



Grotowski and the Politics

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ABSTRACT – Grotowski and the Politics – This article discusses the relationship between art and politics within Grotowski's trajectory and his *Laboratory Theatre* by demonstrating how his artistic actions were imbued with a political resistance which often determined the group's decisions and destiny. After a brief overview of the Polish sociopolitical-economic context, we point out certain actions performed by Grotowski concurring with strategies of *survival* before the Polish communist regime. In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that Grotowski was a real master in the political game, winning a series of *battles* that ensured not only the existence of his group but also the accomplishment of his artistic experiences.

Keywords: **Art and Politics. Grotowski. Poland. Communism. Laboratory Theatre.**

RÉSUMÉ – Grotowski et la Politique – Cet article traite de la relation entre l'art et la politique dans la trajectoire de Grotowski et son Théâtre Laboratoire, exposant la façon dont ses actions artistiques ont été imprégnés de résistance politique qui, dans de nombreux cas, ont déterminé les décisions et le sort du groupe. Après un bref aperçu du contexte polonaise, nous présentons certaines actions de Grotowski qui ont été combinées avec des stratégies de *survie* vis-à-vis le régime communiste. Devant les faits présentés, nous pouvons dire que Grotowski était un vrai maître dans le jeu politique, remportant une série de *batailles* qui assuraient non seulement l'existence de son groupe aussi bien que l'accomplissement de ses expériences artistiques.

Mots-clés: **Art et Politique. Grotowski. La Pologne. Communisme. Théâtre Laboratoire.**

RESUMO – Grotowski e a Política – Discute-se a relação entre arte e política na trajetória de Grotowski e seu *Teatro Laboratório*, expondo como suas ações artísticas estavam imbuídas de resistência política que, em muitos momentos, determinaram as decisões e o destino do grupo. Após um breve panorama do contexto sócio-político-econômico polonês, apresentam-se determinadas ações de Grotowski que estavam conjugadas com estratégias de *sobrevivência* perante o regime comunista polonês. Diante dos fatos apresentados, é possível afirmar que Grotowski foi um verdadeiro mestre no jogo político, ganhando uma série de *batalhas* que garantiram não só a existência de seu grupo como também a realização de experiências artísticas.

Palavras-chave: **Arte e Política. Grotowski. Polônia. Comunismo. Teatro Laboratório.**

Grotowski had a lot of work as a politician. How to be an institution – to exist thus in a legalized sense and to have legal means – and yet remain a truly creative organism, that is, to be minimally institutionalized? How could we be subsidized by the State and at the same time consider ourselves spiritual rebels? How to remain a non-conformist or an outsider while being subsidized by the State? (Flaszen, 2015, p. 292).

Sociopolitical-economic Context: Poland 1959-1984

The Polish group led by Grotowski emerged in 1959, three years after Gomułka took over the political leadership of the country. Stalin, until his death in 1953, maintained for several years all Eastern European countries under a dictatorial regime (single party), economically and politically subordinated to the Soviet Union (USSR), in which all ideological or critical diversity in relation to the State was severely attacked and repressed – period of the so-called Stalinism. After the death of Stalin, a transformation took place in the political configuration, which was called *liberal thaw*, thanks to which there was a greater separation between the roles of the State and the communist single party (the PZPR, *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, Polish United Workers' Party). Many political prisoners were released, academic and artistic trips were allowed and even funded, foreigners became welcome to the country, and public political discussions began to be more *tolerated* by the Party-State, including debates on the many crimes committed by Stalin (Prażmowska, 2010). Although this process of *de-Stalinization* came from the Kremlin itself, loosening the strong political control in all the countries of the Soviet bloc, during the same period in Poland, there was a strong economic stagnation that caused thousands of workers to protest on the streets and declare strike. These protests were violently repressed by the Polish government by sending armed troops, culminating in the death of more than seventy Polish workers.

This bloody episode increased social pressure for reform and a greater independence of Poland from the Soviet Union. Who took power in the country, then, was Gomułka, a former political prisoner who was precisely known for defending that the socialist Poland should follow its own path towards communism. Gomułka had the support of the Polish population, groups of intellectuals, workers' associations, and the Catholic Church as well – an institution with great political power in Poland¹ – because it was

believed that he would implement political reforms that would not only reverse the difficult economic situation experienced by the country since the end of World War II, but would also increase the workers' control over the means of production (participation in the management of the factories). However, the economic plan implemented by Gomułka's government consistently failed to solve the serious economic problem of the nation, and no major changes were made to the political structure with which the PZPR led the country, meaning that the expected political reform did not happen.

In the years 1967 and 1968, a decade later, Gomułka was still in the leadership of the country, when a new political-economic crisis began, mainly due to the worsening of the economic performance and the consequent decline on quality of life and the access to basic consumer goods. In addition to this, another important aspect was the great disappointment of the Polish population, especially of certain social segments (urban workers and intellectuals), in the face of the failure to carry out the expected reforms (a greater democratization). The beginning of a new political crisis came with the publication of manifestos criticizing the regime and street manifestations of students and intellectuals in 1968. These new protests were also violently repressed by the security services of the communist regime. This event would have given the 'excuse' that the nationalist group, led by the Minister of the Interior, Moczar, needed to start an official attack against Polish Jews, since anti-Semitism had never been totally abandoned in Poland. As Flaszen (2015, p. 338-339) reports:

The opposition movement was restrained by police provocations. Naturally, as always, the Jews were guilty, this time they were called 'Zionists' – a label tested by the Soviet propaganda labs. After all, the Polish national-communists used this official term – with a wink – to barely uncover the apparent anti-Semitism and racism similar to the ideology of the Polish ultranationalists before World War II. Everyone knew that the 'Zionists' were the secret enemies of the Polish nation, cosmopolitan bourgeois, lackeys of American imperialism, agents of a worldwide conspiracy against the socialist bloc, poisoners of the healthy spirit of the nation, bearers of liberal miasma etc.

