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Cultural Opposition as Transnational Practice

Introduction

In an essay on cultural life in state socialism, historian György Péteri claimed that "the curtain was made of Nylon, not Iron." Péteri stresses that the curtain "yielded to strong osmotic tendencies that were globalizing knowledge across the systemic divide about culture, goods, and services."[1] By the mid-1950s, the aggressive isolationism of Stalinism gave way to increasing engagement between socialist countries and capitalist countries. Culture was an important and in many respects pioneering sphere in these encounters. The long-held Cold War view of East and West as largely separated realms interacting only in the field of international politics has been decisively refuted by recent research. These new interpretations stress the shaping of the Cold War by multi-dimensional entanglements and transfers across the geopolitical divide.

State socialist societies were influenced not only by a myriad of trans-systemic interactions, but also by contacts among the communist countries. These contacts again ranged from the official (e.g. the cultural propaganda of the notorious societies for friendship with the Soviet Union) to the informal and the illegal. Cultural relations between "brotherly" countries were not limited to Europe. They also included sympathetic countries in the "Third World." Diverse cultural flows thus connected the societies of Eastern Europe and individuals in them with other parts of the world, opening new vistas and spaces of creativity.[2] These relations generated dynamics that transcended official policy intentions. The outcome of these exchanges could never be fully predicted or controlled.

Transnational fields of action were an important arena for dissenters. This chapter will present three case studies which highlight the importance of the transnational dimension for cultural opposition in state socialism. The case studies present momentous entanglements in "high" culture involving well-known personalities of the arts world. They highlight the significance of such encounters and the agendas behind them and also point to contradictions and ambiguities. The case studies show that the transfers were multidirectional and that they created "third spaces" which transcended Cold War boundaries. Non-aligned Yugoslavia was an emblematic such third space, as illustrated by the BITEF festival (see below) or the famous Korčula Summer School, where critical philosophers from East and West met.[3] Yet also the staging of a play by an East European playwright in New York or an arts fair could create ephemeral third places where new relations were formed.

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[1] Péteri, "Nylon Curtain," 4. See Kind-Kovács, *Written here, published there*, 6–7.

[2] Stöcker, *Bridging the Baltic Sea.*

Transnational encounters importantly contributed to shared meanings of opposition and dissent and, more generally, of communism in East and West.[4] However, these encounters also evoked misunderstandings resulting, for example, from different political agendas: oppositional groups in the communist countries were often at odds with the right-wing agendas of anti-communist émigrés who claimed to speak for their "captive" nation, for instance. Western audiences sometimes struggled to understand the impulses of Eastern artists or reduced their work to political messages, overlooking their aesthetic qualities.[5] Texts and artefacts often acquired varying meanings when they were seen in different cultural contexts and submitted to processes of cultural translation.[6]

The very fact that cultural opposition had a strong transnational dimension should not come as a surprise: culture is never limited to state borders, and artistic life in general is characterized by a high degree of international mobility and transnational transfers. The conditions of the Cold War, however, gave rise to a number of peculiarities for cross-border engagement, both in terms of channels and purpose. Cultural activists who were repressed by a communist regime faced particular hurdles in their aspirations and attempts to engage with the "West." We should not forget that despite the increasing openness of borders, receiving a passport and being able to travel were not birth rights in state socialism, especially for people whom the state suspected of "hostile" attitudes. Borders at the time were hard, and the extensive apparatus of the state security closely followed real or suspected dissenters. There were channels to smuggle underground publications out of the communist world or to smuggle oppositional texts printed in the West into it.[7] However, these arduous conditions for exchange naturally limited the material scope of these activities.

The intensity of osmosis across the divide and its societal impacts were, therefore, strongly dependent on politics. The pioneering volume "Entangled Protest," for example, highlights that the viability of transnationality depended in part on the politics of détente.[8] The partial and often only temporal liberalization of cultural life in the 1960s and 1970s offered artists and intellectuals in the socialist countries new options to engage with the West. Not by chance, our three case studies had their roots in the 1960s, not least because this was, first, a period of growing interest in the West in social and cultural life in Eastern Europe and, second, a decade when non-conformist arts challenged the status quo in the West too, and Western radical artists saw in East European dissidents a source of inspiration and similarly minded figures. A non-conformist "Republic of Letters" crossing geopolitical divides began to emerge.

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[3] See Stefanov, "Message in a Bottle," 109–28.

[4] Brier, "Historicizing 1989," 348.

[5] E.g. on the case of music: Beckles, "Longing for a National Rebirth," 38.

[6] Kind-Kovács and Labov, "Introduction," 9.

