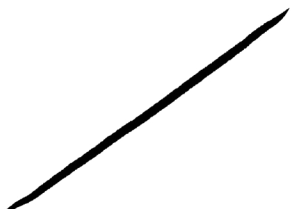


SILENCING: SOFT & SELF-CENSORSHIP

THE CASE
OF HUNGARIAN
PERFORMING ARTS

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Abstract: The article deals with the theoretical and pragmatic questions of soft censorship and self-censorship in contemporary Hungarian performing arts, i.e. the less visible forms of indirect censorship. The article focuses on practices of artistic directors, theater leadership, and the different intimidating gestures of the state representatives and media, from denunciatory articles, to hearings of artistic directors and other forms of control. The article analyzes forms of ideological pressure (through grant applications). The lack of a direct critical language in theater is put into both historical and contemporary light as part of soft censorship. The Hungarian metoo movement is being also silenced as part of the complex phenomena of soft censorship, as the privatization of Hungarian Theater and Film Academy.

Keywords: soft censorship, self-censorship, direct political intervention in theatre, Hungarian Performing Arts.

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The problem of censorship in the Hungarian media is a topic widely analyzed in the past decade. The silencing of the left-wing daily *Népszabadság* in 2016, of the *Index* media site in 2020 and the recent event of silencing radio station *Klubrádió* in 2021, the problems of academic freedom were echoed in the international press, as well as in academic publications (Polyák, 2019). The increase of state influence and interference in the cultural field was also reflected in a recent publication (Humán Platform, 2020). This volume¹ opens the chapter devoted to theatre as follows: "Since 2010, one of the greatest victims of culture has been theatre." Major topics – the process of appointing artistic directors, controlling indirect state sponsorship (tax), the dismantling of the independent performing arts scene, issues concerning the Hungarian Cultural Fund – are discussed in this publication.

In my paper I will discuss further issues, less visible ones, more difficult to grasp as an impact of political involvement in culture, the effects of soft censorship, the more 'covert' and less conscious processes, focusing on the phenomena of soft censorship and self-censorship.

In his four volumes work Derek Jones defines censorship as 'a variety of processes... formal and informal, overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, by which restrictions are imposed on the collection, display, dissemination, and exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and imaginative expressions'. Following Jones's definition there are three forms of censorship (Polyák-Urbán, 2016): the direct censorship, the self-censorship and the soft (indirect) censorship. According to the authors, in the Hungarian and Eastern-European media policies all three forms of censorship are present. Cases of such soft censorship are regularly analyzed and published by the independent Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely group²; soft censorship is reflected in media/press in issues like changes in ownership structures, state advertising practices (rewarding the loyal media), the Media Council's frequency award practice, state media propaganda and journalists'

1 The status of this volume is also interesting to note: it was published with the donation of individuals, and edited by the Network of Hungarian Academics; no major publishing house is signing it.

2 See here the latest one: <https://mertek.eu/en/2018/08/05/an-illiberal-model-of-media-markets-soft-censorship-2017-mertek-booklets-15/>

perception of press freedom.³

In my essay I will focus on cases of indirect censorship. As it was widely analyzed (Green, 2005, Herczog, 2017), direct censorship was not a practice of the state socialism era either; openly banning a play or an author would have created scandal and attracted too much attention or would have – in the new democratic environment – legal consequences. Control of the repertoire of theatres gradually ceased as a practice in mid 1980s (Szabó in Tompa, 2020), but certain taboos remained untouchable until further social changes. Thus, soft censorship forms can have the same impact as direct involvement (Polyák in Tompa, 2021c) without creating legal issues or scandals.

Most of Hungarian cultural institutions, as everywhere else in Eastern Europe, and the big majority of performing arts institutions are state financed, or even state funded; the independent performing arts sector is also dependent on public money. As the problem of budgeting and appointment of artistic directors and the state interference was widely analyzed elsewhere (Humán Platform, 2020, Tompa, 2017), I will now look at the more covert censorship issues of being an artistic director.

