

## ***Gardzienice: Political Bodies in Social Transformation***

### **Bryce Lease**

What we are dealing with here is the old structural notion of the gap between the Space and the positive content that fills it: although the Communist regimes, in their positive content, were mostly a dismal failure, generating terror and misery, they simultaneously opened up a certain space, the space of utopian expectations which, among other things, enabled us to measure the failure of actually existing Socialism itself.

(Zizek 2001: 131)

Włodzimirz Staniewski, the artistic director of OPT Gardzienice, changed the focus of his work in 1990. Up until this point he looked at local traditions of peasant folk culture, which he encountered in what he called 'Expeditions'. The group travelled with a horse and cart to the villages of Eastern Poland. 'The culmination of the Expedition was an evening gathering in which actors and the village community met in song, dance and storytelling.' (Kornas, 2007: 14) In the mid-1990's, Expeditions stopped altogether. Staniewski wanted to exploit mythology as the un-dead drive in all of us, looking at Tristan and Iseult, Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, and now Euripides's tragedies *Electra* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Staniewski is interested in that which can be translated into any culture. In the enigma of the myth lies the collective spirit, which we each participate in through singing, dancing, gesture, music and spoken text. The underlying belief here is that audiences feel alienated at the theatre without mythological texts. (Staniewski and Hodge 2004) Staniewski sees the human urge for personal and collective transcendence through theatre as possible, but nowadays only by means of such texts; what he is suggesting, of course, is the re-unification of humankind under yet another sublime body, a Master-Signifier that structures our spiritual history, only this time it's global. *Carmina Burana*

(1990-1992) was a turning point for Gardzienice. Poland's transition to democracy made the social climate 'lighter and more humorous' (Allain 1997: 85); Staniewski referred to this period of transition as the 'new reality' (Staniewski and Hodge 2004: 35). The position of cultural life in capitalism should be directly contrasted with the semblance of that life in a totalitarian regime. As Stanisław Baranczak has pointed out, there were three main reasons for 'official' culture to flourish in Poland pre-1989: for use as propaganda, as a means of upholding the international image of the regime and for the value of cultural entertainment, 'which can divert the people's attention from more serious issues' (1990: 68). Baranczak argues, however, that after 1976 there was a breach between official culture and subculture that could no longer be disavowed. It was in this in-between space that theatre became a potent political tool, when 'culture as such refused to be owned by the regime.' (Baranczak 1990: 75)

Tamara Trojanowska has observed that the 'discourse of transition' in the early 1990's dominated the theatre scene along with the 'discourse of crisis' which reflected the 'fact that Polish culture was losing its special status in the national hierarchy of values and instead was becoming a commodity' (2005: 93). This latter discourse also signaled the end of Polish Romanticism as a cherished form. So, in 1992, when *Carmina Burana* premiered (Gardzienice's first performance since 1983), the alternative theatre was no longer seen to be the age-old representative of Polish values (to be directly opposed to those of the colonizing power). On some level, the theatre was merely seen to be representing itself, functioning in 'a time of disorientation and traumatic discontinuity.' (Filipowicz 1991: 76)

Kathleen Cioffi disagrees with this view, as does Staniewski. Though Polish theatre could no longer hold its position as the 'life breath of the epoch', it certainly did not lose its ability to reflect and digest the transitional experience of the country. Cioffi claims there could no longer be a national avant-garde theatre. Opinion was mixed amongst Polish theatre-makers as to whether

theatre had been a casualty or a beneficiary of the Polish revolution, as Filipowicz explained it (1991: 71).

In looking at the performance of *Carmina Burana* I hope to shed light on the struggle of a political paradigm shift, and the modes in which an established theatre company attempted to symbolize that transition. How does this particular legend reflect the social problems connected to the socio-political shift in Poland during the early 1990's? It is my greater aim, however, to highlight not only the particular significance of the events themselves, but the way in which such a political transition (and the attempts to properly symbolize it) affords a new perspective on the very notion of subjectivity itself, how it is not only marked by mankind's inability to fit comfortably into his own environment, but the more unsettling conclusion that subjectivity is defined by such failures.