[7] Kind-Kovács, *Written here, published there.*

[8] Brier, *Entangled Protest.*

The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation (CSCE), signed in Helsinki in 1975, was a watershed in cultural relations between the two "blocs."[9] Two elements of the Final Act proved particularly erosive for the communist regimes. First, all signatories (in Europe, only Albania did not sign) pledged to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. This helped turn the language of human rights into a universalist principle to which groups like the Helsinki committees could hold their governments.[10] The internationally validated discourse of human rights was a source of empowerment for opposition groups in Eastern Europe.[11] This gave rise to groups like Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia, which demanded their governments "only" respect and protect the rights which they had recognized in Helsinki. Dissident groups, especially in Central Europe, also paid visits on one another, exchanging information and ideas and adding a new dimension to intra-socialist transnationalism.[12]

Second, the "Third Basket" of the Final Act stipulated the promotion of East-West contacts in the areas of culture, information, and academia, and also between individuals. Nicholas J. Cull concluded that this "opened the way for the greater flow of Soviet ideas westward and the spread of Western culture and ideas in the Soviet orbit."[13] One consequence was the end of the communist governments' practice of jamming Western radio stations. The influence of radio programmes targeting state-socialist listeners, especially the US-funded Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and Voice of America, consequently increased dramatically.[14] These programmes became important sources of information for audiences in Eastern Europe as well as means of cultural transfer, for example by discussing and airing readings of *samizdat* and *tamizdat* texts.[15]

But why did members of the cultural opposition in Eastern Europe bother to engage with like-minded people in the West at all and thereby increase their political exposure at home? As our case studies show, for many of them, the question was not why, but why not. Many non-conformist writers, artists, and intellectuals considered themselves part of a cultural landscape that knew no (national) borders, very much in an Enlightenment tradition and also building on transnational networks from the interwar period. Avant-gards and counter-cultures in East and West fertilized each other. Their discontent was directed against a political and aesthetic Cold War status quo, which was seen as equally oppressive on both sides of the Iron Curtain.[16] In both the East and the West, avantgarde artists contested oppressive power using radical aesthetics. One consequence of this was similarities in aesthetic forms.

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[9] Cull, "Reading, viewing, and tuning in," 456.

[10] Foot, "The Cold War and human rights," 459–61; Snyder, *Human Rights Activism.*

[11] Szulecki, *The Figure of the Dissident,* 175.

[12] Kenney, "Electromagnetic Forces and Radio Waves," 44–45.

[13] Cull, "Reading, viewing, and tuning in," 456.

[14] On RFE see Bischof and Jürgens, *Voices of freedom – western interference?*

[15] Kind-Kovács, "Radio Free Europe," 87.

However, for the cultural opposition in Eastern Europe, contacts with the West had further functions. As Robert Brier observes, "The dissident experience drew heavily on the imaginary of a 'court of world opinion' to which the dissidents could appeal as they sought help against political repression; raising international awareness for their plight was thus a constitutive element in the dissidents' political tactics."[17] International visibility increased the political costs of persecuting writers and artists for the communist regimes, which were also concerned about their international images. However, they were even more concerned about their power, and they did not refrain from jailing well-known writers and artists, if deemed necessary. Václav Havel experienced this frequently.

The following three case studies highlight the vitality and significance of transnational cultural encounters as challenges to political domination. They also point to ambivalences stemming from the fact that the Iron Curtain was an epistemological boundary and, to some degree, the arts served different purposes on both sides of the divide. The case studies represent different genres and are drawn from different countries: the theatre (Yugoslavia), the visual arts (Poland), and literature (Czechoslovakia). They exemplify forms of transnational encounters that go beyond mono-directional transfers across state borders. In these encounters, new meanings were produced in the interactions between practitioners of culture from East and West. Another commonality is the importance of ephemeral or transitory spaces of encounters, such as a festival, a stage production, or an arts fair.

We do not claim that the three cases are the most important transnational encounters in the field of cultural opposition. Other cases in the COURAGE Registry have a transnational or international dimension and would merit closer inspection as well. But the selected examples are highly illustrative of the creative potential and the political salience of transnational exchanges. They also point to the fact that these kinds of encounters did not totally dissolve entrenched (mis)conceptions about East and West in the West and the East. Interacting with the "other" was also a way of positioning oneself in the domestic context. Crossing boundaries could simultaneously create new ones.

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[16] Suri, "Counter-culture," 460–80.

[17] Brier, "Entangled Protest," 12–13.

"Non-aligned Culture." The Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF)

"BITEF always had problems," said former dramaturge Borka Pavićević.[18] The few existing accounts of the "Belgrade International Theatre Festival," better known by its acronym BITEF, however tell a story of success and acclaim. BITEF is presented as "a platform between East and West."[19] BITEF is cited as an illustration of Yugoslavia's status as non-aligned country, as a third space between the two blocs. Yet, how can we measure the success of an avantgarde theatre festival? Was causing trouble precisely a kind of success for avantgarde art? Dragićević Šešić and Stefanović conceive of dissonant heritages as "institutional traumas" which are not revealed by institutional histories, but rather by the memories of eyewitnesses and closer looks into the mirror of the works which were produced by people active in the cultural sphere at the time. [20]

