

University of Theatre and Film Arts Doctoral School

THEATRE CRITICISM OF DENOUNCIATION IN THE KÁDÁR-ERA

An attempt to grasp the transformation of a Stalinist culture control model

Thesis of Doctoral Dissertation

Noémi Herczog

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Supervisor:

Prof. habil. György Karsai

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Subject and method or the research

The thesis wishes to examine the difficulties of our tolerance to criticism in the past of the Hungarian theatre criticism through a phenomenon frequented in the cultural command and communication of power, referred to in my thesis as *reporting criticism (criticism of denunciation)* which as a concept has not been scientifically generalized as yet. The traditional approach, mostly prone to schematism and moralisation, represents the notions of *reporting criticism* and *criticism based on autonomous aesthetic principles* in the form of a binary opposition. Contrary to this, the present thesis aims to consider these two notions in the context of language policy analysis and a joint administrative field of power, which approach disputes the exclusively essentialist theorem of the above mentioned notions. According to my assumption in the ideocratic – ideologically controlled – administrative field of force constituting the *reporting criticism* approach, the notions of *criticism formulating strong and autonomous judgements of taste* resp. *reporting criticism* should be regarded in certain cases also as categories not excluding each other but rather concordant with each other. This interpretation framework is especially inevitable in the research of a schizoid cultural command practice such as that of the Kádár-era, which in spite of “liberalizing” the way of government, preserves the old (Stalinist) structure. Thus examining the transformation of the Stalinist techniques of cultural command after 1953 and 1956 we have to speak about the two aforesaid phenomena as being dependent on the context – not only as the official interpretation but also to be interpreted in the second publicity as well, which can be interpreted in the original reading often contrary to the intention of the author – and often being difficult to be separated from each-other.

Through introducing the five types of dramatic criticism of the era the research focuses on examining how the original Stalinist technique (reporting criticism) as well as the functionality and interpretability of art and theatre criticism transform in line with the changes in the field of Stalinist power in Hungary between 1956 and 1989. I understand denunciation as a totalitarian extension of the administrative state,¹ which originally appeared with the absolute monarchies in the social developments of the western states in the 18th century and became an organic part of the disciplinarian (controlling, intimidating, retaliatory, reckoning)

¹ Foucault, Michel: “The hierarchic supervision” in *deso Discipline and Punish*, Gondolat, 1990.

ideological and violent apparatus of the Stalinist soviet governance, i.e. as a product of an administrative field of power. According to this I could not make any abstraction from the (historical, politological, sociological and social-psychological) examination of this apparatus and political field of power, which generated the phenomenon of reporting criticism and the sphere where this criticism existed. Reporting as such became the accepted standard behavioural norm in all areas of the society, a kind of duty to the citizens. This paper poses the question why and how this status quo changes in Hungary after 1956.

I am aware of the fact that I have not decided by far on a uniform period when I extended the studied period for as long as until 1989. However, I am convinced that my decision is justified by the observation constituting the basis of this research, i.e. that all along this time the Kádár-era performs an almost unvaried communication about the task of criticism. And in the discourse of criticism strong feelings are adhered to certain negative theatre reviews despite the fact that the political power promises to break with the techniques of Stalinist art control and to follow the route of gradual “liberalisation” in the practice. Disclosing the reasons of the social psychological-political phenomenon can barely be made independently from the context of the cultural command of the Kádár-era, which was based on casual prohibitions resulting in paradoxical situations. My research wishes to give an answer to the question what kind of inescapable path theatre criticism follows and how this theatre criticism changes in Hungary after 1953 and later in the period between 1956-89, insofar as the objects of criticism are performances of authors considered to be on the verge of the categories of “endured” and “forbidden”. The question arises: is it possible that there is some correlation between the degree of how much a society endures criticism and the critical history of this society. How can the psychology of a society be modified by the emergence and long-lasting presence of a reporting criticism?

The articulation of the thesis

The paper includes nine chapters: the first four are closely built on each other, whereas the other five chapters represent a horizontal structure. In the first half of the paper I analyse the politics generating the inescapable path of theatre criticism of the Kádár-era. Within this inescapable path I make distinction among the five types of theatre criticism. The second half of the paper provides corresponding case studies.

I.

Following **Chapter 1**, which summarizes the aim and methodology of the present paper, **Chapter 2** clarifies the correlation between the free press and criticism, whereas **Chapter 3** deals with the concept of denunciatory (reporting) criticism at the moment of the birth of the Stalinist model of culture-control technique. It separates reporting criticism from some similar types of ideological criticism (e.g. persecutive criticism).

