



“Ceci est une pipe!”- Reality and Illusion in Tadeusz Kantor’s ”The Dead Class”

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Abstract: *Tadeusz Kantor’s theatre was the work of a reformer and one of the landmarks of 20th century art. Throughout his career, Kantor resisted illusion and firmly believed in the reality of his productions. His very presence on stage during his performances was an anti-illusionist act. Kantor didn’t want to create through his art something similar to reality, but a reality in itself. For Kantor, ‘illusion’ was tantamount to ‘fake’, while ‘reality’ was the equivalent of ‘authenticity’. This article investigates the Polish director’s view on the concepts of illusion and reality, referring constantly both to his performances and to his manifestos, its main documented conclusion being that the resistance to illusion was Ariadne’s thread in Kantor’s art.*

Key words: *authenticity, avant-garde theatre, informal art, illusion, reality.*

Motto: *“Realness has grounded itself in illusion. For good.
There is no realness, Mr. K.
Finally, you have learned your lesson, Mr. K.
Better later than never.”*

Tadeusz Kantor – (1994, 32)

So many pages have been written on the prolific, multidimensional Tadeusz Kantor, whose contribution to Polish and world theatre is doubled by his activity in the field of visual art, that one can but wonder what more could be said both about Kantor and *The Dead Class*. It has become common knowledge that, as a theatre director, Kantor achieved his fame mainly due to this performance, which has become a landmark in theatre history.

Writing about Kantor after so many brilliant minds have analysed his work is a risky endeavour. However, it is a necessary step. Thus, the somewhat unconventional aim of the hereby academic paper is to reframe the perspective on both *The Dead Class* and the aesthetic achievements of its legendary, and, hence, canonical, director with the aid of a key-concept in visual arts - another field in which Kantor excelled: “the vanishing point”.

There is a key to this approach: as my aim is to tackle the relationship between reality and illusion in Kantor’s theatre, my interpretation of the vanishing point as a concept is a metaphoric one. Namely, the convention that generates the analytic code of my interpretation resides in the following extrapolation: the vanishing point is generated, in two-dimensional visual works, by what theorists have named “receding parallels”. A good example of an image with receding parallels that appear to meet could be a picture



of train tracks in perspective. The tracks are side by side, but due to the linear approach of the image, they seem to converge. Reality and illusion in Kantor's theatre are the two receding parallels I'm referring to, and the main questions tackled in my research are: Is there, in Kantor's theatre, a point in which reality and illusion meet, and if there is, is it real, or is it a "vanishing point", a convergence point which is only apparent? Is the theatrical convention a part of the realm of illusion? Can it be broken? Can theatre exist without illusion? Did Kantor win the lifelong war he waged on illusion?

There is a foundation, a theoretical framework that constitutes the starting point of my research on Kantor's *The Dead Class* from the "vanishing point" perspective. This framework has been outlined by Michal Kobialka's work. The prominent scholar has written extensively about Tadeusz Kantor's concern with the pole of reality on the one hand, and illusion, its antipode, on the other hand. I owe Kobialka my first glimpse into what Kantor himself wrote in his manifestos about his views on theatrical convention, on acting and on the aesthetic value of his theatre. Further resources I have accessed include the bilingual journal *Le Theatre en Pologne/Theatre in Poland*, where several insightful interviews with Tadeusz Kantor were published. In some of these interviews, the Polish director talks about his take on reality and illusion in theatre. Last, but not least, one of the arguments for this research is what Guy Scarpetta has stated more than once: Kantor directs like a painter paints (see Scarpetta 2000, *passim*). This not only reminds the theatre aficionado that Kantor had a solid background in the visual arts, but it also makes an analysis of his performances from the perspective of the vanishing point legitimate.

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Kantor's attitude towards illusion is one of the main topics in *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, by Michal Kobialka (Kobialka 2010), a thorough and enlightening work on Kantor's theatre. Kobialka introduces his readers to a most intriguing feature of Kantor's aesthetic endeavours: the resistance to illusion. Illusion in theatre has preoccupied theorists and artists, from Aristotle to Brecht and Boal. Some of them have stated that theatre cannot exist without illusion – even if it is trying to break it -, while others do not concur with this view.

