

Aesthetics
and Ideology
in Contemporary
Literature and Drama

Aesthetics and Ideology in Contemporary Literature and Drama

Edited by

Madelena Gonzalez and René Agostini

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction: The Return of the Real in Art and Politics— Putting Ideals into Practice	xi
Madelena Gonzalez	
Chapter One. The Influence of Ideology on Aesthetics: The Norm, Subversion and Experimentalism	
Esthé-logie et idéo-tique : « <i>regards sur le monde actuel</i> » (Valéry, 1988) (ou : la « culture » de l'« art »)	3
René Agostini	
Mircea Nedelciu et le « traitement fabulatoire » de l'idéologie communiste : l' <i>Est-éthique</i> d'une (contre-)utopie émancipatrice	21
Ramona Hârşan	
Étude d'un poème-manifeste théâtral. <i>Ma Marseillaise</i> (2012) de Darina Al Joundi	37
Johanna Krawczyk	
Poétiques du silence et de l'absence : déconstruire les idéologies dans la poésie concrète et visuelle de Franz Mon et de Gerhard Rühm	49
Bettina Thiers	
Une théâtralisation de l'état des lieux de l'art théâtral contemporain. Autour du spectacle <i>L'effet de Serge</i> (2007), de Philippe Quesne	65
Rafaella Uhiara	
Le comédien, le paradoxe et l'idéologie du salut	77
Christine Farenc	

Chapter Two. The Question of Value: Texts and Contexts

The “Aesthetics” of the Popular	97
Richard Bradford	
Travail de mémoire ou travail de marchandisation ? Esthétique et idéologie de la fiction néo-victorienne	117
Christian Gutleben	
The Ideology of Affect: Jean Rhys’s Aesthetics of Dissent in <i>Voyage in the Dark</i>	131
Villy Karagouni	
Une esthétique du non-positionnement ? Du questionnement de l’idéologie dans les œuvres de Brian Castro	149
Marjorie Ambrosio	

Chapter Three. Challenging Issues in Contemporary Aesthetics

Reality’s a Stage: Staging (Over)Reality in Michel Vinaver’s <i>11 September 2001</i>	163
Giuseppe Sofo	
The Changing Aesthetics of Verbatim Theatre: From Engaged Theatre to Globalization	175
Cyrielle Garson	
“Can we remind you that you’re watching a play?” Tim Crouch’s <i>The Author</i>	193
Niki Orfanou	
Esthétique de la surface et idéologie postmoderne dans le théâtre postdramatique germanophone.....	207
Priscilla Wind	
Défis politiques et esthétiques de la voie négative dans les arts de la représentation.....	221
Lydie Parisse	

Chapter Four. Aesthetics as Political Philosophy

Literary Form and Contesting the Subject in J. M. Coetzee's <i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> and Aravind Adiga's <i>The White Tiger</i>	235
Liani Lochner	
Écrivains engagés ou désengagés dans le théâtre français du XX ^e siècle ?	251
Nathalie Macé	
Staging Politics: A Crossover of Political and Theatrical Aesthetics in Contemporary Estonian Theatre	267
Karina Talts	
En-Gendering the Festive Spirit: <i>The Magdalena Project</i> at Work on the Margin	277
Tsu-Chung Su	
Redrawing Bodily Boundaries: A Look into the Creative Process of Jan Fabre	297
Edith Cassiers, Timmy De Laet, Frederik Le Roy and Luk Van den Dries	
Contributors	321
Index	329

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INTRODUCTION:
THE RETURN OF THE REAL
IN ART AND POLITICS—
PUTTING IDEALS INTO PRACTICE

MADELENA GONZALEZ

The conviction that the development and the promotion of the arts, humanities and culture through the study of literature and the aesthetic are the fundamental constituents of any progress in society is at the heart of this volume. The essays gathered here explore the role of the imagination and an aesthetic awareness in an age when the corporatization of knowledge is in the process of transforming literary studies and political commitment is in danger of disappearing behind a supposedly post-ideological late-capitalist consensus. If aesthetics is understood as everything that is linked to, or that deals with beauty or the beautiful, as the attempt to understand the transition from the imagination to the finished work, or to unfold and explain the truths contained in such a work, this definition implies an epistemological responsibility that connects it to ethics and indeed to the development of individual consciousness. If, in line with the ideas of Classical antiquity, ideology can be conceived of as a body of principles and values with a legislative and initiatory purpose, intended to be beneficial, if not to say, salutary, for the construction of the community or the individual, as a work of conscience contributing to the development of human consciousness, such an ideal is more often than not replaced by propaganda and an oppressive manifestation of the political, as many of the articles published here illustrate.

