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Affective Censorship

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1.

My presentation is more or less a draft of a research project investigating Polish theater as a social institution shaped by affective censorship. As a medium, theater regulates – in a specific manner – the mechanism of such censorship, internalizes it, and instills in the audience an attitude of affirmation towards the means it employs.

As a result of a complex mixture of denial, resistance, and exclusion, theater in Poland created a model of the sublime audience, one which perceived itself as a representation of the national community. The individual experience of the viewer is affectively opened to the experience of communality, a concept that no longer necessarily means a group of spectators gathered to see a specific play.

2.

I would like to present a concept formulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick stipulating that the nineteenth-century homophobic split in the spectrum of male identity (which cleaved it into two mutually exclusive worlds

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– the homosexual and heterosexual one) became a reference point for every other binary opposition shaping the modern human consciousness as my other initial thesis.¹ What is nominally marginal should be central, Sedgwick posits. I would like to test how her hypothesis applies to Polish culture.

The split described by Sedgwick produces a highly effective form of censorship, and one with a highly pronounced capability to mask its own procedures, making it a censorship with low social visibility, one that the audience should not and does not want to see. This is facilitated by the contradiction, diagnosed by Sedgwick, between minority and universalist approaches to homosexuality. One entails radical exclusion and sharp delineations within the spectrum of sexual identity, while the other makes the delineations invisible and purges them of meaning. This, in turn, enables one to equate discrimination with tolerance.

To many a reader, Sedgwick's hypothesis seems risky and exaggerated, but the validity of the concept located at the heart of *Epistemology of the Closet* will be evident to anyone conscious of the fact that it is the homophobic split itself that outlines national identity in the broadest strokes or may even be – as claimed by Sarah Ahmed – the condition of its existence.

We tend to assume that the Jew is a radical figure of the Other in Polish culture. It is, however, a figure endowed with a considerable degree of social visibility. The public's attitudes towards Jewish people have been a subject of public discussion since the Enlightenment. Those attitudes have driven major social and cultural shifts, served as a foundation for attempts to create more open and tolerant societies, and established notions of nationhood based around ethnic Polishness; the historical process of Jewish assimilation has irrevocably changed the shape of Polish culture. All the while, anti-Semitism and the struggle against it divides society, produces overt social and ideological conflicts, and determines the dynamics of many a debate.

The opposite is true of the figure of the homosexual – in this instance, a much broader communal interest advocates its wholesale exclusion or expulsion from the community. Although, to quote Bożena Umińska, after the Jews were annihilated in the Holocaust, “only gays and lesbians remain genuine minorities in Poland.”² A minority, we should quickly add, that has mastered the art of concealment and one that the majority of society considers to be a clinical and criminalized fringe. Krzysztof Tomasiak writes

1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Berkeley University Press, 1990).

2 Bożena Umińska, “Wojna z lesbijkami i gejami,” *Przegląd* 24 (2004), as quoted in Błażej Warkocki, “Biedni Polacy patrzą na homoseksualistów,” in *Homofobia po polsku*, ed. Zbyszek Sypniewski and Błażej Warkocki (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2004), 168.

that “Polishness and homosexuality are mutually exclusive,”³ while Bartosz Żurawiecki decided to title his essay on the situation of homosexuals in Poland “The Non-Existent Other.”⁴ The most overt dissection of that particular exclusion can be found in Witold Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk*. In the novel, the homosexual desire threatening the integrity of the Polish community is embodied by Gonzalo, a foreigner. Since 1981, the novel has been adapted for the stage twenty-seven times in Poland alone. However, the adaptations eventually deepened the homophobic split, colorfully playing the phantasmal figure of the homosexual foreigner and thus reinforcing social stereotypes and clichés with regard to the behavior of gay people. Rather than undermining the narrow-mindedness of communality so as to include the figure into Polish culture, these adaptations of *Trans-Atlantyk* affectively brought the communal emotions to a boil. The first step, however, has been made: the figure has been endowed with a degree of visibility on stage. Simultaneously, however, burgeoning social phobias associated with the spread of AIDS and police operations targeting gays such as Operation Hyacinth drastically reduced the social visibility of the Polish gay community in the 1980s.

