

How to Analyse Theatre in a Social Context?

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Joshua Edelman, Louise Ejgod Hansen and Quirijn Lennert van den Hoogen. *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy - Analysing Theatre as a Social Practice*.

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Joshua Edelman, Louise Ejgod Hansen and Quirijn Lennert van den Hoogen are three researchers who specialise in contemporary arts, theatre and theatre systems. Their book *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy - Analysing Theatre as a Social Practice* tackles an interesting dilemma. We perceive theatre and theatrical performance as something special, something different than everyday social activity, however, this same theatre practice is dependent upon non-artistic social fields, as it is one of the most expensive artistic genres and it relies on a collective reception. As the authors pose in their main research question: "How is it, then, that, theatre is distinct from – and yet connected to – the social world around it?" (11). It is a very interesting topic as theatre is indeed a rather heterogeneous artistic field with a number of genres, different types of organisation, financing systems, etc. It is thus necessary to analyse it not only from within the field, but also from the perspective of its position within a particular society. Furthermore, this question is relevant for artists who claim their position within a society, for policy makers who decide on different kinds of support for the arts, politicians who seeks arguments for supporting arts and culture in general, etc.

The authors offer theatrical autonomy as an answer to the above question. Theatrical autonomy is a concept that stems from Pierre Bourdieu's work about the aesthetic field, where he argues that autonomy and self-referentiality are at the core of the arts and aesthetics in general. The authors discuss in great detail the criticism of Bourdieu and other theorists of the arts sociology (for example, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot). In the end they come up with their own definition of theatre autonomy: "Theatre is autonomous to the extent that it pursues its own value" (27). Nevertheless, the concept of theatre autonomy is not easily described, as it is always renegotiated and thus changing. As the authors conclude in the end: "We have not set ourselves the task of describing or defining this value specific to the theatre field" (199). They state three reasons, but for the sake of illustration, I will cite only the first one: "We argue that any formulation of the nature of specific value can be only temporary as the very

nature of theatre fields – or art fields in general – is that they resist strict definitions” (Ibid.). Thus they try to negatively define that art does not pursue economic values nor stable content or formal patterns.

It is true that it is probably impossible to define the theatre field and its autonomy on an abstract level, but it is necessary if we want to discuss the subject. For this reason, the authors discuss theatrical autonomy from different angles (“The concept of artistic autonomy”, “Autonomy in the contemporary theatre”, “How agents in theatre fields make use of claims to autonomy”) for more than one-half of the book. It proves that the authors have not taken an easy path, but at the same time it does little to clarify the main questions, being, why and how is theatre a social practice, and how should we analyse it to take this into consideration.

Despite all the precaution taken to avoid defining theatrical autonomy, it seems that the authors have decided that the basic features of theatrical autonomy are freedom of speech, creativity, and symbolic capital in opposition to economic capital. With this notion they analyse connections between the theatre field and the rest of society in the last two, and by my opinion, most interesting chapters: “How theatre organization shapes claims to autonomy”, and “How claims to autonomy serve those outside theatre fields”. Here, the authors give a good overview of funding systems (governmental, through different agencies, private funds, private sponsors, ticket sales, etc.), possible connections to the audience, other social fields, and different approaches that have extra-theatrical goals (that is, moral betterment, education, self-representation, economic development, social inclusion). Here it seems that a decision for the above-mentioned definition of theatre autonomy tends to marginalise theatre genres that do not pursue exclusively aesthetic values (that is, social theatre). Thus the authors conclude that theatre has to fight for or persist at its autonomy in order to be able to maintain its place in the society.

Stemming from this definition of autonomy, the authors detect different relationships between theatre and society: 1) media that provide stimulation for productions and a channel between theatre and general public; 2) the direct relationship to the audience; 3) the relationship to the general public that has not seen the production, but has an opinion about it; 4) the funding bodies or authority. These relationships are constantly changing and being re-negotiated, but it is important that theatrical analysis takes them into account.

As I have already mentioned, the aim of this book is to set before a reader a methodological overview, a tool for examination of concrete historical cases. It is on this level that these concepts come alive and give us new insights. It is an approach that has already been used by different authors (for example, Jean Duvignaud in *Sociologie*

du théâtre; essai sur les ombres collectives, various essays by Dragan Klaić and others). What is new here is the fact that theatre autonomy is offered as a key concept.

Nevertheless, it is true that such an approach gives us a better understanding of what was or is going on in a particular period of time and theatre system. Researchers in the sociology of theatre have already done similar analyses for Eastern European theatre under Communism (*The Dissident Muse: Critical Theatre in Central and Eastern Europe 1945–1989*). A more thorough one for Slovenian theatre can be found in my monography *Ujetniki svobode* (Captives of Freedom, 2016).

If such research were to have been done on a regional level and in a wider research group, it would probably test and confirm the proposed methodology even further. It would also enable us to rewrite a theatre history in a way that could give justice to the complexity of our research subject.

For whom can such an analysis be useful? For a number of recipients: firstly, for theatre scholars and students, as they can grasp theatre in its complexity inside the society; secondly, for theatres that seek new ways of connecting to their audience, funders and other social fields; thirdly, for authorities when they are thinking of the potentials theatre/arts have in a society.

The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy is thus a book that opens up an interesting and necessary debate in theatre analysis. It is arguable whether theatrical autonomy, being a concept that is almost impossible to define without a certain amount of reductionism, can be the key concept in further research on theatre sociology, but precisely the research of concrete cases will answer this question. It is therefore a valuable book that will help any researcher or student rethink his or her methodological approach.