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COMMONSENSICAL CHOICES IN JOHN LOGAN'S *RED*

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U drami „Red" Džona Logana (John Logan), savremenog američkog dramskog pisca, glavni junak je Mark Rotko, jedan od najvećih američkih slikara apstraktnog ekspresionizma. Pored njega, u drami je još samo jedan lik, što je autoru poslužilo da naglasi generacijski jaz među njima. Okosnicu drame predstavlja trenutak kada Rotko, angažovan da uradi 35 murala na zidovima restorana u hotelu „For sizons", odbija da uradi posao. Autor ovoga rada dramu analizira u dva pravca: najpre, uočava i definiše elemente koje Logan koristi u drami u izgrađivanju lika koji je u nedoumici, dilemi, a zatim sledi prosuđivanje da li je Rotkov izbor zdravorazumski ili ne.

Ključne reči: savremena drama, Mark Rotko, apstraktni ekspresionizam, izbor, zdrav razum.

Art implies a series of choices, from the image the artists show to the audience to the material they work with and to the techniques and themes of their works, which eventually lead to their success or failure. Always at a crossroads of their selves, of themselves with the world, and of the *directions* in the process of creation, they are the ones that have to manage more planes of the physical and imaginary worlds. Making choices is not easy. They need to cross the border of the temporal and spatial proximity, being always in transition, unlike common people whose vision is not expected to extend beyond their life-time. Artists have to set and reset their fictional worlds around personal, contextual and reception principles, in order to create a visionary work. And yet, very often do they have to deal with apparently simple and unimportant choices which emerge as turning points in their evolution.

Generally choices are believed to be based on reasons or perception, and philosophers trace the concept of common sense so far as to Plato and Aristotle. According to Pavel Gregoric's analysis of the Platonic dialogues, the information acquired through sense organs is co-ordinated through the process of thinking, therefore a different process from passive perceiving: "in Plato's view the senses are

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not integrated at the level of perception, but at the level of thought." (Gregoric 2007: 5). Aristotle exclusively refers to a perceptual ability (sense) that is shared by all the five senses (common). Being perceptual, this common sense is also shared by both humans and animals. "In Aristotle's theory, the senses are not integrated at the level of something that is the subject of both perceiving and thinking. Rather, the senses are integrated by the common sense." (Gregoric 2007: 6).

Among other philosophers who dedicated their effort and time to outlining coherent theories related to common sense a further step is taken by Immanuel Kant with his work *Critique of the Power of Judgement* according to which common sense names a subjective faculty meant to judge the beautiful or "taste":

> Therefore they must have a subjective principle, and one which determines what pleases or displeases, by means of feeling only and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity. Such a principle, however, could only be regarded as a common sense. This differs essentially from common understanding, which is also sometimes called common sense (*sensus communis*): for the judgment of the latter is not one by feeling, but always one by concepts, though usually only in the shape of obscurely represented principles. (Kant 2007: 68)

Kant admits the double meaning of the word common, that is public / collective and vulgar (2007: 123), can raise problems in the understanding of the concept that can be related to a lack of credit or distinction.

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), a contemporary of Immanuel Kant, promotes the idea that people's five senses are originally one and the same which is feeling, and the senses evolve from it and "operate together and conjointly." (Herder 2006: 209) "There is, he insists, no such thing as immediate conviction; no sensation could be conveyed into the mind without passing through some reflective process," considers Moore. (Moore 2006: 12) In Herder's theories there is an early connection between the act of perception and the mind which supports it. Perception implies understanding and judgment. Though the soul contributes by combining and comparing the impressions created by the senses, these get more coherent and concrete in time and new judgments are added, leading to concepts. (Moore 2006: 12) Therefore common sense refers to both the sense common to all senses and to all people, involving the soul and the mind.

