

## Challenging hegemony

### Theatre as an ideological space in Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death

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Recently there has been a renewed interest in the work of the Polish visual artist and theatre maker Tadeusz Kantor. In July 2018, a new collection of essays was published concerning his life and work,<sup>1</sup> and only several months earlier The Wooster Group paid tribute to his work with their performance *A Pink Chair (In Place of a Fake Antique)*. Yet despite this renewed interest in Kantor and his work, a glaring omission in the study of the Polish artist remains: namely, a more in-depth study of the political. Interestingly enough, a good start was made by the British scholar Bryce Lease in 2014, who published an article on the ideological implications of the work of both Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski. Lease's article sketched a rough theoretical framework to analyse the political on an ideological level in Kantor, characterising his work as a Lacanian 'symptom' of a repressive ideological system which disturbs that ideology's role as 'Master-Signifier' (Lease 33-34) or 'mastercode' (Jameson 88). However, the limited scope of the article did not allow for an in-depth analysis or further development of this conceptual framework. As a result, the political in Kantor has remained largely unexplored to this day.

Tadeusz Kantor was born in the small Polish village of Wielopole Skrzyńskie in 1915 and died in Cracow in 1990. His life spanned almost the entire twentieth century, and with it some of its most harrowing, brutal and traumatic experiences. Yet he always denied that his work was political, instead insisting that his art was trying to create an autonomous space, and as such was attempting to reach for truth. He saw the field of art as a "domain of soul and spirit" which demanded "*the highest freedom*"<sup>2</sup> ("From the Beginning, in / My Credo Was ..." 204). He did not identify himself as a dissident, even though he was certainly aware of the dire situation Poland was in under Communism (*ibid.*), and during his lifetime he himself was the victim of state repression multiple times.<sup>3</sup> In his essay "The Theatrical Space", Kantor described his own artistic evolution as a long journey, a series of "Odyssean peripeteia's (...) in the borderlands of art" (121), whose result was an ongoing process of incorporation of the "reality of 'life' (...) in (...) the field of i m a g i n a t i o n" (*ibid.*) – i.e. the theatre play. His personal experiences and his personal imagination were central to the plays he made, forming the raw material from which he tried to create his autonomous theatre.

But it was precisely that principled defence of artistic autonomy and the autonomy of the artwork that made his work profoundly political in a society that did not recognise the personal as an autonomous space separate from Marxist-Leninist<sup>4</sup> ideology. From 1975 onwards, with the premiere of *Dead Class* and the advent of the “Theatre of Death”, he rejected the audience participation of his earlier work as “pseudo-avant-garde” (*Wielopole/Wielopole – An exercise in theatre* 13) and literally cordoned off the theatrical space to emphasise the difference between performer and spectator (“De theatrale plaats” 123). In the process, he deliberately drew attention to the theatrical frame within which his “Artistic Fiction” was being performed, making the spectator aware of the performative power of the gaze. In the plays forming the Theatre of Death his ideas on the autonomy of theatre and art would radicalise, with his “theatre spectacle[s]” (109) being constructed as primarily visual constellations whose images were derived from fragmentary, personal memories from his childhood past. Fitting into this was the way in which he built his aesthetic from ‘the Reality of the Lowest Rank’ (“Reality of the Lowest Rank” 117): broken objects, decaying fabrics, filth were used to create props and costumes.

Much of the research on Kantor’s Theatre of Death so far has focused on decoding symbols and references within his highly idiosyncratic theatrical universe, or on the mechanics with which he constructed these plays (Kobialka 1993; Kobialka 2006; Twitchin 2016).<sup>5</sup> This research has been absolutely essential to achieve a better understanding of Kantor’s work, but this article wants to go beyond that tradition and shift its focus squarely on the political within Kantor’s Theatre of Death. As the plays within the Theatre of Death represent a radicalisation of Kantor’s theoretical ideas in the direction of an almost absolute conception of artistic autonomy, this article will adopt the view that these plays simultaneously (and perhaps ironically) represent some of his most political work. In claiming an autonomous space for theatre, the Theatre of Death directly challenged the hegemony of Marxist-Leninism within Polish society, and in doing so opened up a space beyond it. This article claims that, as there is a unity between form and content in art, it is therefore worthwhile to analyse the Theatre of Death on an ideological level to better understand the functioning of the political within it. It will build upon the rough theoretical framework sketched by Lease through historicising the Theatre of Death, in order to bring out its full political implications.

