

Return to Paris: Thomas Ostermeier and the performatization of the gay identity

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ABSTRACT – Return to Paris: Thomas Ostermeier and the performatization of the gay identity

– In his productions, the German director Thomas Ostermeier proposes a sociological approach that seeks to present our contemporary age's social relations and power structures. What are the obstacles to achieving these goals when the focus rests on the intersection of the axes of oppression through race, class and gender? This essay investigates the contradictions inherent in Ostermeier's self-declared sociological realism, reflecting on the plays *Retour à Reims* [Return to Reims] (2019) and *Histoire de la Violence* [History of Violence] (2020), based on the homonymous literary works by Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis, respectively.

Keywords: **German Theater, Thomas Ostermeier, Queer Studies, Contemporary Theater.**

RÉSUMÉ – Retour à Paris: Thomas Ostermeier et la performatisation de l'identité gay

– Dans ses performances, le metteur en scène allemand Thomas Ostermeier propose une approche sociologique qui cherche à exposer les relations et les structures de pouvoir de notre contemporanéité. Quels sont les obstacles à la réalisation de ces objectifs lorsque l'accent est mis sur l'intersection des axes d'oppression de la race, de la classe et du sexe? Le présent essai cherche à enquêter sur les contradictions inhérentes au réalisme sociologique autoproclamé d'Ostermeier à partir de la réflexion sur les spectacles *Retour à Reims* (2019) et *Histoire de la Violence* (2020), basées sur les œuvres littéraires homonymes respectives de Didier Eribon et Édouard Louis.

Mots-clés: **Théâtre allemand, Thomas Ostermeier, Études Queer, Théâtre contemporain.**

RESUMO – Retorno a Paris: Thomas Ostermeier e a performatização da identidade gay

– Em seus espetáculos, o diretor alemão Thomas Ostermeier propõe uma abordagem sociológica que procura encenar as relações e as estruturas de poder de nossa contemporaneidade. Quais são os obstáculos à concretização de tais objetivos quando o foco recai sobre o entrecruzamento dos eixos de opressão de raça, classe e gênero? O presente ensaio busca investigar as contradições inerentes ao autodeclarado realismo sociológico de Ostermeier a partir da reflexão sobre os espetáculos *Retour à Reims* [Retorno a Reims] (2019) e *Histoire de la Violence* [História da Violência] (2020), baseados nas respectivas obras literárias homônimas de Didier Eribon e Édouard Louis.

Palavras-chave: **Teatro Alemão, Thomas Ostermeier, Estudos Queer, Teatro Contemporâneo.**



It is about taking into consideration not only other “sexual identities” (bisexuality, transgenderism), but also the way ethnic, racial, national, social groups, etc., conceptualize or experience sexuality, discarding the privileged model of the white middle-class urban point of view.

(Eribon, 2003)

Introduction

In 2004, exactly fifty years after the first season of the Berliner Ensemble (Bertolt Brecht’s theater company) in Paris, the also German Thomas Ostermeier was appointed associate artist of the Avignon Festival¹, putting on four shows that year: *Woyzeck*, *Nora (The Doll’s House)*, *Concert à la carte* and *Disco Pigs*. That appointment is quite revealing of how Ostermeier’s production was received in the country which, unlike what happened with the late French absorption of Brechtian poetics clearly registered in the writings of Roland Barthes², took place in the midst of one of the director’s most productive periods, as evidenced by the Molière Prize he received in 2019 for his adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* at the Comédie Française.

Since then, Ostermeier has premiered several shows in Paris, most notably those presented at the Théâtre de la Ville, namely: *Death in Venice (Mort à Venise, 2014)*, *An enemy of the people (L’ennemi du peuple, 2014)*, *The marriage of Maria Braun (Le mariage de Maria Braun, 2015)*, *Return to Reims (Retour à Reims, 2019)* and *History of Violence (Histoire de la Violence, 2020)*. From this specific set of works, it is possible to observe some general characteristic traits in their productions: firstly, they demonstrate a contemporary intra and intercontinental mode of production, through which the shows are made possible through co-productions and correlations between theatrical institutions from different countries that, in turn, define the touring circuit of the works (Poirson; Barbéris, 2016, p. 95). *Histoire de la Violence* (2020) is a case in point. Although it premiered at the Schaubühne in Berlin, it was co-produced by three other institutions: the Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles and St. Ann’s Warehouse-Brooklyn divided the work with the Théâtre de la Ville.

These five performances also suggest Ostermeier’s (2016, p. 41) distrust of the abandonment of the text mandated by German post-dramatic



theater³, indicating the importance that the director places on this scenic element, even if his sources are not exclusively dramaturgical. If his staging of both the classical and contemporary dramaturgies of Henrik Ibsen, William Shakespeare, Georg Büchner, Sarah Kane, John Fosse, among others, are notable, no less so are those that are based on films (as in the case of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*) or on modern (Thomas Mann's novel) or recent literary texts. From this last selection, the last two shows co-produced by the Théâtre de la Ville stand out, namely *Return to Reims* and *History of Violence*. It is on these two productions that this essay intends to focus from now on, but not without first paving the way on the accounts of gay insult elaborated by Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis.