The meaning of the concept has enlarged with those assigned to the word 'common' that is related to basic rational observation and understanding of events and things; to a cultural context functioning on or defined by particular moral, aesthetic, social rules and aspects; to one's education shaping a thinking pattern and values; and to the relations that can be established between all these. The context, personal interest and the common principles and values determine specific behaviour to achieve goals. In his chapter on "Attributional Processes: Psychological", B. F. Malle referred to the way in which 'impression-management purposes' influence behaviour explanations which are an attempt to make behaviour appear rational, therefore make the interlocutor(s) understand it and perceive it as commonsensical. While it is generally accepted that people aim at achieving their goals, the actions they undertake are also expected

to comply with commonly accepted principles. Researchers have analysed actions people undertake to achieve their goals which may be classified according to different criteria: for enjoyment, to be repeatedly satisfied, to be achieved, to be preserved and others. (Schank and Abelson 1977) Systems of structural sequences or units have been identified to explain people's actions, goals, feelings, inter- and intra-personal processes and changes with the same purpose. These theories that interconnect behaviour, goals and explanations lead to the connection between sense and understanding. Nowadays common sense is reason- rather than feeling-oriented.

However, what is commonsensical for common people is not adhered to by artists who have always been in search for the uncommon, the unfamiliar meant to personalize the work and their image. Uniqueness is achieved through a continuous preoccupation with change, a twist of reality to ensure a new perspective. John Logan's play *Red*, hosting an artist as the protagonist, includes a series of choices which are understood from different perspectives and released in an exchange of ideas and memories or experiences that make the whole text pulsate with life and tension.

John Logan has made his name as both a playwright and a screenwriter with remarkable and often awarded works. Among the plays that he has written, *Never the Sinner* and *Hauptmann* had a great impact. *Never the Sinner*, his debut play, is a documentary one presenting a horrific murder at the beginning of the twentieth century. *Hauptmann* is also inspired by a real case of kidnapping and murder by a German immigrant. Logan continues to remain anchored in reality with the topic of *Red* which was very much acclaimed in London (2009) and on Broadway (2010) where it received more Tony awards. Logan's activity as a screenwriter has proven similarly successful with the script for *Gladiator* (2000), *The Aviator* (2004), *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, etc.

Red is a one-act play that brought John Logan more Tony Awards, including best play, best direction (Michael Grandage) and best actor (Eddie Redmayne) in 2010. Despite its being short, the play is very dense and tackles more themes, reaching the most important ideas in the protagonist's experience as an artist. It is the result of the long and serious research that the playwright did to discover abstract expressionism and Mark Rothko. The protagonist is built on the model of the painter who was born Markus Rothkowitz, lived in Russia from birth to age ten, moved with his parents to the United States and changed his name to Mark Rothko when he became a painter. He was one of the most known abstract expressionists, competing with Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Barnett Newman.

As John Logan confessed, he was impressed and inspired by Rothko's life. (Jones 2010) The latter had been invited to paint 35 murals for a restaurant, "The Four Seasons", which opened in New York City in 1959. The studio he used had the dimensions of the restaurant and he also put a false wall and a system of pulleys. His assistant, Dan Rice, helped him with the grunt work. When he realized that customers would not look at his paintings when they eat, especially because their purpose was to impress each other, he decided not to sell the paintings to the restaurant. John Logan was impressed by Rothko's reaction, by his refusal to turn his art into a commodity, which would have hindered his canvases to fulfil the purpose for which they had been done.

The play is also inspired by the painter's written work *The Artist's Reality* where Rothko presents his opinion related to the artist's dilemma concerning his identity and the freedom to express his ideas and not comply with rules imposed by the authority. According to Rothko, people generally perceive the artist as "a moron: he is held to be childish, irresponsible, and ignorant or stupid in everyday affairs." (Rothko 2004: 1) The way people are generally believed to perceive artists is echoed in the play, also revealing Rothko's awareness of the gap between generations and of the discrepancy between art and commercial products, which hints at the artists' ignorance of the everyday affairs.

> Rothko: (...) Everyone likes everything nowadays. They like television and the phonograph and the soda pop and the shampoo and the Cracker Jack. (...) Where is the discernment? Where's the arbitration that separates what I like from what I respect, what I deem worthy, what has ... listen to me ... significance.
> Rothko: Maybe this is a dinosaur talking. (Logan 2010: 10)

The character shows his disdain for new technology and products. His attitude hinders him from adapting to the changes, from understanding them, therefore he deliberately behaves as a "moron". Functioning by older standards, artists apparently are not connected to the topical reality of the others, and Logan's Rothko sets himself in contrast/opposition with both common people and young artists. His actions reveal a type of behaviour conducted to achieve his goal to be ranked among the best and are explained in accordance. His behaviour becomes thus commonsensical for the community of the artists who share the same principles.

