Gesamtkunstwerk Transcriptions in the Polish Theatrical Avant-Garde

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When considering the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the context of the avant-garde, it seems useful to use the term transcription, borrowed from musical terminology, which denotes the development of a composition for a different instrument, voice or ensemble than originally intended. From this perspective, we can speak of a transcription of Wagner's concept to other areas of the arts. In Polish theater studies, the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* appears often. Usually Wagner's concept is cited as one of many inspirations of selected artists and their artistic practices. As far as the activities of artists among the Polish theatrical avant-garde are concerned, this inspiration seems to be obvious. In this article, I attempt to show how the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* functions in selected works of Polish artists, such as Zbigniew Pronaszko, Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. These artists consciously refer to the Wagnerian idea by perceiving the work of theater art primarily as a tool of possible social change.

Introduction

When considering the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (or total work of art) in the context of the twentieth-century avant-garde, it seems useful to use the term 'transcription', borrowed from musical terminology, which denotes the arrangement of a composition for a different instrument, voice, or ensemble than originally intended. From this perspective, we can speak of an artistic 'transcription' of Richard Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to other areas of art. This idea, which originally referred to musical drama, has over time been greatly expanded to include opera, modern theater, and even architecture and other forms of art and beyond.[1] Nowadays, the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—although ubiquitous—can be applied liberally, and at the same time it is a very useful category in the context of art in its broadest sense.

The concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is analyzed by David Roberts in his book *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (2011), in which he focuses on both aesthetic and political aspects, pointing to anticipations of the total work of art in the philosophy of German Romanticism, the literature of French Romanticism in the first half of the 19th century, or the festivals of the French Revolution, among others. Roberts refers to the thesis of Roger Fornoff (expressed mainly in *Die Sehnsucht nach dem Gesamtkunstwerk*, 2004) and describes 'four basic structural components of this concept': first, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be defined as 'an inter- or multimedia union of different arts in relation to a comprehensive vision of the world and society' (Roberts, 2011: 7). Second, it can constitute 'an implicit or explicit theory of the ideal union of the arts' (Roberts, 2011: 7). Third, a total work of art is 'a closed worldview, combining a social-utopian or historical-philosophical or metaphysical-religious image of the whole with a radical critique of existing society and culture' (Roberts, 2011: 7). And, finally, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* means 'a projection of an aesthetic-social or aesthetic-religious utopia, which looks to the power of art for its expression and as the aesthetic means to a transformation of society' (Roberts, 2011: 7). The components listed above represent certain aspects or viewpoints from which a total work of art can be considered. Thus, they do not form an unambiguous traditional definition; rather they offer some interpretive possibilities. The idea of a total work of art, presented in this way, is not so much a utopian project of musical drama or a problem of the history of Wagner's 'influence', but one of the most important utopias of modern culture (Świtek, 2013: 177). Thus, Roberts's further considerations to transpose the aesthetic aspect of the

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[1] I was inspired to think about the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the context of musical transcription by Gabriela Świtek's work (Świtek, 2013). She examines and analyzes the interrelation and 'fields of approximation' of the visual arts and architecture, emphasizing the importance of the 19th-century concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* for determining such paths of synesthesia and integration of the arts.

Gesamtkunstwerk to the context of European avant-garde movements, as well as to the political atmosphere of 20th-century totalitarianism—Stalinism and Hitlerism in particular—are justified. All these phenomena are close to this kind of utopian thinking.

In this article, I intend to show how and in what configurations the aspects of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* mentioned by Roberts function when applied to the Polish theatrical avant-garde. I will argue that, in the activities of selected theater artists, in their visions and concepts (whether realized or merely imagined), a phenomenon of the peculiar transfiguration of Wagner's concept of the total work of art takes place. Over the years various artists have taken the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a reference point and at the same time as a specific goal for their art. Above all, this is manifest in the work of avant-garde artists of the early 20th century, and later in the post-war neo-avant-garde period (the 1960s and 1970s). It used to be believed that the artists active at that time (primarily Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski in the field of theater) were the direct successors of the pre-war theatrical avant-garde. With all the differences and dissimilarities resulting from the variability of various conditions and contexts, there was in fact a desire for the same thing—a total work of art with strong performative power.

Polish Theatrical Avant-Garde

In the Polish humanities, the concept of a total work of art appears all too often. Usually Wagner's concept is invoked as one of the many (if not the main) inspirations for selected artists and their practices. The activities of artists counted among the Polish interwar theater avant-garde directly invoked this inspiration.