### **The Polish Road to Socialism: Marxist-Leninism as a struggling mastercode**

According to Lease, the late work of Kantor can be read as a Lacanian ‘symptom’ (Lease 33) of a repressive ideological system. Referring to Slavoj Žižek, he points out that this type of theatre can represent a “point of eruption of the otherwise hidden truth of an existing social order” (qtd. in Lease 33). Lease then goes on to define the political as the moment in which one social fantasy is destroyed and replaced by another. However, this raises a number of questions which Lease does not answer directly: if Kantor’s work can be read as a symptom of a totalising “Master-Signifier” (Lease 34) or “mastercode” (Jameson 88), which mastercode does this actually refer to? While on a theoretical level mastercodes might seem interchangeable, in reality the content of those codes differs significantly. So which narratives were Kantor’s work undermining? And finally, did Kantor’s Theatre of Death really replace the social fantasy of state-sanctioned Marxist-Leninism with a different one, or should the political in Kantor be defined differently?

After the liberation of Poland by the Soviet Union in 1944, Marxist-Leninism was imposed through force as the country’s mastercode. As such it served as the shared medium of a common discourse through which various classes and social groups articulated their ideological struggles (ibid.). However, the crudeness with which this mastercode was imposed and the lack of any native Communist tradition<sup>6</sup> which could have supported its imposition undermined its legitimacy from the start. The vast majority of people in Polish society did not articulate their ideological struggles through the language of Marxist-Leninism. Kantor himself fell victim to the introduction of rigid ideological norms in the 1940s: he was twice fired as a teacher from the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow for his supposedly deviant and petty-bourgeois artistic views (Encyclopedia Teatru Polskiego, *Tadeusz Kantor*).

Instead, the crude imposition of Marxist-Leninist ideology by the governing Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) mobilised opposition to its regime, creating severe social unrest throughout the country (Davies 8). In response to this situation, the PZPR sought to remedy its lack of legitimacy as the country’s ruling party by linking up Marxist-Leninism with the much more potent narrative of Polish nationalism. The latter had deep popular roots stretching back into the late eighteenth century (Davies 113), and provided the Polish Communists with a good way to strengthen their claim to power. From October 1956 onwards Poland would chart a “Polish path to Socialism” (ibid.).

This mixture of Marxist-Leninism and Polish nationalism would initially prove to be successful. According to the British historian Norman Davies, the attempt by PZPR General Secretary Władysław Gomułka to chart a “Polish path to Socialism” succeeded in stabilising the country for a decade, while simultaneously providing a new ideological horizon to work towards (Davies 12). The building of Socialism became synonymous with rebuilding a more just and equal Poland, and the PZPR was able to portray itself as the force guiding the nation towards this more modern future. While it was frowned upon by Party authorities, the period between 1956 and 1968 saw a genuine renaissance in Polish art, film and theatre: the films of Andrzej Wajda and Jerzy Kawalerowicz, the performances of Jerzy Grotowski, or the happenings of Tadeusz Kantor, represented a breath of fresh air after the harrowing experiences of war and the imposition of socialist realism as the only official art form (“Remarks and Comments: Discussion on The Zaleskie Ball and Participation” 108).

### **Illegitimacy and collapse of the master code**

Despite the initial success of the Party in stabilising the situation and reasserting its grip on power, its legitimacy remained weak. When it decided to ban Kazimierz Dejmek’s 1967 production of the Adam Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve*,<sup>7</sup> it provoked protests which eventually led to the March 1968 student protests in Warsaw (Kopciński 559). The fact that a production of *Forefathers’ Eve* was cancelled by the state was seen by many students as another attempt by a foreign power<sup>8</sup> to undermine Polish independence (ibid.). The protests were quickly crushed, however, and the state responded with a coordinated anti-Semitic and anti-intelligentsia campaign, forcing over 15,000 people – many of them former Party members – to flee the country (Nader 95). From this point onwards, it would become impossible for most artists and intellectuals to articulate their dissent through the mastercode of Marxist-Leninism:

For the generation that treated the 1956 ‘détente’ as a point of reference, March 1968 demonstrated the aggressive, repressive and totalitarian face of real socialism. It signified a farewell to the illusions and beliefs that some form of evolution and a ‘socialism with a human face’ were possible. (“Remarks and Comments: Discussion on The Zaleskie Ball and Participation” 109)

By censoring *Forefathers’ Eve* and crushing peaceful protestors, the Party managed to destroy its own carefully constructed narrative in one swift stroke. Its decision to stir up hyper-nationalist sentiment through its anti-Semitic campaign succeeded in stabilising the political situation in the short term, but it also

exposed the Party for what it really was: a foreign-imposed autocratic government without any legitimacy and little popular support (Nader 94). This situation created a vacuum in the national narrative: while the Party was exposed as illegitimate, there was not yet any alternative narrative to take its place.

The collapse of Marxist-Leninism as the mastercode structuring public discourse left many artists and intellectuals speechless. To deal with the shock of 1967/1968 many withdrew from the public sphere and instead began to emphasise the importance of an autonomous personal space, far away from state control. This new desire for autonomy from state control is best exemplified by the Zaleskie Ball, a performative event organised on June 2, 1968 by the founders of the prominent Foksal art gallery (Nader 95). Provocatively called a “farewell to spring”, the event tried to create a “space without a space in which “the utopia of sovereignty” could be effectively played out” (ibid.). The Ball tried to create a private space entirely independent from the coercion and violence prevailing within the public sphere, rejecting the Marxist-Leninist notion that all property – and therefore all space – was owned by the State. As such, they also rejected the State’s vanguard role in establishing Communism, undermining a central tenet of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The intellectual disorientation caused by the extensive violence and propaganda in the surrounding space would translate itself in the use of the grotesque as the main category through which criticism was levelled (Nader 96). According to art critic and curator Paweł Polit, the use of the grotesque as an artistic strategy to implicitly criticise social and political conditions became one of the main influences shaping Kantor’s Theatre of Death from the mid-1970s onwards (Bishop et al. 109).

### ***The Manifesto of the Theatre of Death***

By the mid-1970s Poland was in a state of flux. The Party was confronted with a failing economy, increasing foreign debt and intensifying social conflict (Davies 13). With its authority ebbing away, it was forced to resort to violent repression and censorship, forcing many artists and intellectuals into exile. By the time Tadeusz Kantor published his *Manifesto of the Theatre of Death* he was not yet one of them,<sup>9</sup> but in many ways the text carried on the renewed hunger for artistic autonomy characterising post-1968 Polish art.

The text was not a turning point in his career, but rather a culmination of his earlier thinking on theatre. This thinking was shaped by the theoretical developments of the historical avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century, and this is reflected in the *Manifesto*, which returned to the thinking of

the theatre reformer Edward Gordon Craig. It took the “postulate of Craig” (“Het manifest van het Theater van de Dood” 91) as its starting point, which Kantor defined as the idea that theatre is an autonomous art form with its own specific language. He then took Craig’s idea of the “return of the marionette” (“Het manifest van het Theater van de Dood” 100) and made it central in his attempt to “purify” the language of theatre and “restore” theatre to the status of a primarily visual constellation that functioned autonomously from any dramatic text. To underline this point, Kantor cited Antonin Artaud’s provocative statement that “[t]o save theatre, it must be destroyed, all actors and all actresses must die from the plague... because they stand in the way of art...” (“Het manifest van het Theater van de Dood” 91). According to Craig the actor should be removed from the theatre so that its formal language could be rid of “unsayable emotions, of passions and (...) coincidence” (ibid.).

