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"Autonomy Has No Objective Measure"

Review of the Book Entitled The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy – Analysing Theatre as a Theatre as a Social Practice

Published in 2016 by Amsterdam University Press, *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy – Analysing Theatre as a Theatre as a Social Practice* analyses the ways in which theatre as a social practice is conceived, as well as autonomy itself as an organizing principle and a possible key concept for further research in the sociology of theatre. The editors, or rather co-authors, Joshua Edelman (lecturer at the Manchester School of Theatre and Manchester Metropolitan University), Louise Ejgod Hansen (research director at the Centre for Cultural Evaluation) and Quirijn Lennert van den Hoogen (editor-in-chief of the Dutch Cultural Policy Handbook and member of STEP, the Project on European Theatre Systems), were interested in studying art from a sociological perspective. The book was inspired by Hans van Maanen (former dramaturg and Professor of Art Society and Theatre Studies at the University of Groningen, Department of Art, Culture and Media Studies), whose main insight is that research from a sociological perspective needs to be complemented by philosophical

concepts in order to understand the meaning and social structure of the arts, especially theatre (art). His book *How to Study Art Worlds* (2009) can be seen as a precursor to the present volume, which is also the ideological-intellectual manifestation of the Project on European Theatre Systems led by van Maanen and Andreas Kotte. *Global Changes, Local Stages* (2009), the first co-edited, co-authored book of the organisation's "political section", is also a precedent for *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy*. Considering that autonomy has no objective measure (29), this rich and witty volume is addressed to theatre scholars, practitioners and students, primarily in an explanatory (rather than normative) way.

The book promises a systematic comparison of theatres, or, to put it somewhat awkwardly, theatre systems, and also aims at a clear understanding of the concept of autonomy from an observer's perspective, as the first chapter indicates. The term "theatrical autonomy" implies, on the one hand, the independence of the theatre, the possible self-government of artistic and administrative affairs, even if the creation of the theatrical production has to be financed and the finished product itself has to be distributed, marketed, seen and understood, all of this also in relation to the outside world. In this light, the authors argue that although theatre autonomy is valued for its ability to promote artistic integrity and creativity, theatres may still have to (in the future) navigate among external factors such as government regulations, funding requirements and audience expectations. On the other hand, as the introductory part of the book emphasises, this kind of autonomy (rather proudly interpreted as something Western) can also be manifested in the act of recognising that the theatrical space is quite different from the milieus "occurring" in one's everyday life – but unfortunately, these different spaces and platforms of life are hardly ever put in relevant parallel in the book. Despite the fact that one of the possible results of the social sphere of theatre (although less autonomous in itself than poetry or music) is the transposition of experiences seen on stage into everyday life, this phenomenon is painfully neglected by the editors, and thus treated as a truly autonomous phenomenon in practice.

In the later chapters, the authors analyse the concepts of autonomy manifested in the internal dynamics and mechanisms of theatre life (chapters 1 and 2), then the volume focuses on the contemporary negation of this autonomy (chapter 3), while the final chapters (chapters 4-6) provide deeper analyses of the specific aspects and manifestations of autonomy. Willmar Sauter's (2000)

theatrical event approach is also reflected in these chapters, and its use in the book is partly justified by the need to adopt a broader and more nuanced social perspective, which seems essential to develop a more detailed and accurate picture of the everyday practices of theatre-making and theatre-going, as well as of the aesthetic quality and form of theatre. One of the strongest strands of interpretation in the volume revolves around the idea that the theatrical space is a meso-level milieu, situated between the levels of society (macro) and individual performance (micro). This concept is also the basis for defining how autonomy manifests and functions in different countries (with a particular focus on Western European societies) and social contexts.

The first chapter, "How can we define autonomy?", aims at and questions the use of the concept of "autonomy" within different disciplines and social spheres. In sociology, similarly to the arts, definitions are not considered definitive by the authors of the book, so there is no clear definition in this section (the Wittgensteinian concept of family resemblance is mentioned, however, drawing attention to the rather hastily defined possibility of autonomy having meaning and/or significance for those working in a given sphere). Fitting into the artistic-academic approach and framework of the volume, the authors instead offer a conceptual formula ("theatre is autonomous insofar as it follows its own value"), to avoid further confusion due to the lack of accurate definitions. By deconstructing this formula in the final segments of the chapter, it is also revealed that the conception of autonomy presented in this book is quite different from the Kantian conception linked to human will and the law of reason (28), while the volume offers other possible ways of interpreting the term "value" (Luhmann uses the term "function", Kant "interest", while in Schiller it corresponds to "impulse"). Moreover, in this sociological conception, the autonomy of the individual itself is ignored in order to shift the emphasis to the autonomous position that the individual can occupy within a particular social field.

At the same time, while the authors affirm that autonomy is not the same as creating art without the influence of political or ethical (or even capitalist) factors, they also suggest that autonomy is a structural property or quality of rather diverse, heterogeneous social fields (and not a social field per se). These fields do not, however, mean social milieus, but human activities that are manifested in the cooperation of social actors within a given social sphere in the collective pursuit of a common goal. Otherwise, the use of the term "field" also refers to Bourdieu's theory of space, in which these interconnected fields (worlds, net-

works, systems) have different positions that social actors can occupy. This is contrasted with the footnote on the critics of the French anthropologist and social scientist Pierre Bourdieu, including the theorists of the Actor-Network, and the chapters inspired by them (and subsequently discussed).

