

And the Voice said, let the Public be made!

A True Report on the Genesis of the Public as Cultural Form
and as Social Being, Illustrated with Scenes of a Culture War
between a Theater and its Public

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ABSTRACT

The questions posed by this thesis refer to the public-ness of the theater and the nature of its public. Its primary stake on the level of theory is to raise the problem of the public in a way that goes beyond what the Author considers the limitations of current sociological and political approaches. In this Report, the Reader will find an analysis of the public as a cultural form and an explanation of the grounds on which public discourse may claim authority and political force. In addition, the Author will discuss publics as more or less ephemeral and unstable social entities that come into being around a cause, crystallize around matters of concern and live their ghostly life up until the attention of their members lasts. The theoretical considerations of the treatise will be given flesh by the analysis of a debate that stirred up the spirits around the Hungarian State Theater in Cluj in the year 2001. The works and deeds of this public spirit will be examined in detail, judgment on their nature and character being left on the part of the idle Reader.

Keywords: public sphere, theaters and audiences, sociology of culture

I believe more than ever that the most important thing is constructing the object... All through my work I've seen how everything, including the technical problems, hangs on the preliminary definition of the object.

Bourdieu, *The craft of sociology*

Choubert: You're right. Yes, you're right. All the plays that have ever been written, from Ancient Greece to the present day, have never really been anything but thrillers. Drama's always been realistic and there's always been a detective about. Every play's an investigation brought to a successful conclusion. There's a riddle, and it's solved in the final scene. Sometimes earlier. You seek, and then you find. Might as well give the name away at the start.

Madelaine: You ought to quote examples, you know.

Ionesco, *Victims of Duty*

The riddle does not exist? If a question can be put at all, then it can also be answered? For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something *can be said*?

Péter Eszterházy: *Little Hungarian Pornography*

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Prologue (*in which the Author sets the stage, presents some of the Characters and says a word about His intentions*)

I think the best way of starting this will be to snatch you right into the middle of affairs. The story in this paper is about a Hungarian theater in Cluj, Romania, which became under the directorship of a charismatic artist one of the most exciting and respected companies in the country. This theater happens to be the oldest Hungarian theater ever. It is a state-subsidized public institution, which trades in “high art” without any popular concessions. The Theater is important for Hungarians both as Hungarians (in ethno-cultural terms) and as amateurs of art (in high-cultural terms). It is furthermore important for Romanians, although I suppose more in the second sense. Part of the picture are some Hungarians who have problems with the person of the Director (he is a difficult person), and a larger group of people (citizens of Cluj) who would applaud some popular concessions. It is remembered that this later company once had the habit of theater-going, but the winds of the “modernist fashion” are said to blow them away. It happened once, in the middle of the 90s, that during a play, an actor imitated masturbation on stage. Some people felt offended. That is not the kind of a job a respectable actor should take on. They were left with the Hungarian Opera to frequent, which has a much more “respectable” staging philosophy. The Opera and the Theater share the same building, in this context a breeding-ground for all kinds of conflicts.

These are, in short, the ingredients. The spark of the explosion came when the Director decided not to renew the annual contract of a Respectable Actor. The Actor wrote a satire in the Newspaper. A Former Actor replied with a satire, presenting us a diagnosis (moral decay and self-destruction of the Theater) and a call to arms (S.O.S. Theater). Let there be a public debate about the public role of the public theater! The Director sent them to hell as fascisto-communist and anti-cultural terrorists without talent. His reaction was harsh.

Terrorists gained some sympathy from the people. There was a favorable moment. Old sores were ripped open, exposed to the public. All kind of people started to write. Some of them common, others not so common, there was a known and Great Manipulator, figures of the mysterious “audience” and the not less mysterious “Hungarian civil society in Romania.” In short, things started to unfold.

What the civic spirit of the revolutionary (would be) terror wanted, was the head of the king. But that head stood firmly placed on its shoulders. The State was its protector, as well as the cultural aristocracy near and far. The revolution had failed (spoiler!). What remains as its lesson?

I imagine the lesson as anatomical. My inspirations are Doctor Nicolaas Tulp, and the Yugoslavian writer Danilo Kis, who wrote a splendid book (*Anatomical Lesson* 1977) about a similar but bloodier culture war fought by him when accused with plagiarism for what was his way of writing prose. The matter, as I conceive it would be to illustrate through the dead body of the public voice how did it function when it was still alive. The physical appearance of that body is the textual material that was produced in the “debate,” the alluvium created by the flow of discussion.

It needs of course a skilled hand for the cut to be clear, and my doubts and hesitations are many. The lesson of the Masters may easily turn into a horrendously mutilated corpse in these conditions. However, the example I follow is their, and I hope that whatever comes out of the dissection, it will not be without some pleasure and edifice.

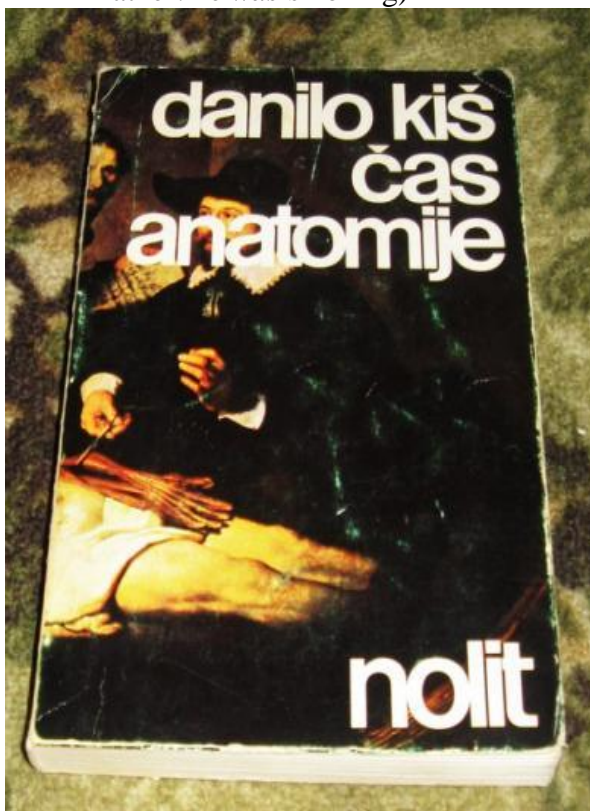
We can find out from Goldwyn's (1961) short and handy biography, that doctor Nicolaas Tulp achieved immortality both through his looks and his deeds. His accomplishments in medicine are reported to be no less distinguished than those in civic affairs. After gaining royal permission to dissect dead criminals, he served for twenty-four years as a public demonstrator, holding anatomical lessons in front of the members of the guild and invited respectabilities. He performed these duties with diligence and distinction. Most of his clinical materials survived in the form of case reports, some quite fantastic, as it is said. In one of his cases, he managed to cure "through suggestion and cathartics" a distinguished Painter, who was convinced that "all the bones of his body had softened to such a flexibility that they might easily buckle like wax if he put the slightest weight on them." We can not be sure whether the painter was Rembrandt or not. However Rembrandt gained fame and appreciation by painting one of Tulp's public lessons.



Although the painting is recognized as a masterpiece, Rembrandt omitted several grave mistakes (such as confusing the anatomy of the right arm with the left) which make Goldwyn to say that, whatever the reason, the *Anatomy Lesson* is not a lesson in anatomy. I register on myself certain anxiousness in letting you know that the cadaver on the painting, a container-maker born in Leyden named Adriaan Adriaans, was hanged in January 1631 for insolence. Goldwyn's overall opinion of Tulp is that like most men, he was chained to his times, however he did not lack certain imaginative qualities. He was, for example, one of the first to suggest reclaiming land from the sea by the means of pumps.



(The problems of a writer: he *is* smoking or rather: he *was* smoking)



In *The book of Kings and Fools*, as Boym (1999) mentions, Kiš deals with a dangerous fiction that proved to have a lasting influence on its readers. *The protocols of Zion Elders*, a forgery of the Russian secret police and a “Nietzschean turned religious prophet” named Sergius Nilus was first published in 1905 and inspired the bloodiest pogroms in Russia and Ukraine in the next years. While the facts and circumstances of its forgery were publicly disclosed during two trials (in 1934 and 1935 based on conclusive proofs the book was judged to be an adaptation of a political pamphlet written against Napoleon III) the fiction remained popular. (I will draw your attention here at the fact that its uncritical editions are available for anyone who types its title in the web-browser, while mentioning that the writer of these lines encountered the book during his high-school years, in times when the circulation of texts assured by the internet was not yet as self-evident as today). Its influence on the shaping of reality is part of *the Truth about the Protocols of Zion*, and that the falsity of this truth was completely exposed countless times does not seem break its strange effect.

Realizing this paradox, Kiš wrote the story in the form of a short novel, and not as an essay, as he originally intended. Since the fantasies of a writer can not compete anymore with the fictions that populate the world, Kiš proposes us to retreat from imagination and examine the paranoid reality on the ground of documents and with the methods of a criminal proceeding. However, as the example of the *Protocols* shows, the correct procedure of establishing the truth is not sufficient to make that truth compelling. Kiš’s solution is to dramatize the danger and absurdity of the Fictive Plot while, through a method of estrangement, to keep the reader *at a distance* and make the events to appear *as strange* to him or her.

While introducing a journalistic report on the atrocities of a Russian pogrom which strikes the reader with the brutal vividness of the description, the voice of the narrator warns us: “The scene is real enough, as real as the corpses; the only artificial element in the nightmarish setting is the snow” (Kiš 1997:135)

1. Introduction (*in which theoretical and practical problems are revealed, the field of argument and that of discussion is projected*)

Towards the end of the year 2001 a handful of concerned citizens organized themselves, and reached the common agreement that things at the Hungarian State Theater in Cluj should not follow anymore their usual path, a path which they saw as leading to decay and self-destruction. Introducing themselves as the representatives of the public, they called for an open debate over the public role of the theater. What could be possibly wrong with such a debate in which all citizens concerned with the fate of the theater could express their views and informed opinions about the matter? In any case, the artistic management of the later saw something inappropriate in it, since in an unusually sharp declaration qualified their appeal as instigation, and their initiative a terrorists plotting.

Both the call to arms and the reaction to it were strongly polemical. Much as the sound of that gong before the show, they signaled that the stage was set for a performance in which the public came to be assigned a leading role. My thesis is an investigation of this performance, claiming that it poses problems that go well beyond its local relevance and context.¹ What may sound first as an elusive battle cry in some rather parochial culture war will reveal itself as echoing more general concerns related to divisions and connections between the field of arts and other domains of social life. It is somewhat ironical, that the criticized theater became known during the 90s as one of the most progressive companies in Romania. Dissenters did not deny that. However they claimed that in spite of its wide success on national and international scenes the theater and its director ceased to serve the needs and interests of either the local public or the symbolically conceived “national” public of

¹ I understand to be more appropriate to speak about performance instead of public debate, since struggles for qualifying or framing it (whether is it a debate or an instigation) were integral part of the phenomenon.

Hungarian minority in Romania. But how could one make sense out of those needs and interests? And in what sense can someone demand their fulfillment?

At a closer look the image of a theater serving the needs and interests of a public reveals itself as filled with ambiguities. Who is the public of a theater? Should we look for it among the inhabitants of a city, the citizens of a nation, a republic of educated amateurs or one of fellow artists? Is it the temporary assembly coming together under the excuse of watching a performance, or that wider, potential audience that would be in principle interested but finds excuses for not coming on this occasion? Does it include those who are not interested at all, should the theater address them? What about those who are not yet born, should a theater look for the gratefulness of posterity? These parties all may have very different “needs and interests,” even when the pleasure they may find in a performance is often considered to be disinterested. To what extent artists should take these needs into account represents another intriguing problem. They may say, as they do say it from time to time, that the expectations of the audience are external to the creative process, and therefore they do not have to be considered. The autonomy of the artistic field conceived as the autonomativity of the artistic process acknowledges the role of the spectator, but it designates this role in it its own terms. You may choose what genre or play you want to pay a ticket for, but you do not give your orders for the play to be performed.

There is a well-known and constant tension between the freedom of artists and the expectations of the audience. As Fabiani (2008) notes, “it is an illusion to believe in a harmony between the autonomy of the artist and the satisfaction of the public.” However it is also true that they can hardly live without each other. Where should then one look for the instance which would be able to settle or at least mediate this tension? One popular candidate is the market. However this candidate is not a candid one, since it clearly favors the “consumer-audience” over the “producer-artist.” The idea that artistic production would lose

something substantial when left at the mercy of the markets paves the alternative road, that of government subsidy. Public funding however needs justification and this raises the question whether the field of art realizes some kind of public good or not. At this point we are deep in the middle of a veritable theoretical minefield concerned with the public role of the arts and the rather complex ways in which artistic activity becomes connected with various publics. The point of collapse usually appears when the sociological problem of audiences intersects with the political problem of the public good. One can take as an example the idea of public theater, the view according to which a widening and democratization of the audience should occur as the effect of public funding. Well, it never occurs. But does this mean that public funding is inefficient or illegitimate? As I will argue later, these questions are profoundly flawed and misleading, and the reasons why they are still posed lie in an inadequate conceptualization in both the sociological and the political understanding of the public.

Publics are queer creatures, as Warner (2002a:7) puts it and I propose to start to think about them considering for a moment the premise of my case, namely the problem of expressing dissent. What are the options for those who are not pleased by the show? They will not show up next time, if we were to follow the market logic. They even may make an appeal for refunding, or in extreme cases, to consumer protection. But in case they wish to express their dissent there are quite limited and ephemeral means at their disposal. As Fabiani (2008) notes, they can raise their voice and they can exit. However their voice fades as they leave the building (possibly forever), and keeping it loud needs something more than the momentary inconvenience of a badly performed play. That “more” can not be explained by the simple model of the marketplace, where ignorance will be the form in which deluded buyers penalize. This form of exit is helplessly unable to explain that voice.

