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UBU THE KING AND THE SUN KING

Abstract: If we were to interpret theatrical practice from the perspective of a sociologist as seen by Adorno, we might recognize the contemporary theatrical moment as a return to the “classicist, atticist period,” a period in which there is insistence on the belief that everything is speakable and even measurable. The “norm” here represents trust in order, rules, and the dominance of will over the unconscious, intuitive, inexpressible, where “body-mind” is again returned to the binary opposition of Body and Mind.

How memory and remembering are dealt with in times of the dominant binary play between the roles of “victim” and “aggressor,” emerges as an important question. “You are not alone” implies taking the baton of the united “we” in relation to the “I,” which, in a state of fashionable and only seemingly resistant resistance, rises and revises the past(s). In what way is revisionism accepted within theatrical-performance practices? All these raised questions are based on the analysis of the Zagreb’s performance “*Ubu the King*” directed by Miran Kurspahić.

KEY WORDS: Political correctness, Personal and social systems, Abject, Carnivalization, “Position of power”, Demonization

UBU THE KING AND THE SUN KING

If we were to interpret theatrical practice from the perspective of a sociologist like Adorno, we could recognize the contemporary theatrical moment as a return to a “classicist, Atticist period,” a period in which there is an insistence on the belief that everything is expressible and even measurable.

I will briefly refer to Gustav R. Hocke¹, who points to the constant repetition of classicist and mannerist periods, in which the key aspect is the relationship to the “being.” The relationship to the “being,” therefore, always implies a certain aesthetics and thus ethics. In the classicist periods, the dominant belief is that “being” can be reached through words. There is a prevalence of symmetry, both spatial and otherwise, clearly defined norms and rules by which one works, acts, and, even, creates.

On stage, crimes are not displayed, language is controlled, and academic rules are adhered to. However, simultaneously in the everyday world, decadence prevails, hidden behind clear hierarchical models.

THE SUN KING

¹ Gustav Rene Hocke: Journalist and art historian; employed *Geistgeschichte* mode in his philological and art-historical studies of Mannerism. Hocke studied in Bonn under the literary historian Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956) under whom he wrote his dissertation in 1934. In 1957 he published his *Die Welt als Labyrinth* his theory of the continual resurfacing of Manneristic tendencies in European art. The book was highly influential.

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In the mannerist times, one reaches the “being” only indirectly. The most important things can be said “obliquely,” as Julia Kristeva² would put it. What is spoken points to the spaces between the lines, which are far more powerful and effective than the spoken words themselves. The moment we articulate something, the power of those words dissipates, and the background, the unspoken, takes a dominant position.

Does this relate to political correctness? I believe it does. Political correctness itself alludes to the paradox it carries; it is about politics. It is about a targeted action. About a norm intended to influence both personal and social systems.

Political correctness implies that there are boundaries: what is correct, and what is incorrect.

² Julia Kristeva (born Yuliya Stoyanova Krasteva, Bulgarian: Юлия Стоянова Кръстева; on 24 June 1941) is a Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, semiotician, feminist, psychoanalyst and novelist. She is author of more than 30 books, including *Power of Horror*, *Tales of Love*, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, *Proust and the Sense of Time*, and the trilogy *Female Genius*.

Kristeva became influential in international critical analysis, cultural studies and feminism after publishing her first book, *Semeiotikè*, in 1969. Her work includes books and essays which address intertextuality, the semiotic and abjection in the fields of linguistics, literary theory and criticism, psychoanalysis, biography and autobiography, political and cultural analysis art and art history. One of Kristeva's most important contributions is that signification is composed of two elements, the symbolic and the *semiotic*, the latter being distinct from the discipline of semiotics founded by Ferdinand de Saussure. Kristeva's "semiotic is closely related to the works of Freud, Otto Rank, Melanie Klein and Lacan's pre-mirror stage. It is an emotional field, tied to the instincts. The semiotic is a realm associated with the musical, the poetic, the rhythmic, and that which lacks structure and meaning. It is closely tied to the "feminine", and represents the undifferentiated state of the pre-Mirror Stage infant. Upon entering the Mirror Stage, the child learns to distinguish between self and other, and enters the realm of shared cultural meaning, known as the symbolic. In *Desire in Language* (1980), Kristeva describes the symbolic as the space in which the development of language allows the child to become a "speaking subject," and to develop a sense of identity separate from the mother. This process of separation is known as abjection, whereby the child must reject and move away from the mother in order to enter into the world of language, culture, meaning, and the social. This realm of language is called the symbolic and is contrasted with the semiotic in that it is associated with the masculine, the law, and structure. Kristeva departs from Lacan in the idea that even after entering the symbolic, the subject continues to oscillate between the semiotic and the symbolic. Therefore, rather than arriving at a fixed identity, the subject is permanently "in process". Because female children continue to identify to some degree with the mother figure, they are especially likely to retain a close connection to the semiotic. This continued identification with the mother may result in what Kristeva refers to in *Black Sun* (1989) as melancholia, given that female children simultaneously reject and identify with the mother figure.

