

Functions and Techniques of Critique in Contemporary Estonian Theatre

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This article examines the techniques of scenic criticism in contemporary Estonian theatre. The examples vary in scale and style from the huge political show *Unified Estonia* by Theatre NO99 (2010) with 7500 participants, which investigated the crisis of democracy in a post-totalitarian country, to the self-ironic search for identity of the small ethnic community called Setos in *How to Sell a Seto?* (2012). This theatrical piece tackled tragic autobiographical choices of young Setos: old traditions versus contemporary trends, village versus city, building or selling their symbolic capital.

Estonia is an example of a tiny nation state searching for its identity in the conflicting historical experiences affecting Eastern Europe and the Nordic countries: socialism and capitalism, civic and ethnic nationalism, mythical past and modernizing future. Although the political passivity inherited from totalitarian times has influenced the slow development of political theatre in all Baltic countries, some remarkable examples of scenic criticism have emerged, varying in their style from documentary and devised theatre to applied and community theatre. These examples expose different techniques of critique: from minor revealing excursions to hidden places, from self-ironic etudes by ethnic minorities to huge political spectacles (Chart 1). I have had the possibility to witness all these examples as a spectator.

On an aesthetic level, all these cases can be classified as postdramatic theatre and mostly also as posttheatrical theatre or “theatre after theatre” as described by Hans-Thies Lehmann.¹ These are forms of reflective theatre that adequately articulate the reality of contemporary social life. In the form of research and projects these performances take distance from the world, demonstrating the critical value of theatre.

For the following analysis I have chosen two examples that are contrary in scale, focus and professional background. However, both of them expose – as Adorno put it – the sharpest “thorns of critique”² and present the most clear-cut focuses in contemporary Estonian theatre. I shall analyze the examples in dialogue with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School by asking the following questions: 1) What are the objects and functions of their critique?, 2) Which techniques of critique are used?, 3) What are the effects and outcomes of their respective critical practices? The aim is to observe the structure of critique in different performances from a five-year period, 2010–2015.

My first example, *Unified Estonia* (2010), was a fictitious political movement by the state-financed Theatre NO99 from Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. During the 44 days of the project, the actors played politicians, exposing the corrupt means of all bigger parties. The performance gathered 7500 people to its ‘convention’ held in the biggest arena in Estonia, thus making *Unified Estonia* one of the largest political theatre events in contemporary Europe. The second example, *How to Sell a Seto?* (2012), voiced the tragic choices of indigenous Seto girls living in the most remote corner of Estonia.

Chart 1: Examples of critical practices in Estonian theatre 2010–2015.

Year	Theatre/ troupe	Title	Object of critique	Techniques of critique	Number of perfor- mances	Number of spec- tators
2010	Theatre NO99	<i>Unified Estonia</i>	The corrupt power of leading parties	A fictive political movement using the technique of subversive over-identification	1	7500
2012	Theatre NO99	<i>First Reading: The Board Meeting of the Reform Party</i>	Dictatorial inner hierarchies of parties	A quick-reaction “first reading” of a political play	1	~200
2013	The Youth Studio of Taarka Heritage Theatre	<i>How to Sell a Seto?</i>	Culture industry, commercialization	Self-ironic sketches based on real life	7	~800
2014	A private project	<i>Unnamed Nature Project</i>	Totalitarian regime	A revealing excursion to a Soviet Union’s secret military airfield	2	~100
2015	Theatre NO99	<i>Savisaar</i>	Edgar Savisaar, the mayor of Tallinn	A play in the form of antique tragedy creating dissonance with the destiny of modern rulers	11	16174
2015	Endla Theatre	<i>45 339 km² of Bog</i>	Emigration	A survey among ~1000 Estonians living abroad	22	2104

Performed by non-professional Seto actresses playing barefoot on a sand floor of an old barn at Setomaa (*Setoland*), this particular piece of applied theatre reflected the tragic collision of the traditional Seto culture with the culture industry through a series of self-ironic studies.

