

LAURA QUERCIOLI MINCER

THE SPACE OF SOUND, THE SPACE OF HISTORY. MIROŚLAW BAŁKA AND PAWEŁ MYKIETYN*

In 2007, an art historian at Adam Mickiewicz University, Izabela Kowalczyk described the emergence of “a new phenomenon” in Polish art. In Poland, the ever-present interest in history, Kowalczyk writes, since the turn of the millennium no longer focuses on concrete events, but instead on the ways in which history “is constructed, what it is used for and how it is used, how it is mixed with fiction and how it functions in our imagination” (Kowalczyk 2007: 25). We thus witness the construction of a series of symbols, or emblems, capable of condensing historical experience. It would be, in the words of the scholar, a sort of “‘destoricization’ of art” able to modify the viewer’s perception, which perhaps provides us with deeper and shared perception and contributes in an innovative way to the construction of the public memory of a nation, of a generation.

Mirosław Bałka (Otwock, 1958) is undoubtedly the greatest representative, or perhaps the forerunner, of this “school.” It has often been said that one of the characteristics of his style is precisely a sense of responsibility towards the past, or, in other words, reflection on how history works “in our imagination.” Even the two sets he created for Paweł Mykietyń’s works (*Oława*, 1971; *Czarodziejska Góra – The Enchanted Mountain*, from 2015 and *Herr Thaddäus* from 2017) propose, also in an unexpected way, reworkings of images shared in the collective narrative of traumatic events of the European past and present.

* This article firstly was published in italian *Lo spazio del suono, lo spazio della storia Mirosław Bałka e Paweł Mykietyń (La montagna incantata, 2015 e Herr Thaddäus, 2017)*, “Transnazionale” no 6 (2022), pp. 125–187. Online: https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/novecento_transnazionale/issue/view/1648; <https://www.academia.edu/77922881>

* * *

In one of his most famous paintings, *The Lovers* of 1928, Renè Magritte (1898–1967) paints a man and a woman against the backdrop of an almost empty landscape, who join in a kiss that becomes paradoxical, mysterious, and disturbing, since the faces are covered by a sheet, a large cloth, or a shroud (<https://www.rene-magritte.com/les-amants/>). The image of the face concealed by a cloth is a plausible reference to the circumstances of the suicide of the artist's mother in 1911, thus illustrating frustration, if not trauma (cf. e.g. Handler Spitz 1994). As with many of the Belgian painter's works, the interpretations are almost endless. The important thing is the profound ambiguity of the painting, the representation of the possibility/impossibility of contact between the characters and of the relationship with the viewer. Obviously, our protective masks, in the long period of the Covid pandemic, have added a very quotidian and concrete level of interpretation to this image.

I was reminded of Magritte's *Les Amants* while watching a short clip (0.49") in which Mirosław Bałka, perhaps the best-known and most appreciated living Polish artist, invites us to attend Paweł Mykietyn's 2017 Opera, *Herr Thaddäus* (produced by Wiktor Kociuban as part of the Dark matter(s) project: <https://deliriumedition.org/dark-matters-en/>); the Otwock artist, as he explains in the video, is responsible for organising the space, the lights and the "help and safety" of the audience, to whom he presents himself here covered with a golden cloth. Here too, therefore, the "voyeuristic pleasure of the audience" is resolutely frustrated (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79933>). The background is equally golden and unadorned. The reference is not, however, perhaps to icon art or to the long period in the history of European painting in which the gold background reigned supreme; the abstraction of gold and the lack of the artist's face are more likely to indicate, in an (auto)ironic way, not only an homage to Surrealism, but also the contrast between the depersonalisation of collective tragedies (discussed below) and the particularism, individualism of the Romantic text, though sometimes an exaggerated one (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOKCojE2qIU>).

