

# From Mirrors to Kaleidoscopes: The Possibilities of Shaping Value-based Discourse in a World of Relative Values

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**Abstract:** This contribution reflects on the possibility of setting up value-based criteria, as well as evaluation itself, in a postmodern context. Drawing on the theses of Walter Benjamin, the contribution points out the loss of the auratic dimension of art and theatre in the postmodern context as well as the loss of modernist engagement. It questions Francis Fukuyama's thesis about "the end of history" and reflects on current forms of theatre practice that contain residues of, or a potential return to, a modernist programme. The contribution leaves open the question of how much the departure points of postmodernist poetics have been exhausted today, and/or whether one could speak of a return once again to the idea-based departure points of modernism.

**Key words:** modernism, postmodernism, Walter Benjamin, Francis Fukuyama, "end of history", values, evaluation, engagement

In what is surely one of the most frequently quoted texts dealing with the essence and mission of theatre, Shakespeare's Hamlet says: "Anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure..." Shakespeare's metaphor of a mirror becomes a synecdoche of mimesis construed by the spirit of the Renaissance in Aristotle's understanding; art is based on mimesis, that is imitation and a presentation of sensory objectification, however, not of ideas, as Plato claimed, but as mimesis of reality. Moving art from the low intellectual level, lower than nature itself, where Plato put it (mimesis as the art of imitating nature, and nature being only the representation of ideas), Aristotle attributes tragedy with an important social and mental position, reflecting it as a cathartic phenomenon which provides man with a repeating ideal production of the inner juices, harmonic accord, and thus also a more objective view of the world. This is the beginning of a journey where theatre experienced different views of its status in society:

it was given the attribute of having a moral and dogmatic function, of being a didactic tool in relation to science as being an inferior instrument that could present life and the world even to the common man. However, it was also assigned the task of carrying ideologies, being a war instrument, and a critic of individual and social ailments; it was given the task of being a moral institution of nations as well as being an entertainment tool all the way to the status of a sovereign artwork whose primary task was to follow its aesthetic function and push any other functions to the background.

From the times of agon until the 20th century, theatre was a space in which the imperative of reflecting on “nature, showing its beauty to virtue, ugliness to malice, its true image and imprint to the time...” was part and parcel of the understanding of its essence, mission, and task in man’s social world. It is a space that highlights the decline of values, morals, and the humanity of man or community, naming the need to reject a value system, thematizing the atavism or deviation of values, and calls for the establishment of a new framework of values, a new value pyramid, pattern, or set of ideals. Whenever the audience applauds, interrupting a production at the very moment when an actor says that notoriously known value observation – that something is rotten in the state of Denmark – every prime minister should realize it is now time to sacrifice one of his ministers. Just like when Nora decides to leave the family hearth, society has two options: either to make a discussion about the state of the family in the community or simply ban the theatrical play. Alfred de Vigny raised the issue of poetic freedom and the position of the poet in society in *Chatterton*, while Friedrich Schiller showed the non-productive, morally perverse, corrupt and disintegrating feudal system in late 18th-century Germany (his effort was also honoured by an honorary citizenship of the French Revolution); theatre mocked and pilloried the values of one or the other religious confession, calling for revolutionary values before it demanded peace.

However, it is generally known that the problem of Western culture arose in the 20th century as a change of the social and cultural paradigm occurred when artists and later also philosophers, aestheticians, and others raised the question of the end of modernism and the onset of a postmodern situation and discourse. I wish to forgo the resolve to more broadly explicate the incentives underlying the origination of postmodernism and the postmodernist feeling about the world, as well as its expressions in various areas of Western culture (and/or its transgression into a context outside of the Euro-Atlantic civilization), and instead focus only on those moments of the post-

modern situation that are related to the question of values and evaluation. In something of a generalization, there is often an assumption that the post-modern period introduced the concept of radical pluralization and essential questioning of the value system on which Western values had rested for centuries: starting with the critique of Eurocentrism, through the critique of logocentrism, from a broadly construed relativization of the spiritual and cultural tradition, all the way to the rejection of the teleological concept of history, culture, and generally any development or progress. The turning point that occurred in Western culture in the last decades of the 20th century was essential and allowed the presentation of a metaphorical opposition of the two previous epochs – modernism and postmodernism – already by the end of the century. Instead of intellectual and elitist modernism, postmodernism appeared to be more mainstream: there was male and female postmodernism, and leftist and neoconservative postmodernism. Friedrich Nietzsche's work in the postmodern period, just like a large portion of other cultural phenomena, is continuously recycled and acquires a new dimension along the lines of a postmodernist perception of his ideas about the death of God, or the death of *homo religiosus*, his meditations about the need of a reassessment of values, his critique of Christian morality in favour of the Dionysian principle, and so on. Similarly, Nietzsche's late 19th-century statement that our culture is no longer capable of identifying what is high and what is low acquires new levels of argumentation in a postmodern context. Western man seems to have lost certainty about what is his value and his non-value. In a remote echo of Nietzsche's theses, one can also reflect on the impulses coming from other theorists dealing with issues of modernism and postmodernism: Hermann Broch believes that the disintegration of values occurred because of a loss of religious centralism that established the conditions for the shaping of a system of values. A similar statement can be found in Begin's thesis that a loss of common axioms (social and ideological) occurred, which consequently led to the impossibility of creating a hierarchy of values. Artaud's assumption that evaluation is possible only in the context of religious eras is directly inspired by Nietzsche's attitudes to the death of God and by the appeals to reassess all values.