Accounts of insult from Eribon to Louis

Returning to *Reims* (2020) and *History of Violence* (2020) bear some significant similarities. Initially published in France in 2009 (Eribon, 2009) and 2016 (Louis, 2016), respectively, both books exhibit autobiographical features of their authors, offering situated reflections about an aesthetics of gay existence unfolding under the political bias as much as the individual one. Written by Didier Eribon, *Return to Reims* records the French sociologist and journalist's journey back to his homeland after his father's death. Coming from a proletarian family, Eribon, the only one of four brothers to achieve a successful academic career, has a trajectory marked both by his proximity to intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, and by a recurrent interest in the homosexual theme. Whether for his book *Reflections on the Gay Question*, originally published in 1999, or as an organizer of seminars and conferences such as *Les études gay et lesbiennes*, held at the Centre Pompidou in 1997, Eribon is an unavoidable French reference in terms of Francophone gender studies and policies, engaging in fertile dialogues with Monique Wittig, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, among other luminaries in the field.⁴

In many respects, *Return to Reims* (2020) can be considered as the exact complement of *Reflections on the Gay Question*. In the latter book, Eribon offers a breathless synthesis of the discursive productions around the theme, whether through a theoretical interlocation with the intellectuals mentioned above, the historical overview of homosexual existences in the



Euro-American world from the nineteenth century on, or even through the critical reading of the literary output of Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, and André Gide. In a more surgical way, Eribon's book starts from the experience of the insult (the symbolic and/or physical assault) to reveal the tension between domination and emancipation, between the intertwined processes of subjection and subjectivation actuated by gays in the modern world. As expected, the main theoretical reference here is Foucault, whose importance in his thinking can be proven both by Eribon's biography of the author and by the third part of *Reflections on the Gay Question*, entirely dedicated to the movement of Foucauldian thought in which life and work "[...] confuse, respond, transform each other reciprocally" (Eribon, 2008, p. 297).

The premise that governs the entire work is unique: insult is the structuring principle of homosexual subjectivity. On this basis, Eribon strives to conceptually identify the forms of life forged by homosexuals to deviate from the devices of abjection that govern heterosexual thought (Wittig, 1980). In his words,

The experience of physical aggression or the perception of its obsessive threat are so present in the lives of gay men that they are found in almost all autobiographical accounts and in numerous novels whose characters are gay men [...] the possibility of being the object of verbal or physical assault remains omnipresent and, at least, was often determinant in the way gay men built their personal identity, mainly by developing an ability to perceive danger or by learning to control gestures and speech very strictly [. ...] The personality they build, the identity they shape, are they not determined by the psychological consequences of this social position of 'harassed' in everyday life (by insult, mockery, aggression, ambient hostility)? (Eribon, 2008, p. 30-31).

Faced with the omnipresent horizon of insult, the way out found by many homosexuals translates into a kind of migration from small towns to large metropolises. For Eribon (2008, p. 33-34), "[...] homosexuality has a connection with the city [...] It was the city that gave gay lifestyles the possibility to develop fully." Through this psychological and geographical escape, homosexuals redefine their subjectivities creating networks of sociability cadenced by friendships and pleasures. In these contexts, they are able to reinvent their gay identities, juxtaposing them in the visible and sayable spectrums, with the other identity dimensions (professional, social, etc.)

that run through them. This is a “[...] cut in the biography” (Eribon, 2008, p. 37), through which homosexuals reject the subjection to heterosexual thinking, instead aiming at the creative possibilities of reinventing themselves.

But is this cut absolute? Would it be possible to completely abandon the familiar past? Would the refuge in the metropolis be definitive, forever burying the past experiences of insult? Would migration preclude a return? In view of these questions, one can understand the complementary aspects between *Reflections on the gay question* and *Return to Reims*.

As the book’s title suggests, *Return to Reims* (2020) is conceived as a first-person autobiographical account in which Didier Eribon records his return to his hometown. The book, in fact, begins with the author’s biographical cut: his decision to no longer visit his family, his total disinterest in his birthplace. However, after the death of his father from Alzheimer’s disease, Eribon decides to return, this being a geographical and, above all, existential counter-movement:

As soon as he was gone, it became possible for me to undertake this journey or rather this process of return to which I had not been able to commit myself before. To find this ‘region of myself’, as Genet would have said, from which I had tried so hard to escape: a social space that I had put at a distance, a mental space against which I had built myself, but which was nevertheless an essential part of my being. I came to see my mother. It was the beginning of a reconciliation with her. Or, more to the point, with a whole part of myself that I had refused, rejected, denied (Eribon, 2009, p. 12-13)⁵.

