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## FROM POPULISM TO POP-ARCHEOLOGY: PERFORMING POPULAR CULTURE ON THE STAGE OF LITHUANIAN THEATRE

**Summary.** There has been a proliferation of studies on popular culture (or vacillating terms such as *mass culture*, *culture for the masses*, *culture industry*, *media culture*) that interpret/investigate the popular as cultural construction – something ‘staged’ rather than ‘natural’ or ‘given’. According to Nestor Garcia Canclini, three currents play the major role in this ‘theatricalization’ of the popular: folklore (as invented traditions), the culture industry, and political populism. Performance can play an important part in all three spheres; however, the main question is how it deals with the popular – by reconstructing and multiplying its images, narratives and identities, by appropriating or by challenging and deconstructing them. If we understand various forms of popular culture as “imaginary stagings of the social,” theatre which forms a tense, interrogative relationship with the popular can become the platform for investigation of the means by which our perception of reality is constructed and new models of identification are produced. Furthermore, there are quite a number of examples in contemporary Lithuanian theatre where combining and contrasting the elements of popular culture / dramatic discourse / personal narratives produce a multiple network of representations that accurately reveal the hidden power struggles of contemporary society as well as various mechanisms of manipulation. On the other hand, contemporary theatre can very easily become part of the popular culture by choosing to mirror its language and to comply with the rules of popularity.

In this paper, the author examines the ways in which the popular culture has been represented (re-contextualization, ironic interpretation, critical deconstruction, or mimetic mirroring) on the stage of post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre, at the same time addressing the larger issues about the political and social implications of these particular stagings of the popular.

**Keywords:** popular culture, mass culture, theatre, Lithuanian theatre.

There has been a proliferation of studies on popular culture (or vacillating terms such as *mass culture*, *culture for the masses*, *culture industry*, *media culture*) that interpret/investigate the ‘popular’ as cultural construction – something ‘staged’ rather than ‘natural’ or ‘given’. According to Nestor Garcia Canclini, three currents play the major role in this ‘theatricalization’ of the popular: folklore (as invented traditions), the culture industry, and political populism.<sup>1</sup> Performance can play an important part in all three spheres; however, the main question is how it deals with the popular – by reconstructing and multiplying its images, narratives and identities, by appropriating or by challenging and deconstructing them. If we understand various forms of popular culture as “imaginary stagings of the social,”<sup>2</sup> theatre which forms a tense, interrogative relationship with

the popular can become the platform for investigation of the means by which our perception of reality is constructed and new models of identification are produced. Furthermore, there are quite a number of examples in contemporary Lithuanian theatre where combining and contrasting the elements of popular culture / dramatic discourse / personal narratives produce a multiple network of representations that accurately reveal the hidden power struggles of contemporary society as well as various mechanisms of manipulation. On the other hand, contemporary theatre can very easily become a part of the popular culture by choosing to mirror its language and to comply with the rules of popularity.

In this paper, I examine the ways in which the popular culture has been represented (re-contextualization, ironic interpretation, critical deconstruction,

or mimetic mirroring) on the stage of post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre, at the same time addressing the larger issues about the political and social implications of these particular stagings of the popular.

To begin with, one has to define the term 'popular' which according to many researchers, "has no univocal meaning as a scientific concept"<sup>3</sup> but rather the ambiguous value of a theatrical notion that is "historically variable and always in part constructed by the very act of theoretical engagement."<sup>4</sup> Even though one might say that this is almost the question of good academic taste to start an article, paper or talk by complaining about the complexities of the term one is about to define or analyse, in case of popular culture, the problems of definition are notorious and expressed in many influential works on the phenomenon. For example, Stuart Hall starts his seminal article "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" by stating the following: "I have almost as many problems with the term 'popular' as I have with 'culture'. You put the two terms together and the difficulties can be pretty horrendous."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there are many different ways of understanding the popular and they all can be situated along the spectrum of two opposing notions – critical and positive. Simon Frith straightforwardly sums up the historical development of debates about the popular in the following way: on one side of the spectrum, with the slogan "if it's popular, it must be bad!" he locates the researchers from the Frankfurt School and their critical analysis of mass production and consumption, on the other – the motto "if it's popular, it must be good!" is exemplified by the works of John Fiske, where every act of popular consumption is celebrated as an act of individual resistance and creativity, as Fiske defines 'popular' as that which audience make of and do with the commodities of culture industries.<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly, it is possible to define these positions in a more articulate manner, however, these binary oppositions delineate the spectrum of understanding of the popular – on one hand, 'popular culture' is described as culture of, by, and for the people in which they produce and participate in cultural practices that articulate their observations and desires, on the other – popular media culture, as described

by Douglas Kellner, is "a largely commercial form of culture, produced for profit, and disseminated in the form of commodities."<sup>7</sup>

