.[7] I consider it excessive presuposition to ascribe this motivation to Stanislavski, following Vasilyev, without indicating the sources proving Stanislavski’s approach. After all, the author knows that similar symbolic transformations are present in various religions, and the idea of transformation, of becoming someone else, she gives – following Mircea Eliade – sacral connotations. However, it is hard to find convincing the claim that Stanislavski’s understanding of acting might be directly associated with transformation into the sacred in the Christian sense. In her opinion: ‘in a quasi-mystical and also sexual language, [Stanislavsky] speaks of that – to him rare – moment when an actor reaches that ganz andere which “shows itself” as “ecstasy”’ (p. 91). In the quoted fragment from Stanislavski’s writings, however, ‘ecstasy’ does not mean a state in which a mystical act of transfiguration occurs. Stanislavski writes about delight, about satisfaction caused by the beauty of one’s own creative act, i.e. about an aesthetic experience. An achievement thanks to ‘correct creative well-being’, the path to which leads through the activation of affective memory (Stanislavski, 1993, p. 346).

It is interesting that the author, when discussing issues related to acting, devotes little attention to affective memory; the word ‘psychology’ hardly appears in the book, let alone ‘psychological realism’. She mentions the discoveries of Théodule Ribot (as well as other scientific peers important to Stanislavski: William James, Ivan Sechenov, Ivan Pavlov – p. 93), but she places the ‘life of the human spirit’ above affective or emotional memory,

situating it, of course, in Russian Orthodoxy.

The references to Orthodoxy in light of the history of the MChT and its co-founder are not new; they were related to the departure – from the 1980s, and especially after the fall of the Soviet Union – from the materialist vision of the 'system' and to the renaissance of religious life in Russia. During the international symposium *Stanislavski in the Changing World* held in Moscow in 1989 with the participation of (for the first time so many) foreign guests, Inna Solovyova described the work of the early MChT as Orthodox (Solovyova, 1994, p. 56). As evidence, the researcher quoted words from a brochure distributed by Stanislavski at the beginning of the 20th century to students of theatre art, according to which the tasks of art should stem from a Christian vision of the world, based on the idea of brotherly (today we would add 'and sisterly') unity. The author of the brochure was Leo Tolstoy, and his considerations were reflected in the principles of coexistence in the team developed in the Art Theatre and in the studios; however, the context of the time – the end of the 20th century – meant that generalising conclusions about the overwhelming influence of Orthodoxy on Russian culture at the beginning of the 20th century became popular, similar to (over two decades later, already in the 21st century) the issue of the influence of yoga on the 'system'.

Stanislavski used vocabulary from various sources; he spent his whole life searching for an adequate language to express the complex processes in acting. Hence, in his dictionary, alongside the aforementioned 'jam jest' or 'life of the human spirit', there appear terms more related to Eastern philosophy and practices, including yoga, such as: 'circle of attention', 'concentration of thought', 'muscle relaxation', 'prana (life force)', 'rays of energy'. Shevtsova emphasises (rightly, in my opinion) that the discovery of

Stanislavski's interest in yoga (fashionable in Russia at the beginning of the last century) led to an overestimation of the influence of this tradition on the 'system'. While disputing with the most important populariser of this trend of thought, Sergei Cherkassky,[8] she also argues that the concepts Cherkassky derived from yoga (obshcheniye, 'attention', 'visualisation', 'jam jest') belong to 'deep Orthodoxy' (p. 109). In doing so, the vision of the religious Stanislavski created by the author in opposition to the distortions of Soviet interpreters or the overly – in her opinion – materialistic approach to the 'system' represented by Sharon M. Carnicke becomes equally one-sided.

Stanislavski's upbringing probably predisposed him to search for impulses in the spiritual sphere, as well as for words that would help him name his discoveries. And I am sure that in Orthodoxy, especially in its hermit and meditative traditions, one can find elements close to his searches – of that I am convinced. Hence, I read with interest the discussion of the Orthodox cosmology of Theophan the Recluse (p. 92); Shevtsova admits that there is no evidence that Stanislavski knew the teachings of this holy monk and theologian, which does not mean that one cannot find traces close to his discoveries in them. Incidentally, it is a pity that the author omitted another parallel between Stanislavski's searches and the spiritual school – one that was noticed by Sergei Eisenstein and discussed by him in an article on the closeness of Stanislavski's acting techniques to the spiritual practices of Ignatius of Loyola (Eisenstein, 2000).

Maria Shevtsova's book contains so many threads and topics that it is difficult to discuss them all in one review. It undoubtedly fills gaps in knowledge about Stanislavski not only for Western readers, but also for Polish ones. I mean here, for example, the artist's activity in both opera studios: after the revolution in the Studio of the Bolshoi Theatre and – in the

last years of his life – in the Opera-Dramatic Studio. Based on little-known sources, Shevtsova reconstructs both the artist's methods of working with opera singers and his attitude to opera. And it should be emphasised that Stanislavski's contribution to the reform of opera directing is an important and indeed neglected topic outside Russia. Even today, it is worth listening to Stanislavski's opinion that it is the music that carries the content contained in the opera, that the opera director must start with 'the score and what its music was "saying" instead of from the libretto and its story and content' (p. 170). Hence Stanislavski's sensitivity to the sung word, to the 'note-word', and not only in the aspect of working on diction. After all, work at the Opera-Dramatic Studio was the time when Stanislavski developed the so-called method of physical actions. Working with actors-singers, Stanislavski was convinced that speech, as well as singing, are actions; that action 'was not solely a matter of moving arms and legs' (p. 172). In Stanislavski's directing work, Shevtsova finds aspects that he examines with particular attention. She points to his desire to make actors co-creators of the performance. Discussing in detail his work in different periods of his life, especially in the studio, she comes to the conclusion that over the years he became increasingly convinced that an actor who reaches the heights of his profession becomes a master, and therefore needs less and less directing and thus participates more and more in the joint work.

This is another aspect of teamwork, which, according to the author, was inspiring for companies in the second half of the 20th century, such as Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil (which began in 1964 with 'collective directors made out of all the company actors in a collectivity of equals in all areas of their common enterprise'— p. 233), and even groups of young dancers in the 21st century.

In *Rediscovering Stanislavski* the political contexts in which Stanislavski had to live and work both before and after the revolution are not omitted, although of course the Soviet era, and especially the Stalinist period, posed an incomparably greater, and often deadly, challenge for anyone involved in public activity. Importantly, the author shows Stanislavski as a man fully aware of the situation in which he operated; making difficult decisions and having no illusions about the oppressive political reality. This lack of illusions was, among other things, the result of the artist's personal experiences, who after the revolution lost not only all his fortune, but also experienced family tragedies related to the arrests and sentencing of some of his family members.

