

CONTROVERSY

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The Ethics of Encounter in Contemporary Theater Performances

What relationships do Theatre and Performance Studies maintain with ethical questions? First, I will outline the ethical aspects related to the emergence and development of Performance and Theatre Studies, secondly, I will relate my thoughts to the other contributions in this series, and thirdly, I will present Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics as a model for Theater Studies performance analysis.

1. Ethical Aspects of the Emergence and Development of Performance Studies and Theatre Studies

Dramatic arts, speech and music theater acts, performances, dance, films and other audiovisual media, cultural performances (from carnivals to gay pride parades) and all kinds of performances (from academic lectures to truth finding commissions) are currently understood as fields of research in Theatre Studies. Since its emergence in Berlin in the 1920s, Theatre Studies has developed a considerable diversity in terms of its content and method: while European Theatre Studies usually distinguishes between theatre arts and social performances, this separation does not hold in Asia, where an understanding of theatre and dance as art forms only emerged due to Western influences. While at U.S.-American and British universities, Theatres Studies and practical training in theater and performance are usually housed in a joint ›Drama Department‹, scientific and artistic research are often situated further apart in continental Europe due to the institutional separation of academic and artistic universities. Thus, there can be no general approach to the question as to what kind of relationship Theatre Studies and Performance Studies have in reference to ethical questions. In any event, it must be addressed in connection with the great diversity of international Theatre Studies, which also means that one's own perspective must also be embedded in its local context. My perspective has been shaped by US-American Performance Studies as well as by German-speaking Theatre Studies. Richard Schechner, who is known today as the founder of Performance Studies, first offered a course on »Performance Theory« at New York University in 1979 (1998, 357–363). Performance Studies allow performances from different cultures to be included within Theatre

Studies: religious and spiritual rituals, games and fights, initiation and other rites are all regarded as performances that, in the context of performance studies, have made their way into and transformed scholarly reflection.¹ The interest of Performance Studies in critically engaging with society and scholarship is explicitly shared by in the field: »Many who practice performance studies do not aspire to ideological neutrality. In fact, a basic theoretical claim is that no position is neutral.« (Schechner 2002, 2)

German-speaking Theatre Studies are – in comparison to literary studies – a young discipline. Max Herrmann, founder of the first institute in Berlin in 1923, was killed by the Nazis in the concentration camp Theresienstadt; at the same time, others who actively supported Nazi ideology founded Theatre Studies departments, which they continued to head long after 1945 (cf. Fischer-Lichte 1994, 17 f.). At the same time, there is also work being done that addresses the social taboos related to the Nazi crimes and their aftermath, for example in the work of Elfride Jelinek, where Theatre Studies also reflects its own problematic history as a discipline (ibid.). Max Herrmann's perspective, which focuses on theatre *performance* (and not on the dramatic text) as the main object of research for Theatre Studies, was widely received in cultural studies during the *performative turn* of the 1990s (Fischer-Lichte 1994, 42–63). In performance, the relation between the performers and the spectators comes into focus and, over the past decade (post-9/11), the question as to how spectators (can) respond to others' suffering has been frequently addressed. While canonic theatre texts such as Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* used dramatic plots to present ethical questions, contemporary theatre performs them with the help of implicit and explicit audience involvement. This has also been a result of the recurrent processing after 9/11 within the performing arts and media arts. Through reflecting on the politics of the nation-state, transnational warfare and collapsing economies, the areas of interest within German-speaking Theatre Studies have merged to meet those of international Performance Studies.

This fragmentary outline shows that the disciplines of Theatre Studies and Performance Studies have been fraught with ethical questions and problems since the very beginning. In addition to the *implicit* ethical questions in Theatre Studies, *explicit* debates around ethical questions have been growing for several years now. In 2005, Bonnie Marranca interviewed the US-American theatre and opera director Peter Sellars on »Ethics and Theatre« (2005, 36–53). In December 2008, the first issue of *Performing Ethos: An International Journal of Ethics in The-*

¹ The Department of Performance Studies, which Schechner still heads today, is currently influenced by exponents of Latin American, Asian and Queer Studies, who continually expand Performance Studies through their contributions on intercultural research. Among them are José Muñoz, Diana Taylor and Karen Shimakawa (for publications, see publication list).

*atre and Performance*² appeared, the following year the first English-language monograph *theatre & ethics* (Ridout 2009) is published, and in 2011 my book appeared, *Das Drama des Prekären. Über die Wiederkehr der Ethik in Theater und Performance* («The drama of the precarious. On the return of ethics in theatre and performance»), the first monograph in German on ethical questions in contemporary theatre (Pewny 2011). These publications also provide points of connection for literary studies.

2. The Controversial Debate surrounding Ethics in Literary Studies – the Story so Far

I propose that considering ethical questions within Theatre Studies can productively contribute to the debate on ethics and literary studies. Here, Theatre Studies serves as an example of a »new ethical criticism« (Groeben 2011, 136) formulated over the past decade. The adaption of Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics as a model for performance analysis relates to performances rather than readings of text. The extent to which this could be of use for analyzing text in literary studies is an interesting point of discussion for a future article. Before I go into detail, I would first like to restate some of the arguments and considerations that have come up in some of the previous contributions.