It is difficult to even imagine Polish theater receiving the same treatment that the London and New York stages were subjected to in Nicolas de Jongh’s *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*.⁵ Twentieth-century British theater and British drama turned out to be very open to representations of homosexuality, despite the fact that Britain had laws criminalizing homosexual activity up until the 1960s. In turn, Poland, although boasting more relaxed moral laws, established much more efficient forms of censorship – affective, rather than governmental, which drastically reduced its permeability. Therefore the investigation of “homosexuality on stage” in our own backyard has required a wholly different set of tools.

3.

The term “affective censorship” implies that there exists an emotional component to the effort, making it somewhat similar to a “crime of passion,” justifying it and absolving its enforcers. Is affective censorship a crime? We are not aware of all its victims, but there are definitely more of them than we

3 Krzysztof Tomasiak, *Gejeler. Mniejszości seksualne w PRL-u* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 319.

4 Bartosz Żurawiecki, “O tym, którego nie ma,” in *Homofobia po polsku*, 183–187.

5 Nicolas de Jongh, *Not in Front of the Audience. Homosexuality on Stage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

know of. Polish culture's lack of consent for the creation of positive models of homosexuality definitely had a devastating influence on the lives of many people. In the face of such violence, Polish theater found itself in a unique position. On the one hand, theater circles were commonly associated with an overabundance of gays and as such were considered a safe and tolerant space. On the other hand, any expression of homosexual desire on stage was conditional upon the artists' capability to universalize it. In this regard, examination of the performances of Henryk Tomaszewski and the stage presence of Erwin Nowiaszak, an actor with the Polish Theater in Wrocław,⁶ would certainly yield interesting results. In the theater world, the violence of social homophobia was subject to complex mediation processes, producing something of a purloined letter effect – its foremost placement making it invisible. Although subject to affective censorship, the theater was simultaneously proof that its enforcement was not unconditional.

Sigmund Freud would say that censorship is always affective. It works precisely thanks to the work of affect, because affect can shift freely between different representations, supporting some while isolating others. However, censorship not only utilizes affect, it serves as the foundation of its eventual liberation. For Freud, affect is always primevally linked with a repressed representation. Accessing it, however, is never unmediated; the primal scene cannot be recalled; it has to be reconstructed. And the veracity of the resulting construct is verified only on the basis of the affective reaction it elicits. In Freud's writings, the primal scene is always marked by sexual violence – establishing a law and breaking it in the same instance. Therefore, censorship is linked with sexuality, and linked even closer with homosexuality; the relationship, however, does not entail censoring sexual notions. Rather, it is based around the fact that sexuality uncovers censorship and its enforcement, while homosexuality unmarks the reasons behind its covert nature.⁷

We may say that censorship is affective in nature. Borrowing the notion of censorship from politics, Freud then completely changed its

6 Erwin Nowiaszak (1932-1990), actor with with Polish Theater in Wrocław from 1963 to 1990. Played gay characters in a handful of movies, performed on stage in Henryk Tomaszewski's and Jerzy Grzegorzewski's plays. Often played strangers, foreigners, demonic characters, overtly transgender characters. Photographs are a much better testament to his specific stage presence than reviews: his facial expressions, make-up, costumes, gestures, and attitude towards fellow actors on stage, clearly demonstrate that elements of gay culture found their way into Polish public theater.

7 An exemplary model can be found in Freud's analysis of the "Wolf Man," wherein the homosexual variant of the Oedipal scenario becomes a hypothesis that is impossible to verify either empirically or psychologically. Sigmund Freud, *The Case of the Wolf-Man: From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* (San Francisco: Arion Press, 1993).

understanding and implications. As explained by Michael G. Levine, censorship as understood by Freud cannot be placed in either time or space,⁸ nor can it be captured *in statu nascendi* – it leaves behind nothing but traces of itself despite its tendency to fully conceal its own efforts. Affect has a similarly virtual nature.

When writing about censorship, Freud often invokes theater metaphors. Rather than portray censorship as a border guarded by vigilant sentries, he depicts censorship as a force that is repressive yet creative, a force that can drive the creation of new notions and set the stage. Censorship becomes staging.⁹

4.