The relationship between reality and illusion in theatre has always been delicate, even more so when one considers Kantor's work. This problematic antagonism has reached its peak with Kantor, possibly because, starting with the avant-garde, the tension between the conventional and the experimental has become obvious, and Tadeusz Kantor's work is illustrative of this phenomenon. In his theatrical productions, especially in *The Dead Class*, the very fabric of theatre is questioned, as Kantor enters his own performance in an anti-illusionary attempt. He becomes the director-actor-conductor of his own show, and that, in itself, is a statement.

I would like to refer next to a chapter included my PhD Thesis, *Poetic versus Political. Alternative Theatre in Poland (1954-1989)*. The chapter deals with Kantor's work and it is titled *The Resistance to Illusion. Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre*. In this chapter, I



have underlined the fact that Kantor was an insurgent throughout his entire career and he was “surely, for many social groups in Poland, a constant provocateur” (Kluth 1997, min. 06:34). As the inventor of the idea and of the phrase “reality of the lowest rank” – which refers to the use of common, non-artistic objects for artistic ends -, he continually opposed conventional approaches and clichés in the performances he directed.

“This lack of appreciation towards conventional reality led Kantor to the rejection of imitation, illusion and fiction in his art (Kobialka 2010, 18-19). Moreover, Kantor’s refusal to accept the concept of a traditional theatrical space, as well as his rejection of the “artistic object” controlled by imitation and representation, had long-term consequences in his theatre, leading him not only to the elimination of stage props, but also to the redefinition of the function of the stage set, costumes, stage lighting and, finally, to the redefinition of the function of stage action.” (Kobialka 2010, 21-22).

Kantor’s view on reality and illusion was strongly related to his own purpose and status within his own productions, but also to the actor’s purpose and status in his performances. In a conversation with Tereza Krzemień, Kantor said that only the actor existed at Cricot-2. There were no parts, no roles. Only he/she, a certain person, existed. Only reality, cleansed of illusion (see Krzemień 1975, 39).

With regard to Kantor’s very actions in the process of dislodging illusion in his shows, theatre critic August Grodzicki relates how the director, who entered the stage during his own performance, would walk with an enigmatic expression on his face, as if he were there to direct the situation in person, in order to destroy theatre’s illusion (see Grodzicki 1977, 11). Kantor himself talked about his onstage interventions, legitimizing them as a consequence of an anti-illusionist frame of mind, in a 1988 text entitled *The Real Me* (see Sociu 2007, online).

Kantor was concerned with the relationship between reality and illusion even in his paratheatrical work. In one of his most notable happenings, *Leckja anatomii wg Rembrandta/An Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* (see Mahlow 1969, min. 46:05) at Nüremberg Kunsthalle, 1968 and Foksal Gallery, 1969, the artist tackled the concept of “reality of the lowest rank”. In this happening, Kantor played the part of a doctor dissecting a fully-dressed male human body. But instead of taking out the organs, he removed from the deceased’s pockets a mouse trap, magazine pages, official letters, buttons, et al., playfully signaling what the man’s daily life had consisted of. This approach to the *reality of the lowest rank* can also be found in the Polish director’s theatre productions. Regarding these productions, one can definitely agree with Jan Kłossowicz, who has stated that, for Kantor,

“[...] the primary opposition was that between ‘Reality’ and ‘Illusion’. As we know, Tadeusz Kantor used these terms to explain the difference between



a traditional theatre dependent on literature and his new, autonomous theatre, which he considered an independent work of art. Traditional theatre is created in order to ‘cheat’ the audience, to make people believe the story shown on stage, to create an ‘Illusion’ meant for spectators and make the ‘Illusion’ grow in their minds.” (Kłossowicz 1995, online).

Guy Scarpetta thinks that the Polish director “differs undeniably from Artaud regarding the matter of ‘illusion’” (Scarpetta 2000, 81). Artaud complained that “since the Renaissance, the theater had been ‘falsehood and illusion’” (Lewis s.a., online), an idea on which his opinions are convergent with Kantor’s – in the matter of traditional theatre. But with Kantor, it was rather all about destroying the illusion, like in the Baroque age, through its very methods. By means of showing the codes, the conventions (see Scarpetta 2000, 115). Not even the written text of the plays escaped the director’s keen eyes: after his interest in Witkiewicz had reached its peak, Kantor’s aim was to demolish the reality of fiction, of illusion, the reality of the text, and head towards a more – “real” reality (see Krzemień 1975, 40).

