

DRAMATURGIES WITHOUT DRAMATIZATION

Performing the Recent Past in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This article examines contemporary theatre and dance practices in Eastern Europe that engage with the post-socialist past without translating it into conventional dramatic forms. Drawing on three case studies from Hungary, Lithuania, and Moldova, it explores alternative dramaturgical strategies—such as visitation, fabulation, and polyphony—that present history not as a linear narrative but as a fragmented, contradictory, and continuously resonating structure. These “dramaturgies without dramatization” challenge mimetic reenactments and question the possibility of authentic historical representation. Instead, they open up aesthetic fields of resonance in which the past appears as a spectral presence. The analysis highlights how key issues of the post-socialist transition—such as economic precarity, migration, and class relations—resist dramatization and require new performative approaches.

Keywords

dramaturgy, post-socialism, documentary theatre, memory, historiography, precarity

Dramaturgie bez dramatizace. Scénické ztvárnění nedávné minulosti ve východní Evropě

Abstrakt

Článek pojednává o současném divadelní a taneční postupy ve východní Evropě, které se zabývají postsocialistickou minulostí, aniž by ji převáděly do konvenčních dramatických forem. Na základě tří případových studií z Maďarska, Litvy a Moldavska zkoumá alternativní dramaturgické strategie – jako jsou vizitace, fabulace a polyfonie –, které prezentují historii nikoli jako lineární vyprávění, ale jako fragmentovanou, rozporuplnou a neustále rezonující strukturu. Tato „dramaturgie bez dramatizace“ si bere na mušku možnosti mimetických ztvárnění a zpochybňuje autentické historické zobrazení. Místo toho pojednané příklady otevírají estetické prostory rezonance, v nichž se minulost promítá do spektrální přítomnosti. Analýza zdůrazňuje to, jak se klíčové otázky postsocialistické transformace, jako jsou ekonomická nejistota, migrace a třídní vztahy, vzpírají dramatizaci a vyžadují nové performativní přístupy.

Klíčová slova

dramaturgie, postsocialismus, dokumentární divadlo, paměť, historiografie, prekariata

1. Conjuring history without dramatization

“I used to believe that our problems would one day be solved by the generational renewal of our political class”, writes the Romanian theatre-maker Gianina Cărbunariu (2014). Born in 1977, the author and director takes a sobering look at the period following the democratic transition in the so-called “Eastern Bloc”, focusing on the ongoing economic precariousness of the working class, the continuing cynicism of politicians, constant corruption and the dark side of neoliberal capitalism. A generation has grown up since 1989, the end of state socialist governments in Europe, and now, from this distance in time, it is possible to reflect on the economic promises and social projections that were fuelled by the transition to capitalism.

Cărbunariu and several theatre-makers have addressed post-socialist depression in the genre of documentary theatre. In my view, however, theatre productions in the region have been most insightful in recent years when not only addressing social and institutional grievances in terms of content, but also, and above all, reflecting on the possibilities of their aesthetic expression, by questioning the assumption that the problems and conflicts of the recent past can be easily dramatized, transferred into a plot structure and adequately embodied by actors. In the last few years, several performances have been created that employ dramaturgies of visitation, fabulation and a plurality of voices – approaches in which the past is not reconstructed in a linear plot but emerges through haunting presences, speculative narratives and polyphonic perspectives. As my analyses will show, these ways of staging thwart the illusion that we can access the recent past as a concise story and present it in an “authentic” and referentially stable way. The three performances from Hungary, Lithuania and Moldova that I would like to examine in this essay deal with the recent “history of the present”, but they refuse to “sum it up” in the form of a reenactment. Instead of dramatising¹ the circumstances, they seek to expose the past in dialectical fields of resonance, staging it precisely in its contradictions, non-linearity and lack of coherence. In this way, they resist the desire to aestheticise conflictual constellations of characters in a veristic manner and instead face the social issues they negotiate with an “aesthetic openness”.

This critical attitude towards representation, which is evident in some performances on Eastern European stages, corresponds to a more global scepticism, namely a mistrust of psychologically realistic portrayals or repetitions of trauma and suppression. Before I discuss my examples in the geocultural contexts of Eastern Europe, I would like to briefly highlight this mimesis-critical tendency, which is not directly applicable to my analyses but is particularly revealing as a global tendency. In decolonial discourses, cultural scholar Saidiya Hartman argues against the retelling of the widespread “terrible spectacle[s]” (1997: 3) – such as the whipping of Aunt Hester or the murder of Uncle Tom – when writing about the history of slavery, “in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body” (ibid.), as she contends in her monograph *Scenes of Subjection*. Hartman’s reservations about the vivid repetition of atrocities boil down to preventing voyeuristic constellations and not perpetuating traditional, racist constellations of desubjectification. In