The Artist's Reality encompasses Rothko's principles related to the authoritarian voice of the past, which is related to his achievement, or to the 'dozens' of voices in the present that tell the artist "what he must do if he is to fill his belly and save his soul" (Rothko 2004: 4), therefore the goals to be repeatedly satisfied, the commonsensical choices he must make. Rothko's abstract painting is deep and demanding of the viewer's involvement and active reception of it. The tension pulsating through the colours on the canvas made Christopher Rothko admit the fact that "Rothko was explicitly a painter of ideas. He said so himself, over and over, and one can feel them percolating beneath the surface of his otherwise somewhat amorphous abstractions." (Rothko 2004: xii) Such paintings require sensitive and imaginative viewers that are not satisfied with commercial products.

With Mark Rothko at the centre of the play, John Logan created a propitious atmosphere and environment for a play of ideas aiming to shape the artist's ever changing identity and mood, a play which hosts only two characters. These characters complement each other and interact in unexpected ways. Logan shows how an important transfer of knowledge and attitude from the famous artist, Rothko, to his young assistant, Ken, can take place during their exchange of ideas. Critics consider that the central theme of the play is the gap between two generations (Rothko's and Ken's). It is in this conflict or tension, similar to the tension between the two raw colours of Rothko's red murals (red and black), that Logan finds the possibility to build up the two characters with all their dilemmas and inconsistencies, the two characters that have to make many choices.

The play tackles the issue of the value of a work of art emerging from Mark Rothko's choice not to exhibit the murals in The Four Seasons Restaurant despite the impressive commission. Was it a commonsensical one? Were the other choices and decisions he made commonsensical? The above mentioned moment is meticulously built in harmony with the outlining of the characters and with the growing intensity of the master-disciple/assistant relation. Common sense is not an attribute of art unless it is assigned a meaning adjusted to the *commonsensical* expectations within the artistic community. The well-known formalistic distinction between 'practical language', that is the common use of language, and 'poetic language' specific to literature can be compared to the distinction between television, phonograph, etc. and painting that is mentioned in the play. The way in which Rothko's experience is fictionalized so as to comply with the requirements of the genre and of the time implies a series of choices that are commonsensical to the artistic community, and yet not usual to the extended community. Therefore the classical slippage of the concept increases with the consideration of various contextual restrictions.

The play begins with Ken's arrival at Rothko's studio as he wanted to be the painter's assistant. Rothko's apparently meaningless and obsessive reaction at the sight of his potentially new assistant is based on Ken's appearance, more precisely on his inadequate outfit:

> **Rothko**: Then those clothes won't do. We work here. Hang up your jacket outside. I appreciate you put on your Sunday clothes to impress me, it's poignant really, touches me, but it's ridiculous. We work hard here; this isn't a goddamn Old World salon with tea cakes and lemonade. Go hang up your jacket outside. *(Ken exits to the entry vestibule offstage. He returns without his jacket. Takes off his tie and rolls up his sleeves.)* Sydney told you what I need here?
> **Ken**: Yes. *(Rothko busies himself, sorting brushes, arranging canvases, etc.)* (Logan 2010: 11)

The playwright creates a first minor conflict which reveals the characters' belongingness to different times and worlds: a young man eager to impress and dressed according to some rules that function for other social groups (for instance, clerks, accountants, businessmen), and a mature painter neglectful of his appearance and conducting his behaviour and choices by his nonconformist ideas. According to Annie Cohen-Solal, Rothko's art meant a step further, a difference from the "several generations of American artists [that] had already complained about the lack of enlightenment in their country, whose culture had long been dominated by pioneers and businessmen." (Cohen-Solal 2013: 56) The characters' actual belongingness is clearly reflected through their appearance. The outer space Ken comes from is impersonal and formal, and stands in opposition to the inner space of the studio which is personal and informal. The entry vestibule is a space of transition that allows Ken to adapt, to change his appearance so as to be able to integrate into the new space commonsensically.

