The Poetics of Playing
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ABSTRACT

Despite the seemingly general agreement that we are still living in a post- or post-post-modern world and many contemporary performances are based on the principles of postdramatic theatre, researchers have noticed certain changes in the poetics of theatrical language, which have not, so far, been described and analysed. This article seeks to search for a poetics of playing ? that is to say, implicit principles of producing and perceiving contemporary performances (non-mimetic forms of playing are beyond the scope of this investigation). These principles in themselves are not necessarily new or contemporary, although their combinations often create such an impression. The article consists of three parts. The first explores the term 'poetics' and the second the poetics of playing. The final part provides an empirical analysis of an example of the new poetics of playing. The political theatre project Unified Estonia Assembly developed the structures and strategies of politics and performing arts to their extremes, at the same time creating a powerful representation of political games. By being a kind of exceptional theatrical event, it helped to exemplify how performers can influence participants or society and how ambivalence as a strategy can be emphasized in comprehension and social interaction. The poetics of playing in Unified Estonia Assembly was based on fluid conceptions of players, roles and participants, playing and reality, and this fluidity also created a strong sense of ambivalence both during the playing and afterwards.

Keywords: playing, poetics, ambivalence, political theatre, Estonian theatre, TheatreNO99

BIOGRAPHY

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The Poetics of Playing[1]

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"*Poiesis*, in fact, is a play-function."[2]

Despite the seemingly general agreement that we are still living in a post- or post-post-modern world and many contemporary performances are based on the principles of postdramatic theatre, researchers have noticed certain changes in the poetics of theatrical language, which have, so far, not been described and analysed. This article seeks to search for a poetics of playing – that is to say, implicit principles of producing and perceiving contemporary performances (non-mimetic forms of playing are beyond the scope of this investigation). These principles in themselves are not necessarily new or contemporary, although their combinations often create such an impression.

The article consists of three parts. The first explores the term 'poetics' and the second the poetics of playing. The final part provides an empirical analysis of an example of the new poetics of playing.

WHAT IS POETICS?

Answers to the question can be quite different, depending on the sources one uses. Mostly the term 'poetics' is related to poetry or to literature more broadly and references to Aristotle and his *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) are often made.[3]

The term: poetics, though, has been used in the West in several and often quite opposing senses:

1. In the late 20th century, poetics has been applied to almost every human activity, so that it often seems to mean little more than "theory"[4].

2. Applied to the works of authors, it means something like "implicit principles".
3. More narrowly, the term has been used to denote "theory of literature", i.e. "theory of literary discourse".
4. "Theory of poetry" is the narrowest definition.[5]

In the present study, the word 'poetics' is used in the meaning close to the second definition above. Poetics is a search for general principles underlying particular types, genres and styles of works of art. Usually a poetics is normative and concerns the creation and/or the reception of works of art. Due to the unstable, changing nature of poetics, the word 'search' is stressed in the description. One should not exclude the possibility that there can exist works of art, which follow certain well-known sets of rules precisely, as for example well-made plays, but variations within the same range of rules can frequently be observed. Nowadays, hybrid forms dominate outside the commercial art sector; thus, one and the same work or its reception can be based on different sets of rules. Nevertheless, even hybrid or novel works of art can often be reduced to some familiar, recognizable principles of art (genre, style, etc.), i.e. poetics in general, because reception hardly starts from a clean slate. On the contrary, receivers tend to connect and compare their artistic experiences. Thus perception of art is also lead by an intuitive search for the general principles underlying a particular work.

Consequently, poetics, here, is also related to the meta-levels of reception and critical analysis. Poetics

is a changing set of rules guiding the reception and comprehension of works of art. Although we believe that the search for poetics is the main domain of researchers and critics, actually every act of comprehension reflects this process that is often referred to as following certain mental conventions (for example detecting characters, storyline or meaning of signs).

On the other hand, artists also, consciously or unconsciously, follow or break certain rules of art and communication or even the poetics of certain types, genres and styles. If artists and audiences share the same cultural context, it is possible that they also share common knowledge about different kinds of poetics but this is not always the case. Every culture is fragmented horizontally (different social classes) and vertically (different subgroups) and both of these axes produce different aesthetical canons and tastes.[6] This means that various poetics might be used by people in the creation and reception of one and the same art work. Hybridity and openness to different approaches make contemporary art works worth studying also from the point of view of poetics.