The Mouse Trap by *Unified Estonia* (2010)

Theatre NO99 is a state-funded theatre company of ten actors and two artistic directors – Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Sem-

per –, operating in the city centre of Tallinn. Since its foundation in 2005, NO99 has defined political theatre anew for the Estonian audiences and has toured in European theatre festivals. Its productions have addressed sensitive topics like racism, energy crisis, the demographic crisis and future visions of Estonia. The critics have concluded that NO99 has demonstrated that theatre can provide a place for discussion where values are shaped the same way laws are shaped in a parliament. Although NO99 has refrained from making active political theatre in recent years and has focused more on the aesthetic challenges of the postdra-



Fig. 1: Actors enacted politicians during the fictive political movement *Unified Estonia*, 2010. Photo: Maria Aua.

matic theatre instead, it has become a showcase-example of political theatre functioning in a posttotalitarian democracy, praised in the academic field. In 2017, it was awarded the Europe Theatre Prize for New Theatre Realities.

The *Unified Estonia* project by Theatre NO99 was preceded by two years of groundwork focusing on unearthing corrupt practices of all the leading political parties in Estonia. At a press conference in the spring of 2010, Theatre NO99 declared that everything they did from that moment onward was to be considered part of the project. What followed was the actors enacting politicians in public (Fig. 1). They gave interviews to TV and radio stations and commented on corrupt practices in newspapers. Their would-be political party drew 7500 people to its 'convention' that x-rayed the populism and corrupt practices of all the major parties, and at the same time gave an overview of the social illpoints usually untouched by politicians, e.g. the shortcomings of the social system, the poor development of regional politics, etc. By using the

technique of subversive over-identification³ the would-be party practiced affirmation with "a surplus which destabilises affirmation and turns it into its opposite".⁴

The aim of the project was: 1) to criticize politicians by uncovering the corrupt mechanisms of power, 2) to enlighten and to activate voters that had been passive due to the Soviet regime's control on the arts and the restrictions of censorship as well as due to the patriotic attitude towards political parties after Estonia restored its independence in 1991, 3) to demonstrate theatre's ability to function as a public sphere, "a collective echo chamber for social and political concerns"⁵. Thus, the *Unified Estonia* project started from criticizing the dominant serf mentality of the Estonian people by announcing that "if you don't deal with politics, politics will deal with you"⁶. The show pulled the role of spectators into spotlight by often turning them into spect-actors: projecting the reactions of audience to big screens, organizing an sms-voting, questioning politicians sitting in the audience, etc., thus emphasizing the

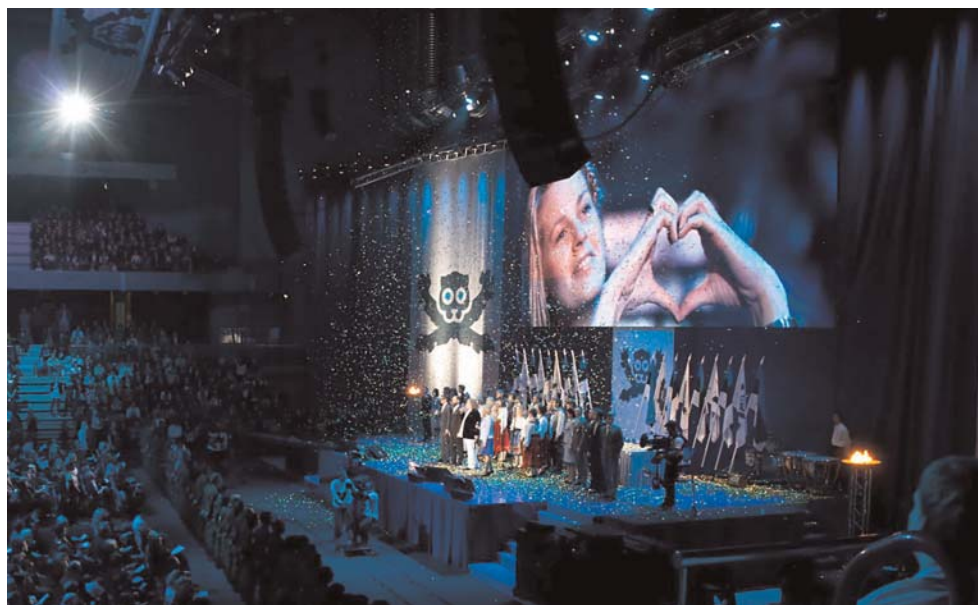


Fig. 2: Spectators were turned into spect-actors in the *Unified Estonia Assembly*, 2010. Photo: Anna Tuvike.