Thus, following the student protests in 1968, the government launched a terrible and massive anti-Semitic campaign, an action that could be interpreted as a perverse strategy to attract public attention and shift the *blame* for the country's economic and political problems to the Jewish population. This shameful campaign led by the regime was not officially de-

clared as anti-Semitic, but rather as anti-Zionist, that is to say, to persecute those who supposedly supported Israel as an independent Jewish state². As a consequence of this *masked* anti-Semitic campaign, about 13,000 Polish citizens left the country. A large part of this contingent consisted of Jewish descendants and also by people whom Flaszen ironically named as “inconvenient elements” (Flaszen, 2015, p. 34), in other words, intellectuals who somehow questioned the cultural and social values imposed by the Soviet dictatorship and were, therefore, labeled as “revisionists” (Flaszen, 2015, p. 34), or, as Flaszen jokes, “Zionists by appointment” (Flaszen, 2015, p. 343).

Immigrants who had entered the country at that time were also forced to renounce the Polish citizenship. In this period of political persecution, Poland also supported the Soviet invasion to Czechoslovakia, a country in which a series of political reforms fostered a greater democratization and political independence from the Soviet domination. This period became known as the *Prague Spring*. Moreover, as Flaszen describes in the following excerpt, this social, political and economic conjuncture affected the professional life of the *Laboratory Theatre* immensely, which at that time had already gained international fame:

But at the same time, in September 1968, in Mexico City, feeling depressed, after the bloody repressions to the revolt of young people, I remember *The Constant Prince* performed as if in isolation, in silence, without any publicity. [...] After Mexico, we were supposed to go to the United States, but the State Department, despite our efforts, finally refused our entry visas. It was the time of the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia (including the Polish People’s Army) to stifle the Prague Spring - the period of major attacks on the liberalization of the regime. They denied us entry into the United States, as if *The Constant Prince* were the Constant Prince, a martyr and rebel, who had invaded a liberated Prague with tanks (Flaszen, 2015, p. 323).

In addition to compromising the professional agenda of the Polish group, this troubled political moment that Poland was experiencing would also have affected Grotowski and his companions personally. As reported by Barba (1999, p. 179), Slowiak and Cuesta (2013, p. 47-49), and also Flaszen (2015, p. 344), Grotowski feared to be arrested as a revisionist intellectual and, because of that, he would have gone so far as to think of

committing suicide in case it did happen, asking Eugenio Barba to send poison to him by mail. And because of his Jewish ancestry, Flaszen, who was persecuted in the press by other writers, was afraid of being killed, arrested or expelled from the country: “So with Kott and Kolakowski, I found myself on a list of individuals to be eliminated from the Polish public life. Or perhaps expelled from the country?” (Flaszen, 2015, p. 342).

However, despite the enormous fuss and tension generated in this historical moment before the beginning of the *Paratheatre* – especially in 1968 – Grotowski and Flaszen were neither arrested nor expelled from Poland. By having already achieved relative international fame, they were kept safe. In 1969, they were even able to stage a successful season of *The Constant Prince* in New York, one of the breakthrough moments of international recognition for Grotowski and the *Laboratory Theatre*. There, also in 1970, *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* was performed, and then, Grotowski made the controversial announcement of his *exit from the theatre* (in the *New York University*).

In 1970, Gierek replaced Gomułka after the crisis that began in 1968. After ruling for more than a decade, Gierek would face one of the strongest social movements opposed to the regime: the *Solidarity*. The birth and rise of this movement are regarded as sociopolitical events that marked the beginning of the process of dissolution of the Soviet bloc and, consequently, the end of the Cold War. Similarly to Gomułka, Gierek took control of the Polish communist State determined to solve the economic problem of the country, enjoying great credibility and support from the Polish population. His figure generated a great national appeal for having had concrete experience as a miner (this generated a great empathy from the working class) and for having achieved an administrative experience of relative success in improving the access of the population of the Katowice region, province where he was the local leader of the Party, to consumer goods.

In the first half of the 1970s, Poland, under the leadership of Gierek, underwent a period of transformation of its foreign policy (resulting in closer trade relationships with the countries of Western Europe) and a consequent growth of the economy and the standard of living of the population in general. However, from 1975-1976, the economic situation changed, returning to a negative scenario, with a big rise in the external debt of the nation. To solve the new economic crisis, the regime announced a considera-

ble increase in prices and the population reacted with strikes and demonstrations. The government suspended the increase, but started to persecute the striking leaders. However, by strengthening the country's contact with the *West*, Gierek had to respond to issues related to Human Rights, which became part of the international collaboration pact and, therefore, to be under the supervision of democratic countries. Poland was also a signatory to the Helsinki Accords (1975), which established the guarantee of civil rights.

Thus, believing that repression by the regime would generate a negative international repercussion, groups of syndicalists and dissidents began the articulation of a great open national opposition movement, which was called *Solidarity*. The major difference between this striking movement and the protests that occurred in the past did not lie in the reaction of the regime. As always, the Party reacted to the irruption of the protests by sending dispersive troops and arresting the main leaders of the movement. However, this time, the government offensive failed to intimidate the movement so easily, because of the degree of national articulation reached by the workers, that is to say, the large number of striking committees and opposition organizations in several parts of the country acting in a coordinated fashion. "Strikes spread through the country and paralyzed the economy and daily life. The regime had no alternatives but open talks with strike committees, of which the Gdańsk committee was the most important"; the latter was the committee that initiated the *Solidarity* (Prażmowska, 2010, p. 208). Another major difference between this movement and the others, those that took place in 1956 and from 1968 to 1970, was the coverage given by the international media. This time, the dissident groups were able to provide a large amount of information to the newspapers from the countries of the democratic bloc, thus giving rise to an international attack to the communist dictatorship. In this sense, the level of political articulation among the workers' unions and between them and the intellectual class was unique, historically speaking.