This is followed by **Chapter 4** titled “Theatre criticism as the tool of cultural control in the Kádár-era”, which is divided into three sub-sections outlining: a) the antecedents of the reporting theatre criticism of the Kádár-era in the Rákosi-era, b) the characteristics of the cultural policy of the Kádár-era, c) finally the characteristics of the inescapable path of theatre criticism in the Kádár-era. This chapter discusses the notion of reporting theatre criticism in the Kádár-era in the realm of *negative consensus* or *negative legitimation*.² The new “hand-controlled”, personally led, not institutionalised cultural policy describes reporting criticism as “a practice of evil memory” of the Rákosi-era (examined in the first subsection of Chapter 4), thus implicitly also positioning itself in opposition to the contemporary strong Soviet control. And- although after 1963 it actually does not do its best that would otherwise follow from the system, so for instance it disclaims the primary use of the instruments of punishment of criminal law which had been made use of earlier in the control of cultural policy, however, all this is done in the field of power, which is generated by negative impulses and by the still not independent press. Thus it preserves the Stalinist structure without any changes. Therefore in the case of the Kádár-era-type reporting criticism we speak about the products of the system informally “liberalising” the Stalinist structure. It is not in the interest of the Kádárist power to discredit itself with eventual administrative – forbidding, retaliatory – measures in the West, or to provoke the throughout hostile and suspicious Soviet comrades to an aggressive reaction by the reconstruction and cutback of the administrative system of the Soviet-type, state commanded and controlled culture. Therefore, while the “forbidden” art holds good, the ambiguous culture category of “endured” appears. The system no longer needs active support: on the level of the individual it allows a primitive form of pluralism. Its slogan is: “whoever is not against us is with us”. The same was the political slogan of Nikolai Buharin, father of the NEP-era, i.e. – at least in this regard, the gendarme criticism of the NEP-era preceding the Stalinism (1921-1928) has something in common with the Aczél-type function of criticism in terms of patience. However, from the point of view of reporting

² Ákos Szilágyi: *Literary policy and legitimation*, 1983, 1986

criticism it is a substantial difference that there is still no central cultural policy doctrine of any kind in the NEP-era. Concerning reporting criticism, the essential scizofreny of the Kádár system manifests itself in the fact that its official declarations are different from the way it practically functions.

The second sub-section of **Chapter 4** investigates first - in the politics of negative consensus/negative legitimation - the release of theatre programmes and the non-institutionalized technique of forbidding. Following this it elaborates on the power communication based on party documents and press discourse, in which the cultural control of the Kádár-era uses (theatre) criticism as a tool of negative legitimation, power-ideological self-demonstration, empty threats for the purpose of communication, but this time without (at least direct) political-administrative interventions.

The role of theatre-criticism in the press is investigated in the last sub-section of Chapter 4. **Realisations and results:**

1. In Hungary after 1963 we cannot speak about reporting theatre criticism in the Stalinist sense, as after the consolidation the power positioned against the Rákosi-era has no interest any more in establishing a precedent in order to intimidate or menace. At most the system uses these tools if it takes steps against groups which it regards as an attack against the new leadership of the unchanged structure. However, it does not “attack” by way of criticism, but in the form of reports and journalistic essays, so this press genre is a proof in itself that “committing the crime” is not of aesthetic nature. In the Stalinist practice of the thirties, but also in the Rákosi-era, the denunciative criticism usually preceded and projected the forthcoming forbidding (see: anti-formalist campaign, 1936), it could even mean life-threatening menace. In the post-Stalinist period, especially in Hungary, in the cultural policy practice of “the three Ts” (support, forbear, forbid) the function of the ideological-reporting journalism is mostly prevention (holding in check) in the hope of making it possible for the power to avoid administrative violence and confrontation.

2. Nevertheless, owing to the policy of negative legitimacy, theatre criticism of the Kádár-era keeps moving on an inescapable path. In such circumstances the theoretical possibility of denunciation cannot be excluded, and the *press organ* (e.g. *Népszabadság*, *Kritika*) or eventually the **power position of the** professionally acclaimed **critic** (e.g.: Pál Pándi, István Király, Péter Rényi, Péter Nagy, István Szerdahelyi) automatically produce the

reporting reading in the mutual field of power of the non-independent press and the negative conditioning.