* * *

The first Mykietyn's production discussed here, first in a chronological sense but also in the perspective of a kind of dissolution of the Opera-form, is *The Enchanted Mountain – Czarodziejska Góra*: perhaps still one of Mykietyn's most ambitious undertakings. Thomas Mann's well-known text focuses on the dimension of time as its main theme. Even the story it tells is, in its basic

outline, familiar to everyone (for many, as director Andrzej Chyra said, “*The Magic Mountain* is the most important book in life”). A young Hamburg industrialist, Hans Castorp goes to visit his cousin Joachim in a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland, with the intention of staying there for three weeks. He stays there for seven years and in that cosmopolitan and morbid atmosphere, a “land of death” where time is suspended, his maturation and education take place. *The Magic Mountain* is above all “an initiatory journey”, as Małgorzata Sikorską-Miszczuk argues, an author of the libretto (written in Polish and translated into German for the staging; Drotkiewicz 2014). Castorp only leaves the sanatorium at the outbreak of the First World War, and in the novel’s last pages we see him trudging in uniform among corpses in an empty space; the author warns us that it would be better not to bet on his survival.

The Opera was commissioned by Michał Merczyński, the director of the Malta Festival Poznań, one of the most important art festivals in Central and Eastern Europe, which he founded in 1991; until 2017, Merczyński has also been director of the Polish National Film Archive. Finally, it was he who nominated Mykietyn as the author of the score. Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk’s libretto differs in many ways from Manni’s vast text; would be impossible to summarise the multiplicity of its plots and suggestions in the limited time of a theatre performance.

Even more than in the original text, the boundaries between life and death become fluid and overlap in the operatic narrative. Just as fluid is the eternal creeping of the Anaconda, a figure absent in the source text, and which in the libretto also symbolises the absolute destruction wrought by war. The opening words of the Anaconda Song, sung several times in the Opera, are projected in the background of the second act: “The anaconda devours everything / the cow, the mountain, the man / everything it meets on the road / everything / even me, and even you”. The letters are gigantic and flow slowly, so that it is difficult to understand their meaning. Yet, the word Mensch, a human being, against which the cousins Hans and Joachim angrily throw handfuls of snow, remains motionless for several minutes, as the work closes with it.

For *Czarodziejska Góra*, Mirosław Bałka has created a single structure encompassing the entire stage, within which the performers walk, sit, lie down, crawl and kneel. It offers them shelter, but at the same time first and foremost encloses them. The light creates Beckettian effects, isolating the characters in a loneliness that has no outlet, making them appear to be immersed in the earth up to their waists. But it also recalls the structure of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe by Peter Eisenman, inaugurated in Berlin in

May 2005. The structure forces the singers in obligatory directions, along the same displaced corridors, articulated in different ways, so as to impose vertical movements, in the first act, horizontal, in the second. The same possibilities of action of the performers are corrected by the place where they appear (Sural 2015).

It was important – said Bałka in the interview with Agnieszka Sural – to be able to define the movement that the set design will make. An existential gesture, as in Beckett, as in Camus: overthrow, fall. The healthy body overturns and is then defined as sick or dead. For me it was important that the set design also be overturned. The result is that the corridors used in the vertical communication of the first act, after the overturning gesture in the second act, can be called trenches (Sural 2015).

Regarding the material, as already mentioned so crucial for the Otwock artist, both in its concrete and tactile dimension as well as in its symbolic one, Bałka went on to explain:

It was also important for me to eliminate all sagging elements: the curtain, the rags that are always found on the stage. I chose the simplest material, the one that seemed most honest to me: a construction of steel and condensate, smeared with black, shiny paint – not opaque, as is generally used in theatre. The paint had to be alive, to catch the light (Sural 2015).

And so, in the second act, the construction seems more suited to crawling or lying down than to walking upright. It is the very structure of the European upper middle class of the time, refined, elitist and infinitely cultured, that reveals its horror ‘reverse.’ The music is edited in the studio and played by a computer. It includes sounds from a wide range, Mykietyn says, from completely natural to completely synthetic. The vocals sometimes adapt to it, sometimes play in contrast, leaving the singers free to choose whether or not to adapt to the proposed tone.