A certain paradox of the Polish theatrical avant-garde should be pointed out and explained from the outset. Usually, when we speak of avant-garde activities in the broadest sense, we mean those characterized by overt and deliberate opposition to what is conservative, official, and institutional. Avant-garde attitudes understood in this way are additionally characterized by a certain utopian way of thinking, assuming that a "new, better world" can and should be built on the ruins of the old one. In the case of Polish artists, the situation is somewhat more complicated, primarily for socio-political reasons. The emergence and development of the theatrical avant-garde in Poland was strictly conditioned by the country attainment of independence in 1918, when theater artists faced the challenge of developing a national stage style, which had previously been impossible. However, this was a difficult challenge due to the position and prominence that the plays of the romantic poets—primarily those of Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) and Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849)—held in the culture of a nation that had been absent from the political maps of Europe for 123 years (at that time Poland did not exist as a State). The dramatic works they created, considered

almost sacred and sustaining the spiritual community of the non-existent state, did not fit into the conventions of the realistic box stage format, and for this reason were often perceived as non-stage works. And it was precisely these non-stage works that were interpreted by the creators of the new theater as modern—and therefore requiring an avant-garde form of staging. Consequently, the most prominent artists carried out their intentions and ideas in official state theaters, conducting avant-garde experiments in the space of the traditional box stage. These activities were primarily aimed at shattering its one-dimensionality and included the introduction of radically new proposals for spatial forms of the theater, which violated the traditional auditorium layout through the simultaneity of the action and the possibility of multi-perspective viewing by the audience (I will return to this example later in the text.) Implementing the above assumptions, one of the dominant trends in staging styles in Polish theater of the first half of the 20th century is the monumental theater.

'We will give Polish dramatic poetry its rightful place, but we will present it in a scenic shape which is consistent with the aesthetics of our times', declared Leon Schiller, creator of the idea of monumental theater, which is considered the most important artistic phenomenon in the theater of the interwar period (Schiller 1983: 70–71; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own). Schiller—together with Wilam Horzyca, the main proponent of the idea of monumental theater—postulated in the press: 'Poland ... has ... a great drama, reflecting the consciousness of the entire nation .... The imperative to create a theatrical form which is the stage equivalent of our drama, must be ... the main imperative of our aspirations in the field of theater' (Horzyca and Schiller, 1925: 135). While putting this idea into practice, they collaborated primarily with the painter and scenographer Andrzej Pronaszko.

During this period, the most important issue in monumental theater was the stage design. The creators of these designs often referred to avant-garde trends in the visual arts of their time. It is worth mentioning that Pronaszko was one of the leading representatives of formism, a Polish movement in modern art (1917–22). Initially, formism comprised of a group of artists operating under the name of Polish expressionism, which was subsequently changed to the term formism as a term that more aptly expressed an artistic trajectory going beyond expressionist interests. The issue that played a superior role in the formists' works was form. They were absolutely opposed to naturalism and, while searching for a new form of Polish art, experimented with various achievements of the Western avant-garde (including cubism, futurism, and constructivism) and linked them with their native tradition. Pronaszko successfully introduced these formist principles into his stage designs, which were characterized primarily by synthetic form, geometrization, strong chiaroscuro contrast (a painting

technique that involves varying the intensity of light and highlighting its contrasts), and the dynamization of the stage through the introduction of multiple sets and rhythms (color, patterns, and form). In addition, the productions of monumental theater were realized with great staging panache, thanks to a large cast of actors and equally large groups of extras, including the frequent arrangement of group scenes. They consistently strove for synthesis: all elements of the performance (light, music, voice, speech, and gesture) were subordinated to the vision of the director, often inspired by the poetic idea of the author of the text. An important goal of monumental theater was the elicitation of an almost para-ritual effect on the audience, to evoke collective emotions and invite them to actively experience the reality created in conjunction with the actors. The ultimate goal was to achieve a total theater, a kind of collective liturgy, which constitutes a performative current in Polish theater.

Pronaszko's finest production in the field of monumental theater is *Forefathers' Eve* [*Dziady*] by Adam Mickiewicz, directed by Schiller and staged for the first time in 1932 at the Municipal Theater in Lviv. This principal play lays the foundations for Polish romantic messianism: a myth deeply rooted in Polish culture and mentality, which assigns to the Polish nation the mission of ensuring the salvation of humanity and the role of spiritual leader—the messiah for other nations.