At the beginning of the debate on ethics and literary studies, Peter J. Rabinowitz (*JLT* 4:1, 2010) and Marshall W. Gregory (*JLT* 4:2, 2010) discussed ethics in teaching university classes and literary analysis: Rabinowitz declared that he does not teach *The Story of O.* in his classes, as to not expose the female and male students to a situation where potentially uncomfortable fantasies may emerge. Gregory outlines the return of ethics that, as he claims, have been looked down upon in postmodernism, after 9/11, and presents a poetry analysis based on »invitations and aesthetic tactics« in literary texts (Gregory 2010, 291). Both authors strongly support ethical considerations in teaching and research on literature. Rabinowitz sums it up as follows: »I share, not surprisingly, Marshall Gregory's position that we *cannot* separate the ethical from the aesthetic, no matter how much ethical criticism is maligned.« (Rabinowitz 2010, 159) The author sees reading as a social, and thus relational, activity. : »*reading is a social activity* [...] Thus, more often than not, reading puts you in relationships with other readers or potential readers« (ibid., 159–160). This applies even more to theatre performances. Because

² This issue includes articles on the following topics: Ethics of representation (gender, class, ethnicity, morality, authenticity etc); Ethics of witnessing and spectatorship; Ethics in relation to inter- and intra-culturalism; Ethics of applied and interventionist theatre, including community theatre, theatre for development, theatre and education, theatre and health; Critical perspectives on ethically motivated performance; Performance, ethics and the law; Ethical practices in the creative industries (including training, employment, sustainability).

those who go to the theatre almost always share a public space with each other and with the performers, the latent relationships during reading become manifest when one goes to the theatre. Theatre performances (insofar as they are dramatic or narrative) entail both relations between figures on stage/in the story on the inner-scene axis and relations to the spectators on the outer-scene axis. The question that arises, however, (both in literature and in the performing arts) is if relationality implies ethics or ethical questions per se. Is there an abundance of ethical relations within theatre performances because they create relationships and, when does it make sense to pose ethical questions? Norbert Groeben, the author of the third contribution dealing with ethics and literary studies, poses a similar question to the first two authors: does it always make sense to make ethical judgments?

Gregory discusses, among other things, the (post-structuralist) explanation that everything is constructed and thus ethically relative – which is indeed open to criticism as the generalization of a relativism that through that generalization becomes a contradiction in itself and thus self-defeating (2010, 275 f., 291 f.). In my view, this criticism is entirely correct. Nonetheless, even at this stage, it must be pointed out that it is not correct to argue in reverse and infer from the demonstration that ethical judgments can be made the (overgeneralizing) thesis that they universally should be made [...].
(Groeben 2011, 131 f.)

If ethical effects of reading a text are possible, *then* Groeben calls for an empirical analysis of the effects of texts on their readers, without however specifying possible methods for doing so.

In conclusion: a »new« ethical criticism has a much, much stronger position if it abandons the incoherent, overgeneralizing thesis that ethical evaluation is universally unavoidable and develops those areas in which ethical judgments are indeed rationally justified in the context of the scholarly analysis of literature. This justification should consider the different content (and thus the more or less ethical *potential effect*) of texts just as much as the distinction between dimensions of textual effect (»central« or »lateral«) – and above all the systematic empirical observation of (ethically relevant) textual effects, in order to be able to undertake ethical evaluations on the basis of them.
(ibid., 135 f.)

I share Groeben's insight that certain texts and theatrical performances can potentially have ethical effects. In contemporary drama examples of this are theatre texts about the wars in Iraq and Lebanon, and in German-speaking countries theatre texts about the traumata of the Holocaust. In other performance formats, such as in performance and dance, forms of cooperation – and thus questions of relations – are currently presented quite often, for example in the works of the artist twin deufert & plischke. My thesis is that literary and Theatre Studies can establish a meaningful relationship with ethical questions, firstly, when a specific model that raises ethical questions is applied and, secondly, when concrete artistic material that (here, I share Groeben's view) implicitly or explicitly raises ethical questions is analyzed. Marshall Gregory's proposal to consider the »ethical invitations«

(Gregory, 291) that the texts convey to their readers can be viewed as a concrete point of departure. Gregory assumes that the self as well as ethical judgments are formed by our responses to the »invitations« that we are met with in the world: »As we respond to the world's invitations in this way or that way, we make up a self out of these responses« (ibid.) In my research on the theatre of the precarious, the object of my analyses are thus performances that do not represent anything »social« of any kind, but rather explicitly deal with vulnerability and suffering, which I analyze with an adaptation of Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics (Pewny 2011).