We are a ‘dream team,’ Andrzej Chyra, born in 1964, one of the best Polish actors of his generation, argues, thinking of all the participants: obviously the musician Paweł Mykietyn, the writer and playwright Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, Mirosław Bałka, the singer and composer Agata Zubel, and himself as director and others. We are people, the director adds, who come from different backgrounds (music, film, performance, writing, sculpture, singing), and are learning to know each other, to adapt to each other. But each of us individually and all of us together very consistently want to achieve a goal.

It is precisely on the collaboration and seamless integration of the various elements that the reviews focus. According to Michał Centkowski of *Newsweek Polska*: *Czarodziejska góra* “seduces with Mirosław Bałka’s monumental scenic vision and splendid, if not simple, music. The result of the meet-

ing of the four artists [Mykietyn, Bałka, Sikorska-Miszczuk and Chyra] is a completely contemporary work, extraordinary for its broad artistic scope” (22.11.2015, <https://www.newsweek.pl/kultura/pawel-mykietyn-czarodziejska-gora-recenzja/xgc86mp>). In the renowned weekly, “Polityka” Dorota Szwarzman writes:

The exceptional music of Paweł Mykietyn resounding from the loudspeakers, made up of electronic, instrumental and natural sounds, blends in a unique way here with the excellent acting and singing performances of soloists from different generations (in addition to already well-known vedettes such as Jadwiga Rappé or Urszula Kryger, promising young artists, including Barbara Kinga Majewska, Szymon Komasa, Szymon Maliszewski, Marcin Habela) and Mirosław Bałka’s claustrophobic set design (07.07.2015, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/teatr/1624945,1,recenzja-spektakluczarodziejska-gora-rez-andrzej-chyra.read>).

* * *

The aforementioned Opera *Herr Thaddäus* (2017) is inspired by the Polish national epic *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz, first published in Paris in 1834. Mykietyn’s music, from a conceptual point of view, also seems to revolve precisely around the antonyms local-global, patriotism-cosmopolitanism. This profound ambivalence is well present in the poem: the Polish national epos opens with the invocation “O Lithuania, my homeland”, and, as is well known, was written in Parisian exile by a poet who had never been to Poland *per se*. It describes, in a manner that is both nostalgic and ironic, the world of the Polish nobility just before the catastrophe, or rather the definitive *Finis Poloniae* caused by successive partitions. On the back cover of *Pan Tadeusz*’s Italian edition, there is a fitting definition by the Jewish-Italian-German-Polish writer Helena Janeczek, according to whom in the pages of the poem “a homeland is drawn where no one is a stranger, because its place of birth and arrival is poetry.”

A homeland where no one is a stranger... In the programme for *Herr Thaddäus* we read that Mykietyn chose to perform *Pan Tadeusz* in German (in the 19th-century translation by the Polish Jew Siegfried Lipiner, a close friend of Gustav Mahler) precisely to strip it of its most obvious ethnic and identity element. “The border between our own and that which is foreign ceases to be obvious, it demands re-examination”, writes Justyna Rudnicka in the programme for the performance on 21 May 2019 (Theatre program – *Herr Thaddäus*: 4). The set design by Mirosław Bałka (which, however, only accompanied the first performances of the Opera, on 17 and 19 December 2017). The performance was by the Okiestra Akademii Beethovenowskiej conducted by

Wiktor Kociuban) plays on precisely these elements. Reduced to a minimum, it consists essentially of lights, smoke and a kit offered to spectators. The waves of light are limited to those of the Polish national flag, with which the nation's cities have been literally flooded, at least since the 2015 victory of *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, Law and Justice party. "They are patriotic colours," said Mirosław Bałka, "and Paweł Mykietyń's work is also very patriotic. The red and white beams of light, which whip around the spectators piercing the haze of smoke, "seem to me," says Bałka, "a good symbol of the reflections on patriotism that are taking place in Poland today" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7Dm8RoZqyl>).

