

Summary of the PhD dissertation

Grotesque in political dramas by Thomas Bernhard

The subject of the dissertation is grotesque in political plays by Thomas Bernhard. The aim of the work is to study the way this aesthetic category was functionalized in Bernhard's dramas raising political topics, such as *the Hunting Party*, *the President*, *Eve of Retirement*, *Heldenplatz*, as well as two series of minidramas (dramolets) – *the German Lunch Table*, and *Claus Peymann Buys Himself a Pair of Pants and Joins Me for Lunch*.

The appearance of grotesque elements in Bernhard's plays has not been examined in detail so far. Even though the work of the Austrian writer is constantly of interpreters' interest, the state of research on grotesque in Bernhard's dramatic works is relatively modest. There are no monographic elaborations of this issue both in German and in Polish. There are only some mentions about grotesque elements in this authors' works in books and articles devoted to him.

In the studies undertaken in this work on grotesque in political dramas by Thomas Bernhard, the hermeneutical method and the theory of carnivalesque by Mikhail Bakhtin were used.

The primary research concepts of the dissertation are the strategy of using grotesque as a tool of subversive social criticism, the revealing function of grotesque, in particular using grotesque as a tool of demystification of Austrian and German national myths and symbols, as well as functionalization of grotesque as an element of writing strategy of the author aimed at provoking, causing a stir and even shocking the recipients. In the studies on the category of grotesque in political dramas by Thomas Bernhard, a crucial research issue is also the language characteristic for the author's dramatic works – full of hyperbolizations constituting grotesque, which are an inherent element of the rhetoric of exaggeration, as well as various types of wordplays such as combining blunt and sophisticated language, negating stylistic conventions, word formation practices, including the accumulation of neologisms and oxymoronic combinations.

The analyzes and interpretations of the selected corpus of political texts by Thomas Bernhard take into account such determinants of the grotesque factor as the interpenetration of heterogeneous elements, tragedy and comedy, death and fun, pathos and trivialty, and combining extreme registers, seriousness with laughter "high" with "low". What is more, the

create the feeling of grotesque, such as the game of illusion and disillusion, the accumulation of repetitions, the presence of axiological contradictions, the presentation of different types of deformations, as well as the absurdization of the presented world.

Based on the research undertaken as part of this dissertation, particular phases of the development of grotesque instruments in Bernhard's political dramas were indicated, the way in which grotesque evolved in the author's works was presented.

The doctoral dissertation consists of six analytical chapters. The analytical part of the dissertation was preceded by a theoretical chapter, in which the following concepts and issues regarding grotesque were presented: the origin of the term "grotesque", the history of the development of grotesque over centuries, the most important theories of grotesque, with particular emphasis on the 20th-century concepts, and findings concerning the functionalization of grotesque as a tool of presentation and criticism of the socio-political reality. The subject of research in this part of work is also the language used in grotesque literature. Among the findings there are also the connections of grotesque with such literary phenomena as comedy, tragedy, absurd and horror.

The second chapter of the work is focused on the question whether Thomas Bernhard is a political writer. Different opinions of researchers on this issue were presented in detail, moreover, various aspects of Bernhard's work were highlighted, enabling to classify the author as a political writer. The subject of research in this part of dissertation are also the areas of disputes and conflicts between Bernhard and the Austrian state.

The main part of the dissertation consists of the studies on the category of grotesque in selected political plays by the author (chapters 3 – 8).

The third chapter of the dissertation was devoted to the drama *the Hunting Party*, which is regarded as the first strictly political play by Bernhard. The category of grotesque in the drama, showing the backstage of politics, was functionalized as a tool for criticism of the negative aspects of socio-political life, such as the struggle for power, political intrigues, burdening politicians with the war past, and the influence of the Church institution. In the context of grotesque, the author's play with literary tradition was also analyzed – references to Anton Chekhov's *the Cherry Orchard*. The grotesque effect, as shown by analyzes and interpretations of Bernhard's play, was achieved mainly through the interpenetration of the elements of tragedy and comedy, as well as the play of illusion and disillusion introduced in the work.