One remarkable feature of BITEF is its continuity: this international theatre event has been held every autumn since 1967. Thus, it has survived more than fifty years of political turbulence. This continuity marks a striking contrast between the Theatre Festival and the history of Yugoslavia itself. BITEF's fortieth anniversary publication in 2007 presents a story of triumph: "BITEF is the most tangible evidence that in Belgrade, Serbia and Yugoslavia, cultural pluralism and universalism was [sic!] the weapon for conquering freedom in the world of political monism and political bipolarism."[21] The anniversary publication and an exhibition were prepared by the non-conformist historian Branka Prpa, who significantly reformed the Historical Archives of Belgrade as director after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević.[22] The anniversary exhibition invokes BITEF's legacy of liberal thought and unconventional artistic forms, which stood in stark contrast to the dominant values of its time in Yugoslavia. However, BITEF had served the Yugoslav agenda well. For Tito's regime, it was "a showcase of socialist Yugoslavia as a free society in which it was possible to question different aspects of social reality."[23] Ana Vujanović claimed BITEF represented a form of "state ordered freedom." Foreigners who attended the festival were indeed impressed. The Austrian art theoretician Georg Schöllhammer, for example, called it a theatre mecca and "one of the internationally most connected spots of avantgarde art in Europe."[24]

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[18] Pavićević, interview. June 2016, Belgrade.

[19] Dragićević Šešić and Stefanović, "How Theaters Remember," 24.

[20] Ibid., 13.

[21] Branka, Prpa. Accessed June 28, 2018. https://www.arhiv-beograda.org/en/bitef-40-years.html.

[22] COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Prpa, Branka", by Jacqueline Nießer, 2018. Accessed: October 09, 2018. and COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Historical Archives of Belgrade", by Sanja Radović, 2017. Accessed: October 09, 2018.

[23] Vujanović, "Nove pozorišne tendencije," 377.

The story of BITEF, therefore, also highlights paradoxes in the role of avantgarde art in Cold War Europe. BITEF goes back to the small, off-scene theatre *"atelje 212"* in Belgrade (212 indicated the number of seats). Important personalities of the Yugoslav literary scene, such as the non-conformist writer Danilo Kiš (who later went into exile),[25] and the director Borka Pavićević were involved in *atelje 212*. It became BITEF's home for the first twenty years. Much of the festival's specificities were rooted in the spirit of *atelje:* it was a place for unconventional theatre, and it also had a gallery where new visual art trends were exhibited. It functioned, furthermore, as a forum of exchange between artists and intellectuals. *Atelje* was founded in 1956 and gained fame as the site of the first public performance in Eastern Europe of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." This was a sensation because only two years earlier a production of this play by the Belgrade Drama Theatre had been stopped because of an intervention following a comment by the famous Yugoslav writer Miroslav Krleža about its nihilistic message.[26]

Despite the cultural opening of Yugoslavia which began in the late 1950s, theatre life did not enjoy complete freedom. There were practices of informal censorship which led to self-censorship, and also instances of official censorship. When a play such as Dragoslav Mihajlović's "When the pumpkins blossomed" addressed politically sensitive issues (in this case, the infamous labor camp on the Goli Otok Island), even the head of state, Tito, intervened and prohibited further performances in 1969.[27] At the same time, the communist leadership discovered the usefulness of non-conformist art for the projection of an image of Yugoslavia as a country that had broken with the Soviet orthodoxy and was open to the world. Cultural diplomacy was part of Tito's policy of non-alignment, which is why the government supported the establishment of the Belgrade International Theatre Festival in 1967. Its mission was to reflect the newest theatre developments in the world "in the spirit of humanistic aspirations and […] in the spirit of the international politics of non-aligned socialist Yugoslavia."[28] Non-alignment and Yugoslavia's (at that time) good relations with NATO and with Warsaw Pact countries made it possible for theatre companies and visitors from East and West to participate. This is why BITEF became a place where experimental and radical theatre groups from the US like "The Living Theatre," the "Bread and Puppet Theatre," and Schechner's "Performance Group" came together with similar groups from Poland (such as Jerzy Grotowski's "Teatr Laboratorium") or the Indian "Kathakali Dance Theatre," for instance. BITEF was led by Mira Trailović until her death in 1989. Trailović was one of the first female directors in Yugoslav theatre. She was succeeded by Jovan Ćirilov, who was festival director until his death in 2014.

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[24] Ibid., 376–77.

[25] COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Danilo Kiš Collection", by Sanja, Radović, 2017. Accessed October 09, 2018.

[26] Dragićević Šešić and Stefanović, "How Theaters Remember," 20.

[27] Featured COURAGE item: COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Documentation of the ban of the play "When pumpkins blossomed" by Dragoslav Mihailović ", by Sanja, Radović, 2017. Accessed October 09, 2018.

[28] Statut Beogradskog internacionalnog teatarskog festivala – BITEF [Bilaws of the Belgrade International Theater Festival, BITEF], Belgrade, November 9, 1980. Article 3.

In part because it was a festival, BITEF helped create a space for free expression, as it was less controlled and more spontaneous than a permanent establishment. Thus, it did enjoy some advantages as an ephemeral event. The ephemeral nature of BITEF underpinned its consistently "countercultural" approach.[29] The festival invited performances and groups that were part of the counterculture in their native countries, whether from the socialist or the capitalist camp. One of the famous avantgarde theatres taking part in BITEF, for example, was the "Living Theatre" from the USA.

