Directing scenes and senses

The thinking of Regie

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Peter M. Boenisch
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CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover: tg STAN's *Summerfolk* (2010). Photo: tg STAN/Tim Wouters

Introduction. The dissensus of *Regie*: rethinking 'directors' theatre'

One can hardly imagine a more contested area in the field of theatre arts than what is often (and most of the time disparagingly) called 'directors' theatre': the production of plays, in particular from the canonical dramatic repertoire, staged by an ensemble of resident theatre artists, usually at the public state and city theatres of Continental Europe. Ever since the new artistic practice of *Regie* emerged over the course of the nineteenth century, directors and their *mises en scène* found themselves in the spotlight, but also in the firing line of audience members and critics. Even today, 'directors' theatre' is frequently, and not only in the anglophone world, experienced as something outright outlandish, if not outrageous. In the memorable words of a New York theatre critic (reviewing Flemish director Jan Lauwers's New York performance of his celebrated *Isabella's Room*), it marks the fatal 'sins of Eurotrash theater', which the reviewer helpfully went on to classify as 'wilful obscurity, over-the-top stagecraft, auteur-ish egocentrism' (McCarter 2004, 19). *Regietheater* is – as another New York critic asserted after seeing German director Thomas Ostermeier's *Nora* – 'dumb', 'idiotic' and a sort of theatre 'that has to wallow in self-indulgence to prove to itself that it's alive' (Feingold 2004, 71). Needless to say, it is the very same directors, pathologically rejected by some, who find themselves (no less pathologically) embraced and idolised by others as *Wunderkinder* and prophets of a theatre of the future.

Ever since moving into UK academia from Germany more than a decade ago, I have been fascinated and puzzled by this perfect example of what French philosopher Jacques Rancière, one of several intellectual inspirations of the thinking behind the present study, terms *mésentente*, or dissensus. He introduces the term to describe a peculiar form of misunderstanding, which is

not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. (Rancière 1999, x)

The terms directing, *mise en scène* and *Regie* similarly divide us within a field where we appear, at first sight, to talk about the same thing. Upon closer inspection, though, an irreconcilable cultural divide opens up, not least between the insular English theatre culture and its geographically not too distant Continental equivalents. They seem to emerge from distant territories, from foreign planets even, with artists, critics and audiences alike conversing in mutually unintelligible tongues. Notions such as *mise en scène*, but also terms such as 'straight' theatre and 'devising', 'dramaturgy', 'performance' and 'postdramatic', to name but a few, resist easy translation and often add to the *mésentente* instead of confirming any truly shared understanding of theatre and its practices. In many conversations, whether in the classroom or at conferences, or just sitting in the theatre stalls on the rather rare occasion of a visit from a Continental theatre ensemble, it is a safe bet that within ten minutes at most, the discussion is transformed into a heated exchange about 'directors' theatre' *against* 'playwrights' theatre', 'text-based drama' *against* 'devised performance', being 'true to the text' *against* the (to my mind usually rather mild) excesses of the director on stage in front us, or, most fundamentally, of Continental *against* English theatre practice. I have been intrigued to find equivalent antagonisms between the Anglo-American pragmatic tradition of realist, analytic thought and Continental, French- and German-style philosophy. A most fascinating parallel world of rejections and allegiances thus opens up between what François Cusset aptly described as the influential export brand of 'French Theory' (Cusset 2008), and its counterpart on stage, Continental *Regietheater*. In often surprising ways, this parallel interlinks the present vogue and the concurrent hatred of figures such as Jacques Rancière or Thomas Ostermeier.

