

**Catherine Bouko, *Théâtre et réception. Le spectateur postdramatique*, Collection Dramaturgies No. 26, P.I.E. Peter Lang, Bruxelles 2010, 258 p., 25 photographs.**

The book under review appears in a recently launched series of books directed by Prof. Marc Maufort (Université Libre de Bruxelles). The last decade, interesting studies were published here by him personally on *Postcolonial Hybridizations of Dramatic Realism* (2006), by him and his colleagues on the hybrid nature of cultures (Maufort and De Wagter (eds.), *Signatures of the Past. Cultural Memory in Contemporary Anglophone North American Drama*, 2008) or by colleagues on specific performers, like Johan Callens' *The Wooster Group and Its Traditions* (2004) and his *Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard* (2007). The present volume deals with more theoretical issues and focuses on the reception of postdramatic theatre, more specifically on the place and function of the postdramatic spectator. Three major items govern Bouko's interpretation of the important theory advanced by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his 1999 book *Postdramatisches Theater*, Verlag der Autoren, D-Frankfurt am Main (French translation in 2002, English translation in 2006). The first major problem that is dealt with is the notion of 'Postdramatic Theatre' itself, a hotly debated issue that returns here in a discussion on some of its discriminative criteria ('Première partie. Le théâtre postdramatique', pp. 17-115). Secondly, the author investigates the kind of semiotics one needs to describe a postdramatic staging and tries to detect what specific dimensions it takes when the artistic form no longer is purely dramatic ('Deuxième partie. Le processus sémiotique postdramatique', pp. 117-194). Once the author has delineated a 'convenient' type of postdramatic semiosis, she tries to detect, in a third big move, what activities and sensations the spectator is going through, a preliminary exercise that is supposed to lead to more collective expectations and experiences ('Troisième partie. Communication théâtrale et modèles coopératifs', pp. 195-241). A general conclusion ('Conclusion générale', pp. 243-249), a bibliography (pp. 251-254), a list of productions ('Oeuvres citées', pp. 255-256) and an index (pp. 257-258) close this book.

The first part of Bouko's book starts with a 'controversy' ('une polémique') over problems of definition, in fact a series of statements that plead for a reduction of the extremely wide categories that Lehmann has been using. In Bouko's opinion, his model is too wide and flexible and embraces heterogeneous characteristics in not always definable and hierarchical positions. Main problem, in her opinion, is the often switching and not outspoken relationship between the dramatic and the postdramatic: mostly in contemporary theatre drama is not wholly absent, it is often enough subservient to

other non dramatic scenic expressions and often enough, when Lehmann arrived at general conclusions, he ‘unintentionally’ (p. 25) obscured the presence of dramatic elements. His terminology has to be considered a paradigm that relies upon a constellation of characteristics to be found on different levels in different contemporary settings. Useful as it may be, she holds, this broad perspective needs a deeper theoretical framework, that delineates necessary and sufficient conditions in order to really become discriminative tools, able to refine theoretical premises. Since the transgression and subversion of the dramatic codes can best be studied through concrete examples and specific theoretical cases, Bouko analyzes their use and presence in a threefold way: their presence/absence in the specific use of text, in the visual presentation of the scenery and in the overall treatment of the body. As a general outline, she challenges Lehmann’s idea that the notion of the postdramatic can be understood starting from the artists themselves, and proposes to work the other way around, departing from a (limited) number of spectacles.

Since many postdramatic artists can be considered proteiform in their activities (Bouko’s main examples are Jan Fabre and Jan Lauwers, founders in the eighties of respectively ‘Troubleyn Company’ and ‘Needcompany’) and since some of them continuously mingle dramatic and postdramatic elements on many different levels, in changing hierarchical ways, on varying levels of intensity and in ever shifting settings, Bouko follows a rather inductive route and departs from some 40 plays that she considers postdramatic enough to contain the necessary conditions and characteristics, singling out five criteria that help to narrow down their postdramatic content.

First of all, she claims for a historical terminus that does not take into account artists born before the years 1940 (pioneers like Grotowski or Barba), a caesura that seems a bit awkward and does not fully exploit, for instance, Karen Jürs-Mundby’s situational sketch of the ‘Post-1960s institutional context’ (see her excellent ‘Introduction’ to the English translation of *Postdramatic Theatre*, pp. 7-9) nor Lehmann’s own continuation of Szondi’s project on the crisis of drama, two epistemological overviews of some major historical and artistic revisions that occurred throughout the twentieth century and do not fancy fixed dates.

Another question concerns the way historical incisions (p. 30, ‘la seconde génération’), affect a geographical distribution. Do all artists living in the eighties belong to a second generation? Do they all have to refer to the same series of founding fathers? What to do with the hundreds of American and Australian directors not mentioned, with the Spanish Fura dels Baus, the Greek Theodoros Terzopoulos or the Turkish Sahika Tekand, etc...? And since many Belgian productions are discussed in this book, why not

referring to the postdramatic works of that other and third famous Jan, Jan Decorte, the third partner in this triumvirate that so profoundly shook the theatrical landscape in the eighties (since 1982)? And why not referring to Jan Joris Lamers or Gerardjan Rijnders, two of the revolutionary minds at work in Dutch theatre?