"The Living Theatre" was greatly influenced by Jerzy Grotowski.[30] Because of its unorthodox performances, it was in constant conflict with the New York authorities. This anarchic-pacifist group was led by actress Judith Malina and painter-poet Julian Beck. "The Living Theatre" had to leave the US in the mid-1960s after having been convicted of tax fraud and after its members had been briefly imprisoned following the play "The Brig" (1963), which assailed the US navy. On their exile tour through Europe, "The Living Theatre" staged a play at the first BITEF in 1967. The British theatre critique Peter Roberts commented: "Jovan Ćirilov, a young, multi-lingual Belgrade writer who is the festival's artistic director, had been shrewd enough to pick up both Grotowski's Arts Laboratorium and the Living Theatre's *Antigone* for last year's first BITEF fling. Neither company, at the time of writing, has yet appeared, as they are now constituted, in dear old insular London."[31]

Considering that BITEF's mission was to challenge "everything which is in one society considered unquestionable, unspeakable and untouchable,"[32] it may come as no surprise that the festival faced troubles. Interestingly, initially the least of its problems came from confrontations with state authorities. First and foremost, the new theatre shocked its visitors. Belgrade's public had been used to classical theatre, which revolved around text. Suddenly, the body (moreover, often naked bodies) was at the centre of the performance; a garage or the street became the stage, and visitors got spit at.[33] Many visitors left the performances outraged, and the press attacked the festival for this "pornography."[34]

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[29] Susa, "1968 i liberalizacija," 613.

[30] Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre*, 181.

[31] Roberts, "Belgrade: Europe Festivals," 48.

[32] Prpa, "Izložba Bitef."

[33] Susa, "1968 i liberalizacija," 616–17.

[34] Ćirilov, "Kako smo stvarali," 13.

BITEF was also criticized by members of the contemporary theatre scene itself: conservative artists and intellectuals insinuated that these new theatrical forms were a "decadent Western import which was wasting the money of the working class." It allegedly would destroy professional theatre conventions. Pavićević remembered phone calls from other theatre directors calling BITEF "anarcho-liberals, homosexuals, decadents." "BITEF really annoyed those guys," she recalled, pointing to the fact that debates about theatre were part of larger discussions about artistic, political and sexual liberty.[35]

BITEF as a symbol for avantgarde theatre was under special scrutiny after 1973, after a purge of liberal party leaders in Serbia, Croatia, and Macedonia. The political climate again became more oppressive, and this had a strong impact on the cultural scene as well. Critical filmmakers of the "Black Wave," for example, were persecuted and could not show or even produce their movies. "Only in paintings and sculpture could artists continue to push boundaries. The regime probably did not feel any threat from these elitist circles."[36] The government installed a commission that would pre-screen performances and decide on their suitability. However, the censors did not understand what they were seeing, and so in the end BITEF managed to retain its artistic autonomy.[37] BITEF faced also interventions from the outside. In particular, the Soviet Union tried to influence the festival's program.[38] Jovan Ćirilov recalled that there was an informal agreement with Moscow: when a non-conformist Soviet theatre group was selected to perform for one year, a classical Soviet performance would be shown the other year. Natalia Vagapova, a Soviet expert on Yugoslav theatre, served as a watchdog for Soviet theatre companies participating in BITEF.[39]

Nevertheless, Tito, who never attended BITEF, continued to consider this annual festival an ideal way of presenting Yugoslav culture as open, innovative, and free. At least for a few weeks in the autumn, these ideals were not mere illusion, but reality. However, this reality concerned only a small circle of people interested in avantgarde theatre, and this may have been one reason for the lenience of the authorities. The ephemeral nature of the encounter as a festival made its liberalism possible, but also defused its critical potential. Nevertheless, BITEF stands out as a space where culture, even if only for a limited time, was liberated from the constraints of Cold War binaries.[40] BITEF represents a Yugoslav counter-history of triumph rather than trauma. It still exists; and thanks to its comprehensive documentation efforts, its history as a countercultural forum and endeavour did not fall into oblivion.[41]

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[35] Susa, "1968 i liberalizacija," 141.

[36] Marković, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" 133.

[37] Susa, "1968 i liberalizacija," 141.

[38] Vučetić, *Koka-kola socijalizam*, 298.

[39] Vagapova, *Bitef.*

[40] Šuvaković, "Noavangarda i neoavangarde," 281.

The Foksal Gallery from Warsaw and the Meta-Politics of Cultural Gatekeeping

When the Foksal Gallery was founded in 1966 by the art critics Wiesław Borowski, Hanka Ptaszkowska, and Mariusz Tchorek, some of the most respectable Polish artists of the time, such as Tadeusz Kantor and Henryk Stażewski, joined the gallery. Predominantly, it presented exhibitions that problematized the artistic process itself. Political questions did not play any significant role. However, in a country in which everyday life was heavily influenced by the state, even seemingly neutral artistic activities had political implications. In particular, there is an interesting amalgamation of aesthetic universalism and dissimulated political engagement in Foksal's activities. From an international viewpoint, it conveyed the image of a dissident or non-conformist institution; at the same time, it was part of the dominant institutional framework of the Polish art world.[42] Thus, the example of Foksal allows an examination of how close and almost indiscernible aspects of dissidence, instrumentalization, and opportunism could become.