The main and permanent compositional element of the stage space in *Forefathers' Eve* was the motive of three crosses—a reference to the biblical Golgotha and at the same time to the image of the crucifixion of Poland, which is part of the play's plot. The landing and the hill were maintained in uniform brown and grey tones and surrounded by the horizon, while the sky was portrayed by colors, ranging from light blue to navy blue. Both light and dark clouds appeared in that sky. The individual scenes were marked only by certain fragments of decor characterized by an abstract dryness—the cross-sectional view of the church building, window, archway, prison bars, etc. The costumes, in turn, quite clearly defined the time of the action—the time of the Partitions of Poland, the time of captivity.[2]

Pronaszko showed considerable interest in the integrity of a theatrical work as seen in the concurrence of text and set design, the treatment of the costume as a sculpture, and the particular vigilance given to the spatiality of the stage. These matters were of course also important to other representatives of the Polish interwar theatrical avant-garde. The theater of the future that they strove to establish was to be in principle a negation of the rules of the proscenium stage of the previous era. They rejected mimicry or

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[2] Between 1795 and 1918, as a result of lost wars and the political situation at the time, Poland lost its independence and de facto disappeared from the map of Europe.

naturalism as well as causal continuity of the plot. Theater was meant to be emancipated into a form of art, governed by its own set of rules and regulations arising solely from the shape of the theatrical space and the desired communication with the audience.

Activities leading to the realization of such a vision of theater took various forms. One of the most spectacular and radical was the project of 'simultaneous theater', conceived and designed by Pronaszko. In his essay 'Rebirth of Theater' ['Odrodzenie Teatru'], he states that to effectively adapt the theater to the requirements of modern life, it is crucial to 'conquer' the relation between the proscenium stage and the amphitheatric auditorium in traditional theater buildings (Pronaszko, 2018: 167–182). In such an arrangement, the stage becomes essentially a one-surface picture decorated with 'paintings for theater' (Pronaszko, 2018: 284). He stresses that the proscenium stage generates spatial contradictions in itself, as it is (contrary to expectation) the auditorium, and not the stage, that is a diversified space in terms of both height and depth. Moreover, by producing the effect of theatrical illusion, the stage completely prohibits any communication or establishment of a relationship between the actors and the audience or, as we would say today, the operation of performative mechanisms. This was what Pronaszko cared about most. Attempts to break with the two-dimensionality of the stage can already be identified in his set design proposals based on the architectural construction of stage scenery and costume, the clear differentiation of areas of acting space through platforms, stairs, and ramps, and the building of artful relations between them, which allowed the introduction of simultaneity of the plot and the opportunity of viewing the events from multiple perspectives.

Pronaszko's architectonic and spatial concept of the simultaneous theater (co-created with the architect Szymon Syrkus in 1928) advocated 'unity of theater space, simultaneity of the plot, flexibility of the stage and integration of the audience into the stage' (Pronaszko, 2018: 288). The concept preserved the division of space into the stage and the audience, but proposed a different spatial arrangement of these elements. A small proscenium stage was to be complemented by two moveable rings across the central area of the acting space, surrounding the stationary amphitheatric auditorium. These rings, moving in arbitrary directions with changeable speed and equipped with trapdoors and smaller rotating stages, were supposed to be the main acting space. Storerooms and wardrobes would have been placed behind the auditorium, and the plastic forms making up backdrops for succeeding scenes would have been placed on the rings. The rotation of the rings would then have brought the sets and actors into the audience's viewing angle. On the other hand, performing the plot in this dynamic space was meant to signify the "movement of life". The lack of stage elevation and the simultaneity of gestures, sounds, and appearance of set forms in compositions

presented to the audience was intended to construct a modern spectacle. Its creators wrote about the idea of the theater:

> Let us now imagine that, at the director's will, both rings rotate around the audience at different speeds and in opposite directions, that a revolving stage and a trapdoor were also activated—then MOVEMENT appears as a completely independent element of the show—a rich and multifaceted element: a circular motion of various kinds and various directions of the rings, rotary motion of the revolving stage, vertical movement of the trapdoor. The stage movement becomes the equivalent of the LIFE movement—but composed not in the way of life but in the way of theater. (Syrkus, 1973: 221)

The light was also supposed to be an integral element of the performance: 'Only light separates the stage from the audience or connects the audience with the stage (there is no curtain); only light determines the place for the viewer to pay attention to' (Syrkus, 1973: 222). The simultaneous theater, subject to the solutions of modern technology, was to use new media such as radio or film and thus take into account the idea of the simultaneity of life. It was to reflect the truth about contemporary life—dynamic, economic, dependent on new technologies and the media.