So far, we have seen that Kantor was keen to destroy illusion in the theatre. But what exactly is this *illusion*, against which the prominent director waged his great war? In her book, *Les termes clés de l'analyse du théâtre*, Anne Ubersfeld tackles this term:

“Traditionally speaking, theatrical illusion is defined as the power of theatre practice to produce an object which is so similar to reality that the receptor-spectator is deceived into considering it real. Such an illusion is, obviously, itself imaginary: the illusion of an illusion.” (Ubersfeld 1999, 45)

This illusionary *mise-en-abîme*, which can be found in theatre, is what Tadeusz Kantor tried to break in his performances. And this may be why theatre critic August Grodzicki wrote that Kantor was one of the most radical informal artists in Europe (see Grodzicki 1977, 9). Moreover, his theatre, regardless of the period in his career we’re looking at (*Autonomous Theatre*, *Informal Theatre* or *The Theatre of Death* – to mention just a few) avoided conventional dramatic structures, being closer to painting and poetry. This idea is endorsed by Hans-Thies Lehmann, who thinks that “Kantor’s scenes manifest the refusal of a dramatic representation of the all too ‘dramatic’ events that are the subject of his theatre – torture, prison, war and death – in favour of a pictorial poetry of the stage” (Lehmann 2006, 71). In the same line of thought, Guy Scarpetta compared Kantor with Goya (see Scarpetta 2000, *passim*), and Tadeusz Kantor himself declared more than once that his theatrical and visual experiences were the same (see Scarpetta 2000, 32).

The Polish director’s creative contributions were accompanied by his own theoretical manifestos – which was typical for the avant-garde period. Thus, interviewed by Bogdan Gieraczyński for the journal *Le Théâtre en Pologne/Theatre in Poland*, Kantor stated that in his work, the so-called theoretical basis was indispensable (see



Gieraczyński 1981, 14). His performances covered many a decade and they all co-existed with manifestos: *Autonomous Theatre* (1963), *Happening Theatre: The Theatre of Events* (1967), *Informal Theatre* (1969), *Zero Theatre* (1969) and *Theatre of Death* (1975). In most of these manifestos, getting the record straight between reality and illusion was Kantor's priority. The director's theories were always applied through his performances, and even though he started to be noticed in world theatre only beginning with the *Theatre of Death* period, all his performances are relevant for the attention he gave to the relationship between reality illusion, a preoccupation which counts as a trait of his career from its inception until its very end.

Whether we talk about *Autonomous Theatre*, *Happening Theatre*, *Zero Theatre* or the *Theatre of Death*, Kantor resisted illusion in each and every one of these periods. What changed from one to the next was the way he approached this issue, and not the issue in itself. In *Lesson 12* from the *Milano Lessons*, Kantor stated:

“There is no work of art [...]
There is no ‘holy’ illusion
There is no ‘holy’ performance
There is only an object that is torn out of life and reality [...]
There is no artistic space [...]
There is only real space [...]”

(Kantor s.a., online)

After having read this excerpt from *The Milano Lessons*, one can only assume that Kantor thought that illusion hindered expression, turned art into fakeness and represented an obstacle in the way of that inner reality which he aimed to make the spectators contemplate.

“The resistance the artist showed towards illusion, and later even its banishment from his theatre, expressed Kantor's wish to retain what had been forgotten in the transfer from the real space of the legitimate reality to the theatrical space” (Kobialka 2010, 23).

The peak of Kantor's theatre is considered by many professionals to be embodied by *The Dead Class*, his best-known performance. It is also an example of how Kantor tried to break the *mise-en-abîme* of illusion, by entering his own show. Two of his theatrical productions, *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole, Wielopole*, are “the most clear expression of theatre as memory” (Crişan 2008, 171) and they are also marked by the fact that the director was on the stage, annihilating convention, increasing authenticity.

In *The Dead Class*, Kantor used surrealist texts written by Schultz and Witkiewicz as a starting point for creating an apocalyptic landscape: spectres returning to a classroom, carrying childlike mannequins with them. “Death in Kantor's work is not dramatically



staged but ceremonially repeated” (Lehmann 2006, 72) and, having become a character in its own rights in the performance (the cleaning woman), Death can be seen in a genuine cleansing ritual. The *Dead Class* “premiered in 1975 at the Krzysztofory Gallery in Cracow. The *Theatre of Death* manifesto (1975) is a record of Kantor’s thought process in that period. What is notable is the shift of the focus from the visible and concrete reality towards regions ‘of the other side’.” (Kobialka 2010, 69).