For decades, the links between theatre and popular culture have formed a field of interactions and conflicts, at the same time mirroring the broader debates on mass culture and its social influence. Theatre performances not only reveal a particular understanding of popular culture but construct a certain notion of 'popular' themselves. We might even argue that many theoretical descriptions of popular culture<sup>8</sup> are exhibited in theatre performances: from the critique of it as a culture for the masses or contemporary folk culture to the understanding of popular culture as a place of power struggles or a form of subversive resistance to dominant forms of culture.

In Lithuanian theatre of the last decade, the reflection of mass or popular culture comes up in many productions. This research however is not aimed at registering every particular performance but rather at pointing out what approaches and strategies do contemporary Lithuanian stage directors use in dealing with the popular culture. First of all, one can state that the proliferation of mass culture in post-modern sociocultural field compels theatre to re-examine its own imagery and means of expression. Furthermore, there is a number of reasons why contemporary Lithuanian theatre is using the language and signs of mass (popular) culture, including the wish to mimic or analyse contemporary reality and to draw closer to the spectator as well as an ambition to uncover, deconstruct and possibly even subvert the functioning mechanisms beneath the production of mass culture.

The tactics that the stage directors use in confronting the signs of mass culture differ depending on the director's personal relationship towards the phenomena of popular culture. Two opposing approaches toward the popular mass culture can be read from the examples of Eimuntas Nekrošius and Oskaras Koršunovas. Nekrošius is a prototype of the cultured modernist artist whose works can be interpreted as examples of pure modernist aesthetics not only because of demands his formal

experimentation imposes upon the spectator, the implicit knowledge that lends density to his stage poetics and aesthetics but also because in his interpretations of texts, culture and history, he is mainly interested in universal ideas and very easily ignores any signs of mass (media) culture or social contexts whatsoever – the references to socioeconomic structure are usually just decorative signs that he immediately slights in order to move on to what really concerns him: universal ontology of individual life. Koršuvovas, on the other hand, is a great example of pop-archaeologist who is concerned with what pop-culture tells us about contemporary society, in decoding it as a language of today that allow us to grasp better the defining characteristics, conflicts and concerns of contemporary era – the realities of the present.

There are at least three strategies of performing the popular in contemporary Lithuanian theatre and they can be defined as illustration, re-contextualisation, and irony. Illustration can be understood as the attempt to give the signs of mass culture a decorative function. In these cases, costumes, posters, fashion items, music, quotes and gestures from the territory of popular culture function as elements of ornamentation and décor, testifying that the particular performance and the issues it is dealing with are ‘contemporary’ and up-to-date. Thus, through the fragments of mass culture, the director is seemingly trying to draw closer to contemporary reality without however getting into analysis of the popular phenomena or demonstrating his/her own point of view. That kind of attitude is neither research nor criticism, nor is it a manipulation of visual pleasure. The term ‘illustration’ would probably be the best way to describe it as the popular culture is seen here as a mere decoration for the theatrical dramas of today.

Re-contextualisation can be defined as a bold interpretation of texts and images of mass culture, when the framework of the director’s concept alters the very nature of the sign of popular culture. For example, in the production of Dea Loher’s play “Innocent” by Gintaras Varnas in 2006 (Kaunas State Drama Theatre), the director changes the nature of the sign of mass culture by re-contextualizing it. In

the production, the features of the objects of popular culture, such as seduction, pleasure, dazzle and lightness, are represented as attributes of death. It is death – suicides, corpses, urns – that turns out to be attractive while the mass culture is represented in the performance as depressing, repulsive, sterile and impotent. In the production, even the space is structured in such a way that the strip club and the morgue occupy the same stage locus and the latter is much more visually attractive than the former. Consequently, the mass culture is re-contextualised as the director moves it to a different semantic territory and by doing so produces new structures of meaning.

Re-contextualization of the images and texts of popular culture can also go hand in hand with irony. In contemporary theatre, irony is often used as a weapon, a response of the marginalized art form (theatre itself) to the dominant and expansive power of mass culture. According to Linda Hutcheon, an ironic attitude, similar to Bertolt Brecht’s *estrangement effect* in acting, does not only allow to construct and maintain the distance but also to take a critical look at the patterns of thought and imagery that mass culture supports.<sup>9</sup> There is a number of performances in Lithuanian theatre that treat mass culture with irony and playful demeanour however without critical evaluation or analysis of the nature of its signs. A good example of such attitude towards popular culture could be the production of Nikolai Erdman’s “The Suicide” staged by Agnius Jankevičius in 2006 (Kaunas State Drama Theatre).