Nevertheless, there is no isolation and autonomy of poetics between the levels of individual creation and reception, or even collective art making and perception. For example, in his *Poetics,* Aristotle analysed tragedy from the point of view of the receiver and his theory became a set of rules for playwrights and theatre makers many centuries later. Since the 20th century, in the era of modernism, postmodernism and postdramatic theatre, artists have created numerous poetics, which are mostly explained through the negation of prior canonical poetics, including the one written by Aristotle. In this respect, authors are investigating different forms of performances and are trying to develop a variety of overarching hybrid poetics and the activity can also be called the poetics of playing.

We should first specify what kinds of poetics are available in a European cultural context and investigate later on how a poetics of playing uses this cultural heritage. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* gives a short and helpful overview of the results of literary theories in exploring the poetics of different types of literature. It is stated that most

works on poetics have consisted of descriptive studies of specific kinds or genres of texts. Poetic genres have been studied in terms of the formal patterning of sounds, rhythms, relations of lines, stanzas, sections, syntax, point of view, etc. Narrative genres have been analysed in terms of certain, supposedly universal elements, such as the 'functions' of characters and the relations between them in a fable, plot or narrative structure and the relationship to and the position of the narrator or reader. Dramatic genres involve the same elements and relationships with the additional modalities of character/actor and stage/audience relations.[7] Thus characters and actors, plot and fable, performance and audience are the decisive elements of dramatic genres.

According to the description above, one can state that, at least in literary poetics, structuralist approaches have been dominant. The use of the structuralist approach as the foundational principle of poetics can also be explained by the etymology of the word. Modern words 'poetry' and 'poetics' are derived from the Ancient Greek root *poïesis* (ποίησις - creation) that comes from the ancient term *ποιέω*, which means 'to make'. Making can be attached both to making theatre and performance but also to making sense, which again brings both the poetics of makers and receivers into play.

The Routledge Dictionary also stresses that poetics does not aim, however, to study these 'devices' of literary work piecemeal, but seeks the determining patterns of structure, such as the master device which Jakobson termed the 'dominant', i.e. the component of a work which sets in motion and determines the relations between all other components.[8] Roman Jakobson explains the term as follows: "The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure."[9]

For a long time, the dominant of poetry was considered to be verse, the dominant of prose narration and the dominant of drama spoken language, primarily dialogue. In the field of the performing arts, the core element of musical theatre was music, specifically singing and the core element of dance theatre was dancing. Musical theatre has remained

loyal to vocal and instrumental musical expression but contemporary drama and dance have also made quite radical twists, sometimes abandoning their traditional dominants, speaking and dancing, quite decisively. But this does not mean that one should entirely abandon the abovementioned terms as old-fashioned and useless. One can just use the words spoken, sung and danced theatre not as normative types and structures but as references to the dominant tool of expression of certain performances. But this does not solve the problem, because sometimes the poetics of performance intuitively seems to reject such an expression. For example, a contemporary dance production with no dance or significant physical movement rejects categorization as spoken theatre because its poetics is based not so much on speech as on a lack of dance.

Genre systems of different types of theatre are based on various principles. Genres of music theatre state their dominant tools of expression: in addition to singing and instrumental music, dancing and speaking might also have important parts in the performance, whereas style and topics are less regulated. Genres of dance theatre are mostly concerned about style, the use of body. The most unique dominant is set up by the terminology of drama genres that intends to evoke certain emotions (either tragic or comic, or mixed ones) in the audiences. While all types of literature and theatre but also other genres set up certain structural elements or tools as their main dominants, drama genres, rather, stress the strategy or the aim of the play. Tragedies are supposed to depict tragic characters and events that arouse "fear and pity" in the spectators, while comedies often have a comic effect only to outsiders, i.e. audiences, not insiders. Of course, there are many sub-genres of drama that deal either with style (realistic, expressionistic, postmodern drama) or topic (historical, political, family drama).