The countries of the Western bloc did not offer direct support to the *Solidarity*; however, several unions from European countries did so, leading negotiations between the *Solidarity* and the regime to extend for several months between the years 1980 and 1981. On the other hand, the movement did not present any concrete path to solve the economic crisis, nor

did it show any interest in an international articulation with the trade unions of other Soviet countries. Neither was the regime, in fact, open to allowing the concrete participation of the *Solidarity* in political decisions. This situation lasted until December 1981, when the then leader of the country, General Jaruzelski, declared martial law, transferring all power to the Army and suspending the civil laws. All forms of civilian organization of opposition were massacred and destroyed by the armed forces, not just the *Solidarity*.

With the imposition of the martial law, economic sanctions and boycotts were imposed by the countries of the Western bloc and international financial corporations, further hampering the economic situation of the country, although the Soviet Union had supported the regime by increasing the imports. In 1982, the martial law was officially suspended, but in practice, it was only revoked in 1983. This historic event is considered one of the key facts for the consolidation of the end of the Cold War, as the end of the myth of neutrality of the Army irreversibly undermined the political authority of the Communist Party, the PZPR. Even under illegal circumstances, the opposition continued to articulate itself politically and to have support from the population and the Catholic Church (Pope John Paul II), leading both sides to reopen negotiations in 1989.

Grotowski decides to self-exile from Poland just after the imposition of the martial law, beginning the process of the closing of the *Laboratory Theatre*, which would only take place officially in 1984. Let us look at the testimonies of Grotowski and Flaszen about this historical moment:

I left Poland because of the martial law that was proclaimed there. For me personally, it was an inevitable decision, because in such a situation there is an enormous difference between directing (as the other stage directors were doing) a theatre that does performance for a *large national audience* – even if it is financed by a state considered as oppressive – and to direct (as I was doing in this period) an international, closed laboratory, still using money of a country where martial law is in effect (Grotowski apud Wolford, 1997, p. 283).

In his view, the situation in Poland was hopeless. He imagined that the regime, fearing its fall, would have no other choice but to make use of terror, including the extermination of its enemies. And even if that script did not happen, other subtler forms of terror would be introduced. The regime would preserve a facade of legality, while ‘death squads’, secret groups of blackmailers and assassins, would spread terror and chaos (Flaszen, 2015, p. 427).

Next, we will analyze how the trajectory of the Polish group led by Grotowski, including its foundation and extinction, besides reflecting a series of purely *artistic* questions, was also connected to the political events in Poland.

Art and Communism: the political game with the *Eye* before fame

As Prazmowska (2010, p. 169) explains, even after the *liberal thaw*, none of the forms of organization of the civil society – unions, local associations, corporations, institutions, clubs etc. – were independent because they were subordinate to the Polish Communist single-party state, the PZOR, which in its turn was *controlled* by the Soviet Union. It was through these sociopolitical organizations officially connected to the Party that the main interpersonal relationships of the professional life of artists and art critics took place, all of them *comrades* from the same social segment. As detailed by Seth Baumrin in the essay *Jerzy Grotowski and the Price of Artistic Freedom* (2009, p 49-77), small-size cultural institutions, such as the *Laboratory Theatre*, were directly controlled by four agencies: regional government (Silesian region), local government (Opole city and then Wrocław), regional censorship and SB (acronym for *Śłużba Bezpieczeństwa*, the secret police). And above these mid-level instances, there were also the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Culture and Arts, the Central Committee and the Censorship Agency. Besides these governmental instances at different levels exercising direct control over the activities, the group was also indirectly monitored by the local Polish community, mainly through the press and the militia of the citizens, the MO (acronym for *Milicja Obywatelska*), and religious authorities.

This form of sociopolitical organization prevented not only the artists but all the citizens from criticizing the government very fiercely and openly, since the very survival of the work depended directly on maintaining a good relationship with the local authorities and higher instances of the State, that is to say, it depended on the maintenance of a “subtle and sophisticated game with the regime” (Flaszen, 2015, p. 292). Metaphorically speaking, Flaszen describes: “Life in such a regime is lived in the constant presence of a specific Eye” (Flaszen, 2015, p. 46).

On the other hand, as Flaszen (2015) and Baumrin (2009) also say, writers, intellectuals and artists were not totally restrained from expressing critical opinion and showing, at some level, their dissatisfaction with the political situation, attacking, even indirectly, the Polish communist regime or the Soviet control over the country. The government officials themselves, to certain extent, expected a critical attitude towards reality and cultural, political events, especially after 1956, the period of the so-called *liberal thaw* in the Gomułka government. Therefore, some degree of rebellion was *tolerated*.

Thus, in this somewhat ironic and hypocritical relationship with the regime, criticism was expressed in a subtle, indirect, even veiled way, in order not to provoke repression on the part of the leaders of the government. Acts of repression, such as censorship, reprisal and exile, were in fact imposed on many important Polish artists and intellectuals at the time, such as Kolakowski. In this sense, a totalitarian regime, whether on the left (communist) or on the right (in the case of Brazil after the 1964 military coup), violently impedes freedom of expression and imposes on artists and intellectuals a professional life permeated by psychological tension and immersed in a constant game with that *Specific Eye*, to which Flaszen referred. On the other hand, it is precisely the presence of this game with the *clutches* of the regime that, paradoxically, stimulates creative ways of circumventing censorship through, for example, sophisticated metaphors and less explicit symbols. As Flaszen put it: “The game with the Gleam of the Eye, the game in the presence of the Gleam of the Eye, demanded a specific attention, and resulted in interesting works of art and ways of thinking” (Flaszen, 2015, p. 41-42).