From the point of view of my case precisely the endurance of that voice is of interest. Keeping a loud voice implies a more lasting engagement, transforming the annoyance into a

vested interest and a deeper concern. It further requires a medium in which it can resonate, or more precisely some other voices that resonate with it. As a first approximation I would propose to imagine the public as this resonance-box which helps voices to be heard together. In a rather basic sense, going public is making one's voice heard.² But that "one" is in a fundamental way already a collective "one," since collectivity is both addressed and implied by it. Being part of a public is being not alone, having at least some imaginary friends for whom to speak. It also implies a certain self-understanding which is not entirely subjective. As Warner (2005d:66) shows, part of this is an intuitive understanding, most often falling outside the domain of reflection, of what public-ness means and how does it work. It is hard to assess whether the nature or the source of this common background knowledge is more mysterious. However saying that the self-understanding of the public is not entirely subjective points at the existence of a public subject, historical and social in its origin, which is incorporated whenever one takes a public attitude (Warner 2005b:160-162). Formulated in another way, when adopting a public attitude we mark our non-identity with ourselves, we engage in a sort of self-abstraction and comply with some rules of engagement which do not depend entirely on us.

Moreover, ways to understand ourselves may disappointingly differ from ways how others understand us. What would be then the right way to look at the initiators of my theater-debate? Are they to be seen instigators or rather concerned citizens, expressing their opinion? It is quite clear that they understand themselves as the latter, while the position of the theater falls closer to the first. The path followed by this research is not that of taking parts or trying to decide which party is right in its assumption. I am more interested in the *rights* which are implied in these assumptions, the grounds on which someone claims concern or indignation.

² This is the definition given by Arendt (1998:50). "The term public signifies two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena. It means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity." For the second meaning of the public discussed by Arendt see footnote 10.

Talking about “rights” I am not referring to something codified in law or in any formal agreement. I am thinking rather to a sense of moral entitlement, a claim to a right, the legitimate or illegitimate nature of which, of course, is open to debate. Again, for someone who takes culture (in the old-fashioned sense of high-culture) as a private issue, a matter of taste on which there can be no dispute, this question of rights makes little sense (it is not the right question).

What I find particularly puzzling in the case I will present in front of you, is the form in which the voices of dissent organize themselves in order to claim this right. One recognizes in this form the familiar shapes of the public sphere as a mechanism of accountability (Fraser 1992:112) or supervision (Warner 1990c:41); however this time as directed not against the state but against an artistic institution. This state of affairs makes this case rather different both from a simple, although public expression of dissent and from the institution of criticism. At first sight it resembles to be a case of a counter-public, and I will have to investigate this possibility. However before arriving at that point I would like to state more clearly the major problems of my inquiry and the structure of my argumentation.

A tentative formulation of the question of my research may look as follows: ***What is the public dimension of dissent and what are the conditions for the voices expressing it to organize themselves as a public?*** Many digressions will be needed to develop the exact dimensions of this seemingly straightforward questioning. First of all it requires a clear understanding of what a public is and how does it work. I propose the theoretical part of my paper as a somewhat formal analysis of (1) the public as a cultural form and the grounds on which public discourse can claim authoritative, political force as well as of (2) publics as more or less ephemeral and unstable social entities that came into being around a cause, a matter of concern, through participating in something (a theater performance, a debate, etc.), and by mobilization. The task will be to build some sort of bridge between the two.

The analysis is said to be formal because it targets the idea of public as a cultural form. As a cultural form the idea of the public serves as a commonly shared background understanding of a certain being-in-the world, a certain way of acting, speaking, thinking on ourselves (at least in the hemisphere relevant to my case). In the first place it implies a distinction between private and public matters, as well as a way of relating the outcomes of this distinction to matters that are considered political. The idea works as a basic operator in a system of classification (Verdery 1993) and it is a key component of a social imaginary called modern (Taylor 2004).

The cultural form of the public mediates a particular form of understanding ourselves. How do we understand ourselves when we understand ourselves as speaking publicly, taking up a public attitude? How do we change (in speaking, acting) when we embody a public subject compared to how things are when we inhabit our good-old private subject? We do change in certain ways, and those ways seem not to be entirely up to us. Our public behavior is not the mere extension of our private one. The I speaking publicly is also someone else. One of my aims will be therefore to properly introduce that “someone else.”

The second part of my argument turns to publics that came into being by mobilization and participation. I will argue that in order to understand them we need to depart from the somewhat reifying or sociologizing view which focuses on the links between social position and cultural participation and to adopt a more processual approach. I will advocate for a strong version of the standpoint according to which publics as sociological objects do not exist as empirical entities, outside the modes of address and the rhetorical contexts which mediate them (Warner 2002). Treating the public as something artificial, much in the manner Latour and Weibel (2005) suggests, means to understand them as potentials which appear or crystallize around particular mobilizations, whatever is considered and treated as a matter of concern (Latour and Weibel 2005) or a cause (Boltanski 2004:30). Methodologically this

would mean to ask how publics assemble and are assembled and around what matters of concern in any particular case (Latour 2005:6). In other words the nature and working of representation becomes central, more precisely the problem, as defined by Latour (2005:6), of the right procedure (“as an attempt to gather the legitimate people around the issue”) and the right portrait (in the sense of presenting “what is the object of concern to the eyes and ears of those who have been assembled around it”).

One way I would like to look at my thesis is this: its stake is constructing the public as a sociological object while the stake of the case study is the very illustration of that object construction. Many things will be hopefully explained also about the case in the meantime. Nevertheless the orientation of the thesis is theoretical, since sorting out the particularities of a rather parochial culture war (which is the case) may not bear too much interest without the theoretical problems (which I think are considerable) that have to be solved, in order to be able to do the sorting. As with the thesis, so with the case, the central problem is framing. And everything, including the technical problems, hangs on that.

2. Public as cultural form (*which explains how the Author means that*)

It has to be noted at the very beginning of this discussion that the notion of the “public” is a very elusive and difficult one (see Newman and Clarke 2009:11). One source of difficulty lies in a proliferation of its different meanings which makes the term one of an unusually wide comprehension. As a noun, it can refer both to a collectivity, to the people as a whole (the general public) and to multiple particularities, groups of people held together by something they recognize as being their common interest or concern (publics in the plural). As an adjective again it may denote something related to the state (public office), something in principle accessible to everyone (a public park), a matter of concern to everyone and something pertaining to a common good or interest (see Fraser 1992:128, Newman and Clarke 2009:11). As a consequence of this plurality of meanings, theorizing the notion becomes dispersed along various disciplinary and thematic interests making attempts to construct an analytical concept of the public very problematic.

Arriving at such a concept, or at least sorting out all the difficulties of the endeavor would go well beyond the scope of this paper.³ I would like merely to point out two influential fields of study, political science and theory and sociology and media studies, to signal the major paths of inquiry related to the public. In the simplest formulation, the first tends to be interested in public-ness, the second in publics. The preliminary condition and theoretical stake of my analysis will be to build a bridge between these two approaches.

First thing to observe is that public belongs to a category of concepts that function as what Verdey (1993:37) calls basic operators in systems of social classification. These systems “not only classify, in institutionalized form, they also establish a ground for authority and legitimacy through the categories they set down, and they made their categories seem

³ I find appealing the call of Somers (1995) for a historical sociology of concept formation or Koselleck's (2002) method of tracing conceptual histories. In analyzing the networks of meaning around the notion of political culture and the public sphere Somers (1995) takes a welcomed step in this direction.

both natural and socially real” (Verdery 1993:37). An operator therefore (and Verdery speaks about the nation in this context) resembles a “sorting device,” marks the boundaries of different categories and assigns people them, making real in this way something that is essentially the work of imagination.

Our notion of public-ness works in a much similar vein in that it introduces a principle of division into the realm of the social, draws the boundaries between spheres of existence perceived if not opposite then at least substantially different. The great divide of course is that between public and private, pointing at difference across spatial and social contexts, kinds of feeling, even genres of language (Warner 2002c:27).⁴ These differences play out differently in various contexts, and although they may be strongly marked, they are not fixed for once and for all. Kissing or holding hands in a square was once seen as public insult for now to be taken as private business. But it is not so easy to tell where the point is when one turns into the other. Sometimes it can go until you take off your shirt. Other times it is enough to hold a hand of a same-sex person.

This last observation also points to the fact that the distinctions underlying notions of public and private are not merely theoretical abstractions but have something to do with a much wider field of moral ideas. This is the line of thinking followed by Taylor (2004:23), who proposes to understand public as one of the fundamental organizing concepts of modern social imaginaries, ways in which people imagine, make sense out of their social existence and formulate normative expectations with regards to it. Thinking on public-ness in this way means that the boundaries implied by it are imaginary, but in the sense Taylor uses the notion, as imaginations that are constitutive of an understanding of what forms of normal, morally acceptable action can be pursued by someone as a private person, a public figure or a citizen,

⁴ These differences are so strongly marked, that their transgression can provoke revulsion, as Warner notes referring to Foucault’s account of Diogenes’s gesture of doing the things of Aphrodite on the public square (Warner 2002c:21).

a sense of what can be normally expected from others, as well as of deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor 2004:23).

While it is clear that they are not up to the caprices of individual interpretation, the question remains whether these imaginations and understandings have some universal character or rather they are varying in particular times and places. Clark and Newman (2009:10) for example argue that the meaning of public-ness is fixed only conditionally since it depends on historically contingent discursive chains which may be disrupted and reassembled again.⁵ I take this as a useful and insightful approach which leads to an investigation of various contestations and struggles over how to dislocate and reconfigure what public means. I would like to emphasize however that the discussion of Newman and Clarke remains on the Western terrain, and that I intend to remain there also. Moreover, in contrast with Newman and Clarke, in focusing on the public as a cultural form, I will emphasize its more universal components circumscribing the implicit background understanding of its Western meaning, and I will not venture too much into the long discussion on the various challenges and reconfigurations of this meaning.⁶ I can only hope that an investigation directed towards the generality of this form will also contribute in a way to making sense out of the particularity of its various appropriations. I will use the Habermasian conceptualization of the public sphere as my thread, in order to not to loose my way in this labyrinth.

⁵ They discuss three such chains, one which links the public with citizens, the people and the nation, another which makes the connection between the public, the state and the public sector and a third which connects the meaning of public to liberalism, legal and democratic values and the public sphere (see Newman and Clarke 2009:13-17).

⁶ For broadening the discussion in that direction see Salvatore 2007, Fraser 2007.

2.1. Public as a sphere and principle (*in which the non-identity elements of the public subject become identified and explained*)

According to the much debated account of Habermas (1989) a radically new and specifically modern public sphere became institutionalized during the seventeenth century in Europe. Somewhere between the realm of the economy and the realm of the state-power and governance, a new social form was born. Its midwife was the printing industry, and as Warner (2005d:66) aptly shows, our intuitive understanding of what public means is very much tied to this figure of a text- or print-public. The spread of printed books unleashed the circulation of ideas in a way unimaginable before, linking persons distant in time and space (some of them being dead, others contemporaries but living abroad) into one common discursive space.⁷

While there are very material conditions of its existence, in an important sense this common space is an imagined one: no one had ever seen it. What one can witness as possessing a common visibility resembles some sort of assembly, people coming together for a discussion or for some entertainment in salons, coffee-houses, theaters and a range of similar sites called by Taylor (2004:86) topical common spaces. But the discursive space opened up by the printing revolution is more than the mere sum of such sites. It rather knits them together into a large, meta-topical common space of non-assembly (Taylor 2004:86).⁸

It is the paradox of the public, as Fabiani (2008:22) notes, that it recognizes itself and it is recognized only in these particular sites and settings and in the same time it can not be limited or reduced to the spatial configuration in which its contours appear. It is crucial

⁷ It is interesting to note that printing is also considered by Anderson (2003:37-46) as the major force which through standardizing vernacular languages paved the way before the birth of nations. For those who would consider some technological determinacy at work here, Warner (2005b:163) makes the point that the public-ness of the publication is rather the result of a cultural revolution, “the extension of republicanism to print contexts as a structuring metalanguage.”

⁸ In a more everyday formulation one can say that “although the media is multiple, as are the exchanges that take place in them, they are deemed to be in principle intercommunicating. The discussions we’re having on television now takes account of what was said in the newspaper this morning, which in turn reports on the radio-debate yesterday, and so on” (Taylor 2004:83).

therefore to understand this extension, of how and in what sense this common space of non-assembly is different from the mere sum of topical spaces. One can take as a useful starting point the way Taylor (2004:85) defines it, as a space “in which people who never meet understand themselves to be engaged in discussion and capable of reaching a common mind.” First, this definition points at people who never meet, as opposed to people engaging in face-to-face interaction. It also points at a certain self-understanding, a consciousness of participants that there is a discussion going on and that is directed toward agreement. Furthermore, engagement is presumed to be voluntary, participants are not forced but capable of reaching a common mind.

Speaking publicly is different than speaking to one’s friends in that it has to take into account somehow the presence of unidentifiable strangers. It implies therefore a particular form of stranger-relationality, one which does not unite people through an appeal to common identity (as “nation” does for example) but merely through their participation in the discourse (see Warner 2005d:74-75). The meeting places of these “people who never meet” are books, journals, in a word: publications. This idea of the publication that can be read in different times and places by otherwise unrelated people, helps us to imagine the public as a social entity, as something that would encompass all the readers of a text (Warner 2002d:68). While one can never tell in advance who will be those readers, it also needs this imagined social entity in order to be able to formulate his or her address. This represents the reflexive layer in the circulation of texts among strangers which is pointed at by Taylor as the self-understanding of being engaged in a discussion. The public as a practical fiction or conclusive presumption appears first of all as a rhetorical function, as an imaginary reference point of public speech. The public is not something made up by discussion, but the imaginary reference point of the discussion as it unfolds.

This point is essential for understanding the imagination of the public sphere as a site of conversation, of argument between people who never meet about issues of common interest. This imagination is so strong that one easily passes over its fundamental falsity. People do not discuss in the public sphere as they discuss in the coffee-house. Instead of “arguing” they rather presume a public through their rhetorical address and they target a public for the circulation of what they have to say. Anything that addresses a public (as a practical fiction necessary for the address) is meant not to argument but to circulation. The paradox is that in order to be an effective address it has to deny the imagined nature of its reference. Warner (2002b:115) formulates this as follows:

The circulation of public discourse is consistently imagined, both in folk theory and in sophisticated political philosophy, as a dialogue or discussion among already co-present interlocutors... The prevailing image is something like a parliamentary forensics. ... This folk-theory enables the constitutive circularity of publics to disappear from consciousness, because publics are thought to be real persons in dyadic author/reader interactions rather than multigeneric circulation.