According to Nowel Witts,

“nothing had prepared the world for the astonishing series of textual and imagistic conjunctions that made *The Dead Class* of 15 November 1975 into one of the key theatrical works of the twentieth century. It was first performed, where much of Kantor’s work originated, in the medieval Krzysztofory Gallery in the basement of the sixteenth-century Krzysztofory Palace in ulica Szcepanska in Krakow, which is still very much as it was in Kantor’s day. Away from the crowds in the city streets above, *The Dead Class* became Kantor’s first great international signature work, eclipsing to a great extent both his former visual work and his former theatre pieces” (Witts 2009, 56).

The main meeting point of reality and illusion in Kantor’s show is the very presence of the director onstage, as himself. Nowel Witts writes about this, referring to Kantor and his actors in *The Dead Class*:

“He stands in front of and among them, dressed in black trousers, jacket and scarf and a white shirt, and silently directs them with hand gestures throughout the show. He appears as the master of ceremonies, allowing certain actions to happen and controlling others, while orchestrating the movement and the sound with impatient gestures to the theatre technicians. There is a clear parallel between him and the conductor of a symphony orchestra, who makes sure that the players come in on time. But there is also a kind of Brechtian distance created whereby the audience sees the show partly through the presence of Kantor, who becomes the editor of what we see” (Witts 2009, 57).

The Dead Class is, actually, “a series of expressionist games, fights and scenes that together combine to make a remembered and distorted picture of school days and memories” (Witts 2009, 57). The best-known filmed version of *The Dead Class* was directed by Andrzej Wajda. In this version we can see that

“[...] as the audience enters the seating area Kantor is standing near the desks, waiting to start the piece, like the classical conductor waiting for the audience to be quiet and the orchestra to start playing. Indeed Kantor’s function throughout is the theatrical equivalent of such a figure, constantly guiding the players, making sure



the visual and aural balance is correct and as it ought to be. Sitting among the desks are the twelve performers of *Cricot 2*, all dressed in what might be classed as funeral clothes, with bowler hats and white and grey faces, staring straight ahead in silence, a frozen image of a remembered or invented past.” (Witts 2009, 58)

Remembered or invented past? This is a very pertinent question one may ask when speaking about Kantor’s productions. However, this might not be the right way to ask it – or to answer it. What Kantor is doing in his performances, and especially in *The Dead Class* – is to combine the real past with the invented one. Hence, the receding parallels that lead to the “vanishing point” in his work are reality and illusion.

Kantor’s entire theatrical and visual career was an attempt to define and redefine the concepts of reality and illusion. His permanent questioning of these concepts, his turmoil and incessant practical and theoretical exploration are the grounds on which he created his innovative, authentic, permanently changing art. *The Dead Class* remains the foremost example of his attempts to break the illusion of theatre. Did he succeed? The answer may lie in the motto of my paper: “Realness has grounded itself in illusion. For good./ There is no realness, Mr. K./Finally, you have learned your lesson, Mr. K./Better later than never.” (Kantor 1994, 32) These are the words that Kantor, with his well-known playful spirit, attributed to a fictional – hence *illusory* – critic of his work. In the end, it remains for the viewer/spectator of Kantor’s work to decide who was right: the Kantor of the *Milano Lessons*, who thinks that “There is no ‘holy’ illusion/There is no ‘holy’ performance/There is only an object that is torn out of life and reality”, or the Kantor who created this fictional critic who chastises Mr K. and tells him there is no realness, because it has grounded itself in illusion.

The concept of “vanishing point” in itself refers to an illusion – since in an image the two parallels only converge in an imaginary point; the viewer knows that in reality they remain parallel. Is this also the case with Kantor’s theatre? The answer may lie, again, in the realm of visual arts: just as Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* signals to the viewer that he or she is not looking at a real pipe, but at the image of a pipe, Kantor’s work has succeeded in revealing and breaking the imitation of life by short circuiting the theatrical convention. Kantor’s primary anti-illusionary gesture consists of his live, onstage interferences. In Kantor’s theatre, *Ceci est une pipe!*

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