To understand today the position in the Hungarian cultural environment of an artistic director I approached four⁴ such leaders asking them questions concerning their situation and experience; all of them where those whose name or theatre was targeted in media, or their persona attacked in one way or another in different contexts. I was interested in what is the experience of a leader of a “state theatre” (which belongs to the ministry or to a city) concerning political pressure, involvement, intimidation coming from any side, and their experience of self-censorship, and, if they experienced any personal attack in the media, what consequence did that have on their work.

None of them reported direct involvement, instructions coming from the state (i.e. ministry or local government); no control of the repertoire or any official “report” on performances was asked for in the past decade, thus direct involvement of political power could not be tracked.

One of the artistic directors reported about a call, an eye-to-eye discussion with a local government cultural representative, which concerned certain issues addressed by theatre. As the director recalls it, the “problem” is not the performances themselves (politicians did not attend shows), but the press release of the shows on the website of the theatre. The issues were: gender issues and migration. “During this talk I was not afraid, recalls the director, but amazed; it was like being part of a film, because it was so absurd.” This meeting was never disclosed in the media; this form of pressure remained invisible and untransparent; no scandal followed. The director added: nothing changed after this talk, things went in the very same direction. The meeting happened in 2018, when a series of denunciatory articles (see below) were published. Another director reported on the “tightening” of the regime in the same

³ See the study: <https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MertekFuzetek12.pdf>

⁴ Three of them answered my questions, two of them asking to be anonymous.

year.

One of the directors recalled that after 2014 (second Orbán government) untouchable topics appeared in the public sphere, concerning the governing powers' morals, bad practices, etc. Preliminary suggestions and criticism about shows tackling such issues are coming from the media in the form of negative reviews.

Such a case was *The Inspector General (The Revizor)* by Gogol directed by Viktor Bodó in the largest theatre in Budapest, the Vígszínház (Comedy Theatre), which was openly denounced of being involved in direct political intervention⁵; the premiere being held before the elections in spring 2014. The denunciatory article also formulated strict aesthetic principles: theatres should no be involved in discussing political issues. The impact of such an article is to prevent (or more strictly put: to call the attention of the artistic directors) theatres from adopting such practices. It is important to note that Viktor Bodó did work on big stage in Vígszínház after this conflict, as Béla Pintér also worked in Katona after the conflict of *The Champion* (see below), so such intimidation did not lead to a direct result in the cases of these directors.

2018 marks the moment when an artistic director reports about self-censorship formulated in this self-questioning: "What are they going to say when they see this?" The third Orbán government's cultural politics is becoming more centralized, political appointees very powerful, loyals replacing all former cultural leaders.

One of the directors reported about two phone calls which followed the director's public speeches and interviews (and again not performances); the state representative was expecting a discussion on their different political views, explaining his own. Such calls wanted to make clear for the artistic director 'where is the limit' of his/her freedom. And, I would add, to intimidate and silence. The same director recalls with a guilty conscience avoiding certain 'irritating political issues' when giving interviews in the period of 2016-2020. "I did not express how furious I am", the director recalls. "Such restraint (control) as a basic standpoint of an artistic director is not necessarily a typical one in every democratic environment, but I handled it with a lot of inner conflict; this is the ugliest part of being an artistic director".

In the performing arts' field there were cases of intimidating gestures of many levels from the beginning of the Orbán regime, i.e. 2010. One example: the hearing by the cultural committee of the parliament of the director of the National Theatre, Robert Alföldi in 2010 which aimed not only to intimidate, but to remove Alföldi from his position. The hearing was masked as a questioning of aesthetic issues, while the *persona* of Alföldi underwent harsh offense by the at that time far right party Jobbik because of his supposed sexual preferences. What seemed isolated cases of extremists in 2010 became a mainstream ideology of Fidesz party in the following decade, targeting openly and in a repressive manner sexual minorities.