Such idealistic definitions as these could of course be conceived of as naïve politically and divorced from social reality. Ideology, taken in a pejorative sense, can stand for a form of political thought which reinforces relationships of power and domination, an analysis stretching from Marx, via Gramsci to Althusser and beyond. However, under the pen of many Anglophone critics such as George Levine, the term “ideology” is currently being used in a loaded way to refer to a largely left-leaning

critical cultural consensus. This is also the stance taken by the editors and many of the contributors to Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral's *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*. In an ironic reversal, the enemies of ideology and its pervasive state power are now considered to be the purveyors of an institutionalised ideological form of criticism. Indeed, there is currently a tension within the humanities and more particularly within literary studies in English between those who are accused of assimilating or reducing literature to politics and ideology and those who yearn for a return to "disinterested" enquiry, based on the notion of aesthetic value. The former are usually grouped under the umbrella heading of poststructuralist theorists, while the latter are considered as belonging to what could be called an anti-theory or post-theory camp which advocates a return to the aesthetic.

It appears impossible today to discuss aesthetics and ideology without at least some initial reference to this debate. The situation currently obtaining and the various implicit ideological allegiances it implies are, however, more complex than the apparent lines drawn up would seem to imply. Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003) is a curious reversal, or indeed epitaph, for his previous positions, coming as it does from a figure responsible for circulating Theory within academia for the past twenty years. Ironically, this new stance resembles some of the more extreme rejections and rebuttals of "Theory's empire" that appear in the volume of that same name, albeit for very different reasons. Eagleton tirelessly targets Postcolonialism as rampant culturalism and lambasts Theory in general, not only in *After Theory*, but also in his subsequent, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, where he dismisses it as a "minority art-form [...] the refuge of a disinherited Western intellect cut loose from its traditional humanistic bearing" (206). In his eyes, the institutionalised practice of Theory, largely assimilated to poststructuralist thought, has indeed become just another way in which an intellectual elite maintains a conversation with itself, mirroring the prevailing social order as much as challenging it.

Our aim here is not to take sides with either party, but to offer another perspective on the debate, a view from elsewhere, so that by articulating things differently, we can think of, and about them, differently. Thanks to a precise description of literary and dramatic art in the political arena through the specific examples chosen for study, our ambition is to help pave the way for a constructive and prospective criticism of the times which would be capable of marrying the philosophical with the pragmatic and the political with the ideal. The approach adopted is interdisciplinary and concentrates on the modern, contemporary and ultra-contemporary in

order to examine current trends in literature and drama. It comprises a wide diversity of models, combinations, perspectives and examples from fiction and theatre within Europe, as well as within the Anglosphere. When the famous French actor and director, Jean Vilar (1912-1971), declared that theatre should be thought of as a “secular religion” (504; our translation), he was suggesting the idea of a human and humane ethics, capable of underpinning the perfect union of aesthetics and ideology, which can call to mind Lacoue-Labarthe’s neologism, “aesthetics”, discussed in one of the opening essays of this volume.¹ The studies collected here point the way towards art as an explicit and implicit manifestation of political thought rather than as a lifeless object in a conventional context, a mere simulacrum of significance whose games and postures provide only a reflection of aesthetic emptiness.

The main focus of the volume is the mutual implication of aesthetics and ideology and the status and value of different types of art within the political arena. Challenging issues in contemporary aesthetics are examined within the wider framework of current debates on the disappearance of the real, the crisis in representation, and the use of new media. The development of technology and new means of communication is of particular political significance in contemporary theatre, as the essays in chapter four on the internationally networked Magdalena Project or the changing status of the director’s theatrical notebook, the *Regeibuch*, in northern European drama explain. The wide-range of examples on which the contributors draw, stretching from experimental poetry in post-war Germany, political commitment in twentieth-century French theatre and countercultural Rumanian theatre under Ceaușescu, to Neo-Victorian fiction, Verbatim theatre in the UK, and political theatre for the masses in Estonia, vouchsafe unique insights into the intersection of aesthetics and ideology and the practical consequences thereof.

The essays collected here strive to make visible the aesthetic and its interaction with ideology instead of subsuming it under a general category of the ideological in a climate where the “poetics of culture”, defined by Stephen Greenblatt as, “the system of signs that constitutes a particular culture” (4), is often accused of obscuring more strictly literary considerations by those in favour of a return to the aesthetic: “criticism threatens to become not so much an attempt to understand those visceral moments of aesthetic pleasure as an essay in exposure of the way those moments—the sense of the aesthetic—are in effect ideological constructions” (Levine 2006b, 15). The relationship between the two concepts is examined and problematized by the authors whose work is collected here, but from the standpoint of aesthetics as much as from that

of any specific ideology, thus redressing the imbalance which George Levine laments in his study, without, however, claiming that the aesthetic can ever stand alone, in splendid isolation from its context.