The subject of research in the fourth chapter of the dissertation is the drama *the President*. As it was shown, when it comes to the title character of this play, the private sphere

(the marital issues of the presidential couple) and the public sphere (terrorist attacks and funeral ceremonies resulting from them) intertwine in a grotesque way. The grotesque in this drama was presented as a tool of exposing dictatorial rules. In the field of analyzes and interpretations there is the image of an individual possessed by a grotesque hubris of power. The reflections provided in this chapter also focus on the issue of the grotesque presentation of the politician's death, as well as the issue of theatricalization of the sphere of politics, the grotesque connections established by the author between the political sphere and the art of theater.

The fifth chapter of the work includes studies regarding the functionalization of grotesque in the drama *Eve of Retirement*, published in 1979. Bernhard's strategy of using grotesque elements in this play is connected with treating the grotesque as a tool for unmasking the nostalgia for Nazism hidden in German society after 1945. By using grotesque instruments, the author of the drama exposes the illusory nature of denazification processes. In the analyzes and interpretations of *Eve of Retirement*, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque was used, which served as an important context for studying the motif of a forbidden feast, presented in the work, glorifying the times of the Third Reich and a Nazi war criminal. The exegeses of the play emphasize the author's explicit transitions from the category of grotesque to macabre. This chapter also examines the way in which music was functionalized as an element co-shaping the aura of nostalgia for Nazism in the work and the grotesque "theater of remembrance" of the period of national socialism performed in the protagonists' home.

The subject of analyzes and interpretations in the sixth chapter of the work is *Heldenplatz*, the most controversial of Bernhard's dramas. The grotesque in the last play was used as a tool for diagnosing the sociopolitical reality in post-war Austria. Using the instrument of grotesque, the author expressed a considerable criticism of different spheres of life in the Austrian state, condemning in particular the aversion of his compatriots to settle accounts concerning the Anschluss and accusing them of anti-Semitism. The analyzes and interpretations emphasized the importance of the rhetoric of exaggeration which appeared in the protagonists' statements. In addition, in the context of functionalizing the grotesque in the drama, the author's play with the literary tradition was taken into account, especially with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and *Minna von Barnhelm* and *Nathan the Wise* by G. E. Lessing.

The analyzes and interpretations in the seventh chapter of the dissertation cover short dramatic forms by Bernhard from the collection *the German Lunch Table*, which confront the reader with the topic of national socialism in a farcical way. The grotesque in the minidramas

is the subject of research as a tool for criticizing the mentality of the inhabitants of the post-war German provinces, whom the author accuses of xenophobia, false Catholicism, and covert adherence to Nazi ideology. In the analyzes and interpretations of the dramolets from the collection *the German Lunch Table* there are also references to the tradition of the German folk plays (Volksstück).

The eighth chapter, devoted to the minidramas from the series *Claus Peymann Buys Himself a Pair of Pants and Joins Me for Lunch*, presents a combination of criticism of the socio-political life in Austria with self-referential reflections. The research mainly includes Bernhard's deconstruction of the felix Austria myth in his dramolets. The subject of studies in this part of the work is also the author's use of grotesque instruments in order to diagnose the condition of an artist in the Austrian state. Detailed findings contain a combination of fictional and real elements in Bernhard's minidramas (satirical grotesque). This part also emphasizes the use of grotesque elements as tools for deconstructing the Burgtheater myth as a national symbol of Austria.

On the basis of the analyzes and interpretations made while studying the grotesque in political dramas by Bernhard it was shown that the mentioned aesthetic category is one of the constitutive determinants of the poetics of the author's works. The grotesque element in Bernhard's plays was functionalized as a tool for a thorough analysis of contemporary times and a subversive criticism of the socio-political life in Austria and Germany, particularly the difficult situations regarding the period of the Third Reich. Based on the research on the category of grotesque undertaken as part of this dissertation it was shown that the source of grotesque in political dramas is mainly the language, which serves as a virtuoso tool for criticizing the socio-political reality.

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Ewelina Drojnowska