5 See the article in *Heti Válasz*, 6.02.2014., and Viktor Bodó's answer in the same magazine: <http://valasz.hu/itthon/bodo-viktor-reagal-a-heti-valasz-irasara-73650>

The so-called ‘scandal’ of *The Champion (A bajnok)*, a play written and directed by Béla Pintér in the Katona József Theatre (2016) is very telling. In my review of the performance, I wrote:

Good old times come back: Hungarian newspapers and magazines denounce performances with political content and call for dismissing the artistic director of the theatre, to close the show or at least personally discredit an artist. (...) Until the premiere the theatre communicated about a Puccini adaptation, and I was completely unaware about any other references. But the media immediately discovered the story resembling a mayor’s family affairs in the provinces (discussed in the tabloids). Actually, a conservative, Fidesz-politician. Then the media avalanche started: a political journalist of index, a major internet site was the first to publish the story. Major political sites started to discuss the show’s political references not in the cultural, but in the home affairs section, like in the 70’s and 80’s, when “problematic” shows were denounced in the newspapers. Conservative *Magyar Idők* (*Hungarian Times*) reminded that Gábor Máté, was appointed artistic director by the Fidesz majority of Budapest city council, but “we will get rid of him again”. The conservative, pro government *Heti Válasz* (*Weekly Response*) first published a review of the show where the critic was “puzzled” by the ethical questions of the show (i.e. telling a story of a concrete family). But three days later the same media makes a “correction” by the deputy editor-in-chief of the magazine: denounces the private life of the artistic director of the theatre, Gábor Máté, going into details about abortion etc. (Tompá, 2016)

But the impact of this denouncing journalism on the theatre and the artists was not discussed later. When asked what this situation created, Gábor Máté, artistic director of the Katona replied the impact was:

...financial loss. I could have discussed this openly, but I decided not to stretch the string. I was afraid if I discussed it, the situation on my theatre would worsen. I did not want that to happen. But this was my personal decision. I did not get instructions [from the city council where the theatre belongs to] not to speak, it was what I concluded to. I did not want scandal, and it wasn’t in my interest to put my theatre into a political arena (Máté in Tompa 2021b).

From the above cited thoughts of the artistic director, it is clear that *silencing* is what such a scandal can create. It is important to note that Máté emphasizes that the local government (at that time with a Fidesz mayor) did not dismiss him as an artistic director (Máté in Tompa, 2021b). But, I would add, neither did publicly defend artistic freedom or freedom of expression.

In recent years an (old-new) genre appeared in the media: a series of articles of the “denunciation” style. The notion of denunciatory criticism (and journalism) is understood as a form of (art) criticism or journalism, which unfolds in public space, and its author addresses his/her message to the professional, social public opinion and the artist, aiming that the state would take actions and the article should have certain consequences (Herczog, 2017). Such a denunciatory criticism unfolds in a state that has the monopoly of legal violence. It is a practice used in the Soviet media of the 30’s but was very present in the era of state socialism in Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

A series of articles in the pro-government media aimed to “denounce” artists, theatre-makers, writers due to their personal political views, views expressed in their work, or due to their sexual preferences; a most visible and discussed series was published in 2018.⁶ The articles expressed those views and forms of behavior which are expected and desired in the cultural field. The impact of such articles is not only silencing (i.e. to intimidate cultural actors not to express their views), but also takes part in forming certain cultural policies and struggles within the Fidesz party government (Polyák in Tompa, 2021c).

It is important to understand how ideological expectations work as a form of soft censorship and as a part of the bulldozer-type cultural policy (Polyák in Tompa, 2021c). After the elections in 2010 the political interference aimed the change of the elite, mostly affecting individuals and not the whole structure or theatre system: changes in leadership of institutions were carried out, exclusion of the old elite in the cultural field. New leaders often expressed their preferences and expectations in the cultural field according to “values” of the Orbán government and not simply cultural values, also publicly expressing loyalty to the prime minister. Ideological expectations are reflected in grant applications or in how cultural subsidies are distributed. Cultural policy makers of the current era have strong ideological expectations toward what would be desirable to be on stage: the big success stories of the Hungarian history, Hungarian values, the sanctity of family⁷, positive heroes and positive messages, and above all Christian values; there are also expectations toward how a play should be interpreted: in a “faithful way” to the author. Some of these expectations are reflected in grant calls; the most recent one of 2021 for independent performing arts reads: “priority is given to: affirmative presentation of Hungarian cultural values on high level, strengthening the consciousness of our national identity, and our belonging to the European Christian culture on a professional, contemporary theatre language in a positive interpretation.”⁸ Parallel with these expectations policy makers are dismissing certain topics, attitudes, theatre forms and of course aesthetics, like activism, negativism, criticism, different forms of political theatre, political issues of contemporary life presented in a direct way.