Obviously, the rejection of the “poetics of culture” and its assimilation to what is perceived as a dominant “ideology”, particularly within North American and British universities, but also elsewhere in the English-speaking world, is in itself ideological and partial. It fails to take into account the situation obtaining in non-Anglophone Europe, for example, where it is fair to say that the study of the aesthetic *per se* has never really ceased and where it is more difficult to reduce “ideology” to a poststructuralist consensus. Many of the essays reproduced here would tend to suggest that the dichotomy so troubling to Levine, simply does not exist in European countries where Formalism has never died out, or, at least, that it does not manifest itself in the same extreme format. In the first essay in the volume, for example, René Agostini pinpoints a tendency in contemporary French theatre and criticism to a form of superficial over-aestheticisation, the exaggerated postures and games of which, in his view, fail to aspire to beauty as an ideal. This produces what the French philosopher, Alain Badiou, terms “in-aesthetics” or an aesthetic devoid of aesthetics so that art becomes a mere reflection of a society in thrall to the spectacle. The wide range of examples collected here aim to open up a space for a meaningful engagement with more authentic forms of art from inside and outside the Anglosphere and, ultimately, use these examples as a platform from which to imagine some form of “aesthetics”, representing an ideal union of aesthetics and ideology. It is hoped that this concept will prove to be relevant within the parameters set out here, but also beyond, for the contributors to this volume are unanimous in refusing to believe that aesthetics and ideology can exist one without the other.

One important aspect of this study is thus its preoccupation with ethics as well as interpretation. This helps to sketch out the preliminary contours of a counter manifesto for art and literature in the 21st-century and the importance thereof against a background of increasing standardization and commodification of culture. The examination of literature and drama at the present time cannot be separated from the historical context of globalization and the “world” label that is now omnipresent within the university, the book trade and other cultural contexts such as theatre. Learning to read or watch reflexively by entering another’s text, performance or universe, through the study of the aesthetic, constitutes an encounter with alternative singularities that can enhance a form of social citizenship of the world, not necessarily available through unmediated cyber literacy and experience. Can the maximization of imaginative skills

as an ability to think and then formulate absent things, for instance, to paraphrase Kant, be seen as producing a surplus value or supplement of creative possibility in relation to the homogenization of globalization and can it bring an ethical dimension to the study of the aesthetic?

This volume uses specific examples to engage with the question of creative originality and conceptual innovation within literature and drama at the present time. In an era when art is so widely disseminated across the globe, does contemporary literature espouse the model suggested by the globalization of culture via the United States or resist this model? Is there room for a new international style based on post-nationalist values and a shared progressive vision of the aesthetic? What of the avant-garde in relation to the flattened surface of Postmodernism? Has the speed of recuperation and dissemination of knowledge, ushered in by the information society, confiscated the possibility of radical originality and political opposition in the arts? The essays in chapter one use examples from poetry and theatre to show how experimentalism and subversion of the aesthetic norm can both challenge established ideologies as well as promote them.

The increasingly rapid development of the cultural crossover and of the assimilation of the exotic, the foreign and the strange to an easily marketable format which characterizes the culture industry at the present time, attracts attention to difference before flattening and homogenizing it for the world market. Chapter two, for example, deals with the mechanisms behind the constitution of the canon of key texts and performances to which other texts and performances refer and in comparison to which they are judged. What is the potential of such works and their study for intercultural and transnational dialogue and exchange? What of other “minor” forms considered as secondary or subaltern in relation to the major canonical genres? The essay on marginal figures, victims and outcasts in Neo-Victorian fiction sheds some interesting light on this aspect, for example. How are minor art forms marginalized by the culture industry and the academy, or, on the contrary, assimilated and recuperated for commercialisation and circulation within globalization and the web of knowledge that subtends it? Richard Bradford’s study of the aesthetics of the popular and cultural consensus engages in detail with such questions.

In the French cultural sphere, as the examples drawn from contemporary French theatre and performance in chapters one and three show, the aesthetic is not considered an irrelevant indulgence or bourgeois privilege, but, on the contrary, part of a set of salutary, if not to say, essential Republican values to which every citizen has a right, ideals

which are meant to be put into practice. This perspective allows many of the authors in this volume to re-inject the aesthetic with dynamic political potential so that it can leave behind the stigma of romantic reaction which is often associated with its defence: “Part of the history of the aesthetic, especially in the nineteenth century, is a recognition of the way indulgence in it is a form of privilege” (Levine 2006b, 11). It is precisely the current separation between ideology and the aesthetic within certain critical paradigms or, as some of the examples show, the harnessing of aesthetics to a superficial postmodern ideology, such as is described in the essay on German postdramatic theatre, that gives the impression that authentic art is somehow exhausted or has disappeared behind the simulacral smoke-screen of a post-real society.

However, the articles gathered here do not start from the need to save or rehabilitate the aesthetic, to prove its importance as “part of a discourse of value” (20), which “helps to create a desirable community” (19), as Levine puts it in his introduction, entitled significantly, “Reclaiming the Aesthetic”, and reminiscent of an Arnoldian concept of the role of literary art as a form of public good, albeit tinged with a trace of elitism. They simply recognize the absolute necessity or unavoidability of the aesthetic, to paraphrase the French theatre director, Claude Régy, quoted in one of the essays in chapter three. This idea, coupled with the enduring belief, inherited from the Greeks, of art as the reflection of a transcendent order of spiritual values, suggests, thanks to the examples examined here, that the function and perhaps the mission of art in our time, theatrical or otherwise, could be to awaken a new consciousness that would be both aesthetic and political at the same time.