In contemporary interpretation of seminal Stalinist era play “The Suicide” the characters are present with equal emphasis together with figures from Soviet cartoons as well as the stars of the post-Soviet popular culture: Algirdas Brazauskas, Rytis Cicinas or Edmundas Kučinskas. The director offers the spectators to take an alienated attitude of superiority towards this burlesque gallery. This point of view can be related to the attitude of Michel de Certeau’s *strategist* as a bearer of safe and indifferent position.<sup>10</sup> The position of a strategist is a metaposition as here one is always dissociating himself/herself from the environment that he/she is examining as if, in other words, residing or being located above

the realities that one is reflecting on or speaking about. The same position is offered for the spectators of “The Suicide” as well – for a short time, the audience is also expected to consciously dissociate themselves from the pop environment and make fun of it together with the artists. The spectators take pleasure in recognizing the already familiar signs and seeing them in a somewhat different context namely theatrical space while the director plays with this “joy of recognition” and eventually the *pleasure of the spectacle* obscures all other messages of the text.

In both theatrical examples, the popular is presented as an inferior culture seen neither as an empowering tool nor a repertoire for subversive reading but rather the manipulative operations by which tastes and opinions are imposed on large groups of consumers. Indeed, as many researchers have observed, “the cultural industries do have the power by repetition and selection to impose and implant such definitions of ourselves that fit more easily the descriptions of dominant or preferred culture.”<sup>11</sup> However, in order to grasp the complexity of cultural relations embedded in the production of popular cultures, one has not only to re-contextualise or use irony but to be able to critically analyse the popular by the means of theatrical inquiry. Within this context, the proponents of critical deconstruction of the mass culture think of it as the “knowledge of today”, therefore they see the vital importance to understand the role of popular culture in a wide range of current social struggles and developments as a brick stones from which we construct our identities, articulate the conflicts, fears, hopes and dreams of individuals and groups confronting a turbulent contemporary reality. If popular culture shape our view of the reality, public opinion, values and behavior, it is important not to ignore, demonize or mock it but to understand and analyze it as a forum of social power and struggle.

The best examples of such critical analysis of the popular mass culture can be found in works of director Oskaras Koršunovas. He began to examine the popular culture in his 1998 production of “Roberto Zucco” (by Bernard Marie-Coltes) and is one of the few stage directors in Lithuania who

have actually mastered the codes of pop-language. While other directors tend to demonize it or overestimate it, Koršunovas is a master in employing it (and unmasking at the same time). One of the best examples of his masterful investigation of popular mass culture can be found in performance “Playing the Victim” (by brother Presniakovs, 2005, Oskaras Koršunovas Theatre)

The *prototext* of “Playing the Victim” is the story of Hamlet, while its theatrical and visual code is mass culture. After all, the popular culture can be interpreted as theatre or acting *par excellence* as it can take on different shapes and embody the seduction of the surfaces. The postmodern pastiche of the Hamlet story in the performance by Koršunovas is extended through music inserts, forms of mass culture, quotes and in that way the production gets enriched with a number of levels of information flow. The simplified kernel of the classical play rendered in the performance is turned into a formal excess: extreme mannerism, musical pathos, particular theatrical density which at times discords with the narrative of the play and at times noisily agrees with it. By using forms of popular culture in the performance, the director is trying to represent the perfect simulacrum – the absence of reality masked by the excess of the signs of reality.

The structural construction of “Playing the Victim” reminds of horizontal landscape that can be extended to any direction except vertically. Cynical attitude towards the reality as an empty, twinkling and intangible spider web that extends towards horizon is presented in a performance as both the feature of popular culture as well as contemporary culture and society in general. Hereby, in the production of “Playing the Victim,” the characteristics of popular culture signs is turned into a particular theatrical density and this excessive form symbolically reflects the artist’s attitude towards contemporary reality.

In the production of “Playing the Victim,” the objects of mass culture are represented in mimetic manner and obtain different meanings only through the change of place in the symbolical order of performance. The director’s imagination constructs the signs that seem to be empty and then juggles with

them in a much easier manner than the virtual popular network does it. For example, the director picks up a seemingly unimportant fragment of the play, namely the recurrent hints about main protagonist's Valia baseball cap with the characters from the "South Park" cartoon and integrates it into the performance through the figure of Kenny in the way this object itself appears at once completely empty (a sign of mass culture) and full of symbolical meanings (Kenny is a perennial cartoon victim killed in every episode of "South Park" and revived in the other – i. e. he is indeed "playing the victim" as the main protagonist of the performance does). Hereby, the meaning in the performance is extended through different references to popular mass culture thus forming a web of intertexts and opening it up to the spectators' interpretation.