In choosing to associate himself with the tradition of the historical avant-garde, Kantor did not merely reject the “pseudo-avant-gardism” of contemporaries such as Grotowski (“*Wielopole/Wielopole* – An exercise in theatre” 13) or link himself with an artistic tradition that was seen as Western. It also made it clear that his thinking was not rooted in the Marxist-Leninist tradition, whilst also distancing him from the dramatic tradition of Polish Romanticism (Lease 42). It meant a reassertion of his agency as an artist, which in turn meant a reassertion of his autonomy to create and construct a theatrical space beyond state-imposed ideology. In this sense the *Manifesto* was not only about setting out the principles on which his theatre would now be based, but also a profoundly political act attacking Marxist-Leninism head-on: while the state might officially have abolished private property and therefore have attempted to assimilate all spaces to the state, he would keep trying to construct private spaces beyond their control. This adds interesting nuance to Lease’s earlier claim that the political aspect of Kantor’s work lies in the destruction of one social fantasy and its subsequent replacement with another. Kantor was formulating his theoretical concepts on the ruins of the social fantasy of Marxist-Leninism. This means that he was working in an ideological vacuum: a space in which Marxist-Leninist discourse had been reduced to a collection of empty signifiers, but at the same time a space in which no alternative discourse had yet emerged that could claim the same status of mastercode. What is crucial to keep in mind here is that Kantor did not attempt to fill this void with a new social fantasy. Instead, he attempted to reassert his own agency as an individual and as an artist. The theatrical space he constructed can only be described as a social fantasy if it is done in a negative sense: as a Messianic space in which time is suspended, and whose suspension creates a

space for an eternal repetition of past horrors. In spirit, this space is surprisingly similar to Walter Benjamin's vision of the Angel of History being cast backwards into the future, only seeing the debris of the past piling up high into the sky (Benjamin 249). In fact, Lease himself points in this direction when he writes that "death as a defense against death" could be a Kantorian leitmotif (Lease 43).

### **Constructing space**

As established above, *The Manifesto of the Theatre of Death* set out a theoretical and artistic framework that sought to create an autonomous theatrical space. This had profound consequences for the ways in which Kantor staged the plays of the Theatre of Death, with the most significant elements being the relationship between actor and object, and the conception of time within his plays. As Hans-Thies Lehmann pointed out, within the theatrical space created by Kantor, death is ceremoniously repeated (Lehmann 71). In the following part, this article will discuss the ways in which this was done, building upon the claim adopted above that the autonomous theatrical space Kantor sought to develop was also a political space.

*The Manifesto* brought together a range of artistic ideas and experiments that Kantor had been developing in the preceding decades. As early as 1944 he had been experimenting with the concept of the mannequin in his play *The Return of Odysseus*, which was staged in an underground theatre whilst Poland was still under Nazi occupation ("Het manifest van het Theater van de Dood" 104). Beginning with *Dead Class* in 1975, the mannequin would become a central structuring element in his plays. The decision to put mannequins at the centre of his plays had the effect of relegating actors to a secondary status, as they would now be mostly defined in relation to these mannequins. As both Lehmann and Lease pointed out in their articles, this reduced the actors in Kantor's plays to mere formal elements within the complex construction of the theatre play. The "actor as mannequin" would function as a surrogate of life, and therefore become a permanent representation of "the message of DEATH" (ibid.). As Lehmann points out, death was not dealt with in the traditional dramatic way: for example, there is no reflection on the meaning of death (Lehmann 72). Instead there is a "dance of death" (ibid.) in which death presents itself in a grotesque and often absurd and surreal manner.

A good example of this, briefly cited by Lehmann, can be found in *Dead Class*: during the opening scene a variety of elderly people are relegated to school benches, clutching mannequins under their arms which represent their younger

selves. The actors are mere shadowy corpses who have already crossed the threshold between life and death. Their movements are mechanical, making them resemble nineteenth-century automatons stumbling over each other to get the audience's attention. The actors are reduced to secondary characters, subordinated to the mannequins they are clutching. This contributes to the creation of a ritual energy which is reminiscent of Jewish religious traditions (Kobialka 2006, 23). The broken, mechanical movements of the actors created an uneasy tension on stage, an unease which seems calculated to tap into one of the most controversial episodes in Polish history: the violent destruction of the Polish-Jewish community during the Second World War and the anti-Semitism that was still (latently) present in Polish society. Here it becomes clear that Kantor's attempt to create an autonomous theatrical space is by no means innocent: in 1970s Poland there was no serious recognition of the Shoah by the Polish state, nor was it possible to discuss the destruction of the nation's largest pre-war minority (Davies 13). Via the gateway of his own personal memories it became possible to bring back images from the destroyed Polish-Jewish community without directly addressing their plight in contemporaneous Poland. As cited earlier, this reinforces Lease's thesis that Kantor's Theatre of Death can best be read as a symptom of a repressive ideological system: via the detour of the grotesque, these repressed images from the past come back with a vengeance.