At this point, one cannot help here but be reminded of Hegel's interpretation, regularly quoted by Slavoj Žižek, of the geographic triad of Germany, France and England as expressing three fundamentally different existential attitudes: German reflexive thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness and English pragmatic utilitarian moderation. Žižek, my other principal intellectual ally throughout the present study, notoriously connected this reading to respective differences in toilet design, demonstrating that even (indeed especially) the most mundane objects and most vulgar activities reveal such fundamental ideological truths (see Žižek 2006a, 16f.). Yet, do we not find these same attitudes, and the same traces of ideology, right at the epicentre of making and presenting theatre, too? Do they not underpin the cultural history of theatre directing, *Regie* and *mise en scène*? Are these three terms really mere 'translations' that talk about the same idea, the same theatrical practice, or even express some general principle of theatre? Where notions of *Regie* and *mise en scène* emerged in German and French theatre as early as the 1770s, the term 'director' entered English theatre language comparatively late, in the 1950s, mirroring the use of this word in cinema (Bradby and Williams 1988, 4). Before this, the theatre director was referred to as 'producer', placing the industrial organisation of theatrical

entertainment and the pragmatics of cultural production and circulation over and above any sense of 'art'. From an English perspective, the idea of 'directing texts' can only be understood as pragmatism of efficient blocking and the smooth organisation of the text's proper enunciation and representation, measured by its conformity to the pre-written script. For this reason, in an English context, 'directing a play' is understood as 'a significantly different activity' from 'making a performance', as Christopher Baugh has suggested, the latter pointing to 'new practices, new technologies and a new stagecraft' (Baugh 2005, 17).

From a Continental theatre perspective, however, it has become utterly unimaginable that one would not break free from the authority of the text, not rethink the play afresh with every new reading and not 'make a performance' of the text with each new production. Directing here means 'choosing a direction, an orientation, an interpretation', while still 'taking as a starting point the text's givens as unalterable, to the letter', as Patrice Pavis explains (Pavis 2013, 294). He draws our attention to the difference marked by English writers where they use the verb 'to stage' as opposed to 'direct', where they refer to such a Continental approach as 'laying out [and] putting on stage' a dramatic text (35); yet this different use has certainly not become systematic or continuous. More recently, the term 'theatre direction', rather than 'directing', has become more and more prominent in an English context (see Shepherd 2012). It now appears on playbills and programme notes, most notably perhaps at London's Young Vic theatre, where (South African) artistic director David Lan, since taking office in 2000, has made very significant efforts with his 'Young Vic Directors' Programme' to productively challenge the way that emerging (English) directors think about their art. 'Direction' in this context marks an artistic and aesthetic approach different from the mere pragmatic execution of stage business.

Staying with names, terms and etymologies, in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurial producer, the *Regisseur* of German theatre directs us to the ties to state bureaucracy and to the German system of public financing, where art and culture are (still) provided for the citizens as a form of 'cultural health service'. It seems noteworthy that *Regie* – notwithstanding the bourgeois ideal of *Bildung*, of intellectual education and erudition – echoes the words 'regieren' and 'Regierung', of 'ruling' and 'government' in the German language. In French, meanwhile, the term *régie* has little connection to the creative art of theatre, but instead originated in the vocabulary of state administration and its budgeting system. Today, the 'régisseur de plateau' is the stage manager, whereas the actual French term for the theatre director, the *metteur en scène*, is semantically situated directly within the realm of art, reinforcing the ideal of artistic autonomy and freedom.[1]

The present book is an attempt to make some sense of this dissensus. We have today learned to consider the director no longer

> as a homogenous individual but rather as a construct that itself articulates wider debates around the intersections between theatre, nation, state and the broader structures through which geographical, political and cultural spaces intersect or collide. Directing is shown to be both a function and a profession, a brand and a process, an encounter and a market force. (Delgado and Rebellato 2010, 21)