In an environment of broadly conceived pluralism, on a democratic socio-political level as well as within a framework of a universal questioning of certainties declared by the Enlightenment tradition, which Western culture was based on until the period between the two world wars, the postmodern situation has produced a feeling of definitive reconciliation and non-

problematic coexistence of as broad a range of art and cultural phenomena as possible.

Theatre also ceases to be a space in which values (negative as well as positive) are presented and is no longer “a mirror of nature”; it becomes a fragmented and pluralist kaleidoscope. If postmodernism has announced the end of big ideological narratives, why should the stage show any struggle against condemnable values and affirmatively present new values? Once Francis Fukuyama told us that we had reached the end of history, that is, we had already discovered the best history could have shown us, we no longer needed to discover anything new. The theatre has been also presenting this thesis: it has ceased addressing potential dilemmas because, as Fukuyama assumes, there is no place for dilemmas. Just like in the social and cultural sphere, in theatre we can also only enjoy the feeling that we have reached the end of the road, and are “alive and well”, with no personal harm, and that we can now, until Judgement Day, indulge in the fruits of the deserved *dolce far niente*. We will forever only recycle old stories, with no extra radical attitude, because there is no place for new, original attitudes in the postmodern situation. Originality was a matter of the now overcoming modernism, it was a part of the modernist programme that spoke of the need for permanent progress. What do we need progress for now that we have reached the end of our journey? When no more development is possible, when the only thing we can do today (and it is part of our programming too) is to turn back to our rich history and choose from it, quote or paraphrase from it, recycle it over and over again, recycle anything, ideally everything?

Postmodernist art, including postmodern theatre, has lost its auratic essence that Walter Benjamin spoke of – the essence that was once part of modernist art. Along the line of Benjamin’s finding that modern culture is auratic, that is, “it creates around itself an aura of uniqueness and non-recurrence, which distinguishes it from the ordinariness of everyday social life”<sup>1</sup>, we can concur that postmodernist culture is non-auratic. The aura of uniqueness and non-recurrence was broken by the onset of mass culture which, according to Benjamin, resulted in the fading of the aura of both modern art and culture. This fading of aura, along Benjamin’s argumentation, is caused mostly by the mass media and “a market of cultural commodities that adds and adjusts everything that was once auratic, intended

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1 BENJAMIN, W. *Dílo a jeho zdroj*. Praha : Odeon, 1979, pp. 21–22.

for elites only”<sup>2</sup>. The mass media blurred the lines between high and popular culture, between professional and popular criticism, and between the author and the work.<sup>3</sup>

Some production forms created in the context of postmodern theatre, however, raise the question of whether such expressions represent a transgression between professional and popular culture (that is, the impact of mass media attacking what was rather auratic, as described by Benjamin) or whether they are just residues of modernist programmes. These forms might include diverse theatre productions featuring non-professional actors, often people from social peripheries, such as homeless people who offer the search for so-called “authentic emotionality”, or productions presented in non-theatrical, often very authentic spaces, or even documentary drama scripts created based on authentic testimonies of various communities (again, frequently from marginalized social groups).

We are aware that such theatrical expressions differ from productions made in what seems to follow the main line of postmodernist poetics. Their principal otherness lies in their degree of engagement: as if being again on the line of the modernist need to protect human dignity and execute the imperative of the progressive quest for a more just world, these productions seem to be unwilling to reconcile with the attitude that everything has been said, that everything is absolutely all right, that nothing needs to be done, that there is no need for any engagement, because we have reached the end of the road and have regained Paradise – which is exactly what the postmodernist idea is inferring. Are productions of this type a new kind of rebellion announcing to the world that we are no longer in Paradise, or not at the end of any road, but that we are on a road which is equally as long as man’s stay on Earth?

Did such productions discover that the postmodern situation was a dead-end street, at the end of which we are doomed to wait for our own end in numbing inactivity, and that the only way to escape this sweet embrace of death, the only way out of inactivity, is to once again open our eyes and discover all things in a new definition, to again rename good and evil, to call anomaly what it is, to say that perspective is perspective, to distinguish value from non-value and once again find “what is high and what is low”.