When such ideological expectations do not correlate with real artistic achievements or when real artistic values with a different world view are not supported by public money or are even sanctioned, we can identify forms of soft censorship (Polyák in Tompa, 2021c). As in the past decade the independent performing arts field was dramatically dismantling (Jászay, 2013), not only important groups closing due to scandalous financial destruction, but also major theatre directors leaving the country – there is evidently such a case.

There are two important aspects which I would like to discuss here, both concerning the lack of direct language as partly a consequence of silencing. Intimidation, denunciation,

6 I must add here that I was part of those who were listed among these.

7 See views of the most powerful theatre professional Attila Vidnyánszky expressed here: <https://szinhaz.online/vidnyanszky-attila-a-sardobalast-is-a-nezok-miatt-viseljuk/>

8 Grant call: https://emet.gov.hu/app/uploads/2021/02/VI.-Palyazati-felhivas_2021_BP_SZINHAZ-TANC.pdf

self-censorship (which I discuss below) affect the use of expressing views in a direct political language, both in speaking in public and addressing political issues on stage.

Rejecting a direct stage language, addressing direct discussion of (political, social) issues derives from two major sources. One is an inherent tradition in Hungarian mainstream performing arts, which had always preferred a stage language of symbols, allegories, metaphors and was widely popular in the era of state socialism. On the other hand, censorship of the state socialism era made it hard to address social, political, historical issues in a direct way. This stage language tradition is certainly important today; documentary theatre or the so called *Zeitstück* drama was never characteristic to Hungarian stage.

Also, artists – especially artistic directors – express their views while talking in public, giving interviews etc. According to my interviewees both control the form of expressing their views, but also their marketing department colleagues propose careful strategies when leaders speak publicly.

Stage actors are often expected not to have any political views, and they are strongly criticized when expressing views on different issues in social media or in media in general; this is also a tool of silencing. All these practices of speaking in public and having a direct form of communication involve self-censorship.

Self-censorship is a contested phenomenon, and scholars have so far not arrived at a universally accepted definition, either with regard to its theoretical implications or its empirical investigability [...] Wherever populists have come to power, freedom of speech has been attacked and restrictive media laws have been enacted. Such settings form the ideal breeding ground for a type of self-censorship we term *adekvatnost*, which can be understood as a ‘feel for the game’ (in a Bourdieusian sense) – manoeuvring skills that open up space for journalistic creativity and negotiated freedom of expression (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2020).

Silencing has a broader impact on the whole society. The story of the Hungarian #metoo is important to discuss here:

In a cultural context, where the governing political elite clearly reflects, communicates and supports a subordinated role for women, the #metoo has just the opposite effect to what it is aimed at. The victim [who spoke up] is humiliated for the second time by the environment and attitude. Those who support the victims in such an environment can’t have an influence (Polyák in Tompa, 2021c).

The two most talked #metoo stories which surfaced in 2017 were both related to the theatre environment, although more abuse stories came out in the academic and publishing sector. The „theatrical” ones became a social shock. There are many angles from which these stories could be told: how public (“official”, party) media and the national news agency dealt with the Hungarian #metoo stories (with complete ignorance, never reporting on it); how other theatre institutes reacted when names of the harassers were stated (refusing the idea of abuse of power in their institutes), what kind of discourses unfolded (from empathy and solidarity to a more general and aggressive blaming of the victims, blaming the theatre environment and rejection of contemporary art); which institutes reacted with the urge of opening up long distance strategies and protocol for healing (only independent, civil organizations and artists).