1 I use the term dramatization in the theatrical sense, namely as a translation of non-aesthetic reality or a fictional construct into an interpersonal and dialogical conflict. As a rule, dramatization is accompanied by a mode of representation that stages what is shown in the present tense, within a closed diegetic framework and in the style of psychological realism (Lehmann 2013: 253–281).

a performance-theoretical context, writer and cultural scholar Fred Moten captures this critique of representation with the term “non-performance”. He primarily associates this term with Blackness to describe performances on the periphery of a metaphysics of presence. For him Blackness is “always surreally present” (Moten 2018: 244), i.e., it has a spectral quality that cannot take shape in any sovereign performance, any autonomous performance in John L. Austin’s sense, but is always articulated in a “non-performed performance” (ibid.: 241). From an aesthetic point of view, it is revealing that the “non-performance” of Blackness appears as something surreal, pointing beyond reality and realism, because for Moten being Black is not compatible with the coordinates of a modernist, rational order of time and space. Accordingly, non-performances realised in an artistic context are always characterised by ghostly figurations that fall outside the linear order of time, disappointing expectations of traditional plot structures, and thus revealing that the logic of identity and individuation are mere phantasms. Although non-performance proves to be a productive counter-model to veristic reenactments, it is closely linked to decolonial contexts, so that its application beyond these frameworks would be a major methodological mistake.

Within queer representational politics, critical attitudes towards representation are prevalent, too. As a form of resistance against realist modes of historiography, the concept of (auto)fabulation has gained prominence.² In his dissertation *The Queer Art of Autofabulation* (2022) – to focus on just one of many positions here – Benoît Loiseau examines autobiographical strategies in writing the history of queer resistance since the 1980s that have challenged and disrupted the stigmatising representations of AIDS patients familiar from the mass media. Loiseau traces autofabulation primarily in performances that employ satirical means, clearly mixing fact with fiction and incorporating rumours into their narratives. Loiseau gives the term autofabulation a political charge by referring to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who see “creative fabulation” as an opportunity for artists “go[ing] beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived” (1994: 171). Fabulations are directed against the dominance of the canon, hierarchical bodily relations, common narrative patterns and acting styles, and aim to do nothing less than challenge established or stereotypical ways of constructing identities. This dramaturgical approach amounts to favouring creative, speculative, inventive and critical modes of narration in order to track down those realities of life which, to use the words of Tavia Nyong’o, “never meant to appear” (2018: 3), i.e., which otherwise could not have found their way into the dominant representational arrangements.

In close connection with the positions outlined above, my interest in this article lies in the potential of a hauntological, fabulating historiography of the post-socialist past in the form of performances and, in accordance with this, a mode of staging that decisively runs counter to the demands of an illusionistic repetition of conflict. Choosing this perspective means favouring a critical attitude and pointing to an alternative to those theatrical re-enactments that express a naturalistic embodiment and deceptive visualisation of the past – including its scenarios of violence – and often smuggle the representational norms of drama back into a post-dramatic era. Not all, but a large number of reenactments, which theatre and dance scholar Gerald Siegmund associates with a “copying approach” (2020: 221), aim at a faithful and authentic repetition of the past

2 Cf. Nyong’o 2018; Afreen 2023; Adams 2025. From the field of contemporary theatre and dance practice, I would like to refer here only to Stefanie Sourial’s *New Endings* (2023), Jen Rosenblit’s *Elsewhere Rhapsody* (2024), and Raymond Liew Jin Pin’s *Maria Cencaru* (2024).

(Schneider 2011). Striking examples of this tendency are Milo Rau's reenactments from the 2010s, in which history – such as the execution of the dictatorial couple Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu in Romania – is repeated in a hyper-naturalistic style.³ The problem with this approach is that Rau conceives of his directing practice as a “new realism” with which he attempts to “close the enormous gap between what actually happens and how we talk about it” (Rau 2018: 37). But believing in an access to “what actually happens” is a phantasm described by Tejaswini Niranjana as “nostalgia for full presence” (1992: 52). This staging practice also carries the risk of theatre being perceived as a place of representation, as an institution of the “negation of any possibility of ever finding out anything that has not already been said” (Dos Santos Bruss 2022: 108).

Following this theoretical introduction, I would now like to use specific examples from the performing arts to identify alternative formats for artistic references to the recent past in Eastern Europe. Although three examples to be analysed come from different geocultural contexts, they are linked in that they all refer contextually to a post-socialist past. This focus is crucial because the political transformations of 1989 marked a major historical rupture in Eastern Europe, bringing about profound processes of democratisation, marketisation and internationalisation. Yet the spread of neoliberal economic structures in the former socialist countries cannot easily be narrated through interpersonal conflicts or dramatic plots with a clear beginning, middle and end in the sense of Aristotle; rather, these historical developments resist dramatic representation and call for alternative dramaturgical forms.