The excerpt above makes explicit Eribon’s incapacity to perform the biographical cut in a definitive way. As much as the migration to the big city had permitted the flourishing of a new identity, a counter-identity linked to the original social space of his childhood survives in this identity, even if in a furtive, forgotten, and/or repressed way. The French sociologist resorts to the migration metaphor in his approach to the processes of homosexual subjectivation: such an approach is of utmost importance both in the book and in the show, revealing a non-essentialist investment in the question of identity. Homosexual migration, then, assumes a diasporic dimension, insofar as it sets in motion a split, traversed, unstable identity (Hall, 2013, p. 49). More crucially, the *deontologized* process of gay identity construction is itself a path of disidentification (Muñoz, 2016; Preciado, 2011;



Butler, 2017) that starts from subjection toward subjectivation. As such, the homosexual migration/subjectivation scene constructed by Eribon in his two works performatizes the conflict of forces – attractions, emergences, repressions, repulsions, etc. – between the sexual order and the social one.

To return is to rediscover another of oneself. The return to Reims recorded in one book is the inverted mirror of the flight to Paris theorized in another. The complementarity between the two works does not stop there, but also manifests itself in their discursive diction. If, on the one hand, *Reflections on the Gay Question* is primarily a historical and sociological study that chooses, as objects of analysis, literary and biographical works with an existential background, *Return to Reims* (2020), on the other hand, is conceived as an autobiographical account that does not dispense with theoretical approaches to a set of issues (sexuality, democracy, school system, class struggle, etc.). These two works can be considered, therefore, as a dialectic diptych in which traces, dictions, and positions in one book gain predominance in the other, attesting once again to the mutual dynamic between life and work that Eribon finds in Foucault.

“This book is the story of my life”⁶ – that is how Édouard Louis (2018, p. 1) recounts his first impressions after tearfully concluding the reading of *Retour à Reims* (2020). Born in 1992, the young French writer has had three novels published, all with strong autobiographical elements. Launched in 2014, his debut novel, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014) – *The End of Eddy* – tells of Louis’ traumatic childhood in Amiens, marked by all sorts of homophobic situations. The literary transfiguration⁷ of the years of abjection is also a real act of rupture: the end proposed in the title corresponds to the author’s change of name. Born *Eddy Bellegueule*, Louis reinvents himself, choosing to bury a name that, for him, was associated with the negative ontology that characterizes the gay condition (Louis, 2018b, p. 7). There is, therefore, a strategy that is at least ambiguous in this autobiographical book, insofar as its author’s original baptismal name refers to a social world from which Louis has migrated. The autobiography is thus the registering of a disidentification.

By itself, this ambivalent biographical cut could already reveal the close connection between Louis and Eribon, were it not for the fact that this best-seller is explicitly dedicated to him. The proximity between the two authors does not end there, since Eribon was Louis’ professor and doc-



toral advisor. In the two following works, the dialogue deepens: if, in *History of Violence* (2020) – originally, *Histoire de la violence* (2016) – Louis starts from a real situation, in which he was a victim of rape and robbery by a young Arab during a Christmas night, to reflect on the causes and consequences of social violence, in *Qui a tué mon père* (Louis, 2018a) – *Who killed my father* –, the author reprises the conflicting relationship with his father, as did Eribon in *Return to Reims* (2020).

The complementarity found in *Reflections on the Gay Question* (Eribon, 2008) and *Return to Reims* (2020) is equivalent, in Louis' work, to the increase in complexity around the gay question. In other words, if, in the first works by Eribon and Louis, the conflict between the sexual and social orders is portrayed through the metaphor of migration, in the others, one can see that the issue of migration goes beyond its metaphorical instrumentalization, revealing itself as an extremely relevant vector in an intersectional force field. The axes of class and sexual oppression are traversed by the vectors of ethnic and racial objectification. Both authors unveil what Audre Lorde (2019, p. 241-245) refers to as the “[...] false appearance of a homogeneity of experience” – whether of gender, race, or sex – which, in turn, entails a “[...] destructive and fragmented way of living.” In the case of the two Ostermeier plays analyzed below, the issue is less the recognition of the various ingredients that make up an identity – as Lorde proposes when affirming herself as a *black feminist lesbian* – than the awareness that, in order to suppress homophobia, it is necessary to confront the other forms of oppression. Thus, it may be said that *Retour à Reims* (2019) and *Histoire de la Violence* (2020) depict the contradictions of a historical fact described as follows by Paco Vidarte (2019, p. 163-167):

The overwhelming majority are queer and lesbian people in our Western Euro-American societies who fight for their rights, but not for the rights of any other oppressed minority. [...] By what right are we going to demand from a straight man that he not be homophobic, if we are transphobic or racist? [...] Is the fact of being gay a sufficient justification for not having to take more responsibility regarding society or other types of injustice that have nothing to do with homophobia?