Pronaszko returned to the concept of simultaneous theater in 1935 with the design of the 'moving theater', prepared in cooperation with the draftsman Stefan Bryła. This time, the project proposed a moveable auditorium completely surrounded by a stationary stage. The following excerpt describes the project:

> The 'moving theater' is a combination of the stage and the audience into one aggregate. ... The rotary auditorium moves the spectators from one place of the action to another. There is no curtain, instead blackout or illumination of the place of action is used, or several places at the same time which provides the effect of a simultaneity of events. (Tonecki, 1935: 8)

However, this radical attempt to create an autonomous stage form, seeking a new relationship between the stage and the audience, remained only an idea. Such large-scale projects and scenographic solutions were oriented towards changing the audience's perception, which in turn led to a new form of communication with them, and seemed to have stemmed directly from Wagner's ideas. His total theater, the perfect *Gesamtkunstwerk*, was to regenerate humanity in a cathartic act to save religion, which cannot exist without art (Roberts, 2011: 7). Wagner also wanted to draw the audience into his creation with an all-encompassing vision, around an idea that cements the community, for the essential

function of the work was realized in its reception. 'The Artwork of the Future' ('Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft') was to be the foundation of a community, united in ideas, and at the same time, it was meant to lead this community towards the most noble values. This goal could only be achieved in the interaction between the rhetorical power of the work, the personality of the artist, and the work's active perception. A similar aim was pursued by monumental theater—a 'total work of art' by Schiller and Pronaszko—and above all, the aforementioned *Forefathers' Eve*, which can be treated as a search for Polish theatrical style and, consequently, national identity.

The direct links between Wagner's concept and the practice and theory of architecture are noteworthy. A great play uniting music, dance, and poetry could not do without an appropriate setting for the visual arts—architecture, painting, and sculpture. Architecture played a key role in defining a space suitable for experiencing a monumental performance. Of equal importance is the precisely designed architecture in the vision of simultaneous theater, whose main goal was to provide the spectator (who was one of its indispensable parts) with a new aesthetic experience appropriate for the times.

Postwar Avant-Garde

The experiments of Polish theatrical avant-garde, brutally interrupted by World War II, found their continuation in the activities of artists of the second half of the 20th century, above all in the work of Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. These artists creatively developed the achievements of their predecessors—whether they did so consciously or not remains a matter of debate—thus generating a renewed "transcription" of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Both created a separate unique space for their respective performances. They experimented and primarily focused on the relationship between actor and spectator.

Grotowski's theater is often referred to as a theater of space, a term usually attributed to Jerzy Gurawski—an architect with whom Grotowski worked very closely. Gurawski made a simple but important discovery even before he began working with Grotowski. He discovered the division of the stage into a space within the actor's and spectator's fields of vision and an intuitive space surrounding people, actors and spectators alike, outside their fields of vision. Gurawski recalls:

> Namely, I noticed that there are, as it were, two spheres of feeling. One is visual, encompassing everything that man sees, that is, this safe world that is defined for him. And the second sphere—intuitive, located at the back, implicit, providing various surprises. Much richer than the first one. Unlike the visible, clearly defined

sphere, it constantly suggests assumptions on the basis of steps, rustles, sounds, and reactions of the interlocutor. It is completely unused in the traditional theater because you only look ahead. I wanted the whole space that surrounds a person to play a part in theater. Grotowski liked this idea very much. (Kuc, 2022)

This idea was used in *Forefathers' Eve* in 1961.[3] Grotowski's performance was a provocation. The director treated the text, which is traditionally considered almost sacred in Poland, in an unceremonious way. He simply removed some parts of the play and made significant cuts in others. Grotowski shifted the focus from political and historiosophical themes (especially philosophical reflections on the meaning of the historical events depicted) to existential and metaphysical issues. He retained, however, the ritual character central to the play and the sacrificial transformation of the protagonist.