The author tries to prove that Stanislavski's views, even during the Tsarist period, were reflected in his work. She cites, among others, Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (premiered in 1900). Stanislavski not only directed this play, but also played Doctor Stockmann, one of his most important roles. Shevtsova mentions Stanislavski's attitude, who sided with the democratic part of society in disputes with the authorities. During the play's performance in St Petersburg, there were student demonstrations against the new regulations, according to which rebels could not only be expelled from universities, but also conscripted into the army. When the students released from custody went to see the play, Stanislavski ordered them to be issued tickets (p. 162). One can assume that the issues he raised about freedom and justice were warmly received by the crowded young audience.

Shevtsova also sees the political potential of the plays Stanislavski worked on after the revolution. She proves that he was not incapable of dealing with political themes, but that he was opposed to theatre used as a clearly ideologised, political stage (p. 183). She recalls Beaumarchais's *The*

Marriage of Figaro (premiered in 1927), in which Stanislavski did not omit the political aspects of the drama. 'Figaro's reputation as a forerunner of the 1789 French Revolution was not lost on Stanislavsky, who stressed that Figaro was, first and foremost, a man of the people" [narod] and "a democrat, protestor and rebel"' (p. 213). The author's argument is weakened by the fact that she refers to an unreliable witness: Nikolai Gorchakov, the author of *Stanislavski Directs* (also published in Polish in 1957), politicised Stanislavski, but in a Stalinist spirit (his book was published in the Soviet Union in 1950). It is hard to imagine that Stanislavski could have expressed his support for the people's revenge in the words quoted by Gorchakov; according to him, the director was supposed to have appealed to the actors to look for folklore and revolutionary elements in Beaumarchais's comedy: 'Of course, in the very content of the play we cannot show the people's uprising. The people who, after a few years, armed with pikes, rifles or simply with pitchforks and axes, will conquer the Bastille, demolish the castles of French aristocrats' (Gorchakov, 1957, p. 279). Apart from the style of this statement itself, which is very inconsistent with the image of Stanislavski that Maria Shevtsova tries to create in her book (including the Orthodox Stanislavski), Gorchakov's account is contradicted by descriptions of the performance penned by reviewers. 'The romanticism of love absorbed the MChT more than the social antagonisms that were evident here. The theatre replaced Beaumarchais – the poisonous pamphleteer – with the "Chevalier de France"!' (*Moskovsky Khudozhevnennyye teatr v russkoye teatralnoy kritikie*, 2009, p. 215), wrote the critic Samuil Margolin. And Nikolai Volkov reported after the premiere: 'The performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* has already provoked a number of protests in the press. The theatre is accused of failing to intensify the struggle of the "state" present in the text of the new staging of this once revolutionary comedy, and

of having removed from the stage the opposition between the France of the old regime and the democratic France' (ibid., p. 217). Thus, the image of Stanislavski as a politician in the sense of a supporter of leftist views has been greatly exaggerated, if not distorted. The author makes him – including because of the staging techniques he used, such as the dialogues conducted by the actors of the First Studio in the theatre aisles and at stage entrance – the patron of the 'radical political theatre of the 1960s and 1970s' (p. 161).

The 'primary task' that Maria Shevtsova sets for herself is to present Stanislavski as a forerunner, as an artist who had a strong influence on contemporary theatre. In the epilogue entitled 'Heritage' that closes the book, she discusses the influence of the artist and his 'system' on directors, teachers, actors in the United States, France, Great Britain, Germany, Poland (briefly), and also in Russia, focusing in particular on the achievements of Lev Dodin and Anatoly Vasilyev. Some of the historical transfers of the 'system' to other countries are better known (for example, its penetration through Ryszard Boleslawski and Maria Ouspenskaya to the United States), others less so, such as examples from Great Britain, in which the role of the intermediary between the MChT and the domestic theatre was played by Harley Granville Barker (pp. 207–208) – an unknown figure, at least in our country.

The pedestal of the monument that Maria Shevtsova erects to Stanislavski is suspiciously pristine, without scratches or signs of ageing. It is a pity that the author did not find an opportunity to show that the man Konstantin Sergeyevich was an ambiguous figure who was criticised even by his students and colleagues. For example, she does not mention, and therefore does not comment on, Yevgeny Vakhtangov's famous statement from 1921, who claimed that 'Stanislavski's theatre is dead and will never be reborn'

because ‘Stanislavski has no control over theatrical form in the full sense of the word. He is indeed a master of constructing scenes and intertwining unexpected connections between acting characters, but he is by no means a master of shaping a theatrical performance’ (Vakhtangov, 2008, p. 181).

Maria Shevtsova’s book has a dense texture: it contains a wealth of information and themes. Many of them are worthy of attention, if only because they are unknown in Poland, but are important for expanding knowledge about the ‘system’, about its creator, and also for understanding why Stanislavski still arouses interest not only among practitioners, but also among people writing about theatre. In the Polish literature, Juliusz Tyszka attempted to deal with the ‘system’ in his book *Metamorphoses of the ‘Stanislavski System’* (1995). The researcher focused on describing the ‘system’ within Stanislavski’s own worldview, on showing the sources of Stanislavski’s thought about acting, and finally on the reception of the ‘system’ in post-war Poland (he devoted his second book on the subject to this issue – *Tyszka*, 2001).

Tomasz Kubikowski, in turn, read Stanislavski’s writings anew (especially *The Actor’s Work on Himself*), adopting the perspective of a contemporary researcher, aware of the state of current research in those areas that can help to acknowledge the phenomenon of acting (Kubikowski, 2015). An important topic for him was the perception of a book of life in Stanislavski’s work: an attempt to capture life itself, as the author writes, and acting through it. This theme of the book was expressed, among other things, in its title: *Surviving on stage*. Kubikowski faced the task of describing the ‘system’ using tools provided by contemporary biological sciences. He referred primarily to the discoveries of the Nobel Prise winner, biologist and immunologist Gerald Edelman, to his concept of the functioning of

consciousness based on ‘neural Darwinism’, to the theory of natural selection. Another point of reference for Kubikowski was the research on the human mind conducted by the philosopher John Searle. Then, finally: concepts from the field of performance studies. Tomasz Kubikowski’s competences allowed him to describe the ‘system’ not, as had usually been done so far, from the point of view of the state of knowledge of the era in which Stanislavski worked (especially in the field of psychology), but from the perspective of contemporary neuropsychology, neurophysiology, philosophy of mind. As a result, he reached interesting conclusions, proving that Stanislavski’s discoveries in the field of acting are precursors to research conducted several decades later. In other words, according to Kubikowski, Stanislavski knew what today’s researchers know, but he lacked the language to precisely name his discoveries.

