

ABSTRACT

Centripetal Force of *locus*: Dilemmas of Nomadism in Contemporary Lithuanian Artistic Practices

By using two cases – a production, called *The Heart in Vilnius* (2012) and a social-artistic project Give Yourself to Vilnius (2014), the article aims to discuss the issue of a “liquid” mind-set (Bauman) as it is perceived, reflected and formulated in contemporary Lithuanian artistic practices. These examples were intentionally chosen because both seem to address the issue of “roots” in one’s native land in opposition to physical or intellectual mobility. By establishing Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, as the spiritual *locus* of emotional fulfillment, both cases dwell on a social anxiety that Zygmunt Bauman terms “a meaninglessness”, typical for a transitional society, where modernization progresses at a different pace in different strata. Moreover, whether it is a political statement or a popular attraction, both examples portray a nomad and nomadism of late modernity as an “Other”, drawing a divisional and alienating line between a “liquid” mind-set and a “stable” one.

Keywords: theatre, popular culture, liquid mind-set, anxiety, contemporary Lithuania.

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Centripetal Force of *locus*

Dilemmas of Nomadism in Contemporary Lithuanian Artistic Practices

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The housekeeper Marguerite, a character in *Le Champ d'oliviers*, a lesser-known Guy de Maupassant 1890 novel, informs her master, the local *abbé*, of her discomfort with a visit by *un maoufatan* – equivalent of *malfaiteur* – for a lawbreaker or criminal in Provençal. In such a manner, good Mlle Marguerite refers to a stranger, a person without any evident provenance, profession or intentions as a vagabond who is assumed to be a hazard at least to the usual rhythm of the day. However, not only the delicious dinner of *poule au riz* growing cold is at stake here. Metaphorically, the figure of the stranger, his/her presence and activities possess an existential threat to the wholesomeness of a micro-world in a sun-soaked coastal village, as well as to the integrity of the lives of the characters in the novel.

Thus, a stranger, a world-roaming vagabond becomes a *maoufatan* in the eyes of the settled local populace. Anthropologically, what we have here is a conflict between two different life styles that have their roots, one in a settled and sedentary, and another in a nomadic lifestyle. As Knut Ove Arntzen points out, in a philosophical context, the nomadic lifestyle corresponds to a metaphorical way of reflecting reality.¹ In contrast to the idea of growth, development and reproduction in a single place, which is the crucial element of a stable lifestyle, the notion of mobility and possibilities within a mobile lifestyle for the nomads becomes a predisposition for learning and producing. In a similar manner, yet in a less approving tone, the Latvian sociologist Tālis Tisenkopfs described the generations that were born in the Soviet Union during the Sixties: “as children

they were enveloped in light rabbit or heavy shearing coats, placed like little buns in the back seat of a ‘Moskvitch 401 or 407’ and taken to the local hospital for vaccination against the measles. [...] In their childhood they made a fundamental pact of inseparability between a dream and a duty. [...] They were the first generation which perceived a life as motion. Freedom is a certain substance without a permanent address: the Sixties’ generation gave a new content to this formula.”²

Rather symptomatically the issue of mobility was one of the earliest that was discussed on the Lithuanian stage: the first play in Lithuanian that proved to be a popular success was the comedy *America in the Bathhouse*, published in 1895. The authors, Antanas and Juozas Vilkutaičiai, evidently aimed not only at providing the amateur Lithuanian stage of the time with adequate playwriting, they saw their play as a contribution to growing concerns about Lithuanian emigration. In the comedy, a credulous country girl, who under the charm of a wandering tailor, tries to elope to the United States, ends up in a steam bath on the outskirts of the village and in shame. Thus *America in the Bathhouse* set a satirical and didactic tone that in subsequent decades became typical for representing the issue of mobility on the Lithuanian stage. As literary scholar Reda Pabarčienė points out, Petras Vaičiūnas (1890–1959, the most prolific Lithuanian playwright of the Interwar period), when addressing migration in his plays, would usually draw a pattern of inward movement for the characters: only temporary excursions out of the native place were deemed acceptable.³