I

The volume starts by contextualising the subject in relation to contemporary philosophy and discusses such important concepts as Adorno’s “dis-artification” or Lacoue-Labarthe’s “aesthetics” which have been neglected in English-language works. France is also an interesting location from which to “push the pendulum back towards formal elements”, as Levine puts it (200b, 23), for, in the home of Theory, it is seldom practised as such; close reading and sustained attention to the formal characteristics of literature and its specificity as literature have never disappeared in favour of the use of literature as a prop for cultural theory and, as the opening essay shows, poetry and philosophy are inextricably linked in the minds of many French thinkers.

René Agostini takes as a basis for his study the provocative concept of

“in-aesthetics”, coined by Alain Badiou and subsequently developed by another contemporary French philosopher, Mehdi Belhaj Kacem. The concept implies that contemporary manifestations of art no longer bear any relation to beauty, but are merely inane posturings to which the critics react as if in the presence of something authentic. For Agostini, much current artistic activity, particularly in the theatre, goes hand in hand with the dominant ideology and has lost all power to do anything but reflect the spiritual and material bankruptcy of that ideology. However, rather than speak of a post-ideological and post-aesthetic age, he announces the return of the aesthetic thanks to artists who are politically aware in the widest sense of the term, without necessarily actively engaging in politics. Neither backward-looking, nor nostalgically romantic, their work nevertheless manifests an elemental awareness of the aesthetic in what he sees as a truly authentic manner. Agostini explains how such authenticity is free from the twin evils of his title, “aesthe-logy” and “idiotic”, in other words, how it remains distinct from art used as a cultural strategy for conditioning and subjugating its audience and from the distorting effects of artificial gestures and appearances of the contemporary. These tend to obscure the genuine link that he believes should exist between aesthetics and the public domain.

This philosophical perspective on art paves the way for a more detailed discussion of the influence of ideology on aesthetics, thanks to specific examples taken from European theatre and poetry which help to illustrate the concept of such aesthetic authenticity. Ramona Hârşan deals with a particular case of antagonism between the individual literary discourse of the Rumanian writer, Mircea Nedelciu, and the legitimizing discourse of a certain social order, imposed by the ideology of the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu from 1965-1989. Nedelciu (1950-1999), a left-wing liberal and humanist, uses aesthetics as a means of subverting the dominant ideology. Textual experimentation, the ironical imitation of political cant, the creation of an open “dialogue”, between the author present in the text and the reader, help to reinforce the “natural resistance” of the receiver in relation to the manipulative tendencies of the politics of the regime. Nedelciu’s aesthetics of transgression, reminiscent of that of the 60s and 70s counterculture in the West, suggests an alternative to the Marxist-Leninist utopia proclaimed by Ceauşescu. The controlled fabulatory mechanisms of his existential dramas of identity, their serious games and “textual engineering” fulfil a psychosocial therapeutic function which aims to minimise the ideological hold of totalitarianism over the individual conscience.

Darina Al Joundi’s dramatic text, *Ma Marseillaise*, denounces a

different kind of repressive ideology, that of the patriarchal model which dominates in “Arab countries”, as she calls them. Taking the French national anthem as its leitmotif, her one-woman show is a declaration of love for French Republican values and the ideal of secularism, as well as a means of demonstrating her allegiance to pacifist feminism. The different voices which intrude on the monologue, that of the author and that of her fictional double, as well as the voices of “all those women who have allowed her to hold her head up high”, turn the dramatic text into a theatrical poem and a political manifesto. Using concepts borrowed from Philippe Hamon’s work on texts and ideology, Johanna Krawczyk shows how the intimate dream-like framework of the play reaches out towards the spectator. This enables her/him to become conscious of the role s/he plays in the construction of constantly fluctuating identities which resemble the shifting voices on stage and thus to participate in a politicized aesthetic experience in the defence of Republican values and the rights of women.

The confident adherence to a specific utopian ideological model evinced in Al Joundi’s play is absent from the work of post-war German experimental poets such as Franz Mon and Gerhard Rühm who wanted to create a poetical language free from ideology as a reaction against the political manipulation of art and literature during the Second World War. Writing in a context where the Sartrean model of “committed literature” dominated Europe, their experimental “concrete” poetry was accused of existing in isolation and of following the idea of art for art’s sake. Basing her study on the distinction made by Jacques Rancière between political art and the politics of art, Bettina Thiers makes a case for the aesthetic commitment of these artists whose break with norms she sees as a form of political act. Thus, although they never espoused the cause of “committed literature”, their work does indeed possess a political dimension, according to her analysis.