A dominant "rules, determines and transforms the remaining components," i.e. triggers a general poetics of performance and playing. This statement can further be exemplified by an observation of Marvin Carl-son: "Throughout much of the history of Western theatre a strong conservatism in subject matter and genre organization has provided spectators with highly predictable psychic models to apply in the reading of new dramatic pieces (or in revivals of older ones). From Greek until fairly recent times the designation of a play as a comedy or a tragedy alerted the spectator to expect a certain emotional tone, certain types of characters, even certain themes and a certain structure of action."[10] Although the classic genre system is considered to be out-dated, researchers and critics should be aware of the influence of classical poetics, which is deeply rooted in the school education system. It can help in the clarification of the dominant(s) of a performance: the main tool of expression, a certain style, the topic or the impact on the receivers for example.

WHAT IS THE POETICS OF PLAYING?

As stated before, characters and actors, plot and fable, performance and audience are the decisive elements of dramatic genres. The most interesting and complicated parts of poetics deal with the relationship between these six elements. In the context of a poetics of playing, one can use the following corresponding terms: roles (instead of characters) and players or performers (instead of actors), structure or narrative (instead of plot) and strategy or ideology of playing, performance or playing and participants (including both actors and audience). The relationships between these elements can be analysed according to the figure below.
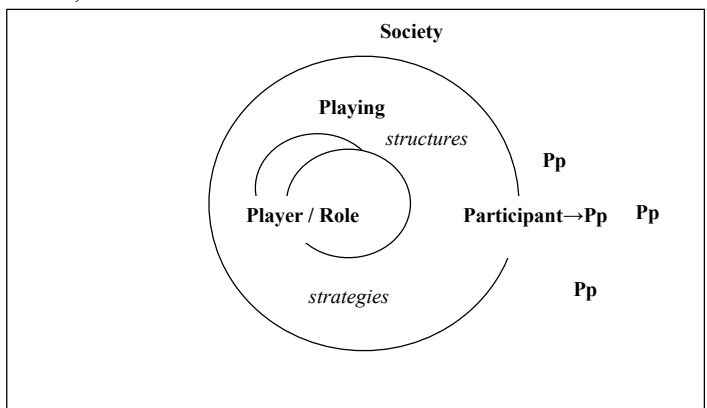

Figure 1. Minimum conditions of playing.

The figure describes the minimum conditions of playing where there is at least one player who fills a certain role (for example one-man-show, mono-performance). The borders between the player and the role are not normally clear or emphasized; one can even state that a two-way transfer of identities takes place during playing. Thus, the player fills a role according to his/her individuality, but the role also brings to the forefront certain characteristics of the player and might influence the player's identity during and after playing. Ambivalence is an essential characteristic in the description of the relationship between the player and the role in the poetics of playing and this issue will be tackled more thoroughly later on.

Normally, there is also at least one spectator or co-player involved in playing, named the participant in this model. Depending on the type of game and the role of the participant in this game, s/he is more or less immersed into the world of playing. At the one end, there is an ignored spectator of illusionistic theatre, and at the other, emotionally, intellectually and physically involved co-player. In contemporary performances the line between the spectators and the players is often not essential and clear. Thus, the term 'participant' is preferred in order to integrate both of them. Both the term and the figure above point out the liminality of the spectator's position in the poetics of playing. Often a special role (or roles) is also implicitly or explicitly given to spectators in the framework of playing or is acquired by spectators themselves – not to mention spectatorship as a role in itself. In addition to that, people who are influenced by or influence the playing indirectly can also be called participants (for example technicians, PR people or everybody who carries on a discursive practice about it). Following the idea of Temple Hauptfleisch about the seismology of theatre, the shock waves of a theatrical event can influence not only people attending the performance but, in one way or another, also the informed cultural elite or even all the inhabitants of the place or potentially everybody on earth. [11]

Willmar Sauter has used the notions 'agents' and 'beholders' or A and B in the context of playing, stressing that the "flexibility of players, including their movement between A and B, constitutes a major characteristic of playing".[12] A(gent) and B(eholder) correspond to Player and Participant in the figure above. These pairs share a common linkage: the first element in both expresses activity and the second passivity. Nevertheless, the player as a specific agent differs from others because of the double-codedness of his/her actions (this will be discussed later) and this distinction narrows down the connotations of the term. The participant, at the same time, belongs to the play and player but his/her position or role is more unclear and ambivalent than the one suggested by the term 'beholder' (witness?). In both cases, the fluidity of the roles is foregrounded to such an extent that A and B can be viewed as two performers on the stage. Border crossing between the positions of the player and the participant seems to be more marked, often by physical markers in the performance space or by special behaviour. Therefore, the player and the participant seem to be more relevant notions for the poetics of playing.