Maria Shevtsova has tried to balance two perspectives: the historical and the contemporary. Crossing the boundaries between them requires free movement in the vast material, which did not exclude minor mistakes that would probably be hard for most readers to spot.[9] I have voiced my own doubts about some of the author’s findings above. How much of the old Stanislavski is in the new, and how much of the new is in the old – let the readers decide.

Translated by Mark Hoogslag & Tim Brombley

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Footnotes

1. The author of a book important for a new perspective on Stanislavski's 'system' – see Kubikowski, 2015.
2. In brackets, I provide the page numbers of the publication in question.
3. The author explains her decision as follows: 'I write the word "System" with a capital letter to distinguish Stanislavski's system from all others, and also to distinguish it from the ironic, dismissive use of the word by critics in the early years of the MChT. Stanislavski himself wrote "system" in quotation marks when he quoted them or, more importantly, when he wanted to emphasise the provisionality of the term. […] Hence, "system" in quotation marks draws attention to the inadequacy of the term in relation to the constantly developing creative process that takes place in actors' (p. 23). One might wonder whether the author's decision to elevate the word "system" to the rank of proper names, to place it on a pedestal, as it were, does not contradict Stanislavski's own intentions. In this article, I will stick to the old spelling.
4. See Carnicke, 2009; 2023. The American researcher is also known in Poland, not only for her publications; in 2016 she was invited by the The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw to participate in the conference *Ryszard Bolesławski, his work and his times* (2016).
5. Peredvizhniki (Russian: Передвижники) is a proper name, untranslated into other languages, denoting a group of realist artists from the second half of the 19th century; the

full name of the group was the Society of Traveling Art Exhibitions.
6. Not always. It can also mean doing something incompletely, e.g. pieriekusit' (to take a bite).
7. This word comes from the verb pierivopłotit'sia, meaning to transform or incarnate – due to its origin from the word body (płot).
8. The Russian theatre director and teacher, also known in Poland, among others, thanks to the book *Stanislavski and Yoga* published in cooperation with the Grotowski Institute – see Tcherkasski, 2016.
9. Here are some of them: Sulerżycki was not himself a *Doukhobor*, as the author claims (p. 123), but only helped to transport members of the sect to Canada. Secondly, women in the First Studio of the MCHT did actually direct (see p. 131): Nadezhda Bromley and Lidiya Deikun put D'Annunzio's *The Daughter of Lorio*on the stage (1919). Furthermore, it was Vakhtangov who perceived the studio as a 'convent,' not Stanislavski (p. 126), and the Second MCHT was dissolved in 1936, so it could not have lost its seat in 1955 (p. 140). Finally, a funny mistake with a Polish element: Maria Shevtsova, reporting on the history of the Fourth Studio of the MChAT, discusses the play *Ziemia Obiecana* from 1922 by an unidentified (as she writes) author (p. 144). The translator, citing the author's opinion, adds that it was most likely an adaptation of Władysław Reymont's novel. Meanwhile, a glance at the old *Soviet Theatre Encyclopedia* allows us to determine that it concerns the drama *The Land of Promise* by William Somerset Maugham.

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/ STANISLAVSKI

Stanislavski and his Acting System: An Attempt at Psychological Verification

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The creator and reformer of the turn-of-the-century theatre, Konstantin Stanislavski, created one of the most famous acting systems still in use today. In An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary, Stanislavski presented a comprehensive set of recommended practices for stage creation, which he developed based on years of observations. The artist also showed that in order to better understand how one should act on stage, it would be good to make use of psychological knowledge, which was not widely available to him at the time, also due to the fact that psychology as a scientific discipline was only just being formed at the time. This paper is an effort to integrate selected aspects of Stanislavski's system with contemporary psychological research. The paper focuses primarily on introducing the issues of memory together with the most important classifications thereof. It also develops the issue of 'emotional memory', which Stanislavski wrote about, in an attempt to interpret the category of memory created by the artist in the light of available terminology and psychological research.

Keywords: Stanislavski's system; Konstantin Stanislavski; emotional memory; psychology of memory; autobiographical memory; cognitive psychology; cognitive conception of emotions; psychological basis for acting

Introduction

The subject of this article is the system of Konstantin Stanislavski, created at the turn of the 20th century and currently considered one of the most important sets of acting methods and techniques (Piskorska, 2018). The Russian director, founder and creator of the Moscow Art Theatre (MChAT), wrote down his advice for actresses and actors in a series of publications, including *The Actor's Work on Himself* and *The Actor's Work on a Role* – books that contain an explanation of his methods. Stanislavski's system gained importance especially in the second half of the 20th century, becoming the basis for the performances of artists such as Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner of the American method of building film characters, known as Method Acting (Kołacz, 2017). In Poland, the work of the founder of MChAT was an important source of inspiration for theatre artists such as Jerzy Grotowski, Jerzy Jarocki and Krystian Lupa (Guczalska, 2011). Today still, Stanislavski's system remains a topic that leads to discussion and steers stage practices – as evidenced by the Stanislavski Studio acting school established in Warsaw.[1] Beata Guczalska (2011) suggests that, in the context of Stanislavski's system, we can mention three dimensions of its message: aesthetics, technique (two categories indicated by Grotowski) and worldview. Starting with the latter – understood as the meaning and purpose of theatre and the art of acting – it is worth quoting the words of Stanislavski, who wrote that in stage work it is crucial to: 'create the "life of the human spirit" of the stage character and present this life on stage in an artistic form' (1953, p. 27). The creator of MChAT organized his system to these aspirations. In view of the task set before the actor in this way, the broadly understood knowledge of the human actor, understanding his psychological processes seems essential, and is referred

to by Stanislavski as ‘engines of psychological life’. Following this idea, one may conclude that psychological knowledge should be an adequate point of reference to check and verify the potential effectiveness of the methods and techniques suggested by Stanislavski. Stanislavski himself referred to psychology (as it was available to him at that time). He mentioned that, in *The Actor's Work on Himself*, he would use scientific terms such as ‘subconsciousness’. At the same time, however, he emphasised that his understanding of the categories belonging to a field other than acting would, unfortunately, be pedestrian, common. As Stanislavski pointed out: ‘It is not our fault that science disregards stage creativity, that this creativity remains unexplored and that we have not been given the words needed in everyday practice’ (1953, p. 8).