This was translated into the abolishment of empty, homogeneous time and the creation of a "cariological time" (Kobialka 2006, 22). Time in the plays of the Theatre of Death became spatialised and symbolic, creating a form of "Messianic time" (qtd. in Anderson 41) where past and future appeared simultaneously in an instantaneous present. Repetition became a structural element of Kantor's Theatre of Death, and as such became one of the most important strategies to disrupt linearity (Kobialka 2006, 22). As Kobialka himself writes, this in turn allowed for an alternative space to emerge that allowed for a "challenge [to] official art of mass culture" (ibid.). More precisely, the creation of a cariological time allowed for many different personal and historical memories to emerge on stage simultaneously, and this made it possible for Kantor to create a space in which contentious historical memories could emerge without him or his work being labelled as explicitly political. A haunting example of this can be found in the 1988 production *I Shall Never Return* in the recurring image of the "March to the Gas Chambers". Several times through the course of the play a Jewish man can be seen fleeing from a group of ghastly soldiers playing the violin. As he flees, however, he keeps conducting the orchestra pursuing him – perhaps indicating that his compositions have been racially appropriated to the soldiers representing

‘Aryan civilisation.’ Following the procession, stumbling and falling, is a woman singing a Jewish lamentation, a song frequently sung before an execution took place in a gas chamber. This procession is never foregrounded, but marches solemnly onwards in the background, as a terrible nightmare that keeps returning. It is exactly thanks to the suspension of linear time that it becomes possible for this image to reoccur in the background, as there is no linear unfolding of a drama taking place on stage. As such, the recurrence of this scene is not an interruption of the performance, but rather like a refrain or leading motif in a piece of music. The use of repetition here seems to suggest that this scene is central to understanding the performance, even though it is not linked to anything else happening during that same performance. This forces the spectator to pay additional attention to it. In this way this troubling image underlined the hypocrisy of the dominant narrative at the time, which denied the unique character of the Shoah and did not allow free discussion of it (Čapková et. al. 2017).

Another good example of the intersection of the theatrical space as a ritual and political space can be found at an earlier point in *I Shall Never Return*. The play was heavily influenced by Kantor’s text *My Work – My Journey*, and depicted Kantor at the end of a long journey resting at a *Kneipe*, a way-side inn. The journey from which he is resting is the “journey of his life and work”, implying that he is resting in the borderlands between life and death. In the *Kneipe*, he again meets characters, figures and scenes from his previous work, going all the way back to 1944’s *The Journey of Odysseus*. During a carnivalesque procession in the early moments of the play, a “mayor of Kraków” appears who gives a fragmentary speech in which the language signs he uses are entirely desemanticised, opening up a gap between form and meaning which is typical of Kantor’s work (Lehmann 74). While this character is performing his speech, a host of characters from previous plays (such as the priest from *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*) run onto the stage quarrelling with each other over the question where Kantor is. A few minutes later, Kantor’s voice is suddenly booming over a giant loudspeaker suspended above the scene. Ironically, these characters have already been standing around the real Kantor, who has been seated at a table in the *Kneipe* for several minutes, but they do not recognise him as Kantor since he is the *real* Kantor. They only recognise Kantor through the voice on the loudspeaker, because that too is part of Kantor’s imagination as opposed to the *real* Kantor sitting at the table. This distinction, which is subtle, further reinforces the eerie impression which the Messianic time generates within this play. Through being present on stage he emphasises both the fact that the play is an

emanation of his imagination, but also the fact that there is a radical separation between the spectator and the actors on stage. This separation is not without meaning: his presence on stage represents an in-between position which walks the fine line between life (spectator) and death (actor), immersing the spectator within the world of his theatre play while at the same time distancing the spectator from it – a move similar to the cordoning off of the performance area in *Dead Class*.