Foksal Gallery was one of the few cultural institutions in socialist Poland that could develop strong contacts with international partners. Thanks to its backing by the art community, the gallery entered the international art scene during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Kantor's words became a leitmotif: "National art only matters when it transcends its own national borders. Otherwise, it becomes particular."[43] The political system, however, imposed certain restrictions, and the first international engagement of the gallery began almost by chance. The "official" history of Foksal's travels abroad begins with the invitation to the 3e Salon international de Galeries-pilotes in 1970.

Salon was an exhibition of art galleries held in the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne. In 1970, a total of forty-three galleries from Europe, North and South America, and Japan exhibited at Salon. From socialist Europe, there were three institutions besides Foksal: the Gallery of Contemporary Art (Zagreb, 1966), the Galerie Art Centre (Prague, 1966), and the Moderna Galerija (Ljubljana, 1970).[44] In the words of organizer René Berger, Salon functioned as an observatory confirming and reinforcing the ultimately scientific role of galleries.[45] Considering the political division during the Cold War, Salon functioned as a means of transgressing borders based on apparently "objective" indicators. Art as "science" and galleries as "observatories" were two of the main metaphors that shaped Salon's program. Berger called for artistic "research facilities" that would help grasp not only "known constellations" but "flashing lights" as well.[46] According to Borowski, the focus stayed on art; no ideological or political issues were raised.[47] In the preface to the catalogue of the second edition of Salon, though, Berger mentioned the struggle of the superpowers.[48] While being presented as mainly aesthetic and universalistic, the notion of transnational knowledge production, thus, was also affected by geopolitics. Moreover, Berger regarded scientific discoveries as the foundation of supremacy. The self-perception of the galleries at Salon as "pure avantgarde," therefore, reinforced Foksal's power interests precisely by dissimulating the societal scope of its politicized epistemology.

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[41] Since 2004, the Historical Archives of Belgrade holds BITEF's documentation, comprising 443 boxes on more than 50 metres of shelf space. See COURAGE Registry, s.v. "BITEF Collection", by Jacqueline Nießer, 2018. Accessed: October 09, 2018. (forthcoming)

[42] For a broader discussion of Foksal's foreign experiences see Skowronek, "Crossing the border," 379–89.

[43] This article is based on an interview with Wiesław Borowski in Warsaw, September 16, 2010.

[44] See http://college-de-vevey.vd.ch/auteur/gp123/index.html. Accessed May 10, 2013.

After Salon, Foksal's next experiences abroad were in Scotland in 1972 and 1979. It was Kantor, once again, who functioned as a key mediator for Foksal. Richard Demarco, one of the organizers of the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, was fond of the art he saw in the gallery.[49] He therefore agreed to invite Kantor's theatre Cricot 2, together with Foksal and other artists from Poland.[50] Contemporary art from Poland was considered part of a cutting-edge visual culture. As a consequence, Demarco continued his cooperation with Foksal in subsequent years. In 1979, the Foksal Gallery was in Edinburgh again. In his review of the "Polish month in Edinburgh," Paul Overy writes: "This September was the fortieth anniversary of the German invasion in Poland, and Britain's somewhat tardy declaration of war two days later. In Edinburgh, Richard Demarco presented four exhibitions of Polish art for the Festival."[51] With this opening, Overy places his following deliberations in a political context. He attributes to Foksal "the most interesting work today," and he recognized something familiar in the exploration of the "area between drama and the visual arts." "[It's] worth reflecting that much of the most interesting work in Britain today, like that of Stuart Brisley or Ian Breakwell, lies in that area too." Thus, while Germany was mentioned at the beginning of the review, at the end Britain is situated alongside Poland, almost as compensation for the "somewhat tardy" response in 1939.[52] This highlights the embeddedness of art processes in the symbolic order of politics.

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[45] Berger, "Préface."

[46] Berger, "*Bedeutung und Ziel,*" 10–11.

[47] Borowski, interview.

[48] Berger, "*Bedeutung und Ziel*."

[49] Ibid.

[50] Although the exhibition in Edinburgh was similar to the one in Lausanne, it represented a changed institution. Ptaszkowska, "Wspólny czas i wspólne miejsce," 450–52.

[51] Overy, "Edinburgh's Polish month," 10–11.

[52] Ibid., 10.

As had been the case in Lausanne, Foksal's attendance in Edinburgh must, therefore, be seen in a geopolitical context. In 1979, though, it was no longer Germany that constituted an "obstacle," but the socio-political regimes in Communist Europe.[53] For the exhibition in Edinburgh and Salon in Lausanne, Foksal served as a frame for the rhetorical appropriation of Polish art and its separation from the Eastern bloc. To cite Overy again, "[It] is not entirely surprising that in its variety, international awareness, internecine aggressiveness and peculiar brittleness, the art scene in Poland reminds one most of Italy among Western countries." The "Italianization" of Polish matters appears to have served as a means of constructing familiarity in alien territory because "East Europe [...] remains unknown ground."[54] Comparable to Salon in Lausanne, Foksal functioned as a vehicle with which to convey the notion that Eastern Europe was, hypothetically at least, part of a common knowledge space. Although the events in Lausanne and Edinburgh differed with regards to the degree of their politicization, similar methods for regulating the symbolic order were in operation: the idea of a scientific and neutral representation of contemporary art.