Kristeva has been regarded as a key proponent of French feminism together with Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. Kristeva has had a remarkable influence on feminism and feminist literary studies in the US and the UK, as well as on readings into contemporary art.

Kristeva argues her writings have been misunderstood by American feminist academics. In Kristeva's view, it was not enough simply to dissect the structure of language in order to find its hidden meaning. Language should also be viewed through the prisms of history and of individual psychic and sexual experiences. This post-structuralist approach enabled specific social groups to trace the source of their oppression to the very language they used. However, Kristeva believes that it is harmful to posit collective identity above individual identity, and that this political assertion of sexual, ethnic, and religious identities is ultimately totalitarian.

The incorrect becomes / means the dirty (Mary Douglas³), the abject. An additional paradox lies in the fact that while we speak of the *abject*, of the *marginal*, we insist on avoiding dichotomies, binary positions, and polarizations. The abject takes on the place and treatment of the “sacred.” What was once abject is now sacred; what was once marginal now occupies a central position. But does this change the essence of things?

Carnivalization is not allowed because it is dangerous. Therefore, the abject actions are those that in any way threaten the sanctity of the former “abject.” By claiming that something is *abject*, that “self-designated” position is guaranteed *protection* and safeguarding.

The “norm” here represents a trust in order, rules, and the dominance of will over the unconscious, the intuitive, the unspeakable, thus returning the “body-mind” to the binary opposition of Body and Mind.

Living in the era of cancel culture, in the name of so-called justice, leads us towards summary judgment, persecution methods, and public lynching carried out through social networks, media, and platforms, even towards exerting pressure on the judiciary systems and institutions. The soap opera that self-identifies as a movement against the witch hunt results in the same violent actions of the group, clan, or the mass.

The cult of the victim and the demonization of the “position of power” create numerous chasms and splits, engendered by the culture of trauma. It has become almost in bad taste not to label oneself a victim and, consequently, revising one’s personal past. The position of a victim is the one that yields power and that requires revision of personal histories.

³ Mary Douglas was a British anthropologist, known for her writings on human culture, symbolism and social anthropology. Douglas' book *Purity and Danger* (first published 1966) is an analysis of the concepts of ritual purity and pollution in different societies and times to construct a general concept on how ritual purity is established, and is considered a key text in social anthropology. The text is renowned for its passionate defense of both ritual and purity during a time when conceptions of defilement were treated with disdain. In contrast to Claude Levi-Strauss' approach, Douglas seeks to demonstrate how peoples' classifications play a role in determining what is considered abnormal and their treatment of it. Douglas insists on the importance of understanding the concept of pollution and ritual purity by comparing our own understandings and rituals to "primitive" rituals.

Theatre promptly responds to these tendencies: there is hardly a repertoire that does not point fingers at sexism, homophobia, and the like. “The personal is political” has shifted to an intimate code⁴.

However, most of such repertoire moves play it safe: we will be scandalized if we do not address some scandal, which naturally aligns with the dominant new narratives. Political divisions and simplifications of the victim-perpetrator relationship become part of the political agenda. Just as during the reign of the Sun King⁵—through performative forms like comedies-ballets and the like—the goal was to gather nobles under the guise of shared artistic activities, but with a clear economic agenda to ensure the security of the Sun King. Nobles were required to attend performances, leaving their estates, which would decline, thereby diminishing their influence on the position of the royal families. Similarly, citizens could advance to higher social ranks.

⁴ Niklas Luhmann wrote 1982. *Liebe als Passion: Zur Codierung von Intimität*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp; (English translation: *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986.) With this interdisciplinary study, Luhmann greatly pushes the boundaries of traditional sociological research. The author deals with the semantic transformation of the concept of love following French and English society, and he finds rich support for his theses in novels, treatises and maxims.