A clash between nomadic and settled lifestyles strongly resonates in contemporary sociology, where Zygmunt Bauman terms the mind-set of late modernity as “liquid” in contrast to its “solid” modern predecessor.⁴ Bauman’s late modern subject is “light and liquid”: an individual who shifts her/his geographical, social, political, marital, sexual, cultural positions in a fluid manner, excluding her/himself from traditional forms of support, such as family, community, nation and state. In a metaphorical sense, such a nomad withstands the common law of gravity, which presupposes a power relationship between the core and the peripheral, where the former attracts the latter, thus defining its actions and trajectory.

Moreover, as Rosi Braidotti points out, some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one’s habitat. According to Braidotti, a nomadic mind-set should be regarded as aiming at the subversion of a set of conventions and at consciousness-raising, rather than the literal act of traveling.⁵ Consequently, the nomad becomes a lawbreaker in a political sense, or, as Bauman argues, in the contemporary world, mobility (physical or indeed intellectual) has become a powerful tool in the restratification of social hierarchies.⁶

Society in post-Soviet Lithuania provides a good insight into the clash between two different mind-sets. As sociologist Jolanta Kuznecovienė notes, contemporary Lithuanian cultural practices can be divided and grouped into two distinct tendencies, which advocate for either a *national* or *transnational* identity.⁷ Moreover, globalization in economics and the consequent increase of mobility both physical and intellectual is proportional to the influx of intercultural elements into the local socio-cultural pattern, thus the possibility to detect “unique” features in Lithuanian identity is diminishing. In the typical quest for a definition of national uniqueness, the side arguing on emotional and ethical grounds substitutes the lack of clear-cut features by elevating national and transnational identities into a moral opposition.⁸ In other words, transnational identity, springing out of the nomadic or “liquid” mind-set, is opposed to the *doxa* of stable and homogenous nationality, which, in the Lithuanian case, was created in the course of nation-building in the first half

of the twentieth century. Moreover, under Soviet rule, the notion of Lithuanian nationality was intentionally transformed into depoliticized “folk”, to use the philosopher Nerija Putinaite’s wording, thus increasing its rural, ethnographic and pre-modern connotations.⁹ As such it remained in popular imagery after 1990, fuelling controversies on Lithuanian-ness further. Perceived in this way, an opposition between the *doxa* of stability and the “liquid” heterodoxy can easily be transferable to a political debate and an economic argument.

In a political sense, increased mobility can be related to social stratification, or as Bauman notes, rather than homogenizing the human condition, the technological diminution of temporal/spatial distances tends to polarize it. For some people, mobility gives freedom of meaning-creation, yet, by the same token, is condemned by others for meaninglessness.¹⁰ In Lithuania these were metaphorically expressed by the infamous division of society into “*runkeliai*” (the beetroots) and “*elitas*” (the elite), which has grown into a fixture of public discourse in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is interesting to note, how such a division semantically included an opposition between “rooted” stability and “detached” mobility that explicitly becomes a domain of “the elite”.¹¹ Thus, the upper echelons of society were equaled to those who are able to benefit from the nomadic or “liquid” lifestyle, whereas the physically or intellectually “rooted” rest were degraded. Because of such a lack of equilibrium social tensions are highly possible in different layers of society, Emmanuel Todd observes that modernization progresses at different paces, whereas the ideals of liberty and individualism are not necessarily embraced as positive in all strata.¹²