One may easily add sociology to the illustrious company of folk theory and “sophisticated political philosophy” mentioned by Warner as a contributor to this deception. Elaborated models of reader-response theory, encoding and decoding have as their starting point a model of communication rather than a model of circulation. I will mention some of the consequences later on, however at this point it is enough to emphasize the modeling of public discourse on conversation as the first constitutive element of the public-ness as a social imaginary.

The third element of Taylor’s definition, namely that people are not forced but enter voluntarily in the public arena points at another important aspect. It suggests that public discourse is self-organized, and not imposed by some external authority on the participants.

The idea that as a common space of discussions, the public sphere lies outside external frameworks of authority is one of the central insights of Habermas. This has basically two meanings, both of which being understood by Taylor (2004) as the *differentia specifica* of the Western, modern notion, signs of its extraordinary novelty. In the first place it means that the public sphere is constituted, imagined as being outside politics, second, that it is (imagined as) secular.⁹

The extra-political locus of the public sphere is a fundamental component of its imagination. This assertion however can be read and evaluated in two rather different and to a certain degree contradictory ways. According to the first, the emerging common space represents an exit-door from a historical immaturity understood as dependence on external authority and guidance. In short, it is a site and principle of emancipation, of liberation, a chance to finally grow up. This is the way of Habermas through Kant. There is however a second reading, according to which “placing” this common space outside politics represents in a fundamental sense a reduction, a retreat in the realm of the social from the realm of politics understood as the project of building a common world.¹⁰ This is the agonistic way of Arendt through the Greeks.

Let me briefly expose this difference. The Greek philosophical tradition on which Arendt is relying takes the private and the public as two distinct spheres of action, the first being governed by necessity the second by freedom. All that matters for someone in its status as a private person is the proper management of the household, trying to overcome necessity and scarcity. Public life on the other hand represents the preoccupation with the political

⁹ Secularity is understood here not in the strict sense of the expulsion of religion from the public sphere but as a way of perceiving society as founded on contemporary action (for the whole argument, less relevant to my discussion here see Taylor 2004:93-99).

¹⁰ “Second, the term “public” signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it” (Arendt 1998:52). Arendt (1998:52-56) brings up the image of the table which stands between people, joining and separating them in the same time. More than that, preoccupation with this table has to be transcend “the life-span of mortal men,” an argument which is repeated by Lippman (2009:41-47) in his definition of common good.

matters of the polis and a chance to overcome the futility of human existence through doing something that will be remembered by coming generations. This kind of activity was possible (“obviously” – says Arendt) “only after the much more urgent needs of life itself had been taken care of” (Arendt 1998:65).

This points at something a bit more substantial than the rather common sense observation according to which one needs some leisure in order to be able to pursue politics. First of all it does not separate public activity from the exercise of power. Second, it implies that overcoming necessity in the private realm is a prerequisite of political action. As a consequence political activity becomes freed from the play of private interests and becomes constituted as the sphere of ambition.¹¹

In contrast with this view, for Habermas freedom is not a prerequisite but a stake of politics and the bourgeois public sphere represents the site on which it can be achieved. What Habermas traces so skillfully in the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is the historical emergence of a principle of democratic control.

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people coming together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason” (Habermas 1989:25)

Habermas emphasizes here that the modern public sphere is constituted by citizens *as* private persons who engage themselves in a progressive struggle against public authorities. This implies that the bourgeois members of the public do not have the ambition of their Athenian

¹¹ See Arendt 1998:22-78 and Warner 2005c:58-61 for a detailed argument. As Warner notes on page 61, “personal is political” gains a subtly different meaning when one reads it in the background of Arendt’s views.

colleagues, or rather that they have different ambitions and motivations. As private persons they were coming together to discuss the best ways of doing politics. It would be somewhat ironical to understand the upcoming revolutions as produced by the heat of these discussions. In any case these deliberations had an important contribution in forging beforehand what I may call their ideological heavy artillery of these revolutions (and as a matter of fact prominent thinkers as Marx understood the process not just as forging but as a veritable forgery). Citizens, as Habermas makes clear, started to renegotiate their share in public authority through “the historically unprecedented medium” of “the public use of reason.” This classic distinction between the public and private use of reason comes from Kant (1991:57):

Thus the use which someone employed as a teacher makes of his reason in the presence of his congregation is purely *private*, since a congregation, however large it is, is never any more than a *domestic* gathering. In view of this, he is not and cannot be free as a priest, since he is acting on a commission imposed from outside. Conversely, as a scholar addressing the real public (i.e. the world at large) through his writings, the clergyman making *public use* of his reason enjoys unlimited freedom to use his own reason and to speak in his own person. For to maintain that the guardians of the people in spiritual matters should themselves be immature, is an absurdity which amounts to making absurdities permanent.

The Kantian point thus is that the public use of reason is a free use, unrestricted by any authority external to reason itself. The priest who acts “under the instruction of someone else” practices the private use of reason. The same person however, as a cleric, may *change his mind* so to speak, and speak freely what he thinks, when addressing the real public and not those people who have to be guarded in spiritual matters. The reference to the real public as literate makes clear that what Kant had in mind had something to do with the circulation of

ideas mentioned earlier. The scholar speaks *through its writings* to the public. The international republic of which he (sic!) is a citizen is therefore one of the letters.

This poses the scholar in the paradigmatic situation of being a citizen of two worlds: one of the reason, the other of public authority. Giving to each what they demand may sometimes become demanding, however being a citizen of reason offers some unexpected advantages. It enables him to give a wise opinion to the Caesar. As Taylor (2004) shows this is one of the main reasons why public opinion (not as the sum but as the result of reflections) started to acquire some kind of normative appeal for the government. The primary *raison d'être* of the deliberative public sphere was to “enlighten the government about its duties, its errors and its real interests” (Taylor 2004:88).

Calhoun (1992:16) also emphasizes that the public use of reason and critical debate in its formative period were not directed towards achieving compromises or interfere in a direct manner with the exercise of power. Their aim was rather to discover general laws governing men and societies, to use *ratio* in order to show for *voluntas* what was practically necessary in the interest of all (see also Habermas 1989:83). There is however a short distance between giving a reasonable advice and claiming the rule of reason. Claiming that “in the law the quintessence of general, abstract and permanent norms, inheres a rationality in which what is right converges with what is just” (Habermas 1989:53), one advocates for the very inversion of the Hobbessian contract according to which “not truth, but authority makes the law.” This change in the ground and principle of domination is made explicit by Habermas (1989:82) when he says that: “The domination of the public, according to its own idea was an order in which domination itself was dissolved; *veritas non auctoritas facit legem.*”

The modern public sphere thus in Taylor`s (2004:90) words became constituted as “a discourse of reason *on* and *to* power rather than *by* power.” With this, it established a principle of supervision as opposed to the principle of existing power (see Habermas 1974:5).

As a domain outside politics the principle of public-ness consolidated the view that political power has to be supervised by an authority which is not political in its nature. Moreover, the authority of this outside state of supervision comes not from a higher instance, a pre-existing framework given by laws or God, but something which is reached as a common agreement, a common mind in a discourse.¹²

Early observers (most famously Marx) had already suggested, that besides the pure reason there may have been also some interests at play in the common agreements that had been thus reached.¹³ Habermas does not deny that; however he argues that the principle and its emancipatory potential is what really counts.¹⁴ Nevertheless his treatment of the relation between private and public interest remains at least problematic. Just as a respectable Athenian citizen heading towards the agora was expected to leave his concerns over the *oikos* back home, the men of good will assembling in the Habermas Club are expected to leave their personal matters on hooks in the cloakroom.¹⁵ The suggestion is that as far as rational argument is the sole arbiter of any issue, private persons coming together are able and willing to “bracket” those particularities that make them different (Calhoun 1989:13). The common interest in truth was to assure that more mundane private interests will be suspended. Now, as Fraser (1992:120) points out, bracketing differences in a discussion quite simply “means proceeding *as if* they don’t exist, when they do.” We find an eloquent treatment of this problem in *The Jewish Question* (1992), where Marx talks about the “sophistry of the

¹² To the principle of existing power, the bourgeois public opposed the principle of supervision – the very principle which demands that proceedings be made public. The principle of supervision is thus a means of transforming the nature of power, not merely one basis of legitimation exchanged for another. (Habermas 1974:5)

¹³ Is it possible to detach the principles of a bourgeois public sphere from the class-interests of the bourgeoisie and make them universal? While the Habermasian project intends to do something similar, Marx (1964:231-240) famously saw these universal principles as illusions which mask and therefore obstruct the possibility to realize them. Fraser (1992:121-122) is not less radical when claiming that the elimination of all “systemic social inequalities” is a prerequisite for narrowing the gap of participatory parity of dominant and subordinate groups.

¹⁴ More precisely the universalist principles of the liberal public sphere ground its potential of self-transformation. See on this point see Habermas 1996:359-387

¹⁵ The figure of speech comes from a thoughtful observation made by Latour (2004:456): “When men of good will assemble in the Habermas Club to discuss an armistice for this or that conflict and they leave their gods on hooks in the cloakroom, I suspect that what is under way is not a peace conference at all.”

political state,” which divides “the human being into a *public man* and a *private man*” and emancipates the public from religion through displacing religious convictions into the realm of the private. Similarly to discussants who act *as if* their differences could be bracketed, the state acts *as if* religiousness would represent merely a private matter. The magical conjunction *as if* points indeed at some sort of veil of ignorance, however I am afraid not in the sense Rawls would agree with.

The reason why Marx could talk about sophistry is that the nature of the *as if* mode of bracketing is quintessentially rhetoric. As Warner (2002b:165) shows, it is part of the more general rhetoric of self-abstraction operating in the public sphere, constructed around a principle of negativity: “In the bourgeois public sphere ... a principle of negativity was axiomatic: the validity of what you say in public bears a negative relation to your person. What you will say will carry force not because of who you are but despite who you are.” Self-abstraction, the gesture of bracketing status and body as well as the desires and interests these may imply, represents a key rhetorical device on which the claim to authority can be grounded. It is clear that, as such, the rhetoric of self-abstraction represents a differential resource,¹⁶ a point which is (was and also has to be) made against Habermas. While not making it again, my intention here is to draw your attention to the requirement of self-abstraction and disinterestedness in public speech and to their rhetorical grounding.

¹⁶ It is not accessible to everyone and on equal terms and it favors certain unmarked identities over marked ones. The subject who could master this rhetoric of disincorporation was white, male, literate and propertied (see Warner 2002b:165-166).

2.2. Public vs. Public (*in which the idea of the counter-public comes under scrutiny and an argument is made for the necessity to open it up towards a general theory of publicity*)

Up to this point I tried to outline some of the universal components of that cultural form which we may call the public. I tried to grasp them as the non-identity components of the public subject which shape the contours and the intuitive understanding of what public-ness means and public attitude implies. As constitutive elements of a socially imagined public-ness I enlisted the sense of division and perception of boundaries between private, public and political spheres of life, the modeling of public discourse as conversation, the principle of supervision and the principle of negativity.

However it is clear that the various self-understandings of publics depend on discursive-rhetorical devices that encompass a larger field than the common background knowledge offered by the cultural form. It is not so easy to tell what exactly someone who takes up, embodies the public subject, has in mind. This is not to say that the matter is up to private whim, some sort of individual-subjective interpretation that goes beyond the scope of sociological interest. It rather means that the public-making rhetorical devices are deployed in particular historical and social circumstances, in the frame of a much wider space of claim-makings, meanings, and struggles to define those meanings. It is not something accidental that perhaps the most powerful criticism of the normative idea (or rather ideal) of the public sphere comes from part of scholars – Dahlberg (2005) calls them difference democrats – who take dissent far more important than consent and are preoccupied with identity politics (see Fraser 1992, Mouffe 1999).¹⁷

¹⁷ In line with the terminology used above, difference democrats question both the extra-political locus of the public sphere and the idea that this would be (or should be) a unitary, *one* common space. Fraser (1992) argues for the recognition not outside but *by* power of counterpublics, indifferent of the nature of their self-understandings and claims. Be them neo-nazis or radical feminists, to the extent they have a publicist orientation (meaning that they understand themselves as parts of a potentially wider public and not as enclaves) they contribute to the widening of the discursive space. In its essence this means the recognition of radical difference,

The notion of counter-public comes from this terrain and it was coined as an effort to emphasize the constitutive exclusions of the Habermasian public sphere model (on Habermas reflecting on this see 1992). Fraser (1992:123) proposes the term subaltern counterpublics in order to point at “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs.” The notion therefore refers to groups that are oppressed or dominated in some sense, and a counter-public discourse is understood as a counter-discourse shaped by an opposition with a dominant one.

While this is in many respects a promising track to follow, I would point at the case discussed in this paper as one which draws attention to some of the limitations in theorizing counter-publics. Thinking at the dissenting public of the theater in terms of a counter-public does not work so well. While this public formulates something that resembles a counterdiscourse in the sense that it is directed against something and it is circulated, it is hard to find any sense in which those who articulate it could be taken as members of an oppressed or dominated group. Moreover, the discourse they articulate does not even challenge a mainstream, but it can be taken as part of it.¹⁸

If difference democrats shift the perspective from the normative idea (or rather ideal) of the public sphere to a more conflictual understanding of identity politics, I would argue that there is a need for a second shift which would open up the dominant-dominated dichotomy towards a more processual and wider understanding of publicity (see also Calhoun 1992:3). Essentially this means shifting our attention from the oppositional dimension of publics to what Warner (2005d:114) calls their performative dimension. To understand

a vision of a common world where antagonisms are not reduced or absolved through agreements but openly expressed and conflicted.

¹⁸ There are good arguments for saying that most of the elements of the discourse they articulate are parts of a dominant discourse of culture and ethnicity in the Hungarian context.

publics (and what they are doing) it is not enough to understand against what they are formed (or against what they are doing something).

We can take this performative dimension of public discourse as poetic in the sense that it not just creates a public through addressing it, but it specifies in many ways what kind of public is being addressed. “Public discourse says not only: *let the public exist*, but *let it have this character, speak in this way, see the world in this way*” (Warner 2005d:114). There is always a risk and an expectation at play in this process, as well as a necessary illusion that the particular public which is thought to be addressed exists outside the rhetorical devices of its creation. I will point at some of the practical reasons behind the ways this illusion becomes utilized in what follows. To bear in mind at this point is the basic formula of how publics work, which in the rather theatrical formulation of Warner (2005d:114) reads like this: “You put up the show and see who shows up.”

