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It's hard to deny: Paweł Demirski is the most important Polish playwright working today. With his deeply politically engaged, brilliantly intelligent theatre, his appearance is like a dream come true for all those awaiting a new Sławomir Mrożek, a Polish Bertolt Brecht or a Polish verbatim theatre. At the same time, Demirski has disappointed them all by creating plays unlike anything previously identified with political theatre in Poland. He says he owes his greatest debt to the furious communist theatre of Dario Fo, but it would appear that when it comes to creative technique, he owes his greatest debt to the French situationists.

When I think of the dramatic works of Paweł Demirski and productions that have been based on them by Monika Strzępka and Michał Zadara, the finest directors who have worked with him, I am inevitably reminded of the title of the long-forgotten experimental-political film by situationist director René Viénet, *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*, which is being rediscovered today. The most wonderful thing about this film is its titular question, wonderfully impertinent, smashing to smithereens the gravity and scepticism of those who try to answer it in the negative and the revolutionary zeal of those who fervently seek its affirmation.

By contrasting kung-fu fight scenes from *The Crush*, a Hong King action movie directed by Tu Guangqi, with leftist manifestoes and lectures in political philosophy, Viénet attacks cinema as a medium that deepens the dominant passivity characteristic of the 'society of the spectacle'. He attempts to return the film medium to its proper function, in line with the postulates of Guy Debord, who wanted to transform it from an entertainment into an essay, to make it a historical analysis and a medium of memory.¹ The gist of the idea of storming the barricades erected by capitalism between the proletariat and the bureaucracy, armed to the teeth in dialectics, does not lie in the potential success of the act but solely in the gesture of the political kung-fu warrior, regardless of whether the gesture finds its target or misses, or whether it is sharp, powerful, excessive, somewhat caricature-esque and at the same time brutal and absurdly funny. Viénet directs our attention towards that which in reality we cannot see, but also to that which is absent but can appear if we turn off the common sense, good taste, impartiality and good manners that stand guard before the eternal order. Demirski applies a very similar strategy, although he can hardly be called a situationist par excellence,

1 Guy Debord, *Spoleczeństwo spektaklu* [*La Société du spectacle*] trans. by Anka Ptaszkowska with Leszek Brogowski (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 1998).

and is all the better for it.

High-Speed Urban Theatre

It is said that there have been two turning points in the history of Polish theatre since 1989. The first was in 1997 when two performances were staged at the same time in Warsaw, by Krzysztof Warlikowski (*Electra* by Sophocles, Dramatyczny Theatre) and Grzegorz Jarzyna (*Tropical Madness* based on Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Rozmaitości Theatre). Initially provoking outrage among conservative critics and the public with their pop-culture aesthetics and daring handling of issues of sexuality and morals which had previously been taboo in Poland, the directors rapidly came to be seen as the leading representatives of their generation, and consequently became famous abroad.

But the theatre of Warlikowski and Jarzyna, despite being brave, capable of making the audience uncomfortable and focusing on many types of marginalized minorities – women, gays and transsexuals, those struggling with mental illness and addiction – was as distant from entertaining, bourgeois parlour theatre as it was from real life and the problems of contemporary Poland. The young left-leaning intelligentsia gathered around *Krytyka Polityczna* – which was established in 2002 in Warsaw and evolved from a magazine of the same title into an institution combining an ambitious publishing house with elements of discussion club, alternative youth club and open university – continued to await their generation of directors, who would show the homeless of Poland, preferably the real thing, not actors, instead of oversensitive characters suffering in sterile designer apartments.

These directors arrived in 2003 with another coincidence of events that has taken on symbolic importance: the debut of Jan Klata (*The Government Inspector* by Nikolai Gogol, Dramatyczny Theatre in Wałbrzych), the Polish debut of Michał Zadara (*HamletMaszyna* [*Hamletmachine*] by Heiner Müller, PWST Theatre Academy in Kraków), Maja Kleczewska's breakthrough production (*Czyż nie dobija się koni* [*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*] based on Horace McCoy, also in Wałbrzych) and the revolution initiated at Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk by its director, Maciej Nowak.