I have mentioned a kit offered to the spectators. It is a small plastic wrap, which contains a thermal blanket. In the interview conducted by Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, Bałka talks about the strong symbolic connotation that each material has for him. He emphasises how important it is to give the wrapping to the audience, who open it and choose, according to their body temperature, which side they want to wear – if they are cold, they will see the golden part, if they are hot, the silver one – and how this simple gesture creates a sort of community among the people gathered inside the theatre. Mickiewicz, in a well-known passage from the 1828 poem *Konrad Wallenrod*, calls the folk song "the ark of the covenant" that unites generations. What we see, and what Bałka, who refuses to make any dramatic or grandiloquent statements, does not say, is not only that the drapes reflect and amplify the colours of the set, but that the people gathered to listen to the patriotic epic *Pan Tadeusz* are transformed into passengers on a shaky ark, where they themselves are called upon to play the role of migrants encased in tarpaulins, in other words, those who, if they ever had a homeland, have generally lost it forever. (Mickiewicz himself was an exile, the authors reiterated when asked by journalists. <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/warszawska-jesien-2018-jak-wygladalo-lobby-panstwokompozytorow>).

* * *

In the first chapter of *Opera's Second Death*, co-written with Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar points out how Opera historically represented the privileged place where the fantasies of a mythical community were enacted; and, in this way, imagined communities (according to Benedict Anderson's well-known formulation) overflowed onto real ones: Opera served as an ideal confirmation of the absolute monarchy first, and then that of the nation-state (Žižek & Dolar 2002: 3). Hardly classifiable as an Opera in the strict sense, Mykietyń-Kociuban-Bałka's *Herr Thaddäus* is the negation of the fearsome and 'imag-

ined' national community, through the transpositions of languages and meanings of the original text, while, at the same time, it proposes a human community, perhaps equally imagined, open to the world.

* * *

The more traditional the reference text, the less so the spatial organisation of the orchestra and the temporal organisation of the music. In *Herr Thaddäus*, the podium is empty, all the musicians are in the audience, which is directly observed by the conductor. The entire score, where harmony is reduced to an absolute minimum, plays only on a single note that continuously increases in speed.

The velocity of the note is an issue that Mykietyn has been dealing with for more than twenty years; it was while working with *Herr Thaddäus*, he says, that he succeeded in working out an algorithm (too complex, he warns, to be illustrated to the uninitiated) that regulates the musical construction, managing to achieve infinite acceleration. This choice is, moreover, intimately connected with the narrated story, which deals precisely with the time that is definitively past and unattainable, if not through a growing tension of imagination and memory.

Although he proclaims that “every artist should commit patricide” (Gmys 54), Mykietyn’s music is situated in the wake of the most famous Polish composers: Lutosławski, Penderecki, Górecki and Szymanowski. What distinguishes him from these “traditional” composers, however, is above all his research into microtonality and his work in the digital and mathematical spheres (we have already mentioned the complicated algorithm that the composer claims to have arrived at in recent times). Mykietyn, as a musicologist Jan Topolski claims, “makes very intelligent use of repetition, incorporating pop or classical elements combined with an extremely dramatic character, which has allowed him to experiment in the widest and most traditional areas [...] avoiding avant-garde nonsense and retro-taste banalities” (Topolski 2019, 127). However, the Olawa musician presents his achievements with a certain understatement:

Human capacities – he said in an interview – are limited. A computer allows me to get inside the pure structure. I am able to obtain a time such that a repeated sound is conceived as continuous. These are values in microseconds, impossible to perform with any instrument. Of course, one could also say: this is not music, it’s just a laboratory exercise (Gmys 2015, 61).

The term of “limitation”, *ograniczenie*, also appears in another of the interview cited by Gmys. Speaking about his transition from postmodern to microtonal neo-tonal poetics, Mykietyn states:

The only parameter I changed was that I started to apply microtonal harmonies and methods, which had a number of consequences, for example I had to retune all the instruments, and new limitations appeared, but, as they say: freedom is found in imitation... (Gmys 2015, 55).