In addition to the questions formulated by Vidarte with the goal of an LGBTQIA+ Solidarity guided by the recognition of a *fabric of micro-discriminations*, others will now be investigated in the two stage adaptations

of Thomas Ostermeier: How does the gay question relate to the proletarian question? How do markers of race and class influence the gay question? Will one minority always be sympathetic to the other? Will one minority always recognize the other? In short, in Ostermeier, how do the resources and mechanisms of performatization combine for the staging of this web of oppressions? Such inquiries are of utmost importance if we wish to properly understand the stage realism conceived by Ostermeier (2016, p. 61), through which the field of forces that impinge on a social context is exposed, thus aspiring to be a *sociological theater*. This *sociological theater*, unlike the post-dramatic fragmentation of capitalist realism characteristic of the German scene (Friques, 2015), reveals a constant concern with recognizing the other. Is the recognition of the other enough? What about the repertoires of representation of that other (Hall, 2016, p. 140)? Do they change or remain intact? Let us now look for the answers in the performances.

Retour à Reims: the dissociation of the confessional self-critique

At first, it seems possible to establish certain connections between Ostermeier's staging and the confessional performative device repeatedly used by the American performer Spalding Gray: on an empty stage, there is only a table with a glass of water, a notebook, a pen, a microphone and a chair. This choice of set adequately reflects the autobiographical bias of Didier Eribon's book, enabling a single character, the narrator of himself, to disclose the memories of past times without mediation. The dissociation of the confessional apparatus is produced by the addition of new elements to this device, in particular, the editing studio found at the bottom right of the stage, and, above all, the huge projection screen that occupies the upper central part of the set. On the screen, the spectator follows the documentary records of Didier Eribon's return to Reims, the stage thus serving as a kind of post-production room.

One could consider *Retour à Reims* (2019) as an unfinished staged documentary, the performance being one of the final phases in its post-production process: the director played by Cédric Eeckhout receives, on the sound editing studio of rapper Blade McAlimbaye, the actress Irène Jacob, who then lends her voice to the work's narration. While the screen displays



images of Eribon's journey to his homeland, with shots of family reunions (especially with his mother) and landscapes around Reims, the audience watches Alimbaye and Eeckhout record Jacob's voiceover, reading some excerpts from the book.

Besides the main action around the documentary in-progress, other situations alternate, in particular the dialogues between the two white actors (Eeckhout and Jacob) concerning contemporary political conflicts. Through the performance, Ostermeier establishes a friction between Eribon's work and recent popular insurgencies, notably the yellow vest demonstrations⁸ (*gilets jaunes*) which took place at the same time as the French run of *Retour à Reims* in 2019. The book justifies this movement, since it contains a segment entirely dedicated to Eribon's observation (extremely timely in France and Brazil) that the working class – which in its infancy would have been ideologically aligned with left-wing parties – was now lending its political support to representatives from the extreme right. The intertwining of the personal and public dimensions is also noticeable here, insofar as Eribon's father personifies the left-wing proletarian while his brothers, the extreme right-wing workers. The distance between the author and his family also provides a justification for this political inversion: for Eribon, the divorce between the proletarian class and the intellectuals and leftist leaders is one of the main factors for the *disidentification* of workers with the ideological program of this political segment.⁹

In his in-progress stage documentary, Thomas Ostermeier endorses Eribon's suggestion that the divorce between workers and progressive governments was one of the catalysts for the contemporary rise of far-right conservatism. However, it is precisely at this point that the show distances itself from the book, since Eribon, in his autobiographical account, approaches this question with the complexity that is inherent to it: the reinvention of himself in his escape to the metropolis caused the sociologist to repress not only the behavioral prejudices that mark the social context of his childhood, but also his connections with an oppressed working class. Eribon's biographical cut also represented his estrangement from the restrictions and social injustices of an entire social group, a divorce that the author tries to repair by rediscovering, on his return, the other of himself.

This self-critical path of the book is greatly diminished in the show, since both the character of the actress and that of the director discuss con-

temporary movements but without making a self critical investment in their positions of enunciation, as Eribon did. Consequently, Ostermeier's production transforms the French sociologist's self-critical exercise into a set of theses shared with an audience that, in general, tends to agree with his opinions about a declared enemy (the extreme right) without any room for doubt or hesitation. Instead of self-criticism, there is consensus. The complexity of Eribon's autobiographical thought seems to unravel in a way equivalent to the separation of the stage resources in this in-progress documentary: the detachment between the audio recording scenes and the images projected on the big screen is also a separation between the biographical dimension and the political thought. At this moment, Blade McAlimbaye enters the scene.

Originally from Normandy, the French-Senegalese rapper Blade McAlimbaye (Panara, 2016) serves an accessory function during much of the show, playing the role of a sound technician who spends a good deal of time in the aquarium located at the back right of the stage, either making technical adjustments or simply observing the scenes. As *Retour à Reims* (2019) draws to a close, Alimbaye takes center stage, occupying the place previously reserved for Jacob. Sitting in the chair in front of the table, he then begins to narrate to his interlocutors the diaspora of his family from Senegal to France, and this is crowned, in the final moment of the show, with a rap that the artist performs for an enthusiastic audience.