The sub-chapter "Actions of agents in theatre fields: position-taking" underlines that these agents (be they companies, collective agents, individual artists, artists working in the same style, genre or school, e.g. naturalists, symbolists, poets, or even non-human agents), or rather actors (in both the artistic and ontological sense of the word), always act in the theatrical fields in order to accumulate as much domain-specific capital as possible. In Bourdieu's definition of the fields (complemented by the works of Theodor Adorno, Christian Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and Eve Chiapello, while also drawing on Bourdieu's intellectual precursors Wittgenstein, Lévi-Strauss, Durkheim, Marx and Pascal), the position occupied by the social actor is experienced by individuals in the form of motivation. The so-called "children's theatre", which is a prominent type of theatre in many European countries, is a striking example of the positioning and self-positioning in the book, while in other cultures it is still considered less valuable and "frivolous". In this respect, "children's theatres" or puppet theatres face much greater challenges when they want to pursue the very same values that other types of theatre are interested in, such as marketability, which is so often maligned.

As the authors of the book explain quite sharply and with great insight, autonomy is the essence that separates one (social) sphere from another. Since there is virtually no social field without a certain degree of autonomy, the so-called rights-based discourse (which roughly means that the definition of autonomy also questions certain rights of artists) conflicts with the rights of others, but also, on a larger scale, with the values of general justice or democracy. Despite this apparently neutral view of autonomy, the following unavoidable steps lead to the ultimate realization of theatrical existence: "(1) an initial degree of separation between the theatrical field and other fields is (2) a necessary precondition for perceiving and shaping theatre as art, which then (3) allows the creation of the specifically artistic results of theatrical systems" (26). However, these explicitly artistic results are defined in this chapter mainly as having an aesthetic quality.

The importance of social ties and their artworks and products (even if they are purely aesthetic) is further emphasised by the authors, who stress that value,

as such, must be recognised by other social actors in order to be valid. Here the authors examine the phenomenon in a Lacanian-Freudian context (while also referring to Slavoj Žižek), since the object of desire has a necessary element in the psychoanalytic unconscious (32), and thus the concept of autonomy is necessarily fluid, in which art must be separated from its social context, rather than growing out of that context. "Value" is used as a synonym for "capital" by Bourdieu (following somewhat in the Marxist tradition), whose insistence on using both terms in the plural (as values and capitals) highlights the fact that they may come from different sources but are not in fact interchangeable. The production of these values, no matter how ambiguous their relation to autonomy is in the volume, is cultural and not economic (although Bourdieu argues that it must ultimately be).

The second part of the first chapter aims to make the concept of individual capitals more accessible, integrating Bourdieu's example of the French literary field of the late nineteenth century – a social milieu that seems to have little to do with the central theme of the volume, contemporary European theatre. While contrasting economic, prestige-based and cultural capital, the authors pay particular attention to the romantic roots of the latter. This section contains the first concrete example from the world of theatre, focusing on the Netherlands, where there is a rich tradition of cabaret presenting political satire. Despite the fact that these productions are the second most popular category in Dutch theatre, as both the number of performances and the number of tickets sold account for sixteen per cent of the total Dutch theatre event arsenal (VSCD 2012), their genuine value lies in their political nature, which is neither a positive nor a negative phenomenon. This kind of "rebellion in the system" can be seen as somewhat paradoxical, since its structurally constructive power lies in its essentially destructive character.

After a first chapter, rather lengthy and convoluted in its theoretical apparatus, the following sections mainly dissect the concepts and problems already introduced, with various historical-contextual inserts. The above-mentioned value neutrality, for example, is further challenged in the chapter "The concept of artistic autonomy", which also presents the history of artistic autonomy, with particular reference to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), while the later section on the functional social perspective of Plato and Aristotle includes Aristotle's narrative representation of fact in testimony, philosophy or history *(diegesis)* and the aesthetic form of representation employed by artists *(mime-*

sis), and the role of the artist in society, as described by Plato in "The Republic", draws attention to the spectacularity *(hypocrites)* of the art of the actor. The concept of catharsis is seen here as one of the most essential forms of value or capital. The author of the chapter emphasises the differences between modern and ancient Greek conceptions of the relationship between (theatre) art and society, since for the Greeks, the primary concept of art, techne, is closer to the term "craftsmanship", which can give many a sense of unprofessionalism. Aestheticisation, as the key concept of the Enlightenment, is the next point of reference in the text, with the ideas of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schiller (again), with a special focus on the reception of a particular work of art rather than its intensionality. After a moment's hesitation, the volume continues with Kant's own momentary understanding of the autonomy of art, reflecting on the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's understanding of art as an (increasingly self-referential) system of communication, which already embraces the interconnected nature of art, which is thus hardly autonomous. Moreover, quite the contrary, as Luhmann sees it, "art became an autonomous system only at the moment when self-reference in artistic communication could take precedence over references to other kinds of communication" (59). To conclude the chapter, the theories of George Dickie, Arthur Danto and Howard Becker on art as an institution, Boltanski and Thévenot (and later Chiapello) on art and values, and their vision of ANT society are compared, citing examples from different (state) communities. These communities represent clear cases of divergent values that usually appear in mixed forms in the scenario of real life.