## **Tristan and Isolde**

'First presented in 1990, [*Carmina Burana*] responded to the monumental social and political changes in Central and Eastern Europe brought about by the collapse of communism' (Staniewski and Hodge 2004: 11). For Staniewski, there were the obvious elements that drew him to the piece. Being one of the oldest legends in Europe, Tristan and Isolde provided poetry that was dramatic and could be set to music, using the song cycle of the "Carmina Burana", as well as indigenous laments and folksongs. There are many versions of this legend, ranging from 'Gottfried von Strassburg's epic romance to Wagner's operatic version' (Staniewski and Hodge 2004: 105). Staniewski chose to use J. Bédier's account of the legend as the starting point for this performance. The music came from 'the thirteenth century Carmina Burana song cycle, which was written mainly by anonymous clerks and wandering scholars or Goliards' (Allain 1997: 92-93). This music fit well with the themes of aspiration and conflict, virtue and

indulgence, as well as the human struggle with Fortune that characterize the legend of Tristan and Isolde.

Staniewski described the performance's main theme as 'an allegorical image of a human being in an age of transition...a vision of man suspended between two cultures (pagan and Christian). And so the Middle Ages became a metaphor of man's condition in our contemporary world' (Allain 1997: 99). In this mode, the performance can be situated between both of Trojanowska's discourses of transition and crisis.

It is of great interest to this critic that Staniewski should choose 'love' as the theme for this performance. Staniewski claims that love was the only appropriate response to the 'velvet revolution', in its ability to reflect the more benevolent elements of human nature, such as forgiveness, kindness, tolerance, loyalty, etc. However, what is less obvious, and of more interest to this analysis, is exactly the *class* of love Staniewski chose to represent on stage. Why was it courtly love – as it is depicted in the story of *Tristan and Isolde*, the most popular form of love in the poetry of the medieval ages – that captured Staniewski's attention?

Staniewski says that loss of love is essential: 'isn't it paradoxical that it is only in moments of losing that love becomes ideal?' (Staniewski and Hodge, 2004: 116). In Lacanian theory, it is not that this functions as a paradox that is curious, but rather that without paradox there is no desire. In Freudian terms, Staniewski is referring to the loss of *the Thing*, which leads to nostalgia, sentimentality, and the sublimation of the feminine. Lacan tells us that the essential quality of courtly love, one of the key themes of poetry in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Northern Europe, is 'unhappy love', in which the female becomes sublimated, and is seen for her "values": 'she is essentially identified with a social function that leaves no room for her person or her own liberty, except with reference to her religious rights' (Lacan 1992: 147).

In *Carmina Burana*, the relationship between Tristan and Isolde is not viable because of King Mark, Isolde's betrothed.<sup>1</sup> Given the status of the female as commodity in the medieval ages, and the brotherly relationship between Tristan and Mark, it is unthinkable that any sexual relationship should ever exist between the illicit lovers. Thus sparks the *drama* of the scenario: this barrier to love. While Tristan's devoted friendship with Mark thickens the plot, it is the inaccessibility of Isolde that is the ultimate point of departure; as Lacan suggests, 'the object involved, the *feminine object*, is introduced through the door of privation or inaccessibility' (1992: 149).

The audience, however, cannot take Isolde's passion too seriously, for she has drunk the love potion. This potion makes any person who drinks it fall in love with the first member of the opposite sex they see. Isolde screams and begs for Tristan on stage, and yet it is the screams of a hysteric, someone in a trance, a woman who's been drugged. There are a number of approaches one could deploy in the interpretation of Isolde's drugged state. One could choose the medieval context in which Isolde is purely symbolic: '[i]n this poetic field the feminine object is emptied of all real substance' (ibid.). And so the Lady is 'never characterized for any of her real, concrete virtues: wisdom, prudence, competence,' (ibid.) which is why we encounter her as a hysteric. Staniewski refers to this loss of reality when he speaks of the foundation of Solidarity: 'Poles have been in such a cave, a prison where everything has been suspended. Nothing was real: not politics, history, people, not life' (Staniewski and Hodge 2004: 117). What man demands, however, according to Lacan, is to be deprived of something *real* (1992: 149). Once Isolde enters the symbolic realm then we can see more clearly what it is that Tristan has been deprived of; namely, *das Ding*, or the Thing.