Moving beyond discourse analysis or political science debates, the following reflections engage with the recent past in Budapest (Hungary), Vilnius (Lithuania), and Chișinău (Moldova) through the dramaturgical structures of three performances and, in connection with this, speculate on the question of how contemporary performances can negotiate their reference to the past in the aesthetic register. What images of history, identity and class are staged when theatre-makers practise their social criticism without a veristic repetition? What dramaturgies are available that take into account the pitfalls of representation when negotiating history? And how do artists deal with “performance” and its contradictory meanings which are anchored in both economics and art? In this article “dramaturgies without dramatization” refer to aesthetic strategies that engage with historical experience without translating it into a coherent dramatic plot or psychologically motivated conflicts. Instead, these dramaturgies mobilise fragmented, polyphonic and often speculative forms of staging in which the past appears indirectly – as resonance, visitation or fabulation rather than as a linear narrative.

2. Visiting the archives (Csaba Molnár, Zsófia Tamara Vadas, Imre Vass: *game changer*)

In a thoroughly conceptual manner, three Budapest-based dancers from Generation Y (Csaba Molnár, Zsófia Tamara Vadas and Imre Vass) look back on their artistic careers since the 1990s. Their dance performance *game changer* (2022) begins with an unexpected conversation with the audience, which Vadas introduces with the following words: ‘Hello! Thank you for coming back! We would like to start our conversation

3 Consider, for example, *Die letzten Tage der Ceausescus* (*The Last Days of the Ceausescus*, 2009) or the production *Hate Radio* (2011), which deals with the genocide in Rwanda. We could also mention Rau's trilogy of violent crimes (*Seven Easy Pieces* [2016], *Die Wiederholung* [*The Repetition*, 2018], *Familie* [*Family*, 2020]), in which crimes that went viral in the media and shook society are re-enacted on stage in a naturalistic manner.

right away!’ The audience wonders what the subject of the conversation will be, as everyone has just arrived at the theatre. Vadas continues:

So we thought we would like to talk to you about what you saw. We deliberately did not ask for a moderator because we want to bypass that authority; we don’t want to talk to you through the filter of a third person, but directly and in an open space. You can now “throw” anything that comes to mind into this space.⁴

This conversation, it seems, will consist of nothing more than the audience’s feedback on a performance that none of those present in this constellation could have seen. What connects the participants in this shared situation is thus a collective lack of knowledge, a common speculation about what none of those sitting in the audience has experienced. To put it differently, the performers are attempting to create a radically democratic community in which there are no knowledge hierarchies between the audience members, no wrong answers, no inadequate interpretations or irrelevant feedback, no shared experiences that could become a shared topic. What ultimately comes up in the discussion are the genre ideas and aesthetic norms that the participants remembered from performances they visited previously in the same venue or associate with contemporary theatre and dance performances in general: “I thought it was great that only Imre got naked.” “The music and the movements were very beautiful, but the ending left me perplexed.” “Were the movements choreographed or improvised?”

Before the conversation begins, Csaba Molnár tries to encourage the audience to participate by explicitly forcing them to exchange fragments of their experiences: “Feel free to say whatever comes to mind – feelings, impressions, opinions, sensations. You don’t have to proceed chronologically...” The aim, therefore, is not to invent or reconstruct the performance we have not seen and manifest it in the form of a coherent narrative, but rather to initiate a joint discourse on the sharing of perspectives, images and projections that are sometimes contradictory and incompatible with each other. The end result is, in fact, a polyphonic narrative that cannot have a commensurable focal point.

Performance *game changer* opens up the space for a verbal reflection on many earlier productions by the three dancers, almost all of which took place on the same stage, Budapest’s most prominent venue for freelance artists. Although the stage is empty, the past performances are virtually present here. Memories of them are hinted at partly by the audience and partly by the performers themselves. But over time, the images of memory rise to the surface in such density that it seems increasingly difficult for the three dancers to move around the space. “Don’t you want to dance?” the other two ask Molnár. “No, I’m not dancing. The room is too full. I can’t dance. How many years exactly? Ten or twenty? It’s very crowded here.” Instead of moving in a dance-like manner, Molnár paints “TIME OUT” on the stage floor with a wet mop. This fleeting inscription made with water can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, as a kind of break or pause, and on the other, as an interruption of his twenty years of dance practice, i.e., as a break with the rules of the game and the genesis of a no longer chronological time-space in which the norms and conventions of the past are called into question. Molnár tells us that at the dance school where he studied, no one was allowed to have sex on the day of a stage performance because the master was convinced that it would throw the dancers off balance. Ballerinas were

4 The quotations were translated by the author and were taken from an unpublished recording of the first night of the production (28. 02. 2022, trafó, Budapest).

even forbidden to defecate before a performance because it was believed that it could throw them off balance to such an extent that they would fail their pirouettes. *game changer* questions the pedagogical and aesthetic aspects of recent dance history and culminates in a house party where the three performers take turns playing pop songs to which they move in counter-rhythm. The performance finally ends with an imaginary basketball game in which the stage and the auditorium form the two halves of the court. We only imagine the ball when we throw it to each other.