Inspired by experiments in the aesthetics of verbatim theatre, Nowak decided to transform the Gdańsk theatre, known for its star performers and striking productions of classic texts, into a centre for new, intensely politically engaged theatre. With this aim he did not appoint an experienced theatre scholar as the head of the theatre's literary department, as is the norm in Poland, but instead appointed a young journalist with no previous theatre experience: Paweł Demirski. Demirski was promptly sent off to London to learn from the best. He took part in stage-writing workshops at the Royal Court Theatre to learn the techniques of documentary theatre, in which plays are based on interviews with their characters, press articles and archive trawls.

On returning to Poland, Demirski began a cycle of documentary plays called *Szybki Teatr Miejski* [*High-Speed Urban Theatre*]. Along with his play *Padnij!* [*Get Down!*] on the sensitive subject of Polish soldiers who fought in Iraq, the cycle included productions about back-alley abortions and homelessness. But the next play written by Demirski and produced in Gdańsk, a tale of economic migration directed by Michał Zadara, *From Poland with Love* (2005), combined the authentic dialogue

of a generation lamenting lost dreams while washing dishes in British fast-food restaurants and lyrical passages worthy of Tadeusz Różewicz. This was the case again with the controversial *Wałęsa. Historia wesolą, a ogromnie przez to smutną* [*Wałęsa. A Happy Story Made Sad by Being So*] (also directed by Zadara in 2005) where the reminiscences of the legendary Solidarity leader, recorded in interviews, were treated with the same gravitas as the lyrics of U2's song *New Year's Day*, which references the imposition of martial law in Poland.

Paraphrases

It was soon evident that Demirski was at his best working on critical approaches to (or dramaturgical rewritings of) found material – that is, the cultural memory of his audience. He raised his first major scandal in 2007 with *Dziady. Ekshumacja* [*Forefathers' Eve: Exhumation*], directed by Monika Strzępka (the pair have now worked together for nearly a decade). The Romantic tragedy by Adam Mickiewicz, Poland's most important play over the nearly two centuries since its creation, has transformed in the popular imagination into a 'venerable temple', though it was written as a rebellious, sometimes even sacrilegious scream of protest against political oppression and moral hypocrisy. Demirski reinstated the play's protest-song sharpness by mixing deformed, torn and twisted phrases from Mickiewicz with quotes from punk songs and countless vulgarisms and swear words. He acted like a naughty schoolboy impertinently scribbling moustaches, horns and genitals with a ballpoint pen on posed photos of national heroes in his textbook. By exhuming the corpse of the Mickiewicz play, which thus far had been lying perfectly still, he created a zombie; it may have been ugly and lacking in refinement, but at least it was alive, angry and very dangerous. In the same way that questions about freedom, national identity and social justice remain alive and dangerous.

This is a strategy Demirski has returned to many times. The plays collected along with *Forefathers' Eve* in *Paraphrases* explore literature and cultural phenomena as diverse as *Iphigénie* by Jean Racine [*Iphigénie: A New Tragedy*], *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekhov (*Diamenty to węgiel, który wziął się do roboty* [*Diamonds Are Coal That Got Down to Business*]), *The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht (*Opera gospodarcza dla ładnych pań i zamożnych panów* [*Economic Opera for Nice Ladies and Wealthy Lords*]), the work and social standing of Andrzej Wajda (*Był sobie Andrzej Andrzej Andrzej i Andrzej* [*There Was Andrzej Andrzej Andrzej and Andrzej*]) and even the popular communist-era TV series *Four Tank Men and a Dog*, which had offered up a propagandist take on Polish-Soviet fraternity during the Second World War (*Niech żyje wojna!!!* [*Long Live the War!!!*]). Each time the unsuspecting audience was violently confronted with the playwright's brazen treatments, created by taking well-known stories beloved by the public, shifting their meanings, subverting sense and causing countless transgressions against good middle-class taste and traditional notions of logic. In *Diamonds Are Coal That Got Down to Business*, subtle Sonya shouts 'Shut your face!' at Astrov, and Voynitsky doesn't want to shoot because he knows that during tens of millions of performances of *Uncle Vanya*, none of Voynitsky's shots have ever met their target; in *Long Live the War!!!*, 'Friend of the Little Children' Joseph Stalin makes an appearance to supervise the torture of the central characters while Szarik the dog, once a favourite of TV audiences, turns

out to be working for the NKVD.

