Secret theatre

*Off-the-grid performance practices in socialist Poland and Czechoslovakia*

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Concluding Notes

This study started out by asking if a certain kind of projects can be examined as imaginary spaces. I identified four case studies and proposed that they can be interpreted as imaginary micro-worlds which appear due to alterations to the familiar environment. The case studies, two Polish and two Czech, were projects undertaken in socialist-era Poland and Czechoslovakia between 1956 - 1989. In chronological order, these were: the Theatre on Tarczyńska Street (1955–1958, Warsaw), the Separate Theatre (1958–1963, Warsaw), Footprint on the Window (1973–1975, Brno) and the Pataphysics Collegiate of Teplice (1980–1986, Teplice). The first three, addressed in Chapter 2, were cases of groups who met in private apartments, staging performances or poetry readings with theatrical elements. The Pataphysics Collegiate, discussed in Chapter 3, set up events in public places, such as a town bus or a park.

I provided a definition of and historical context for deterritorialized places – or, as Alexei Yurchak more precisely calls them in the Russian version of his study on the subject, places of vnenahodimost – which are spaces that occurred as a result of the performative shift that took place within the societal system of the late Soviet Union and the countries under its influence. This shift enabled events and entire lifestyles that neither participated in the socialist system nor went against it either; in other words, these new spaces were outside of the system, or deterritorialized. I then investigated these deterritorialized spaces as theatre performances taking place in private homes. That is to say, the combination of an inherently public activity (theatre) and a private space (home) created a heterotopical place that was not easily categorizable and therefore not straightforwardly included in the system. I concluded the study with an analysis of deterritorialized places outside the domestic space, where an ironic intervention into a public space set-up temporary cases of defamiliarization and ambiguity. In these Concluding Notes, I would like to address the wider implications of this study as
well as the prospects for future research.

To approach my case studies, I constructed a methodological framework around Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia along with Alexei Yurchak's work on deterritorialization/vnenahodimost. In addition, I involved a number of other concepts and theories, such as strange places (Heczková, Svatohová), abstract space (Lefebvre) or imaginary worlds (Wolf). Some of these ideas, especially Yurchak's, are imbedded in the history of the Soviet Union, namely in the period starting with Stalin's death in 1953 up to the dissolution of USSR in 1991. As such, studies that rely on Yurchak's terminology tend to focus on the understanding of the Soviet experiment (Fainberg, Kalinovsky:2016, Fürst:2017). However, this project is not primarily a contribution to the Soviet debate. By relying on a combination of historically anchored theoretical notions and concepts from other disciplines, such as cognitive studies (Turner) or philosophy (Foucault, Bachelard, Lefebvre), this study sought to bridge several type of analysis. The central aim of this study was to test how historically rooted concepts can be used in combination with notions of other disciplines to build a trans-disciplinary and cross-cultural approach.

My findings and the interpretation of my case studies as imaginary micro-worlds allow me to transplant Yurchak's terminology to a different scholarly discussion: that of otherworlds or imaginary worlds. These notions come from a wide range of disciplines. For instance, an otherworld is a term from medieval literary studies (Byrne:2016) while imaginary worlds (Wolf:2014) originates in literature but is also applied to analysis of other cultural phenomena, such as computer games. I propose that it is possible to use an analysis of projects like Theatre on Tarczyńska to answer an entirely different set of questions about how human imagination works and how we collectively construct and uphold our realities. This can be achieved by going outside of a historically rooted analysis and thus gaining access to a wider network of conceptual frameworks. For example, in her work on otherworlds in medieval literature, Aisling Byrne explores the building blocks on imaginary realms. One of these, according to her analysis, is what she calls pseudo-mimesis and it refers to detailed descriptions of imaginary environments that create “an illusion that what they are describing might actually exist.”381 Pseudo-mimesis involves detailed descriptions of small, minute details of a landscape or a world that, according to Byrne, serve no apparent narrative function – she calls such descriptions “ornamental”382 and compares them to what Roland Barthes called “insignificant notation.”383 In other words, Byrne's notion of pseudo-mimesis illustrates the importance of non-narrative elements in believable world-building. This can be related to Mark Turner's work on how humans construct environments. I discussed this in some detail in the Introduction and in Chapter 2, pointing out the cognitive significance of non-narrative aspects of reality to how we forge self-identities.

This dissertation demonstrated theoretical, historical and empirical approaches towards largely unknown (to an English-speaking reader) performance projects. In this way, it has contributed a new page to theatre and performance studies. In addition, this study opened opportunities for other kinds of encounters – for instance, that between theory and artistic practice. This dissertation laid groundwork for practical research projects geared towards the understanding of imaginary space construction. Over the course of this study, I have focused on imaginary spaces not only from a theoretical standpoint but also on their use in performance. To this end, I have explored (and am exploring still), the role of gaps and misinterpretations in human perception, which are necessary for our ability to imagine.

381 Byrne:2016, 31
382 Byrne:2016, 30
383 ibid
In practice, such analysis relies on the imagination of a group to create a space that exists in the mind of the participants and then to overlay that imaginary space over the real one. For example, in May 2016, I conducted a workshop with professional actors in Oporto, Portugal. In an hour-long session, I have asked the participants to explore a previously unknown space. The participants were asked to keep their eyes closed for the duration of the experiment. The space was an attic of a large house. None of the participants have visited the space before. I led them into the space one by one and lightly navigated them, with minimum interference but ensuring their safety, through the hour. I then led them out, one by one. During the second part of this session, I gave each participant a differently colored marker and asked them to draw a map of the place they have just explored. The resulting map is a space that does not exist – it is a blend of the sensory memories of each of the participants (Fig 4.1).

In other words, this study offers possibilities to further develop a practical body of work which seeks to create heterotopical milieus through performance. In addition, this study has also inspired the creation of a yearly international symposium, which I have conducted in Prague since 2017, and a body of practical research in heterotopical acting techniques, which I am developing within the Centre for Aliiative Research (CenAR)³⁸⁴, an independent organization I founded in 2009. Both of these initiatives present venues for future research to which this project is foundational.

³⁸⁴Www.aliatology.com