Csaba Molnár, Zsófia Tamara Vadas, and Imre Vass are Budapest-based free-lance dance artists whose work has significantly shaped Hungary's contemporary independent scene since the 2000s. Their practice is closely tied to production conditions in which underfinanced presentation venues, project-based funding, and institutional gatekeeping strongly structure what can become visible as dance and framed as "dance history". What's more, over the past fifteen years, Hungary's conservative cultural policy has systematically prioritised ideologically aligned institutions and artists, while independent and critical practices have been marginalised and rendered structurally precarious. In this context, *game changer* reflects not only on the construction of dance history, but also on the fragile visibility of artistic labour in a cultural landscape shaped by political loyalty and institutional exclusion.

Performance *game changer* criticizes institutions, education and representation, and is so revealing from a dramaturgical perspective because it makes political claims on an aesthetic level. It blurs the boundaries between past and present, current and virtual references, and individual and collective memory. The "public discussion" opens up an aesthetic time-space in which a (virtual) performance history, including its tradition and archive, is invented without being presented and embodied in a mimetic way; for the transfer of such an archive into a phenomenal, empirical stage reality would carry the risk of being considered exclusionary, hierarchical and prescriptive. Instead, the performance opens up a ghostly space-time that remains speculative, in which it becomes impossible to distinguish between fiction and fact, play and repetition, and to close the order of representation.

Although the choreography focuses on the past, it conveys the impression that a collective and multi-perspective encounter with history can never be conceived in terms of reconstruction, but only in terms of visitation: in a time-space in which chronologies, linearities, and the separability of the existing and the non-existing are systematically undermined and resist the human intention of archival systematization. In this respect, *game changer* differs from the canonical choreography *New* (2013) by the Berlin performance collective Lupita Pulpo, in which the three dancers attempt to choreograph an original, never-before-seen piece, but with every scenic idea they come up with, they have to conclude that it has already been realised on Berlin stages in recent years. "This has been done" is the demoralizing response when someone makes a suggestion for a "new" performance.⁵ But while Lupita Pulpo quotes specific dance performances from recent years, indeed evoke a mental reservoir of images from fleeting dance performances, in *game changer* the references remain indeterminable and, due to their spectral quality, lie beyond right and wrong memories, beyond expert knowledge and reconstructability.

How would it be possible to stage a dance archive spanning almost 20 years in one evening? Which authorities should decide what to include in and exclude from this archive? How can the risk of overwriting individual memories and their diversity with a naturalistic re-enactment be avoided? These questions, which hover in the

5 Cf. Susanne Foellmer's analysis on this performance (2022: 39–59).

background of *game changer*, are answered with collective and playful storytelling. This is because *game changer* deals with strict referentialities in an extraordinarily creative way, mixing the recapitulation of the past with qualities of the fantastic, the inventive and the speculative. The collective and spectral re-enactment of dance history is particularly reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's idea of storytelling and "the fantastical, all unfettered by responsibility", insofar as such speculations can be "only woven together in the telling" (Benjamin 2014: 317), in a non-scripted, collective relating to the past. Beyond the limitations set by the idea of classical re-enactment, *game changer* seeks not only to build on what has already been seen, but also to manifest a non-dominant and solidarity-based order of dance history. This claim to democratization is also evident, for example, in the fact that within the framework of the first night of the performance the three performers established an award, which they have been presenting every year to invisible workers of the independent scene: dance teachers, archivists, production managers or committed audience members. In doing so, they pay tribute to key players in the scene who otherwise do not have glamorous appearances and do not find their way into the neoliberal orders of visibility (Engel 2009).

The turn to history can be described as subversive in *game changer*: the performance opens up a space for hauntings that do not seek to nostalgically re-manifest the past as something missing or lost, but rather encourage continuous reflection and imagination about an inclusive and collective writing of dance history. The spectral dramaturgy of the evening confuses layers of time and thus leads us into more open, imaginative possibilities for relating to the recent past and the future. In this way, *game changer* stages dance history not as a sequence of events to be reconstructed, but as a field of overlapping memories and an encounter of many perspectives, exemplifying a dramaturgy without cohesion and intact representation – a dramaturgy without dramatization.