Found Footage

The notion of found footage will be useful in my analysis of Demirski's dramaturgical methodology in his works published in *Paraphrases*.² The methodology of the author of *Forefathers' Eve: Exhumation* is very reminiscent of this tactic, widely used in critical art. Found images, words, sound and ideas become the raw material, components which can be used to create a new whole. The nature of their role means it is difficult to evaluate these borrowed 'subcomponents' (noble imitation or emulation versus cruel parody or profanation), compounded by the fact that Demirski does not draw his 'raw materials' directly from book pages or film scenes, but rather from a false collective consciousness which feeds on mediated experience, where his materials arrive already deformed and distorted, like words in the children's game of Chinese whispers.

In his paraphrases, Demirski practices his own variation on situationist *détournement* with the ambition of simultaneously practicing and attempting to destroy the essential, hated art. Debordian plagiarism served to dissect dead works of the past and connect them to a living being to allow them to return to reality (in line with the idea that the contradiction of culture preserves its sense).

Of course Demirski did not need to read Debord – one can find many domestic examples of *détournement* in Poland, often much older than the 'Situationist International'. Witkacy (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1885–1939) could be one such spiritual great-grandfather, stitching his dramaturgical patchworks together from Edmund Husserl's phenomenological writings, communist manifestos, the plays of his precursor Stanisław Wyspiański, pulp fiction, newspaper ads and ribald folk songs of the Polish highlanders. Tadeusz Różewicz could be the grandfather (he is quoted in a key scene in Demirski's early work *From Poland with Love*), who described his play *Grupa Laokoona* [*The Laocoon Group*] (1961) as the 'Cloaca maxima of dead aesthetics' and formed it from philosophical writings of Søren Kierkegaard, tragic monologues of William Shakespeare, aesthetic thought of Doris Lessing, the émigré poetry of his countrymen Kamil Norwid and Juliusz Słowacki, proverbs, aphorisms and radio newspeak. Demirski takes things a step farther by practicing, like a performance artist, the 'art of the commentary'.

The Earthworm

The situationists believed that power, in ordering reality – and in delineating countless oppositions within it: work time and free time, the private and the state, duty and freedom, etc. – has created a fragmented world. The notion that a living, contemporary culture should reflect this state of affairs was already grasped by avant-garde artists at the beginning of the 20th century. Alfred Döblin shocked adherents of traditional literary theory by opposing the ideal of the work of art as a harmoniously constructed 'beautiful animal' with a form which cannot be modified without detriment to the coherence or even the existence of the whole, with the ideal of the earthworm. When an earthworm is sliced into pieces it does not die but each fragment moves independently, functioning as a

2 Paweł Demirski, *Parafrazy* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2011)

macabre *pars pro toto* of the whole. And so it is with the modern work of art, comprised of fragments that will never form a beautiful, coherent, self-contained whole, and at the same time each fragment (paradoxically!) carries with it a reflection of an overriding sense. The fragments do not strive to return to a cohesive whole but scatter in different directions, subservient only to their own anarchic dynamic.

Demirski practices this unique form of looting which Theodor Adorno³ saw as the foundation of the essay as a philosophical rather than a literary form, because the essay, according to the philosopher, is the opposite of conventional 'truth'. *Long Live the War!!!* and *There Was Andrzej Andrzej Andrzej and Andrzej* are essentially a type of essay on history, which for the society of the spectacle has become a junkyard of dilapidated objects. The playwright takes us to a television-newspaper junkyard so he can dig through piles of refuse for anything that has not lost all its value and can still be artistically recycled. From these found images and words, he will create unique dramatic collages (or perhaps assemblages).

Art in the 20th century set itself a seemingly insurmountable task: to reconcile the objective recording of reality with the artist's subjective expression. The technique known as montage turned out to be the perfect tool for the job (particularly in film) as 'objective' images giving a faithful representation of slices of reality recombined into new forms thanks to the artist's subjective gesture, splicing together new combinations, creating new senses and emotions.

Demirski, a journalist by training who has spent years exploring verbatim theatre, a unique form of documentary theatre, is extremely adept at 'objectively' recording the world: he captures the unique attributes of the language of the street and of the so-called salons. He extracts and accurately impales the most vital features of people and situations. The subjects that occupy him, the world that he shows, have not changed much since *Get Down!* was staged at Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk in 2003 as part of *High-Speed Urban Theatre*. The only change has been to the nature of the montage, which has grown increasingly audacious, more dynamic and ever closer to subversive *détournement*.