The juxtaposition between the autobiographical productions of Eribon and Alimbaye is quite suggestive. On the one side, there is a book in which the sociologist revises his biographical cut theoretically formulated in his *Reflections on the Gay Question* (Eribon, 2008), as evidenced by this excerpt from *Retour à Reims*:

Two paths, then. Intertwined one in the other. Two interdependent trajectories of reinvention of myself: one with regard to the sexual order, the other with regard to the social order. However, when it came to writing, it was the first one that I decided to analyze, the one that has to do with sexual oppression, and not the second one, the one that has to do with social domination, redoubling perhaps through the gesture of theoretical writing what the existential betrayal had been [...] This choice constituted not only a way of defining and subjectifying myself in the present time, but also a choice of my past, of the child and the adolescent that I had been: a gay child, a gay adolescent, and not a son of a worker. And yet! (Eribon, 2018, p. 28-9)¹⁰.



Here, Eribon clearly expresses his conflict in the face of two intertwined personal journeys: homosexual identity and proletarian identity. By defining himself as a class defector with a view to affirming his gay existence in a large metropolis, the author, while maintaining a certain idealized solidarity in relation to minority demands, interrupts any possibility of socialization in his original social context. It is precisely this escape that Eribon seeks to circumvent in *Return to Reims* (2020), even appealing to the thoughts of black authors, notably James Baldwin and John Edgar Wideman, to investigate, from the analytical accounts of their respective family relationships, the dissonances and consonances between social determinisms and identities (sexual, racial, etc.).

On the other hand, Alimbaye's trajectory as a French-Senegalese rapper opens a new scenario of identity claims. Unlike Eribon's theoretical treatises, Alimbaye resorts to a musical genre closely related to affections, sociabilities, and global peripheral agendas, making rap the vehicle par excellence for his opinions and conceptualizations (Panara, 2016). The son of Senegalese parents, Alimbaye was born in France and had a childhood marked by episodes of daily racism. In his debut album, *Bleu: Point Zero* (Bleu, 2015), the artist reviews his journey, making a point of affirming his African roots, denouncing, at the same time, the hypocrisies of French society on the subject. As can be seen in the song *Utopie 98*, especially in the final part, when the voice of actor Jean-Michel Martial unveils the permanence of structural racism from distant facts in time such as the defeat of the French soccer team in the World Cup in South Africa in 2010, and the Colonial Exposition in France in 1931: "The just love victories, when there is victory we are all French, huh! But failures are reduced to their origins: the suburb, the other side of the highway, a color, a religion, of unconscious delirium, of fiction".¹¹

But what one sees on the stage of the Théâtre de la Ville is less the diasporic aesthetic of a rapper of contemporary blackness than Alimbaye representing himself within the framework of a show created by a white German director. As much as the end is dedicated to Alimbaye's presence and to anecdotal evocations of his Senegalese grandfather, Ali M'Baye, the very fact that the rapper is the character of himself raises a question about the instrumentalization of his figure within a fictional universe in which white actors are allowed to play roles other than that of their racial identities. In

other words, while other actors are allowed a process of disidentification from their existential paths considering the representation of other characters, Alimbaye is denied this possibility, as he is imprisoned in his ethnic, geographical and racial representativeness.

In a show about the reinvention of the self and the explicitness of the mechanics of enunciation, such a question is not trivial. It is true that the characters of the director and the actress play a mediating role in the thought movements of Eribon and Alymbaye. But why not establish a direct confrontation between these two paths, banking on a fertile imbrication between sociological treatise and diasporic rap, between biographical cut and fight against oblivion? Why does the conceptual debate staged by the couple of white actors exclude Alimbaye for much of the time? Why does the rapper only have the role of a witness to himself? Even with all its benevolence, isn't *Return to Reims* endorsing, once again, a hierarchical dynamic of enunciations? Might the show not be dramatizing, even if unintentionally, the difficulties of contemporary Euro-American directors in promoting a truly intersectional debate? If *Retour à Reims* (2019) does not provide answers to these questions, let us see if *Histoire de la Violence* (2020) is able to do so.

Histoire de la violence: the mechanics of enunciations

If *Retour à Reims* (Retour, 2019) can be considered as a documentary in progress from Didier Eribon's book of the same name, *Histoire de la violence* (Histoire, 2020) is, like Édouard Louis' novel, a kind of existential autopsy of a traumatic bittersweet Christmas night. The starting point of the novel and the show is Louis' chance encounter with illegal Arab immigrant Riadh B (christened in the fiction as Reda, a *Kabyle*, Moroccan or Algerian, newspapers report) on December 25, 2012. That night, Louis and Reda meet on the streets of Paris and, after a few exchanges of glances, decide to go to the former's apartment to share Christmas caresses.

After some sexual intercourse, the relationship between the two begins to cool down, especially after Louis, fresh out of the shower, suspects that Reda has stolen his cell phone. From there, a game of accusations begins that ends with Louis being raped by Reda, followed by the latter's escape.