Defined by Freud in theatrical categories, censorship reveals one other crucial characteristic: trans-historicity. In this particular instance, we are dealing with a protracted durational effect. The figures affiliated with the superego – the ones that hold sway over the stage that is consciousness – represent parents and caregivers, that is values that the ego treats with respect even though they may be considered anachronistic by society. Thus, the superego furnishes internalized intergenerational communications. “Our lives are never fully entrenched in just the present,” concludes Freud. Therefore, employing the concept of “mass psychology” is valid only insofar as it is shaped by the structural similarity between superegos of individuals brought up within the same cultural circles.

In the context of Polish culture, the influence of censorship in the trans-historical sense is heavily linked with an opposition against modernization. Therefore, Sedgwick’s concerns that no aspect of modernity can be comprehensively examined without a critical analysis of the sharp dichotomy between homo- and heterosexuality should be seriously considered by all scholars interested in investigating Polish culture.

The concept of affective censorship enables us to break the deadlock stemming from overexposure to historical determinants. In analyses drafted back in the Polish People’s Republic, censorship was often equated with institutions of state control which, in turn, obfuscated the degree to which censorship carried out the wishes of the society in general and cooperated with other, ostensibly competing, centers of power, such as the Church or

8 Michael G. Levine, “Freud and the Scene of Censorship,” in *The Administration of Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Burt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

9 Sigmund Freud, “Wykład XXIX. Rewizja marzenia sennego” and “Wykład XXXI. Rozszczepienie osobowości psychicznej,” in *Wykłady ze wstępu do psychoanalizy. Nowy cykl*, trans. Robert Reszke (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 2009), 7-24, 45-62.

opposition groups. In a 1976 report to Minister Kazimierz Kąkol, the state's religious affairs director, a representative of the Polish Church, Bishop Bronisław Dąbrowski, expressly stated that Jerzy Grotowski's *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* is an "apotheosis of homosexuality" which threatens the welfare of the entire nation. The bishop's concerns were met with understanding and full agreement on the minister's part.¹⁰ It took Polish theater scholars much longer to arrive at the conclusion that Grotowski's play gives voice to homosexual desires than it took the bishop (Agata Adameicka-Sitek's excellent analysis of *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* revealing that fact was published by *Didaskalia* only in 2012).¹¹

After 1989, censorship became attached to the neoliberal system, thus obscuring the fact that neoliberal economic censorship simply supports desires espoused by the majority of society. The neoliberal system is not a particular proponent of censorship itself, but employs it whenever its economic interests are threatened. Criticism unfolding along these lines fails to consider the psychosocial dynamics of acts of censorship. Leftist analyses of censorship (Ewa Majewska's publications, for example)¹² are thus caught in a very specific aporia. The nature of this aporia is laid bare by the stature that Chantal Mouffe has in Polish left-leaning circles. The struggle against censorship targeting minorities cannot go against the emancipatory pursuits of the majority, the latter defined as a group mistreated by the neoliberal system. For example, the "Kissing Doesn't Kill" campaign, launched in New York City by the Gran Fury Collective in 1989 and aimed at subduing the panic surrounding the AIDS epidemic, Mouffe considered an example of "a strategy of the subversive re-appropriation of the dominant forms of communication"¹³ in the struggle against neoliberal hegemony, thus completely obfuscating the real political objective of the campaign. Mouffe emphasizes that it is necessary for the left to employ populist slogans, she accepts the accommodation of nationalist and religious values, insofar as they are representative of the majority. This approach to leftist ideology is espoused by theater directors Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski, their work intent on unmasking those secret alliances between

10 Jakub Dąbrowski, *Cenzura w sztuce polskiej po 1989 roku. Artyści, sztuka i polityka* (Warszawa: Fundacja Kultura Miejsca, 2014), vol. 2:119-120.

11 Agata Adameicka-Sitek, "Grotowski, kobiety i homoseksualiści. Na marginesach «dramatu człowieczego»," *Didaskalia* 112 (2012): 94-105.

12 Ewa Majewska, *Sztuka jako pozór? Cenzura i inne paradoksy upolitycznienia kultury* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!Art, 2013).