shared space and the active role of all citizens in everyday politics (Fig. 2). In order to keep the border between art and reality blurred, the troupe kept monitoring the situation and giving hints at whether they were merely making theatre or moving seriously into politics. This way, they seemed to be staging a massive Mouse Trap reminiscent of the one in *Hamlet*.

An evidence of the influence of the *Unified Estonia* project appeared two years later when a prominent member of the Prime Minister's Reform Party revealed illegal funding of his party. In his announcement he admitted being inspired by the *Unified Estonia* movement. Immediately, a scandal broke out. In the wake of the heated conflict between the party and its members, Theatre NO99 feared that the freedom of political expression in Estonia was being threatened. Therefore they quickly organized a reading of their new semi-documentary play *The Board Meeting of a Reform Party*, the motto of which was a quotation by

an Estonian poet: "When truth is threatened, it should seek shelter in fiction in order to remain the truth."⁷

In both cases, NO99 voiced a critical attitude towards the current political situation and towards the passive attitude of Estonian citizens. They practiced critique as the art of "[...] not to be governed [...]" thusly, like that, by these people, at this price," as it was defined by Michel Foucault⁸. Surprisingly, instead of media or civic initiatives, it was a theatre troupe that took the lead in voicing the critical attitude. They pointed out populist strategies used in election campaigns, the use of youth organizations, buying off voters and practicing the dictatorial inner hierarchy of parties, that is called inner-party democracy – another system of domination, comparable to ideologies analyzed by Rahel Jaeggi.⁹

With the help of aforementioned projects, Theatre NO99 increased the political activity of the citizens, supported the rise of civic society and started independent poli-

tical movements that demanded honest politicians. As a result of the events, Kristen Michal, the long-time secretary general of the Reform Party and the Minister of Justice, was named as a suspect. He was accused of money laundering and illegal party financing. Despite the fact that the case was closed due to insufficient evidence, the non-partisan political movements “Enough of Deceitful Politics” together with many demonstrations and a declaration signed by public figures, many of whom were active in the field of culture, forced the Minister to resign in December 2012. Thus, *Unified Estonia* did have a real result. It had enhanced agency of the so-called “ordinary people”, responding to the idea of Foucault that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question the power on its discourses of truth.¹⁰ And finally, the weapon of critique had shot down a corrupt minister.

In addition, through its enlightening political campaign, NO99 revealed the immanent correlation of knowledge and power by common opinion being simply a myth. During the ‘party convention’ an actor reflected in a monologue: “I can’t even get a job in a cafe because I don’t know Finnish. But what are the conditions for getting into the Parliament? The only condition is your age. You have to be 21. Congratulations, you turned 21. Now you can go to casinos and be elected to the Parliament.”¹¹ While Foucault notes that “[...] all exercise of power, even if it is a question of putting someone to death, implies at least a *savoir-faire*”¹², the Unified Estonia project emphasized that the main skill politicians seemed to possess was related to their use of populism and manipulation techniques in their hunt for votes and in supporting their career.