In contrast, Philippe Quesne seems to be making a mockery of the very notion of aesthetics in his play *L’effet de Serge* (2007), which opens to Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries”, accompanied by the rhythmical clicking of the headlights of a car in front of one audience on stage which is part of the play, and the other, real audience, in the auditorium. While the fake audience smiles uncomfortably, the real audience laughs out loud. However, it soon becomes clear that the experiments of the main character, Serge, and his interaction with the audience are part of a quest for beauty, situated beyond the intelligible. Thus Serge creates “because he doesn’t know what he has to say until he has tried to say it” and the process of creation becomes a reflection on how such an art form might

affect society, represented by the audience on stage, and how it might answer the implicit question posed by the title of the play. If this kind of experiment in contemporary theatre can often seem divorced from politics, here, things felt (*aisthêta*), and things understood (*noêta*) blend in a meta-theatrical experience that raises the consciousness of the spectators who are rescued from banality, thanks to the aspiration to the beautiful evinced by Serge's quest.

The aesthetics of performance and the position of the actor as an individual within society are central to Christine Farenc's study of the development of French acting since the 17th century. She explains the long legacy of disgrace which accompanied the acting profession in France until quite recently. Originally excluded from grace and salvation by the Roman Catholic clergy and state, it took centuries for the actor to be fully rehabilitated as a citizen. This meant that French actors devised extreme aesthetic responses in relation to their quest for the acquisition of salvation, such as the tradition of exteriority prevalent in the 17th century or the more recent practice of disembodiment, popularised by Louis Jouvet. Today the actor's contribution is fully recognised thanks to state funding of theatre, but French acting is, nonetheless, still the product of this unique relationship between aesthetics and the belief in an ideology of salvation.

II

The question of the status of the artist has repercussions for the value of art, a subject that is essential to any discussion of aesthetics and ideology. Richard Bradford addresses the problem in an original form in his essay which proposes a new methodology for determining value over and above personal taste or cultural consensus. The contradiction, as he sees it, rests on the existence of a well-defined canon of great works intended to improve readers intellectually and ethically and the lack of transparency behind the evaluative judgements that differentiate an elite from a popular aesthetic. What precise qualities distinguish the addictive subgenres of fiction which currently saturate the market from the great works? With reference to a variety of examples from Jeffrey Archer and Barbara Cartland to J. K. Rowling, E. L. James and even Bob Dylan, he proposes a clear set of criteria within which to frame and articulate judgements as to aesthetic value and taste in the realm of literature.

Christian Gutleben is also interested in the way in which the market interferes with the status and value of literature. At first sight the revival of enthusiasm for the nineteenth-century and Neo-Victorian fiction may

appear as mere pastiche divorced from any aesthetic or ideological consciousness. However, Gutleben shows how the frequent representation of the subaltern, victim-figure or reject in such novels fulfils an ethical function. As he points out, this attempt to intimately understand the other or outsider and his or her sufferings carries ideological weight as a celebration of the forgotten figures of history. Thus, he claims, this stance contrasts with what might, at first sight, be construed as a reactionary aesthetics and the indulgence in nostalgia for a past epoch.

A study of one of Jean Rhys's early novels also provides a relevant excursion into the recent past and the interpenetration of literary aesthetics and socio-political ideologies in relation to the question of value. Set in England in 1910, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) explores different facets of ideological dissent through the perceptual prism of the female social underdog, exemplified by Anna, one of the novelist's literary alter-egos. Villy Karagouni uses Rhys's novel as a case study showing how the language of affect, generally shunned by Modernism, challenges pre-conceived ideas of the canon and Rhys's place in it. The aesthetics of dissent demonstrated by the postcolonial-criticism-friendly *Wide Sargasso Sea* which made Rhys famous was already present in her earlier work, argues Karagouni, and proves the perennial relevance of Modernist literary voices that challenge the rigidity of fixed ideological premises and value-judgements where literature is concerned.

The aesthetic identity of the novels of the Australian author, Brian Castro, borrows from both Modernism and Postmodernism and thus presents an important challenge to the critic seeking to evaluate or classify his work. Castro, who is of Chinese descent, consciously resists categorisation within the norm, both as a writer and as an individual, although his first novel, *Birds of Passage* (1983), was rapidly labelled "multicultural". Castro's writing tends to put art before politics and demonstrates a high level of aestheticization. Marjorie Ambrosio examines the novelist's apparent rejection of ideology in favour of the aesthetic but wonders whether such rejection is not also a form of borrowing and recognition. Could this gesture be the driving force behind Castro's aesthetic and its ambition to project itself beyond genres, beyond constraints and evaluative labels, even beyond words?