3. Resonance chambers of economic precariousness (Anna-Marija Adomaitytė & Gautier Teuscher: *Workpiece*)

Countless neon tubes hang from the ceiling in a network-like arrangement. They are reflected in the glass walls of the stage backdrop, but despite their large expanse, they throw a gloomy light onto the deep black stage area, whose contours remain blurred. Only the exhausted face of performer Anna-Marija Adomaitytė and her bright red top stand out from the dark landscape of a factory setting that seems infinitely large and deserted. Barefoot and facing the audience head-on, the performer moves in slow, steady steps on a treadmill in her solo *Workpiece* (2024). She briefly scans the room with her eyes, then immediately switches to a robotic choreography. Her steps become faster and faster. She fixes her eyes on invisible events in the room and then moves her head hectically in different directions at a rapid pace. Her gaze oscillates between right and left with complete efficiency, without digression and without any rhythmic deviation. It is as if she is evaluating the products passing before her eyes on an imaginary conveyor belt. However, it is difficult to determine whether she is still controlling the mechanical movements of her head herself or whether they are the result of neurotic tics.

The squeaking of the treadmill and the sound of the performer's measured steps dominate the grey soundscape of the piece. Her movements show no human qualities. Rather, her arms and hands seem like prostheses optimised for specific functions: she straightens her fingers and turns her wrists as if she were moving certain products aside, sorting them or pushing them along. Then she stretches her arms forward again. Her hands begin to tremble as if they were taking on the resonances of the machines. A loud,

iron-like noise suddenly fills the room and refuses to leave. This deep sound penetrates our somatic tissue, involving us, the audience, in the vibrations of the mechanical apparatus.

The performer continuously moves forward on the treadmill, yet she remains in the same place. In this – as Walter Benjamin would describe it – “dialectic in stand-still” (1998: 1–14) the achievement of a detail worker comes to light, which Karl Marx associated with ‘virtuosity,’ (Marx 1987: 335; van Eikels 2013: 477–483) even though the repertoire of movements involved in assembly-line work does not really inspire social fascination and admiration.⁶ From this perspective, Adomaitytė’s choreography can be read against broader debates about labour in the post-socialist era of neoliberalisation (Virno 2017: 198). If, according to Marxist philosopher Paolo Virno, we are living in a post-Fordist age in which work is becoming increasingly immaterial, assembly-line work represents a model that is on its way out. Success, on the other hand, comes to those players in the economy who no longer manufacture objects but make a living from virtuoso performances. Virno’s virtuosity – in contrast to Marx’s concept of the same name – is characterised by creative, flexible, singular and original performances in front of an audience. Read in this light, what makes the dramaturgy of *Workpiece* so interesting is how it complicates the chronology of this paradigm shift in economic history: Adomaitytė’s solo performance reminds us that physical labour does not disappear even in post-Fordism, even if it is no longer considered a successful model of production. From such a perspective, the neoliberal concept of economical performance seems not to pay attention to class-based hierarchies, obscuring the fact that everyday working life for many precarious actors of post-Fordism has not really become immaterial, or that there are still hard work processes that cannot be taken over by machines. Consider areas such as transport or logistics, which form the physical pillars of the neoliberal economy and whose actors – through their work at airports, logistics centres and transport companies – enable the flexibility, mobility and creativity of privileged “performers of neoliberalism” in the first place.

But there is more to it than that: *Workpiece* insightfully confuses simplified comparisons between socialist planned economies of the past and capitalist market economies of the present. Before 1989, socialist commodity production was generally regarded as a standardized process in which time-regulated labour produced material goods (Vonderau 2015: 98). Anthropologist Asta Vonderau sums up the work ethic of the ideal socialist worker hero with the following characteristics: “activity, industriousness, willpower, curiosity, energy, optimism” – and adds: “just like today” (ibid.: 103). But does this continuity really make sense? Despite the theoretical differences between planned and market economies, there are, indeed, numerous similarities in how the two models were and are being implemented. If we take a look at the niches of the socialist economy, we must acknowledge a long tradition of unofficial moonlighting as an inventive form of production, as a form of neoliberal work *avant la lettre*. Workers in the Soviet Union and its satellite states were also active as “entrepreneurs under the table”, i.e. they produced for external demand using tools and materials belonging to state-owned companies without permission – often during working hours. Hungarian philosopher Miklós Haraszti describes this form of moonlighting as a particularly resourceful and inspiring practice that required the skilful reuse of factory waste materials and allowed individuals to exercise a certain degree of creative freedom (Haraszti 1989).

