

JACOB JUNTUNEN

Department of Performing Arts  
University of Illinois, Chicago  
juntunen@uic.edu

## **“WE REPRESENT THE POLISH PEOPLE”: THE UNITED STATES PRESS’S PORTRAYAL OF TADEUSZ KANTOR’S CRICOT 2 PERFORMANCES AT THE 1984 OLYMPIC GAMES IN LOS ANGELES**

In 1979, when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan, US President Carter responded by threatening and then carrying out a boycott of the Summer Olympic games to be held in Moscow in 1980. In summer of 1984, the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc retaliated by boycotting the Olympic Games held in Los Angeles, citing security concerns. However, despite this ban placed on athletes, Polish theatre artist Tadeusz Kantor and his troupe the Cricot 2 theatre performed at the Olympic Arts Festival, heralded by the “Boston Globe” as the “biggest cultural event ever in the United States”.<sup>1</sup> They were the only theatre artists from the boycotting countries to perform in the US regardless of their government’s supposed concerns about security. Due to the political context, much US press coverage of the Cricot 2 performances used Kantor and his troupe as a synecdoche for the Polish citizenry. The US press positioned Kantor, and, hence, Polish citizens, in opposition to the communist regime. Though American papers mentioned the “emasculatation of the Polish trade union Solidarity”,<sup>2</sup> they nevertheless refused the narrative that the USSR had successfully quelled resistance and alternatively insisted, by using Kantor as an example, that the Polish people still actively resisted communism.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Kelly, *Olympic Arts Festival Is Golden*, “Boston Globe”, 22 June 1984, p. G1.

<sup>2</sup> I. Mulgrew, *L.A. Revels in an Arts Extravaganza: The Audiences Are “Willing to Take Risks”*, “The Globe and Mail” (Canada), 17 July 1984, p. H4.

This article examines the politics of the Cricot 2's performances at the Los Angeles Olympic Arts Festival and, particularly, the US reception of those performances by using a methodology proposed by Richard Knowles known as materialist semiotics.<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s, semiotics was questioned by materialists because of its suggestion that there could be a closed sign system.<sup>4</sup> In 1989 and 1990, however, Marvin Carlson – influenced by the Prague School – amended theatre semiotics by opening the signifying system beyond the production text to include signs perceived in the auditorium, the theatre's lobby, the neighborhood, and the trip to and from the theatre.<sup>5</sup> Twelve years later, Knowles combined Carlson's theories with the reader response theories of Stuart Hall to suggest the audience has even more power to interpret signs than scholarship previously acknowledged.

Materialist semiotics, as Knowles describes it, concentrates on three fundamental areas: the performance text, the conditions of production, and the conditions of reception.<sup>6</sup> In order to examine the performance text, one does a close reading of the script, the *mise-en-scène*, and the design. One can base this reading of the performance text on accounts from written sources and/or interviews, photos, videos (if available), and other records of what occurred on-stage. Knowles suggests that, if possible, one should actually attend the production multiple times to accurately use his method, not because that will provide the scholar with an objective or definitive measure of the performance text, but because it will give the scholar more detailed data to combine with other accounts of the production. In order to examine the conditions of production, one summarizes how the play came to be produced at that moment, again based on accounts from written sources or/and interviews and any other available production records. Finally, there are two aspects to examining the conditions of reception. The first is to get a sense of what it was like for an audience member to travel to the theatre, to watch the show, and then to leave the theatre, and that is the sense in which Knowles uses it most prominently in his book *Reading the Material Theatre*. One does that by analyzing the architecture of the theatre (interior and exterior), the theatre's amenities, neighborhood, transportation available to and from the site, ticket prices and audience demographics. All this can be based on accounts from written sources or/and interviews, physical visits to the theatre, photos, and histories of the neighborhood. The second aspect of investigating the conditions of reception is to analyze the discourse surrounding the play such as reviews, interviews, advertising campaigns, and any other cultural artifact that related to the play. Susan Bennett

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<sup>3</sup> R. Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, London 2004, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> M. A. Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1989; M. A. Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1990.

