**CZECH GRUMBLING AND NORWEGIAN DREAMING**
A SLIGHTLY SUBJECTIVE REPORT FROM THE CONFERENCE

“ART CRITICISM – A PUBLIC AFFAIR”

HELD ON 22ND SEPTEMBER 2017 AT THE CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART DOX

I must confess – as I had been previously convinced – that being someone who considers himself a genuine practitioner, I approached the conference and discussion on “art criticism” with suspiciousness. However, I was happy I took part eventually. What I appreciated the most from what the workday at DOX had to offer was the chance to meet people across genres, media and generations. It may sound both overstated and banal, but the truth is that the “critique of critique” or general thoughts on critique as a principle and service (as we may have heard) keep vanishing (or have already vanished) from the public – and private – space. Society, and art as well in logical terms, is being particularized, shattered into “bubbles” (which is not the fault of social networks only), therefore the opportunity to meet and conduct a dialogue with colleagues and associates across all disciplines is rare and always welcome.

I began the report with a general description and so was the way the conference commenced. Kateřina Kalistová, the Deputy Minister of Culture, welcomed us and Petr Fischer, the brand new managing director of Czech Radio Vltava, commenced the conference from the “professional point of view”. We could not expect more than urbanities from the first speech, yet I must admit I was bewildered by the generality of the second speech. Fischer approached his speech in the terms of a wider ideological definition of the state and the term of critique. Although the words on the “critique as a deed of decision” or quotes from Walter Benjamin (comparing critique to alchemy) and Winston Churchill (comparing critique with an allergic reaction drawing attention to a problem) are virtually interesting, they sounded as a hollow rhetoric exercise. I had a similar feeling during Karla Hofmannová’s speech, which inclined to a philosophical (and rather chaotic) contemplation on the term ‘critique’ rather than the announced “presentation of the current state, conditions and challenges of the strategic support for art critique in the Czech Republic”. The following two presentations eventually turned out to be much more interesting; Sindre Hovernak’s contribution – as I will demonstrate later – appeared to be decisive in the panel discussion. In the Czech context without virtually any public support of critical work, which would not be ‘hidden’ under a limited general support of non-profit media, his message about the possibility to acquire a direct personal support of critical work from the state or private foundations was intriguing. Similar acts have been inconceivable in the Czech Republic so far, and I am afraid that Sidre Hovernak’s idea that the support often leads to questions whether the supported journalist/critic may remain independent under such circumstances (or can be seen as independent hereafter) sounded rather trivial to us, although I acknowledge its relevance. Generally speaking, there are no crucial differences between critical work in Norway and the Czech Republic, which can be understood as a reason for joy in the context of the final contribution of the first part of the conference. The state of Hungarian theatre – or cultural – scene is, to put it mildly, unfortunate. Independent theatres in particular have been in operation without any support from the authorities. The situation is necessarily reflected in practice and state of art criticism, which – like theatre makers – has to resist the official ‘doctrine’ and the party-based system of staffing important positions, which I knew about as my Hungarian friends shared the news with me. Still, the (yet another) eyewitness account was interesting and engendered an emotion contradicting the Norwegian account: whereas we could be a bit envious of some kind of ethical problems the state support of criticism brings, I was relieved that the state of affairs is not so distressing in the Czech Republic.

Even though I ventilated my disillusionment of the introductory and generally ‘theoretical’ part of the conference, I must admit that the panel discussion with a limited number of participants righted my impression to a large extent.

Jana Návratová, the moderator, summarized our discussion in her final report under a partly serious title of “Czech Grumbling and Norwegian Dreaming”. Its first part was probably most influenced by the fact that there were many representatives of printed and online periodicals: Svět a divadlo, Divadelní noviny, Taneční listy, Opera plus, Taneční aktuality. It necessarily had to affect the practical character of the debate and the topic selection. ‘Grumbling’ resulted into coining a new term of ‘critical precariat’. It can shelter all topics concerning the direct ‘operation’ of critical practice: professional critics (critiques in dailies have their own specific features) can never consider their work secure and stable (which is one of the features of precarisation) because their media are non-profitable by definition, therefore it always depends on outer sources – which are usually grants. This is a situation most of us have already come to terms with; yet everybody agreed that it is absolutely necessary to have the possibility to win long-term support for our activities. We also ‘grumbled’ about the impossibility of gaining other sources than those from the state budget as the ‘ministry grants’ are limited in their capacity and by rules, so many critics have to subsidize their activity (trips outside the centers, for instance) from their resources. This is part of ‘Norwegian dreaming’ when we would welcome the possibility to create the fund supporting (or subsidizing; it can hardly be a primary source) professional critical activities. The great advantage of the fund independent of the state would be the fact it would not be subordinated to the state policy of culture support, which has been in the doldrums recently, or the current changes in political representation.

‘Grumbling’ would also encompass complaints about the insufficient university training of future critics concerning the skills, general knowledge of the discipline and a wider range of cultural knowledge. We encountered the limits of the critical practice: it is virtually impossible for practicing critics to teach, i.e. to cooperate with departments to conduct long-term seminars. And vice versa: university teachers cannot be active critics because such activities cannot be accounted for their publication activity because most critical journals are not impacted periodicals, therefore they are not accepted in the infamous evaluation ‘grinder’. The discussion on entrants drew on the previous topic as well; it could be a desired way for the editorial board to get new authors. We had to admit, though, that such activity, which is not on a voluntary basis (free of charge), is inconceivable under current organizational and financial conditions and all attempts in this area (the student SAD of Svět a divadlo magazine or online activities of Divadelní noviny) sooner or later encountered personal, organizational or financial limits and did not last long. To quote Jana Návratová again, we ‘dreamt in the Norwegian way’ and imagined the possibility to create a relief fund, which would support such activities in the form of scholarships for selected authors or editorial board.

However, we did not only discuss the regrettably practical affairs. One of the discussed topics – in the ‘grumbling’ category – was the general crisis of critical thinking and the ability to accept criticism in the time many people call postfactual. We deal with the question of the validity of the critical judgment in the time when we lack significant authorities, everybody can be right (or at least they can think they are right and be convinced by their ‘social bubble’). In this milieu, critics can be perceived as elitist, who usurp the right to pass judgments, which often contradict the ‘popular vote’ of the majority (see different film rating done by critics and ČSFD server built ‘from below’). It appeared to us that contemporary paradigm is not beneficial for the rare voices publishing in exclusive low-cost journals and we were trying to find a way ‘to get out’. It was closely linked to the topic what should critics do comply with the wishes of the ‘masses’ (which is an expression I use here – like in the discussion – without the traditional pejorative aspect). We have not probably noticed so far that there is a generation, which is not used to looking for information in classic printed periodicals or online media. It is a generation ‘weaned on YouTube’, the generation of short text messages and Twitter. We may have agreed that we are ‘conservative’ with a strong preference for traditional media, we realize, though, we cannot face the trend and we need to come to terms with it. We have no choice but to adapt to it and transfer some of our activities to new media. Once again we experienced ‘Norwegian dreaming’ and the possible support model as we cannot expect bigger flexibility from current donors and supporters (the Ministry of Culture in particular) in the foreseeable future.

**Mgr. Jakub Škorpil**

**Editor of Svět a divadlo magazine**

**and (co)founder of the NaDivadlo blog**