The Lithuanian artist and scholar Kęstutis Šapoka provides an additional correlation between social divisions and contemporary Lithuanian art. In his 2011 review of Žilvinas Kempinas’ personal exhibition in Vilnius, the scholar argues that Kempinas’ “ingenious and amusing”, “intentionally lighthearted yet suggestive enough” and, above all, perfectly executed work mirrors cultural preferences and tastes of the Lithuanian bourgeoisie.¹³ This well-heeled stratum, which arrived at a dominant position in the Nineties, to use Šapoka’s wording, “is too

spoiled to believe in solid, universal values”. Whereas the “common folk”, in the scholar’s opinion, in front of Kempinas’ *oeuvres* remain cold and indifferent.¹⁴ It is important to note that Kempinas (b. 1969) is not only one of several Lithuanian artists (such as Aidas Bareikis, Gediminas Urbonas, *et al.*), whose work has gained the biggest international acclaim and is mainly produced abroad, but also that the exploration of the phenomenon of movement is at the core of his signature kinetic installations.

Hence, the topos of nomadic elites and “rooted” underprivileged “folk” becomes equally handy both for populist politics and for artists, who seek attention and popular approval. In fact, as my examples will demonstrate, populist agenda and artifacts, designed for popular consumption, are tightly interconnected in their common masquerading as advocates for social change (or, rather, redress) in the name of those in need of one. I have chosen two instances, one might be called high, the other low-brow, yet both seem to address the issue of “roots” in one’s native land, or of the importance of one’s *locus* as opposed to physical or intellectual mobility. Both of my examples focus on the image of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, which is being presented either as an object of desire, or as a *locus* where hedonistic cravings are most likely to be fulfilled. In both artifacts Vilnius becomes a symbolic center of gravity, attracting the fictional subjects. Such a framing, as well as the representation of the centripetal force, are presumably designed to resonate with the audience, producing both economic and political effects.

LOCUS AS MORAL OBLIGATION

The growing body of scholarly research in which Vilnius is treated as a cultural text tends to represent the centrality of the present capital of Lithuania and its gravitational qualities in mythogenic narratives of at least four nations – Lithuanians, Poles, Belorussians and Jews.¹⁵ A basic reverse assessment made in a Braidotti manner¹⁶ shows that Vilnius was not necessarily a political capital or important cultural center at all times: fifty years ago, in 1964, it was the capital of the Lithuanian SSR and of limited influence; eighty years ago, in 1934, it was

a provincial city in the Second Polish Republic; a hundred years ago, in 1914, it was an administrative center on the outskirts of the Russian Empire, a status that had not changed since the dissolution of the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth in 1795. Yet the peripherality of Vilnius, as Laimonas Briedis points out, is one of the reasons, why the city became central for numerous minds.¹⁷ In the case of Lithuanians, the groundwork was laid in the early twentieth century, or, as Tomas Venclova notes, in between the First and Second World Wars when Lithuanians already perceived Vilnius as a mythic residence of Renaissance-era rulers of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Hence, it was regarded as the spiritual and (hopefully) political capital, a center, synonymous with power, fame, enlightenment, or indeed, Lithuania itself. Besides, Vilnius is a notoriously “necro-friendly” location, as Briedis would add: “In the absence of a coherent historical narrative and stable geographical location, the dead became the most identifiable markers.”¹⁸

In 2012 the State Youth Theatre in Vilnius premiered *The Heart in Vilnius* (*Širdis Vilniuje*), a production based on Arvydas Juozaitis play, directed by Jonas Vaitkus and Albertas Vidžiūnas. The production received very mixed reviews, yet most of the critics agreed that if not the production itself, then the play is quite a remarkable undertaking.¹⁹ To present the plot very shortly, the play can be regarded as a sort of closet drama and is mainly a dialogue between Józef Piłsudski and Felix Dzerzhinsky that occurs during their fictional post-mortem meeting.