13 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 144.

all sorts of minorities and the neoliberal system, the latter always preying on the national majority; thus, their plays equate censorship and the principles of political correctness, imposed upon the national community of the “exploited” by the emancipatory pursuits of the minorities.

6.

The final aspect of my research project pertains to queer studies’ methods of conceptualizing the so-called structural censorship, acting through affective enforcement of cultural norms rather than through specific political institution. I would like to tentatively outline three distinct models of said censorship.

The first, rather widely internalized in Poland, was put forward by Judith Butler.¹⁴ Butler formulates an assumption that I consider crucial: censorship is a product of speech, rather than the silencing of speech. Accordingly, no text can be fully censored or uncensored. Butler’s approach allows structural censorship to be countered by representatives of discriminated sexual minorities interfering with powerful performative utterances constituting the normative majority. Her postulate, however, has two inherent weaknesses. Firstly, it deprives minorities of their own individual culture and language through overemphasis of strategies based around appropriation, repetition, paraphrase, and catachresis. Thus the drag queen is the central figure of her political program. Secondly, such a transgressive strategy requires the subject to possess considerable cultural and social capital and excludes many representatives of minorities from political activism.

The second model can be found in the work of Sara Ahmed.¹⁵ Ahmed undermines Butler’s transgressive ideas and incorporates into the body of queer behavior many attitudes that other queer theorists consider “insufficiently queer.” She does not believe censorship to be a line separating the excluder and the excluded, but rather a circulation of affects that orient themselves towards certain objects, while avoiding others. She wonders what affective circulations facilitate the constitution of a nation – one encompassing such a large community – as the subject and object of emotions. Ahmed also points out that social norms are shaped not only by power, but also by emotion. The latter infuse these norms with a sheen of naturalness that establishes a relationship between the concepts of nation

14 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

15 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

and heteronormativity, a relationship founded upon the principle of biological and cultural reproduction. This is precisely why Ahmed does not advocate for the incorporation of queer subjects into the national community, the latter considered a specific form of affect circulation. Politically speaking, the struggle is not supposed to culminate in the integration of the minority into the community, but rather in the endowment of the minority with the right to the uninhibited expression of their desires and feelings in the public sphere. Ahmed criticizes American LGBT circles for their outspoken participation in nationwide mourning after 9/11 and their ignorance of the fact that their acceptance into the national community in this period was merely conditional and trauma induced. She claims instead that minorities need to obtain the right to mourn and that parties whose affective orientation runs counter to the orientation of the nation towards which they manifest fellowship are more or less pointless.

The third model is represented by Michael Warner¹⁶ and his concept of the public and counterpublic. The contemporary perception of public space, Warner explains, quoting Benedict Anderson, was established through the circulation of texts that presume strangers to share the same values and norms, taking part in the production of normativity. The ideological appropriation of public space entails the imposition of community effects on circles of indefinite recipients. Thus, Warner provides us with a range of excellent tools with which to deconstruct the ideologeme of the Polish theater audience, seeing that Polish theater equates – linguistically, at least – the audience with public, and then of public with the public.

Different forms of counterpublic life are also very specific forms of public life, the former defined by Warner as overly embodied and sexualized, valuing performance over text and thus conflicting with the dominant public space. Although bearing all the characteristics of that which is public, the two differ in circulation range. “Speech that addresses any participant as queer will circulate up to a point, where it is certain to meet intense resistance.” Whereas speech taking place in public space always presumes its own universality and erases the groups that resist it. Thus, Warner describes two sides of the same barrier restricting texts and performances which I termed “affective censorship.” On one side, this is recognized and felt, while on the other, it remains invisible and imperceptible. The counterpublic, however, is not marginalized in public discourse; rather it sets up its stages in places it considers comfortable and, depending on the circumstances, either enjoys the privileges of invisibility or fights for visibility.

16 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

Ahmed's and Warner's concepts seem to me to be especially effective tools with which to deconstruct the ideological construct that the theater has become in Polish culture – as a national, public, or repertory institution. We will have to remember, however, that the presence of the counterpublic in Polish public theater – due to abovementioned reasons – will be detectable only in the traces that affective censorship has left behind.

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