The achievements of Bradby and Williams in their pioneering and infinitely valuable study on 'Directors Theatre' (Bradby and Williams 1988), and of Pavis's singularly systematic explorations of what he terms *mise en scène* (Pavis 1982, 1992, 2010, 2013), have helped us to arrive, in the English theatre discourse as well, at a consensus that 'the craft of directing is never simply a question of "interpreting" but rather about shaping, representing, positioning and creating' (Delgado and Rebellato 2010, 18). But if we start probing further, a lot of questions still remain unanswered, perhaps not even asked. For more than a decade now, theatre research has offered prolific, sustained and profound investigations into the art, techniques and problems of the actor, of acting and performing. We still lack a similarly in-depth interrogation, let alone understanding, of theatre direction. We are certainly well supplied with a range of survey studies and historiographical accounts that offer many facts and data on directors, *Regie* and *mise en scène*. Plentiful 'how to' manuals on the craft of the theatre director fill our bookshelves further, yet they often seem to perceive directing as little more than professional labour in an 'aesthetic service industry', whose core aim is the successful delivery of marketable, pleasurable experience products to its audience-customer-consumers.

This book does not set out to offer a(nother) 'new' history of theatre directors and direction, nor will it attempt to provide an exhaustive survey of the contemporary field of Continental European 'directors' theatre', nor offer a manual for what to do in the rehearsal room. For the encyclopedic overview of the field of directing in the English language, I refer readers to Innes and Shevtsova (2013); for a panorama of contemporary European *Regie* to Delgado and Rebellato (2010). Pavis's systematic exploration of present-day *mise en scène* (Pavis 2013), read alongside Shepherd's innovative 'practical theorisation' of 'direction' in a UK context (Shepherd 2012), provides further indispensable and inspiring ground for many of the questions raised and further developed in this study. Additionally, there are most useful editions of interviews, primary material and other writings on theatre directing offered by Delgado and Heritage (1996), Giannachi and Luckhurst (1998) and Schneider and Cody (2002). Within Anglo-American theatre (and performance) studies, the long-held, almost exclusively Anglo-centric perspective has subsequently been redressed through particular attention to Continental European theatre directing by Kelleher and Ridout (2006), Carlson (2009), Lavender and Harvie (2010) and Shevtsova and Innes (2009), as well as Finburgh and Lavery (2011). Furthermore, the English translation of German theatre scholarship by Lehmann (2006) and Fischer-Lichte (2008) has familiarised a wider international readership with crucial conceptual paradigms of postdramatic theatre and of a performative theatre aesthetics.

Since there is no need to repeat what colleagues have already achieved in the aforementioned marvellous work on the subject, I have taken the liberty of dedicating the present volume, at its most fundamental level, to a conceptual exploration of *the thinking of* Regie: of how to think about theatre direction, and how *Regietheater* thinks itself. My approach here is committed to the speculative tradition of Hegelian dialectic thinking, and to avoid disappointment, I should clarify some further methodological deliberations at the outset. To think through directing in a way that is able to account not least for these all-too-underexplored, (perhaps not so) subtle

differences between English and Continental European concepts, conventions and expectations, it seemed necessary to attempt an outline of an alternative framework of categories. Above all, I wanted to resist the persistent slipping back to a handful of worn-out clichés and reductive stereotypes, which hardly do more than keep unhelpful controversies alive. The focus here therefore shifts from an exploration of what it is that 'the director does', or what they should do, to what *directing* does, and what directing can do, tapping into and realising the potential of *what theatre does and may do*. This has become a pertinent matter within our global configuration, where art and culture are no longer, in Marxist terms, mere aspects of the ideological superstructure, but have themselves become the very sites of alienation, conflict and exploitation. Today, certainly in the West, intellectual labour and the creative power of employees, rather than physical strength and manual work, are what the capitalist system exploits and appropriates. This crucial context not only of contemporary theatre making, but of human existence today, which Bifo Berardi and Jodi Dean have designated with their influential terms 'semiocapitalism' and 'communicative capitalism' respectively (Berardi 2009; Dean 2009), provides an important horizon for my own critical thinking about *Regie*, to which I shall repeatedly refer. Moreover, my own exploration of the dissensus of directors' theatre is inspired by an attempt to think through the *politicity* of twenty-first-century theatre performance, which is how Jacques Rancière describes a political potential that springs not so much from the content, as from the very formal and structural fabric of an art form. My most fundamental wager is that theatre directing should, above all, quite literally be taken to mean 'giving a direction' – or a purpose – to the text that is being staged, and to theatre at large, as a medium, a cultural form and aesthetico-political force within society, on every single night the curtain goes up.