In the subsequent years, Foksal's network and its international relevance expanded. In its home country, however, the gallery's reputation did not remain unchallenged. While exhibiting modern and avantgarde art, the gallery kept an apparent distance from governmental endeavours to instrumentalize art. As a public institution on the margins of the state-owned Visual Art Workshops (Pracownie Sztuk Plastycznych), however, it received infrastructural and material support to organize its projects. Foksal's combination of different institutional layers and artistic discourses provoked ambivalent reactions. A specific conservatism and latent opportunistic attitude were among the most commonly criticized features.[55] Some made Foksal responsible for conveying the notion of avantgarde and non-conformism to the political system. Foksal took advantage of these debates. Borowski ambivalently divided the Polish art world into "real" and "fake" avantgardists. With reference to the West and thus based on his experiences, he took an external viewpoint in order to regulate internal matters.[56] The gallery (or at least Borowski) cultivated its image of artistic self-marginalization in the name of promoting seemingly universalistic values, while at the same time fighting against possible domestic competitors. This ambiguous and rather cynical attitude towards political matters was apparently shaped by Foksal's Western experience.

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[53] Of course, in 1939 and later, Germany was not a mere "obstacle" to national and cultural development in Poland, but a hostile aggressor.

[54] Overy, "Polish Pluralism," 12–15.

[55] In recent years, a number of publications have focused on the gallery's artistic and institutional strategies. Krajewski, *Strategie upowszechniania sztuki*; Nader, *Konceptualizm w PRL*; Lachowski, *Awangarda wobec instytucji*; Polit, "Warsaw's Foksal Gallery"; Skowronek, "Institutionelle Introjektionen."

[56] Borowski, "Pseudoawangarda," 11–12.

In particular, it seems as if the Cold War division into East and West overlapped with and partially realigned Borowski's differentiation between "real" and "fake" avantgarde. While neither a political nor a dissident art institution per se, Foksal operated strategically in a transnational cultural sphere that was highly politicized. Accepting national as well as foreign stereotypes did not necessarily amount to collaboration with the regime; nevertheless, the impression of opportunism could arise. In any case, Foksal's activities can be called meta-political insofar as they interacted with principles and desires that were characteristic for discourses about catchy concepts such as "official" or "dissident" art. Instead of writings on political theory, Foksal demonstrated its epistemological capacity by dissimulating the political nature of the artists' claims to universalism and by concomitant procedures of gatekeeping.

From a post-socialist perspective, it would be worth examining in greater detail the extent to which the notion of institutional superiority affected the further history of the gallery and the Polish art scene in general. In particular, this concerns the problematic relationship between the gallery and the Foksal Gallery Foundation (FGF), which was established in 1997, because the standing of FGF in the contemporary art community is not undisputed. For a long time, FGF was considered the predominant institution in the contemporary Polish art scene, especially when speaking about international contacts in the late 1990s and 2000s. However, FGF was sometimes criticized for its arguable monopolization of contacts with influential Western institutions. Beyond that, the conceptual and rhetorical struggle regarding the foundation's position showed traits of a "Borowskiean" determinism and dichotomization. While regularly participating in art fairs, FGF disclaimed any similarity with commercial galleries.[57] At least partially, therefore, FGF seems to reproduce Foksal's gatekeeping role and dissimulative attitudes. However, claiming a post-materialistic nature of one's endeavours while attributing commercial interests to others is common practice, especially on art markets.[58] In addition, idealistic worldviews, such as artistic universalism and anti-materialism, were cultivated in East and West, if not on the same societal scale (keeping the meta-conflict between capitalism and socialism in mind) then at least with comparable passion in the particular art worlds. Most likely, therefore, the Cold War's highly ideological theoretical and ethical positions continue to shape contemporary encounters between former opponents. Thus, we can speak of a history of discursive dominance and cultural alternativity that is closely connected to the discursive fabrication of dissidence and the reproduction of power interests.

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[57] Cf. Adam Szymczyk in a panel discussion during the conference "Kunst Werte Gesellschaft" on May 16, 2008 in Berlin. Accessed August 18, 2012. http://www.kwg.kunstvereine.de/doks/16_05/kunstspektakel.html.

[58] See Skowronek, *Marktgestalten in Sorge*.

Havel in New York: Performing Central Europe on Stage

"Writers have more disagreement, less commonality of principle and interest than is generally admitted," read the caption of a caricature in the *New York Times* depicting the debates at the 48th annual International PEN Congress in New York in 1986. Indeed, transnational communication in the Cold War faced manifold obstacles, which were not solely caused by the impermeability of the Iron Curtain. Even if non-conformist literature, alternative art, and uncensored theatre plays managed to cross the systemic divide, their cultural translation often failed. The result were expressions of cultural alienation between East and West. In particular, the transfer of non-conformist theatre plays and their performances in the West resulted at times in misunderstandings and miscommunication.