<sup>6</sup> R. Knowles, op. cit., p. 10.

argues that reviews and other factors surrounding the play influence a spectator's "selection" of a particular play, and that each act of buying a ticket, to some extent, is buying a particular ideology.<sup>7</sup> Reviews and advertising, like all discourse, have an ideological content. Basing one's ticket purchase on reviews and advertising, then, is to be swayed or made curious by a particular ideology. Therefore, studying the selection process helps show what ideology the spectators were buying, and how the socialization that occurred in that transaction could have challenged or maintained the dominant ideology.

However, because this paper seeks not to analyze the ideological transaction made by those who saw the performances but to examine how the US media understood Kantor's performances in their Cold War context, it highlights an oft-ignored aspect of the conditions of reception by paying special attention to historical context and the review process. This is because the conditions of reception – particularly a production's reception in the mainstream press – give the most insight into how these productions did political work. Reviews often "determine a very specific set of expectations in the audience and thus determine how that audience will receive the play".<sup>8</sup> For instance, if a review states that the play is the greatest tragedy since *Macbeth*, one may be skeptical, but it may also be difficult to see the production without the comparison in mind. Hence reviews are important artifacts for understanding how a production was received in its time. Further, the discourse of a play frequently goes beyond the bounds of the theatre through its reviews; in fact, more people may read a review than see a particular production. The reviews of a production are also evidence of how a production was integrated into a particular periodical's ideology. By looking at reviews, one can speculate on spectators' expectations of the production, how the production's discourse was incorporated into a periodical's ideological discourse, and what ideology a spectator would choose to buy in the form of tickets and/or merchandise based on that incorporation. Finally, and most importantly, this article argues that a review is trying to incorporate a theatrical production's ideology relative to the worldview of its periodical. A review of a production is archival evidence of how a periodical incorporated into its ideology an idea made material by art; by documenting one spectator's – that is, the critic's – reaction to the production, the review suggests the possible reaction of a group of like-minded spectators.

This argument can be made by utilizing the media theories of James Carey. In his work, Carey posits that there are two ways to analyze a newspaper: using the transmission view of communication or the ritual view of communication. At the center of the transmission view of communication is "the

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<sup>7</sup> S. Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, New York 1997, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> B. Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, Routledge, London 1999, p. 122.

transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control”.<sup>9</sup> This view posits that the producer of communication has information, like a good to be transported, that is sent via the medium to the audience, who receives that information like a product. The ritual view of communication “is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but towards the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs”.<sup>10</sup> The goal is not to disseminate information as far as possible for reasons of control and persuasion, but instead to make society as unified as possible. Carey argues:

This projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form – dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech – creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process.<sup>11</sup>

One can look at “news stories” – for example, reviews of Kantor’s 1984 Olympic Arts Festival performances – not as “information” that is disseminated to people outside the community of readers, but instead as “confirmation” to the already extant community of readers about how the performances are related to the community’s view of the “underlying order of things,” what one might refer to as the community’s “ideology.” For instance, a subscription to “The Nation” will not only transmit information but will also confirm a liberal ideology; likewise, a subscription to “The Wall Street Journal” will transmit information while confirming a more conservative ideology. Thus, this article argues that the ritual communication taking place in the reviews of the Cricot 2’s Los Angeles performances confirmed an ideology that believed Kantor and his actors to be radical Polish resistors to Soviet oppression. In order to understand these reviews, however, one must first examine their historical context.

While Carter’s ban on US participation in the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the Soviet’s retaliatory boycott of 1984 Los Angeles Olympic games were front page news, Polish political events were also frequently written about in US newspapers during the early 1980s. On December 13, 1981, Martial Law was imposed on Poland in order to crush the trade union movement, Solidarity. Martial Law lasted until July 22, 1983, so during the summer of 1984, Poland was only one short year out of this political crisis and still feeling the deep impact of it on its economy and civil liberties. And, while the attempt to get the USSR and the Eastern Bloc to participate in the LA Games was on the front

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<sup>9</sup> J. W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, Unwin Hyman, Boston 1989, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

page of many US newspapers in the summer of 1984, the first legal proceeding against any prominent leaders of Solidarity also received in-depth press coverage. This trial of Jacek Kuroń, Adam Michnik, Henryk Wujec, and Zbigniew Romaszewski was described in the US news media as "the most important political trial in Poland since the period immediately after WWII".<sup>12</sup> The same article stated that "increasingly generous offers of temporary exile or limited cessation of political activity in return for their freedom have consistently been refused by the defendants, who have demanded unconditional release".<sup>13</sup> Without undermining the actual bravery and heroics of these men, or the importance of this trial, it is critical to note that the writing in the newspaper article is not an impartial statement of facts. Again, according to James Carey, a newspaper article can be viewed as a ritual act of communication, maintaining and enforcing an ideology – in this case, a rather romantic view that despite the "generous offers" made by the Polish government, the heroic dissidents refuse and "demand" "unconditional release." The facts may be true, but from another perspective the storytelling lives up to US expectations of a radical dissident's fiery rebellion.