In *Forefathers' Eve*, Grotowski was particularly interested in the community participating in the title ritual. *Forefathers' Eve* (in Polish: *Dziady*) is a Slavic ritual in honor of deceased ancestors. It is in this context that the shaping of the space was of crucial importance. Gurawski completely abandoned the division between stage and audience, creating a multi-level playing space where chairs for the audience were placed at different angles and at different heights in relation to each other. The spectators therefore had a different, sometimes limited, view of what was going on, depending on their position. Importantly, they also saw each other. A comfortable viewing experience was also made impossible due to the fact that the actors played not only in a central position but also between the spectators, and sometimes even behind and with them. At certain moments the actors would address the audience directly and even involve them in the stage action. Such manipulations were intended by the artists to create a ritual community. They were an experience received by the spectators not only through sight and hearing, but also through smell, touch, or instinctive reactions (Kosiński, 2009).

The whole piece was to give the impression of an amateur game of theater (consider, for instance, the costumes or props), of a ritual, undertaken by overexcited participants of a party. It was as if with this performance Grotowski wanted to ask, and at the same time test, whether this sacred ritual, which in a sense defines and establishes Polish culture and identity, still had the power to bring about change in a completely different reality.

Tadeusz Kantor also strove for the autonomy of a theatrical work, for a "total theater". Writing about himself, he states that 'He has seen the prospect of avant-garde

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[3] The production premiered at the 13 Rows Theater [Teatr 13 Rzędów] in Opole.

in Cricot 2 in a strictly theatrical realm, in the emancipation of a theatrical work (the performance) from its role subordinated to the literary text' (Kantor, 2005: 130). Although he based his actions on dramatic texts—for a long period these were Witkacy's texts—he meant to create a total theater in which the traditional hierarchy of the elements of the spectacle is suspended, a theater in which the logic of the text and the logic of the stage coexist independently. For various reasons he showed his performances in 'non-theatrical' spaces—mainly cafés or art galleries. It allowed for arbitrary arrangements of the space of the stage, which were generated afresh each time and followed specific needs and ideas resulting from his artistic quests, often also encompassing ideas from visual arts.

In the realm of visual arts, he found an excellent tool in the fight against theatrical illusion, namely the neo-avant-garde concept of the "happening", which signifies the total destruction of the traditional painting, or even the work of art in general. In brief, a happening is a spontaneous activity, formally open and eclectic, utilizing a real environment and putting a lot of emphasis on the participants' activity with the intention of blurring the border between life and art.

Kantor's radical gesture stemmed from his attempt to combine in one performance those two contradictory conventions—theater and happening. The realization of this intention was the staging of *The Water Hen* [*Kurka wodna*] by Witkacy (1967). Kantor was aware of the avant-garde nature of this project: 'I began to work on *The Water Hen* absorbed in the idea of movement. I was tempted to do *The Water Hen* as a happening in theatre. Yes, I know it's impossible. Happening and theatre, things quite opposite by nature' (Oliver, 1972).

The premiere of *The Water Hen* took place in a 'real' space—the café of the Krzysztofory Gallery (Galeria Krzysztofory) in Cracow, Poland. Wooden barriers, which according to Kantor's intentions should 'form some kind of division' (Kantor, 2005a: 397), were set out at random amid the tables and benches occupied by the audience. Thus, the traditional fixed border between stage and audience was strongly compromised and the possibility of its existence was only faintly implied. The spectators paid a visit to a café and authentic waiters, hired by Kantor, took their orders for coffee or wine. It was not clear to which reality the waiters belonged—the real café, Kantor's performance, or maybe to both at the same time. Moreover, the moment the performance began was obscured. Actors already dressed in costumes approached the spectators from time to time asking whether the performance had already begun. Obviously, it was a comic element of the performance, but it also showed the liquidity of formal conventions and blurred rigid borders, which were aspects of considerable importance to Kantor.

Kantor built the spectacle around the idea of travel, which manifested itself mainly in costumes and props, and in the development of the action on stage. Actors dressed in costumes of tramps and beggars, lugging enormous bundles and suitcases, cruised around the tables occupied by the spectators. They were constantly moving from place to place, performing mostly trivial activities taken from the convention of the happening. The dominant impression was total chaos; no single linear action could be identified. The spectators had to keep track of many activities performed in parallel, and it was entirely their choice on what they should focus.