3. Public as fictive social entity (*which makes the point that the public as an empirical reality does not exist, while the public as practical fiction does exist and hints at the usefulness of this fiction*)

The premise of this thesis is that problems of self-understanding and self-abstraction in public sphere and among publics are not mere abstractions bearing more intellectual than practical interests. First of all the methodological problems posed by researching a phantom public are not easy to settle without a serious engagement in theory. One can recall here the Bourdieuan critique of polling according to which the public of the public opinion is constructed exclusively by the means of its so-called measurement, only to become circulated in the public sphere as an expert report in order to perform its role in opinion formation (see Bourdieu 1995). The false postulates of opinion polling criticized by Bourdieu¹⁹ are not new for political scientists. Already in 1922 public opinion was located by Lippmann (1998:29) in the artifactual pseudo-environment of the pictures in the head, acted upon by “groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups.” A public opinion presumed to exist outside the way it emerges from discussions taking place in the public sphere was also criticized by Habermas.²⁰ One can never distillate the public opinion from a sum up of whatever is to be found in people`s head precisely because what one finds in those heads is already dependent on the reflexive circulation of public discourse. There is then a sophisticated sophistry at work in this case also, one which acts *as if* it would be possible to account for public opinion on the basis of the opinions private individuals may have on this or that.

¹⁹ That everyone has an opinion, that opinions are of equal value and that there is an implicit consensus about what are the relevant issues to raise, questions to ask. See Bourdieu 1995:149.

²⁰ In *Between Facts and Norms* for example he writes: “Public opinion is not representative in the statistical sense. It is not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons. Hence it must not be confused with survey results. Political opinion polls provide a certain reflection of “public opinion” only if they have been preceded by a focused public debate and a corresponding opinion-formation in a mobilized public sphere” (Habermas 1996:362).

The persistence of such approaches is remarkable, not in the last place because representations of the public remain of central importance in key segments of political and social fields (Bennett 2007). What Bennett (2007:56-57) suggests is that since images of the public play an instrumental role in the larger domain of politics of representation, the methodological criticism mounted against their construction tends to be ignored rather than refuted. After stating that “more often, than not, audiences are artifacts of the instruments selected for their investigation,” he points at the already familiar *as if* mode of proceeding:

Yet, however, familiar these perspectives may be, debate in these areas often proceeds as if the point at issue was that of somehow really fathoming out the audience, of finally getting to what audiences actually do with media, how they really interpret media messages, the real truth of their media lives (Bennett 2007:57).

The *as if* postulate is famously discussed by Žižek (2008:33) as a form of fetishistic disavowal, one rendered succinctly by the formula: “they know that in their activity they are following an illusion, but still they are doing it.” Although it would lead us a bit far from the track of the present reasoning, I would argue there is something substantial grasped by it, something that points towards potentially very practical consequences of inadequate theorizing. One does not necessarily have to appeal to a framework of domination or ideology in order to make visible these consequences. Ways of imagining the public and its workings operate in a more direct and straightforward manner in the enigmatic place where the political problem of public good and interest intersects with the sociological problem of the publics qua audiences.

As Fabiani (2008:155) shows in the French context the central organizational preoccupation of public policies and social scientific approaches in the domain of culture revolves for a long time around the idea of cultural democratization. A sociological

preoccupation with problems of the social and symbolic function of cultural goods and the unequal social conditions of their appropriation associated with the work of Bourdieu, found its counterpart in public policies justified by the imperative of equalizing access to cultural goods, associated with the name of the then cultural minister Andre Malraux (Fabiani 2008:155). The work of Bourdieu still waits for a critic worthy of its grandeur. It helped us to understand, among other, why the widening of the audience and the general democratization of culture is not solvable by cultural policies alone and why it is therefore completely unrealistic to blame the artistic field for its failure. While the arts may make life somewhat more bearable, they definitely can not make disappear through a magic trick all the existing cleavages in societies.

As an increasing number of studies show, it becomes more and more difficult to account for practices considered as “cultural” through grounding them in the social position of their practitioners. The problem may be related to what Fabiani (2008:157) calls the essentialization of the public on the ground of “observations drawn from the social composition of particular audiences.” This all too easy jump from the particular to the general obscures the fact that “the mode of the publics is that of permanent decomposition and re-composition in spite of the constats of sociology of existing cultural regularities grounded in class-relations” (Fabiani 2008:157).

Taking at face value the social reality of a public grasped merely through information regarding its socio-demographic structure, the sociology of cultural legitimacy literally invented a social entity defined through postulating the link of class between individuals, ignoring the fact that members of an ephemeral collective, whatever their prevailing social characteristics may be, are not representative of the social classes as they exist in society in general.

Publics exist solely through participation, and this makes them a difficult object for sociological description which is always suspended between a state before-the-fact and a state after-the-fact. Sociology speculates about how the public looks like, before the later would have the chance and make the choice to become a public. It makes its bets, and then its measurements among those who leave the building (of a theater for example). I tried to give a sense above of how those bets could be winning a prize, although a tricked prize, resembling to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The “public” won by sociologist tends to be an “audience” lost by the theater. Moreover, there is always a chance for all this to be transformed into a zero sum game. According to Bennett (2007:57):

... one needs to abandon the empiricist dream of some day being finally able to assess which approach had finally got the audience "figured out" correctly, and focusing, instead, on the respects in which different ways of figuring audiences or readers - statistically or ethnographically for example - are connected to, and calculated to produce effects within, quite different regions of practical activity.

Those “regions of practical activity” are producing, among others, decisions concerning whether a theater should be subsidized or not, and the “lost audience” all too easily can be found to be a good argument in the debates about the matter.

3.1. Numbers (*which presents on a thought exercise and a concrete example the tricks and treats of audience-counting*)

Let me illustrate the points made above through an example which refers directly to the particular situation of the Hungarian Theater in Cluj. While audience numbers occupy a prominent place in the argumentation of those who, for various reasons, do not agree with how the theater is run, the issue has also wider implications in a changing Romanian policy context, which started to link the amount of public subsidy given to theaters to the amount of spectators they have in a stage-year.²¹

This argumentation constitutes the audience in various ways, by invoking sheer visitor-numbers, a more vaguely defined majority, in ethnic terms, in generational terms, etc. The accuracy of these references can be checked empirically. Some of them, like the visitor-numbers can be looked at in a more direct manner, others, like ethnic, generational, or socio-economical composition need the more indirect methods of sociology. There is no way however to assess the significance of the fictive groupings thus created. To take simplest example, does it make any difference whether the theater has 1.000 people who are so content of a performance that they go for it twice, or if it has 2.000 people looking at it for one time? In the first case it is presumable that a really good performance was put together, or something else appealing enough is going on, even if that something is not more than a really good coffee served in the buffet. In the second case, the play could be a total failure or the coffee so terrible that no reasonable person would bother to come for the next time. What should we think therefore when someone claims that 2.000 visitors per week are few, a lot, or just the appropriate number?

²¹ While these are important changes, I will leave them only mentioned and resume myself to the argumentation of dissenters.

I allow that as a thought-experiment the example has to be looked with certain caution. However the curious case of the Hungarian Theater of Cluj with its audience presents a similar structure, although on a much higher level of complication. As a combined effect of the scarcities and benefits of socialist cultural policy as well as the conditions of general and ethnic oppression, the theater had a large and reliable audience-base before the nineties. However things started to change after the 89. People started to have less free time and they could spend what they had on a wider range of pleasant activities (the formerly restrained television-watching figuring prominently among them). Ethnic Hungarians emigrated massively from the city at the beginning of the decade, and intellectuals were overrepresented among them. In any case, the theater had to cope with a massive loss of spectators during these times. The magnitude of loss can be read out of the numbers: there were 37.000 spectators for 111 performances in the year 1991, a number which fell to 11.000 on a roughly same amount of shows for the stage-year 1999-2000 (Madarász 2001).

The charismatic director Gábor Tompa, who made his name with a series of innovative staging in the 80s, was appointed as the head of the theater by then cultural minister Andrei Plesu in a moment which favored artistic excellence over other considerations, when deciding who should mark the new era of Romanian theater life. This favorable moment did not last for long, but it brought a number of internationally recognized artists to the head of Romanian theaters and it gave them a relatively free hand to realize their conceptions (see Ichim 2004:208). Most of them left after the initial years, when they realized that the state of the art can not be changed so easily. However Tompa stayed to reinvent the Hungarian theater along the lines of a strong artistic program and administrative professionalization. Institutionally this program implied the almost complete rebuilding of the company, steps towards the integration of the ethnic Romanian audience and a more accentuate orientation towards the national and international theater scene.

Reinventing the theater however also implied the reinvention of the spectator. The old spectator was dying out as the decreasing numbers stand to testify. The dramatic potential of this loss was very early played on by those who for various reasons did not agree with the direction of changes. Reading the grievances and objections published in the 90s on the pages of the dailies in Cluj, one can reconstruct the real and imagined discontents of a “public,” but also indirectly document the hardships and insecurities of the experimenting with the new invention: cancelled premieres, changing repertoire, etc. Promises that the theater made but did not honor, and the pouting of an audience feeling betrayed.

It is not so clear however whether one should read the fall of the audience as the theater loosing its spectators or rather as the spectators loosing “their” theater. Those lamenting the good old days are far more less than those who actually remained loyal to the theater. In 1990, as one of the main character of the debate recalls, the audience gathered in front of the theater and raised an inscription: “we thank our actors that they remained with us” (referring to the mass-emigration that was at custom at that time, see Jancsó 2001). The actors could not possibly return the nice gesture later on, since the audience did not remain with them. They had therefore to create their own audience.

3.2. Poetics of the theater (which discusses how the theater makes its public, the singular experience and the invented spectator)

Arriving at this, I have to make a point which is as necessary as complicate about the nature of this creation. The question is: how does a theater create its public, what is the particular nature of this act of creation or poesis?

In one, rather basic sense the poetic or public-creator role of the theater lies in its ability to bring people together under the excuse of a performance and provide to them a certain type of experience. What Habermas says about the public sphere applies entirely to

the theater. It is a sphere of “private people coming together as a public.” The question remains: why?

Citizens, in Habermas’s case, were said to come together for discussion. There is a range of answers given by sociology on the question why people go out to watch a film, why do they feel the need to read a book, go to a performance. The strong element of these answers is also their most common problem, namely that they fall prey to a kind of sociologizing reduction of the phenomenon. People show up because they are interested. The problem of sociologization appears when the reasons for why they are interested comes to be linked with some social forces external to them which will make them to act in a certain way as members of their class, status-group or whatever is called that backstage realm from which explanation is brought to the fore. A small revolution was needed in audience studies in order for researchers to suspend for a moment these presuppositions and ask people themselves about their motives. While this is an extremely welcomed move, it does not solve the problem entirely. The ways in which people understand and account for their motives are already hooked in those discursive circuits which make them understand themselves as a public of something. Sociology is part of those discursive circuits. When you ask someone why he or she came, the person may say eventually something which resembles to the sociological presupposition of the reason, and this is also because he or she understands those reasons partly in sociological terms. When you hear the most simple answer: “I came because I’ve heard that it is a good play,” it is like an invitation to orient your questioning on how information concerning the plays flow in formal and informal networks, how these networks are accessible to some while do not reach others, what are the sociologically meaningful common elements in those some and those others, etc. You can write a thesis, make a publication, even a book about issues like this. And it will be not incorrect, since those networks do exist, they show a certain pattern of access-not access, that patterns can be

related to a range of commonalities, starting with your income and ending with your father's occupation. At different levels of elaboration, of systematicity, your interviewee will also link his or her "folk" explanation to similar things.

This vicious circle of self-explaining explanation can, in principle, be broken by careful observation, made available by the ethnographic method. As Latour observed, ethnography remained the last observational science among the social sciences, and its potentialities stemming from this are huge. Although not automatically, but ethnography gives us the chance of paying attention to both what does the theater mean and what it can offer as well as to how that offering is accepted in particular times and places.

Let me ask for your patience a little bit more. Anyone who had the chance to observe the rather esoteric preparations behind the curtain could account for the tensions arising among artists: will we have a public tonight? Having a public means less how much people will come (although this can be important in several ways) but rather: will we have a receptive public, one which will be tuned to the performance? This is not a matter of how the play will be understood, decoded, of whether the "meaning" will come across and alike. The problem, each and every night is this: will there be a theatrical moment?

What the theater aims at, is a receptive public, a public which appreciates theater qua theater and finds pleasure and instruction in that particular thing vaguely called theatrical experience. This public is not the same as the educated public, and nothing would be more misleading than to maintain this often made false equation. The "moment," in principle does not depend on the level of education, and this was understood clearly both by Brecht and Artaud, the pillars on which the edifice of contemporary theater stands.²² It was a common knowledge also in the time of Shakespeare, who, before entering the hall of high-culture guarded by the bodyguards of educational services was a rather popular writer, stage-director

²² I was reassured in this opinion with regards to Artaud by a splendid essay of Sontag 1980. With respect to Brecht I would recommend the discussion between Alexander Kluge and Heiner Müller (1996).

and actor. The educated public is precisely that ideal which falls outside the domain of theater, and there is certain hypocrisy in demanding from the theater to do the job of educating in the place of the social institutions designed for that. The point of going to watch a *King Lear* is not precisely to learn something about Shakespeare. Although one *may* decide, of course, to go, based on the desire to learn something about this great author, what he or she gets will be something of a different nature than accessing a Wikipedia article.

