

REVIEWER:

Prof. Dimitar Milchev Vatsov, member of the Scientific Jury, professional field 2.3. Philosophy, New Bulgarian University, Department of Philosophy and Sociology

REVIEW

of a dissertation thesis for acquiring the academic degree of *PhD* in Professional Field 8.4 Film and Theatre Arts

Author: Yavor Gardev Stefanov

Thesis:

Power, Sovereignty and Theatrical Direction. Experiments on Performative Force, Interpretive Freedom and Creative Autonomy

Yavor Gardev's dissertation "Power, Sovereignty and Theatrical Direction. Experiments on Performative Force, Interpretive Freedom and Creative Autonomy" has a total volume of 294 pp. The work begins with an Introduction, followed by four main parts, neatly subdivided into chapters and subchapters, a Conclusion and a Bibliography. The more than one hundred titles in several languages of the bibliography are correctly presented and cited in the text of the thesis. The work is a completely original authorial study. The contributions in the abstract are precisely formulated and correspond to the work done in the dissertation. The dissertator has submitted 16 publications, at least 5 of which published in

reputable journals directly reference the dissertation topic. The candidate meets all the formal requirements for admission to the competition for the degree of PhD in the professional field 8.4 Film and Theatre Arts. I have no conflict of interest with him/her.

x x x

Yavor Gardev himself defines his work as interdisciplinary. We could call it philosophy of theatre or philosophical theatre studies. Essentially, it is a careful philosophical and social-theoretical reflection on one particular professional field - the author's own professional field - theatre. And theatre, in turn, is problematized through a specific key: "The object of study of this dissertation is the power relations that the director initiates or falls into and interacts with in the specific contexts of modern, postmodern, and contemporary theatre" (p. 8).

That is, the guiding question of Gardev's study is: What is and how does the power of the theatre director function? And this question is addressed by means of philosophy and social science.

But Gardev does more than that. He often inverts the prism of analysis and through his privileged experience as a theatre director problematizes and criticises a number of philosophical and social theories. He overtly draws on this experience, but uses it somewhat covertly because he does not articulate it in detail - to avoid auto-ethologizing and/or memoir. But this personal experience is there, even though the text keeps a theoretical distance from it. For Yavor Gardev knows first-hand how the power through which the director mobilizes the text, the actors, the audience, and even the external environment of a performance is actualized and at risk.

It is this privileged first-person knowledge that allows him to see the deficits of theories that work with a flat and only negative notion of "power" and that conceive of power entirely as external coercion that is inherently unjust and must be rejected. Gardev quotes an amusing but also quite true remark by Lukes: "Perhaps the widespread tendency to

view asymmetric power or power over others as negative (ignoring the opposite cases) stems from the liberal aversion to relations of dependence and the Marxist view of social order as inherently conflictual. " (Lukes, 2007, p. 60; qtd. in Gardev, p. 73) On the contrary, according to Gardev, "power can also be empowering, even transformative, by increasing the resources, capabilities, and effectiveness of others" (ibid.). So, with the help of many serious theories as well, but starting from his own privileged experience, Gardev concentrates on the programmatic possibility for him "that power, freedom and productivity can be thought of on the same axis, as complementary." Through the question of power of the theatre director, he attempts to construct a more holistic philosophy of power that is also a philosophy of freedom. As we shall see, the thesis outlines the first touches of a general "performative metaphysics".

Like other scholars today, he seeks to overcome the "negativity" of the poststructuralist legacy in critical thinking. In his view, the critique of metaphysics and the deconstruction of presence should not be self-servingly radicalized to the point that they dogmatically annihilate the tangible presence, agency, intentionality, productivity, and subjectivity found at many levels in directorial practice, and in other practices as well. But neither should the reverse be true: these concepts cannot simply be uncritically brought back into play, as self-evident, as if no critique of metaphysics had ever taken place. "[T]he subject, with its presence in the action and its absence in the event, remains [...] something like Schrödinger's cat" (p. 22). Once confronted with such a dilemma, Yavor Gardev seems to hesitate how to strategically deal with it: to turn it into a relational analytical model, to seek a "middle way" between the extremes, or to try to transcend it directly.

But this is not a matter of dogmatic decision, but of careful critical study. In the first two parts of his thesis, Gardev analyzes the concepts of "power" and "legitimacy" - as well as many other concepts that form a common semantic web with them - incorporating theoretical resources from sociology, political theory, social psychology, hermeneutics, and semantics. Not only the 'classics' Weber, Foucault and Koselleck are part of the arsenal of these problematisations, but also a host of interesting contemporary authors and theories. In the spirit of Weber, and with the help of Uphoff and Guzman, Gardev constructs an interactional notion of "power" according to which - I will amplify the formulation slightly! - power