The poetry of courtly love tends to locate in the place of the Thing (which is missing) certain discontents of the culture. And it does so at a time when the historical

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<sup>1</sup> In the triad Mark-Isolde-Tristan we are meant to detect a parallel with Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot.

circumstances bear witness to a disparity between the especially harsh conditions of reality and certain fundamental demands.

(Lacan 1992: 150)

One cannot help but read this in the context of Poland in 1990. In other words, what we should focus on in this intersection between the Polish political transition ('harsh conditions of reality') and the nature of courtly love ('and certain fundamental demands') is precisely the configuration of the Thing itself (both in its Lacanian definition and as the Kantian Thing-in-itself). Essentially, the key insight of courtly love revolves around a constitutive lack – the relationship is sustained insofar as it cannot be properly consummated (thus we have the example on Wagner's *Tristan of Liebestod*, wherein the courtly relationship between the illicit lovers can only be fully achieved in death), and the Thing 'is nothing but its own lack, the elusive specter of the lost primordial object of desire engendered by the symbolic Law/Prohibition' (Zizek 2002a: 97). This is why Lacan was forced to employ the notion of *objet petit a* as a means of reconciling the a priori void of the Thing to 'the empirical objects that give us (dis)pleasure' (ibid.), wherein they begin to function as stand-ins for the impossible Thing. Can we really view the political situation in 1990 and Staniewski's fascination with courtly love as a coincidence? That is to say, it is easy to merely relate Staniewski's own reasons for wishing to incorporate the theme of 'love' in his work (forgiveness, tolerance, etc.), but his use of courtly love in the guise of Tristan and Isolde relates back to the relationship between desire and the Thing, and Staniewski does so precisely 'at a time when the historical circumstances bear witness to a disparity between the especially harsh conditions of reality and certain fundamental demands.'

There are two kinds of love affair represented in the piece: that between Tristan and Izolda Starsza (the older), and the secondary romance between Tristan and Izolda Moldsza (the younger). The latter is permitted and the former is forbidden. The staged representation of these opposing forms of passion perfectly exemplifies Lacan's distinction between *pleasure* and *enjoyment*.

Tristan knows the ultimate penalty for his affair with Isolde will be his own death. Instead of backing away from this threat, he is drawn closer to it. This is ultimately the Kantian opposition between external law and unwritten, interior moral law. A love affair, like that between Tristan and Isolde the Younger, creates no risk, no danger, it merely procures *pleasure*.

If Staniewski's dissection of Isolde into Older (prohibited) and Younger (transcendental) as the distinction between the corporeal (the erotic) and the sublime (the ideal) then we find the basic matrix of courtly love. Only this staging complicates the normal rendering of the Lady (Isolde) as a sublime object. In Lacan's writing on courtly love in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he reminds us that the Lady *qua* sublime object is precisely the trap to avoid. If indeed Isolde the Younger functions as Tristan's Ideal, 'emptied of all real substance' (Lacan 1992: 149), then Isolde the Older reminds us in her corporeal immediacy that the equation is not so simple. It is Lacan's point that the Lady is not sympathetic or warm-hearted, but functions like an automaton who gives out orders that have no basis in logic but which must nevertheless be pursued. Žižek points out in *The Metastases of Enjoyment* that the relationship between Lady and Knight is 'thus the relationship of the subject-bondsman, vassal, to his feudal Master-Sovereign who subjects him to senseless, outrageous, impossible, arbitrary, capricious ordeals' (2005: 90). And is this not compounded in *Carmina Burana* by the fact that their love did not develop organically – that Isolde's behavior is rather the machine-like performance of a (drugged) woman under the spell of the love potion?