The subjectivity of the choices they both made sets the first barrier between them. The arguments Rothko uses to make Ken take off his jacket and tie are based on reason:

"we work hard here", also supposing rough, physical work. Similarly, commonsensical reasons, which Ken does not mention, but are implied, may have determined him to choose that outfit. There are some standard requirements for the first meeting with a potential employer which impose a formal outfit that is widely accepted. It is also known that artists seldom, if ever, comply with such standards. Ken's life experience is not that long to ensure the development of his ability to anticipate one's behaviour and requirements, even if he had known what the work in a studio entails. Without knowing much about Rothko, Ken adopted what he considered a generally accepted formal outfit. Rothko's irony actually suggests that he was not insensitive to Ken's effort to put his "Sunday clothes." The clash between the two becomes unavoidable and the author uses it as an ingredient for the atmosphere of the play and as an insight into the abyss he first aims at outlining. The unrollment of events eventually makes the two characters overcome the initial conflict.

By bridging the opposites, Logan makes his characters know and understand each other and even share the other's opinion. Both characters follow their goals and the ways towards their achievement keep crossing in the studio physically and through an exchange of ideas that add luminescent layers to the initial image. Rothko used pentimento as a technique: "I do a lot of layers, one after another, like a glaze, slowly building the image, like pentimento, letting the luminescence emerge until it's done." (Logan 2010: 12) Pentimento, with its roots in the Italian "pentire" meaning repentance or correction, stands for a mark of a previously painted element that reappears in a painting though it was painted over. By using pentimento as a technique, Rothko aims at grasping the becoming, the flow of experiences and emotions that contribute to one's life and image. Pentimento is not a corrected error but the changes determined by different moments in one's existence, rational at the time, irrational when reconsidered later. Yet, the essence of this technique is exactly the fact that any choice/decision leads to a work that keeps pulsating underneath.

Pentimento has been borrowed in literature towards the end of the 20th century. Lillian Hellman wrote *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits* (1973) in which she drew the portraits of the people who had an influence on her development, who led to changes in her life which, to her confession, remained unfinished. Hellman also adapts the term to serve her goal:

> Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called pentimento because the painter 'repented,' changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again. (Hellman 1973: 3)

Julia Jordan associates it with visible errors: "So a pentimento might betray a shadow of an arm at one angle the artist later regretted and overpainted, but that [...] is strong enough to come through the surface of the artwork (perhaps a mistake, perhaps a possibility that the artist wished to keep a record of but subsequently chose not to pursue)." (Jordan 2019: 35)

For Rothko the layers are to be done so as to let the former choices emerge through them and this is the technique that Logan also uses to shape his characters with their reconsiderations of the previous actions. For instance, though Rothko warns Ken that he is not going to teach him or guide him in any way, he starts doing the opposite: he invites Ken to have a drink, pours two glasses of Scotch and gives one to Ken; the painter starts teaching Ken various things from a 'compulsory' reading list to the relation between painting and thinking. Therefore the play gradually reveals experiences and people of the past that left a mark on both characters while also presenting the work in progress as Rothko and Ken influence each other along the experience they share.

In order to establish his authority, Rothko firmly announces Ken what his requirements are. The strict schedule he imposes on his employee is similar to that of the bankers, he will be asked to do demanding and demeaning tasks, and that he has to keep everything he sees secret. Eventually, Rothko asks Ken to choose whether he wants to stay or leave. Apparently Ken's choice is not 'commonsensical' as he stays. People have the tendency to avoid demanding jobs, unless they are very well paid, which is not the case here. Considering Ken's aspiration, that is painting (Logan 2010: 10), and Rothko's fame, this is the only way the young man can learn more. Therefore common sense is subjective and ever changing, depending on the person's context and interests.

The exchange of impressions, which is an intrusive way of discovering the other in this play, concurs to the shaping of the characters. The two characters focus on the impact colours may have on viewers, on the fact that colours are personally experienced. Rothko starts with white and explores the meaning it has for Ken. The latter's images, emotions and memories related to white are like brushes building his personality, a layer revealing part of his past. For instance, he first mentions: "Bones, skeletons... Charnel house... Anemia... Cruelty." (Logan 2010: 20) and the fact that it makes him feel frightened because it is like the snow "outside the room where [his] parents died." (Logan 2010: 21) A later discussion on red brings to the surface more details of Ken's childhood and tragedy: the blood on the bed where his parents were murdered probably with a knife, the fact that blood gets darker on linen but it remains red on the doorknob and the white snow outside. All these elements that recreate a key moment of Ken's life can be found reflected in the layers of red, maroon and black on Rothko's murals.