Day after day in July of 1984, there are stories in the US press about the attempts of Olympic organizers to get the USSR and the Eastern Bloc to participate; similarly, the trial in Poland of the four Solidarity leaders is covered as much as possible given that the press had limited access to the courtroom. And it is in that same July that US press coverage appears of Kantor's Olympic Arts Festival performances.

The two plays presented by the Cricot 2 company were *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole, Wielopole*. Since Kantor's work is familiar to many, there will be only a brief description here. In *The Dead Class*, the setting is a bleak village schoolhouse represented by wooden benches in which adults dressed entirely in black rags and pale, green make-up represent students returned from the dead; they act out their lessons, all the time with Kantor as himself onstage making subtle adjustments to the action. Each character seems stuck in his or her own repetitious journey: an old man carries his broken bicycle, a woman tends her mechanical cradle with two wooden balls banging inside it, a woman stands behind the window looking in from the cold. Perhaps the most chilling image is when the class enters carrying on their backs mannequins of the child corpses of their child-selves, what they looked like when they truly attended school.

*Wielopole, Wielopole* is set in a room with a revolving bed that swivels to contain a dying relative or a mannequin of a dead relative on it; a back wall of wooden slots that opens like a cattle car in which naked bodies writhe and have

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<sup>12</sup> T. Marshall, *Four Polish Dissidents' Trial Begins; Walesa, Sympathizers Barred*, "Los Angeles Times", 14 July 1984, p. A26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

dirt thrown on them; a pile of earth with wooden crosses in it suggesting an open grave; and a plethora of characters. They include uncles and aunts, a platoon of grey-faced soldiers who are shot – in both senses – by an old woman rolling around a camera out of which springs a machine gun barrel, a priest who is crucified onstage, and a Jewish man who repeatedly gets shot down and stands back up again. At the climax of this play these characters form the image of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* and are slowly led off the stage, one by one, until, finally, in an act of reconciliation the Catholic Priest and Jewish man dance off the stage together and Kantor folds up the table cloth and walks off-stage himself.

These dark, visual, and abstract plays seem to puzzle some US reviewers. As a result, they give their pieces titles like, "*Wielopole*": *Not Exactly Our Town*,<sup>14</sup> and write, like Sylvia Drake, that "'The Dead Class' is not 'Fiddler on the Roof'".<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, in the same review Drake also writes that "Its after-taste of death in life may be foreign and not entirely satisfying. But it's also disturbing and, above all, it doesn't go away".<sup>16</sup> No matter their reaction to or understanding of the plays, every reviewer comments on the indelible hold Kantor's images placed on their imagination.

Dan Sullivan reported: "I've never seen a theatre audience as slow to disperse as the first-night crowd for Cricot 2's 'The Dead Class' [...] They milled around the blown-up manifestoes posted near the doors, studying the vatic prose of director Taduesz Kantor [...] Compare the rush to the car after the average show – the need to put the experience behind you. This crowd wanted to let the overtones of Kantor's dream-play linger and perhaps resolve. Even if they didn't do so, an experience had still been had".<sup>17</sup>

Even more forceful in his admiration of Kantor was the director John Houseman, an important organizer of the Olympic Arts Festival. Houseman was quoted saying "that American theatre by comparison 'is terribly realistic, pedestrian theater. Compare our theater to [...] Kantor. It may be that they simply take their theater more seriously. It must give us pause. We must not be satisfied'".<sup>18</sup> While realism may dominate US theatre in a way it does not in Poland, it is difficult to believe that Polish theatre artists take their craft "more seriously" than their counterparts in the US Surely US theatre artists contemporaneous with this newspaper article – such as Richard Foreman, the Wooster Group, and Robert Wilson – would be surprised to hear that they did not take theatre seriously. What reason might Houseman have for saying Kantor has

<sup>14</sup> S. Drake, "*Wielopole*": *Not Exactly Our Town*, "Los Angeles Times", 13 July 1984, p. G1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> D. Sullivan, *A "Dead Class" for Whom the Schoolbells Toll*, "Los Angeles Times", 12 July 1984, p. H1.