And the trajectory of the *Laboratory Theatre* and Grotowski provide several examples of this political resistance, because, in several moments, political issues determined the decisions and, consequently, the destiny of the group. And these moments show how peremptory was the presence of that *Specific Eye* mentioned by Flaszen in the above quotation.

As Slowiak and Cuesta (2013, p. 25-27) and Baumrin (2009, p. 49-77) report, Grotowski, in 1957, at the beginning of his theatrical career, and before founding his group in Opole, became directly involved as a political leader through the ZMS (acronym for *Związek Młodzieży Socjalistycznej*, Association of the Socialist Youth). It is not known exactly why

his political activity *stricto sensu* lasted a short time, but Baumrin defends the hypothesis that Grotowski was part of the delegation that, in 1957, went to meet Gomułka to propose a series of democratic reforms, to which the Prime Minister would have reacted negatively. In the words of Grotowski's brother: "[...] although the Gomułka regime was never as oppressive as the previous regime, it was still oppressive. Jerzy learned quickly that nothing could be done, that the system would always be oppressive" (K. Grotowski apud Baumrin, 2009, p. 71). The *fact* is that Grotowski, before founding the *Laboratory Theatre*, moved away from acting in political institutions, such as the ZMS, and went on to declare his theatre as purposely apolitical. However, this statement can be precisely considered as one of the many political strategies that Grotowski had to use to maintain the state subsidy and endorsement, without losing, however, the critical content of the work done. In Grotowski's words: "I had to say I was not political in order to be political" (Grotowski apud Findlay, 1997, p. 180).

As Ferreira (2010) broadly analyzed, the intense dialog between the theatrical productions of the *Laboratory Theatre* with the romantic tradition – using texts by authors of the Polish romanticism such as Slowacki, Wyspianski and Mickiewicz – and with the Christian tradition – evident references to Catholicism in the plays – “[...] reveals Grotowski's involvement with the cultural resistance to the massacre of the Polish symbolic imaginary throughout the Polish history” (Ferreira, 2010, p. 119). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the most renowned authors of the Polish romantic dramaturgy lived, parts of the Polish territory were invaded by neighboring countries (Russia, Prussia and Austria). Then, as a consequence of these invasions and dismemberments of the nation, many intellectuals and artists were exiled, such as the authors cited above, Chopin and others. Thereby, the nationalist content already present in the romantic movement in several countries becomes even more ululating, particularly in the case of the Polish romanticism, since, through art, the national cultural identity was reaffirmed. And the artists of the period were transformed into *heroes* or *martyrs* of the political-cultural resistance against the foreign domination. In this sense, choosing the Polish romantic dramaturgy for the productions of the theatrical phase was evidently not a mere accident. As described by Barba (2006), Grotowski was obsessed with these authors precisely because of the similarity between the two historical contexts in rela-

tion to foreign domination (romantic and post-Second World War period), similarity that provided, by analogy, a way of resisting the manipulation of the Polish social memory by the USSR.

As Prazmowska (2010, p. 203) points out, not only the great majority of the Polish citizens were Catholic, but there was a singular and strong identification of the painful course of the nation with Catholic symbols (images of Calvary and Crucifixion). In the performances directed by Grotowski, the romantic dramaturgy was recurrent, as well as the explicit or implicit allusions to the Christian culture as a whole³, especially to the passages and stories of the Bible and the Gospels. It was a critical and, sometimes, parodic dialog with the Christian myth as an intrinsic part of the Polish culture. This critical dialog with the myths of the national culture was often seen as blasphemy, sacrilege and/or disrespect for the country. In this sense, the choice of the works and the *intervention* of Grotowski in the original texts, by using staging resources, generated a “new *avatar* of the text” (Barba, 2006, p. 32), because, at the same time, he kept the original lines and thematic content, updated the text in relation to the historical moment and added an obviously critical-political dimension. As the most evident examples, it is possible to mention the choice, in the production of *Dziady*, of putting a broom in the back of the protagonist, alluding to the cross of Christ. Or, in *Akropolis*, to migrate the scenic space of the production to a Nazi concentration camp, instead of the Castle of Krakow, where the story took place according to the original play. Also, the costume of the production of *The Constant Prince*, in the case of the protagonist, was evidently referring to the figure of Christ and, in the case of the other actors, to the dress worn by the socialist military jury of that period. As Barba (2006, p. 32) explains:

Grotowski, on the contrary, confronted the classics with stubborn conviction that they contain an archetype, a fundamental situation of the human condition. In order for the audience to be aware of this, Grotowski constructed scenic equivalents that derived coherently from the text, but which literally altered it with an extremism that the history of theatre was unaware of and which, at that time, was considered sacrilegious. With Grotowski, the tradition of the director who dissects and drastically changes the literary structure begins. His desire was not only to update texts, but especially to recreate, through them, the experience of extreme historical situations and individual and collective obsessions. He had an attraction for the classics

and also a sincere faith in their value, which he manifested through blasphemy and profanity.

This “deconstruction” operated by the stage productions of the *Laboratory Theatre*, named “dialectics of Derision and Apotheosis or worship and desecration” (Kudliński apud Grotowski, 2007, p. 52) provoked negative reactions from both the community, the Church authorities, and the State, according to Grotowski himself (the last lecture of the *Collège de France* 1997-1998), by Flaszen (2015, p. 169 and 292), Tymicki (1986, p. 19-22) and Attisani (2008, p. 82-83).

In this way, the stage productions represented a concrete mode of political-cultural resistance to the Soviet control. “All [the plays] with an explicitly political subtext, all linked with the history of Poland” (Barba, 2006, p. 52).

Especially regarding the early years of the *Laboratory Theatre*, Kerela defines Grotowski’s political acting as “ketmanship”⁴ (Kerela apud Baumrin, 2009, p. 61), referring to his enormous political skill in dealing with the authorities to ensure the continuity of his own artistic work and, consequently, of the political-cultural resistance that he articulated.