What the theater can offer to people is different than what can be offered to them by a movie, a concert or a book. This rather simple fact has to be emphasized against all temptations of the sociologizing gaze which lumps together all that is particular about going to theater into the melting pot of cultural consumption. In order to make sense out of that offering we need an understanding of the particular nature of theater as an art-form.²³ While I do not have the space here to engage in that discussion, I have to make a point about it. I propose to take Badiou as our guide for that purpose, his *Theses on Theater* having the double quality of being both short and unusually clear on the matter. Badiou (2005:72-73) proposes to understand the theater as an assemblage of heterogeneous components gathered together in an event in order to produce ideas which can not be produced elseways. The produced ideas are theater-ideas, and work as illuminations, rendering the complexities of the inextricable life legible. The stake of the artistic effort is to simplify and separate the inextricabilities of life, to make them visible, comprehensible, and public. Since the effort can fail in many ways, chance is central to this undertaking. And “in chance, the public must be counted” (Badiou 2005:74)

²³ Of course the meaning of art, as I use it here, has nothing to do with aesthetics as such, but refers to a kind of technique and it is connected to the notions of artificial (Latour 2005) and the artifact (Gell 1996). While there is a fortunately not completely forgotten tradition in anthropology (an interest in ritual going back at least to Durkheim, bringing close people like Richard Shechner, Peter Brook, Augusto Boal or Eugenio Barba to anthropologists like Victor Turner) and sociology (the dramaturgical tradition of Goffman, whose use of theatricality is not merely on the level of metaphor but on the very actual explanatory frame of the how-s and why-s of everyday behavior), it is striking the extent to which the interest in theater as a form of art became disregarded among the social sciences in the favor of an interest in it as an institution of high culture.

The public of the theater is a chance public (Badiou 2005:74). Its chance lies in being part, experiencing something which can not be experienced by alternate means. One does not have to fully agree with the particular meaning Badiou gives to the term (that would be something like a universal-ideal public which completes the theater-idea), neither his opinion that *this* public would be the only that “is worth anything at all.” It is enough to accept the singularity of the experience and decide on the ground of this acceptance whether it worth a chance or not.

Besides its singularity, nothing more can be said now about the nature of theatrical experience. I admit that it does not sound as a too compelling argument in that long debate, dated back to Plato, about how the government should treat this institution. The point I am trying to make is less about the theater and more about its public. To the extent it is educated, this public is educated *in* theater rather than *by* it. The common wisdom according to which there is no theater without a public has to be inversed. There is no *public* without a theater. The policy question has to be inversed accordingly. The matter on which it has to be decided is not whether the theater should exist or not, but whether to give a chance or not for the public of the theater to exist.

Badiou (2005:74) asserts that “the public comes to the theater to be struck.” While literally this is not necessarily true (the paths of the public are always mysterious) nevertheless he has a very fundamental point here. The theater has to offer some kind of singular experience in order for the people to choose it instead of choosing something else to spent money and time for. The nature of that experience is to a certain extent up to local configurations that can be rendered meaningful by ethnography. What Fabiani (2003, *Forthcoming*) shows so well in the case of Avignon is in a quite paradoxical way exportable also to other places, where the theater attempts to become a matter of concern through

cultivating as its own *genius loci* “the genuine atmosphere of original and somewhat unlikely encounters.”

This element of cultivation or culture is not so self-evident and one can easily skip over it when paying attention only to a time horizon tied to the present. This cultivation needs time, effort and its outcome is made uncertain by the chance built in the practice itself. This state of the affairs makes necessary for the theatrical enterprise to invent its public, as a practical fiction, in order to be able to keep its focus and motivation. The idea is well illustrated in Barba`s (1999:94) version of the notorious paradox of the actor. The mastery of the actor, in Barba`s (1999:94) view, lies in an ability to “captivate the senses and induce the reflection of the spectator,” something which is substantially different than serving its taste.²⁴ S/he can learn the “art of bewitchment” through imagining for him/herself at the very beginning of the training “one chosen, invisible and dear spectator” to address. As Barba (1999:94) says: “the actor then becomes provocative because s/he embodies a paradox: s/he acts in the present while addressing spectators who have been or will be, and does not listen to the applauses of the present time.”

I think that the public of a theater comes into being as a result of cultivation in the sense mentioned above and that its paradox lays in the fact that it has to be invented before its actual existence. The public, “as such,” can of course be invented in other ways and means and with other purposes, as national, ethnic, as an unpredictable group of self-interested consumers, or amateurs of art, connoisseurs of great works and the list could be further expanded. However from the point of view of a public action or policy which appropriates

²⁴ Captivation is central to the maybe most famous metaphor of theater in the dramatic literature, the Mousetrap scene in Hamlet. In order to gain conclusive evidence about the guiltiness of Claudius, Hamlet recurs to the help of stroller actors, who present a performance which enacts the regicide in front of him. The King can not rule over his immediate reactions thus proving the proof of his guiltiness for the investigator. Captivation is thus what makes him captured by the mousetrap (for a more broad discussion of this scene see for example Schmitt 2006).

these imaginations and grounds its aims and strategies on them, the observed public seen in the light of the invented one will never “look good.”²⁵

²⁵ As Fabiani (2008:156-157) points at, with respect to the French case, in discussing the discrepancy between the ideal public of popular education and cultural militancy and the sandwich-eater beer-drinker people of public libraries.

4. The surgical knife (*introduces the analysis of the press debate which will show how the cultural form of public-ness was created and how it started to create its public.*)

All this being said, let me now turn the “surgical knife of critical consciousness” (Kis 1999) towards the cadaver proper. In the conclusion of a statement signed by several actors, intellectuals and public personalities somewhere in the middle of the events (formulated as a call *For a Theater as a Form of Art*, see Public Statement 2001a) one finds an interesting statement:

It is our conviction that the press-debate (or that something called as such) which formed around the theater and its director lately, is detrimental in several ways. (We are not against the possibility of the dispute, but against the particular form it takes in this case)

What I would highlight as significant is the rather equivocal way in which the whole matter of affairs considered detrimental becomes identified. That *something called as such* is not a clear negation of the *debate*. Its meaning remains suspended between negation and affirmation, a sign of distancing that articulates an in-between position, further specified in the following sentence, in parentheses. We have a differentiation between two kinds of dispute here: one, as a possibility, as some sort of an ideal; the other as its worldly corruption. This kind of portrayal already represents a move from the much more categorical statement of the director, made one month earlier:

I would like to say in advance that we do not want to engage in dispute with the uninitiated nor to launch into explanations before them. Everyone is an expert of philosophy, less are expert in shoemaking. The theater is also a craft in the matters of which the uninitiated are constantly horning in. I do not claim that the newspapers should not give space for opinions on their cultural pages; however

these are not expert opinions. They contain such mis-statements that denigrate the long effort and work of a company with an excellent artistic potential (Tompá 2001).

The graduation between earlier and later presumptions, and the very fact that a call *For a Theater as a Form of Art* had to be written, is the sign of the momentum gained by a mobilization campaign, aimed at the removal of Gábor Tompa from the directorship of the Hungarian Theater in Cluj. In what follows I propose to look a bit closer to this campaign, based on the textual traces that remained behind it. I will not return here to the premises of the “way of looking,” clarified in the previous chapters. I will try instead to illustrate how the poesis of public discourse works, rendering explicit what it implies and what is implied by it. As the quotes above reveal, the very nature or form of speaking about the issue represents a not self-evident challenge, something that Bedford and Snow (2000) would name a core framing task, for the participants. Is it about expressing opinions? Should those opinions be “expert”? Should there be a debate on the theater? What kind of a debate, and on which aspects of it?

A few notes of caution however are necessary before proceeding. While I consider that in the light of the questions posed by this research relying on the textual material in this analysis is perfectly legitimate, I would like to emphasize that I do not find this material sufficient for a complete and accurate portrayal of that “something called as a debate.” In order to be able to do “something like that” a much more complicate and extensive work has to be done. Three problems are worth mentioning in this respect, I will enlist them according to their increasing degree of complexity:

First, focusing on publicly available press-articles disregards a couple of other events and materials that were part of the “debate” but were not preserved or not accessible to the writer of these lines. Most significant of these is a public forum on which the matter of the theater was discussed in the absence of its representatives and a decision was made to

formulate and initiate a parliamentary interpellation in order to remove the director. The second problem is suggested by the issue of parliamentary interpellation, and relates to the fact that the “debate” was not merely a matter of spontaneously organized private citizens, but it had a complex relation with political processes going on at that time. I will not enter the various interpretations of that aspect since I am not familiar on the terrain. My third observation is that the “debate” did not emerge out of the nothing but it represents a particularly forceful moment of ongoing criticism against the theater. In order to properly understand that criticism a much broader research would be needed, one investigating the reconfigurations of theater-audience relationship from a historical perspective.

With all these limitations however press-articles can be taken as sufficient and reliable material for the purposes at hand. Those purposes are not to reveal all the relevant dimensions of the “debate”, but to illustrate the functioning of a public voice that expresses dissent in a particular way. The first part will be dedicated to the birth of the public as a cultural form, revealing the rhetorical strategies through which private issues become transformed into public matters, and a field of conversation becomes projected, claiming the right to be taken into account (supervisory function) on the ground of its preoccupation with the common good, pursued in a disinterested manner (negativity). As soon as the case of the theater is established as a cause, and the supervising claim of the public sphere becomes operative, a public of dissenters starts to take shape around it, and the second part of the analysis will be preoccupied with them. Finally the third part will briefly discuss some internal contradictions of the whole process.

The analyzed material consists of more than 80 articles, compiled by Kinga Kelemen, administrative assistant of the theater, for archiving purposes. Most of them were published in the opinion page of the local daily *Szabadság* (51), but the “discussion” reached other Hungarian media (22) and it was taken up also by the Romanian media, although in a very

restricted and one-sided manner. The role of the local daily can be taken as central, both in giving space for the discourse and in circumscribing its scope of circulation. This aspect can be read clearly from the dynamics of publication which fell drastically at the point where the editors decided to leave the issue.²⁶ This happened at the beginning of February 2002, almost 90% of the articles being published between October 2001 and that date.

4.1. From dissent to public contestation (on the birth of a Form and a Cause)

The “debate” in question was not the first expression of dissent towards the Hungarian Theater of Cluj. The 21 years of directorship of Tompa were accompanied by various disagreements and discontents, formulated periodically in the press. What proved to be the major difference at this occasion were a relatively successful mobilization and a coherent articulation of a form in which pressure could be exercised. The phenomenon represented more than the voice of a couple of indignant persons uttered publicly. Besides attacks in the press, a public forum was held, a statement was signed by various public personalities, and an interpellation was prepared to the Romanian Cultural Minister demanding Tompa’s dismissal. This peculiarity requires some explanation. But in order to arrive at that, I will have to spell out the mechanisms through which dissent acquired its specific aura of legitimacy which made its claims forceful.

We can start with differentiating, following Bedford and Snow (2000:615), between the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational purposes of the framing activity oriented to mobilization. The first has definitional, attributional and boundary making components, it comprises ways to describe the nature of the situation (a problem), of identifying its sources (linking the problem with its cause) and of drawing a line between protagonists and antagonists (good guys and bad guys). Prognostic framing addresses the eternal question of

²⁶ This decision was made in an editorial meeting on the ground that the whole thing degenerated into indulging in personalities (K.K. editor, personal communication).

“what is to be done,” through articulating and circulating a solution to the previously defined problem and offering some kind of plan of intervention. The task of motivating on its part has to convince people to accept the plan and contribute to its realization (see Snow and Bedford 2000:615-618).

In our case the initial completion of these tasks is to be found in a programmatic article, signed by Sebesi (2001b) in the name of not further specified “initiators.”²⁷ The formulation of this initial appeal is straightforward: there is a problem identified (the alienating artistic policy, disregarding the audience, arbitrariness, psycho-terror, intimidation) and characterized as “detrimental to everyone.” There is a cause specified in the persons forming the directorship. There is furthermore a boundary drawn between the directorship and eventually everyone else. The action plan is first to take a public stance, then to join the public forum, soon to be organized on the matter. The reason for engagement is given by the magnitude of the stake (200 year old cornerstone, noble cause) and the urgency of the intervention (the evil plot against the Opera is coming to its end). I would say: a textbook case.

It is not surprising that the author begins his appeal with the problem of “competences,” since the major stake of his text is to redefine who and on what grounds can legitimately interfere with the functioning of the theater. *Whose Theater is it?* – is the main question, to be echoed later on by a “discussant” (See Fuchsné 2001) Sebesi’s mode of address takes the form of a communitarian appeal which has a particular salience and makes identification easy for its would-be public.²⁸ In the communitarian frame it projects, the theater is not merely an artistic institution but a central cultural institution of the collective.

²⁷ See Appendix. The article with the title *In what direction, Hungarian State Theater?...* appeared in *Erdélyi Napló* on November 6 but it was sent on October 25 to three Hungarian redactions, *Szabadság* among them. While it was published relatively late, it was circulated and known by the relevant actors at the moment when the so-called debate started.

²⁸ This is the mode of address practiced for example by political leaders who ground their legitimacy on the political representation of the collective interest of Hungarians.

The “alienated audience” refers not merely to those people who do not like what happens on the stage, but to the body-politic itself, to Hungarians alienated from their culture. The problem is not just that less and less people are willing to go to the theater. The problem is that “the 200 years old cornerstone of Hungarian theater playing” is on the edge of destruction, closely followed by “our sole Opera House.”

One of the main characteristics of public speech discussed earlier is the necessity to deny the fiction of its address in order to be effective (see Warner 2002a). Effectiveness means further circulation, which is possible only in case that people will recognize themselves as parts of that imaginary reference point addressed by the discourse. In our case this imaginary point of reference is the ethno-culturally understood “community,” and this also explains the nonchalance with which the writer passes over those who potentially will not agree with his diagnosis. *This* potential public is not addressed, and the statement of Sebesi is written *as if* they would not exist. It contains however an indirect address towards the “artistic and assistant personnel” of the theater through portraying them as “intimidated,” and leaving open a backdoor for the case they would express an objection against this, later on. The backdoor reads like this: “part of our creative artists out of compliance, another part out of their lack of legal expertise, accepts the ongoing psycho-terror.” With this, (1) an explanation is given for the curious fact that the “call to arms” does not come from someone directly involved with the catastrophe going on in the theater, (2) a space is created for the employees to position themselves for or against, (3) and the category of “compliance” is suggested for those who would prefer to be against.