Luhmann himself described his theory as "labyrinthine" or "non-linear", and claimed he was deliberately keeping his prose enigmatic to prevent it from being understood "too quickly", which would only produce simplistic misunderstandings.

Niklas Luhmann was a German sociologist, philosopher of social science, and a prominent thinker in system theory. *Systems theory* is the transdisciplinary study of systems, cohesive groups of interrelated, interdependent components that can be natural or artificial. Every system has causal boundaries, is influenced by its context, defined by its structure, function and role, and expressed through its relations with other systems. A system is "more than the sum of its parts". Changing one component of a system may affect other components or the whole system. It may be possible to predict these changes in patterns of behavior. Some systems support other systems, maintaining the other system to prevent failure. The goals of systems theory are to model a system's dynamics, conditions, and relations

⁵ The Sun King - King Louis XIV. He moved the French court from Paris to Versailles on May 6, 1682. It was about the final and official relocation, while previously for years Louis XIV. transferred more and more court functions to Versailles. That castle remained the official seat of the French court until 1789, i.e. until the time of the French Revolution. No king before or since was so passionately devoted to dance. He was elegantly built, with beautiful body proportions and beautiful long blonde hair. His teacher used to say that he had a "divine appearance and demeanor, a sign from God". A big role in this was played by dedicated work and daily training under the supervision of dance teacher and ballet master Pierre Beauchamp, who taught and trained him every day for more than twenty years. He played his biggest role, which earned him the name King of the Sun, in the ballet *La Ballet de la nuit*. The ballet took place at night; it described discord, nightmares and darkness, which was a metaphor for the current political situation in France. But, in the early hours of the morning, Louis appeared as the Sun. Clad in gold, rubies, and pearls, with glittering brilliant diamond rays flashing from his head, wrists, knees, and elbows, richly adorned with ostrich feathers projecting from his head, Louis destroyed the Night! It was a theatrical but also a political twist. To enhance the impression, Louis repeated the performance eight times in the same month. Thus, ballet becomes the dominant art form of that era. The entire nobility wants to participate in the plays or watch them, so that they would be closer to the king's grace.

Thus, it is about a false concern for others. Performative practices are used to demonstrate care for the weaker and less “powerful.” However, the agenda and the goals are of a completely different nature: in this way, the king, who feels threatened by powerful nobles, creates new allies for himself, newly declared powerful individuals.

The world of spectacle, which favours consumerism, consumption over use, has led us to the world of scandal. Everyone, it seems, is enabled to be the main character of a scandal, for, at least, five minutes.

What are the roles of memories and remembering in times of the emergence of a dominant binary game between the roles of “the victim” and “the aggressor”?

This is an important question, as revisionism is on the rise, in a personal realm, but also with respect to the mandatory literature and classics readings, and even in the theatre, i.e., performing arts. It also leads us to “puritanism” which – not literally, but symbolically – “undermines” masterpieces of past times, nullifies, censors classics.

UBU, THE KING

Laughter is also a place of abjection. Well, not all laughter. Reactionary laughter is favoured, as in any time of totalitarianism, while the subversive laughter is prohibited, deemed dangerous, backward-facing, exclusive, almost demonic. And, as in times of so-called “mythical thinking” – some is mistaken for all: whoever commits a “violation” of any kind, viewed from the perspective of the dominant, imposed narrative, is declared a demonic figure. If one laughs - then one lies, if one lies - then one steals, if one steals - then one also kills. Whoever laughs in the wrong place, therefore – kills.

We must not laugh at anything that would have been called “different” until recently. But the result is the same: “the other” and “the different” are indeed punishable, only the flavour is different.

Ludism, logically, is the next step, but it is only declaratively appreciated. It has been fundamentally extinguished, suppressed, deemed dangerous. It is because ludism, in fact, leads us on the paths beyond the norms and the new normal.

Contemporary socio-political activist actions that insist on the idea of “us,” of numerous “I(s)” merging into one, are inherently risky. The phrase “You are not alone” implies the takeover of the baton by a unified “we” over the “I,” which arms itself with trendiness and only seemingly offers “resistance to the powerful.” Indeed, they are aiming for the rise to power, often, revising the past, including memories and what is remembered.