It is especially true in the negative legitimisation atmosphere of the Kádár-era's dictatorship that this suspicion operates the mechanism of reporting criticism: the individual responsibility is only vaguely inferred to, but a reading of getting into power can also arise around a review if its author describes his/her personal opinion. This is the reason why taboos exist for the critique even in the second publicity. For the transgression of the above get a reporting interpretation - even in the middle of the 70's, irrespective of the intent of the journalist - the Weöres-pamphlet of Ákos Szilágyi, or the Beckett- and Ottó Ádám-reviews of Gál Péter Molnár – as an expression of group solidarity operating within the subculture. This is how the accusation of collaboration is automatically created against the critic criticizing the quazi “endangered” author, if his piece is published in a party-friendly organ, especially if it represents a kind of left-wing stream. This is how the scope of the plurality of opinion/taste/interpretation gets narrowed down in a dictatorial state, even within the oppositional subcultures.

3. The critique of the Kádár-era has three choices as a possible answer to the “endangered” works of art:

- a) to keep silent about the performance
- b) to use an apologetic voice in the review, which describes the play as something different from what it really is (e.g. it negates the seditious character of the play),
- c) the art critic analyses the play in its real scope of interpretation, thus openly formulating, “revealing” the strain of the play which is regarded to be provocative.

If we accept that just like denouncing the apologetic behaviour in this case also means the acceptance of the negative legitimacy, and as such fulfils the role of a kind of system-legitimation, then in certain cases reporting criticism in the Kádár-era has to be interpreted as a kind of resistance against the system: as sticking to the chance of forming an opinion and expressing judgement independently from the system, which also meant the refusal of the status quo of the system and querying the negative legitimisation. In other words: in this system criticism containing independent and sharp opinion and judgement can ad absurdum concur with reporting criticism. *Therefore instead of trying to unfold the underlying intention of the reporting journalist - I analysed what were the “charges” mentioned in an article: is the critic denouncing the artists/the performance/the political power for the ideological crime? Or is the ideological critic protecting any of them? Then I studied if the article was preceded or followed by administrative interventions of any kind or not. This is how I finally separated*

five typical categories: “midwifery” theatre criticism; reporting criticism; reporting theatre reports and journalism; phantom accusations; reversed “reporting”.

II.

Next the paper lists the case studies (**Chapters 5-9**), which offer instant examples for the typology built up in the first half on the thesis. The selection process was laborious, as while examining the leadership techniques it was hard not to get too entangled but find one’s way out from the triangle represented by the party ordering the report (power), the denunciator (editorial office, critic, journalist) and the designated enemy (theatre artist, writer, art grouping). Namely the political order cannot be derived from the power of one-person, not even in the case of the totally person-centred Stalinist leadership, as all the actors at the horizontal level of the hierarchic structure have their own individual sphere of scope and interests, which do not always overlap with the central will and interests at all, on the contrary, they can even interfere with them. Therefore the critical corpus examined here extends only to the reception of the performances regarded to be “endangered”.

Typology- Theatre criticism on an inescapable path

I. “Midwifery” theatre criticism (Chapter 5)

Main characteristic features, typical period: The most typical role for the critic during the Kadar-era. In this case the critic protects the artist by an interpretation, through which not the real meaning of the piece of art - which the system does not approve of – is brought to light, but a lie: a softened up interpretation, which is meant to be passable for the system (**an eclectic, imperfect reasoning**). The protecting criticism is compelled to dissolve the essence of the work of art while interpreting it. Considering the reception of the “endangered” works of art, it is the most characteristic critical attitude in the Kádár-era.

Related political campaign: -

Case study I: János Ács: *The persecution and killing of Jean Paul Marat as performed by the actors of the Charenton insane asylum, rehearsed by Mr. de Sade, Csiky Gergely Theatre.* Kaposvár, 1981

In this case we witness the phenomenon which become infamous as “the law of the big stop your gob”: to protect the performance the critic does not name the obvious references to 1956, and the power acknowledges the accessory silence. The “reporting” takes place after the guest performance of BITEF: the unsuspecting foreign critics breach the implicit agreement on

silence and with their praise they unwillingly report the performance. (Béla Köpeczi: The interpretation of revolution – under the pretext of Marat. *Kritika*, 1983/2. pp.23-25.) **Some examples for midwifery criticism discussed in the case study:** i.e. Júlia Szekrényessy: The merciless theatre of consolidation. *Élet és Irodalom*, 15/01/1982, p. 13.; András Pályi: Artaud – for home use. *Mozgó Világ* 3, 03/1982, pp. 80-85.

II. Reporting criticism (Chapter 6)

Main characteristic features, typical period: this kind of criticism is aimed at a narrow circle of intellectuals and after the opening up in 1963 it is difficult to trace. The performance of *Széchenyi* (1957) disappeared from the programme of the Madách Színház unawares, in silence, but unexpectedly early, and in the same way, half a decade later, the editor of the literary magazine *Jelenkor* is dismissed from his position in 1963. The fact of the ban and the political reason of the dismissal cannot be proven in either case, they are implied at most. Although the system promises to do away with this type of criticism – and in the majority of the cases even keeps this promise – no formal guarantee is ever given for it.