It is here that distinction between Isolde the Younger and the Older becomes crucial. If the love potion confers onto Isolde her 'inscrutable Otherness', that which functions as in her more than herself, what Žižek might call her 'uncanny, monstrous character' (ibid.), then we can see why the Young Idealized Isolde is a symptom of Isolde the Older, the 'real' lover. Isolde the Younger's etherealized state hides the prohibition of Tristan's relationship with Isolde the Older, and in so

doing, Tristan causes her traumatic element to be rendered invisible. And what is so traumatic is the minimal difference that forever isolates Isolde the Younger from the Older. In short, the two shall never meet. This becomes obvious Tristan when he attempts to join them together in a kiss, a union which is prohibited by King Mark.

A further reading of *Carmina Burana* could locate the locus of Tristan's fantasy as the unbarred subject-in-language., the subject who has direct access to *jouissance*. This is why we have the scene in which Socrates' myth is played out of the primordial union of man/man, woman/woman, and man/woman before the gods split them in two to render humans more vulnerable. This scene occurs when Mark and Tristan (man/man) embrace at the top of the stage and below them are the two Isoldes (woman/woman) and Merlin and Vivian (man/woman). Here we see Tristan's fantasy *par excellence*. It is this moment that Tristan tries to return to again and again throughout the rest of the performance, and we know it is particularly Tristan's fantasy in his attempt to unite the two Isoldes. This fundamental fantasy of unity is cut, however, by the inherent antagonism between traditional organic unity and modern reflective freedom. This, one might argue, could be the very fantasy that provokes both of Trojanowska's discourses of transition and crisis; both exist *qua* the irreconcilable tension between these two states. At the end of the performance we see Tristan and Isolde the Older tied to a black sail that spins in endless circles. The lovers are tied back-to-back, unable to see one another, but nonetheless connected. What Tristan should ultimately realize when he is crucified with his back to Isolde the Older is that there is an 'endless oscillation between the two poles', that 'the very impossibility of and repeated failure to reach final peace is already the thing itself, that is, this eternal way is man's fate' (Zizek 2006: 157).

The easy step to take her would be to point out Freud's tenet:



...the psychical value of erotic needs is reduced as soon as their satisfaction becomes easy. An obstacle is required in order to heighten libido; and where natural resistances to satisfaction have not been sufficient men have at all times erected conventional ones so as to be able to enjoy love.

(Freud 1986: 187)

But this misses Lacan's point entirely, and, what's more, testifies to a certain political utopianism. What is impossible about Isolde is not that Tristan creates obstacles in order to heighten his desire for her, but rather that she reflects no concrete content, she functions like a signifier, a stand-in around which desire can construct its circular motion. Not only do we see this circular motion at the end of the performance when Tristan and Isolde the Older are crucified on a black sail, the Wheel of Fortune is the central image of the performance. This is Žižek's point when he tells us that 'external hindrances that thwart our access to the object are there precisely to create the illusion that without them, the object would be directly accessible' (2005: 94). It is for this reason that we can see *Carmina Burana* as the undoing of the Polish Romantic sublimation, a position which ultimately leaves us in a deadlock of xenophobic nationalism.

What's more, is it not clear that the spinning co-crucifixion of Tristan and Isolde the Older (the prohibited love object) precisely embodies the move from desire to drive – the very deadlock of transition itself as a permanent state? As we see the various body parts shift before our eyes, we see briefly Isolde's dark hair, her red dress, her open mouth replaced time and again with the image of Tristan, we should be reminded of the inherent paradox of *objet petit a*. Just as we glimpse Isolde she disappears, just as we think she is gone she reemerges. It is here that we can understand *objet a* as 'the object which coincides with its loss, which emerges at the very moment of its loss' (Žižek, 2006: 61) in terms of desire. But this is not the masterful turn of Staniewski's mis-en-scene, nor is it reflective of Trojanowska's discourse of transition. Rather than focusing on Isolde the Older as the object that coincides with its loss, so that the glimpses and disappearances of her face, breasts, outstretched arms, are mere metonymic

stand-ins for the Void, for loss itself, for nothingness, as Jacques-Allain Miller sees it ('the true object-cause of desire is the Void filled in by its fantasmatic incarnations' (ibid.)), but rather, taking one step further, we should see this appearance and disappearance of Isolde as Tristan's *very staging of loss itself*, and this is *objet a* as the object of drive rather than as the object of desire. Staniewski's staging makes this distinction crucial.