Such a call by Stanislavski, even if it is an expression of regret, also draws attention to the fact that the creator was aware of the importance of scientific work (including empirical research) for the development of the art of acting. It should therefore be emphasised that Stanislavski, when building his system, tried to use the knowledge available to him from the fields of biology and psychology of the time. In *The Actor’s Work on Himself*, the creator of MChAT referred to the works of his peer, the researcher Théodule Armand Ribot – a teacher of philosophy and professor of experimental psychology at the Sorbonne. Ribot believed that memory was a biological phenomenon (Nalbantian, 2013). He saw it primarily as mechanical repetition and looked for neural connections that might be responsible for this process. In this connection, Ribot was primarily interested in possible malfunctions of biological mechanisms responsible for remembering, which he studied and described in his 1881 work *Les Maladies de la Mémoire* (*Diseases of Memory*). It was he who formulated the principle related to the phenomenon of retrograde amnesia, known today as Ribot's law. Stanislavski

was also inspired by Ivan Pavlov, a researcher very significant in the development of psychology, including contemporary psychology (Zaorska, 2010).

Pavlov, the author of the theory on the process of shaping unconditioned reflexes, also wrote about types of the central nervous system, distinguishing, among others, the artistic type. Stanislavski used this concept, considering that for stage artists it is particularly important to develop and use visual memory, understood as the ability to create or extract visual images from memory in response to verbal material (e.g. the text of a play, stage dialogue).[2] Looking more broadly at the development of psychology in Russia at the turn of the 20th century, one can see that Stanislavski's work echoes the understanding of this discipline at that time. At the end of the 19th century, psychology in Russia (as in other European countries) was close to philosophy, and scientists dealt with problems such as free will or human nature (Sirotkina, Smith, 2012). The angle of exploring and attempting to define that latter topic is also visible in Stanislavski, who referred several times to issues around it, e.g. in the area of control that we can exercise over ourselves and our internal processes (Stanislavski claimed that only nature – and not we ourselves – controls part of our mental processes; 2010). At that time, experimental psychology and physiology were also beginning to develop in Russia, which had an impact on the recognition of the importance of the brain for mental processes. For example, Ivan Sechenov wrote an important work combining both of the aforementioned disciplines, in which he showed that thought is an action which does not end with the motor movement phase. It is also worth adding that Sechenov inspired Pavlov, to whom Stanislavski referred. Perhaps the focus on action (physical, but also so-called internal), which the creator of MChAT presented in his system, was supported by the knowledge of Sechenov's works as well.

This work is therefore an attempt to respond to Stanislavski's call to include stage creativity in the realm of scientific considerations and to provoke systematic reflection on acting activity using the language appropriate to psychology. Adequate recognition and presentation of relevant psychological research (especially in cognitive psychology) will allow for the practical verification of Stanislavski's system, i.e. checking whether and/or under what conditions it can effectively support the creative process of actresses and actors.

We are not aware of any Polish work that closely examines Stanislavski's system from such an application-verification perspective. The system is therefore used more or less consciously and more or less selectively. As Agnieszka Marszałek (2011) has shown, in Polish reality, Stanislavski's system is often learned along the lines of 'Chinese whispers', that is, it reaches many people, but from indirect and therefore potentially distorted sources. In the theatre and film environment, Stanislavski's work is present and is commonly referenced, despite the fact that few have become familiar with works such as *The Actor's Work on Himself*. At the same time, there is no analysis of the psychological mechanisms that Stanislavski (to a large extent) correctly observed, assessed and employed in his system. In our opinion, such a status quo may be related to the lack of a unified acting method based on verified and potentially effective assumptions of Stanislavski's system. It is not our goal to evaluate this state of affairs; we only want to show that it is possible to create a psychological verification of Stanislavski's system. In our opinion, this type of work can be compared to creating the musical notation to a melody – and creating the musical score of a song heard (if done faithfully) does not change its sound, but makes it easier others to reproduce the melody, rendering it a useful and effective tool.

The possibility of looking at Stanislavski’s system from the perspective of contemporary cognitive psychology is also important for the ethics of acting. In this area, it is impossible to ignore the practices promoted and practised by one of the American advocates of Stanislavski’s system, Lee Strasberg (Kołacz, 2017). Strasberg learned about Stanislavski’s thought indirectly, while studying at the American Laboratory Theatre. He did not have the opportunity to work directly with the creator of the system. Strasberg was particularly interested in Stanislavski’s views on emotional memory. In the Group Theatre he ran, it was affective memory that became the foundation in the process of building a role. Interpreting this part of the system, Strasberg concluded that in order to reliably and authentically convey emotions on stage, one should reach for one's own memories and include personal history in the process of creating a role. This consisted of substitution, i.e. mentally replacing one's own experiences in place of the character's analogous experiences. So, for example, if the character played by actor X experienced sadness and regret as a result of a stormy breakup with a partner, then when playing this character, one should refer to one's own difficult breakup with someone close. Strasberg understood that such use of memories can be burdensome, which is why he recommended that his students, whom he introduced to the world of acting at the Actors Studio, use psychoanalysis sessions to help work through these difficult emotions. As mentioned, Strasberg never had the opportunity to work with Stanislavski, so his interpretation and use of the system may have significantly differed from how the rehearsals at MChAT were conducted. Strasberg's conflict with Stella Adler, who learned Stanislavski’s system with him at the American Laboratory Theatre, could be an illustration of this: Adler did have the opportunity to meet Stanislavski and talk to him about his techniques and methods. This meeting resulted in a different interpretation

of the system, causing the dispute between Adler and Strasberg. In light of this, it seems fully justified to emphasise the importance of the ethical aspects of acting. Therefore, showing the psychological mechanisms underlying the functioning of memory and emotions emerges as a valuable part of understanding the dynamics governing the human psyche. An attempt to look at Stanislavski's system using cognitive psychology can help us understand which personal resources individual techniques potentially draw on, which in turn should translate into more conscious decisions regarding their use.

How to use Stanislavski's system is of particular importance for people who are just starting to act professionally. As prof. Barbara Osterloff (former vice-rector of the Theatre Academy in Warsaw) admitted in an interview with prof. Barbara Mróz, Stanislavski's work is not unfamiliar to teachers teaching at the Theatre Academy (Mróz, 2014). What is more, his system, to a varying extent and subject to individual interpretation by the teachers, is passed on to the students. Perhaps, expanding the interpretation of Stanislavski's system with knowledge about cognitive processes could be beneficial from the perspective of learners, leading to a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms that underpin stage work.