Influenced by two friends, Louis – a tall young man with fair skin, blue eyes and a fragile air – then chooses to file a police report against Reda.

In his adaptation, Ostermeier chooses to explicitly transform the stage into a crime scene. For this, the German director keeps the central part of the stage empty, leaving on its perimeter some scenographic elements that, in the flavor of the staged autopsy, are mobilized by the actors: a row of chairs similar to those found in a police waiting room on the back right, a shower on the back central left, a table containing a camera on the left and, in particular, the instrumentalist musician Thomas Witte with his drums on the right side (this last feature is very striking in Ostermeier's aesthetics). Bed, table, armchair, and chairs are brought on stage at certain moments, and at the back of the stage, a screen displays the course of the investigation on several occasions. All this stage equipment is mobilized in a temporal mosaic that alternates, at any given moment, the face-to-face meeting between Louis (Laurenz-Laufenberg) and Reda (Renato Schuch), the former's report to the policemen (Christoph Gawenda and Alina Stiegler) and to his sister and brother-in-law (Gawenda and Stiegler), and also the author's self-critical exercise, generally carried out through a microphone installed on the front right part of the stage. The scenes from *Histoire de la violence* (2019) sometimes follow one another, and other times overlap temporally, as exemplified by the moments in which Louis relives intimate moments with Reda, being simultaneously observed and questioned by police officers or family members.

The temporal simultaneity proposed by Ostermeier's stage device thus contemplates two contrasting modes of autopsy: the police investigation and the scenic-literary reconstitution. On the one hand, the police investigation is enacted and the facts of Christmas night are crystallized into a set of social stereotypes. As such, Louis plays the role of the passive and perverse gay man who seeks to fulfill his insatiable sexual fetishes, while Reda symbolizes the typical object of homosexual desire, managing to survive in Paris as a refugee in exchange for sexual favors. On the other hand, the estrangement in the face of this reductive framework is the object of analysis in the second autopsy performed by Louis: how to deal with the fact of the assault? How to locate the origin of the attack, in the causal chain of events or in social determinations? What to wish for the perpetrator of his rape? Are victim and perpetrator products of a racist and prejudiced society?

Louis responds to this last statement in the affirmative. Thus, to the narrative expropriation that the author witnesses from the moment his sexual reversal becomes a police case, Louis creates a counter-investigation, at once personal and sociological, in order to relativize Reda's responsibility for his actions. In this sense, Louis continues Eribon's effort by showing that "[...] verdicts –woman, poor, black, Arab, gay, trans etc. –fall upon us, making certain experiences and lives impossible." (Louis, 2018b, p. 7)¹². Such a posture endorses the activism of this young French literary phenomenon who, among other public stances, quickly assumed his proletarian origin (unlike Eribon's first moment of flight) and also launched a manifesto in favor of the *gilets jaunes* in the middle of the demonstrations. The responsibility for the violent act suffered by Louis was not, therefore, Reda's, but that of a whole social context marked by racial discrimination and by the unequal distribution of wealth and vulnerability.

The solidarity among the offended in *Histoire de la violence* (2020) does, however, present some contradictions. First of all, we must remember that, in the realm of French *faits divers*¹³, Riadh B was imprisoned for eleven months and claims, in the courts, a confrontation between him and Louis, refused by the latter. More decisively, in the fictional universe mobilized by the show, the character Reda fulfills no other function than that of an agent of violence, without there being any moment in which he shares Louis' right to a self-critical autopsy. As such, even more so than in *Retour à Reims* (Retour, 2019), which proposes a passage of speech from Eribon (interposed by the white actors) to Alymbaie, *Histoire de la violence* (2020) is centered on the voice and existence of the white European man and his relativization, supportive but objectifying, of the immigrant Arab moniker of his tormentor.

In doing so, it is possible to agree, albeit partially, with Thomas Ostermeier (Ostermeier, 2020) when the director states that "[...] part of the tragedy of the story is that they are from the same class. But they don't recognize each other."¹⁴ However, this is not only a question of class. Beyond the question of identity, what connects the Arab, black, and sex-dissident communities is the differential distribution of insecurity induced by the global acceleration of inequalities. As such, "[...] precarity is the rubric that unites women, *queers*, transgender people, the poor, those with differentiated abilities, stateless people, but also racial and religious minorities: it is a



social and economic condition, but not an identity” (Butler, 2019, p. 65). If the difficulty in forming alliances between different vulnerable communities is one part of the tragedy, the other part is an act of solidarity that, despite its good intentions, is still based on the reification of the other closely linked to the dynamics of enunciation and the right to speak.