It is important to note that those two artists who personally came out telling their stories and the names of those who sexually assaulted them were both independent artists. First it was the independent actress Lilla Sárosdi, former member of Krétakör (and wife of Árpád Schilling) who published on her Facebook page her 20-year-old story; and it was a former male dancer, Ákos Maros, living now in the US and breaking with his artistic career who named the other theatre director. Both predators were artistic directors of big theatres in Budapest. Sárosdi was (until she left the country with her family in 2018) especially under pressure, being accused of „destroying” a human life and a career, although there were many women (at least ten altogether), who presented their stories in the independent media, saying that in a legal process they will witness her. But a small video spot from the theatre production by Árpád Schilling, *Loser*, was largely circulated, where Sárosdi could be seen naked; boundaries of art and privacy were blurred, Sárosdi being accused of pornography and “provoking”.

The two named harassers were both male, very powerful, influential in the theatre field, general directors (intendants) of big, Budapest-based state theatres, artistic directors, working for decades with big companies, and both also teachers (the late László Marton and Miklós Gábor Kerényi). They were surrounded with respect, and a lot of visibility. And their reactions were also similar: both directors at first refused the accusations and announced to take legal action, but later (probably advised from the same legal representative) apologized. Both victims were young, inexperienced, willing to start an artistic career. Both directors were instantly fired from all positions, or they resigned themselves, not always clear. Marton finally asked for forgiveness in a grotesque manner: „I apologize if I did something or behaved like offending somebody”.

A third important and theatre related *#metoo* case surfaced in late 2019; but this one had a far more dramatic impact and consequence: the silencing of the Theatre and Film Academy. The so-called “Gothár affair” was also used as a tool to destroy the University but also to destroy and definitely silence the Hungarian *#metoo*.

The case was used by the state to increase its influence and to take under ministry auspices some theatres that previously belonged to the Budapest local government.

”If, however, an institution funded by a local government, in this case a local government-funded theatre, wants to receive large amounts of public funding from the government budget, we believe – and the Gothar affair only reinforces our view – that the state must conclude a contract with the municipality of Budapest, or with a city [with similar status]”, and these contracts should have “basic operational criteria”, the spokesperson said (trtworld.com, 2019).

This rhetoric reflects the aim of the state representative to connect (or rather use) the *#metoo* for state control purposes.

It is important to note that all three directors, involved in harassment, could come back to their work; Péter Gothár’s new film was just released.

The Hungarian cultural change of elite has come to a final stage: the *einstand* (term which we use in Hungarian with the meaning of ‘take over’) of the academy, the University of Theatre and Film Arts this summer. One could see it as part of the

kulturkampf going on since the Orbán regime, but there is little *kampf* anymore in the past years: it is not a battle of equally strong parts, but a carpet bombing. The academy was taken over very quickly, in a process euphemistically called “change of institution model”, i.e. privatization. The state gave the university into the hands of a foundation which will run it. It is now happening to many universities, but not one has created such a resistance and a series of resignations by professors and has a clearly political message.

It has been a long time since the university has been criticized by theatre makers on the Fidesz supportive side. A bad sign of the ongoing, but unexpressed *einstand* process was that the new rector, legally elected by the Senate of the university in November 2019 was not fully appointed by the minister. His election happened in the unfortunate moment of two crucial events for Hungarian theatre: a demonstration against the government’s decision to further the grip on all theatres, and a harassment *#metoo* story (the Gothár affair), in which the academy was also involved, both in early December 2019. It was a moment of opportunity for the political power to create the notion of *harassing theatres*, including the university.

The “critics” of the university, without ever saying any argument or even giving examples of why the academy is bad in their view, launched a campaign of discreditation against the professors and the academy. The strong “argument” was that there is an “ideologically based pedagogical activity” practiced there, hinting on the academy being a liberal one. The discourse today became a very low level one, a personalized mud-slinging. Resistance and refusal of accusations was raising. In the past years the university was one of the worst financed higher education institutions in Hungary; film director Ildikó Enyedi called it “a university artificially starved to the bone with deductions”. Financial destruction was one of the tools to destroy the university; but this wasn’t enough to definitely occupy it.