Stanislavski's system is a theory that is being used with varying degrees of compliance with the original. However, the theory behind it has not yet been empirically verified from a psychological perspective. Although the connections between psychology and the art of acting were written about in the 20th century, those works set themselves the task of explaining the impact of art on humans, strongly emphasizing the issue of catharsis (Chojnacki, 2019).[3] However, we are not aware of any Polish works where the question of how to use knowledge from the field of cognitive psychology

to formulate a set of practical tips supporting acting is addressed. In this work, we want to emphasise in particular the reference to issues of cognitive psychology – we will not deal here with Freudian psychoanalysis, nor with social or developmental psychology akin to Lev Vygotsky. We will not construct our considerations around the concept of catharsis, which seems to be Freud's or Vygotsky's emphasis. Our goal is to reflect on how the research we have in the field of cognitive psychology can help actors in the process of building a role, especially when they use the Stanislavski system and techniques related to memory processes.

It seems to us that such a psychological elaboration of the material contained in the interpretation of the system is close to Stanislavski's aspirations. We formulate such conclusions based on his appeal 'to the subconscious creativity of man through the conscious psychic technique of the artist' (1953, p. 25). Stanislavski used the term 'subconsciousness' many times in *The Actor's Work on Himself*. However, as he mentioned in that work, it concerned the common understanding of the term at the time. The time of the creation of the system partly coincided with the emergence of Freud's psychoanalysis, considered (incorrectly, by the way) to be the discoverer of the unconscious, but it is difficult to state unequivocally whether Stanislavski had access to his works — there is no consensus on this issue among researchers. Alexander M. Etkind (1994) indicates that, at the beginning of the 20th century, psychoanalysis was very popular in Russia. The author quotes a fragment of Freud's letter to Jung, in which he even mentions an 'epidemic' of psychoanalysis in Russia (primarily in Odessa). In 1909, the first translations of Freud's books into Russian were published, and two years later the Russian Psychoanalytic Association was founded. Freud was of interest not only to psychoanalytic circles – artists also referred to him.[4] In turn, John J. Sullivan (1964) points out that Stanislavski's

approach to characterization and identity, exploring the inner lives of heroes, was a natural element visible at first mainly in literature and in line with the prevailing zeitgeist in Europe. Sullivan also points out that the term ‘subconscious’ comes from the French psychiatric tradition. The researcher also draws attention to Stanislavski’s use of the word ‘superconscious’, which is a term foreign to Freud's theory and to the psychological tradition in general. Jean Benedetti (1999), in turn, believes that the creator of MChAT, when writing about the subconscious, spoke of those mental processes that to his knowledge were not subject to the volitional control of the individual. It is difficult to state unequivocally which processes belonged to this category according to Stanislavski. However, it is worth noting in these words the desire to include mental processes in the acting work and – to the extent possible – to gain at least partial, direct control over some of them. In such an approach, it seems all the more justified for us to undertake work that will compare Stanislavski’s thought with the achievements of contemporary cognitive psychology.

It should be noted here, however, that Stanislavski’s work on the subject of stage performance is quite extensive, and more than one book could be written on the subject of the advice he gives to actresses and actors. Therefore, in this article we will address only one of the many issues which the creator of MChAT addresses in *The Actor's Work on Himself*. We have chosen the topic of memory, and in particular autobiographical memory. We will consider the ideas and tools developed by Stanislavski in the light of contemporary psychological research. We will also consider the implications of such comparisons for the work of actors.

Stanislavski and the Psychology of Memory

When we look for connections between acting and memory, the first associations may concern learning a text or learning a sequence of stage movements (Stanislavski, 1953). Many researchers dealing with the psychology of memory most often conduct experiments on the general population and rarely deal with a specific professional group. Konstantin Stanislavski appears as a leader in attempts to apply his empirical observations (which could be called ‘folk psychology’) and the knowledge acquired in this area to theatrical activities. It is also surprising that the creator organizes his works around autobiographical memory, which to this day remains a relatively less known area within memory research (Jagodzińska, 2008). In order to better understand the meaning and functioning of autobiographical memory, it is worth first taking a look at the definitions and categorizations proposed by researchers dealing with cognitive psychology. This is also a direct implementation of Stanislavski’s call to provide everyday practice with appropriate and precise words of description.

Memory is conceptualized in psychology in several different ways, depending on the context and the purpose of its analysis. It is possible to pay special attention to its different aspects. Hence, defining memory allows for the separation of several conceptual groups. Daniel Schacter and Endel Tulving (1982) pay attention primarily to the functional and dynamic aspects of memory, emphasizing its importance for the existence of an individual in the world. Tulving (2000) considered memory as a neurocognitive ability to encode, store and retrieve information. Such a broad and general definition of memory understood as an individual ability shows the importance of processes occurring in the nervous system, which enable us to learn. The

second important way of understanding memory is to perceive it as a system (and therefore statically) that stores information (Atkinson, Shiffrin, 1968). In this context, encoding, storing and retrieving content refers to memory metaphorically presented as a warehouse. The systems approach to memory allows for its further division into smaller subsystems such as: sensory storage, short-term memory storage and long-term memory storage. The division criterion described above takes into account the temporal aspect of information storage, distinguishing individual forms of memory depending on how long information can be stored in them.

According to the division proposed by Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin (1968), the sensory warehouse (also called ‘sensory memory’) is closely related to the reception of sensory stimuli, e.g. visual or auditory. The role of the sensory warehouse is to store stimuli in memory for a very short period (from a few milliseconds to a few seconds), so as to enable its further processing at higher levels. Its operation is independent of our will.

According to another division, taking into account the time of storing information in memory, we can distinguish between short-term memory storage and long-term memory storage. Short-term memory storage has a small capacity, which is why it is easily burdened. It stores both information reaching it from sensory storage and that which is recalled from long-term memory. However, its main function is the current processing of information and maintaining it long enough so that it can be used to achieve a higher goal, e.g. writing down the phone number of a new friend on a piece of paper. The time for which newly provided data is maintained in the short-term memory storage is on average from several seconds up to about a minute (Nęcka et al., 2006).

Long-term memory storage is characterized by the longest duration of

storing information. Data can be stored in it for years. The capacity of this storage can be unlimited. The main task of long-term memory is to collect knowledge about the environment, so that it can be used to adapt the individual to the environment. Within long-term memory, Larry Squire (1994) made another division into declarative and non-declarative memory, also called ‘procedural memory’ (Ryle, 1970). Declarative memory includes the type of information that we can verbalize, e.g., ‘I visited my cousin from the Netherlands in 2009’, whereas information stored in non-declarative memory is difficult to precisely put into words, e.g. describing exactly all the actions one takes while driving a car.