Bouko's second criterion in delimiting postdramatic productions concerns the textocentrism, its demands and construction, especially elaborated through the differences Richard Schechner made in the eighties between 'drama', 'script', 'theatre' and 'performance' and that were meant especially for the contemporary American 'avant-garde'. Third and (probably) main criterion is the presence and manifestation of 'theatricality' ('théâtralité'), an important and difficult notion, since so many varied settings and multiple contexts seem to imply it. Fourth criterion concerns the aestheticism of the so called 'sphinx or opaques signs' that keep the whole process of signification in a state of suspension, without returning to or becoming fixed in a conceptual way. Fifth category, in the stricter modelling that Bouko wants to propose, concerns the frequent transition between artistic means and settings, especially the ongoing combination of different theatrical languages that preserve both representational and performative dimensions.

Surely, all five criteria are interesting fields of discussion and the author integrates a lot of French theatrical research to illustrate her points of view. But do they, in a substantial way, really narrow down the notion of the postdramatic, and do they turn Lehmann's comprehensive theory into a more scientific and closed model? A great number of problems that could be helpful to realise such a result are not among the most easiest to deal with. Is the author using an inductive methodology to come to her five restrictions, or does she (secretly, or unconsciously) work with a deductive pattern of thoughts? Is it possible or even advisable to finally arrive at a black box solution where all concerned productions obey to the same patterns? Is the author aware of her position within the human sciences, where different types of epistemology reign, and does she differentiate enough between an empiricist and post-empiricist philosophy of science? Would a list of forty other postdramatic productions have resulted into other conclusions? Can any analysis based upon the study of forty examples pretend to be more than a just a freewheeling exercise? Is this a list of productions actually seen by the author and therefore 'useful'? And concerning the extension of the corpus: what quantifications are needed in order to be acceptable on an empirical scale? General and broader assumptions like these govern the epistemological status of theatrical studies as such, and some of them had important consequences in the past: when applied to a definition of the notions of 'tragedy' and the 'tragic condition', it appeared that neither of

them could be 'defined' just along deductive nor inductive lines (see Eagleton's sarcasm in the first chapter 'A Theory in Ruins', in *Sweet Violence*, 2002).

The second part of this book deals with the notions of sign and semiotic processes. The main question here is the search for an 'appropriate' theory, one that 'suits' the particular composition of the postdramatic theatrical sign. Although it is obvious that linguistic and literary theories based upon structuralist tenets and on a more or less closed system do not do justice to the nature of the opaque and not transparent new kinds of signs, it is less obvious where to find this more appropriate semiotic theory. A common solution is to turn to the American 'school' that relies upon Peircean criteria and to focus upon the concrete situation of sign users. Codes are not given beforehand but have to arise in concrete pragmatic situations. This is the option that Bouko develops and heavily relying upon Peircean descriptions of the iconic sign, she tries to adapt the whole of his sign system to the functioning of postdramatic theatrical units. Signs are combined into systems that take the form of multisensorial and thematic isotopies and, in their midst, meaning remains a floating and allegoric experience. Clearly, in dealing with these 'floating' layers of experience, Bouko prefers a more cognitive and intellectual approach and turns for confirmation and further elaboration to the semiotics of Umberto Eco's *Lector in Fabula*, a model that invokes the addressee in terms of his intellectual competence and an encyclopedic knowledge strong enough to activate the meaning of the work. The spectator is supposed to question his own socio-cultural parameters and to try to make sense of what he sees in terms of existing and not yet existing isotopies. Since he is teased to question all (dramatic) codes involved, the spectator addresses 'une compétence' that urges him to leave the usual codes and invites him to go for an 'iconic reception'. However, this spectator always ends up 'dramatising' the performance ('le spectateur finit toujours par dramatiser', p. 193), even if he is confronted with a spectacle that no longer relies on previously known forms of representation. Hence, the final conclusion of Part Two can only lead to a radical confirmation of an intellectual approach: 'Les dispositifs postdramatiques réclament toujours une approche intellectuelle' (p. 193).

The third part called 'Communication théâtrale et modèles coopératifs' (pp. 195-241) enlarges the issues handled in part two. Now the spectator is no longer seen in his function as a model, one who performs acts of 'desemiotization' in a type of iconic reception, to be followed later on by acts of 'semiotization' as part of an unavoidable mandate for a new dramatisation, but as an empiric spectator. This new perspective needs a theoretical reorientation, since it has to turn to a more systemic point of view. This entails that spectators are seen now as members of a cultural community, one that

makes them create and formulate endless series of rules and regulations. This new approach is supposed to bridge the gap between the individual dimension of the spectator and the collective dimensions of a spectatorial activity. Personal encyclopedic competences are left for constraints that have to be shared by other members of the cultural community and that are imposed by the type of spectacular events as promoted by the theatrical institution. For this transition towards of a more systemic approach, the author situates her discussion on the level of its communicational aspects, and in order to open up its pragmatic dimension, she starts to use some notions derived from sociologists (Goffman's *frame analysis* and *symbolic interaction*) and anthropologists (Winkin's anthropology of communication) This decision enlarges in fact her earlier decision to opt for a Peircean analysis that thrives upon the concrete situation of the sign user and at the same time, it opens the way for a more extended use of Goffman's analysis of society as a non homogeneous series of settings. When studied in a Peircean/Goffmanian way, a postdramatic performance asks for a triple framing ('un triple cadrage postdramatique'), since each individual introduces first primary cultural frames, adapts them during each theatrical and dramatic performance (secondary framing, or first process of 'keying') and finally, when confronted with the disturbing effects of a postdramatic staging, he needs to enter a tertiary framing (or second 'keying') that often enough leads him outside cultural legitimation.