It is important to stress that the published version of the play (2011) bore the subheading “historical tragifarce”²⁰, explaining the genre of the text. Marshal Piłsudski’s (1867-1935) ways did actually cross those of Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926). Piłsudski – a major and highly revered Polish politician, as head of the Second Polish Republic and the notoriously brutal Dzerzhinsky nicknamed “Iron Felix”, a Soviet statesman and a founder of “Cheka” (precursor to the KGB) were born in the Vilnius region, attended the same school, served sentences in 1900 at Warsaw Citadel prison, accused of subversive revolutionary activities: one representing the Polish Socialist Party, the other a Marxist party called Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithua-

nia. In spite of early encounters, Piłsudski's socializing with Dzerzhinsky in later life was hardly imaginable: the ideological differences between their political stances were too great. Yet, according to the Lithuanian theatre critic Vaidas Jauniškis, the 2012 production of *The Heart in Vilnius* gave the impression of a poetic fantasy on a historical subject rather than a farce. The farcical tone was totally eradicated by director Vaitkus's "utmost seriousness", who staged the play in a key reminiscent of Lithuanian poetic theatre of the Seventies.²¹

The production contributes to framing Vilnius as a symbolic center of gravity that attracts intellectual and physical motion by revealing how important the historical capital of Lithuania is for at least three parties concerned. The *personae* of Piłsudski and Dzerzhinsky are the personifications of Poland and of Russia subsequently, whereas the character of a Professor, the prominent Interwar literary figure Balys Sruoga, symbolically represents Lithuania. Interestingly enough, as an incarnation of Lithuania, the playwright chose a stereotypical figure of a scholar, learned yet totally incapable of handling the challenges of reality. "He must be Lithuanian: he has the gaze of a sheep," utters Felix.²²

In contrast to Piłsudski (representing the expansionist "ego of twentieth century Poland", as literary critic Rima Pociūtė observes²³) and Dzerzhinsky, who in his youth had dreamt of an empire stretching from Warsaw up to Moscow and obviously incorporating Vilnius and Lithuania altogether, the Professor is given only a minor part in the play. Thrown into the same purgatorial space as the two former characters, the Professor represents passionate nationalist ardor. Pociūtė equates the Professor to the primordial instincts of Lithuanian society, uncompromising and straightforward when it comes to the matters of integrity of their country. Thus after recognizing Piłsudski, the Professor shouts „Kill him!“ yet he gets killed himself. "The Professor does not improve," observes Dzerzhinsky.²⁴ It is easy to note that such a turn instantly gives an ideological shade to the entire play. The brief and sharply terminated stage presence of Lithuania incarnated by the Professor highlights and acknowledges the country as an unsafe area primarily because of its unfavorable geo-political situation between Poland and Russia.

Unfavorable for Lithuanians, yet very desirable for others, i.e. neighboring nations with their own pursuits.

The production, seemingly dwelling on the simple reasoning of "appreciate it, as you may lose it", actually opens a more complex debate. First, the play emphasizing emotional attachment to Vilnius frames the city as a symbolic *locus* of attraction, whereas exploiting mythemes of Vilnius as a metaphor for Lithuania addresses the issue of "roots". According to several theatre critics in the production, Piłsudski and Dzerzhinsky, whom Lithuanian historiography traditionally portrays as negative characters, are rehabilitated – mainly because of their affection toward the Lithuanian capital.

According to Piłsudski's last will, his heart was removed from his body and was interred in Vilnius. The mausoleum at Vilnius' Rasos Cemetery bears the inscription "Mother and Son's Heart", as the urn containing the heart was laid to rest together with the remains of Piłsudski's mother (which in 1935 was exhumed and transferred from an original burial place in Suginėiai), hence creating a powerful symbol. As theatre critic Konstantinas Borkovskis notes: "Oginski's solemn polonaise, which is constantly played during the performance as if for Piłsudski's funeral procession, is not a parody or illustration, it is rather a metaphor"²⁵, possibly suggesting that the Polish Marshal's sentiments were more familiar than Lithuanians think.