Final Considerations

In this essay, we reflected on the questions presented by two shows recently conceived by Thomas Ostermeier: *Retour à Reims* (2019) and *Histoire de la violence* (2020). In these works, based on literary sources, the German director chooses, as a starting point, the experiences narrated by two French gay authors – Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis – whose discursive flows contemplate the intersectional meshes of oppressions that constitute the contemporary world under the omnipresence of injury and global precarity. In the first case, the show reflects on the dizzying ascendancy of the far-right closely linked to xenophobic discourse, all through the autobiographical lens of Didier Eribon. In the second case, starting from a chance sexual relationship between two young people (a *Kabyle* immigrant and a European), the thought movement of Édouard Louis is staged in his inquiries about the origin of violence (is it a result of the direct act of a subject or the social dispositions that condition him to it?).

However, it is not only these performatizations of gay identity at intersection with other axes of oppression (in particular, racial-ethnic) that the two shows reveal. Symptomatically, *Retour à Reims* (2019) and *Histoire de la violence* (2020) also stage the impasses and dilemmas faced by Ostermeier’s theater in relation to the performatization of our intersectional fabrics of microdiscriminations. There is no denying the existence of a certain solidarity among the insulted, which has been one of the main elements of the two performances analyzed here, be it for the remarkable presence of Alimbaye or even the narrative importance of Reda. However, such solidarity proves to be, at best, unidirectional and hardly dialogical, since it invests in an unequal distribution of protagonisms and agencies in relation to the European and the non-European characters.



Moreover, if the unequal distribution of precarity is founded on an asymmetry of citizenship rights, the questions analyzed here do not sound trivial, since such asymmetry also results from political decisions about who can (or cannot) appear and speak¹⁵. As much as there are important relativizations within the main characters' discourses, and diasporic voices are heard at specific moments in the performances, both works still do not seem to transform the repertoires of representation usually associated with non-Europeans: a Senegalese rapper fulfills his diasporic role while a *kabyle* hustler denies his homosexual desires in homophobic violence. Thus, even if the *sociological theater* proposed by Ostermeier fulfills its function by reflecting, at a certain distance, on some relevant social facts, he himself seems, contradictorily, to disregard his own theater as a social fact. Or wouldn't the unequal distribution of the right to voice and visibility resonate in the asymmetry of enunciative positions in these works that specifically deal with such issues?

In light of the above, let us return, finally, to the viability of Ostermeier's staged realism guided by a desire for sociological revelation of the power relations that arrange the contemporary social space. *Retour à Reims* (2019) and *Histoire de la Violence* (2020) do indeed succeed in conceptually exposing the web of oppressions that marks our contemporaneity. This exposure contradictorily collides with the very dynamics of their enunciations. If recognizing the other is a necessary step, allowing this other to migrate, politically and existentially, from object to subject of enunciation (Kilomba, 2019) reveals itself as an even more decisive tactic for a theater that wishes to be sociological and is concerned with not only staging but rearranging the conditions of enunciation within the very heart of stage production. Otherwise, gay performatization will be instrumentalized under the *privileged model* that Eribon speaks of in our epigraph, diverting attention from the performative invisibility of our many allies.

Notes

- ¹ Thomas Ostermeier (1968) had already participated in the Festival de Avignon in 1999, when he presented three plays created in the Baracke do Deutsches Theater, in Berlin: *Below the belt* (*Sous la ceinture*), de Richard Dresser, *Shop-*



ping and fucking, by Mark Ravenhill, and *Man Equals Man* (*Mann ist Mann*), by Brecht. In 2001, then as director of the Schaubühne, he returned with an adaptation of *Danton's Death*, by Georg Büchner.

- ² Even though some of Brecht's plays had already appeared in the French cultural horizon since 1937 – when Hélène Weigel staged *Señora Carrar's Rifles* (*Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar*) – it was only in 1954 that *Mother Courage* (*Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*) was presented by the Berliner Ensemble at the Théâtre des Nations, in Paris. In *Écrits sur le théâtre*, there is a collection of essays by Barthes where one can follow the debates that marked Brecht's reception in France.
- ³ Post-dramatic theater should not be definitively construed as non-textual. As Lehmann (2013, p. 860) clarifies, “[...] the word postdramatic describes aesthetics and styles of theatrical practice and thematizes writing, written drama, or theatrical text only marginally. There are forms of post-dramatic theater with dramatic texts –in fact, with all kinds of text. In addition, there is a description in the book of a variety of theatrical forms, from the de-dramatized presentation of dramatic texts to forms that do not depend at all on a pre-defined dramatic text.” Some shows considered post-dramatic are part of the repertoire of the Schaubühne theater, and two of them were analyzed by Friques (2015) from the respective perspectives of contemporary melancholy – *Never Forever*, by German Falk Richter in partnership with Total Brutal – and anthropotechnics – *I'd rather Goya robbed me of sleep than some other arsehole*, by Spaniard, Rodrigo García.
- ⁴ As Bruno Perreau (2012) informs us in his reconstitution of the epistemological field of gay and lesbian studies in France, Eribon played a key role, alongside Françoise Gaspard and Sam Bourcier, in the development and visibility of the field. Nevertheless, this visibility should not hide the fragility of the field, always located in the university margins. A good example of this is the scant attention given to the French thinker Monique Wittig in her native country, which probably made her migrate to the United States.
- ⁵ In the original French: “Dès qu'il fut absent, il me devint possible d'entreprendre ce voyage ou plutôt ce processus de retour auquel je n'avais pu me résoudre auparavant. De retrouver cette « contrée de moi-même », comme aurait dit Genet, d'où j'avais tant cherché à m'évader : un espace social que j'avais mis à distance, un espace mental contre lequel je m'étais construit, mais qui n'en constituait pas moins une part essentielle de mon être. Je vins voir ma



mère. Ce fut le début d'une réconciliation avec elle. Ou, plus exactement, avec toute une part de moi-même que j'avais refusée, rejetée, reniée".