The roles of players and participants are more or less prescribed by the type of game they are playing or, to be more specific, by the structures and strategies of the game. Structures can be defined as more or less stable and materialized elements of playing, like players and participants, plot or script and its smaller units (acts, scenes, roles etc.), as well as some necessary props. Jakobson argues that "it is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure". For the sake of clarity, we suggest that it is the strategy (based on the dominant(s), which often is/are just artistic and social convention(s)) that models the structure of a play and functions as implicit or explicit guidelines for players. More precisely, the strategy prescribes which structures and tools should be used in which ways and for which aims.

However, when we are thinking about the poetics of playing more broadly, other dominants than tools of expression, certain style, topic or impact on the receivers come to mind, like for example the typology of Roger Caillois and the four guiding principles of games: *agon*, or competition; *alea*, or chance; mimicry, or mimesis, or role playing; *ilinx*, or altering one's state of mind.[13] Theatrical playing can combine or stress all of these dominants. Mimesis has been considered the essential feature of per-

forming and probably needs no further explanation. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that mimesis could be considered both as a structure (a means) or a strategy (an aim) of theatrical playing. One of the main functions and strategies of performing is *ilinx*, to have an influence (either aesthetic or ideological) on others, to alter their state of mind, either temporarily or permanently. The aspect is also stressed by the terminology of drama genres as was discussed earlier. *Alea* can be connected to the uniqueness of every performance and improvisation as a technique but becomes a dominant in improvisational theatre. There are also certain risks or dangers related to performing arts. Almost all performers have thought or dreamt about the possibility of failing on stage, but the danger is especially relevant when performers are expected to demonstrate great technical skills, like for example ballet dancers, opera singers, circus artists, etc. Failure in these cases is not just a question of insufficient training but also bad luck. *Alea* is also a relevant element from the point of view of spectators, who always hope that they have, often by chance, chosen a good production and will have the chance to see a good performance. Thus, the players and participants have a common aim to work toward in the name of a good play. It can also be said that competition, *agon,* is not completely alien to performing, when one considers the human desire to be the best at something or the different kinds of award systems. Finally, it must be stressed that contemporary performances tend to mix and link diverse sources, genres and conventions as a result of which a multiplicity of poetic traditions is often in use. Since the dominants of artistic forms sometimes refer to structures and sometimes to strategies, it is practical to handle these aspects separately.

The structures and strategies of playing can be analysed according to the following research questions:

Structures*:* What kinds of roles are represented in playing? How is playing organized? What are the conventions and rules of playing? How can the frames of playing, processes, styles, and contexts be described? Are there limitations for playing? How does playing relate to reality and fiction?

Strategies*:* What are the aims and purposes of playing? What functions of playing can be iden-

tified? How does playing relate to the co-players, audiences, society? Which ideologies of class, gender and ethnicity are used by the players? How are power relations expressed in playing? Is there an ethics of playing?

It is important to stress that the structures of playing can be dealt with on a more or less abstract level, describing and analysing ideal models or empirical examples of certain types of playing from a structural and/or phenomenological point of view. For example, research on *Hamlet* or on Christmas celebrations as types of playing can easily illustrate questions of conventions, role playing and frames of playing. Strategies of playing more directly involve specific cultural, social, political, ideological contexts, which distinguish similar performances of *Hamlet* or the conventions of Christmas in different places in terms of purpose, functions and ethics as original events. Furthermore, relations between the structures and strategies of playing should be investigated because mostly they work in close correlation with each other. Structures often depend on or grow out of the strategies of players or play-makers. If the players are not even aware of any strategy of playing, their activity still serves certain aims, purposes and ideologies.

A poetics of playing is thus, a principle or a group of principles governing artistic or intellectual activities, which are based on the playful usage of different artistic and social practices. The poetics of playing is also a tool for the conceptualization and comprehension of all kinds of art works but becomes especially useful in the analysis of hybrid or exceptional events.