6 Although assembly-line work is “measured in quantitative terms, these measurements do not correspond to any amount of recognition,” writes Kai van Eikels (2013: 479).

Adomaitytė's appearance combines elements of Fordist working practices, which she quotes choreographically, and post-Fordist virtuosity, with which she transforms the choreographic material into an artistic performance and sells it as immaterial work. Moreover, Adomaitytė emphasizes in the programme note for the piece that the movement material of *Workpiece* is based on her autobiographical work experiences in a fast-food restaurant, where assembly-line work of our present day takes place and which functions – regardless of geocultural differences – as a workplace for migrants in both Eastern and Western Europe, in the north and south. *Workpiece* thus brings to light the repressed persistence of manual labour on the assembly-lines of our society and undermines generalized projections that attempt to sharply differentiate between Eastern and Western European, socialist and post-socialist ways of working on the basis of ideological differences. In short, *Workpiece* disrupts geographical and temporal localizations of material and immaterial work processes along the shadows of the Iron Curtain and shows how these two forms of work – in the case of a freelance artist – can also merge autobiographically. Adomaitytė's artistic practice generally focuses on forms of social violence and the ways in which bodies register and negotiate them. Emerging from the postsocialist context of Lithuania in which neoliberal restructuring rapidly reshaped labour relations and cultural infrastructures after 1989, *Workpiece*, too, draws on experiences of labour migration and transnational precarity.

The choreography becomes increasingly irregular over time. As the hand movements can no longer be interpreted as a concrete translation of work movements, the piece tips into abstraction. A forearm raised into the air begins to move vertically, the outstretched fingers pulsate continuously, and the head movements reach a frantic speed, as if the body were suddenly bringing the stresses on the nervous system to the surface. The movements lose their sovereignty and any functional purpose. Suddenly, there is a knocking and haunting in an unseen outdoor space, so that the scene begins to tremble and the choreography of hopeless locomotion becomes readable as a futile dynamic of escape.

Adomaitytė's physical exertion creates images of a worker who stands beyond realistic social contexts and has been torn out of an economic milieu. With her many tics and twitches, she exposes the negative effects of exploitation and haunts, like a ghost, the rational movement patterns of the economy and its aestheticisation – as is the case, for example, in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. However, the play also breaks with stereotypical, "right-wing conservative appropriations" of the "white, male-heterosexual" (Seier 2024: 70) worker figure, who is stylised as a hero in socialist and often capitalist representations in order to deny real workers any platform on the one hand and to perpetuate class-preserving typologies on the other.

After the lights go out on stage, we can still hear Adomaitytė's footsteps on the treadmill for several minutes. Her work does not end; it is merely pushed out of sight by society once again. *Workpiece* is a choreography that deliberately lacks any dramaturgical progression. Instead, it opens up a space of resonance for the underrepresented structures of degrading work and links precarious workers across national and bloc boundaries with subversive ghosts that not only support capitalist scenarios of enjoyment, but – in Adomaitytė's case – can also provoke them. In this sense, *Workpiece* exemplifies a dramaturgy without dramatization, as it addresses the persistence of exploitative labour conditions not through a narrative of a dramatic constellation of personal conflicts, but through an embodied field of resonance that makes structural continuities of neoliberal economy perceptible.

4. The dramaturgy of minor disasters (Nicoleta Esinencu & teatru-spălătorie: *Playing on Nerves*)

There are times when “small disasters” are so prevalent that they affect all areas of life, span generations but do not culminate in any dramatic event. Due to their insidious nature, these “small catastrophes” tend to become commonplace or invisible and therefore resist dramatization, even narrative rationalization and theatrical re-enactment. I am thinking here of everyday tragedies without a climax, life stories without sensational, headline-grabbing turning points, processes of upheaval without a culmination. If we take a closer look at stories of continuous exploitation and economic marginalization, colonization or self-colonization⁷ in Eastern European contexts, we encounter complex historical processes whose effects often remain latent. For this reason, they are difficult to re-enact, as they flow into an a-temporal present that cannot be told in a plot structure with a “beginning, a middle and an end”. Nevertheless, the “small disasters” of an era want to be expressed artistically and reflected upon; if not in the form of reenactments, then in vibrant fields of resonance.