It is in this push-and-pull mechanic of simultaneously immersing and distancing the spectator, that we find perhaps the most political aspect of the Theatre of Death. The spectator is allowed to peer into the theatrical space, making the awareness of the spectator's own gaze one of the constitutive elements of the play, but the fact that Kantor consciously cordons off that same theatrical space makes it clear that it is an autonomous space: it is a space that is separate from the public sphere and therefore not subject to the same ideological norms which apply to the rest of the Polish public sphere. It is a fundamentally free space, and as such in direct conflict with the Marxist-Leninist assertion that all property, and therefore all space, is owned by the State.

### **Conclusion**

This article has tried to dig deeper into the political of Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death. It has done this through analysing the political on an ideological level, building upon the framework sketched out by Bryce Lease which defined Kantor's work as a symptom of a repressive ideological system. It defined this mastercode as the Polish version of Marxist-Leninism, and then proceeded to evaluate Kantor's theoretical writing (the *Manifesto* in particular) and look at several concrete examples from his plays. In this way it became clear that Kantor's claim to an autonomous theatrical space attacked one of the core tenets of Marxist-Leninist ideology: the ownership of all property, and with it all spaces, by the state. Both on a theoretical level and a practical artistic level the plays of the Theatre of Death re-established Kantor's agency as an artist, further undermining the narrative underpinning the legitimacy of the Polish Communist state – narratives which were already in a weakened state after the events of 1967 and 1968. At the same time this article confirmed the idea that the Theatre of Death is a symptom of a repressive and totalising social fantasy, which it undermined but did not replace with a new social fantasy or a new narrative. As a result, this article concludes that the political in Kantor's work is to be found in a negative sense: it undermined a hegemonic narrative, but through its assertion of an

autonomous and individualist position this made it a lot harder (although far from impossible) for a new totalising narrative to emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Kobialka, Michal, and Natalia Zarzecka. *Tadeusz Kantor's Memory: Other Pasts, Other Futures*. London: Polish Theatre Perspectives, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis added by Kantor.

<sup>3</sup> See Pleśniarowicz, Krzysztof. *Kantor*. Warsaw: Wielka Litera, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> In this article I am using Marxist-Leninism to refer to the official version of Marxism which was introduced in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. While I am aware this hides a lot of complexity and nuance, this text sadly does not have the space to elaborate upon the differences between (e.g.) classical Marxism, Marxist-Leninism, Western Marxism, Maoism, other types of Marxism, and the national variants of Marxist-Leninism. For this article it should suffice to know that it refers to the way in which the PZPR adapted the official ideology of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, I do not mean that this has been the only focus, far from it. All the scholars mentioned above were certainly aware of the fact that Kantor's work has substantial political implications. What I am saying instead is that it was never the focus of their work, and that as a result little attention has been paid to the work of Kantor on an ideological level.

<sup>6</sup> The Polish Communist Party had always been operating in the margins, largely thanks to the politics of the Comintern, until it was dissolved by Stalin in 1938. This lack of native tradition meant that Communism was always seen in Poland as something imposed by the Soviet Union, and that the Polish United Workers' Party felt more insecure than other 'brother parties' in the other socialist countries. See: Brossat 76.

<sup>7</sup> Mickiewicz was (and still is) considered one of the "bards" of Polish Romanticism, a literary movement which was instrumental in keeping the idea of Poland as an independent culture and state alive throughout the long period of foreign occupation in the nineteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> In *Forefathers' Eve* the foreign power occupying Poland is the Russian Empire. In the 1960s it was the successor to the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union.

<sup>9</sup> This would change after the premiere of *Dead Class*: all the major plays he produced between 1976 and the fall of Communism in 1989 would premiere abroad first (See: "Tadeusz Kantor", *Encyclopedia Teatru Polskiego*, <http://www.encyklopediateatru.pl/autorzy/609/tadeusz-kantor>). An interesting side-effect of this semi-exile is the fact that it most likely helped boost Kantor's stature with Western art and theatre critics, whose knowledge of Polish theatre was otherwise limited.