Grotowski explained to me in every detail how he thought of behaving, what would be the likely and diverse reactions, with whom and to what extent resorting to Polish patriotism to be ‘ideologically incorrect’ without creating high-level problems with the Russians. I was a witness to the birth and development of his mental processes, which became strategic plays to defend the ‘essential’ (Barba, 2006, p. 51).

We can understand this ‘essential’, mentioned by Barba, as both creative freedom and political-cultural resistance through art, and also the very survival of the group, without which neither artistic freedom nor political resistance could exist. Along the way as the artistic director of the *Laboratory Theatre*, and also, later on, outside Poland, Grotowski had to devise countless tactics to *circumvent* both the institutionalized powers (local government officials, senior officials, specialized critics) and internal problems with/among the other members of his group. Thereby, in order to conduct his research, it was necessary to have an ability of strategist to architect different solutions to external (relationship with the Polish government or the artistic and intellectual community), or internal political issues (management of the people who worked directly in the institute).

The first example of political strategy is the way the group gained international recognition in the 1960s. As reported by Eugenio Barba, in details, in his book *The Land of Ashes and Diamonds* (2006), the international fame of Grotowski and his *Laboratory Theatre* was gained through a series of self-promotion strategies, many of which were carried out by Barba himself, when he was the assistant of Grotowski and an exchange student in Poland with a grant given by the Italian government. Barba, by not being Polish, was able to leave Poland without permission and, therefore, made a series of international trips⁵ to visit artists, critics and influential people in the theatrical environment⁶ in order to spread the ideas of Grotowski and attract international attention to the theatrical researches that were being carried out, then, in the small Polish city of Opole (where the first headquarters of the group was located)⁷. In 1963, Barba even *robbed* a bus to bring a group of critics, journalists and directors, from several countries, who were in Warsaw to take part in an international congress – the *10th ITI Congress, International Theatre Institute* – to attend a performance of *Dr. Faustus*, from the *Laboratory Theatre*, in the city of Łódź, precisely because the group had not been invited to this international event. Some of these critics brought to Łódź by Barba – R. Temkine, M. Denis, M. Julien and others –, impressed by the performance, began to write criticism and newspaper articles⁸ on the work of Grotowski and his actors (Barba, 1999; Seymour, 1963). From this international publicity, which was reached thanks to these astute initiatives of the Barba-Grotowski duo, but also because of artistic merit, of course, the group received, later, many invitations to perform in several countries of the world⁹, including winning awards¹⁰.

And, thanks to these strategies – and also to others, such as the publication of the book *Towards a Poor Theatre*¹¹ – the performances of the *Laboratory Theatre* – mainly *Akropolis*, *The Prince Constant* and *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* – had long seasons and great international circulation, and Grotowski and his actors began to be invited with some frequency to give lectures, seminars and courses in several places. As described by James Slowiak and Jairo Cuesta (2013, p. 44), in 1969, before the premiere of *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, the group had already performed in almost every country in Europe and in Mexico.

However, these fruitful tactics of dissemination of the Polish group were not planned and put into practice only because they were striving after

international recognition. These were also necessary actions to ensure the survival of their work, often rejected by the local population and constantly threatened by local authorities and press. International visibility had as one of its direct consequences the strengthening of the image of the group vis-à-vis the governmental control agencies, ensuring its maintenance as a State-financed institution, as well as an increase in the subsidies and, mainly, a concrete reduction of the chances of the *Laboratory Theatre* to be closed down by the authorities of the communist regime. Prior to this recognition, received mainly after 1965, the group lived under the threat of dissolution, having to periodically persuade the Polish government officials to validate the research being carried out and the resulting artistic productions. In this sense, Flaszyn (2015, p. 386) states: “International acclaim served as a protective shield against enemies and local jokers of our *Laboratory Theatre* and disarmed the suspicion, the distance and – in the most difficult moments – the diabolical purpose of the communist state sponsorship”.

Another example of political tactics, as discussed by Ferreira in the essay *Grotowski e a memória social da Polônia* (2010), was the renaming of the *Theatre of 13 Rows* to *Laboratory Theatre of 13 Rows*, which occurred in 1962, to justify the long duration of the rehearsals between each premiere of a new stage production of the group, and the small audience that was allowed in the presentations, to the inspectors of the government¹². The term *laboratory*, in this sense, would have been purposely chosen to make explicit the emphasis on the work of research, its experimental, investigative, and methodological character to the inspectors of the government. In a brief comment, Barba describes that the denomination *laboratory* was one of the options in a form sent by the Ministry of Culture that had to be filled in by the groups subsidized by the State. The existence of this nomenclature is most probably due to the reference to Stanislavski’s Laboratories in the Theatre of Moscow. Barba points out how the term was soon valued and added to the name of the group, in order to “[...] justify the quest, in the artisanal sense, of what was ‘essential’ in theatre” (Barba, 2006, p. 38-39), as well as to suggest, and emphasize the dialog of the group with the Russian school (not only Stanislavski, but also Meierhold).

In 1966 and 1970, changes in the name occurred again: first, it was named *Laboratory Theatre* and then, it became *Laboratory Theatre Research Institute of Acting Method* (Slowiak; Cuesta, 2013, p. 46). As discussed by

Kolankiewicz (2009, p. 55-74), the term *Institute*, as it also belongs to the scientific terminology commonly used in the academic field, was added to reinforce the analogy between the artistic research undertaken under the leadership of Grotowski with a more *stricto sensu* scientific research. Grotowski, to explain the methodological investigation under his direction, even gave the Bohr Institute¹³ as a comparative example and model. In this sense, it reinforced the idea that these were methodological researches aimed at the work of the actor, which did not follow the usual time to produce results, something that also explained the fact that many activities were closed and restricted to a few previously selected participants.