The division made by Squire serves mainly to organize knowledge about memory and it is worth noting here that the categories distinguished by the researcher are not hermetic; on the contrary, the elements of declarative and non-declarative memory interact with each other. Within declarative memory, Squire presents another division, distinguishing, following Tulving (1972), semantic memory and episodic memory. The first category introduced by Tulving refers to general facts, knowledge about the world that can be verbalized, e.g. ‘The capital of France is Paris.’ The context of obtaining this information is not important and is usually not an important element necessary for retrieval. The second category is the memory of events that can be anchored in a specific place and time, e.g. a friend's birthday party that she organized this summer. The verbalization of knowledge contained in episodic memory depends on the individual's linguistic skills and the level of detail in the recording of a given event. As is the case with declarative and non-declarative memory, information belonging to these two categories may overlap in the case of semantic and episodic memory.

A specific type of episodic memory is autobiographical memory, which refers to personal events, i.e. those related to the Self, e.g. one’s first swimming lesson. This type of memory closely related to the Self is assigned to episodic memory, because it contains proportionally more data about the event than semantic information (Maruszewski, 2005). Maruszewski additionally lists further determinants that allow us to distinguish autobiographical memory as a separate subcategory. The material in the memory related to the Self is subject to a characteristic type of organisation. First, it is chronologically ordered in time. Moreover, the information contained in autobiographical memory is ordered and regulated by the course of social interactions. Such units of information built around contacts with other people create larger episodes that are meaningful to a given subject. Another important feature of autobiographical memory is the high degree of connection with emotions: memories related to the Self contain more emotional material compared to other types of memory. The last important distinguishing feature is the issue related to encoding and storing knowledge related to the Self. Initially, before it is stored in memory, information about a given individual is very specific, and only after encoding does it take on a more general meaning and fit into a broader context (e.g. a personal narrative about one's own life).

The types of memory presented above are constantly activated during everyday activities; e.g. while training we store an important date in short-term memory to write it down in a notebook right away, or with each drawing lesson we get better at drawing portraits, although it would be difficult to explain exactly how the whole process of creation works. We can say that specific types of tasks are associated with specific types of memory. In this context, in the case of acting — in the process of building a stage character — we could also distinguish such tasks that trigger the use of different types of memory. First, we should mention learning the text of a

role, which is connected with the operation of semantic memory. Another phase could be practising specific skills needed for a specific performance, e.g. to master a fencing duel for a performance in *Hamlet* – here we have a sequence that can be learned thanks to procedural memory. Looking at it in this way, the work of actresses and actors seems very far from involving episodic memory. The memory of events is seemingly not connected in any way to the tasks of on-stage creators. However, the tasks listed above do not refer to that stage of creation which requires that patterns of a character's behaviour be established, or, as Stanislavski wrote: 'creating the "life of the human spirit"' (Stanislavski, 1953, p. 27).

This description of categories and divisions significant for contemporary cognitive psychology was necessary from the perspective of our reflection on Stanislavski's work, because, as can be seen, the concept of emotional or affective memory, which the creator of MChAT used so eagerly (drawing on the work of his contemporary researcher, Ribot) did not appear here. So where can we place this emotional memory, about which Stanislavski wrote in the form of a master–disciple dialogue: 'This very memory, thanks to which all your feelings experienced during Moskvin's performances and those after the death of your friend are repeated, we call emotional memory' (2010, p. 325)?

Placing this example within the framework of today's categorizations, we can see that Stanislavski refers to autobiographical memory, a characteristic feature of which is 'emotogenicity' (Maruszewski, 2005). We will therefore take a broader look at the understanding of the concept of emotional memory and pay special attention to its consequences in the process of building a role.

Emotional Memory

So what constitutes this emotional memory (or, in other words, the memory of feelings) for Stanislavski? The artist claims that it is a gradable ability, occurring in individual people at different levels, which concerns the possibility of recalling the feelings accompanying the individual in given circumstances. Few people have this disposition in a developed form. Stanislavski also organizes memory according to the senses – he distinguishes, for example, its visual and auditory forms. In today's psychology, sensory memory functions within the short-term memory system and includes both iconic memory, related to vision (Sperling, 1960) and echoic memory, related to hearing (Neisser, 1967). However, both of these categories refer to extremely short-term reactions to the presented stimulus, because the time of storing perceptual information, both visual and acoustic, is measured in milliseconds. However, it can be noted that what Stanislavski understands by ‘sensory memory’, we currently recognize as issues related to the organization of three memory processes – encoding, storage and retrieval. Visual memory in Stanislavski’s approach would be best suited to one of the methods of encoding, which is the creation of images. As for emotional memory in his vision, the importance of extraction processes, especially the ability to handle relevant cues, is much more clearly outlined here. Stanislavski writes the following about the two types of memory mentioned above:

> Just as in visual memory, a long-forgotten object, landscape or human figure comes alive before your inner sight, so in emotional memory once experienced feelings come alive. It seems to us that we have completely forgotten about them, when suddenly some

> allusion, thought, familiar image makes us experience again, sometimes just as strong as the first time, sometimes a little weaker (2010, pp. 325-326).

Writing further about emotional memory in his diary, Stanislavski also touches on the issue of individual differences that can affect the mechanisms of memory. In order to illustrate his observations, he cites the story of two travellers: the first of them remembered his behaviour perfectly; that is, the actions he took during the event in which he took part, while the second did not recall any actions, but was able to recall the emotions that accompanied him at the time. The ability to recall and describe feelings in such an accurate and expressive way as the second man in the story was able to, Stanislavski calls ‘the possession of emotional memory’. The artist believes that emotional memory is a certain ability that differs from person to person. According to him, this means that not everyone has the same ability to execute a task associated with emotional memory, e.g. to recall the feelings that accompanied a specific event.

Emotional memory is particularly important to Stanislavski, because in his opinion it determines the possibility of obtaining and showing internal experiences in the process of playing the role. Without those, according to the creator of MChAT, the actor and their creation are based only on external actions, on mechanical repetition of movement sequences and spoken sentences. In such circumstances, the goal of ‘creating the life of the human spirit’ is not fulfilled.

As we have already mentioned, Stanislavski sees emotional memory as a gradable ability that varies from person to person. He also provides examples of possible behaviours that indicate a specific level of emotional

memory efficiency. If an actor in a stage setting is able to recall very quickly, almost instinctively, all the feelings that accompany a given role during the previous rehearsal, it means that they have an exceptional memory of feelings. However, as Stanislavski himself points out, this happens very rarely. Still, if a stage actor, after initially activating only a previously established sequence of physical actions, after some time is able to recall the feelings that they previously experienced in connection with these fragments of the role, it means that they have a good emotional memory. Stanislavski wrote about this as follows:

> You could start the etude guided only by the previous settings. They should remind you of the experienced feelings, and you would give yourself over to these emotional memories and play the etude dictated by them. I would then say that you have a good emotional memory, although perhaps not exceptional or supernatural (2010, p. 324).