As opposed to the forward-looking situationists, Demirski has also (and perhaps primarily) used montage to settle his scores with history – or rather with post-history which, with its discontinuity, disharmony, internal contradictions, predominance of gaps over certainties, is perhaps closer to the dissected earthworm of Döblin than to Hegel's spiral of history. The author of *Economic Opera for Nice Ladies and Wealthy Lords* combines these fragments anew, with the absolute certainty that the merger cannot be successful and that the very links and methods used in composing the fragments are more important than the fragments / episodes / facts themselves. Demirski plays with differences, rejecting the temptation of an optimistic coherence which delivers sense and solace. He can be said to practice his own form of the art of memory, as described by Georges Didi-Huberman, analysing Bertolt Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal* diary and *Kriegsfielbel* album: 'Contrasts, fractures, dispersions. But all these fractures form in order to properly show the right

3 Adorno, Theodor W., 'Esej jako forma', in *Sztuka i sztuki. Wybór esejów*, ed. by Karol Sauerland, trans. by Krystyna Krzemień-Ojak (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1990).

relations between things, their common ground, that imperceptible but nevertheless binding relation, even if that that relation is based on distance, inversion, cruelty, nonsense'.⁴

Bricolage

Subsequent texts by Demirski are linked by the red thread of the theatre of memory. They often refer, to a greater or lesser extent, to what may be termed the *Forefathers' Eve* project: an inseparable, always incomplete part of Polish theatre over the past two centuries, a formula created by Mickiewicz then continued by the director Tadeusz Kantor among others, which posits the theatre as a place where we give voice to the dead brought back from the netherworld. As a result, the image of the past is continually subject to revision (traces of this idea can be found not only in *Forefathers' Eve: Exhumation* but also in *Waleśa* and *There Was Andrzej Andrzej Andrzej and Andrzej*). The game is therefore played with high stakes: myth.

One of the principal controversies surrounding the work of Demirski is whether his deconstruction creates something new – proposing fresh discourses in place of those he undermines, discourses which he considers just and not inauthentic or devalued – or only rearranges the junkyard of ideas, essentially going around in conceptual circles.

This form of opposition is nothing new. Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*⁵ presented the bricoleur-handyman who rebuilds and revitalises myth by sewing a patchwork from existing, ready-made elements by merely changing the order of the content (and not the content itself) and questioning the possibility of giving existing elements of reality new meaning, an engineer capable of creating ex nihilo. The rational engineer can completely free himself from the established order, create new meanings and objectify discourse.

Demirski, though, does not want to free himself from Polish myths, heritage, history or memory. On the contrary, he does not claim the right to create new lines of thought and philosophical-aesthetic systems. He takes the third way delineated by Jacques Derrida,⁶ who protested the dualism of Lévi-Strauss, stressing that the perfect engineer does not exist. The discourse of the engineer is also a bricolage because his genesis is invariably founded on quotation and repetition, while objectivism is impossible. For Derrida, the bricoleur becomes a medium through which flows a stream of myths; his role is limited to merely retrieving them from the unconscious and giving them contemporary form. In this instance, 'merely' can also mean its opposite because the handyman's strategy is synonymous with the critical attitude. The bricoleur edits myth for us, the audience.

The desire to be engineer number two of Polish myth has motivated many creators of Polish literature and film in recent decades. In his most controversial play, *There Was Andrzej Andrzej Andrzej and Andrzej*,

4 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Strategie obrazów. Oko historii 1*, trans. by Janusz Margański (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!Art, 2011), p. 82.

5 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mysł nieoswojona*, trans. by Andrzej Zajączkowski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2000).

6 Derrida, Jacques, *Struktura, znak i gra w dyskursie nauk humanistycznych* [Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences] trans. by Monika Adamczyk (*Pamiętnik Literacki*, 77 (2), Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 1986).

Demirski takes on self-appointed 'architects of the imagination' – film directors who formed the acclaimed Polish school of filmmaking, who he accuses of creating myths that seduce viewers while remaining completely blind to reality with an unwillingness to confront it critically. Fortunately, he does not enter into an architectural competition with them, even when in *Wałęsa: A Happy Story Made Sad by Being So* he and director Michał Zadara brought to the stage the story of Solidarity, which was still waiting for its Homer-mythographer. Demirski attempts to crush bricks with dialectics. And it appears that he is successful.

Translated by Aleksandra Sakowska

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