All these name changes of the group sought to emphasize even more the laboratory character of the work done and, consequently, to justify the *scarcity* of resulting artistic products and the restriction of the number of spectators/participants or people directly benefited (student-actors) by the work financed by the State. As such, these name changes can be seen as political strategies that, above all, aimed at the survival of the group and the artistic research that was being carried out.

There are a number of other strategies that are worth mentioning here. According to Slowiak and Cuesta (2013), Grotowski, in his early years in Opole, would have given collective vacations to his actors to prevent the authorities from breaking the group up, since, at that time in Poland, it was forbidden by law to dismiss anyone who was in vacation. Also, the transformation of the group into a POP (*Podstawowa Organizacja Partyjna*, that is, a basic cell of the Party) and the episode of the change from Opole to Wrocław were great political feats made to ensure the survival of the group in the *fight* against authorities, artists and critics of Opole. According to a historiographical research by Osiński (1997) and Baumrin (2009), when the WRN administration changed – Kosicki was nominated in place of Buziński – the group, previously supported by government and press representatives, became target of systematic criticism in local newspapers, mainly because the director of the main theatrical company of the city, Teatr Ziemi Opolskiej, was said to have wanted the *Theatre of 13 Rows* (first name of the *Laboratory Theatre*) to be dissolved, simply to end the local *competition*. As a first defensive strategy, Grotowski turned the group into a Party cell, POP, which protected the work for a while. Later, with another alternation of positions, the group is again threatened when Galiński takes

over the place of Tejchma – a friend of Grotowski’s – as a member of the plenary of the Party. Offended by the stage production of *Kordian*, Galiński articulated the arrangement of a commission from the *Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki* (Ministry of Culture and Art, acronym MKiS) to investigate the activities of the *Laboratory Theatre*.

But Grotowski and Flaszen, through contact with allied and influential people in the SB (secret police) and MKiS, managed to completely reverse this unfavorable situation by turning the investigative commission into a kind of *artistic conference*. At that conference, the group showed some of the exercises and performances, then, at the end, not only managed to ensure its maintenance but also its transfer to Wrocław. Faced with the avant-gardism of the researches showed in this conference-turned to *inspection*, Grotowski convinced the authorities and some critics of the press about the importance of the artistic work undertaken by the *Laboratory Theatre* and about the need to transfer the group to Wrocław, a larger and more cosmopolitan city, therefore, more *suitable* as headquarters.

Also, as Cynkutis (2015, p. 49-63) reports in his personal journal, even in 1968, when the group had already gained some international recognition, the subsidization and the consequent state control in relation to the activities continued to be a major concern, influencing directly the direction of the rehearsals. The following is an excerpt:

[...] it is clear that Grotowski does not personally care about this premiere [*Apocalypsis cum Figuris*] and that the work leading up to it is not in the least compelling for him. Rather, it is wearing him down. But he has to do something, for the situation of three years without a single premiere *arouses the suspicion of outsiders – the authorities – and they are now categorically demanding to see some dividends from their donations* (Cynkutis, 2015, p. 53, emphasis added).

This excerpt shows how the group was pressed, over the three years it took, to set up a new performance after the success of *The Prince Constant*. The condition of a company financed by the State generated this demand by the authorities that monitored the group. And, as Grotowski commented in the last lectures he gave at the *Collège de France* in 1998, the premiere of *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* caused a major scandal, provoking negative reactions from both regime and Catholic church officials, dividing the audience into two opposite groups: the fans, generally young people who “created a

kind of cult around the play” (Grotowski apud Sodr , 2014, p. 250), and the Polish Catholic community scandalized and offended by the performance.

These are some concrete examples – almost all of which occurred in the 1960s – of how the political context directly interfered with the trajectory of the group and how it was not easy to deal with the *Specific Eye*, censorship, and strong direct or indirect governmental control in the environment of a dictatorial regime.

Art and Communism: the political game with the *Eye* after fame

And, after moving to Wroclaw – from 1965 on – and during the 1970s (paratheatrical period), although the situation was relatively more stable, thanks to the international fame achieved by the group, neither the problems and threats, nor the consequent *survival strategies* and the care required by the political-economic context ceased to exist. As Jerzy Tymicki analyzed in *The Polish Theatre 1970-1985* (Tymicki, 1986, p. 13-46), in the early 1970s, despite the strong censorship of the regime, much of the artistic class, including the theatrical artists, lived a period of ‘good relationship’ with the government led by Gierek. In his words, it was “a love affair with communism” (Tymicki, 1986, p. 13), speaking metaphorically. According to this author, many prominent actors and directors in the Polish theatrical scene of that period occupied important official positions in the Party and had a number of privileges also granted to political leaders, such as: to receive high salaries and have access to more luxurious goods and houses, go to exclusive events and parties for the elite and permission to travel abroad. Only the political and artistic elite received such privileges and special concessions, while the *ordinary* population suffered from lack of access to consumer goods (either necessity goods or not), rationing of food, bad housing, prohibition to leave the country etc. According to Tymicki, these privileges shared between the Party elite (PZPR) and the theatrical elite were a justification for the inequality between public figures (political and cultural leaders) and the rest of the population. In his words: “These people were public creatures. Their lifestyle justified the lifestyle of Party officials” (Tymicki, 1986, p. 15).

Tymicki also describes that, during the early years of the government of Gierek (the early 1970s), the Polish theatrical production experienced a period of great internationalization and consequent international recognition, that is, many artists and groups began to perform in other countries, either in festivals or in longer seasons. Among the artists who had the greatest international circulation with the endorsement and support of the regime were: Grzegorzewski, Tomaszewski and Grotowski. However, in the view of the author, this internationalization was “two-faced” (Tymicki, 1986, p. 22): on the one hand, it disseminated the Polish culture, but on the other, it worked as a form of positive propaganda for the communist regime in world.