This approach clearly indicates the use of autobiographical memory resources. Stanislavski refers here to the phase of retrieval from memory, recollection. It is therefore worth presenting briefly the temporal organization of memory processes. This allows for a division into three stages: encoding, storage, retrieval. This approach is dynamic in nature and draws attention primarily to the fact that we can look at memory not only as a system of structures, as suggested by the previously cited division by Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968), but also as a mechanism of functional information processing.

The initial phase of memory processes is encoding, which allows information

to be stored in memory thanks to operations such as: organization, verbalization, creating images, and elaboration. Encoding can occur both consciously (explicitly) and implicitly. The process that consolidates a newly created memory trace is verbalization, i.e. naming individual elements of the seen image. This stage is characterized by selectivity, because not all elements of reality will be encoded. The role of attentional processes and strategies used to achieve the goal, e.g. the effective memorization of selected aspects of one's own experience, is significant here. The more deeply, consciously and actively we process the information that reaches us, the more likely it is that we will store it in memory (Zinczenko, 1961).

Importantly, both encoding and subsequent retrieval are more effective when aligned them with the goal and employ an effective strategy, closely linked to the conscious and active use of attention. Fergus Craik and Robert Lockhart (1972) created the concept of processing levels, according to which the durability of a memory trace depends on the depth to which we process the content that reaches us. Material that we receive only sensorially (e.g. smell, taste, visual impressions, colour and shape of font) is the most basic level, while what we subject to semantic analysis is at the opposite end of the continuum. In short, this means that the deeper we process a given portion of information, the better we remember it; e.g. if we write a work that is an interpretation of a selected film scene, we will remember this fragment of the work better than other sequences we only watched on the screen.

Let us now return to Stanislavski's concept and emotional memory. As we have already said, what he calls the memory of feelings falls within the system currently classified as autobiographical memory. As mentioned, Stanislavski believed that this is a gradable feature and that not everyone

has the same abilities in this respect. From the perspective of contemporary cognitive psychology, Stanislavski's considerations can be compared with the aforementioned concept of levels of processing (Craik, Lockhart, 1972), but also with the effective use of a retrieval cue, i.e. information that can be helpful in gaining access to our memories (Jagodzińska, 2008). We can divide cues into external ones – related to the context, e.g. an object in the environment – and internal ones, i.e. those that the individual generates themselves, e.g. associations or ideas.

The quality of such a cue is also important – a good one should be distinctive, i.e. characteristic only of a given memory. Looking at the role of clues, it is worth considering whether the diverse abilities in emotional memory described by Stanislavski can be related to the ability to create and use them. Skilful use of clues can help an actor quickly access their memories, including experiences related to emotions. For example: while working on a role during rehearsals, an actor discovered that a specific scene led his character to a feeling of disgust. If he wanted to support the process of internally experiencing this emotion, he could try to think about what disgust is associated with. He could then realize that disgust is associated with an Antonovka apple and thanks to this, he could recall a situation in which, while visiting friends, he was treated to fruit from their orchard. Unfortunately, when he bit into the apple, it turned out to be worm-eaten and he felt disgust. Keeping a diary containing emotion-association pairs could be helpful in developing clues related to memories of greater or lesser emotional charge. An association would be a clue allowing access to memories related to the experiencing of a specific emotion. In our opinion, such practices could be appreciated by Stanislavski, who wrote in his *Ethics*:

> In most cases, during rehearsals, the feelings that have been stored

> in emotional memory are analysed. In order to understand them, grasp them with reason and remember them, one must find the right word, example (descriptive) or gesture by means of which one can evoke and perpetuate this very feeling (2010a, pp. 60–61).

However, it is also necessary to refer to the ethical aspect here. Such use of one's own autobiographical memory resources can be risky – as illustrated by Lee Strasberg's practice and the recommendation to use psychoanalysis sessions so that actors and actresses are able to cope with difficult memories that they recall for the purposes of stage practice. It seems to us that Stanislavski does not suggest to actors that the only way to achieve internal experience on stage and go beyond the schematic physical action is to recall personal autobiographical memories with a high emotional charge each time. Rather, he treats the material contained in autobiographical memory rather as a source of inspiration, and, using more psychological terms, as cognitive resources on the basis of which subsequent stages of stage work are based. Stanislavski wrote about this process as follows:

> So try to learn, first, the means and methods of extracting emotional material from your own soul, and second, the means and methods of creating endless combinations of human souls of characters, characters, feelings and passions from that (2010, pp. 342–343).

Memories that contain emotional reactions should not be recalled on stage every time and try to experience exactly the same feelings (in type or intensity) that are found in the extracted memories. Moreover, Stanislavski was aware that memory does not work like a camera, and memories are not

a re-creation as an exact digital image stored on a memory card is. The director showed that what we extract from memory, what we recall, is fluid, changeable and susceptible to fluctuations. He wrote: ‘Please do not wait for what was yesterday and be satisfied with what is today. You only have to employ even the resurrected memories well’ (Stanislavski, 2010, p. 337). Autobiographical memory has a reconstructive nature, and the memories we retrieve depend on many factors, such as the context or our current goal (Jagodzińska, 2008; Maruszewski, 2005; Bartlett, 1932/1933).

Emotional Memory and Assumed Circumstances

In Stanislavski’s concept, the so-called assumed circumstances play a fundamental role, i.e. the context of action established by the stage creator, which can be built using the word ‘if’. This is a suggestion that asks the actor, ‘How would you behave if certain circumstances occurred?’ Looking at Stanislavski’s words describing good emotional memory, quoted earlier, it is not possible to clearly state how the described actors and actresses came to experience specific emotions during the previous rehearsal. However, knowing the broader context, which is the entire system, we can assume that it was the assumed circumstances that were helpful in this process – not personal memories. The assumed circumstances are supposed to lead to the stage action being ‘internally justified, logical, consistent and probable in reality’ (Stanislavski, 2010, p. 98). In turn, Stanislavski firmly places the possibility of ‘creating the life of the human spirit’ on stage in stage action. It is worth considering how, by using this ‘if’, a stage artist can achieve a genuine emotional experience. Richard Lazarus's concept (1991) is helpful here. Lazarus' theory assumes that emotions are the result of an individual's

interpretation of events. Each situation – referred to by Lazarus as an encounter or an adaptive episode – is in some way linked to the person's system of aspirations, goals and values. The individual evaluates the encounter in relation to personal motives. The result of such an evaluation process is the emergence of emotions, the sign of which – positive or negative – depends on how the adaptive episode is interpreted by the person.