exists as an asymmetrical relation between forces, i.e. power exists only if and as long as it meets with submission and recognition, i.e. only as long as it is legitimate. Hence, the author elaborates a fourfold typology of the legitimacy of directorial power, which is quite rightly listed among the contributions: 1. Immediate legitimacy - the recognition and submission that actors directly give to the director during rehearsals; 2. Mediated legitimacy - the recognition that actors mediatedly give to the director after they in turn receive recognition from the audience; 3. Public legitimacy - the recognition that the director "in absentia" receives from the audience of the performance; 4. Publicity - the recognition that various external narratives (media, etc.) give to the performance and the director by constructing their virtual image/authority. It will be interesting if in the future Yavor Gardev develops this cogent theory of his in another key: by seeing what snags and mishaps happen when, in one way or another, recognition (legitimacy) breaks down at each of these levels - when the performance literally falls apart, when the theatre becomes "dead" in Brook's sense (p. 254), or else various smaller cataclysms occur in theatrical interaction, which, let us not forget, is an exercise of power. Incidentally, with the synonymy between 'legitimacy' and 'recognition', which I deliberately emphasise even though it is absent from the thesis, I also suggest to the author a possible future extension of the theme - to contemporary philosophical theories of recognition.

The next third part of the dissertation is extremely interesting. There, Gardev problematizes the notion of "power" (and in particular the director's power) through the notion of "sovereignty", and vice versa - through his experience as a director he problematizes the notions of "sovereignty" and "power".

Gardev often (re)constructs conceptual contradictions within a notion - but these contradictions do not destroy the notion that contains them, nor do they render it meaningless. On the contrary, they turn out to be constitutive of it. If the contradiction is resolved, if one of the contradictory principles prevails, then the concept is rendered meaningless. On the contrary, the concept has meaning - it is alive - if and only if the contradiction that constitutes it stands unresolved. Derrida calls such contradictions "constitutive," and Chantal Mouffe expands his idea to "constitutive paradoxes."

Such a constitutive paradox is contained in the concept of "power" and Gardev has shown it. He brings it out historically in two phases, following Ward: first, in the "dispersed field of the fragmented and conflicting medieval powers, the idea of the absolute sovereign uniting them in himself, who is unaccountable and stands above the law, is gradually clarified and synthesized.' (p. 115) But then, in modernity, 'this same now absolute sovereign is gradually fragmented into powers separate from one another, now placed under the rule of law and, over time, made to account...' (pp. 115-116). Ward's historical generalization, though rather wholesale, is true - it is not wrong to point out, however, that the purely historical roots of the concept of sovereignty can be and have been traced much further back in time - to the "imperium" and "dictator" as legal statuses of the Roman Republic, at least. More importantly, Gardev builds on Ward's historical thesis and turns it into a general (in this sense ahistorical) tool: he manages to show power as a constant oscillation between two opposing tendencies - towards the consolidation of absolute sovereignty and towards the dispersal and dissipation of sovereignty: "The cyclical and slow oscillation between overcentralization and dispersion of power in the historical process sets up something like an iterative paradigm, which I will use as an analogy to the case of directorial power, whose mandate, I think, is also susceptible to a similar movement between extremes. ' (p. 116) Such a 'synthesis, I think, also takes place in the modern directorial figure, who combines the increasingly discomfoting patriarchal demiurge-sovereign and the network-mediator' (p. 109).

Here, however, I want to show why this contradiction is constitutive of 'power'. Namely, because if absolute sovereignty, or, on the contrary, its dispersion, is fully realized, then the relation of power breaks down - ceases to exist. If we imagine that sovereignty does indeed reach its maximum of absolute decisionist power, unlimited, without resistance, then that power will not be able to gain submission from, nor recognition and legitimacy - and therefore will not be power. As, obviously, does the reverse - the complete dispersion of sovereignty (of command decisionist power that seeks and encounters submission) also renders the concept of power meaningless. So, through his historical-theoretical reconstruction and through his directorial experience, Gardev has simultaneously made a rather powerful philosophical generalization, which I also try to further

amplify: he has shown us power as a concept based on constitutive contradiction, moreover, as a concept with a double internal thrust, with two opposite vectors, with a double intensity. And this plastic notion, in my opinion, has the capacity to grasp the complex intensities of power in the world (not only in the theatre): where, in different degrees and forms, power is now consolidated and personalized, now dispersed and shared, though never completely. For complete sovereignty is impossible, as is the complete disappearance of sovereignty. Sovereignty and its absence are utopian horizons of power that the actual power never achieves.

Gardev makes another interesting historical digression - this time from the history of the emergence of modern theatre - which sheds additional light on the issues of power and sovereignty. According to his reconstruction, one hundred and fifty years ago, Georg II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, was the first to (alongside many other theatrical innovations) set the director apart as a figure in his own right, and in doing so he bestowed (in this case, bestowed upon himself) an extraordinary power: nearly complete sovereignty over actors and theatrical space. Then, according to Gardev, "[b]ased on the example of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, the director goes the way of the theatrical sovereign and demiurge," and the great directors of the theatre, despite sometimes dramatic differences in their approaches and aesthetic concepts - Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Stanislavsky, Tairov, Meyerhold, Brecht, and Artaud - "all expanded immeasurably the field of directorial sovereignty and directorial authority." (c. 153)