III

Aesthetic challenges are the focus of chapter three which uses examples from contemporary British, French and German theatre to enter into a debate about the status of art in a globalized world, dominated by a

postmodern ideology of the disappearance of the real. Michel Vinaver's play *11 September 2001/11 Septembre 2001* describes the indescribable: the reality of an event erased by the consequences it produced. The dramatist uses only the actual words of the people who lived through this event, taken from newspapers or television, so that spectators are forced to confront the truth of the event itself. However, the mixing of these voices means that the final speeches of Bush and Bin Laden, for example, seem to blend, giving rise to controversial political implications. According to Giuseppe Sofo, the reason Vinaver can mix the two leaders' words so easily, is because their speeches, disseminated worldwide, thanks to modern media, share a similar linguistic, rhetorical and even, dramatic, form. He discusses how Vinaver creates a drama that is deeply political, simply thanks to montage, without even adding his own words, and how he poses some important questions in the process, such as: Is our reality already so theatrical that theatre can replace art with this artificial reality on stage? In a world where, according to Vinaver, it is no longer possible to write tragedies, is the absence of art the best way to create a political and poetic discourse and to resist "dis-artification"?

The next essay goes some way to answering this question thanks to a study of verbatim theatre in the UK. This type of drama, based, like Vinaver's play, on actual words spoken by "real" people, is often denied the transcendent status of "art" because it disrupts the dominant ideology's cultural certainties about authorship, creativity and the status of the text. Cyrielle Garson argues, nevertheless, that there exist a plethora of aesthetic experiments using verbatim material as a consequence of, and in response to globalization. She proposes to read verbatim theatre against the grain of its claim of supposed "authenticity" and "truthfulness" and to suggest the need for a discourse which better articulates the interdependence between its aesthetic imperatives and the possibilities of social engagement. Using the examples of Richard Norton-Taylor's *Justifying War* (2003), Lloyd Newson's *To Be Straight with You* (2008) and Alecky Blythe's *London Road* (2011), she discusses the potential of this new form to make interventions into ideology as a form of engaged or committed theatre.

Tim Crouch's *The Author*, which had its premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2009, uses extreme tactics to make such an intervention. His play challenges the legitimacy of depicting violence and horror for artistic and ideological purposes. He seeks to make the audience actively involved in his critique of the distorted values of our society and seems to encourage what he calls, "individual, dissensual spectatorial responses", since the audience can actually speak or leave the theatre.

However, contrary to most critics, Niki Orfanou argues that, in fact, *The Author* constitutes an act of violence against the audience. She claims that the text dictates its staging completely, leaving no room for other interpretations, and shows the limitations of Crouch's "invitation" to the audience whose role, she claims, is already decided in the text, for the audience is silenced, their so-called choices are already charged with meanings taken from the play's ideology. If the play and its staging attempt to "hold up a mirror" to the audience by asking them how much violence they are prepared to see and accept on stage and, by extension, in society, Orfanou suggests that the "perfect union" of aesthetics and ideology, for which Crouch is aiming, may sometimes be a dystopia rather than a utopia.

The interaction between text and audience is of course central to the concept of postdramatic theatre defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann in 1999. According to Priscilla Wind, the surface aesthetics characteristic of post-Brechtian German theatre work against any possibility of clear commitment and substitute in its place the mere reflection of postmodern superficiality. She shows how the work of Elfriede Jelinek and that of other contemporary German dramatists opposes the depth and complexity of character, plot and psychology common to both classical and modern theatre. According to her, the contemporary stage is transformed into a *theatrum mundi* where the consciousness of playing a role in the theatre of life links the character, the actor and the spectator and gives rise to an exaggerated mirror effect or *mise en abyme* which dominates this aesthetic.

Lydie Parisse takes up the Baroque theme of the *theatrum mundi* with reference to the work of other contemporary European dramatists, notably the controversial Italian, Romeo Castellucci. She quotes the famous French theatre director, Claude Régy, who goes against the Brechtian tradition, by suggesting that Sarah Kane's work replaces the word "political" with the word "subversive", and she reminds us that Antoine Vitez, another influential figure in French drama, insists on the fundamentally polemical and political dimension of theatre, stressing that political theatre is not necessarily theatre which talks openly about politics. Castellucci's work falls into this category, according to Parisse. Thus she considers his *The Four Seasons Restaurant*, inspired by Dante, Hölderlin and Rothko, to be a work that is able to take the spectator to the limits of language and of what is human, symbolized by the final cry of "I", vanishing in the dark at the end of a performance which stages the end of the world. For Parisse, Castellucci's play symptomizes what she calls an aesthetics of negativity, that is to say, a radical manner of conceiving of

the world and of the human within the paradigms of de-figuration, of de-possession, of de-invisibility, which she claims are at the origins of much contemporary art.