PLAYING AT THE LIMITS OF PLAYING

Coming back to literary poetics once more, one might find the following quotation thought-provoking: "In general, we may say that Western poetics, unlike the several Eastern poetics which have mainly concerned themselves with the expressive and affective powers of literature […], has mainly taken as its central problem the issue of the reliability of verbal representation of the external world, i.e. mimesis […]. The main issue has been the dispute over the nature and (objective) veracity of a work's

depiction of 'reality' whatever that is taken to be."[14]

Theatre (as well as other ephemeral and time-bound cultural performances) tends to establish direct contact and reference points to its time, place and audiences, thus its social and political nature cannot really be disputed, even when mimesis cannot be detected at first sight. The question of the reliability or veracity of the theatrical representation of the external world is also not wholly out of date. For example, productions which present non-fictional material in theatrical frames or styles, or fictional material without any artistic framing provoke questions and debates about authenticity and imitation, reliability and repetition, contexts of references, ethics and ideologies of aesthetics, etc.

Theatre, like other forms of playing, operates simultaneously on two levels: at the symbolic level of play and the non-symbolic level of reality. For example, Andreas Kotte, developing Johan Huizinga's ideas further, has analysed playing in a coordinate system of two axes: a contest for something (consequence) and a representation of something (emphasis). The coordinate system, with absolute play at its origin, must establish limits, since the quality of the play inevitably declines in both dimensions. On the one axis, the limit lies at the point of total representation, i.e. the image. On the other axis, the limit is represented by death, the point of total consequence where play disappears.[15] Thus, Kotte uses two axes, instead of two levels, which help to investigate the functions and outcomes of different playful forms (he uses the term 'scenic sequences') but also the limits of playing culture. According to Kotte, playing borders are a fixed image on the vertical axis and death on the horizontal axis. These notions are also relevant in reading the figure on page 11 where playing is depicted as a circle in a solid line; instead, there should be a dotted line because theatrical playing definitely reaches out to reality and has certain consequences there. Playing also tends to end when firmly fixed, "dead" images are presented, which do not imply any interpretation from the receiver, and this definition makes the line between playing and non-playing unstable and highly dependent on individual perception. Nevertheless, in the context of this article, it is important to point out that theatrical playing is at the same time strongly drawn towards its ends as it has the following aims (and traditions): 1) to emphasize (represent or present) something, 2) to influence particular participants and through them society in general.

Dramatic or illusionistic theatre tends to surmount the dichotomy between the symbolic level of play and the non-symbolic level of reality, so that playing (often also called fiction, illusion, and representation) would overshadow the presence of the stage reality and performers. Since the 1960s, theatre has developed towards performance art in breaking and questioning the gap between these two levels but also experimenting in the gap of representation and presentation, fiction and reality. The intentional strategy of playing at these levels simultaneously causes ambivalence of meanings and affects. It means that the ontological ambivalence of theatre and playing has been brought to the foreground, and during the past decades a specific poetics has been developed out of random experimentations. For the sake of clarity, we might call this strategy a poetics of ambivalence.

POETICS OF AMBIVALENCE

The word 'ambivalence' is mostly defined as follows:

1. simultaneous and contradictory attitudes or feelings toward an object, person, or action;
2. a: continual fluctuation (as between one thing and its opposite),
   b: uncertainty as to which approach to follow.

The poetics of ambivalence is based upon ambivalence in production and reception. In post-postmodern theatre, the following aspects trigger ambivalent meanings and affects:

- signs of fiction and reality presented in close proximity,
- ambiguous identity of a player (character-performer-mediator-citizen),
- mode of expression (seriousness versus playfulness, tragic/angry versus comic/ironic mode, tradition versus novelty),
- intentions and ideologies of theatre makers (political/social project versus entertainment), etc.

More than other fine arts or genres of games, theatre is based on a continual fluctuation between reality (physicality of performers, props, spectators) and fiction (i.e. performance) but also on a fluctuation of different ways and modes of expression. It leaves the spectators uncertain about which approach to follow, which attitudes to choose and which feelings to feel and often results in mixed attitudes and feelings. Helena Grehan, however, has noticed: "Instead of seeing ambivalence as something that leads to stasis or inertia, it should be reimagined as an unsettling and productive space. Neither ambivalence nor undecidability necessarily imply that the subject will flounder or experience paralysis in terms of decision making [...]; rather, it may generate an environment in which subjects become aware of their obligation to respond, as well as of the unstable or contingent nature of any response they might make."[16] In the following example, I will demonstrate how ambivalence as a strategy can be used in theatrical playing, and how the framework of playing developed earlier can be used in analysis.