Performer Doriana Talmazan alludes to the effects of everyday disasters in post-socialist precariousness when she issues a “trigger warning” at the beginning of the performance *Playing on Nerves. A Punk Dream* (2023). We can see the translation of her words on a screen above the stage: “This show can be extremely boring for Westerners.”⁸ Indeed, the evening begins with an invitation to fall asleep together: “First, take a deep breath and make yourself comfortable... I’d like you to think of the first part of your day... Get in touch with every important moment. It can be something simple, natural. When did you wake up? Where did you wake up?” But slowly, almost imperceptibly, instructions creep into the meditation manual that bring cultural privileges to our attention and urge us to reflect on our own social position. “Did you have hot water? What about electricity?” The relaxation exercise turns into a dialectical experiment in which images from one’s own biography are confronted with projections of Western and Eastern European standards of living. The performer then invites us to slip into a state of semi-sleep between the era of Soviet communism and that of post-socialism, into a long, never-ending continuum of the only dreamed-of transition around 1989 – “when you go to bed in the East and wake up working for the West.”⁹

The three performers on stage come from Moldova, speak Romanian and work in Western Europe. They regularly appear in Nicoleta Esinencu’s theatre productions in German-speaking countries and address their audience with the polyphony of auto-fictional fragments of experience that provide mosaic-like insights into a post-socialist existence. Rejecting authoritarian rehearsal practices and male-dominated leadership models, Nicoleta Esinencu’s theatre practice emerged as a key platform for politically engaged performance in Moldova, yet has been repeatedly marginalised through the withdrawal of institutional support and indirect forms of censorship. Against this background, *Playing on Nerves* reacts to the “minor disasters” within a broader field

7 The concept of self-colonization is used by Bulgarian historian Alexander Kiossev to describe cultures that have surrendered to the cultural power of Europe and the West without actually being conquered and colonized (Kiossev 2024).

8 The quotations are taken from an unpublished video documentary of the performance *Playing on Nerves. A Punk Dream* (Directed by Nicoleta Esinencu & teatru-spălătorie). Performance: Artiom Zavodovsky, Doriana Talmazan, Kira Semionov; Technical Team: Neonil Roșca; Sound: Janis Klinkhammer; Light: Lea Schneidermann; Premiere on 3 June 2023.

9 The quotations are taken from an unpublished recording of the premiere (3 June 2023, HAU1, Berlin).

of structural silencing, social precariousness and political vulnerability. With a punk attitude, the performers spit and scream – in musical rhythm – discourse fragments, memory images and, above all, frustrations of their socialization in Moldova. They speak individually, always alternating, but accompany, even rhythmise, the monologues of the others from several mixing desks. Through detailed descriptions of misery, suffering and hardship the performers denounce the asymmetrical distribution of privileges and the degrading living conditions of marginalized people.

The evening is sensual, loud, triggering, it gets under the skin and irritates the nerves – but not only in a metaphorical sense: during the performance, the actors connect themselves to electrical devices that are used in physiotherapy for the stimulation and healing of nerves. The electric shocks are conducted directly to their skin and shake the tissue of their legs, arms and chest while the performers denounce the status quo. In short: they tremble and twitch not (only) because of what is being said, but above all because of the electrical stimulation. At first glance, the basic constellation of the evening suggests an attack on the audience, who, in addition to the loud tirades, are constantly blinded by spotlights and blown on by fans. But the dramaturgy of the evening is more complex.

“When you have dreams and they fall apart together with the Soviet Union.” – With these words, the reflection on the date 1989 continues, indeed on a phantasmal turning point in world history that often serves as a point of reference for black-and-white historical narratives. But the chronological recapitulation of the recent history of Eastern Europe becomes significantly more complicated in *Playing on Nerves*: When the performers report on the period after the system change from a Moldovan perspective, they actually (also) name the problems of the working class and the (post-)migrant society in Berlin: “When you don’t know if you’re the next one to be fired...” “When you know that tomorrow you’ll retire and you don’t retire either tomorrow or the day after and no one gives you a pension anyway...” The ensuing complaints about rising inflation, housing shortages and inadequate nursing care insurance fade away before an audience in which these experiences find immediate resonance. The rhetorical question “Didn’t you study historical materialism?”, posed by performer Doriana Talmazan also echoes in Berlin, the venue for the performance, like a ghostly element of a discourse from the GDR, opening up space for points of contact between the lamenting performers’ speech and the audience members’ memories. *Playing on Nerves* is not triggering because it addresses the Berlin audience as the target of accusations but because many freelancers, students, unemployed people and economically disadvantaged individuals in the audience can easily identify with what is being said. However, the density with which the stories of subjugation are told increasingly gives the impression that most of the people who are actually the subject here do not in reality have the privilege of standing on stage or sitting in the auditorium.