<sup>18</sup> J. Houseman, quoted in M. Gendel, *Foreign Troupes Overshadowing U.S. Counterparts*, Houseman Says, "Los Angeles Times", 14 July 1984, p. F2.

more at stake in theatre than US artists? It is plausible that Houseman is glorifying Kantor's art by exoticizing his Polish background, which brings one back to the historical context of these media articles.

Interestingly, Houseman's interview discussing how Eastern Europeans take their theatre more seriously than Americans appears on the page just above an article on the defection of the Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky. While the US reviews of the Cricot 2 performances seem to be concentrating on the artistic merit of Kantor's work, they do not occur in a political vacuum. They are literally surrounded by articles about the Soviet and Eastern Bloc boycott of the games; about Soviet artists defecting; and about trials of high-level leaders of Solidarity. Where does Kantor fit into all this?

Much as the coverage of the real life Polish dissidents fulfills a pre-conceived notion of uncompromising radicals, the US media describe Kantor as an uncompromisingly political artist. In an article titled "Kantor: The Curmudgeon as Artist", Dan Sullivan cites Kantor insulting the work of some of his fellow theatre directors – particularly Ariane Mnouchkine's Kabuki-influenced interpretations of Shakespeare – and then goes on to write, "It's not the way that the solid citizens who run theaters in the English-speaking world behave. But, when they refer to themselves at panel discussions as 'artists,' it always seems a bit of a figure of speech. Kantor filled our (and, probably, his) romantic image of the artist as a lone irascible genius, responsible to one thing alone – the fulfillment of his vision".<sup>19</sup> In the same way that the US press portrays the Solidarity leaders on trial as unafraid to stand up to their country's political leaders, the US media represent Kantor as unafraid to rebuke other influential theatrical innovators. And, just as the Solidarity leaders' refusal to compromise fulfills the US newspapers' vision of political dissidents, Kantor fulfills the US reviewer's image of an artist with his uncompromising manner.

In the same article, *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole, Wielopole* are described as "strongly political, a kaddish for the awful losses that Poland has taken in this century – a country under perpetual occupation, it seems".<sup>20</sup> Though the losses and occupations that Kantor's two plays specifically address are those from the era of the two World Wars, the phrase "perpetual occupation" cannot help but bring to mind the contemporaneous influence on Poland by the USSR. And when the article later states that Kantor has "outstripped [his oppressors]," it is inevitable that one not only thinks of his youthful oppressors, but also his contemporaneous ones.

This view is amplified in the media coverage of Kantor's only public interview session during the Los Angeles Olympic Arts Festival. One representative article describes the interview this way: "The largest media gathering since the first week of the Olympic Arts Festival took place at a converted sound

<sup>19</sup> D. Sullivan, *Kantor: The Curmudgeon as Artist*, "Los Angeles Times", 22 July 1984, p. P41.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

stage Wednesday to hear Tadeusz Kantor [...] answer essentially one question: Why did the Polish government, party to the Olympic boycott, allow Kantor and company to come to Los Angeles?"<sup>21</sup> What followed was basically a 45-minute response from Kantor during which he spoke at length about artistic freedom and independence. He stated that he was not concerned about security, the supposed reason for the boycott, and he also stated that his artistic freedom is helped by what he called "fervent friends" in the arts throughout the world. "That is why the Polish Ministry of Culture cannot refuse us," he said. "Because if they did, it would be a great scandal".<sup>22</sup> Perhaps. But he also, and perhaps more convincingly, stated that he has left the country many times and has always returned, making him a low-risk for defection. As he put it, "I know many painters and writers who left Poland to live abroad [...] But for me, an artist must have a wall in front of himself against which he can bang his head. I find that in Poland".<sup>23</sup>