In the light of the implications of the cultural form of public-ness discussed earlier, the significance of these modes of address lies in establishing a legitimate critical space in which the principle of supervision could be operative. The radical communitarian framing portrays the situation as one of urgent collective concern for *everyone*, independently of the

quite familiar particular divisions between those who like and those who do not like the theater. While crucial from this point of view, this remains a dangerous formulation, and one could easily expect that it will be seriously objected. However the political stake of this early stage is to get things started, and to define the terms of the “discussion.” The risks of this framing are necessary to take therefore, and the “compliance” motive serves precisely to take the wind out of the sails of the legitimate persons who may object, or at least rebate somehow the effect of their objection.²⁹

4.1.1. Rhetorical grounding of public pretense (or how the rhetorical magic transforms private into public, personal into impersonal, interest into disinterestedness)

The “theater as a cause” of public concern curiously grew out from something that can be considered rather a private matter. On 20 October a satire appeared on the pages of *Szabadság* (see Jancsó 2001). It was written by an older and respected actor whose contract was not renewed by the director for the 2001/2002 stage-year. Jancsó was playing since 1968 in the Hungarian Theater and became, as he ironically wrote, “an independent artist,” just before his retirement. The readers of the same newspaper were presented in March with the decision of the Romanian Cultural Ministry to cut 30% from the budget of theaters (see Nánó 2001). Tompa then declared that the budget would be up to 55% with the inflation, while in the existing structure expenditures being kept at the minimum possible without an artistic compromise. To the question whether the theater would permit to dismiss some of his artists, the response was that while he would not like to do that, they would certainly survive in case some actors have to leave.

This was the case of Jancsó in October, the reasons of his dismissal being “budget cut on the one hand and no assignments on the other.” His satire makes the portrait of the artist as

²⁹ The objection, quite predictably, came from the part of the actors: “we deny the adjectives stressed during the debate: squat, compliant, intimidated, or subservient. Trust us, as responsible artists no one can force us to cringing.” (Public Statement 2001b) However at that point the debate is full-blown and they have to make reference to it as such.

an old man, who served his community for a lifetime and now has to look for a job in Moscow Square, Budapest, the iconic site of poor Transylvanian migrant workers of the 90s.³⁰ In a language of metaphor and allusions, Jancsó makes a list of his grievances.³¹ There are no direct accusations in all this, only certain acrimoniousness, somewhat understandable given the circumstances.

The real mystery lies in the way in which this private matter came to be transubstantiated into a public issue. The magic trick of connecting the *metaphor* to reality and the *allusio* to accusation is produced by Sebesi (2001a) in a short text published on the same day as his call to arms started to circulate (however not yet published), entitled *Esteemed Miklós Jancsó, my dear founder crony*. This remarkable text already shows in its title the duplicity of formulation utilized for achieve the semantic metathesis. Its address is both formal (esteemed) and informal (crony) while *founder crony* (alapító komám) has the additional meaning of co-founding in Hungarian. The text begins like this:

We were reading with great interest and in a smirking way your project to found a Moscow Square theater in the Saturday edition of *Szabadság*. Although we are still on Széchenyi Square (yet), we have been beating about the bush for almost ten years now. Maybe now, that no one can say about you and your better half – unfortunately – that you are doing and writing all this because *you are a second class actor... you do not invite regularly your bread and butter... you do not follow the artistic humility given to us on the Köteles street in Targu Mures... etc.* allow us, a couple of people, more and more of us, to join to your founding project with the following comments and ideas (Sebesi 2001a).

³⁰ While the portrait is suggestive, it is also slightly misleading. At the moment of his dismissal the author was a regular professor at the department of Hungarian Language of the largest Romanian university, as well as at the Protestant Theology in Cluj, and a private university founded and maintained by the Hungarian state in Romania. Since 1999 he was also a regular receiver of a monthly fellowship, offered by the Hungarian state in the frame of complex a policy-system of assisting ethnic Hungarians abroad.

³¹ The manner in which the decision was communicated, the disinterest of the press, the old chagrin of the audience-oriented theater, the vanity of the director, poverty, the fate of the minority artist, the institution of annual contract as well as the abusive utilization of phones for long-distance calls and way too expensive decors (see Jancsó 2001).

There are a couple of crucial rhetorical devices here at work. First to note is the simultaneously personal and impersonal address ingeniously utilized to create the implied addressee in the shadow of the explicit one. The address works *as if* it were intended to J.M. in a form of fictive conversation made possible by the medium of the press. The implied addressee, of course, is the reader, who has to be “prepared” for the categorical statements made in his other article. As Warner (2002d) wisely notes: “public speech has to be taken in two ways: as addressed to us and as addressed to strangers. The benefit of this practice is that it gives a general social relevance to private thought and life.”

Going a step further, Sebesi (2001a) projects the image of an unspecified but steadily growing group of “we” (us, a couple of people, more and more of us) who finds great interest and propensity to join to something which at this point is still a figure of speech, a metaphor expressing disappointment. The metaphor will turn into real in the ninth comment out of the ten: “After all it would be nice now to have one of those fashionable *forums, talk-shows, discussions* about our only theater in Cluj, maintained on public money, since we hope you do not imagine this project in a mono-dramatic form...”

The idea of the public sphere springs up from the seed of the steadily growing “we.” In the meantime, Sebesi (2001a) grounds in it the operation of the negativity principle. It can be expected that most of his readers know about his personal conflict with the director, one which goes back to the years when he was part of the company. He left the theater in 1990 when Tompa was appointed, and it is not a big secret that he was considered an actor without too much talent by him. This personal involvement is rhetorically neutralized by establishing a link with the person of Jancsó. Since the later can not be accused of lack of talent, moreover it is reasonable to expect that his satire was read more with sympathy than with denigration (or seen as inadmissibly biased) his *allusions* can be linked with Sebesi’s *allusions* soon to become statements. We find in this gesture the ground-zero of the idea that what comes to be

said soon, will hold true not because who is saying it, but in spite of who is saying it (the negativity principle as defined by Warner).

The allusions of Sebesi (2001a) are many and sometimes they aim quite below the belt. Among others he alludes that the director is copying performances (directing based on videotapes), and writes a curious sentence referring to him which makes no sense in Hungarian and therefore can be read in two ways: either he forces his employees into oral sex, or he has the habit of cursing before them. The text ends with a musing over some sort of “nowadays fashionable forum, talk-show, talk out,” and a statement, suspended somewhere between a wish and an appeal that “the rest: (should not be now) silence!”

The very same day Sebesi sent the *In what direction* manifesto and call to arms, presented to you earlier, to three Hungarian newspapers, making clear that he thinks about this wish-fulfillment in quite practical terms. It was not accepted for publication, and it finally appeared 11 days later in *Erdélyi Napló*, a weekly with a far more reduced readership and local impact as *Szabadság*. However till that point all the rhetorical preparations were already made for evoking of the cultural form of the public sphere in the front of the would-be public. There was an ongoing conversation projected coming from private discussions and reaching the press, personal bias was polled back to a reasonable degree, personal address was moved towards an impersonal one. Moreover, the seeds of a *cause* were planted through the range of allusions which would support the fact-ness of the “detrimental conditions” stated. Departing from the realm of metaphor, expressions like “joining” and “initiative” acquired a very concrete meaning (“taking stance,” expressing opinion, coming to a public forum).

The reaction of the theater came in the knowledge of Sebesi’s call to arms, however before its publication. Moreover, since *Szabadság* refused to publish this one as well, it appeared first in the Romanian press. The communiqué (see ADHTC 2001, in Appendix) signed by the artistic management of the theater, but presumably authored by Tompa himself,

has an unusually harsh language, somewhat understandable, given the harshness of the assertions on which it reacts and the several allusions beyond the customarily defined canon of good taste. The text speaks about dilettante former actors instigating against the theater, and taking up a joke of S.K.A., terms “the association which refers to itself as J.M. and its cronies,” terrorists. Ad hominem, indeed, but the point is precisely to firmly de-legitimize the carefully fabricated pretense to public significance from the “initiators” (not a conversation but the eruption of dark forces of irrationality, not disinterestedness but the resentment of the talent-less, not speaking for and in the name of community, but smearing any notion of community, etc.).

However for an everyday reader the call to arms of Sebesi is not yet available and Jancsó is linked to his “cronies” only through rhetorical tricks and devices. The harshness of the communiqué thus seems a bit exaggerated. Furthermore, completing the unspecified “we” of Sebesi with the figure of Jancsó, the communiqué paradoxically reinforces the magical and crucial private-public transition, which is at stake. That the situation thus created resembles to a mousetrap will become clear two days later. On 1 and 2 November, two interventions will substantiate the frame components that will become the main charges of Sebesi, namely the “plan to eradicate our sole Opera House” and the “intimidated employees.”

4.1.2. The phantom of the Opera and Abusive Father (on two central components of the masterframe and on the closing the mousetrap)

On November 1, *Szabadság* published an unsigned material under the title *Dangerous Intrigues. Opera-Theater conflict on Sétatér* (Szabadság 2001a). The material reported on a letter, sent by Simon Gábor, the head of the Opera on October 4 to Béla Markó, the president of DAHR. Reportedly, the letter formulated several charges. Chief among them one, according to which for the last three years Tompa sends denigrating letters to Simon and the Cultural Ministry *in Romanian* (my emphasis), claiming that the Opera exists only as a

façade of multi-ethnic culture and it is maintained only for political reasons. The readers were informed that both the Opera and the Theater are state-subsidized institutions, and that since 1948 the costs of maintenance and administration are included in the budget of the theater. In spite of this, Tompa, bothered among others by the loud work of the Opera, abusively denies their right to the services of the common personnel (porter, assistances) and makes impossible the joint existence of the two institutions in the common building. The letter of Simon characterizes Tompa as someone who, “when does not have something to stage doesn’t know what to do with his authority, and when he starts to administer he becomes a public danger.”

That there are tensions between the Opera and the Theater it was not something entirely new, at least for the better informed part of reading public. On 14 September another Hungarian daily reported on these, however emphasizing quite different aspects (see Pap 2001). While the exchange of letters in Romanian was brought out in the title as something that catches the eye, the same title pointed attention to the renovation of the stage as the source of conflict. In this version Tompa objected to the Opera for not contributing to the renovation and maintenance costs, while Simon replied with the common budget argument reproduced also in *Szabadság*. The article also mentions the Ministerial budget-cut, attributing the increasing tensions to this.

The differences of portrayal are significant enough to support the statement that, when read against the background of what was said before, the *Szabadság* article did not report on the Opera-Theater conflict but substantiated the frame of the deploying “theater debate.” Most significantly, it enforced the main motivational frame-element in Sebesi’s call to arms, the destruction of the Opera. Second, it strengthened the portrayal of the director as abusive, authoritative ruler who intimidates his employees. Third, it linked another respectable public personality to Sebesi’s unspecified “we,” enlarged thus into a group of three. Although we

are not informed about who is writing the article, one may count its invisible presence to be the forth. While budget cut remains unmentioned, the unknown writer explicitly links the report to the “initiative”

The letter of the head of the Opera became public after the relation between the directorship and a part of actors whose contract was not renewed by Gábor Tompa is becoming increasingly poisonous.³² As it is known the eight actors dismissed were joined by S.K.A. who left the company beforehand, and now accuses the director of being “anti-communitarian and anti-audience. (see Szabadság 2001a)

How exactly the letter of Simon *became* public? Although the passive voice suggests otherwise, our writer *makes it public* through reporting about it. The letter of Simon was written on October 4, and it is termed by the article “an open letter” addressed to the head of the Hungarian party. Whatever the “open letter” means in this context (open to the public? of public importance?) its public-ness dates to 1 November, when the article about it gets published.³³ Moreover, the number of dissenters also grows with seven actors (plus Jancsó), who, *as it is known*, were joined by Sebesi in their dissent. In fact this is the first public information about the number of actors dismissed. And it is also far from being clear what were those actors doing and in what sense Sebesi was joining them. Are they to be seen those “initiators” in the name of who Sebesi signed his call to arms? One can not be sure, however, with the exception of Jancsó none of the dismissed actors intervened earlier or later on in the debate. The truth remains the rhetorical truth of the statement: a group of dissenting citizens are organizing themselves and break the wall of silence around what’s going on in the theater.

While the “phantom of the Opera” enforces the urgency of intervention, the intimidation and power abuse component of the diagnostic framing becomes substantiated

³² Compare the wording with Sebesi’s (2001b): people condemning in private “that we all know that it’s real, it exists, moreover: it is becoming poisonous.”

³³ The attentive readers will find out only on the next day that the letter was made public, sent to the press by Simon himself (see Tompa 2001).

next day through an interview with Lóránd Madarász, actor and the vice-president of the labor-union of the Hungarian Theater. The short introductory text gives the context:

Lately our redaction gets more and more articles written by people who react to the situation that emerged in the Hungarian Theater. Fed up with the importune work-relations between the directorship and the employees, many actors left the company. The letter of S.G. in our yesterday edition, addressed to Béla Markó, and sent also to the press bears witness about a war between these two Hungarian institutions, a war which is not merely an internal affair of these. We asked about these Lóránd Madarász, the vice-president of the union of the theater, and Gábor Tompa, the director of the institution (Szabadság 2001b).

It will not take much for a trained eye to identify “the logic of discourse” in this exemplary “contextualization.” I will not return to the problem of the growing “we,” the lost and found letter, and how the war is not an internal affair anymore.³⁴ But there are also some novel elements, as the one according to which the actors *left* with a good reason, and not dismissed nor remained without their contracts renewed.

In any case, the “facts revealed” by the vice-president of the labor-union (putting pressure on the workforce, oppressing other views, arbitrariness in evaluation, denouncing others) complete the authoritarian portrait of Tompa, moreover, this portrait is made by one of his actors, a legitimate and insider person therefore (see Madarász 2001a). Madarász does not mention “psycho-terror,” but still, he makes us understand how life is made hard by such a whimsical and all-mighty Father. The interview also sorts out somehow our puzzle around getting your contract renewed or being dismissed. Following the circles of argumentation, they turn out to be the same. The first premise is that contract renewal depends on whether

³⁴ The reader attentive to the particular word-choosing and linguistic formulation will find great examples of the circulation of discourse on this level. While one should not suspect necessarily some sort of intentionality behind this phenomenon (as everyone, journalists are working under pressure and from available material), the self-reinforcing effects are obvious.

you get a role or not. The second states that Tompa (and not the directors who stage the play) has absolute authority over who gets role and who not. The inevitable conclusion is that therefore contract renewal is just another word for dismissing. The elegance of the syllogism does not loose much from its beauty because of the small note of correction published ten days later by Madarász (2001b), according to which:

Gábor Tompa gives roles or suggests casting, since the invited directors could not be familiar with the company. He attempts to intervene in the casting of the invited director. It is not a chance that Andrea Spolarics played in every performance. The interventions sometimes succeeds, other times not. For example Rozália Rekita got the role in the Bánk Bán because of the lobby of Árpád Árkosi, while Lóránd Madarász (the very author of the correction, *my note*) got out from the casting due to the successful intervention of Tompa.