It is certainly no coincidence that Bałka also speaks of limitation when referring to the two sets he created for *Mykietyn*. It was his music, he said on both occasions, that imposed limitations on me. If there is something that unites both artists, it is certainly also the 'ascetic' and minimalist choice made by both of them. An adaptation to the existing space, trying to be in tune with it rather than to colonise or conquer it. A scenographer and professor of theatre at the University of Colorado, Bruce Bergner writes in *The Poetics of Stage Space*: "Those tasked with composing new spaces [i.e., we might add, any artist] should learn to look deeply into existing spaces. They should strive to understand them, to understand how they work, to listen to the stories they tell and see the images they project" (Bergner 2013: 7).

Scenography, so he concludes, is nothing more than the ability to see space (ibid).

Visual artists' commitment for the Opera stage is ancient, going back as far as Raphael, and may even constitute a 'parallel art history'. So, according to a Canadian curator and writer Denise Wendel-Poray, author of the only, to my knowledge, comprehensive treatment of visual artists' participation in Stage Design (Wendel-Poray 2018: 12, 14).

In Poland, Bałka is certainly not the only artist who has designed sets for musical and theatrical performances. In this country, we can name excellent visual artists such as Jonasz Sztern, or Andrzej and Zbigniew Pronaszko, or, a more contemporary artist, Zbigniew Libera. The fundamental experiments of Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor tended towards the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, i.e. a profoundly intermedial artistic product – and we can also mention Adolphe Appia's contemporary, Stanisław Wyspiański, a great example of a total artist. Finally, staying in the Eastern European sphere, where there are still many names to be mentioned, we cannot fail to refer to the Polish/Russian/Ukrainian/Catholic/Jewish/Orthodox artist Kazimir Malevič, who, in his futurist and anti-rationalist musical work of 1913 *Pobeda nad slontsem* – *Victory over the Sun* - showed for the first time his famous black square in the set design, one of the fundamental images in the history and conception of modern art (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/kazimir-malevich-1561/five-ways-look-malevichs-black-square>).

In more recent times, such world-famous architects as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry or Daniel Libeskind have created sets for the Opera. Or, to list just a few of the people interviewed by Wendel Poray: Rebecca Horn, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, William Kentridge, Anselm Kiefer, Bill Viola (Wendel Poray 2018: 388 ff.). Yet, as Pierre Audi, the cosmopolitan director of the Dutch National Opera, writes: “In recent times, artists’ attempts to design for the stage have been few, and infrequent. The rare examples reveal a tension that has not yet been properly accepted, understood, analysed” (Mendel-Poray 2018: 11).

* * *

One might perhaps ask whether there is a specificity of set design for Opera. Perhaps such a possible characteristic should not be sought in technical and structural elements, but in the form of the work itself. Paul Thom, a Professor of Philosophy of the Performing Arts at the University of Sydney, in his contribution to the *Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, dwells on the difficulty of the ontological definition of the form “Opera”, due to its hybrid essence, to its quintessentially intermedial character - although this intermediality was probably only realised from the beginning of the 20th century, thanks to the already mentioned Adolphe Appia (i.e. three centuries after the birth of this form), and has only found its overall theorisation in the last decades (cf. Thom 2011). The elements that must be placed side by side within the Opera form without being confused with one another (cf. e.g. Levinson 1984) contain perhaps a kind of sublimation of our existential coordinates. The music (or music/booklet as it may be) is a reflection on time at its maximum power and rarefaction; while the scenography concerns the perception and sense of space. So, taking this reasoning to its extreme limit, can we say that right here we can find the most potentially complete illustration of the space-time structure of the universe?