It is worth mentioning that, not by chance, the artistic production of these artists did not thematize – at least not explicitly – the country’s political-economic reality, but explored more *purely* artistic issues, such as methodological or formal issues. In this sense, they were “safe exports” (Tymicki, 1986, p. 19). And because of this political *alienation* from the theatrical production in relation to national problems, as a counterpoint to the considerable expansion of the world-wide recognition of the Polish theatre, there was, internally, an emptiness of public, a disinterest for the national *export* production disconnected from life in Poland at that moment. The great exception to this public disinterest was precisely the performance *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* which, during the 1970s, continued to attract the domestic audience, especially young Poles. But, in general, according to Tymicki, the Polish viewers became more interested in the work of still amateur groups – among them, the *Teatr 8 Dnia* – or more independent professionals, that is, without the financial support of the regime, because they created stage productions that were more obviously politicized and directly associated with the movement of opposition to the regime. These *dissident* groups were violently repressed by State agents (censors and police) through arrests, beatings, suspension of the performances with the confiscation of scenarios, costumes and props.

This situation lasted until about 1976, when the artistic class gradually begins to join the *Solidarity* movement, assuming a more clearly position opposed to the communist regime. This politicization of the artistic class would culminate with what was called the *Boycott*, which occurred after 1982 as a reaction to the martial law. With the martial law enacted in De-

ember 1981, not only civil rights were suspended, and streets occupied by the army, but all artistic production was stopped, all theatre venues were closed and many journalists, writers and artists were arrested. After some months of its promulgation, the authorities of the regime decided to authorize the return of the artistic activities, especially television. Many artists were invited to work, but almost all of them refused. According to Tymicki, in 1982 the adhesion to the boycott was of 95% (Tymicki, 1986).

In the case of the *Laboratory Theatre*, it is possible to say that the beginning of the paratheatrical phase, to some extent, was benefited by this moment of internationalization of the Polish theatre. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Grotowski or his companions were part of the *favorite* groups of the Party, those who in the early 1970s received high salaries and participated in grand luxury events promoted by Gierek or other regime leaders such as the directors Hanuszkiewicz and Cywinska. On the other hand, the great and growing international recognition of the *Laboratory Theatre* ensured that paratheatrical activities were *allowed* without reprisals, despite the great controversy generated by the *exit* of the theatre (decision not to produce anymore). In that period, the 1970s, Grotowski and his actors gained permission and financial support to undertake a series of trips out of the country for both theatrical/paratheatrical seasons and workshops, as well as for research expeditions. Also thanks to this moment of *good relationship* with the regime, the group was able to acquire a new campestrial site for paratheatrical investigative immersions, a renovated granary in the town of Brzezinka. On the one hand, the decision to start *Paratheatre* generated a lot of criticism, on the other hand, it appeased the frequent internal controversies generated by the performances of the 1960s, considered by many Poles as blasphemous and offensive, both in their critical dialog with the myths and beliefs of Catholicism, and by the intervention made in the canons of the Polish dramatic literature used for staging. According to Tymicki, the *exit* from the theatre was, for many, a relief, the end of the political provocations of the stage productions (Tymicki, 1986).

In this sense, comparing the 1960s to the 1970s, it can be said that the *Paratheatre* coincided with a moment of relative calm. At least, in relation to the external political conflicts and the direct and indirect *clutches* of the communist regime. However, this does not mean that Grotowski and his

teammates had been totally free, or that they no longer needed strategies to ensure the continuity of the state funding of the group.

According to Motta-Lima (2012, p. 185), the maintenance of the performances of *Apocalypse* throughout the 1970s, as a parallel activity and complementary to the paratheatrical projects, helped to keep the group's theatrical production as publicly *active*, and in this sense, can be seen as a political strategy to maintain the financial support of the group, even with the frequent criticisms in relation to the artistic validity of the *Paratheatre*, appeasing "the scandal of theatre without performances" (De Marinis, 2009, p. 173). Likewise, the recurrent participation of the group in important international festivals at home and abroad – especially the major international event *University of Research* – and the frequent interviews given by Grotowski and his colleagues throughout the 1970s can be seen as decisions that certainly collaborated to maintain the prominence of the Polish group and its director in the world artistic scene, ensuring the governmental subsidy for the promoted activities, even when these were very restricted and *questionable*. The enormous care in the selection of the participants for the paratheatrical projects can also be interpreted as another political strategy in view of the historical context of that moment, as, from 1974 on, the activities began to be 'open' to the public and to cover a significantly larger number of participants (Kolankiewicz, 1978, p. 16). In the attempt to ensure that the people selected were a *family*, that is, people with a similar world view, who *shared* the same values, the same philosophical-existential quest the members of the *Laboratory Theatre* did, it was very likely that they were not only trying to ensure that the participants would *embark* in the proposals with greater commitment and psychophysical integrity, but also to avoid that *dangerous, unwelcome* people had access to the work, like officials and authorities of the Party or more reactionary critics.

In another dimension, the paratheatrical activities themselves represented a mode of opposition and political resistance to the communist regime, for they created an isolated and secure space, and also psychic conditions for Polish citizens (especially young people) to experience a greater degree of freedom suppressed in the totalitarian society in which they lived in that period, in the 1970s (Slowiak; Cuesta, 2013). By proposing closed activities that did not result in public performances, the access of the "rogues"¹⁴ of the regime, as well as censorship or any kind of external con-

trol, was completely avoided, which, as Grotowski himself confessed, (Ahrne, 2009, p. 219-220), was very strong in the 1960s and 1970s. In his words: “[...] my whole attention focused on the fact that you can censor a play but not rehearsals. And rehearsals have always been the most important thing for me” (Grotowski apud Ahrne, 2009, p. 219-220). However, as Taviani pointed out, it was not a matter of transforming theatre into a refuge or of finding a refuge in theatre, but rather of adapting its needs as a researcher to the possibilities offered by the historical context in which it was inserted (Taviani, 2009). In this respect, it was not just a matter of political tactic, although it was, but concrete artistic needs coupled with strategies of survival. Corroborating this view, Flaszen states: “It is a peculiar irony of fate that people of theatre, of innate anarchist instincts against power, order and rulers, use the financial support and protection of the powerful ones... And they have to do it; this is their karma” (Flaszen, 2015, p. 321).