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2 Ibid.

3 HUBÍK, S. *Postmoderní kultura. Úvod do problematiky*. Olomouc : Mladé Umění k Lidem, 1991, p. 47.

Looking at the issue this way, it is no longer important whether such an attitude is a residue of modernism or a transgression of postmodernism. Theatre has to reflect on the question of whether some authors remained firmly anchored to modernist positions in the belief that this world would always offer something to reflect in theatre and using artistic means, while simultaneously assuming a value-based position. Other authors, after leaving the modernist programme and succumbing to the careless luxury of the postmodernist poetic programme, then became traitors a second time over and, like little beasts, opened their eyes just to return to modernism, which they betrayed because of their vision of prosperity. A cynic would say that it is a negation of a negation, which is – as is well known – something natural and inevitable in the dialectical sequence.

Nonetheless, we should still review another issue that emerges in relation to the engagement of the period of modernism and postmodernism – an issue demonstrated by Dubravka Oraić Tolić who used very suggestive examples. Tolić is a theorist who has pointed out that there is an essential difference between modernist and postmodernist engagement:

“The modernist engagement was large and passionate, just like the ideas on behalf of which it occurred. Zola was arrested because of his ‘J’accuse’. Pound was locked up in a cage for promoting Mussolini’s regime; Sartre was torn because of ethical issues related to the theory and praxis of communism.”<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the postmodernist engagement is essentially different. It could be said that it is salon-based, incapable of self-sacrifice, commenting on issues from the secure distance of private study; Tolić demonstrates this using examples from the Yugoslavian conflict of the 1990s:

“War on the territory of former Yugoslavia also introduced the character of the modern, engaged intellectual. However, it was no longer a living person, but only his shadow – a simulation of the formerly ardent carrier of big ideas. At the outset of the war, French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut defended the position of Croatia being the victim, Susan Sontag went to Sarajevo to manifest her solidarity with the besieged city, Jean Baudrillard uttered his legend-

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4 ORAIĆ TOLIĆ, D. *Muška moderna i ženska postmoderna. Rođenje virtualne kulture*. Zagreb : Naklada Ljevak, p. 183.

ary statement that Europe had died in Sarajevo... And finally, when the war rolled away to Bosnia and Herzegovina and become 'entangled', the engagement slacked and intellectuals shrugged everything off, trying to equalize all involved parties, until they lost any interest in this issue."<sup>5</sup>

Are we still living in postmodern times, in an end-of-history period, in which we have once again found our lost paradise, or do the numerous movements at a social level across the Western world (from refugees, through "Brexit", threats of war conflicts in various parts of the world, all the way to the growth of right-wing radicalism, religious radicalism, permanent impoverishment and a geopolitical redefinition of borders) force us to perceive our world as an unfinished chapter that has not, and probably never will, discover the best of all possible worlds?

Optimists will surely say that if we have sobered up after the postmodernist carnival of the late 20th century, all we can do now is to look for and discover values and re-establish a value system. But is it possible? Can we do this in what Lipovetsky calls "the era of emptiness"? In a "burnt-out society" as Byung-Chul Han calls our times? Or, how Budan puts it, on the move "from a society without hope towards hope without a society", and "either having a future without society or having a society without future"? Is this even possible, if our society is tired, as Chekhov described its values?

What has to happen to give a postmodern intellectual once again the position of social commitment, despite sacrificing oneself, and not the position of political kitsch?

Can we still be enraptured by the image of a struggle for some kind of value presented on stage, or will we, like Ranevskaya in a bittersweet nostalgia for a golden age, suffering from migraines, in a sentimental melancholy and a theatrical gesture, slip away to join some imposturous, new love in our version of Paris?

*Translated by Ivan Lacko*

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5 Ibid, pp. 183–184.

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**Biography:**

**Michal Babiak** is an Associate Professor at the Department of Aesthetics, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava, and at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Arts Academy in Banská Bystrica. His studies and scholarly articles in the field of literary science, aesthetics, and theatre studies have been published in Slovak and international journals and collections. He has prepared some of the dramatic work by Jozef Podhradský, Štefan Petruš, and Vladimír Hurban Vladimírov for publication. He is the author of *Tri scenáre* [Three Scripts] (1997), *Literatúra a kontext* [Literature and Context] (1999), *Drámy 2* [Drama 2] (2008), and *Spomínanie medzi bytím a zabúdaním* [Remembering Between Being and Forgetting] (2009). In 2011, his aesthetic studies and essays entitled *Anabasis* were published in Nadlak. He also works as director and dramaturge in professional drama and opera theatres in Bratislava, Banská Bystrica, Zvolen, Košice, Žilina, and Trnava as well as in Serbian theatres.

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