Related political campaign: an ambiguous campaign on the level of rhetoric against the attitude of the bourgeois decadence, the notion of which had never been defined precisely.

Case study I: Ottó Ádám: *Széchenyi*, Madách Theatre, 1957.

The cancellation of *Széchenyi* from the programme of the theatre in the period of restoration after 1956. **The example for reporting criticism in the case study:** György Bölöni: “Short theatrical notes”. *Élet és Irodalom*, 24/05/1957, p.7.

Case study II: Ottó Ruttkai: *The Window Cleaner*. Miskolc National Theatre, 1963.

The play is cancelled from the programme of Miskolc theatre after the second performance: this is the time when the review of the powerful culture-politician and critic, Pál Pándi of *The Window Cleaner* is published. At the end of the press-campaign, Tibor Tüskés, who published the drama in the literary and art magazine *Jelenkor*, was also removed from his post of chief editor. **The example for reporting criticism in the case study:** Pál Pándi: “The negation of the negation”. *Élet és Irodalom*, 07/12/1963. p.8.

The typology of journalism of reporting character in the period after the opening up in 1963:

III. Reporting theatre reports and journalism (Chapter 7)

Main characteristic features, typical period: after the cancellation of *Széchenyi* in 1957 we can witness a “post factum” type (György Kardos: Struggling. *Kisalföld*, 30/06/1957.p.2.), then this type also goes “extinct” and is not at all representative in the early 70s. It appears in

1972, probably as a result of the returning strictness owing to Brezhnev. However, exactly this anachronistic feature evoking earlier reflexes is applicable to illustrate the case when the power intervenes against groupings in the form of an expansive press campaign connected with high politics: the “offenders” are not accused of artistic misdeed, but of political offence. The articles follow administrative interventions, and are reported to the potential deviants in the administrative publicity. **Related political campaign:** anti-youth in its rhetoric, where the term “youth” means the young people organizing around the amateur movements of the era. Actually, the reporting is aimed at the new-leftist, oppositional artistic groupings in terms of the dual-front struggle of the power. The power fears that the artistic groupings change into political trends.

Case study I:

The Orfeo-case (1972). The attack against the new-leftist group fits into the “dual-front struggle” typical of the years after 1957, which – besides bourgeois decadence – also attacks the ultra-leftist, so called “sectarian” elements in terms of reckoning with the past before 1956. **The examples for reporting criticism and journalism discussed in the case study:** Gábor Szántó: Orfeo in the False World. *Magyar Ifjúság*, 13. October 1972/41. pp 5-7, and Gábor Szántó: Once again about the Orfeo-Group. *Magyar Ifjúság*, 17. November 1972/46. pp.5-6.

Case study II: The boglári-case (1973)

The instigating piece written for *Népszabadság* launches a press campaign against the artists working and artistic events organised in the chapel-atelier of György Galántai in Balatonboglár between 1970 and 1973. It was published already after the atelier had been banned. The intention behind it is probably to put a pressure on the artists and make them emigrate from the country, so that the political power should not be constrained to use openly forbidding tools. **The examples for reporting criticism and journalism discussed in the case study:** László Szabó: Happening in the vault. *Népszabadság*, Sunday Cultural Supplement, 16/12/1973, p.2; Barna Horányi: Some avant-gardes on illegal paths – Illegal exhibitions, programmes, in: *Somogyi Néplap*, 08/07/1971. p.5.; László Esztergomi: Bitter-sweet rambling by Balaton, Problems, possibilities. *Magyar Hírlap*, 18/07/1971. p.10.

IV. Phantom accusations – warning theatre reviews and debates (Chapter 8)

Main characteristic features, typical period: The most typical type in the Kadar-era for denouncing: there are no more sanctions, this type corresponds to the genre of **politically manipulated debate**. The open censorship is substituted by a peaceful self-demonstration of

power, which simulates denunciation. In order to mitigate the effect of the knocking pieces or the articles attacking the new type of leadership of the system, the paper has the right to publish pieces in response or to generate a debate. **Related political campaign:** press attacks disguised as matters of aesthetics.

Case study I:

The supported director and criticism (Ottó Ádám: *Danton's Death*. Madách Theatre, 1963)

The reception of “Danton’s Death” is a perfect example for demonstrating that denouncing and phantom accusations can showcase the rhetoric of relative apology and knocking style alike. E.g. the critic can protect the creators and condemn the show at the same time.