However, last year in Zagreb, on the Zagreb stage, specifically at the “Kerempuh” Satirical Theatre, another king opposed the Sun King – King Ubu. (Co-production of Gavella City Drama Theater & Kerempuh City Satirical Theater.)

Miran Kurspahić⁶ created a play that boldly touched on numerous neuralgic points of the contemporary moment: playfully engaging with the elements of the new-normal revisionism, taking on the commissars of the new language who are concerned with being constantly mindful of any sentences that might carry a hint of sexism, nationalism, racism⁷. The actors took a bold step: they subjected all the trendy battles, the “poetics of resistance,” to the test of laughter.

⁶ Miran Kurspahić (Zagreb, 1979) is a Croatian theater director, actor and performer.

⁷ The famous Paris premiere of the play *King Ubu* in 1896 "confused and offended" the audience with its licentiousness and unconventionality. The writer, who was only 23 years old at the time, wrote a piece that was met with boos and outrage from many, but there were also those who, like the great Irish poet Yeates, witnessed a "revolutionary event" that evening. And indeed, it is a text that announced the arrival of avant-garde movements, from surrealism and Dadaism, to the theater of the absurd, while outside the theater it peered deep into the darkness of hubris and the desire for power, thus hinting at the darkness(s) of totalitarianism and war(s) which will follow. Still, *King Ubu* might operate with a blunted edge today, at least in a society or part of the world currently spared a totalitarian leader like the protagonist of a drama whose ambition and hunger exceed his talent and abilities. Our *King Ubu* is therefore placed in the author's framework and thus becomes a play within a play, an original play in the jaws of a small class of a pseudo-progressive high school. Among the characters in that class was Alfred Jarry himself, a student who, in spite of the school leadership and his classmates, puts on a play during class, or at least tries to. Although the setting and costumes are set at the end of the 19th century, culturally and sociologically, it takes place in the present. Students try to stage a piece in spite of the piece itself, riding the wave of superficial moral superiority, woke culture and cancellation culture.

The original *King Ubu*, passing through the sieve of censorship, disappears more and more, but the Ibi spirit spills over to each of the students, drawing out of him greed, envy and the desire for power. Through irony and humor, this play touches on numerous "forbidden" topics and mirrors the bizarre times we live in so that we can look at them and laugh at them.

Premiere: February 25, 2023. Director: Miran Kurspahić
According to the translation of Mislav Hudoletnjak
Text adaptation: Miran Kurspahić and Rona Žulj
Playwright: Rona Žulj
Set designer: Matija Blašković
Costume designer: Danica Dedijer

Just as it should be: the play unfolded amidst thunderous laughter from part of the audience, with shouts of "Bravo!", while the other part of the audience was appalled. Some left the play when the current *sacred places*, always dictated by some "king" or a "queen," were exposed as profaned by gestures of picking the ripe fruit.

Theatre continues to demonstrate how it is a meeting place for various voices, and therefore – for those who only see the surface of things – it is dangerous. However, precisely because of this, it (the theatre) acts as a healing force within the community. The ancient Greeks⁸ knew this well. Theatre is (also) a place for the affirmation of Mihail Bakhtin's "The more otherness, the more self."

But here we must be careful. The content of that "secondary," "other," "different" is a variable category.

Associate for music: Igor Jurinić
Assistant for stage movement: Matea Bilosnić
Light designer: Zdravko Stolnik
Assistant costume designer: Dora Črnjević

Alfred Jarry – Miran Kurspahić / Marko Petrić

Felix-Frederic Hebert, King of Ubu - Borko Perić

Monsieur Trapu, Gluposlav – Amar Bukvić

Monsieur Sycophant, Captain Bordura: – Sven Šestak

Conchita Sausage, King Vjenceslav: – Enes Vejzović

Henri Moron, Boleslav, Emperor Aleksej – Ranko Zidarić/Andrej Dojkić

Charles Moron, Ladislav, Medvjed – Đorđe Kukuljica

Monsieur Accessory, Pile – Ozren Opačić

Mbape Nganou – Josip Brakus

Madame Cougouar, Mama Ubu – Nela Kocsis

Mademoiselle Fakin, Queen Rosamund – Barbara Nola

Mademoiselle Vertu – Iskra Jirsak

Monsieur Metronome – Igor Jurinić

⁸ They attended the plays of both slaves and prisoners.

Wearing the badge “I am the other” – therefore, “you are obliged to treat me with correctness,” is not a guarantee of truthfulness.

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