

AESTHETICS AND IDEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND DRAMA

University of Avignon

Arts Faculty

***Cultural Identity, Texts and Theatricality* (EA 4277)**

19th-20th June 2013

International Interdisciplinary Conference

Call For Papers:

This conference is intended as a follow-up to *Poetical and/or Political Theatre*, which took place in Avignon in November 2008.¹ Thanks to an interdisciplinary approach, it aims to widen the perspective by focusing on *Aesthetics and Ideology*. It will concentrate on the contemporary and ultra-contemporary in order to examine current trends in literature, theatre and other forms of artistic expression. Special consideration will be given to the ideas summed up by Mehdi Belhaj Kacem in *Inesthétique et Mimésis* (2010), concerning Adorno's definition of "dis-artification" and Lacoue-Labarthe's "dis-art" which results in, "the alienation of art, the commercialisation of art, the failure of its emancipatory utopia, the destruction of its rebellious nature, the extinction of its spiritual drive, the effacement of its messianic calling" (83, 116). Specifically referring to theatre, Kacem goes on to explain that "ritual tragedy informs the community of its political status...[tragedy is] the repressed origin of art...it is Plato who obscures the tragic origin of art..." (54-55, 95). He also speaks of "the sublime and agonizing force of tragedy [in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, contrary to what is found in Euripides and Aristotle]...the poor quality of mimesis...the inauthenticity, the artificial format [of most of today's theatre]..." (56-57). He affirms that "Greek theatre was not merely 'theatre'... [Greek actors] were meant to play a public role in the state...they were citizens and not just actors...men in the true sense of the word, responsible adults, not children or immature adolescents...but the celebrants of a civic religion" (67-68).²

Poetics and politics, art and politics, aesthetics and ideology are not entirely synonymous, although they share a common space. Aesthetics and ideology seem particularly closely related to the fundamental and essential elements of action or creation in the fields of art and politics. The conference will concentrate on the connection between these two concepts, as defined below.

Aesthetics, from the point of view of reception theory, criticism and philosophy, is to be understood as everything that is linked to, or that deals with beauty or the beautiful, the attempt to understand the transition from the imagination to the finished work, or to unfold and explain the truths contained in such a work. Ideology, in ancient civilisations, traditional societies, in myths, is to be understood as a body of principles and values with a legislative and initiatory purpose, intended to be beneficial, if not to say, salutary, for the construction of the community or the individual – ideally this would be an intellectual process for the benefit

¹ See René Agostini (ed), *Théâtre poétique et/ou politique ?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2011.

² All translations by Madelena Gonzalez and René Agostini, unless otherwise specified.

of human consciousness rather than a seductive act of persuasion. However, it is also necessary to take into consideration other common understandings of ideology as a concept. In *Éthique et Responsabilité* (1981), Paul Ricœur considers ideology as “history and culture with an integrative function and a tendency towards falsification; ideology as norms, rules, social symbolism with a corresponding rhetoric of legitimisation of authority and thus of persuasion, an aspect, which, of course, lends itself to criticism and to suspicion; finally, ideology as a reference to the founding myths of society, thus as collective memory, a form of legitimisation that can be fraudulent and reinforce domination by making it invisible” (103).

How should the relationship between aesthetics and ideology be understood and defined? Clearly there is a temporal problem related to the literature of the past and its accessibility in the present. Have certain past aesthetics or ideologies been employed to serve present ideologies and aesthetics? Can special artistic effects be traced back to aesthetic considerations consonant with previous notions of the aesthetic? Can one conceive of a relationship between the quest for beauty or the beautiful and that for ideological principles and values? What is to be understood exactly by “aestheticisation”? How to comprehend and define the aesthetics and/or ideology peculiar to a dramatic text? How can a text which contains its own ideology and/or personal aesthetic condition a staging, an adaptation or a translation out of keeping with its essence, if we accept that such an essence is traceable and definable in the first place? Is it possible to establish an aesthetic and/or ideological hierarchy in dramatic art and literature? Should this hierarchy be defined or not through its relation to aesthetics and ideology?

The main topics for discussion at the conference will be:

Aesthetics and ideology in drama and literature (texts and/or staging: examples, models, comparisons, generalities and specific cases)

Past and present models

The problem of value and evaluation

To what extent could, or should, aesthetics be the manifestation, the externalisation, or the translation of an implicit, maybe unconscious ideology, and how can this be discerned at the level of the text?

To what extent should or could ideology determine aesthetics, or vice versa?

Is it possible to conceive of aesthetics without ideology?

Examples of aesthetics or art at the service of political ideology or party-political ideology.

Examples of art seeking to throw off the shackles of ideologies, religions, politics.

Have we entered a new age of “art for art’s sake” related to the process of depoliticisation everywhere apparent in society? When Jean Vilar wrote that theatre should be thought of as a “secular religion”, perhaps he identified a human and humane ethics, capable of underpinning the perfect union of aesthetics and ideology.³ The neologism created by Lacoue-Labarthe, “**aesthethics**”, might also be usefully invoked here.

We plan to consider the greatest possible diversity of models, combinations, perspectives and examples. This conference could also help to pave the way for a constructive and prospective criticism of our times, a detailed description of literary and dramatic art in the political arena, even a manifesto for theatre in the 21st century. Its aim could be to provide an alternative to the conception of art as a lifeless object in a conventional context and thus

³ See Jean Vilar, *Le Théâtre, service public*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975.

constitute a basis for the rebirth of genuine art, aesthetics and ideology and, ultimately, of an ethics or an “**aesthetics**”.

The enduring idea, inherited from the Greeks, of aesthetics and ideology as the reflection of a transcendent order of spiritual values suggests that the function and perhaps the mission of art in our time, theatrical or otherwise, could be to awaken a new consciousness.

The official languages of the conference will be French and English.

Please send enquiries and proposals for papers (300 words approx), accompanied by a one-page CV to

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Deadline : 5th February 2013