From a theoretical point of view, this book asks a number of justified questions and develops a methodology that leads to interesting results. One could qualify it as an attempt to define more appropriate ways of understanding postdramatic theater, and the largely semiotic and sociological perspectives help a lot to understand what categories are involved. Since 'Firstness' can be conceived as involving emotional aspects, and 'Secondness', in its wake, can be seen as an energetic effort, it is only in a third semiotic movement that 'sensitive interpretation' is transcended and results into a logical interpretant, a semiotic effect that, in Peirce's eyes, constitutes the highest and final step of semiotics. The purely iconic dimension, ungraspable in always new and never seen or experienced postdramatic situations, often revealing itself in series of opaque signs (pure nakedness, excitement, chaos...), finally gets at rest and finds a place and a function for itself, but cannot help to be conceptualized, and hence tamed, as the third step, as a kind of victorious overview in the mind of the logical interpretant, bringing the interpretation at rest.

At this very moment, however, one has to ask for the general cultural and even ideological value and relevance of this type of research and for the importance the postdramatical theatre claimed since the late eighties. A Peircean semiotics being more

indicated for classifying and interpreting the presence of signs, and being more interested in searching for points where meaning finally comes to a point of rest, definitely has been relieved, the last decades, by poststructuralist practices that are better suited for the interpretation of unsettled aspects of the signs, for an appreciation of their extra-cognitive aspects, and for a search for the restlessness of the endless track. In his 2002 article 'De grenzen van de semiotiek'<sup>1</sup> ['The limits of semiotics'], the Belgian theatre scholar and founder of the Jan Fabre Institute at Antwerp University, Prof. Luc Van den Dries, already pointed at necessary shifts within these paradigmatic fields and applied a new poststructuralist methodology in all of his publications on Fabre. When no longer theater aims at the *focus* but rather on the *flux*, he said, when it is more interested in libidinal forces and energetic streams (see Lyotard and his introduction of the notion of 'somatographie'), when a 'body-in-desire' explicitly resists any possession by a colonizing system, then a radical other methodology seems appropriate, one that already Artaud inaugurated with his 'Body-without-Organs' ['Corps-sans-Organes'] and that was continued and fully explored by Deleuze & Guattari (1972). Indeed, poststructuralism developed a theoretical possibility and a new meta-language to situate the continuous transformation of energy on the stage and to discuss numbers of nomadic and iconic states that drove bodies to states of orgasm, exhaustion or excitement. Christel Stalpaert, editor of an excellent book on Jan Lauwers<sup>2</sup>, mentioned very hastily by Bouko on p. 78, but continuously used by her, applied this poststructuralist methodology in nearly all of her publications on postdramatic theatre. The same goes for the French theatre scholars Nicolas Redout and Céline Astrié in all of their publications on the *Tragedia Endogonia* by Romeo Castellucci<sup>3</sup>. Reasons enough to ask oneself whether Bouko was right in her decision to opt for a semiotic rather than for a poststructuralist methodology, when dealing with postdramatic theater. Her use of older semiotic (Peirce) and sociologic models (Goffman, not quoted in the first editions of his books, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, dating from 1959, not from 1990, which is only a later edition; id. for *Les Rites d'Interaction*, 1967 instead of 1974) does not allow her to cope 'sufficiently' with the important notions of intensity and energy as present in Fabre's productions (see her discussion of Fabre's *L'Ange de la Mort* for instance, on the pages 204-208, that implies so much more than an interchange of the facial activities between stage and spectator she mentioned). But here again, my own

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<sup>1</sup> Luk van den Dries, 'De grenzen van de semiotiek', in: Luk van den Dries, Steven De Belder, Koen Tachelet (Eds.), *Verspeelde Werkelijkheid / Verkenningen van Theatraliteit*, Van Halewyck, Antwerpen 2002, pp. 21-38.

<sup>2</sup> Christel Stalpaert e.a. (Eds.), *No Beauty For Me There. On Jan Lauwers' Theatre Work with Needcompany*, Gent, 2007, Academia Press

<sup>3</sup> *Tragedia Endogonia* di Romeo Castellucci, Idioma Clima Crono, Cesena, I-XI, 2002-2004.

notion of a 'sufficient' analysis can only be made in terms of the epistemological and ideological conditions of the type of research it enhances. Ultimately, what this important book on the position of the postdramatic spectator lacks, is a level of methodological consciousness that takes into account contemporary changes in the self-image of whole cultures.

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