Three conclusions thus can be suggested. Firstly, *The Heart in Vilnius* exploits and encourages popular understanding of the importance of one's physical roots by stressing the affinity between a person and their place of birth. Secondly, the attraction of Vilnius, framed as a *locus* of a radiating centripetal force, serves as a vehicle for a double message. It metaphorically represents Lithuania and the object of desire. Thirdly, the production clearly aims at opposing intellectual and physical "liquidity": ostensibly portraying the seductive power of Vilnius, it elevates the discussion about the importance of one's "roots" into a moral dilemma. In the play's argument the *maoufatan* or lawbreaker is not only a hostile neighbor, but also the one who finds her/his reasons to challenge a sedentary mind-set and to trespass boundaries of national identity and of

native country, thus implying that the two men who went abroad should have stayed in Vilnius.

LOCUS AS FULFILLEMENT

My second example is of a different kind. In early 2014 a new social project Give Yourself to Vilnius (*Atsiduok Vilniui*) has emerged. The public body of the same title is its manager, whereas a group of prominent Lithuanian pop performers (singers and actors) are its key personalities, led by Tomas Augulis, a singer. According to the post on a dedicated Facebook page, the main aim of the project is a) to generate a Give Yourself to Vilnius community that would contribute to the development of the city in terms of loveliness, authenticity, openness and tidiness among others, and b) to support the capital, which is supposedly on the edge of financial meltdown.²⁶ The centerpiece of the project is a song and music video: “Give yourself to Vilnius, because he loves you / Nah, nah, nay ... / Give yourself to Vilnius, close your eyes and fly away / Nah, nah, nay ... / Give to Vilnius a tear of happiness / Whop, whop, whop... / Give yourself to Vilnius in winter and summer. Give yourself.”²⁷

What could be regarded as a self-promotional stunt, aimed at redressing the fading profiles of the performers (most of whom had their heyday in the Nineties), is also a case of another framing of *locus*.

As musicologist Rūta Stanevičiūtė points out, songs that took Vilnius as their thematic subject make a considerable body of popular music, produced for listeners in Lithuania. Currently, the archive of the Lithuanian National Radio lists more than 200 entries (these were mainly produced in the last century and mainly in Lithuanian, hence it does not include songs dedicated to Vilnius in other languages such as Polish or Yiddish).²⁸ One of the early popular successes was *Hey, World, We Are Not Relenting Without Vilnius*, written by Petras Vaičiūnas in 1922 (music by Antanas Vanagaitis) to evoke Vilnius’s annexation to Poland.²⁹ According to Venclova, the song rose to the status of an unofficial anthem in Interwar Lithuania.³⁰ Alongside militaristic (“We’ll redeem the throne of Vilnius with lightning fires”) and slightly martyr like overtones (“If we’ll have to, we’ll die free”), *Hey, world* framed

Vilnius as the spiritual core complete with “ancestors’ bones” that call for blood and recuperation, thus fixing the popular mind (as well as the eyes of the global community) upon it.³¹ Another notable example was produced in the Sixties. *The Vilnius’ Roofs* by Edmundas Juškevičius (lyrics) and Mikas Vaitkevičius (music) was written in 1966 and in numerous rearrangements has remained popular ever since.³² As Stanevičiūtė observes, the song represents a peculiar instance of an official Soviet modernism. Written as a stylized twist, it was clearly an answer to the Western counterpart, yet laden with an ideologically active message.³³ Vilnius within is portrayed as twofold – the “old” (as tiled roofs of the Old Town) and the “young” (as flat roofs of the newly built apartment blocks). The protagonist, who links these two facets, or rather emphasizes the latter over the former, is a young man, possibly a newcomer to the capital. Thus, this time Vilnius became a symbol of postwar Soviet aspirations: a spatial embodiment of sophistication and energetic modernization associated with youth, that in Stanevičiūtė’s opinion served as an encouragement to forget the trauma of occupation and to naturalize a Soviet utopia.³⁴ In both songs, the image of Vilnius is expected to create a centripetal motion inspired either by the spirit of patriotism in the interwar years, or urged to take a part in (and benefit from) building the new Soviet reality.