Also, the multiple and parallel activities promoted by the *Laboratory Theatre* from 1976 on can be seen as a sort of a *shielding* strategy for the new research project, the *Theatre of Sources*. In the same way that the performances of *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* kept the theatrical production of the group publicly *active*, the proliferation of distinct and concomitant activities organized by the *Laboratory Theatre* without a very direct involvement of Grotowski – workshops conducted individually or in pairs by other members, new paratheatrical projects and the new play *Polish Thanatos* – ensured social legitimacy to the work of the group as a State-funded institution, while Grotowski conducted closed and restricted expeditions and investigations (*Theatre of Sources*).

Thus, throughout his trajectory, Grotowski adopted a series of political strategies that allowed the continuity and propagation of the activities of his *Laboratory Theatre*, inside and outside Poland. Therefore, it can be said that Grotowski was a master in the political game with the *Specific Eye* of the communist regime, winning – and also losing – a series of *battles* in order to ensure not only the existence of his group/institute for more than twenty-five years, but also the theatrical and paratheatrical artistic experiences that represented a sophisticated and not obvious mode of cultural opposition/resistance, in a particularly difficult sociopolitical and economic scenario, a delicate and even dangerous one.

Notes

- ¹ As Prażmowska explains, during the Cold War period, Poland was the only country where the communist regime could not effectively reduce the interference and influence of the Catholic Church on political issues. According to the author, this was due to the fact that not only the great majority of the Poles is Catholic, but also because of the historical association between the Polish identity with this religion. “The distinctiveness of the Polish situation was that to Poles the fight to maintain the Catholic Church influence in all aspects of life, spiritual and secular, was no less than a battle to retain the Polish national identity, if not for survival of the nation” (Prażmowska, 2010, p. 203).
- ² The Soviet Union vehemently opposed the formation of the State of Israel, especially after the beginning of Arab-Jewish conflicts, in 1967, during the so-called Six-Day War, in which the Soviet bloc assumed the position and defense of the Arabs.
- ³ For example, in the stage productions of *Kordian*, *Akropolis*, *Dr. Faustus*, *The Prince Constant* and *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, themes directly related to the main myths and archetypes of the Christian cosmogony were addressed.
- ⁴ The term *ketman* comes from the Arabic *kitman*, meaning cover-up for self-protection, in other words, to support the powerful ones verbally while being secretly opposed.
- ⁵ As he reports in *The Land of Ashes and Diamonds*, Barba traveled to Vienna, Rome, Zurich, Basel, Geneva, Paris, Stockholm, Copenhagen and Oslo (Barba, 2006).
- ⁶ Among the people visited by Barba were James Hillman, Richard Schechner, Fernando Arrabal, Mircea Eliade and Raymonde Temkine (Barba, 2006).
- ⁷ People who boarded the bus to Łódź to attend the presentation of *Dr. Faustus* were: Eduardo Manet (director of the Festival del Teatro de las Naciones – Havana), Hubert Gignoux (director of the Centre Dramatique de l’Est – Strasbourg), Kasja Krook (Finnish theatrical critic), Raul Radice (Italian theatre critic), Henry Popkin (American journalism), Kristin Olsoni (Finnish director), Tone Brulin and Jan Christiaens (Flemish playwrights), Alan Seymour (Australian playwright), Ingrid Luterkort and Palle Burnius (Swedish directors), Sveinn Eirnarsoon (Icelandic director), Jean Louis Roux (Canadian di-

rector), René Hainaux (Belgian director) and Ossia Trilling (English critic of Polish descent).

- ⁸ Newspapers, such as *The New York Times* and magazines, such as *Plays and Players* and *Encore*.
- ⁹ For example, in 1966, there was a performance of *The Prince Constant* at the *Théâtre des Nations* in Paris and, in 1968, a performance of *Akropolis* at the *Théâtre de l'Épée de Bois*, also in Paris.
- ¹⁰ In 1969, *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* received the *Drama Desk* award for best performance and Ryszard Cieślak received two *Obie* awards for best actor and most promising revelation of the decade. Also in that year, the performances of the *Laboratory Theatre* were acclaimed by the *Times* magazine as the most important ones of the decade (Slowiak; Cuesta, 2013, p. 54).
- ¹¹ *Towards a Poor Theatre* was published in 1968 by the Odin Teatret and the book brings together texts produced by different authors (Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Ludwik Flaszen). They are articles published in newspapers and magazines, transcriptions of interviews given by Grotowski in the 1960s and essays that describe and analyze the performances or the trainings developed by the *Laboratory Theatre*. As Osiński reports (1979, p. 87), in the 1960s and 1970s, the book, translated in several languages (in Brazil, as *Em busca de um Teatro Pobre*), became a kind of bible of the modern theatre, as it has influenced artists and companies in many countries.
- ¹² From 1959 to 1962, the name of the group was *Theatre of 13 Rows*, then, in 1962, *Laboratory Theatre of 13 Rows*; later, in 1964, it would be named only as the *Laboratory Theatre* and, then, the *Laboratory Theatre Research Institute of Acting Method*, in 1967.
- ¹³ In the essay *Methodical Investigation*, one of the chapters of the book *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski, to explain the purposes of his institute (better known as *Laboratory Theatre*), compares it with the Bohr Institute. "The Bohr Institute fascinated me for a long time, as a model that illustrates a certain type of activity. Of course, theatre is not a scientific discipline, much less the art of the actor, in which my attention is centered" (Grotowski 1987[1968], p. 102).
- ¹⁴ Name given to the representative authorities of the regime (Flaszen, 2015).

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