The final words in the assembly of Unified Estonia were spoken by Tiit Ojasoo, the Artistic Director of Theatre NO99, who announced: “You are free!” This slogan

can be seen as a hint at the notion of “originary freedom” by Foucault, highlighted by Judith Butler: “Whatever this is that one draws upon as one resists governmentalization will be “like an originary freedom” and “something akin to the historical practice of revolt.”¹³ Therefore, the effect of critique is the same as pointed out by Michel Foucault: “[...] critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially ensure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we would call, in a word, the politics of truth.”¹⁴

To conclude, Theatre NO99 decoded the mechanisms of domination, demythologized the image of “well-informed politicians” and gave agency back to “ordinary citizens”, indicating that knowledge and power are in their hands. The situation was changed by the help of critique of mentality and demonstrated results for a longer time.

Cultural Traditions vs Culture Industry in *How to Sell a Seto?* (2012)

By contrast, in the remote corner of Estonia six non-professional Seto actresses, supervised by a professional stage director Anne Türrpu, told their stories in a small barn, performing barefoot on sand. It was a summer production with an ironic title *How to Sell a Seto?* (2012), finding its sequel in *Seto is Searching for Leelo* (2013) and *Non-stop SETO* (2015). To understand the performance it is helpful to understand the specific situation of Setomaa which is a region in the south-eastern corner of the Republic of Estonia, located on the border of Eastern and Western civilization. It is a place which has been inhabited by Estonians and their predecessors for more than 8000 years. At the moment, Setomaa is home to about

3000 Setos and about 10 000 more are living in other parts of Estonia.

Setos are an indigenous ethnic and linguistic minority with old cultural traditions. They have kept their customs of clothing, jewellery and unique ancient multiple-voice singing tradition that is called *leelo*. In 2009, *leelo* was officially recognised and added to the list of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.¹⁵ To this very day many melodies, myths and religious motives that date back three thousand years are kept alive in the oral culture of the Setos. Along with Orthodox Christianity, Setos practice and support a vernacular traditional folk religion which worships native gods, amongst whom the most outstanding is the god and mythical king Peko, the god of fertility and brewing.¹⁶

However, the present-day situation of the young Setos is complicated. On the one hand, the new generation is expected to keep up cultural traditions: wearing folk costumes, following customs and carrying out rituals. On the other hand, the young Setos are confronted with the increasing pressures of capitalism, consumerism and commercialization which are endangering the continuity of their cultural heritage (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: To wear or not to wear a folk costume? The continuity of cultural heritage is in the hands of young Setos in *Non-stop SETO*, 2015.

In *How to Sell a Seto?* we see a series of self-ironic studies of the tragic choices of young

Seto women as they find themselves at the crossroads of traditional and commercial cultures. For example, in one episode a girl is coming home from university for the weekend just to find out that her father has been drinking vodka since the early morning hours, and when going to the Seto choir singing lesson, she does not even understand all the words in the Seto dialect. The girls are faced with questions: how to react to the building of a new supermarket at the place of an old cemetery or to the fact that services and goods that use Seto symbols bear no resemblance with the traditional Seto culture (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: How to react to the building of a supermarket at the place of an old cemetery, ask Seto girls in *How to Sell a Seto?*, 2012.

As an ironic refrain the girls sing a mixture of traditional *leelo* songs and contemporary popmusic: “Super-Seto, Super-Seto, leelo, leelo”, thus pointing sarcastically to the commercial requirement “for all contemporary musical life to be dominated by the commodity form,” as stated by Theodor Adorno¹⁷. In doing so, the production *How to Sell a Seto?* left the impression of a mayday call from a sinking ship. Although the girls presented their critique as self-irony, thus making their own lives a target for the “thorn of critique”, the problems raised reflect the ills of post-totalitarian societies on a wider level: 1) poor regional politics which leave distant countryside

isolated and deserted, enhancing problems of unemployment; 2) deserted places as easy targets for tourism, possibly resulting in whole regions becoming huge open air museums, 3) on a higher level, a question of survival of old cultures. Large parts of the critique of the capitalist world presented by the Seto girls correspond to the problems of industrial society and the culture industry as analyzed by Herbert Marcuse¹⁸, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer¹⁹. Here, one can notice more than the contrast of the mythological and the rational world-views. Setos, who have lived in close contact with nature, feel the pressure of the unleashed market economy to master nature and to use it for profitable aims. Adorno admits that it is the line “both of destruction and of civilization”²⁰.