One might conclude that of all strategies dealing with popular culture on contemporary Lithuanian theatre stage – re-contextualization, ironic interpretation, or mimetic mirroring – Koršunovas production of "Playing the Victim" comes closest to the notion of critical investigation. In this performance, popular culture is understood as a site where, according to Stuart Hall, "collective social understandings are created": a territory on which "the politics of signification is played out in attempts to win people to particular ways of seeing the world."<sup>12</sup>

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## TARP POPULIZMO IR POPARCHEOLOGIJOS: POPULIARIOJI KULTŪRA ŠIUOLAIKINIO LIETUVOS TEATRO SCENOJE

### Santrauka

Populiariąją kultūrą analizuojantys mokslininkai kalba apie įvairias jos apraiškas – kultūros industriją, masinę kultūrą, pramogų ar liaudies kultūrą, tačiau sutaria dėl vieno jai būdingo bruožo: populiarioji kultūra turi būti suvokiama kaip formuojamas, kuriamas ir interpretuojamas fenomenas, t. y. kaip procesas, spektaklis, teatras, o ne stabiliai egzistuojanti duotybė. Pasak kultūrologo Nestoro Garcia Canclinio, trys faktoriai „teatralizuoja“ populiariąją kultūrą: folkloras, kultūros industrijos ir politinis populizmas. Plačiai suvokiamas „spektaklis“ dalyvauja visose trijose srityse, todėl mokslininkams svarbu atskleisti, kaip konkretus vaidinimas ar teatro spektaklis interpretuoja populiariąją

Therefore, popular mass culture can be interpreted as a repertoire of social meanings and theatre can become the place where one is taught not only to enjoy or interpret it but to deconstruct it as well.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Canclini, Garcia. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: a Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Hall, Stuart. Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'. In: *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: a Reader*. 2015, p. 442.

<sup>6</sup> Frith, Simon. The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent: Defending Popular Culture from Populists. In: *Populism: A Reader*, New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2005, p. 162-163.

<sup>7</sup> Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture*. London/New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 16; Kellner, Douglas. *Media Spectacle*. London/New York: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For summary of definitions of popular culture, see: *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: a Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everydaylife*. Berkeley: University of California Pres, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, Stuart, Ibid, p. 447.

<sup>12</sup> *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: a Reader*, p. 4.

kultūrą: ar palaiko ir daugina jos vaizdinius, pasakojimus, siūlomas tapatybės formas, o gal kaip tik kritikuoja ar dekonstruoja populiariosios kultūros vaizdinį ir jos veikimo mechanizmus.

Populiariąją kultūrą galima interpretuoti kaip įsivaizduojamą socialinės elgsenos repeticiją, tam tikrų socialinių reikšmių repertuarą, kurį teatras gali perteikti subversyviai, atverdamas ar net perkeisdamas jo prasmes, o gali tiesiog mėgdžioti, taip priartėdamas prie populiariųjų tikrovės vaizdavimo ir suvokimo formų. Šiuolaikinio Lietuvos teatro spektakliai taip pat atskleidžia savitą požiūrį į populiariąją kultūrą ir formuoja jos sampratas. Galima teigti, kad teatro spektakliai savaip išreiškia įvairias teorines populiariosios kultūros apibrėžtis: nuo komercializuotos kultūros kritikos iki šiuolaikinės visuomenės veidrodžio. Režisūrinės taktikos, kurias renkasi kūrėjai, susidūrę su masinės kultūros ženklais, yra skirtingos ir priklauso nuo paties režisieriaus santykio su populiariąja kultūra.

Šiame darbe, pasitelkiant konkrečius atvejus, nagrinėjamos Lietuvos teatro scenoje vyraujančios populiariosios kultūros interpretavimo strategijos: iliustracija, rekontekstualizacija, ironija ir kritinis tyrimas. Straipsnyje analizuojami režisierių Oskaro Koršunovo, Gintaro Varno ir Agniaus Jankevičiaus darbai.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** populiarioji kultūra, masinė kultūra, teatras, šiuolaikinis Lietuvos teatras.

*Gauta: 2016-10-10*

*Paruošta spaudai 2016-11-28*

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