It is often unclear whether we should see the lovers as dead at the end, confirmed in their love in the Wagnerian motif of losing life for eternal love (*Liebestod*). Interpreting their circulating crucifixion as a symbol of Wagnerian *Liebestod* is strictly correlative to the mistake of reading Freudian death drive as a desire for non-existence. Žižek suggests that death drive signifies the un-dead drive in us, that which is more alive than we are ourselves, which embodies the endless repetitive wandering of the human subject in guilt and pain.

The paradox of the Freudian death drive is therefore that it is Freud's name for the very opposite, for the way immortality appears in psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life...humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things.

(Žižek 2006: 62)

Does the brutal circular movement of Tristan and Isolde not illustrate this very drive? Simply put, Tristan's desire for Isolde could be staged in stillness; in stillness we could envisage Isolde as the stand-in for the Void of the impossible Thing. In other words, we do not need the lovers to endlessly spin around each other in order to stage desire, which is, at its heart, an aspiration for fullness/completeness. Instead of viewing Isolde the Older as a partial object, Tristan's stand-in for the Thing, the Void (which can then only be accessed through metonymic partial object stand-ins), as the object of desire, what Staniewski has staged is the very circular movement of drive itself. Recall that in

drive the libido gets stuck on a particular object and, as a result, we are 'condemned to circulate around it forever' (ibid.).

It is with this in mind that the Wheel of Fortune should make sense as a central object of the performance. First, it is Isolde the Younger who straps Tristan onto the Wheel. In this move, Tristan is placed as the object cause of Isolde's desire, that which provokes her drive – literally, that which sets it spinning in motion – and his position at the centre should be recognizable as the *objet a*, as the object of desire around which the desire circles. Staniewski's *Fortuna* is a perfect representation of Lacanian drive and desire. It should come as no surprise that the moment of Isolde the Older's sublimation arises when she is installed at the centre of the Wheel of Fortune (drive) by Mark and Tristan near the end of the performance. Instead of an eruption of violence, as one might expect, they are now *united by* their shared drive

If we see Isolde as a temporal anamorphosis – in other words, if Isolde is an object that is attainable *only* through constant postponement, 'as its absent point of reference' (Zizek, 2005: 95) – then we see the equation of sublimation at its core. This is the process in which something which is impossible to attain (one could say in Hegelese it is the stand-in for *das Ding* – the impossible Thing) is experienced as prohibited. This is an easy short circuit that again allows us to externalize our barred position in relation to enjoyment.

Can we escape the profound coincidence of 1990 here? Of course we can see this distinction between pleasure and enjoyment in political terms. It is easy to associate this with the position of the Polish dissident post-1990. Whereas in the relationship between Tristan and Isolde the Older, an affair which is 'a challenge to the gallows', a transgression, the lovers experience *desire* through postponement, but also by creating the illusion that without external hindrance they would have direct access to *enjoyment*: the position of the Polish political dissident pre-1989. Is it any wonder the audiences no longer filled Polish

theatres in 1992? The enjoyment of the act was stolen from them by their own political victory. Enjoyment is ultimately the *displeasure* that Tristan and Isolde the Older experience, that is the 'surplus' 'that comes from our knowledge that our pleasure involves the thrill of entering a forbidden domain' (Zizek, 2002: 239). One can also reflect on this in a spiritual sense, alternative Polish theatre performed in the 'forbidden domain' of churches for example. And just as Tristan can never have the same relationship with Isolde the Younger, so the Polish public can never have the love affair with alternative theatre so long as they are free to enjoy it because *prohibition is the constitutive feature of desire*. Lacan's lesson here, exemplified in Staniewski's production, is that prohibition itself is an illusion created to obfuscate the more traumatic realization that enjoyment forever alludes us.