Broadly this is the background against which one should read the second quote of this analysis (page 40-41), the words with which Tompa began his interview. I introduced the lengthy quote from the correction note above in order to give a sense about the nature of the mis-statements mentioned by him. This correction note gradates or layers to a certain extent the reader's presumption with respect to the impartiality of Madarász and the accuracy of the portrayal made by him. However, as in the case of the actor's objection (see footnote 29) it will come at a moment when the "debate" is already full-blown.

The paradox of Tompa's interview reveals itself in its very first sentence: "I would like to note in advance that we do not wish to engage in disputes with the uninitiated" (see Tompa 2001). In many ways that impossible trope or space of *in advance* is the topos of my whole effort in this thesis. Tompa more than surely means that he has something to say *in advance* he would start to answer questions, before the questions of the interviewee would start to shape in many ways what he will be have to say. He wants to clarify something,

before the restrictions posed by every question on a speaker would start to become effective. But no matter how *clara et distincta* his clarifications and distinctions may be, these are already trapped somehow in his very condition of speech, by that mousetrap fabricated *in advance* which I tried to take apart and present piece by piece in front of you. His clarifications will come on the condition and with reference to that fiction which was pieced together as a case and a cause, effectively enough to make him reflect on it. Him speaking: is the testimony of that effectiveness. When he says that “we do not wish to engage in disputes,” that “we” is already engaged by a “dispute,” one which already dictates some terms of engagement. From his interview, less his efforts to clarify or his efforts to refute the accusations will be significant in the following, but more the insolence heard out from his word-choosing: “the uninitiated.”³⁵

4.2. Plots and Characters (*where the Characters are defined from the point of view of the public voice they inhabit, and their role in process and portrait is revealed*)

The rest of the spectacle will not be presented in such a detail as the crucial first act. What I will offer you instead is an overview, a sort of libretto or menu of the major frames, their shifts and alignments, and the characters behind them, in order to make sense of how and what kind of public came into being around the “noble cause” launched by Sebesi.

The strangeness of the public performances as the one analyzed here lies in the fact that they are enacted not by actors but by the public itself. However as we speak about actors enacting a character in a play, we can also speak about characters enacted in a public discourse. *Character* originally meant an engraved mark, later to refer through a metaphorical extension to those qualities that define someone. It was in this sense that it became utilized around the seventeenth century with respect to fictive figures, whose qualities were defined

³⁵ The public character called “the member of the audience” will have a predilection to refer to this sentence later on (see for example Fuchsné 2001).

with the means of textual devices and rhetoric, by an Author. Public discourse does not have an almighty author but it certainly has a rhetorical quality. Those who are marked by it, those who enact it, do not necessarily play a role or engage in some sort of deception. They rather make something to act, to exist, to be. Deception, of course is part of this game also.

The criteria of defining the characters of the “debate” will be therefore the source and nature of their public voice, the way they are to be understood as public persons. From this respect we encounter people who speak as the members of the audience, as journalists, as public intellectuals and of course we have statements made by the actors of the theater. These are rhetorical stances, which nevertheless cover real persons. Here I am interested in their rhetorical existence, without speculating too much about their “real” one.

It is useful to approach our public characters from the standpoint that they are engaged in (and by) a game of representation. The stake of this par excellence political game is to establish the speaker and the object of speak in a particular way. Latour (2005:6) clarifies this point well, when speaking about the two different meanings the word *representation* may have:

The first one, so well known in schools of law and political science, designates the ways to gather the legitimate people around some issue. In this case the representation is said to be faithful if the right procedures have been followed. The second one, well known in science and in technology, presents or rather represents what is the object of concern to the eyes and ears of those who have been assembled around it. In this case the representation is said to be good if the matters at hand have been accurately portrayed.

The procedure, as Latour shows, “draws a sort of place, sometimes a circle, which might be called an assembly, a gathering, a meeting, a council.” The portrayal on the other hand “brings into this newly created locus a topic, a concern, an issue, a *topos*.” However the

question is always: “*Who* is to be concerned, *What* is to be considered?” (Latour 2005:6). The characters are interesting from this point of view. As they enter the arena the question will always revolve around their share of legitimacy (first among the first) and the accuracy of the portraits they make.

We saw in the first act how the cultural form of public-ness with its range of implications (supervision, negativity, etc.) was established on a rhetorical level. As I showed, in terms of portrayal this implied a particular way of framing the issue of concern. I further pointed out how this portrayal was enforced by bringing legitimate characters to strengthen its particular aspects. As public discourse “as such,” became established, other characters started to populate the scene. People, some of them common, some of them not so common, started to express their opinion. They started to join the “we” projected by Sebesi, understanding the public-ness of their engagement with reference to that imaginary community around which a circle was drawn by the very means of its imagination. This “we” are the Hungarians, citizens of the city, those who do not agree, those who used to talk about their disagreement in private but now will take a stance, those who are fed up with Tompa, etc. The terms of joining this “we” are both generous and concrete enough for some people to recognize themselves as being addressed. We have for example Fuchsné (2001), citizen of Cluj, presumably a public notary. *An uninitiated who asks: whose theater is it?*

This is what I ask myself each day, moreover for years now, when I think how enthusiastically I used to go, we used to go to the performances of the theater in Cluj. If I think a second time, more people are coming in my notarial office lately than to the temple of Thalia on Sétatér. I realize that the current director will sweep me down and together, similarly to all those who think differently (maybe more healthily?), and strews me in the basket of uninitiated. Even so and in spite of that we have to raise our voice and say it loud that now the glass is full, this is not allowed, it is not possible to continue in this way. Because as it is made clear by the most part of the articles of newspapers, besides one-two, maybe three-four supporters the majority of theater-goers is discontented.

I will spare you from a thorough exegesis and make only the statement that the person here *thinks a second time* all her relation with the theater in the exact terms proposed to her by the fabricated discourse. Matches between her public opinion and the public discourse can be identified on levels deep as the word-choosing. Which does not mean, of course that she is consciously manipulated. It means only that she uses the categories and frames established by the discourse in order to articulate an opinion. It is more or less what each of us is doing when speaking publicly, only that my frames and categories now are oriented by a different reference-point and address.

When I think a second time, I was also present in Cluj when the theater-debate was going on. I knew about it and encountered some articles in the newspaper. I have read a couple, with a certain amusement for that matter, and I certainly had something like an opinion. But it never occurred to me to write articles, since the address of Sebesi did not touch me in any way. It had no appeal. Although I might have been signed a counter-statement in case I would perceive the matter taking a serious turn, at that point both the magnitude of the stake, and the urgency of the intervention resembled more to some bad joke rather than a serious motivational frame-component.

Someone becomes part of the public through mere attention and the endurance of its participation depends on an engagement in circulating it. Both attention and engagement are fragile things, as shown by the attitude of the writer of these lines in those times. One finds its *simile* in another example (told however in an anectoditacal manner in an intervention), the case of a mother who planned to participate in the forum organized by dissenters, but when his son came home from a performance and talked quite enthusiastically about it, she changed her mind. She was thinking that, after all, she did not go to the theater for a while herself (see Szabó 2001).

The author of the quoted text also spells out quite explicitly that there *was* a time when she *used to go* to the theater and the fact that the majority of theater-goers are discontented *is made clear by the most part of the articles*. The simple reason for that may be that contented theater-goers were not addressed, called into arms to take a stance and write articles, therefore they did not feel that there is a need to express their opinion. Most part of the articles was written by those interested in the debate, less part by those who were not.³⁶ What lies behind the character of the spectator, seen through its public voice, therefore is far from being self-evident. Out of twelve opinion pieces speaking this voice, written from the standpoint of the spectator, ten are critical while only two are supportive to the theater.

The public voice of the journalist is complicated by their role as professional circulators of the discourse, whose work is subject to the old rule according to which something reported is something that exists. It is telling in this respect that more than one third of the texts was produced by journalists, and that the whole flow of discussions dried up, when its main forum, the daily *Szabadság*, took down the issue from the agenda.³⁷ Besides assuring self-referentiality of circulation there were also journalistic voices that took a clear or not so clear evaluative stance.³⁸ Those against the theater were engaged in a game called by Benford and Snow (2000:623) amplification, taking up several motives from the frame, elaborating and highlighting them as salient.³⁹ The game of the supporters on the other hand is counter-framing, an attempt to “rebut, undermine or neutralize a person’s or group’s myths, versions of reality, or interpretive framework” (Benford and Snow 2000:626). In this respect

³⁶ There were of course, “members of the audience” who objected to this strategic reduction of “the Audience” into dissenters. See the contribution of Váli (2001) in this respect.

³⁷ It is quite complicate to assess the role of this daily in the shaping of the events. In the early phase of the debate it refused to publish the appeal of Sebesi and the harsh communiqué of the theater, however 80% of the texts appeared on its pages. Its self-understanding as a forum which gives space to the discussions but does not take part in it was emphasized by the then chief editor. However the fact that the whole matter suddenly ceased to exist when it dropped the issue clearly points that “discussions” circulated not in an empty space, as suggested.

³⁸ The for-against ratio I propose is 4 to 5 in terms of intervention and 2 to 3 in terms of people, both favoring the supporters of the theater.

³⁹ Dénes László (2001) for example takes up the need for a public debate-motive, Csomafáy (2001) writes a long article about the audience which can be resumed by its telling title: *The empty seats are accusing*.

they come close to the more heavy-weight defense deployed by supporting members of the next category, that of public intellectuals. There is no space here for a detailed analysis of these interventions, but I will return to them briefly in the following chapter.

The core of the opposition (14 articles) is given by three people, Sebesi and Jancsó being already somewhat familiar for the reader. They can be considered as the main frame articulators (Benford and Snow 2000). The third one, István Szőcs, is a controversial figure, known opponent of the director and its artistic policies. After a long history of attacks on Tompa`s person and unfavorable criticism towards the performances of the theater, Szőcs (2001) comes to deliver in the context of this debate the “artistic” part of the critique. And that can be summarized and judged both in style and content from the following quote:

With regards to the artistic burn-out of Tompa, I do not see the major problem where many others see it, namely that Tompa copies, mimics whole scenes from productions made by other directors, as he did it in the case of *Hamlet* or more recently in *Troilus and Cressida*... after all the theater is the art of imitation, while should a director not imitate? And anyhow, in the case of *Hamlet* and *Troilus* the copied scenes were by far the best, without them we would not get anything. But that points at more tragic secrets when Tompa stages the *Hamlet* after ten years in Craiova and he copies his own staging in Cluj. He is convulsively attached to certain intellectual stereotypes, which is an alarming sign from the point of view of the intellect.

As an alarming sign or not, Tompa`s *Hamlet* in *Craiova* was awarded the best play and the best staging of the stage-year 1996/1997 in Romania, and it brought a best actor of the year award for Adrian Pintea in the role of Hamlet. On his staging of *Operett*, nominated next year, Szőcs states that it was “enormously clumsy and empty” and tells the readers how after the first act on its premiere he tried to hold back the “panic-stricken fleeing audience.” The absurdity of these assertions is obvious and supposedly as well-known as the bias of their author. Their subtext however, or their “rhetorical truth,” works not on the level of refutable

or sustainable arguments. While it would hold some interest to make explicit the exact chemical composition of this bile, it would require an unusually punctilious analysis, which I can not make here. I will make my point therefore conditionally, without deploying any concluding evidence. According to this point, Szócs's main role is to exacerbate. There is one single line of logical progression in his writings, the iron law of radicalizing, pushing into its limits every statement and topic. This means that his mis-statements are not merely blatant, but *too* blatant, and his insinuations not merely insinuations but insinuations pushed to the extreme.⁴⁰ The only reason I can imagine for this is to attain an effect which I can only express in the following formula: *What he says is certainly exaggeration, but there has to be a grain of true in it if he exaggerates to such an extent.* Other possible reasons are beyond my apprehension, therefore with respect of his role: I rest my case.

4.3. Frames and contradictions (*in which three major frames deployed in the debate are briefly discussed along with their problems*)

Finally, there are three major frames that deserve an all too brief discussion. All of them were pointed at in the previous chapters, and they all are interlinked in various ways. Here I will resume myself to reveal some of their contradictions. The first is the communitarian frame, the second the antagonism between high-culture and popular concessions, and the third the distinction of the private and public person of the director.

⁴⁰ It needs a full quote to make perceivable the full effect. In discussing the artistic qualities of *Operetta*, at a certain point Szócs (2001) states:

There is one more reason why this performance remained with me as a very sad memory. A couple of seats away in the row behind me sat Miklós Tompa, the former chief director of the theater of Targu Mures, father of our Gábor. But he was a great personality not merely as a theater machinator, but also as someone who is familiar with all the details and secrets of staging. Now one could read from his face that he does not believe his eyes: he was pale, lips half dropped, transpiring when one observes at the seminar that the very devil from the hell is sitting in front of him, staring at him: freezing bewilderment radiated from his eyes, witnessing that never in his worst nightmares or his most dreadful denunciations he could not imagine that something like this could happen on the stage. Unfortunately I never met him after, I keep this image of him now for the end of the days: it could have been sad for him after so many years spent in and for the theater, to go to the grave with the feeling of this play: because not much after that he indeed died.

The two major problems of the community frame relate to the difficulty of drawing the boundaries of the imaginary “we,” without falling into the logical trap of circularity and self-contradiction. It is somewhat at hand to draw this boundary according to ethnic criteria, and to suggest that the community of the theater is that of Hungarians in Romania. Here we meet two problems: that of the legitimate representatives of the community, and that of the theater as a state-subsidized institution. Let us start with the second. The statement of the public forum defines the theater introducing a private-public distinction (Public statement 2001c). According to this, the theater is not a private establishment, therefore “its artistic policy, efforts, aims can not depend on the taste and arbitrariness of one person.”