At times the actors spoke directly to the spectators. There were also moments when individual people from the audience were drawn into the action, made to participate by performing some activities assigned to them. It seems that by the introduction of the happening convention Kantor procured 'the unity of theater space, simultaneity of the plot, flexibility of the stage, and almost literal integration of the audience into the stage' (Pronaszko, 2018: 288), implementing the ideas Pronaszko and Syrkus had in mind.

In *Towards the New Spatiality of the Stage* (1976), Pronaszko states disappointedly that even after the war and despite all the theatrical avant-garde, the developments, and the technical progress, creators still remained faithful to the space of the traditional proscenium scene: 'Beyond this space, our courage and inventiveness had no strength to get through' (Pronaszko, 1976: 268). At the end of the text, he asks: 'Are we really going to stay for centuries in these horrors and will we never get the collective effort of creating a new, rational, theatrical space coeval with the Sputniks?'[4] (Pronaszko, 1976: 268). It is a question to which he provides the answer: 'It seems that this is what will happen' (Pronaszko, 1976: 268).

Kantor was aware of the failure of the pre-war theatrical avant-garde. On numerous occasions he expressed his belief that World War II completely compromised the dreams of a new, better world and thus also of a new theater and the strenuous efforts to reform it. During one of his meetings with the audience in the 1980s, he claimed: 'The idea of the constructivists went bankrupt ... Above all, the politics they wanted to sign up to, went bankrupt ... that each subsequent age takes one step forward, that means, that it is better than the former one ... Thus I asked: ok, but what will be at the end? Paradise. Well, we didn't see the twentieth century reaching paradise. Despite constructivism at its beginnings' (Kantor, 1988).[5]

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[4] This is the name of a series of Soviet artificial Earth satellites. The first-ever artificial satellite (Sputnik-1) was launched on 4 October 1957 at 7:28 p.m. The flight of Sputnik-1 marked the beginning of the space race between the USSR and the USA, which resulted in the moon landing in 1969.

[5] Statement by Tadeusz Kantor during a meeting with the audience, West Berlin, May 1988; audio recording stored at the Center for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor Cricoteka in Cracow.

Pronaszko's simultaneous theater concept was in fact close to the postulates of constructivism. It would be unrealistic to expect Kantor to pick up the ideas of his artistic mentor anew. Besides, this kind of univocal continuation would not have been his style. If he drew on someone's work intentionally, the reference was always filtered through his own artistic sensitivity, revamped and used for his own artistic objectives. Perhaps it was for these reasons that he never dealt with theater architecture in the literal sense. This might also be the reason for his fascination with the happening, which he used to accomplish goals akin to Pronaszko's design of the simultaneous theater.

Kantor knew that mixing happenings and the theater was impossible. Nonetheless, he realized the performance, as if he wanted to confirm his beliefs through practice. However, just like Pronaszko, Kantor failed. The border between stage and audience or, in other words, art and life, could not be overcome. Both spectators and reviewers interpreted the spectacle as just a theatrical performance complemented by elements from the convention of the happening. On the one hand, these elements were quite dangerous, as they required the personal active involvement of the spectators, but on the other hand, they led to a light reception concentrated on the amusing nature of the participation. That is probably why Kantor officially abandoned the happening theater movement. This, however, does not mean that the idea of breaking the fourth wall ceased to tempt him, although he already knew that spatial re-arrangements in the theater and classic participatory mechanisms alone did not lead to the desired results.

His next spectacle, *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* [*Nadobnisie i koczkodany*] (1973),[6] comprises another step in this direction, one which is already situated on a different level. Kantor seemingly preserved the clear division between the stage and the audience. While entering the room, the spectators were subject to selection into two groups, which were assigned different tasks in the performance. Some of the spectators received wooden plates with numbers, and then during the performance, they were dressed in the costumes of the Mandelbaums[7] and subjected to an obligatory muster. Other viewers sat on benches. The viewers in the first row had aprons draped around their necks. These were decorated with painted, invasive, disciplining slogans similar to those hanging on the walls all over the room. Thus, the spectators either became extras or parts of the set. An audience in the classic sense simply did not exist. This paradoxically meant that the performance could not be staged without the presence of the audience. The audience was thus annexed in a non-obvious way, so that from a

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[6] This performance was based on Witkacy's play of the same title. Its premiere took place in 1973 at the Krzysztofory Gallery in Cracow.