Examples for phantom accusations discussed in the case study: Péter Rényi: Danton’s death. *Népszabadság*, 02/02/1964, p.9.

Case study II:

The “grotesque” as enemy. (Tamás Major: *Romeo and Juliet*, National Theatre, 1971); The question arisen in the debate discussed in the case study is perfectly summarized in the quote by Tamás Koltai: “Do we have to protect our children from Tamás Major’s *Romeo and Juliet*”.³ **An example for phantom accusations discussed in the case study:** e.g. Péter Nagy: About the essence of the debate - The politician about the theatre. *Népszabadság*, 01/07/1971, p.8.

Case study III: Attack against the theatre critic (Tamás Koltai and a theatrical debate, 1973). Tamás Koltai’s article is followed by a lengthy, manipulated debate conducted by several press organs at the same time, probably in order not to let the open criticism of the theatrical structure without any opposing opinion. **An example for phantom accusations discussed in the case study:** Tamás Ungvári: In defence of the actor. *Új Írás*, 1973/4. pp. 115-122.

V. Reversed “reporting”: suspicion reflexes (Chapter 9)

Main characteristic features, typical period: In the field of power of the negative consensus the “denunciator” does not position itself in the field of power, but in the field of a passive-opposition. Actually, the subject of his message and accusation is the collaboration with the power. In order to protect an author who is thought to be “endangered” and due to group solidarity, no negative, public criticism of the author is approved. My examples date from 1969, 1971 and they can be interpreted in the context of the relative freedom of the economic

³ Tamás Koltai: The effective portraits of reality, Season-ending notes. *Színház*. 1971/6, p.2.

opening-up, but this type has in reserve some other examples as well in the second half of the 70s.

Related political campaign: -

Case study I: The “supported” director to be prosecuted? (Ottó Ádám: *Shelter for the Night*, Madách Theatre, 1968).

The case is an absurd example for the situation: what happens if the critic does not like the performance directed by the supported director (Ottó Ádám). **An example for reversed “reporting” criticism discussed in the case study:** Iván Sándor: How far can the critic go. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 04/01/1969, p.3.

Case study II: Magyar Nemzet reports the party organ (László Vámos: *Oh, those beautiful days!*, Thália Studio, 1971).

The misunderstanding is probably also generated by the necessarily dual, complicated language of the review published in the party organ. **An example for reversed “reporting” criticism discussed in the case study:** Tamás Ungvári: Oh, those beautiful days! *Magyar Nemzet*, 10/01/1971, p.11

The present dissertation deals with genres that are not so long-lasting: mainly reviews and journalistic pieces published in daily papers. Nevertheless, it is an attempt to understand complex connections that are beyond the printed text, i.e. what kind of consequences the past of a non-independent press and theatre criticism has for a society. Can the difficulties of enduring criticism in a society be traced back to the past of theatre criticism? Although as a practising theatre critic I have to acknowledge that there is hardly any society where the relationship between theatre critics and artists cannot be conceived as hypersensitive. However, in my view, even so there are different and deeper connections in Hungary in understanding this relationship. The contextual and language-political analysis of the notion of reporting criticism demonstrated, that if the suspicion of a reporting criticism arises – as it may arise – in a society, it is most likely that the ideals of an independent journalism and free criticism will be replaced by the permanent norm of a committed press supporting certain groups of interests. In these societies of a dictatorial past even the press organs declaring themselves to be liberal (especially in a publicity which is narrowing down), may unwittingly show the pattern of the suppressing nature of practices of the past and present leadership of power. This discretion can promote not only the more complex comprehension of reporting criticism, but can also help to understand how the presence of a reporting critical context in a

society can affect the status of a criticism representing an independent and strong opinion and judgement.

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- Foucault, Michel: “The hierarchic supervision” in *deco: Discipline and Punish*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1990. pp. 234-242.
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Publications and lectures related to the theme of the dissertation

Studies

- What shall we make of the curtain call after the first night of *Fáklyaláng*? Endre Gellért: *Fáklyaláng*, 1952. *Theatron*, 2013/3. pp. 3-8.
- If necessary – let’s forbid! Reporting criticism in the 70s. *2000*, 2017/7. pp. 14-29.
- 1956 in the theatre criticism of the Kádár-era: the last taboo. Puzzling over a review of *Danton* directed by Ottó Ádám. *Színház*. 2016/12. pp. 14-18.

Conference

- The dramaturgy of taboo – 1956 in the theatre criticism of the Kádár-era. 1956 and socialism: crisis and rethinking, Eszterházy Károly University, Eger, 2016. (manuscript)