On 24 March 2010, people in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, were surprised to see numerous outdoor political advertisements for a new political movement, Unified Estonia (the advertisements were actually about the Unified Estonia convention). Huge billboards displayed the faces of actors from NO99 Theatre,[17] with the colours of the Estonian flag painted on their faces, and the slogan of the movement: "One for all, all for Estonia!" The latter is, of course, a paraphrase of the well-known motto of Alexandre Dumas' three musketeers – "All for one, one for all!" Some other statements representing the movement's political platform were also exhibited on separate billboards. Since Estonia, like many other countries in Europe, has lately faced a rapid growth in individualism, social disparity and stratification, the name and slogan of Unified Estonia seemed to propose a cure for social problems, albeit in a framework of idealized nationalistic ideology. Ironically, Unified Estonia paraphrases the name of the biggest Russian political party, Unified Russia, headed by Vladimir Putin. These contrasting associations questioned the democratic potential of national unification.

At noon on 24 March 2010, NO99 Theatre held a press conference "on an important public question" in Radisson Blue Hotel. Tiit Ojasoo announced that after meetings that took place over the course of two and a half years with various people involved in politics, they had reached a decision that the dreadful material could not be summed up with a traditional theatre production. Instead they had established a political movement, Unified Estonia, which would hold its convention on 7 May 2010 in Saku Hall and that everybody was expected to participate in it. Ene-Liis Semper added that Unified Estonia reflected the well-known populist traits of all major political parties in their behaviour, rhetoric, programme, campaigns, and so on. In the end, Ojasoo threw a word of warning in the air - many movements and parties in Estonia have been started jokingly (based just on an idea and enthusiasm of a small group of people) but influential social-political powers have grown out of them. "The 'joke' has potential."[18]

The event set up the main rules of the project and answered the ontological question of the spectator and spectating – what is the name of the game. Unified Estonia was imitating the establishment of a political party, openly and extensively demonstrating the performative strategies and power of politics but also theatre. The aim of the game was not fully exposed and only ambiguous references to different possibilities were made. Nevertheless, the establishment of a political party as an activity and a type of playing was, to a certain extent, familiar to most of the potential participants, thus they were more or less aware of the following events and strategies, even when these where modified or defamiliarized.

The theatre project *Unified Estonia Assembly* lasted for 44 days. The mass media paid a great deal of attention to the project. Both leaders of the movement, Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper, but also members of parliament, politicians, intellectuals, and columnists were invited to discuss the matter in newspapers, radio and television shows. Political commercials of Unified Estonia were shown on Estonian National Television and episodes of video lectures entitled Election School were uploaded on the internet during the next six weeks. These lectures employed popular language to acquaint viewers with political mechanisms. The party also had

a home page (http://eestieest.ee/eesti-eest) and an account on Facebook and Twitter, which were also used for immediate and personal communication.

The assembly was completely sold out in only two days and over 7000 people were ultimately packed into the hall due to enormous popular demand. The closer we came to 7 May, the more the public asked if a new party would or would not be born. Various political technologies were introduced during the convention, speeches were given, and so on. The election of a new leader and the new leader's speech concluded the convention with an ambivalent statement: "You are free!" News portals carried live broadcasts of the convention online and the message of the Unified Estonia assembly was discussed very actively over the next few days in the press and it is still often referred to as a paragon of political art.[19]

The theatre's actors and directors formed the core of the movement but also some other actors, two singers, the Chancellor of Justice and some other public figures were included as players. Most of them wore new suits and ties, were – and looked – young, handsome, tanned, energetic. Members of Unified Estonia performed a collective role of a new political power so eagerly expected in many European countries and created the image of perfect citizens easy to identify with. They acquired a position similar to that of characters on stage who are objects of identification and to whom spectators lend their agency, at least for a certain time and purpose. In general, Estonians are politically quite passive, like spectators in a traditional theatrical configuration, and prefer to watch rather than act. Thus the comparison is not really arbitrary. The players, of course, just imitated the behaviour of politicians but nevertheless managed to create such believable and positive characters (or social roles) that the participants, i.e. all people in Estonia, could identify either with the created images of the new power or with the theatre people who were mocking politicians and politics or they could even split their sympathies between the role and the players.