The situation can therefore trigger a negative affective state, because it is assessed by the individual as an unfavourable event that to some extent threatens their current status. Although at this stage the presented concept of emotion and its application in relation to Stanislavski’s works may seem obvious, the concept proposed by Lazarus in light of Stanislavski’s writings has much more significant implications. The latter noticed that the focus should not be on the emotion itself, but on the circumstances that caused it. An example of this can be the following assumed circumstances: the heroine receives a letter from a wealthy aunt who decides that to give her money for her education if she considers the girl to have the right potential. The aunt writes that she will come to visit. We observe the protagonist just before this visit. Adopting certain assumptions regarding the situation in which the stage heroine or hero finds themself means that actors have opportunities for external actions (actions in which the character may be involved) and internal actions (thoughts that accompany the character; affective states). This vision of Stanislavski, who emphasized the need to outline the form of options towards goal-oriented action, is consistent with the concept of Lazarus, because it shows that affective states do not arise in a vacuum and are, in a way, a side effect of experiencing various situations and relating them to personal aspirations.

Moreover, Stanislavski stressed that it is impossible to experience the same affective state twice. Therefore, striving to recreate only the emotions seems ineffective and incomplete. According to Lazarus's cognitive concept, emotions do not arise in a vacuum, so in order to experience them, we need a process that goes on from the encounter (adaptive episode) to the evaluation. Such an encounter can take place precisely within the framework of the assumed circumstances described by Stanislavski, where the on-stage creator shapes the context in which the stage events will take place. The actor, taking on the role, evaluates this situation from the perspective of their character. In this way, it is possible to create an affective state and experience emotions that are consistent with the emotions of the character. As Stanislavski wrote: 'One can understand the character, empathize with their situation and begin to act like them. This creative action will evoke in the actor himself experiences analogous to the character's experiences' (2010, p. 341).

Cited in relation to Stanislavski's system, the concept of Lazarus shows the possibilities of attempting to explain the operational mechanisms of subsequent elements contained in Stanislavski's works very well. Such a perspective shows the potential of verifying the director's assumptions by using the resources from the field of psychology.

Summary

To sum up our considerations on the subject of Stanislavski's system in the context of contemporary psychology, we would like to cite a set of remarks that the creator of MChAT expressed in his *Ethics*: 'Many actors, especially guest performers, usually only act during rehearsals, and this is unacceptable. What is the use of barely mumbling a role, not experiencing it

internally, or even not understanding it?' (2010a, p. 23).

Indeed, without understanding and experiencing the role, it is probably difficult to achieve the goal of art as Stanislavski saw it, which is to create the life of the human spirit on stage. However, if we refer to cognitive psychology and memory processes, we can see the sense of rehearsals, during which actors and actresses only 'technically', or, as Stanislavski would say, 'craft-like', play their roles. The value of such rehearsals lies in the functioning of the procedural memory mentioned earlier, which allows us to master repetitive activities and skills. Thanks to this type of stage exercises, the actor learns (memorizes) the sequence of dialogues and stage movements (e.g. if a choreography appears in the performance), which is useful, provided that the creators are aware of the purpose of such a rehearsal.

> In most cases, during rehearsals, the feelings that have been stored in emotional memory are analysed. In order to understand them, grasp them with reason and remember them, one needs to find an appropriate word, an example (descriptive) or some gesture that can be used to evoke and preserve this feeling (Stanislavski, 2010, pp. 60–61).

In this paper, we proposed to look at Stanislavski's work as a space for exploration, interpretation and verification using tools from contemporary psychology. The creator of MChAT worked with his team, with whom he tried to reach the vision of theatre that was outlined in his imagination. At the same time, he was a diligent and meticulous observer of life and people, thanks to which many issues raised in his works are not only relevant today –

and possible to implement – but also effective in the context of working on a role. It should be noted, however, that Stanislavski, even with his drive to equip himself with knowledge, had only modest resources at his disposal, because psychology was a freshscientific discipline in his day. He suggested that acting is a profession focused on using personal resources, and he recognized these resources, described them and indicated how to use them on stage.

It is precisely this potential for implementing his system into stage work that is the reason to look at his work methods and place them in the context of the conceptual apparatus that is widely available today to those interested. Recognizing and interpreting the folk psychology practised by Stanislavski can serve to help stage artists see how they can use their own resources and create a tool adapted to individual characteristics. Looking at Stanislavski's concept of emotional memory cited in this article and the closer and wider connotations related to this category proposed by us, we can see that although our memory processes are governed by relatively universal principles (i.e. belonging to everyone), they do not lead to the same results for everyone.

By presenting memory in a dynamic way and focusing on the successive phases of encoding, storage and retrieval, we have indicated that what happens in each of them influences what information we can remember, and therefore use in stage practice. Looking at Stanislavski's system more broadly, we can see that as an author he tried to show that the path to stage realization – close to life, realistic – is for the actor to learn about his conditions and subsequently, to select those tools for these dispositions which in stage circumstances allow for the intended performance.

Knowledge of memory, grounded in psychological research, may prove

helpful in constructing a map of the space created by the individual resources of each person acting on stage – their personality, temperament, cultural patterns, life experiences, etc. In this work we managed to look at only a small fragment of these resources, focusing primarily on contemporary concepts of memory and factors concerning emotional memory as described by Stanislavski. However, we are aware that his publications are rich in content and, we hope, will receive appropriate, systematic analysis and interpretation in the context of psychological knowledge in the coming years, in accordance with Stanislavski's wish quoted in the introduction to this article. This article is a response to that wish, and a step in that direction: a systematic analysis of this type of stage performance.

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Footnotes

1. Website of Stanislavski Studio: https://www.stanislawskistudio.pl/
2. Pavlov's concept of central nervous system types is currently considered in psychology to be one of the earliest concepts of temperament types. Contemporary, research-based theories in this area to some extent develop Pavlov's thought – see Strelau, 2015. However, they do not refer to categories such as ‘visual memory’.
3. Lev Vygotsky, looking at Stanislavski’s system, formulated a theory of drama in *The Psychology of Art*. He also showed how energy is released and a state of catharsis is experienced.
4. Etkind mentions a situation from 1912 when three actors from St Petersburg organized a performance in which they embodied three qualities of the I – rational, emotional and unconscious – which may have been a reference to Freud's id, ego and superego.

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