IV

Literature's political and ethical promise lies not only in its content, that is, the cultural materials that it draws on and which make it possible, but also in what makes it literary—its performing or staging of that content, as Liani Lochner avers in her discussion of two postcolonial novels. Chapter four highlights the intimate link that can exist between aesthetics and political philosophy through the blending of form and content and, as such, illustrates one of the main premises of this volume, that of the interdependence of aesthetics and ideology, construed positively. As Lochner points out, the performative power of language can transcend the normative horizon set by the existing cultural order. In her reading of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, she argues that both novels contest the ideologies of state racism and neo-liberal globalization by staging the performativity of social identity. *Waiting for the Barbarians* explores interpellation through a subject who, even though he ostensibly occupies a position of power in society, finds himself subordinate to an objectionable law. Through the Magistrate, who is the central character and narrator, the novel enacts a dialogical and allegorical engagement with the discursive determinations of Empire and of apartheid and questions the possibilities of a truly ethical encounter with the barbarian other within such an ideological framework. As for Adiga, Lochner sees his narrator, Balram, as writing himself into being, staging and contesting the functioning of a framework which sets capital as the norm for the performance and recognition of social identity. According to her analysis, this enables the reader to identify the subaltern in ways not governed by neo-liberal discourses on globalization and its attendant language on human rights; it also means that existence is staged as potentiality rather than belonging.

Moving from the novel to 20th-century French theatre, the relationship between poetics and politics proves unexpectedly complex. Nathalie Macé explains how playwrights lagged behind writers belonging to other literary genres in adopting ideological positions; few were clearly committed and the staging of political values was often accompanied by a certain aesthetic conservatism. By studying the case of writers portrayed as characters on the French stage in numerous 20th-century plays, Macé illustrates the difficulty some writers found in associating the treatment of

the beautiful with political principles. The staging of such figures, whether they be autobiographical or fictional, mouthpieces or counter-models, allows playwrights to transpose their own conception of the necessity of, or the impossibility of, or the dangers of, ideological commitment. It seems that despite the influence of Brecht, many of the dramatists under study were more interested in aesthetic issues than in ideological ones.

The context in which Karina Talts examines some recent trends in Estonian theatre is more overtly and decidedly political, to the extent that she can speak of a crossover between the two. She starts by explaining how theatricality and performativity are an increasing feature of political rallies which now resemble vast public spectacles. Politicians also behave as characters on stage instituting a fourth wall to separate them from the public. In response to this, *Theater No99*, one of Estonia's most radical theatre groups, created the "Unified Estonia Assembly", a 44-day long political theatre project. With more than 7200 spectators, it was one of the largest theatrical events in the history of modern European theatre. Although, presented as a theatre project, the reception of "Unified Estonia" clearly demonstrated that a great number of people believed in it as a real political force and the supposed formation of the new political party was an on-going subject of speculation. *Theater No99* made use of various political techniques and strategies in order to present concrete political proposals that were ludicrous and inconceivable, and draw attention to the fact that the rhetoric and actions of Estonian politicians lack transparency and are thus not acceptable. Talts shows how the project created a strange mixture of political act and theatrical performance, of reality and imagination. Her discussion of the ideological and aesthetic aftermath of the project allows her to explore the dramatic tension created by the intersection of the two.

Tsu-Chung Su examines another example of collective theatre which positions itself in opposition to mainstream ideology but also outside any avant-garde aesthetic, in line with Eugenio Barba's concept of "third theatre". Founded in Wales in 1986, the Magdalena Project is constituted by an international network of women whose aim is to create a space where performance is self-discovery. The project's feminist rage at the suppression of the feminine voice furnishes the energy with which to celebrate female theatre practitioners' creativity, sisterhood, and networking power; it provides a platform for women's performance work and training through festivals, happenings, and workshops, a forum for critical and intellectual discussion through events and conferences, and a source of support and inspiration through newsletters, publications, and the Project website. Favouring a nomadic system of growth and

propagation in order to contest established hierarchies, the Project is characterized by a myriad connections between events, organizations, circumstances, and psychophysical acting, relative to women's arts, voices, performances, mind-body continuum, and social struggles, all in a plural, expansive, and polyphonic style. Tsu-Chung Su traces the reasons behind the project's continuing success; he sees it as a fundamental event in theatre history because of the way it transfers power into the hands of female practitioners from one country to another thanks to its creative energy, passion and commitment. He explains how the rhizomatic and nomadic nature of the project's particular aesthetics facilitates the dissemination of its ideological message across the globe within the context of the modern mediaverse.

Luk Van den Dries and his co-authors continue the discussion on the aesthetical and the ideological challenges posed by new media in the context of contemporary drama. He focuses on the director's theatrical notebook, developed in collaboration between the director and the playwright, which has been a key element in theatre in many northern European countries since the beginning of the twentieth century and whose importance has increased in a spectacular manner with the use of new media in the theatre. This suggests the beginning of a paradigm change as the text disappears behind visual and auditory creativity, inspired by the director, and the notebook itself becomes a sort of "storyboard". Using examples from the notebooks of the controversial Belgian artist and director, Jan Fabre, Van den Dries shows how dramatic narrative is increasingly determined by the visual rather than the textual; he also explores the implications of this change for contemporary theatre and the way it stages ideas, political and otherwise.