Give Yourself to Vilnius follows the same model. Yet this time, alongside evident sexual allusions, the song, the music video as well as the posts on the Facebook page stress the hedonistic qualities associated with the capital. In quotidian Lithuanian, *atsiduok* stands for giving oneself up sexually. The music video features occasional ecstatic body language, whereas Vilnius is masculinized as “he”, instead of a neutral “it” on promotional T-shirts in English. However, in the song, the proposed image of the capital not only offers hedonistic sensations of a cup of delicious coffee after nocturnal pleasures, but it also focuses on openness to the populace who come from out of town. (Some of the artists in mind were not born in the capital themselves.)

Despite different levels of discourse, *Give Yourself to Vilnius* and *The Heart in Vilnius* both share the same tendency to dwell on the stability of tradition-

al markers such as identity, community, nation and state and to establish Vilnius as a symbolic center of gravity, attracting everyone physically, emotionally as well as intellectually. The *Give Yourself to Vilnius* song even lists the names of peripheral Lithuanian towns, claiming that the capital equally “loves” inhabitants from them all. However, the visual narrative differs slightly: the paper cards, listing the names of the towns that are displayed in the video, include only smaller scale places, which statistically are most likely to lose some of their population due to ageing and emigration abroad. A suitable indirect commentary, posted on a Facebook page, states that Vilnius is in no way inferior to other European cities.

Thus, *Give Yourself to Vilnius* can be regarded as a double-sided project. Firstly, it aims at appealing to potential consumers by seemingly addressing the people who possibly suffer due to “meaninglessness”. The project provides them with a vision of an emotionally rewarding community in Vilnius, i.e. right at their fingertips, and symbolically reinstates the sense of value of one’s native place. Secondly, it enters into the realm of politics as it assumes a stance in a debate on migration. By aiming to create a community, *Give Yourself to Vilnius* in fact encourages people to move, yet in a particular centripetal manner towards the *locus* where the followers can find their hedonistic reward. Such a *locus* coincides with the capital of Lithuania, whose immanently strong image is additionally enhanced by both sexual references and a promise of emotional fulfillment. Moreover, in the hands of local celebrities, centripetal movement can easily transform into a model for imitation. As Will M. Gervais *et al.* observe, so called “prestige based” learning bias is common, as people tend to imitate older, skilled, prestigious and successful cultural models.³⁵

CONCLUSION

As of September 2014 only one showing of *The Heart in Vilnius* at the State Youth Theatre in Vilnius was advertised. The following of Give Yourself to Vilnius project has been equally slow, counting just above 1300 Facebook “total page likes”, despite the song being broadcast on commercial radio

channels, and for a short while reaching the second position in Lietus Radio top ten charts in March 2014.³⁶ It is difficult to indicate the reason why both projects failed to attract a wider audience, yet their background clearly indicates an intention to cater to people who feel themselves somewhat at a tangent to Baumanian “restratification”. Just as in populist politics that, according to Chantal Mouffe, organizes its appeal by opposing “the establishment” to “the people”,³⁷ *The Heart in Vilnius* and Give Yourself to Vilnius agendas, each in their own way, frame the *locus* by othering a “liquid” mind-set from a “stable” one. If, in the former case, the potential nomad is being equated with the *maoufatan*, or lawbreaker, then in the latter a role model, promoting the centripetal migration to Vilnius and so preserving the populace for the country, is being established. Both projects not only dwell on mutual ideals but also conspicuously side with the *doxa* of stability and thus an unwillingness to accept change in conventions. As such, both rely on preserving the illusion of the wholesomeness of modern times and on the false hope that it can still be reconstructed.

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- 36 Quoted as in: <http://www.topdainos.lt/dain-a/6321/%C4%AFvair%C5%ABs-atlik%C4%97jai--at-siduok-vilniui> (accessed 10 September 2014). Lietus Radio is a channel mostly dedicated to Lithuanian music.
- 37 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Routledge, London, New York 2005, p. 70.