The uniqueness of traditional cultures is threatened by the increasing assault from the culture industry. The symbols of the ancient Seto culture are used for the benefit of commodities of mass production. Commercialization and the mass culture along with its fetishism, banal repetitions and “liquidation of the individual”²¹ threaten to destroy the heritage and the cultural continuity that has been kept alive for thousands of years. Here we can see the risk of the “one-dimensional universe” (Marcuse)²² of thought and behaviour. In this way, the historical experience of Estonia can be taken as an experiment – coming with the experience of totalitarian Stalinist regime, a failed attempt to build socialism and trying to prove itself now in the circumstances of market economy, Estonian theatre people voiced the mixed feelings about positive scenarios for future.

Despite the possibility of “positive rationalization” offered by *Unified Estonia* where civic society could replace corrupt government structures, the path of Enlightenment does not show many solutions in response to the mayday call of the last Setos.

In conclusion, in both of the critical productions explored above, critique itself is a practice that does not only suspend judgement but offers a new practice of values based on that very suspension, as indicated by Judith Butler²³. Furthermore, a characteristic of the essence and of the technique of critique can be noticed here, following the line of thought by Martin Heidegger²⁴. Namely, however different the scale of critical practices and however different their modes – from x-raying the mentalities of the society to performing self-ironic sketches –, technique is “a way of unconcealing”²⁵. In both cases the essence of critique is unconcealed and brought forth. In doing so, critique is not only a comment, a response, but an ongoing process. It opens up a possibility for practicing new values and for finding new directions.

Notes

- 1 Hans-Thies Lehmann, “Theatre After Theatre”, in: Marijke Hoogenboom (ed.): *Na(ar) Het Theater – After Theatre? Supplements to the International Conference on Postdramatic Theatre*. Amsterdam School of the Arts Research Group, pp. 47 – 55.
- 2 Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society”, in: *Prisms*, transl. by Samuel and Shierry Weber, Cambridge, M., 1997, pp. 17 – 34.
- 3 Stephen Wilmer, “Theatrical Nationalism: Exposing the ‘Obscene Superego’ of the System”, in: *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Spring 2009, pp. 77 – 87.
- 4 Inka Arns and Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance”, in: *Maska*, xxi, (3–4), Spring, 2006, pp. 5 – 21.
- 5 Christopher B. Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, Cambridge University Press, p. ix.
- 6 #NO55: *Ash and Money*, a film by Theatre NO99, 2015, vimeo.com/130752912 [accessed 20 September 2017].

- 7 Eero Epner, *The Board Meeting of the Reform Party*, in: *Eesti Ekspress*, 15 June 2012.
- 8 Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?", in: Michel Foucault: *The Politics of Truth*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, introduction by John Rajchman, transl. by Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter, Los Angeles: Semiotext (e), 2007, pp. 41–82, here p. 75.
- 9 Rahel Jaeggi, "Rethinking Ideology", in: Boudewijn de Bruin, Christopher F. Zurn (eds.), *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, Basingstoke et al. 2009, pp. 63–86.
- 10 Ibid., p. 47.
- 11 *NO55: Ash and Money*, a film by Theatre NO99, 2015, vimeo.com/130752912 [accessed 20 September 2017].
- 12 Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?", p. 71.
- 13 Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue", in: *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, Vol 5, 2001, www.eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en [accessed 20 September 2017].
- 14 Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?", p. 47.
- 15 Setomaa: *Unique and Genuine*, 2014, p. 4.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 40–41.
- 17 Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, ed. and with an introduction by J.M. Bernstein, London and New York 2006, p. 37.
- 18 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, London and New York 2007.
- 19 Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London 2016.
- 20 Ibid., p. 92.
- 21 Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, p. 35.
- 22 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, London and New York 2007.
- 23 Judith Butler, "What is Critique?".
- 24 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, transl. and with an introduction by William Lovitt, New York 1977.
- 25 Ibid., p. 10.