In this historical reconstruction, there is one biographical detail about Duke Georg II that is particularly important conceptually: 'While serving as an officer in the Prussian army, he took the Prussian side in the Austro-Prussian War, thereby politically siding against his father, the then Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, Bernhard II, who in turn formed an alliance with Austria. After the war was successful for Prussia, on 20 September 1866 Bernhard II was forced to abdicate the Ducal throne in favour of his son Georg II, who came to power sacrificing willingly (and even enthusiastically) much of the political sovereignty over his hereditary domain to the emerging and centralising around the future Kaiser (Caesar, Emperor) Wilhelm I of the German Empire.' (p. 151) According to Gardev, "At the expense of his ceded political power, George II transferred his passion for absolutism and autocracy to the theatrical terrain, thereby

becoming the first modern director." (pp. 151-152) He essentially supports Osborne's thesis that in this case it was "a movement from political to aesthetic despotism in accordance with the ideological pressures of the age." (pp. 152-153)

I have not examined the case of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, and there is perhaps enough factual evidence to support Gardev and Osborne's thesis - that George II transferred his autocratic passion from the field of politics to that of art. Nevertheless, I will allow myself a provocative philosophical question for the dissertator: Could we not - and even should we not, in the light of the notions we have developed so far (of the two-vector concept of power) - reverse the interpretation of the Duke's case? He, even if he believed that the theatre opened up a field for him to realise his absolutist passion, in fact psychoanalytically substituted his failure to exercise that passion in politics.

But even more so: if absolute sovereignty is theoretically impossible, here we see its practical failure - George II failed to hold it in his duchy and - in Gardev's words - "willingly (and even enthusiastically)" sacrificed it. And perhaps this was the moment when the Duke himself realised that absolute sovereignty was not possible literally, but only fictionally. And also - that the attempt to realise absolute sovereignty after all is not only never entirely successful, but such an attempt cannot be justified either metaphysically or instrumentally. Such an attempt could only be justified aesthetically, as Nietzsche would say.

To put it another way, the director is born when the sovereign dies. Even if George II believed otherwise.

Yavor Gardev might disagree with such a reversal. In his dissertation, he repeatedly points out the risk that the deconstruction of metaphysical sovereignty will render the very notion of sovereignty meaningless, and hence block our understanding of the practices of power - in particular, of director's power: "I strongly sympathize with the effort to de-absolute sovereignty and to disperse it democratically 'in the form of microsovereignties' (as formulated in a footnote (Vatsov, 2021, p. 17)), but I do not think that such an operation can succeed without the notion of sovereignty being dis-semanticised or even reduced to its opposite" (p. 161). He therefore insists that "the idea of sovereignty, and the more archaic version of it, that of unconditional and unlimited sovereignty" be maintained as a "guarantee" (p. 224) - and, I would argue, as a utopian

horizon - of directorial practice. Gardev himself, however, is apparently aware that the "guarantee" of directorial (and any other) sovereignty is not inherently guaranteed, insofar as at the end of his work he elaborates "[his] proposal for a fluid directorial sovereignty (queer sovereignty), which in the present case is based on an idea of fluidity that is not necessarily and exclusively gender-identifying.' (p. 266) And this queer sovereignty is realised (or fails) in a field of 'precarious agonality' (p. 231) - in a power interaction of forces that is inherently indeterminate, i.e. uncertain.

In the end, I believe that "sovereignty" but also "presence," "intentionality," "subject," and many other concepts of classical metaphysics (and of our everyday practices), can and should be rehabilitated after their radical deconstruction, but precisely in this way - as "precarious," uncertain in their reality, unguaranteed concepts. And this is an extremely important task for contemporary philosophy and humanities. Performative theory since John L. Austin, or "radical pragmatics" as I call it, which Yavor Gardev works with extensively and precisely in his dissertation and which is a field he and I share - this theory can be a good approach to solving the above task. I also agree that its solution requires a further transition from speech theory (philosophy of language) to ontology (critically reworked metaphysics), a transition that Gardev has begun with the help of Alice Lagaay's "metaphysics of performance." I also agree that "[w]hether a reliable link can be found between an eventual metaphysics of performance and a radical pragmatics that would secure the possibility of analytic pragmatic reflection on an intensional subject, it seems to me that such a link could be 'force', insofar as it, in addition to being a metaphysical category, also refers to illocution in the performative, that is, has been established as a valid analytic category since the very birth of speech act theory." (p. 213) As can be seen, Gardev unfolds a more comprehensive philosophical project through a philosophy of theatre. He makes a philosophy. And this can only be welcomed.

In conclusion, Yavor Gardev's dissertation "Power, Sovereignty and Theatrical Direction. Experiments on Performative Force, Interpretive Freedom, and Creative Autonomy" meets and exceeds many times over all legal and internal university requirements of the current procedure. Therefore, I strongly recommend to the members of the scientific jury and

the academic council of NBU to vote FOR Yavor Gardev to be awarded the scientific and educational degree "PhD" in the scientific field 8.4 "Film and Theatre Arts".

Primorsko,
September 6, 2024

Sincerely:
Prof. Dr. Dimitar Vatsov,
Department of Philosophy and Sociology, NBU