

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 43

Issue 1 *Engaging the Pastoral: Social, Environmental, and Artistic Critique in Contemporary Pastoral Literature*

Article 18

December 2018

Christine Hegenbart. Zum Politischen der Dramatik von Thomas Bernhard und Peter Handke. Neue Aufteilung des Sinnlichen. Peter Lang, 2017.

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Recommended Citation

Girardin, Catherine (2018) "Christine Hegenbart. Zum Politischen der Dramatik von Thomas Bernhard und Peter Handke. Neue Aufteilung des Sinnlichen. Peter Lang, 2017.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, Article 18. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2053>

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Abstract

Review of Christine Hegenbart. *Zum Politischen der Dramatik von Thomas Bernhard und Peter Handke. Neue Aufteilung des Sinnlichen*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017.

Keywords

Thomas Bernhard; Peter Handke; Theater; Jacques Rancière; Politics; Austria

Christine Hegenbart. *Zum Politischen der Dramatik von Thomas Bernhard und Peter Handke. Neue Aufteilung des Sinnlichen*. Peter Lang, 2017. 375 pp.

Christine Hegenbart's *Zum Politischen der Dramatik von Thomas Bernhard und Peter Handke. Neue Aufteilung des Sinnlichen* analyzes the political dimension in the plays of the Austrian authors Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke. As the title of the book indicates, her study is entirely based on Jacques Rancière's aesthetic-political thought, especially his theories of the "Aufteilung des Sinnlichen" 'distribution of the sensible' and of the "Identifikationsregime der Kunst" 'identification regime of art.' The core of the book comprises the analyses of three works by Bernhard: *Ein Fest für Boris* (*A Party for Boris*, premiere: 1970), *Der Präsident* (*The President*, premiere: 1975), and *Heldenplatz* (premiere: 1988) alternating with analyses of three works by Handke: *Kaspar* (premiere: 1968), *Über die Dörfer* (*The Long Way Round*, premiere: 1982) and *Die Fahrt im Einbaum oder Das Stück zum Film vom Krieg* (*Voyage by Dugout or The Play of the Film of the War*, premiere: 1999). The epilogue, chapter 4, is the analysis of *Burgtheater. Posse mit Gesang* ('Burgtheater. A Farce with Songs,' premiere: 1985) by Elfriede Jelinek.

The premise of the book, explained in chapter 1, is that the scandal created by a play expresses its "politische Dimension" (11) 'political dimension.' Yet, Hegenbart confronts the reader with the ambiguousness and complexity regarding the political potential of such a phenomenon as Bernhard's and Handke's discourses testify (13-15). Unsatisfied with the current definitions of "politische Literatur" (18-21) 'political literature,' Hegenbart calls on Rancière's approach, because it is turned toward discourses of "Macht und Herrschaft" (23) 'power and domination' and does not separate the political from the artistic spheres, but considers them as imbricated (24), a position she will try to maintain throughout her book. According to Hegenbart, Rancière's "Aufteilung des Sinnlichen" refers to a "System von Normen" (24) 'system of norms' defining and structuring the ways in which our perceptions and experiences are ordered, and thus, the scope of our participation in the social world. This order is governed by the "Polizei" (27) 'police,' which is not to be understood as a State apparatus, but as a "Konstrukt . . . dem Leben eingeschrieben ist" (28) 'construct . . . inscribed in life itself,' organizing the bodies into a society (27). An act becomes political when it puts into question the order set by the "Polizei," leading to new definitions of objects, subjects, or spaces. Hegenbart also calls on Rancière's terms of "Konsens" 'consensus' and "Dissens" 'dissent' (29); the "dissident" act being that which breaks the "Konsens" and forms a political subject. Hegenbart notes that, for Rancière, theater, as an institution at the service of the social order, is a "Polizei." However it performs "Dissens" when it negates the theatrical conventions of its time or presents new dramaturgical models (45).

Chapter 2 sets out to examine how Bernhard's and Handke's plays "consent" to or "dissent" from the established order of the Austrian literary and political fields of their time. Hegenbart divides her detailed and seamless analysis of each work into two parts: text and context. In the first one, she studies the configurations of characters, speech, space, and action. In the second one, she investigates the plays' origin, reception, and history. Each text and context analysis is followed by a summary in which the author evaluates the degree up to which the play can be characterized as political in Rancière's sense. *Kaspar*, for example, is said to be "stark politisch" (84) 'strongly political' on the level of both text and context. Hegenbart states—perhaps too restrictively—that Rancière's "Aufteilung des Sinnlichen" is entirely based on *logos* (25-26, 109), that is, political acts are performed through language. In *Kaspar*, however, Hegenbart notes that the characters undermine the existing order with different means, those of noise (109). With regard to context, the play is political in that the skepticism it shows toward language also put into question the legitimacy of the authorities in place after the end of the coalition between the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) 'Freedom Party of Austria' and the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreich* (SPÖ) 'Social Democratic Party of Austria' in 1966 (117-18).

Chapter 3 seeks to confirm the relevance of Rancière's theories in the field of theater research. Most importantly, Hegenbart verifies the founding hypotheses of her book, which can be condensed as an attempt at tracing the importance and significance of the political dimension of the authors' works throughout their careers in relation with the dominant "Identifikationsregime der Kunst." Hegenbart proves that this task cannot be achieved if the plays are considered as autonomous literary objects (330).

The strength of Hegenbart's study is that it is sustained by the will to establish a real dialogue between the works and the political-cultural situation in which they emerged. However, her methodological choice of separating text and context analyses sometimes leads her to go astray from Rancière's approach, which is to envision politics and art as a whole. On the one hand, Hegenbart's analysis of *Heldenplatz*, for example, concludes with the idea that the play is not political on the level of text, because the characters' speech is ineffective in that it is condemned to encourage the status quo and, confined to the domestic sphere, unable to reach the outer world (245). On the other hand, her context analysis shows that the play created a scandal because of the way it associates Austria with the national-socialist ideology. Her text analysis, focused on unfolding the power structures imbedded in the characters' language, fails to point out one of the main reasons why the play provoked such uproar, that is, the harshness of Bernhard's words toward Austria and the Austrians. Nonetheless, as the political dimension of Bernhard's and Handke's work has up to now only been the object of short studies, Hegenbart's monograph fills a gap in research in the field of Theater Studies.

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