First, transnational theatre performances enabled the creation and recreation of social and cultural relationships. As plays can be understood as an enactment of the written word, theatre performances of non-conformist dramas from countries behind the Iron Curtain provided the Western viewer with an opportunity to see and experience literature on stage from these largely unknown parts of Europe. In contrast with the written word, through their enactments on stage, Havel's non-conformist plays turned into "performed Samizdat,"[59] or rather performed Tamizdat, as it was exiled, translated, and adapted to North American conditions and realities.[60] The Russian novelist Vassily Aksyonov, who was stripped off his Soviet citizenship in 1980 and remained in American exile for the next ten years, once declared "where can a contemporary writer find more vertiginous adventure […] than in literary exile."[61]

Many dramas by the famous Czech playwright and dissident Václav Havel reached the West.[62] Theatre directors in New York were among the many influential figures of theatre life who took an interest in them. Joseph Papp, the director of the Public Theater in New York, remembers that in 1986 "Havel told me 'I don't know who I am writing for anymore.' […] He can't test it against an audience. He is writing in a vacuum."[63] As Havel's literature was banned in Czechoslovakia after 1968, he was writing his plays without ever seeing them performed, like a "composer who never hears his orchestra."[64] One way for Havel to escape this cultural isolation was to have his plays staged in New York. In the context of the New York Shakespeare Festival, Havel's "Memorandum" was performed in 1968 at the New York Public Theater. It was the first and last production in New York the opening of which Havel was able to attend in person.[65] The adaptation of "Memorandum" was well-received. Its stage director Joseph Papp won praise for "carefully calculated matter-of-fact staging" and his ability to translate the play for a Western audience. The play was considered a "wittily thought-provoking play in itself." Critics said that it would increase American interest in culture from Czechoslovakia.[66] Papp appreciated not only that Havel had a "tremendous sense of satire," but that he most importantly did not "carry his ideology on a placard.[67] In 1983, the adaptation of Havel's play "Private View" was staged by the female director Lee Grant in New York. It was also judged a success. One critique said that the director had managed to turn the text, which exposed the "dehumanizing effects of totalitarianism" with "wounding honesty and irony," into "an event of artistic and political urgency."[68]

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[59] Duda, "Message from a playwright."

[60] On the adaptation of Polish theater to the German context, see: Fischer and Sellner, *Polnische Dramen*.

[61] Freedman, "The Writer as an Exile," 11.

[62] Václav Havel is well represented in the COURAGE registry, with two collections specifically devoted to his legacy: COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Václav Havel Collection of the Czechoslovak Documentation Centre", by Anna Vrtálková, 2018. Accessed: October 09, 2018. COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Václav Havel Library", by Michaela Kůželová, 2018. Accessed: October 09, 2018.

[63] Freema, *Portrait of a Playwright*.

Havel and his works and plays became well-known in the United States and beyond. As theatre performances are always the product of interaction between actors and audience, playwright and director, text and performance, Havel's plays in New York enabled cultural and artistic encounters that went far beyond what had the official approval of the communist government. While protest inside Central and Eastern Europe took on a "theatrical dimension" in so far as it was performed in public places, mobilized masses, and relied on a certain rhetoric, "real" theatre performances of non-conformist literature constituted a form of non-conformist protest, whether in the East or the West.

In 2000, Havel claimed that theatre was not "just another genre" but the "only genre in which, today and every day, now and always, living human beings address and speak to other human beings." Therefore, theatre was and still is far "more than just the performance of stories," but instead "a space for authentic human existence that transcends itself" with the aim of "[giving] an account of the world and of itself."[69] Theatre can overcome the East-West binary. As an acknowledgement of the successful cultural translation of Havel's works, Havel received the North American *Off-Broadway Theater Award* (OBIE) for his plays "Memorandum" (1968), "The Increased Difficulty of Concentration" (1970), and "Private View" (1984). This award acknowledged the importance of Havel's works for the American audience.

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[64] Ibid.

[65] New York Times, "Czech Writer," 14.

[66] Barnes, "Drama," 55.

[67] Andelman, "A Thoroughly Politicized Czech Playwright," A3.

[68] Gussow, "Stage," 16.

[69] Havel, "Forword," 40.

In addition to such public acknowledgment, literary transfers also helped foster cultural solidarity among artists, writers and playwrights which reached beyond the Iron Curtain. According to Richard Dean, the increase in the "number and scope of contacts" between East and West resulted in the "increasing sophistication of the dissidents" with regard to their awareness of the political situation in their home countries and in the West.[70] The West also served as a kind of archive: through writings smuggled into the West, Havel's "bits of life […] [could] be assembled into a mosaic" which resembled a "portrait of the artist as enemy of the state."[71] The Western cultural scene served as a sounding board, without which the marginalized dissident cultural elite in Eastern Europe would have been limited to performing their art in the cultural underground. In the case of Havel, when he was arrested in 1979, there were outpourings of transnational solidarity. Many American and Western writers and intellectuals, such as Joseph Papp, Arthur Miller, Kurt Vonnegut, Tom Stoppard, and fifty others demonstrated against his imprisonment in New York.[72]

However, publicly expressed solidarity was just one side of the game. Literary exile or the transfer of one's literary works to an unknown audience also had ambiguous implications. Tom Stoppard remembered Havel's reaction when he came to visit Havel in Prague: "He was glad to see me," yet "he also made it clear it was a little bit of a drag to see another Western sympathizer wheeled in. He felt a bit like a tourist attraction, like the Taj Mahal."[73] There was, it seems, a degree of sensationalism in the curiosity of Western intellectuals for dissident writers and playwrights from communist countries.