"Autonomy in the contemporary theatre" is the first chapter that focuses only on theatre as an art form, and discusses contemporary forms of performance (such as documentary theatre and stand-up comedy) that are seemingly rejecting any claim to autonomy. The chapter opens with the exciting idea that the problematisation of autonomy is a key instrument for the development of the theatre sociological field. In exploring the role of autonomy in the wider social fabric, the authors raise further questions about the aesthetics of contemporary theatrical forms, and examine how they allow the actors (agents) in and around the performances to put their autonomy at risk. Their objection lies in the fact that while the concept of autonomy was a rather useful "instrument" in the past, it is simply not relevant in the world of theatre as it is today. This section focuses on the appreciation of specific theatrical practices (post-dramatic and immersive theatre, verbal and documentary theatre, and applied and

community theatre), for which the authors give great examples (e.g. how a fictionalised play format is enabled by the theatrical context within a theatre production). With recurrent, sometimes weaker, sometimes stronger counter-arguments, the chapter questions both the need for theatre autonomy and its mere existence. The weaker set of arguments includes the anachronistic notion of autonomy, in which autonomy is rather outdated (the parallel in the book is aristocracy) and represents an organisational pattern that is no longer relevant. However, reflecting on the ideas of Liesbeth Korthals Altes and Barend van Heusden (authors of the 2005 book *Aesthetic Autonomy: Problems and Perspectives*) the co-authors argue that autonomy is still a key concept when discussing the relationship of artists, ensembles, collectives or other bodies with society.

For comparison, the chapter "How agents in theatre fields make use of claims to autonomy" focuses on the social agents, i.e. the question of social agency itself, and whether these agents (or actors) are able to change the internal dynamics of the field at all, and how autonomy can be achieved (even in the case of a sub-field, as in the case of a sub-field such as children's theatre, which here arises in the context of the dissatisfaction between the fields of theatre and education), while the agents of the field strive for publicity, and how autonomy allows for political engagement outside the political field – all these questions remain unanswered. Consequently, in a sense, the main purpose of the volume is simply to ask questions about issues and phenomena of importance to society as a whole, rather than to provide clear answers to these questions.

The sections "How theatre organisation shapes claim to autonomy" (chapter 5) and "How claims to autonomy serve those outside theatre fields" (chapter 6) are quite similar in the sense that both are rather slogan-like, but very straightforward messages, in order to prove that autonomy is not opposed to society, since autonomy functions rather as a form of social operation. In this regard, Chapter 5 focuses on the changes in the organisational characteristics of theatrical fields, which can provide rich material for future research in the field of theatre sociology. Models of funding systems and public funding are also presented in this chapter (together with an in-depth analysis of the differences between cultural policy systems based on the four models developed by Harry Hillman-Chartrand and Claire McCaughey in 1989, namely the Patron, the Intermediary, the Architect and the Engineer), while in the turmoil of perspective in chapter 6, theatre is in fact moralised merely so that the art form (the field) can ultimately be exploited in a capitalist way.

Overall, therefore, it can be seen that *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy* builds in part on the autonomous theatre as a Schillerian idea of moral good-ness in its broadest sense (113). Partly, as is mentioned in several places, because the book itself cannot provide an in-depth analysis of any theatrical area or field, nor a systematic portrait of the autonomous relations inherent in them. Despite the authors' attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of autonomy, they hope that autonomy will be a useful tool in the future (even if it is not as rele-vant as it was before), the book is not exempt from weaknesses. It is somewhat ironically stated at one point that the examples given are justified because they illustrate the concept discussed in the book, however, these examples are far from systematic, e.g. the Eastern European countries are only mentioned in the context of the changes that took place in 1989, which also affected the relation-ship between theatre and society. Although many useful, easy-to-understand tables and figures illustrate the inner workings of the theatrical field (and/or sub-fields), the text is also riddled with misspellings (e.g. Romeo Castellucci's name is given incorrectly) and syntactically awkward sentences, while occa-sionally heavily colloquial expressions (such as the use of the words "things", "okay", etc.), while undoubtedly effective in conveying the message of the work, can leave a scar on the academic soul. Although at first glance the focus of *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy* may seem too broad, its seemingly random but undoubtedly entertaining examples and parallels make it an important and enjoyable reading for theatre professionals and sociologists alike.

Sources

■ Edelman, Joshua, Hansen, Louise Ejgod and Hoogen, Quirijn Lennert. 2016. *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. **https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048530274.**

■ VSCD (Vereniging van Schouwburg-en Concertzaaldirecties). 2012. *Podia 2011, cijfers en kengetallen [Stages 2011. Facts and Figures].* Amszterdam: Vereniging van Schouwburg-en Concertzaaldirecties.