Rothko is built as an inconsistent and whimsical person. He provides Ken with reasons to leave, but he simultaneously teaches his assistant what he should do to be a good painter. The painter also receives his small lessons from Ken whose favourite painter is Jackson Pollock and who finds it surprising to exhibit the murals in a restaurant. Both characters have well founded, 'commonsensical' reasons to support their choice concerning the exhibition of the murals. Rothko associates his paintings with the great names that lie behind the building of the restaurant: The Seagram building was designed by the world's greatest architects - Mister Philip Johnson and Mies van der Rohe, whom he calls "titans of their field, revolutionists" (Logan 2010: 16); the name of the restaurant is like Vivaldi's symphony – Four Seasons; he is paid 35 thousand dollars "No other painter comes close". As the playwright mentions in stage directions, 35 thousand dollars at the time means about 2 million dollars nowadays. His

choice to accept the offer reunites all the elements a painter dreams of: recognition as he is equalled to the world's most famous people, the association with music which makes him imagine his murals as "a continuous narrative filling the walls, one to another, each a new chapter..." (Logan 2010: 16) and eventually an important sum of money for an artist who faced financial difficulties all his life. It was also a way to demonstrate that his paintings were better that Pollock's.

Rothko's maturity also made him more pragmatic and the border between art for art's sake and commercial art is obviously crossed. This is the moment when Ken re-establishes the balance with his different, not new, but younger and less needy perspective. Ken advances the idea that by selling his murals to the restaurant, Rothko turns them into a commodity. On the other hand, nobody will go there to look at the paintings and those people may not even be prepared to understand them. By accepting the deal, Rothko will become a Pollock himself, ready to sell his paintings without caring about the destination.

> Ken: Just admit your hypocrisy: The High Priest of Modern Art is painting a wall in the Temple of Consumption. You rail against commercialism in art, but pal, you're taking the money. (Logan 2010: 56)
> Ken: They could have gone to de Kooning, but they went to you ... It's the flashiest mural commission since the Sistine Chapel.
> Ken: It's your Oldsmobile convertible ... (Logan 2010: 57)

A visit to the restaurant helped Rothko make the decision as he realised Ken was right, the people wouldn't look at his paintings being busy to eat or impress the others.

> Rothko: (...) Philip, this is Rothko. Listen, I went to the restaurant last night and lemme tell you, anyone who eats that kind of food for that kind of money in that kind of joint will never look at a painting of mine. I'm sending the money back and I'm keeping the pictures. No offense. This is how it goes. Good luck to ya, buddy. (Logan 2010: 63)

A similar visit took place in reality and Rothko was accompanied by his wife. When they got to the restaurant, which gave him the same impression, there was the painting "Blue Poles" by Pollock hanging on the wall. He turned down the offer. Though the decision seems to be based on solid reasons, there is also much subjectivity and speculation based on feelings. Rothko has no proof that the people will ever look at his paintings. It is rather his perception of those people that leads to this judgment, it is a choice supported by feelings. More universal arguments could have determined him to make the opposite choice. The conflict actually emerges from the fact that Rothko is an artist and common sense within their community is different from the 'common' people's.

Ken himself, though the engine of the change in Rothko, is not consistent as he criticises Rothko for the fact that he does not like the people who buy his paintings, and at the same time feeds Rothko's hate for the rich people. In both cases Ken has arguments that make his choice commonsensical, which demonstrates that both Ken

and the idea of common sense changed in time. The fact that Rothko considered Ken's suggestions reveals a more flexible and sensitive person in the painter whose decisions are relatively commonsensical. The play pulsates with inner and inter-personal conflicts revealing the restless minds and souls of the two characters and the way in which they respond to the world, by reflecting it in their abstract works and in the choices they make.

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SUMMARY

COMMONSENSICAL CHOICES IN JOHN LOGAN'S *RED*

John Logan, a contemporary American playwright, centred his play on Mark Rothko, one of the greatest American abstract expressionist painters. The two-character play highlights the generation gap and centres on the moment when Rothko, who had been commissioned to create 35 murals for the walls of the Four Seasons restaurant, chooses to turn down the offer. The presentation unfolds into two directions: the identification

of the ingredients Logan uses in the play to build a character with a convincing dilemma and the analysis of whether the choice Rothko makes is a commonsensical one or not.

KEYWORDS: contemporary drama, Mark Rothko, abstract expressionism, choice, common sense.

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