We can see a larger disappointment opening up here in relation to political enjoyment and its ties to displeasure. Again we have to consider the radical negativity that bursts out of human solidarity (the same mode in which the universal can explode out of the particular), a process exemplified in the antagonistic relationship between Tristan and Isolde. We can consider this relationship antagonistic insofar as it exists in its refusal of the conventional, symbolically-bound relationship between Isolde and King Mark. What we should be immediately reminded of here is Lacan's maxim that no sexual relationship between two people is possible, there must always be the presence of an imagined third. In other words, that which Tristan and Isolde are rebelling against in their love for each other is the *very condition of their love*. Without King Mark, there would be no Tristan and Isolde. Is there not an obvious metonymic shift from the lovers to Vaclav Havel's disappointment in 'really existing' capitalism? When Zizek suggests that 'although the communist regimes, in their positive content, were mostly a dismal failure, generating terror and misery, they simultaneously opened up a certain space, the space of utopian expectations' (2001: 131), his point is here is that dissidents such as Vaclav Havel fail to take into account precisely this 'gap between Space and the positive

content that fills it'. What makes Staniewski and Havel so dissatisfied with the implementations of democracy – let us not forget Staniewski's continuing fear of 'total democracy', democracy that functions as a totalitarian power – is that this gap has disappeared. Despite their mutual frustration with communism, it was the regime itself that allowed the Space for human solidarity. This is also the reason why they are 'so disappointed when actually existing capitalism does meet the high expectations of their anti-Communist struggle' (ibid.).

In a similar vein, the crucifixion of the lovers at the conclusion of the performance does not testify to a Wagnerian-style hope for the fulfillment of love – prohibited in life – in the afterlife, but rather to the enduring postponement of desire, that this postponement is ultimately *the form of drive*. This is why Tristan and Isolde face in opposite directions, and are never conjoined. What is required for their love to flourish is not their deaths, but rather the Space for love that the figure of King Mark opens up because his presence always defers their union.

From this there stems a (political) division between the illicit lovers and King Mark (as the embodiment of totalitarianism). Isolde is the beautiful Queen who comes from the West (Ireland) – a very ominous metaphor. The lovers refuse to be controlled or defined by King Mark; what's more, the lover's *are not to be read as an embodiment of enjoyment*. This is the beginning of freedom, the renunciation of the *régime ancien*. Of course, Tristan and Isolde are never able to fully *enjoy* their affair – not even in the forest. This is the 'extra' or the 'surplus' which nothing in the symbolic network can fill. In trying to overcome the limits set by King Mark, however, we see the desperation for freedom in the lovers' activity – in short, we see *their desire for freedom embodied*.

Throughout the performance, we see Tristan and Isolde slowly lose their power for introspection. In the forest, on the sea, in the castle, they become totally dependent upon their environment. With the drinking of the potion we see that the lovers lose their spontaneous ethical impulses. All the action that follows

from this is fittingly affected. Somehow their identities are consumed by a their socio-symbolic structure already in place, in which their code of ethics, their 'free choice', is replaced by what is permitted, forbidden or ordered. It is the final crucifixion that changes the coordinates of their socio-symbolic network, in which they no longer give way to their desire (for freedom).

The ultimate insight of this performance is not that love conquers all hardship, as Staniewski reads it, but rather that – insofar as subjectivity is fixed to drive – we find the space for emancipation in our desire to love. The void of political ontology that opened up in Poland in 1990 is directly correlative to the relationship between Tristan and Isolde because it demanded the repudiation of their ties to their community. The bodies of the medieval lovers remind us that what has not yet been civilized, reconciled, or symbolized is the only genuine expression of freedom.

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## **Bryce Lease**

**Bryce Lease is completing his Ph.D. thesis *Fantasy or Symptom? The Politics of Polish Theatre* at the University of Kent and starting work on a new study, *Why Performance Studies Needs Lacan*.**