3. Lévinas's Ethics of Encounter as a Model for Performances Analysis

Recent Theatre Studies publications (by Nicholas Ridout, Peggy Phelan, Hans-Thies Lehmann, Ulrike Haß) that tie in with ethics refer to Lévinas's ethics of subject constitution; I develop this at length elsewhere (2011) and will sum my arguments up in the following:

Emmanuel Lévinas was born in Kaunas (Lithuania) in 1906. In 1923 he moves to France where he lives until his death in 1995. In Lévinas's ethics, the encounter of the self with the other is central because it constitutes the subject status of the self *through responsibility for the other*. Both aspects are indivisibly interconnected because, for the philosopher, the self becomes human by acknowledging the other (1982, 78). In Lévinas's thinking, acknowledging the other means that the self steps out of relatedness to itself and into difference to itself. The humanity of the self exists in the acknowledgement of the mortality of the other and in making the other's concerns one's own. The exposure of the other is an invocation, command or assignment for the self to show responsibility (Lévinas 1902, 163). I translate the Lévinasian ethics of encounter into theatrical performances and assert: the ethics of theatrical performances consist of *how* the other faces the spectators. In other words, theatrical performances are an encounter with the other, if possibilities are opened up to the spectators to respond to the vulnerability of the other. *How* these possibilities take shape, are both the ethics and aesthetics of the performances. As in Lévinas, where each subject constitutes itself through the invocation of the other, the audience only becomes an audience vis-à-vis the performance. The spectators regard the other nolens volens, while and as soon as they assume their positions (as spectators) that, in turn, are only constituted through the encounter with the vulnerable other. Regardless if the spectators are obviously involved in a performance or appear to be passively sitting in their seats, every position they assume is a response to the claim of the other – insofar as it has been assigned to them.

Theatre performances that raise ethical questions offer *possible* stances as responses to the claim of the other. The possible responses however must remain offers, for they are located on an ethical (and not a moral) plane, they can neither

be prescribed nor thoroughly reconstructed. Similar to the political, the ethical is not primarily to be found in the substances, but rather in the forms (of perception) of post-dramatic contemporary theatre (Lehmann 199, 471). I will explain below how this can be done, and offer a concrete example.

In 2006, theatre scholar Bonnie Marranca interviewed Peter Sellars on ethics and performance (2006, 36–53). His production *For An End to the Judgment of God/Kissing God Goodbye*, which he presented in autumn 2004 at the renowned *Redcat Theatre* in Los Angeles, is an excellent example of an evening of theatre ›post 9/11‹.³ *For An End to the Judgment of God/Kissing God Goodbye* is performed after George W. Bush's first term and one and a half years into the Iraq war, briefly before the presidential elections. The stage is empty except for a high desk facing the audience. John Malpede is dressed in an American admiral's uniform and holds a monologue from Antonin Artaud's radio play *For An End to the Judgment of God* (Artaud 1946). After a slow start, Malpede begins to speak more quickly, as his bodily movements visibly become less and less coherent. At the same time, rotating pictures from the Vietnam War are displayed on the back stage wall. The scene comes to an end when a performer stands up in the middle of the audience and recites author June Jordan's poem *Kissing God Goodbye*. Jordan's poem critically questions Christianity's story of creation and the imagination of a god who determines life and death. Towards the end of the poem, more and more names are called of people, who – and that remains unclear – are dead or the living who love the dead: »And so the names become the names of the dead and the living who love« (Jordan 1997, 96). Calling these names of people out loud summons the dead. Because the proper names, which turn out to be the »names of the of the dead and the living who love«, are common names like Mike, Steven, Sara, Nancy, the spectators may hear their own names, or insert their names into the blank space »the names of the ... living who love«: »And out of that scriptural scattershot our names become the names of the dead.« (ibid., 98) A third possibility is to incorporate the names of the »dead« and the »living who love« into their memory. The names of the dead are clearly discernible *traces* of the other. The other is not represented – Lévinas also does not necessarily aim to create an encounter between two people – on the contrary, with him, it is often unclear if the other is divine or human (cf. Ridout 2008, 54–61). The encounter with the traces of the other precedes the situation in the theatre, just as the other precedes the self in Lévinas's model. They are the dead and those who remember them. This means that the status of the figure on stage cannot be ontologically distinguished from other theatrical elements.

In summary, this means:

³ I am referring to the performance on 21 October 2004. The radio play of the same name by Antonin Artaud from 1946 and the American author June Jordan's poem *Kissing God Goodbye* serve as theatre texts, cf. Artaud 2002 and Jordan 1997, 91–100.

1. Due to their history (intercultural critique and the Nazi crimes committed), ethical questions are self-evident in Performance Studies and Theatre Studies.
2. Ethical dimensions of theatrical performances cannot be grasped using a generally applicable method in the sense of an unchanging approach that is also useful for the analysis of different works of art. Therefore, Lévinas's ethics of subject constitution cannot be applied to all (post-dramatic) theatre performances, but it is useful for performances that confront spectators with a vulnerable position (of the other).
3. In such performances, which I call the theatre of the precarious, ethical and aesthetic dimensions are inseparable because the position of the audience constitutes itself through the encounter with the (vulnerable) other. This can take place in many different ways (through embodiment and/or obvious absence of the theatrical representation of the other).

The presence of Lévinas's ethics in the »new ethical criticism« of literary and Theatre Studies may indicate that a paradigm shift is currently taking place, shifting ways of thinking about the other from psychoanalysis towards phenomenology. A further question could be if Lévinas's ethics of encounter could also be applied to reading text within literary studies.

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