

Review of *The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust* by Grzegorz Niziołek (trans. Ursula Phillips), published in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 30.4 (December 2020), pp.568-70.

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Grzegorz Niziołek's examination of 'the Polish theatre of the Holocaust' explores the fundamental potentials of *theatre*, as not only an object of study but also a means by which cultural memory becomes visible. Concerned with relations between perception and interpretation that are not so much symbolic as symptomatic, Niziołek addresses what might be occluded or denied through a theatrical construction of seeing. Indeed, the very opening sentence of his book presents such a challenge for thinking through its historically situated and multivalent sense of visibility as *theatre*: '[t]he most important thing is to realise that everything was visible, that it really did take place and that everyone saw at least a fraction of what was going on' (1). To consider the articulation of this visibility – not only in its immediacy, but subsequently (indeed, consequently) through time – one could begin with the complex relation of terms set out in the book's very title. The question of time here is not simply chronological, of course, but concerns 'what cannot be expressed in categories of discourse... [as] the symptoms of discursiveness' (80). Together with reflections on the Holocaust as a question of (and not only for) modernity (as with Zygmunt Bauman and Hannah Arendt), Niziołek also addresses these symptoms with reference to Jean-Francois Lyotard's analysis of figures of a libidinal economy within cultural production.

What, then, is particular to a *Polish* theatre of the Holocaust? What work does the 'of' in this book's title do – referring not simply to theatre during, or about, the Holocaust, but also to theatre as part of (or complicit with) an understanding of it? This last possibility touches upon dynamics of active and passive, for instance, as they structure the use of theatrical metaphors in construing social experience. These include forms of pathos that not only recur in theatrical representation (through which that experience may have already been conceived), but in the construction of spectatorship. The notion of spectator (imbued

with the particular sense of also being a work's co-creator) is elaborated here in the context of Raul Hilberg's extension of the victim-perpetrator relation to address the role of bystander. The latter is not a neutral category (the indifference of which would be itself symptomatic), but refers – as Niziołek insists throughout – to the experience of being witness to another's suffering. This sense of visibility interweaves both historical and theatrical meaning, in which the accepted sense of primary and secondary meaning is unsettled. The question of a responsibility for things that we have not ourselves done remains one of the principal ethical problems of our time, hardly confined to those crimes against humanity that have been already prosecuted (in both senses). To adapt a key term from Michael Rothberg, the 'multidirectional' sense of racism, after all, continues to present profound challenges to any understanding of the humanities today.<sup>1</sup>

With recourse to psychoanalytic categories for examining cultural practices – especially in addressing the dissociation of thought and feeling in repression – Niziołek engages with what is repeated (in place of being remembered) in examples of post-war Polish theatre and film. In chapters on specific productions – from Stefan Otwinowski's *Easter* (1946) to Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Our Class* (2010), and offering new insights on work by Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor, Józef Szajna and Andrzej Wajda, amongst others – the work of repetition here is understood not simply in terms of manifest, historically attestable, experience, but of the witness inscribed in the denial of implication. It is not, then, a question of Holocaust denial, but of something more pervasive, involving a question of the art of theatre in re-figuring relations between past and present – not least, in unsettling defensive claims to knowledge about the Holocaust. Such knowledge, after all, is not only institutionalised, but widely disseminated in the form of clichés, through which cultural memory is reduced to a mere abstraction of the past.

Crucially, the analyses of this book invoke questions of pedagogy, albeit complicating enlightenment values of education and citizenship (as distinct, for instance, from connotations

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

of religious identification and ethnicity, supposedly qualifying the understanding of Polish citizenship). This resonates in the book's opening presentation of photographs showing bystanders within a frame that makes visible the violence being done to others – to those who had become no longer Polish Jews (fellow citizens) but simply *Jews* (as if no longer Poles) – during the Nazi occupation. In Niziołek's sense of a 'society of witnesses': 'Polish theatre after 1945 became a venue for the circulation of affects linked to historical experiences and hidden cultural transactions, in which images of the Holocaust were subjected to various procedures of appropriation and deformation' (30). It is through such 'appropriation and deformation' (rather than the conventions of explicit representation) that Niziołek explores the complicity of post-war audiences in the denial of that visibility. His analysis is itself, then, a contribution to the very work which it attests to, resisting falsehoods that are not only historical but ethical. 'Polish culture is confronted not only by the task of reminding society of its "forgotten" history, but also by the restoration to society of its status as witnesses: witnesses of the second and third generations, witnesses of the generation of postmemory' (44).

The word 'Holocaust' in the title of this translation – for which we must be grateful to Ursula Phillips – itself opens up interesting questions concerning the first term, 'Polish'. As Niziołek discusses in the introduction to this English edition of his book, 'Holocaust' is not the Polish word (*Zagłada*, or 'extermination') for what falls under the discussion, in English, of the Shoah or the Holocaust – terms that have their own complex history, emerging only in the 1950s. The question of what is translatable into English of *Polish* cultural memory, as posed by Polish art and criticism, also involves a history of translation into Polish of work written in English, of course. The historical context of both the Cold War and of nationalist imaginaries (often evoking pre-war cultural politics) throughout Europe is thus also figured in this translation. For it is not simply the formalised transference of meaning, but a sensitivity to the 'conceptual void as well as paralysis of empathy' (7) held in the understanding of these words, that is at stake here. This applies not just to the works analysed by Niziołek, of course, but to his work of analysis itself, and such a brief review as this cannot possibly do

justice to its insight and complexity. With a paperback edition due in early 2021, however, it is to be hoped that it will find a wide readership able to discover its importance for themselves.

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