Whether Polish authorities trusted Kantor because they knew Poland was a necessary wall against which he could bang his head, or whether Polish officials were too afraid of international outcry if they refused Kantor and his company passports, Kantor was allowed his international travel. But what the coverage of this press conference emphasized was not actually the answers Kantor gave. Instead, the coverage focused on Kantor's relationship to his government. Quoted again and again in the press from this interview is Kantor's statement: "We represent the Polish people." He said in full: "We are not official. We are not government sponsored. We represent the Polish people. If I felt even the most minimal trace of government restrictions I would leave the country".<sup>24</sup> Here we again see the US media treating Kantor like an uncompromising artist, but this time explicitly stating that if he felt in any way oppressed by the communist regime, he would leave; in other words, if he felt constrained he would defect. This gives lie to the idea that Martial Law and other government policies successfully allowed the communist government to crush the resistance of the Polish people. Not only did the US press portray the leaders of Solidarity attempting to use their trial as a public rallying point, the same media described Kantor as an artist stating openly and in public that the communist government could not keep him from his artistic freedom. This trope was repeated again and again in US newspapers; perhaps these quotes from Kantor were repeated so widely precisely because the USSR and the Eastern Bloc were clearly successful at repressing their athletes' freedom to leave their borders to attend the Olympic Games. In Kantor the US media could portray the ideology

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<sup>21</sup> M. Gendel, *Polish Acting Troupe Gets Media Treatment*, "Los Angeles Times", 5 July 1984, p. H1

<sup>22</sup> T. Kantor, quoted *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> T. Kantor, quoted *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> T. Kantor, quoted *ibid.*

that the people under communism fought their governments and, in fact, were succeeding in their rebellion.

But how true was this, even for Kantor himself? While he was allowed to attend the Olympic Arts Festival, was he truly free from any governmental interference? And was he the politically rebellious artist representing the Polish people as the US press claimed?

On December 11, 1981, two days before Martial Law was imposed on Poland, the country's most important artistic figures met in Warsaw, ostensibly to discuss the state of the arts in their country. Given the circumstances in Polish politics, however, and since Solidarity delegates were at the same time gathered for a meeting of the National Coordinating Committee (NCC) in the Lenin Shipyard, Gdańsk to review a draft declaration to endorse protests in cities all over Poland, the artists in Warsaw understandably took to the floor and spoke about politics. "Speaker after speaker delivered impassioned speeches on the state of nation instead" of the state of the arts.<sup>25</sup> But, as described by Candyce Fisher: "Then it was the turn of avant-garde theatre director Tadeusz Kantor. He, too, was obsessed, but by a different demon: his work. Kantor said he was an artist, not a speechmaker. And he proved it, to the indignation of some and the amusement of others. For an hour and a half he took center stage doing what he is known for – performing".<sup>26</sup> Without insulting Kantor's work as an artist, can a man who is unwilling to talk about politics even on what might have been the eve of popular revolution really be a representative of Polish rebellion as the Western media portrayed him in 1984? Without a doubt, he was an iconoclast and not in Los Angeles representing the communist government, but that is a far cry from being a symbol of a people actively resisting communism.

Further, how free was Kantor from government interference? The fact that he and his troupe could travel is certainly remarkable, and it does seem that throughout his life he was able to make his avant-garde work regardless of the prevailing fashion of the authorities. This would be especially true when he started making theatre as a young man during the Nazi occupation, for which he could have been killed, and certainly true for his underground theatre during the early years of communism in Poland. But by 1984, he was part of Poland's artistic establishment. While he and his troupe may not have relied on the Polish government for funding or institutional support, even his privately funded group was not immune to the government censors. Before a play began rehearsing, the script had to be reviewed and approved by the authorities; then, to make sure nothing got by the censor during that initial process, the dress rehearsal was then monitored by cultural overseers from the communist Party

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<sup>25</sup> C. Fisher, *Theater of Death's Live Wire*, "Los Angeles Times", 1 July 1984, p. T45.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

before the play was given its final stamp of approval.<sup>27</sup> While Kantor operated with a tremendous amount of artistic freedom, it would be inaccurate to say that he was completely outside the influence of the Polish government.

Thus, while Kantor was certainly rebellious and innovative artistically – without doubt one of the foremost theatre artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – he was not the synecdoche for a politically rebellious Polish people that the Western press tried to make him during its coverage of the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival. The articles covering his theatre's performances displayed more about the prevailing ideology in the USA – that the Polish people were succeeding in resisting their communist government despite the successful ban on athletes attending the Olympic Games – than they did about the performances of Kantor and the Cricot 2 Theatre.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.