The monologues transcend the dichotomies of East-West, then-now, socialism-capitalism, articulating problems that no longer have a fixed geocultural anchorage. This is particularly evident in the migration stories that tell of class-based stigmatization: of an elderly woman who has no pension and not only performs paid care work, but also has to imitate the niece of the dementia patient in need of care without remuneration; of the younger woman who, while working seasonally abroad, is not allowed to take toilet breaks or quench her thirst during her shift; of the young foreigner who spends hours in German (integration) classes learning about loading and unloading trucks and is taught only the working vocabulary of those bread-and-butter jobs “which the Federal Republic of Germany imagined as jobs for immigrants”. But we also hear from parents back home who see no progress in their everyday lives after the system change:

“There won’t have been any old times in the next 10 years” – a strangely pessimistic perspective expressed in the future perfect tense. And we learn that this statement dates back to the 1990s: “30 years have passed since then.”

The dramaturgical finesse of the performance lies in the fact that the performers often leave us in the dark as to whether a particular statement refers to Moldova, the so-called Eastern Bloc in general, or their stay in the “West”, as the insights into the many everyday catastrophes of contemporary slave labour suspend any clear geocultural or epochal anchoring. *Playing on Nerves* creates a space for stories that challenge and disrupt entrenched geopolitical perspectives on Europe’s recent past. The ambiguous contextualization of the biographies is a political programme here. In contrast to a cultural-historical analysis, in which the absence of precise historical contextualization in a narrative is considered a methodological mistake, the monologues in *Playing on Nerves* unfold an autothematic discourse on the growing and boundless dynamics of classism and racism precisely through their free-floating in an a-temporal and a-historical concert setting. The autofictional fragments, which remain uncommented upon in their excessive accumulation, partly evoke the idea of reenactment as “minor mimesis”. According to media philosopher Maria Muhle, this form of reenactment makes “a-historicity strong” (2016: 129) in the representation of everyday life.¹⁰ The non-contextualizable “minor disasters” in *Playing on Nerves* make “any kind of fixed interpretation impossible due to the excessive, ambiguous, homonymous character of images and words” (ibid.:133). *Playing on Nerves* thus lends visibility to the socially omnipresent but rarely represented catastrophes of everyday life, detaching the experience of subjectification from the realm of the individual, the Eastern European and, above all, the dramatic, and transferring it into a polyphonic field of resonance of the many.

5. Conclusion

The starting point for the preceding analyses was the question of how contemporary theatre and dance performers from the former Eastern Bloc participate in the historiography of the post-socialist past and what diagnoses of the times they articulate in the realm of aesthetics. The examples discussed here demonstrate striking correspondences in that they refuse (or fail) to identify a “key event” from the recent past that could – in the course of an artistic examination – serve as an icon or parable for the developments of the post-socialist era. Instead, contemporary theatre-makers confront us with the fact that they perceive history as a complex structure without clear turning points or culminations, as a structure that resists dramatization, i.e. a consistent, recognisable, concise stage representation. However, they also distance themselves from any claim to classical theatrical reenactments that “reconstruct history as a whole” (Muhle 2020: 134).

The reason why it is impossible to identify historical moments that should be repeated in the present mode of theatre is that the striking problems of the recent past that deserved to be addressed remain valid even without their aesthetic repetition. Which historical moment needs to be re-enacted in times of apparent continuity and a rigid

10 Muhle’s concept of reenactment as minor mimesis emphasizes the criticality that results from an ahistorical exposition of the past in the form of an exact repetition. These forms of reenactment exclude “the activity of the critical author,” and suspend “the judgement of the self-aware, sovereign – and therefore critical – subject” (Muhle 2016: 122). However convincing the concept of reenactment as minor mimesis may be in our context, the aestheticisation and theatricalization of the spoken texts cannot be ignored here.

status quo? Artists such as Nicoleta Esinencu, Csaba Molnár, Zsófia Tamara Vadas, Imre Vass and Anna-Marija Adomaitytė seem to answer this rhetorical question with a commitment to artistic formats that deconstruct the consolidated ideas of linearity and progression in historiography more radically than any re-enactment – favouring ghostly, fabulating, polyphonic dramaturgies in order to open up vibrational spaces with multiple temporalities and topographies. From a historiographic perspective, this approach shifts the focus from reconstructing historical events to staging the conditions under which the past continues to resonate in the present.

What is particularly striking in the examples analyzed is the directorial intention to confuse the temporal anchors of memory and experience and to question ideological certainties about history, the present and the future, i.e. to complicate and blur the categories of East/West, past/present, socialist/post-socialist, archive/repertoire. Against this backdrop, we are dealing with conceptual works that not only address something, but also always negotiate questions of representability. They do this in explicit searches for spaces of experience in which cultural influences, working conditions and socialization knowledge resonate without flowing into a representation of everyday reality. In this sense, the performances do not correspond directly to dramatic constellations of everyday reality, but rather open up complex fields of resonance in which the challenges of self-assertion, change and raising one's voice are manifestly and temporarily overcome.

This research was funded in whole by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) P 35728-G.

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