* * *

Leonard Bernstein used to say that the construction of an Opera is a perfect metaphor for the construction of democracy. As in Chyra’s description, as in Levinson’s and others’ reflections: the most diverse subjects contribute together to the common construction, accepting also compromises and limitations for the final collective good outcome. If we want to expand this metaphor, we might easily add that the democratic construction cannot fail to involve an indispensable recovery of the figures of trauma and defeat, even today. The Opera installations discussed here propose images that are shared

and sedimented in the discourse and collective memory of the desperation of the trenches and the desperation of immigration, and perhaps participate in their (re)discovery and taking charge of them, beyond and against all rhetoric.

References

- Bergner A.B. (2013). *The Poetics of Stage Space: The Poetics of Stage Space: The Theory and Process of Theatre Scene Design*. Jefferson NC – London: McFarland.
- Bowlit J.E. (1987). *From the Pale of Settlement to the Reconstruction of the World*. In: *Tradition and Revolution Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912–1928*. Ed. R. Apter-Gabrie. Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1987, pp. 43–60.
- Drotkiewicz A. (2015). *Czarodziejska góra: podróż inicjacyjna. Rozmowa z Małgorzatą Sikorską-Miszczuk, “Dwutygodnik” 06.2015*. Online: <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/5994-czarodziejska-gora-podroz-inicjacyjna.html>.
- Gmys M. (2015). *Integration Attempts: Paweł Mykietyn and the Composer’s Self Reflection*. “Musicology Today” 12. Online: <https://sciendo.com/article/10.1515/muso-2015-0006>.
- Handler Spitz E. (1994). *Museums of the Mind*. New Haven – London: Yale University Press.
- Jewish Women in London Group & Swirsky (1989). *Generations of Memories. Voices of Jewish Women*. London: The Women’s Press.
- Kowalczyk I. (2007). *Historia w sztuce współczesnej*. In: *Nowe zjawiska w sztuce polskiej po 2000*. Ed. G. Borkowski, A. Mazur, M. Branicka. Warszawa: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, pp. 25–28.
- Levinson Jerrold. (1984). *Hybrid Art Forms*. “The Journal of Aesthetic Education” n. 4, 18.
- Mickiewicz A. (2018). *Ed. Messer Taddeo*. Trans. it. Silvano De Fanti. Venezia: Marsilio.
- Sural A., Bałka M. (2015). *Kretowisko, upadek i okopy*. Online: <https://culture.pl/pl/artukul/miroslaw-balka-kretowisko-upadek-i-okopy-wywiad>.
- Thom P. (2011). *Authentic Performance Practice*. In: *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*. Ed. Th. Gracyk, A. Kania. London – New York: Routledge, pp. 91–100.
- Topolski J. (2019). *Polish Music of the Last 100 Years: Looking for the Higher Order and Being Lost in Networks*. In: *On the Edge. Culturescapes Poland*.

- Transl. engl. K. Botanova, W. Przybylski. Ed. M. Ajewska. Basel: Culturespaces, pp. 123–132.
- Wendel-Poray D. (2018). *Painting the Stage. Artists as Stage Designers*. Torino: Skira.
- Wicha M. (2021). *Kierunek zwiedzania*. Kraków: Karakter.
- Žižek S., Dolar M. (2002). *Opera's Second Death*. London: Routledge.

Theatre programs

Herr Thaddäus:

https://www.nfm.wroclaw.pl/images/Sezon_2018_2019/MEN_2018/omowienia/7_Mykiety_n_MEN.pdf

Czarodziejska góra / Zauberberg:

<https://malta-festival.pl/public/upload/files/Czarodziejska-gora-libretto-PL.pdf>

HERR THADDEUS – Photos

Caption: Photo by Grzegorz Mart, used thanks to kind support of Delirium-Edition: Organisation for Tomorrow's Art.

CZARODZIEJSKA GÓRA – Photos

Caption: The Magic Mountain, (Paweł Mykiety_n, Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, Andrzej Chyra, Mirosław Bałka), photo by Maciej Zakrzewski, production: Malta Festival Poznań)

Photos available at link: <https://we.tl/t-UO9ECnHIRN>