The whole *Unified Estonia Assembly* project was built on the poetics of ambivalence, presenting signs of reality and fiction in succession or jointly creating frames both for an aesthetic reception strategy (the project is just a theatrical production) and for a non-fictional reception strategy (the project is a theatrical production with a possibility/proposal/intention to change the current political culture or even to establish a new party).[20] For many citizens of Estonia the issue of politics, i.e. their current and future prospects, is highly relevant and emotionally loaded (mostly disappointment). As a result, they more easily inclined towards a non-fictional framing. This tendency is not exceptional in arts or games in general because, in spite of a playful mode and a certain distance from 'real life', the attachment of participants to playing often depends on the relevance of the game. Theatrical playing might be relevant to some people because of the topic presented or an interesting point of view or an exceptional form or excellent style. At the same time, the outcome is usually not as important as it is in sports, gambling or even social role-play. *Unified Estonia* was relevant to explicit and implicit participants because of all the reasons mentioned under theatrical playing but its outcome was also highly intriguing. This argument explains the course of the following events and the reception of the project.

One should also analyse the poetics of playing from another aspect: what kind of roles players have in society in general, what kind of roles they take in a particular game and the nature of the power structures between different roles inside and outside of the game. In our case, one should first ask the following questions: How reliable are actors, theatre makers or artists in general? Should one take seriously a political project carried out by theatre people? Is it not commonly believed (and also fixed in institutional theory) that art is whatever professional artists do and present as art? Answers to these questions depend first of all on the cultural context and the competence of the subject. In Estonia, theatre and theatre makers are very popular and highly valued, at least in the mass media, but after the restoration of independence, they have lost some of their social and political importance, like in other democratised countries. It means that although actors as prominent people have a certain influence in opinion making, it does not much concern the field of politics, which is quite alienated from other domains of society. Thus, the reliability of actors

as professional players in non-artistic domains like politics cannot be considered to be very high. But, as mentioned before, public games and provocations like *Unified Estonia* have the potential to open up the possibility of change, even in politics, and this might be frightening. Thus, one could say that Estonian theatre makers can arm themselves with symbolic capital, which is built on their special and desirable status as professional players and popularity in society.

There were at least two groups of implicit and explicit participants *Unified Estonia Assembly* addressed directly – all citizens of Estonia and politicians. Since NO99 Theatre had conducted research on politics, in their own words collecting material about the Estonian political field and practices for two and a half years, the theatre people definitely acquired the role of experts, at least in the eyes of wider audiences, and the role was also explicitly played out in the project. The performers who imitated, but also de-familiarized the behaviour and habitus of politicians and in later parts also accused them of demagogy, deceit, misappropriation of power and outrageously mocked certain individuals personally, received a lot of attention from the media and people involved in politics. The exposure of political strategies and habitus probably caused a lot of inconvenience in many political parties. Thus NO99 Theatre took both a political and economic risk with this mega-project, facing the risk that their state subsidy might be decreased the following year by the Ministry of Culture and, in the case of an artistic failure, having a deficit in their budget. But in general, most of the participants identified strongly with the players, at least in public, and the rest of the inhabitants of Estonia with the displayed social roles.

The question, what is the name of the game or what is the poetics of playing strikes the spectator right at the beginning of the performance and might haunt him or her until the end or even longer because in the course of playing rules might be changed, initiated mostly by theatre makers but sometimes also by other participants or audience members. The latter is partly bound to attitudes or frames of viewing intuitively or consciously taken by spectators. The notions of theatrical framing elaborated by Henri Schoenmakers[21] and the relevance of games discussed above play crucial roles here.

The theatre project *Unified Estonia Assembly* developed structures and strategies of politics and performing arts to their extremes, at the same time creating a powerful representation of political games and had fundamental subversive consequences on the Estonian political field and consciousness. By being a kind of exceptional theatrical event, it helped to exemplify how performers can influence participants or society and how ambivalence, as a strategy, can be emphasized in comprehension and social interaction. The poetics of playing in *Unified Estonia Assembly* was based on the fluid conceptions of players, roles and participants, playing and reality, partly structures and strategies, and the fluidity also created a strong sense of ambivalence both during the playing and afterwards. All these features that where outlined through the project concern the ontology of the poetics of playing.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1   The research for this chapter has been supported by the Estonian Research Council (grant "Emergent Stories: Storytelling and Joint Sensemaking in Narrative Environments"; PUT 192).