Therefore, instead of further following the traditional academic focus on the interpretation of playtexts and on performance analysis, this study attempts to once more 'render strange' the problem of theatre direction. To trace theatre's politicity, I will start by delineating some crucial, basic parameters of the *formal* operation of *Regie* and its constitutive *structural* dynamics and problematics. The speculative methodology of theatre theory adopted here follows an explicitly Hegelian approach of speculative thinking. It is aligned with the emerging field within our discpline of 'performance philosophy' (see Cull 2012, 2013, and http://performancephilosophy. ning.com) Above all, I start by asserting that '*directing thinks*' and that it thinks in its own way. And by thus thinking, theatre *plays* – with theatre texts, the theatre stage and with us as theatre spectators. Confronted with that Rancièrian *mésentente* – which we may very liberally render as a 'messy understanding' – about *Regie*, I wonder whether precisely a genuinely emancipatory 'messing up' is not the briefest possible description of what the contested *Regietheater* does, of how it thinks and plays? Do not all the debates and misunderstandings precisely affirm the crucial shift its dissensus suggests, by challenging and going beyond established paradigms of meaning and standard patterns of the common 'partition of the sensible', as Rancière terms it (see Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of his concept)? By tackling the playful thinking, and thinking playfulness, of *Regie* with a no less playful, speculative and subjective methodology, which itself 'messes up' some widespread assumptions about

theatre directing, I hope to initiate a thinking that resonates with current problems, challenges and the sheer 'mess' that confronts us, in the liminal field between contemporary Continental *Regie* and fresh approaches in English theatre direction, and most certainly everywhere beyond.

It has been a deliberate decision to present for this purpose an expressly partial study, which reflects selected episodes from (mainly German) theatre history in Part I, and then proceeds to isolate what I consider the core parameters of *Regie* by discussing, in Part II, a somewhat contingent choice of recent theatre work created in the first one and a half decades of the twenty-first century in European languages other than English, and within institutional contexts significantly different from the Anglo-American theatre market. While confining my study to theatre work I have followed and myself seen over the past decade of working on this book between 2004 and 2014, I leave out, quite notably given my proposed scope of 'Continental European theatre', work from the French, Italian and Spanish, and not least the Eastern European theatre world, which I have seen, but with which I cannot claim the same linguistic familiarity as with work emanating from my 'home turf' in the German- and Dutch-speaking world, in which I have worked, watched and researched since the rather accidental development of my enthusiasm for theatre at some point in the 1980s. Moreover, I also decided against including, as a foil, much work I have also watched from the anglophone theatre context, and not to present it side by side with the examples discussed here. This would have suggested a homogeneity and coherence that betrays the very dissensus from which this project started. In fact, throughout this study I insist on the strangeness, the 'foreign body', the partiality, particularity and the partisanship of *Regie* by applying this very term – *Regie* – instead of a universalising 'theatre directing' or a generic 'mise en scène', in order to dissociate us from assumptions, expectations and conventions, and instead encourage us to acknowledge the cultural and aesthetic differences and specificities in direction. My partial view from outside and as an outsider will, I hope, offer an opportunity to take a step back and reflect. I hope that this will be true for European readers as well, as they will be only too familiar with the *Regie* work under discussion in this study; perhaps I am able to offer for them a more sideways look that fosters fresh thinking, too, just as my own 'givens' were challenged after I moved into a rather different aesthetico-political framework in theatre and in higher education.

Against authority: the deadlock of 'directors' theatre'

The principal aim, then, in what follows is not to attempt an impossible comprehensive account of 'directors' theatre' and its most representative artists, but to arrive, via rather particular and subjective manifestations of *Regie*, at a sharper insight into theatre direction and its potential, its aesthetic possibilities and its political implications. *Regie* is here shown to be far more than the arrangement of signs and meanings that 'produce' the play on stage (as in a common but all too reductive