- ⁶ In the original French: "C'est livre est l'histoire de ma vie".
- ⁷ The expression literary transfiguration is used here based on the idea by Antonio Candido (Candido, 2000), for whom text and context have a dialectical relationship, which causes social determinations to be transformed, within the work, into a factor of artistic construction. For discussions of this from the perspectives of theatrical systems and global contemporary art, see, respectively, Friques (2016) and Friques (2018).
- ⁸ The yellow vests designate a set of demonstrations that emerged in France in October 2018 in response, initially, to Emmanuel Macron's announced increase in taxes on fossil fuels and carbon emissions. As the weeks passed, the movement expanded, gaining new agendas and alliances. At these demonstrations, members generally wore yellow vests, similar to those worn by traffic wardens, lending homogeneity to the marches and highlighting the movement's working-class origins. Between October 2018 and March 2019, approximately 300,000 French people took to the streets, clogging up the roads and being targeted by police violence.
- ⁹ The rise of far-right populisms is one of the thorniest sociocultural phenomena of current times. Political scientist Sheri Berman (Berman, 2019) offers a possible interpretation for this rise by observing that, in the European context, the primacy of politics led by social democratic parties and which dominated the thirty glorious years inaugurated by the post-war period gave way, from the 1980s onwards, to the expansion of the right. This shift was due, above all, to the adoption of the neoliberal agenda by the left-wing parties, and this economic dislocation aroused a feeling of abandonment by the proletarian electoral base. The far right then filled this gap by adopting a conservative social protection discourse, as exemplified in the French case through the change of stance between Jean-Marie Le Pen (who advocated a minimalist state) and his daughter Marine (who advocates a chauvinist interventionist state, limiting social welfare only to the French and not to immigrants). Xenophobia became a sociocultural uniting element of the far-right electoral base as a reaction to market deregulation and trade openings. Economists Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee (Duflo; Banerjee, 2020) strive to deconstruct the racist myths that surround the contemporary issue of immigration, questioning the *napkin* economic logic that grounds it, according to which the flow of migrants diminishes market opportunities for the native population. Fundamentally, they ar-



gue that this flow is much smaller than xenophobic alarms would have us believe, since most of the population is unwilling, even in adverse contexts, to move outside their ties of belonging.

- ¹⁰ In the original: “Deux parcours, donc. Imbriqués l’un dans l’autre. Deux trajectoires interdépendantes de réinvention de moi-même: l’une en regard de l’ordre sexuel, l’autre en regard de l’ordre social. Pourtant, quand il s’est agi d’écrire, c’est la première que je décidai d’analyser, celle qui a trait à l’oppression sexuelle, et non la seconde, celle qui a trait à la domination sociale, redoublant peut-être par le geste de l’écriture théorique ce qu’avait été la trahison existentielle. [...] Ce choix constitua non seulement une manière de me définir et de me subjectiver dans le temps présent, mais aussi un choix de mon passé, de l’enfant et de l’adolescent que j’avais été: un enfant gay, un adolescent gay, et non un fils d’ouvrier. Et pourtant!”
- ¹¹ In the original French: “les bien-pensants aiment les victoires, quand y’a la victoire on est tous tricolores hein! Mais les chutes sont réduites à avoir des origines: la banlieue, l’autre côté du périphérique, une couleur, une religion, du délire inconscient, de la fiction.”
- ¹² In the original French: “les verdicts – femme, pauvre, noir, arabe, gay, trans, etc. – se sont abattus sur nous et nous ont rendu certaines expériences et certaines vies impossibles”.
- ¹³ *Fait Diversis* a French expression that does not have an exact translation in English. In general, it designates a section of the newspaper where brief and miscellaneous publications appear which do not fit into the other sections (Economy, Politics, etc.): scandals, gossip, accidents, etc..
- ¹⁴ In the original French: “une partie de la tragédie de l’histoire est qu’ils sont de la même classe. Mais ils ne se reconnaissent pas”.
- ¹⁵ “What we sometimes call a ‘right’ to appear is tacitly supported by regulatory schemes that qualify only certain subjects as eligible to exercise that right” (Butler, 2019, p. 57).

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This original text, translated by Tony O’Sullivan, is also published in Portuguese in this issue of the journal.

Received on January 22, 2021

Approved on April 24, 2021

Editor-in-charge: Fabiana de Amorim Marcello

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