

Peter M. Boenisch

Directing Scenes and Senses: The Thinking of Regie

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. 256 p. £65.

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Peter Boenisch and Thomas Ostermeier

The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier

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These publications from Peter Boenisch represent two sides of the same project: to bring the continental European traditions of political philosophy and the particular form of theatre directing known as *Regie*, into dialogue with each other. In *The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier*, Boenisch does so literally by interspersing the director's own writings (previously unpublished in English) with images of his work, reflections from his closest collaborators and in-depth studies of two key productions: *Ein Volksfeind* (Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, 2012) and Shakespeare's *Richard III* (2015). Those wishing to study, and particularly to teach, the work of the best-known mainland European director to English audiences (thanks to his long association with the Barbican) will find their task is made very much easier by this volume, which is richly varied and will be accessible to students at all levels. Readers of this volume will, however, benefit considerably from being able to contextualise it against *Directing Scenes and Senses*, Boenisch's considerably more ambitious and detailed study of the historical and theoretical development of the art of *Regie*.

The second volume takes as its starting point Rancière's idea of the 'aesthetic regime of art', which Boenisch connects with Hegel's announcement of a 'new era' in his 1807 book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In its first part, the book then plots the development of the

Regisseur, and of *Regie* as a mode of thinking, from the late eighteenth century to the work of Leopold Jessner (1878-1945). In an appropriately Hegelian move, Boenisch seeks within this history for insights which may help us to understand contemporary *Regie* as a process and a function where, in his words, 'the playtext remains [...] the same, yet our perception and understanding of it is ultimately changed' (9). Prominent among such insights are Schiller's notion of 'play' as a mediating function between binary oppositions; Helmar Schramm's conception of performance as a situation defined by relations between corporeality or kinesis, meaning or semiosis and perception or aesthesis; and Jessner's activation of dialectic relations between text, staging and spectators. In the second part of the book, Boenisch reads the work of contemporary *Regisseurs* in the light of the constellation of ideas explored in the first. He offers complex, provocative readings of productions that are likely to be known to a UK audience, such as Ostermeier's *Volksfeind* and Ivo Van Hove's *Scènes uit een Huwelijk* (*Scenes from a Marriage*, 2005), as well as major works from directors less likely to be familiar to an Anglophone readership: Jürgen Gosch, Michael Thalheimer, Andreas Kriegenburg, Guy Cassiers, Frank Castorf, and the Antwerp-based collective tg STAN.

Boenisch acknowledges the partiality of this list, which, in spite of the variety of the work discussed, can only be considered to be problematically monocultural in the context of contemporary Europe. It would be true to argue that an all-white and male selection is nonetheless representative of those *Regisseurs* currently privileged enough to make work on the scale that Boenisch has chosen to analyse: predominantly large cast productions of canonical works. But some will doubtless find a troubling connection between the politics of this selection and Boenisch's Hegelian account of the history of *Regie* as 'a chain of mediated antagonisms and sublated contradictions' that ultimately affirm the canonical texts with

which it unfolds. Those who take issue with Boenisch's account along these lines will, however, still find much that is valuable in this deeply scholarly account of the many ways in which *Regie* offers opportunities for attacking the 'distribution of the sensible' under contemporary capitalism, and disrupting 'the established hegemonic aesthetic-political order of things'. My own perspective is that Boenisch's over-arching approach to the study of *Regie* takes somewhat for granted another 'established hegemonic [...] order of things', namely the processes by which the particular directors he has chosen to study have been able to rise to such cultural prominence (186). But I am nonetheless entirely persuaded that the dialectic form of *Regie* that he elucidates in such detail here contains numerous essential intellectual tools for generating forms of theatre that enable us as spectators to, in Boenisch's words, 'reflect on our involvement and our responsibility as a subject in our [...] world' (147).