The transnational adaptation of texts often also caused cultural alienation. Although well-acquainted with New York intellectuals, writers, and directors, Havel was not allowed any say in the actual stage productions of his plays. When his play "Largo Desolato" was performed in New York in 1986, the American critique Frank Rich denounced the incapacitating attitude of the Western producers towards Havel. He pointed out that "the lesson Public Theater audiences are likely to learn at 'Largo Desolato,' […] is not necessarily the one its author intended." Instead, the performance told the audience "less about the suffering of writers in a police state" than "about the self-indulgence of American directors who plaster their egos over playwrights' words." Rich felt it wrong that Havel lacked "the freedom to supervise the liberties Mr. Foreman has apparently taken with his work."[74] Some critics also felt that over time, the novelty of plays from Eastern Europe dissipated. Henry Popklin, for example, observed in 1977 that "not so long ago" East European theatre had looked like "the only true home of wonderful novelty, the source of dazzling comets that zoomed across the sky and presaged revolutions in our theatrical life."[75] But by 1977, he and the American audience were disappointed, as they felt that "Eastern Europe's bag of tricks" appeared "not quite so dazzling" anymore. He acknowledged, however, that East European theatre still "contributes more than its share to enlivening our theater stage."[76]

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[70] Dean, "Contacts with the West," 51.

[71] Freeman, *Portrait of a Playwright*.

[72] Gwertzman, "U.S. Harshly Rebukes," A3.

[73] Freeman, *Portrait of a Playwright*.

[74] Rich, "Stage," C15.

Against this backdrop, one can conclude that the transnational transfer of Czech non-conformist plays to New York and their adaptation to the local conditions affected their meanings in ambiguous ways. This transfer did indeed enable the reception and consumption of otherwise inaccessible cultural products. Yet it also caused feelings of alienation and misunderstanding. As Henri Voigt concisely pointed out, alienation means that people feel "alienated, estranged, or even subjugated," regardless of whether their alienation was "voluntary or forced, societal or psychological," or whether it was "negative or positive."[77] With that in mind, dissidents and non-conformist playwrights felt "powerless," and not only inside their own socialist societies.[78] The difficult and sometimes even impossible cultural translation of their non-conformist literature and plays from East to West could trigger similar feelings of powerlessness and disillusionment.

Conclusion

The stories of the BITEF theatre festival in Belgrade, the Warsaw Foksal Gallery, and the staging of Havel's plays in New York highlight the fact that, while the Cold War may have divided the world, it also stimulated cultural practices that strove to overcome these divisions. The specific political conditions for transnational encounters during the Cold War era overdetermined and politicized East-West engagements. Some of the hopes pinned on them were disappointed, in part because cultural translation proved tricky, as exemplified by the reception of Havel's plays in America. The actors engaged in these encounters pursued their own agendas, which were not merely universalistic but sometimes also individualistic. Nevertheless, despite these ambiguities, transnational encounters were an important element in the peculiar vitality of "Cold War cultures."[79] Intellectuals, writers, and artists in Eastern Europe found eager audiences in Western Europe and North America, to whom they often represented a form of idealism that Westerners thought to have lost. Engagement with art from the East was a means of self-reflection for Western observers. For non-conformist cultural activists from the East, the West provided publicity at a time when their works were often banned in their home countries.

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[75] Popkin, "The Brilliance."

[76] Ibid.

[77] Vogt, "*Between Utopia and Disillusionment,*" 160.

[78] Havel, *The Power of the Powerless.*

[79] See Lindenberger, Vowinckel, and Payk, *Cold War Cultures.*

At the same time, the nature of transnational encounters during the Cold War should not be romanticized. For one, the repressive apparatus of the state was never far away. Many well-known and less known figures of the cultural opposition lived precarious lives and faced persecution by the state, some of them precisely because of their Western exposure. For many dissidents, there was also a significant "mismatch between international acclaim and little domestic impact."[80] Communist regimes even exploited the transnational activities of critical minds in order to portray them as "vassals of imperialism" who were estranged "from the people." As shown by the case studies, encounters with the West were also not free of misunderstandings. These were ultimately underpinned by the power asymmetry in these relations: East European dissenters were in a more existential need of Western support than vice versa. As the example of Havel's reception in New York shows, the West's engagement with dissident art was not without narcissism, as Western observers ultimately attributed only a particularistic message to East Europeans, while they claimed a universalist stance for themselves. Nevertheless, transnationality was an important force of creativity and made the Cold War a distinct cultural phenomenon for which efforts to cross the Iron Curtain were as constitutive as efforts to build and maintain it. The fact that many collections described in the COURAGE Registry have a transnational aspect offer testimony to this.

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[80] Szulecki, *The Figure of the Dissident*, 177.

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