2   Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Routledge, London 2001 [1949], p. 119.

3   Aristotle, *Poetics*. - http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html

4   Consider for example some journal titles: *Poetics. Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts*, *Poetics Today: International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication*.

5   *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds., Frank J. Warnke, O. B. Hardison, Jr., and Earl Miner, ass. eds., Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993, p. 929-30.

6   Jan Mukarovsky, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1970.

7   *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Peter Childs, Roger Fowler, eds., Routledge, London and New York 2006, p. 179.

8   Ibid.

9   Roman Jakobson, "Dominant" in *Selected Writings. Vol. III. Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, Monton Publishers, the Hague, Paris & New York 1981, p. 751.

10 Marvin Carlson, "Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance" in *Theatre Semiotics. Signs of Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1990, p. 15.

11 Temple Hauptfleisch, "The Seismology of Theatre: Tracing the Shock Waves of a Theatrical Event in Society" in *South African Theatre Journal*, vol. 21, 2007, p. 259.

12 Willmar Sauter, "Playing Culture – an Introduction" in *Playing Culture. Conventions and Extensions of Performance*, Vicki Ann Cremona, Rikard Hoogland, Gay Morris, Willmar Sauter, eds., Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York 2013, p. 17.

13 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago 2001.

14 *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, op. cit., p. 931.

15 Andreas Kotte, "Play is the Pleasure of Being the Cause. On the Comparability of Scenic Sequences within the Playing Culture" in *Playing Culture. Conventions and Extensions of Performance*, Vicki Ann Cremona, Rikard Hoogland, Gay Morris, Willmar Sauter, eds., Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York 2013, p. 46.

16 Helena Grehan, *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2009, pp. 34-5.

17 Theatre NO99, its ideology and reputation needs some contextualization here. In 2004, Tiit Ojasoo (b. 1977) was elected the new artistic director of the Old Town Studio (Vanalinnastuudio). As a result, the theatre's profile was changed from comedy to experimental theatre. The theatre took a new name, NO99, but nevertheless maintained its stable state subsidy. For the past ten years, Ojasoo has been working together with set designer, performance artist and director Ene-Liis Semper (b. 1969). NO99 used to have a permanent 11-member troupe of actors. Three to four new plays are produced each season, often in collaboration with the troupe, improvising scenes and texts relying on ideas of the directors.

18 The press conference can be followed at the address: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30eHIPREIqo

19 The production is more thoroughly analysed by Eva-Liisa Linder, "How Theatre Can Develop Democracy. The Case of Theatre NO99" in *Nordic Theatre Studies*, vol. 25, 2013, pp. 85-96.

20 One cannot totally dismiss the non-fictional possibility. In 2009, Jón Gnarr, an Icelandic actor, comedian and writer established The Best Party (in Icelandic Besti Flokkurinn) with the implicit aim to mock leading political parties and to expose their corruption and populism, but explicitly copying and exaggerating their strategies (for example, being openly corrupt). The Best Party got the majority (37.4%) of votes in the local government elections of 2010, holds six of the fifteen seats on the council and Jón Gnarr became the mayor of the city of Reykjavik. A similar event happened in Lithuania in 2008, where Tautos Prisikėlimo partija (National Resurrection Party), headed by a former Lithuanian performer and producer Arūnas Valinskas, took 16 of the 141 seats in Parliament. Valinskas himself became the speaker of the Seimas and later also a candidate in the Lithuanian presidential elections. A case resembling the former ones can also be found in Denmark. Comedian Jacob Haugaard was elected to Parliament in 1994 after his rather playful campaign for more tailwind on bicycle paths and shorter queues in the supermarkets.

21 Henri Schoenmakers, "To Be, Wanting to Be, Forced to Be. Identification Processes in Theatrical Situations", in *New Directions in Audience Research. Advances in Repertion and Audience Research 2.* Instituut voor Theaterwetenschap, Utrecht 1988, p. 138-63.