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The articles collected in this volume propose some original insights into the interaction and intersection between aesthetics and ideology. Their largely European perspective enables them to open up the discussion beyond the division currently drawn between the two concepts within the Anglophone academy and suggests a way forward out of the impasse. For those in favour of a return to the aesthetic such as Patai and Corral, the French heritage and a form of poststructuralist nihilism are seen as the root causes of the abandonment of the text in favour of "preposterous and unreadably convoluted theories" (Patai and Corral 2005b, 7) which have become a new orthodoxy, only to be contested on pain of intellectual excommunication. According to them, for example, Theory, based on a

certain type of left-leaning ideological consensus, has assumed the “moral and political high ground” (3) and, following De Man, the resistance to Theory is in itself theory, a double bind which, they suggest, risks silencing its opponents, who, in any case, are often branded as “out of touch”, “self-interested”, “traditional”, “conservative”, or worse, “reactionary” (1-18).

Erin O’Connor, one of the contributors to *Theory’s Empire*, imagines a “post-postcolonial criticism” (297) which would be conditioned by “honest enquiry” and “dignity” (310), before concluding in the following manner: “The future of literary studies depends on our willingness to abandon the stasist security of paradigmatic thought and to search earnestly for more dynamic, less scripted ways of reading, writing and teaching about literature” (309). The obscurely utopian thrust of such a programme raises many important questions which Patai and Corral’s anthology and other similar volumes fail to address. Valentine Cunningham, for example, ends his *Reading after Theory* with an appeal to “readerly tact” and a “rational, proper, moral even, respect for the primacy of the text over all theorizing about the text” (169). Ethics are indeed an essential component in any discussion of the aesthetic, as is ideology, a fact to which the articles in our collection attest. However, nostalgia for a form of nonpartisan liberal humanism, allied to a refined aesthetic sensibility, is, alas, unequal to the task of engaging with the challenges of contemporary art, whether it be explicitly or implicitly political. The examples examined here, trace out the contours of an alternative position, which might, after all, draw strength from maintaining the tension within the complex dialectical relationship between aesthetics and ideology. Taking the word dialectic in one of its original meanings as “conversation”, from the Greek, *dialektikos*, it may be possible that, by sustaining a dialogue between the two concepts, the political potential of art as an element of individual and public good, indeed, as a fundamental human right, can be both imagined and put into practice.

It will be remembered that the Greek root of the word *aisthetikos* refers to the notion of sense perception, and indeed the experience and sensation of the beautiful is available to every human being capable of feeling. This does not necessarily imply an aestheticist withdrawal from the world; on the contrary, it may help us to see art as the very “soul of the city”, in the words of Jean Vilar (503; our translation), creating an intimate connection between its population and the aesthetic, an ideal marriage of the poetical and the political, without which beauty cannot exist. According to the American art critic and historian, Hal Foster, an eclectic notion of the postmodern undoes the co-articulation of the artistic and the political (see

Foster 1996, 5); it also confiscates transcendence and tends to give rise to a spectral or simulacral performance of a transitory aesthetic, consonant with the status of art as a consumer object within the logic of late capitalism, such as is described in the first essay in this volume.

However, a return to the conception of the autonomy of art as an Enlightenment ideal is not a solution to the feeling of alienation and emptiness which can sometimes be generated by contemporary manifestations of art and the spectacular effect of the real which has deprived the real of its substance, according to such analysts of the contemporary as Baudrillard or Žižek. The latter proposes a reversal of the “postmodern doxa according to which ‘reality’ is a discursive product” (19) as an antidote to our present paradoxical condition which he explains in the following terms: “*we should not mistake reality for fiction*—we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real, which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it” (19). This suggests the possibility of a return to real social life through art and thus a dynamic role for aesthetics as a way of making ideology visible, but also viable as an articulation of, rather than as a mystification of, reality. If Postmodernism’s self-reflexiveness is one of the strategies with which it strives to connect with and engage its public, it is only when art is conceived of as a living organism, a subject existing in the tension between the ideal and its practice that it has the ability to return us to the real.

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Notes

¹ In an essay published in 1991, Lacoue-Labarthe sees this term as encapsulating a break with the Platonic conception of aesthetics as mere mimetology: "Lacan continues to affirm that what he wants to show can be situated between a Freudian ethics and aesthetics...But in fact, this means that what Lacan constructs is nothing other than what we could call an aesthetics with two hs, which, in order to be ethical wants to rescue aesthetics from aesthetics, like nearly all philosophies of art in our time. That is to say, to rescue aesthetics from what has constituted it since Lacan, in other words, mimetology" (31; our translation).

CHAPTER ONE

THE INFLUENCE OF IDEOLOGY ON AESTHETICS: THE NORM, SUBVERSION AND EXPERIMENTALISM

CHAPITRE 1

INFLUENCES DE L'IDÉOLOGIE SUR L'ESTHÉTIQUE : LA NORME, LA SUBVERSION ET L'EXPÉRIMENTAL