After the appointment of the new board (led by eight men) a series of professors resigned; two dozens of academics and some one hundred fifty students left, setting up a new educational forum, the Freeszfe Associations where they continue their pedagogical activity. Four international film and performing arts academies (Polish, German, Austrian) will help the students to finish their studies in the frame of the Freeszfe.

Any effort of the university to take part in the process of privatization, any proposal was disregarded, and all the leaders were neglected, not one moment of dialog and negotiation was offered by the decision makers. No representative proposed by the university – a list of not only prestigious theatre-makers, but also largely accepted professionals, even members of the National Theatre – nobody was accepted into the new board. The decision upon how and with whom to operate the new ‘model’ was taken by the government without consulting the university’s rector and Senate and students’ representatives.

The most visible and performative event organized by the students was the occupation of the building which lasted 70 days. A wave of solidarity from the performing arts’ field, writers, academics, lots of organizations, and internationally acclaimed artists and institutions came. Silencing a very large and important artistic

majority in the University I understand as almost a form of direct censorship.

Finally, one must remark that Hungarian cultural policy and soft censorship practices cross the border and have a big impact on Hungarian communities, institutions and artists living as ethnics outside Hungary. According to Boróka Parászka, Hungarian journalist of Târgu-Mureş Radio, Romania:

...conflicts in Hungary are extremely suffocating for the cultural and public life in Romania. On one hand political and economic control (all resources depend on loyalty to Hungarian government), on the other hand there are no forums, tools, strategies and a social structure able to handle these conflicts in Transylvania, Romania (Parászka in Tompa 2021a).

According to Parászka, the aim of this political power is that those who are not with them do not exist. They have to be made not only silent, but also invisible.

Finally, I would like to reflect upon my own experience, both as a (former) theatre critic and as a writer. I was wondering long time ago if I can experience self-censorship, especially when writing this paper. I first became targeted as a writer when accepting a state award in 2015, when I made a statement in the media, saying that I accept the prize, but I give the money award to an organization which is known for its large social activities. With this gesture I wanted to make clear my criticism about the cultural and social policy of the Hungarian state. Right wing media immediately attacked⁹; gender-biased articles (I was called a ‘lady’ and not a writer) not only being given a negative review of the books I wrote but questioning the “real Hungarianness” of the author and her feel for the Hungarian tragedies. Although on my personal (writer’s) Facebook-page I express my political views and criticism (and not so much in papers), and portray myself in lots of demonstrations where I go, I do grasp self-censorship: first of all in writing far more articles and conference papers on cultural policy issues in international environment than in my national one. Also, when speaking in public as a writer in front of my readers I try to avoid that direct language of discussing contemporary issues of Hungarian society and politics which I requested in this article. Why? Maybe to be accepted by all kinds of readers? To avoid conflicts? I am far more direct when speaking (writing) to an invisible audience.

Another aspect is – and this goes back to a long story – that being a former editor-in-chief of the *Színház*¹⁰ theatre magazine and a current president of the foundation publishing it, I was in a double and conflictual position: maintaining a critical, free, autonomous theatre magazine and applying every year for public money at the more and more state controlled National Cultural Fund. I tried to “solve” this conflict by creating different positions: me as a writer and me as an editor-in-chief. It is a “normal” situation for a theatre magazine to have conflicts, but ours were far more political and dramatic than ever before.

9 See the article of Ottó Gajdics in Magyar Nemzet 23.01. 2015 <https://magyarnemzet.hu/archivum/paholy-blog/lady-dilemma-4047333/>

10 I was editor-in-chief between 2015-2020, since then I am the president of the Foundation Színház.

And one should wonder how honest theatre criticism is still possible when artists, performances, theatres are targeted, silenced, attacked. This is an issue I often discussed – but not so much in public – with my colleagues. It looks like we often go back to certain practices of the past: we are becoming accomplices, avoiding direct speech.

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