The theater as an institution is the property of the *state*, therefore one of communal property. We maintain it, through buying an entrance ticket and through paying taxes we the citizens assure the money from which the state subsidizes this institution (Public Statement 2001c).

The second premise reads as such: “this theater is not just a theater, but – according to its name, it is Hungarian.” The conclusion:

Being a public institution of the Hungarian national community, in our opinion is false the view held by the actual directorship of the Hungarian theater according to which the audience (our community) has no interference in how does it work, what kind of artistic policy it follows (Public Statement 2001c).

However it is quite obvious that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. The most part of the theater-budget does not come from ticket sells. Moreover, tickets are bought by Romanian spectators and the largest share in taxes on which the theater is subsidized is paid by ethnic Romanians. We, the citizens of the state, and we, ethnic Hungarians, are not the

same ground for negotiation, and speaking about a “public institution of the Hungarian national community” makes little sense in the context of this argument.

Moreover, there is also the problem raised by the journalist Demény (2001) earlier: “What does serve the interest of the nation?⁴¹ Who should we consult with in this question? With Sebesi?” In Romania, consultations on that topic are most often the table of DAHR, which, while it functions as a political party draws its legitimacy from promoting the interest of Hungarians. Without the DAHR taking stance, speaking in the name of the community is less convincing.⁴² We can understand from this the significance of evoking the form and supervisory function of the public sphere. Civil self-organization was meant not merely as form in which demands could be articulated for the Cultural Ministry, but also to put pressure on the DAHR to take up the issue. Evidently, the statement of the initiators, signed by a number of Hungarian public personalities and intellectuals was addressed both to the DAHR and to the Cultural Ministry.⁴³

This however reveals another ambiguity in the boundary making of the projected community. While the issue had to be framed as being of universal concern, emphasizing that the cause of the theater concerns all Hungarians in Romania (although not Romanians), it was rooted in the particular “audience” of a locally defined public. While this particular-universal tension offered some space of strategic maneuver,⁴⁴ it also considerably weakened the universalist pretenses of the initiators.

⁴¹ This reads as the ethno-cultural nation.

⁴² The DAHR however stayed at the margin, and intervened only at the phase when the Romanian ultranationalist P.R.M. party started to attack both the theater and the opera. The statement issued by DAHR made clear that the alliance “does not support any subversive actions that would endanger the existence of our institutions.”

⁴³ An interpellation was prepared by Vekov Károly, deputy of DAHR to the Cultural Ministry. Vekov maintained his personal sympathy and support for the initiative although he finally did not make the interpellation which was categorically objected by DAHR. There are opinions according to which his aim was to gain popular support from locals for the coming elections since his place in DAHR lists was shaking (K.K. personal communication).

⁴⁴ On the one hand it served some sort of empirical basis for the claim that the audience is alienated from the theater, on the other hand it was possible to use it as a way to de-legitimize those supporters of the theater who were not living in Cluj. Expressing his opinion on the matter, Selmeczi György, well known composer, was met

While the community frame met some immediate efficiency in launching the issue, its internal contradictions soon wedged it apart. Moreover, it was conceived as inclusive to such a degree, that it could not possibly find a place for disagreement within those who qualify in the community. As a consequence it had to be circumvallated with additional fabrications, two of them being of greater importance: the high art and popular concessions antagonism and counterposing the private and public person of Tompa.

The high art versus popular concessions issue, as it may become clear for the reader now, it is slightly more complicated in this context by the fact that the theater in question is the sole Hungarian theater in the city, and as an institution, has a long history of communitarian “mission.” This refers not merely to the theater being “the temple of Hungarian language,” as the public statement of the initiators referred to it (see Public Statement 2001c). It also circumscribes an expectation to serve the needs of all segments of this Hungarian audience. The point is made by a member of the audience:

On the right of expressing my opinion and with many of my fellow spectators I admit that indeed I feel responsibility for our theater. This is not the theater of the manager, of the director, of the actors and employees, but the theater of those in Cluj and it is not exaggerative to say that of Hungarians in Transylvania also: it is the theater of the manager, of the director, of segments of the public and of the segmented public (Kovács 2001).

This is a crucial issue, one which fuelled many discussions since the nineties and which partly explains the support from the part of many public intellectuals for the “initiative.” Even some of those who in this case took a clear stance against the claim to remove Tompa, adhere to the opinion that the theater should seek for a balance between on the one hand producing high-culture, seen as being of interest for few, and serving the more popular needs

with the demand from the part of Szőcs to look after his own business and not to interfere in “our saint devotion” (see Szőcs 2001b)

of the many, on the other. Through a long quote from an article written by him in 1994, Kántor (2002) takes a position which is representative in this respect:

On the ground of my taste and theater culture I am clearly in favor for that type of theater playing which here is represented and realized today by Gábor Tompa – however I also see the one-sidedness of that artistic management which does not assure a proper place in its artistic policy for performances played for the large audience. It is and should not be allowed the realization of a taste-terror in the name of this or that conception on the nature and role of the theater.

Kántor (2002) takes the high and popular theater as a false opposition, in the sense that the two can be combined, through playing high-art in the studio and popular one on the main stage for example. I also take the opposition as false, although in quite different sense than the abovementioned one. In the spirit of the arguments in this thesis, essentialized and reified notions of taste-cultures do not offer any ground for understanding publics or predicting their formation.⁴⁵ The statement signed by the actors of the theater, not surprisingly, also emphasizes the validity of the performance and not its connection to previous expectations or taste, while making clear the quite obvious fact that the actors can play only for those who come for the play:

For us there is only the performance. From the point of view of the actor genre-theoretical, space-partition (studio/main stage) or other differences are not decisive. The challenge, the duty is to make the performance valid, to live and therefore to make the performance living. This is what those for whom we are bowing from night to night are thanking us when there are applauding (see Public Statement 2001b)

⁴⁵ For my arguments in this respect I refer the reader to the 3rd chapter of this thesis.

As brief as the earlier ones, I also have to mention a third frame built up and maintained throughout the “debate.” This frame establishes a contradiction between the director as an artist and as a manager. Not considering now the obviously rancorous and denigrator insinuations on his person, one finds the clearest expression of this divide in the characterization of Tompa made by Simon (2001) according to which: “when he does not have something to stage, he does not know what to do with his authority, and when he starts to administer he becomes a public danger.” Although the “critiques” of Szócs (2001) were meant to make a point about the “artistically narrow language” of the director, no one could hope to seriously be able to question Tompa’s qualities in this sense.⁴⁶ Making him a “public danger” as an administrator proved to be the track on which the “unbearable and abusive personality”-frame was aligned.

⁴⁶ As I hope the excerpts quoted earlier convinced already the reader, under the pretext of theater criticism Szócs in fact pursues the denigration of the person and the portrayal of the staging as alienating the audience.

5. Conclusion (or the inevitable stitching)

For a public demonstrator arriving at the conclusion represents the ungrateful moment of stitching up, and thus making disappear most of what he intended to reveal. With the risk of turning “the wit the seamy side without” I will however attempt to comply with this demand.

With respect to the case, Jancsó (2002) wrote an *Epilogue of Sétatér* almost one year after the publication of his *Moscow Square* satire. In that article, he states that he never intended to initiate any kind of public debate, and I hope the analysis convinced the reader that indeed, what happened had nothing to do with those public discussions which are supposed to deliberately produce common agreements, grounding on their turn decisions that effect matters of common concern. What happened, and hopefully you found the analysis convincing in this respect, resembled more to a (perhaps not entirely) chance meeting of a frame articulator and a medium of circulation on a dissecting-table.

Can one say more than that without inevitably entering into speculations? Is this “debate (or something called as such)” telling us something about the public of the Hungarian Theater of Cluj or about the public role of this theater? Do the problems, issues and complaints tendentiously formulated and presented with the air of disinterestedness under the pretext of a “noble cause,” possess an amount of “realness” outside the reality of the discourse that holds them together?⁴⁷ In case I would have to answer to these questions, I would propose certain caution in drawing the consequences. Speaking about some sort of “real” public would require a more ethnographic presence in the daily life of the theater, and different methods, protocols of observation than used in this research.

⁴⁷ These are questions posed for example by the theater critique Tompa Andrea (2004), who interprets the “debate” as a symptom of the rapid changes in the social, artistic and institutional contexts in which the theater operates. While I find some truth in this, I think her disregard of its rhetorical dimension makes the link between those changes and the “debate” to appear stronger than it would be the case. I would agree with understanding the “debate” as a symptom, but I am not sure that it is the symptom of what Tompa suggests.

What I hopefully was able to show with the means and material at my disposal was the way in which a cause was constructed and made public through certain forms of address and modes of circulation, as a matter of concern that could bring together those who understand themselves as being addressed by it. In a word: how public-ness and publics work. However it is also clear that the whole rhetorical procedure, this performative public-creation of public discourse, had a strategic dimension and it was oriented to the attainment of certain goals. In our case the goal can be said to be political in that it aimed at the removal of Tompa from the directorship of the theater, through claiming the legitimate critical space and supervisory principle of public self-organization. While this will to power was not completed with any policy suggestion (at least dissenters did not present any conceptions to the reading public for the case they would reach their goal) I would argue that the story is not without some policy moral. As Stone (2002:9) points out, the instrumental nature of political reasoning relies more on metaphor and analogy than on rational argument. The stake is always rhetorical, in that a whole field of argument has to be projected, in an effort “to get others to see a situation as one thing rather than another... Each vision constructs a different political contest and invokes a different set of rules for resolving the conflict” (Stone 2002:9).

In case one agrees with McGuigan (2002:1-2) in that “cultural policy is a matter of urgent public debate” (and I myself fully agree with this statement), I think it is not without interest to pay a closer attention to the rhetorical contexts in which those debates will be held.

6. Appendix (*which contains two translations*)

In what direction, Hungarian State Theater?...

First and last observation: not on this way!...

For a long time now the situation in the Hungarian State Theater in Cluj – the selfish, antinational, anti-communitarian and anti-audience artistic policy, the refusal to consider the opinion of the Audience, the abusive dismissal of talented young and old actors, etc. – grew out of the competence of an acting company, a cultural ministry and a director's arbitrary decisions over the shaping of the artistic policy of the theater. This state subsidized institution, maintained by public funds became to an ever growing extent a painful prickle for its community. Opinions related to this matter seem to have faded away lately, their expert representatives, the commoners, the Audience but also the real professionals express only in private (in private talks, on the street-corner, in the family or in small circles) their judgments about something that we all know that exists, moreover that it became poisonous. In the same time we also have to recognize that the artistic and assistant personnel working at the company is intimidated; the theater which means something for all of us is living the renaissance of dissolving yearly and not yearly contracts. Due to this a part of our creative artists out of compliance, another part out of their lack of legal expertise accept the ongoing psycho-terror.

The diseased and detrimental conditions in the Hungarian State Theater in Cluj can not be considered anymore the internal affairs of this (more than 200 years old) cornerstone of Hungarian theater playing! They transgressed this boundary a long time ago, and all the signs suggest that after alienating the audience, the directorate of the theater may also complete its old plan and dream: the eradication of our sole Opera House, its degradation to the mere musical division of the theater, and after that...

We make an appeal to the representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Religions, to the national and regional representatives of our minority cultural policy, to the leaders of our historical churches and civil associations, to the theater-loving audience of Cluj, to everyone for whom the existence of this theater is important, to take attitude in this noble cause in the press, in forums, wherever they can or send their written contributions to the following address: 3400 Cluj-Kolozsvár, str. Cuza Voda, nr. 18-20, ap.6. Write on the envelope: S.O.S. THEATER. On the base of the received opinions, as well as the opinions appeared in press the initiators are planning a public panel discussion taking place in November (following month, *my note*) where we are waiting all the implied parties.

In the name of the initiators

Sebesi Karen Attila

Cluj, 25 October, 2001

SEBESI BING LÁGYEN

- Communiqué -

In the last few days there appeared again on the pages of the Hungarian daily newspaper in Cluj a couple of unprintable pieces, this time by Miklós Jancsó and Attila Sebesi Karen, instigating against the Hungarian theater. We are also acquainted with the fact that Sebesi Karen, taking advantage of the director Gábor Tompa who is currently staging *King Lear* at Vígszínház in Budapest with one of the most popular Hungarian companies, sent a leaflet to the Hungarian press in Romania, a piece outrageously inimical to the theater and full with calumny, lies, fiction and personal offence, calling upon a general opposition against the company in Cluj.

We consider as scandalous, abominably demagogic and mischievous that dilettante actors without occupation are constantly preaching in the name of the nation and the audience, creating an animus atmosphere around the theater, attacking it in such a horrible and opprobrious tone that evokes the language of the Nazi press or the spirit of the Stalinist cultural revolution and recreate the image of the “enemy of the people” which shallows and smears the notions of community, audience and nation.

The Hungarian State Theater in Cluj as the emissary of Hungarian language theater playing in Europe, as the awarded guest of countless national and international festivals proved both to the professional and lay audience that holds a place in the vanguard of Hungarian theatrical performance and Romanian theatrical movement and that it does not need any defense in front of such obscene vilifications. Just as Shakespeare, Molière, Goldoni, Bulgakov, Ionesco, Beckett, Mrožek, Pirandello, Gombrowicz, Katona József, Madách, Molnár, Vörösmarty, Spiró, Örkény or Bajor Andor do not need absolution from the charge of “anti-national artistic policy.”

All this being said we consider the abovementioned attacks terrorist actions against the theater and the universal and European values of Hungarian culture. For now it appears that the association which refers to itself as “Jancsó Miklós and its cronies” spreads its own stupidity and lack of talent in envelopes, since they are not possess any anthrax or variola pathogens. This is the reason why we do not intend to join a debate, to ask or to accept any “benevolent” advice, nor to participate in any kind of “public panel discussion” with these dark forces of irrationality.

We address public opinion, the representatives of the press as well as the growing audience of our theater to avoid being contaminated by similar subcultural products full with hatred and to keep approaching our theater and its performances without prejudices, with open hearts, with love and objectivity.

We express our concerns that even at this time such anti-cultural, instigating and fascistic pieces are published in the Hungarian press of Romania.

Cluj, 2001 October 26

The artistic directorate of the Hungarian State Theater in Cluj

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