[7] The Mandelbaum group are characters from Witkacy's play *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes*. In Kantor's staging, they were dressed in black hats and Jewish challahs.

formal point of view it did not exist, although it was physically present and separated from the space of the play as in earlier theatrical traditions.

Another step can be seen in *The Dead Class* [*Umarła klasa*] (1975).[8] Scholars agree that its main theme is the tragedy of the Jews during World War II.[9] The audience is separated from the space of the play by a thin rope, suspended on small structures symbolizing the classroom's corners. The rope is at the same time impassable and fragile, easy to tear. It does not hide anything visually. One can safely assume that the audience of this spectacle is something more than a mere audience of a theatrical performance and that the spectators in some way also pose as themselves: they are real-life spectators of a particular performance by Kantor. The society—Polish, but not only Polish—looks at depictions of the Holocaust with fear, helplessness, but also perhaps without emotion or even with satisfaction. This topic had and has been taken up in both preceding and successive Polish literature; nevertheless, at the time of the premiere of *The Dead Class* it was certainly absent from public perception. The audience became another, collective character of the play.

Kantor used to say that he found inspiration for his theater in his memory and his history. Most of the researchers deduce from this statement that his theater was intimate and autobiographical. Nonetheless his experiments with the demarcation and demolition of the borders of a theatrical work have led to new solutions, albeit not constructivist in their nature, based not on architecture and revolution in the spatial order, because he knew, maybe also due to Pronaszko's example, this was ineffective, but on the logic and philosophy of the performance. Inspiration for this performance was not taken from Pronaszko's Sputniks but rather from actual plays of modern times. Using the traditional stage and maintaining its classical division between active actors and passive spectators, Kantor simultaneously destroys this division. *The Dead Class* has the power not to allow the audience to remain passive and mentally involves them in the course of the performance.

The examples of artists and their theatrical projects can be considered examples of avant-garde transcriptions of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Despite these examples' different socio-political circumstances, we can point out their common denominators, which in turn correspond to the aspects of the total work of art delineated by Roberts, for Polish artists have consistently striven for the integrity of the artwork. Moreover, this aesthetic unity is frequently related to the space in which the materialization of this work of art takes place.

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[8] The premiere of this piece, undoubtedly Kantor's most famous performance, took place in 1975 at the Krzysztofory Gallery in Cracow.

[9] The book *The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust* by Grzegorz Niziołek should be recalled in this context (Niziołek, 2019).

In summary, one can ask a crucial question, to which it may not be possible to find a clear answer. Why, for what purpose, and for what reasons do Polish artists refer in their works to the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*? It is an idea that has a very utopian character. One can venture to say that Pronaszko's projects and undertakings were closely related to and resulted from the then socio-political situation in which the newly independent Poland found itself: a situation that required, or rather demanded, confirmation of national unity and national community. It demanded the strengthening of faith in "a new and better tomorrow". It demanded real social changes resulting from the geopolitical changes that had taken place. The tool that made such changes possible was avant-garde art, in which the Wagnerian assumption of an ideal vision of the world and society was realized.

This situation, however, did not last very long. Very soon it turned out that the postulates and the ideas put into practice were likely to fail precisely because of this utopianism. The situation in post-war Poland was quite peculiar—in terms of the presence of the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk.* According to Roberts, the idea of a total work of art was realized in the political system imposed at the time—communism. However, it is worth noting that Polish artists did not adopt Wagner's idea directly but rather 'transcribed' his concept. This is because they were most interested in working with 'a closed worldview, combining a social-utopian or historical-philosophical or metaphysical-religious image of the whole with a radical critique of existing society and culture' (Roberts, 2011: 7).

The utopian nature of this idea and the associated potential for failure, of which the artists were well aware, seem to be the perfect tool for the game they are playing. This game is based on a kind of ambiguity: it is based on understatements, and it is a constant balancing between what is real and what is illusory, connected with convention, with the world of art. This is perhaps most evident in Kantor's idea of the happening theater. On the one hand, the artists were forced to function in an oppressive system, which on the other hand, they strove to change, wanting above all to sensitize society to the situation in which they now found themselves.

Much more important, however, and also relevant to the Wagnerian concept, seems to be the conviction (or rather the belief) in the performative power of the artwork, which is treated as a potential tool for changing reality. This kind of change is not possible without changing the condition of the spectator of a theatrical work, without making them an integral part of it. It should be remembered that this kind of aspiration is characterized by a high degree of utopianism—but perhaps this is what we need today.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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