Transnational networks and gay subjectivity in the theatre of Thomas Ostermeier, Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis

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ABSTRACT
The work of French writers Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis has, through translation, gained an international audience. Thomas Ostermeier has adapted Eribon’s Returning to Reims (Retour à Reims, 2017) and Louis’ History of Violence (Histoire de la violence, 2018) for the stage allowing the authors’ reflections on growing up gay and poor in rural working-class France to transform as they travel across borders. This article will map this transnational literary-theatrical network in relation to Eribon’s idea of a “collective minoritarian experience”. It uncovers how Ostermeier and his collaborators adapt these texts for the stage, and how Eribon and Louis are themselves represented as subjects. The article asks how these productions develop a shared theatrical aesthetic to represent a shared queer experience. Focusing on the networks that made these productions possible reveals the potential of transnational collaboration for representing new experiences, as well as the transformations prompted by these collaborations.

KEYWORDS
Thomas Ostermeier; Didier Eribon; Édouard Louis; adaptation; queer subjectivity; transnational theatre

Introduction: Transnational networks and gay subjectivity

In an article published by Le Monde in English in 2018, French author and sociologist Didier Eribon (b. 1953) describes his friendship with fellow writers Édouard Louis (b. 1992) and Geoffroy de Lagasnerie (b. 1981) as joining “a long tradition of what one could call ‘gay relations’. Circles of friendship bound by an affinity which rests on a common sexuality – and thus on a type of shared experience, a common rapport with the world and with others” (2018). Eribon here constructs a social and literary network centred around a shared sexual orientation, one that has the potential to transcend borders to establish connections with other individuals who can relate to this minoritarian experience. As detailed in his 1999 book Réflexions sur la Question Gay (published in 2004 in English as Insult and the Making of the Gay Self; all quotes are from Michael Lucey’s translation), Eribon sees this building of social networks based on shared sexual experiences as a crucial aspect in establishing a gay subjective identity: they form “processes of [gay] subjectivation”, that is, the creation of “a personal identity...
out of an assigned identity” (2004, 7). He goes on to say that the “gay way of life is founded on concentric circles of friendship as well as on the continually renewed effort to create these circles, to form these friendships” (26). Through the intersection of an individual, “socialized” subjectivity and the collective group, Eribon attempts to conceive of gay subjectivity outside of the realm of psychoanalysis and to pursue a “socio-logical” theory of subjectivity (xvii). This works to draw together subjective experiences to form a “collective minoritarian experience” (xvii) through which identities can be made, or remade, in different contexts. The making of the gay self, to quote from the book’s title, is predicated on social (and other) networks that provide space and support for this identity to take shape.

Considering the importance Eribon attributes to networks in his understanding of gay subjectivity, this article explores what happens when the literary and social network formed between Eribon, Louis, and de Lagasnerie expands to include new members from different contexts, examining how the presentation of these authors and their subjective experiences become altered as their texts are adapted into new mediums. Through translation, the literary work of Eribon, Louis, and de Lagasnerie has gained a significant audience outside of France. In more recent years, theatrical adaptations of Eribon and Louis’s texts in particular have allowed their autobiographical reflections on growing up gay and poor in rural working-class France to travel transnationally in new forms. German theatre director Thomas Ostermeier has worked on multiple stage adaptations of both Eribon’s and Louis’s texts since 2017, bringing in a new, theatrical network of collaborators and artists that intersects with the queer literary network of Eribon, Louis, and de Lagasnerie. Ostermeier’s Rückkehr nach Reims (English title: Returning to Reims), based on Eribon’s autobiographical book Retour à Reims, had its premiere in the UK at the Manchester International Festival in 2017 and was a co-production between the Schaubühne Berlin, Manchester International Festival, HOME Manchester, and Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. It has since been performed in Germany, France, and Italy. Ostermeier’s production of Louis’s novel Histoire de la violence (2016) premiered at the Schaubühne in 2018 and toured internationally until 2020. This adaptation also had multiple producing partners, including Théâtre de la Ville Paris, Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles and St. Ann’s Warehouse Brooklyn. In 2020, Ostermeier directed an adaptation of Louis’s essay Qui a tué mon père (German title: Wer hat meinen Vater umgebracht, published in English as Who Killed My Father?). A co-production once again between the Schaubühne Berlin and Théâtre de la Ville, this adaptation placed the author directly onto the stage, with Louis playing a version of himself for performances in France and Germany.

Eribon’s and Louis’s texts have thus become subject to multiple translations and adaptations in a variety of different performance contexts. In light of this special issue, I am particularly interested here in uncovering the ways in which a transnational theatrical network (represented through Ostermeier and his collaborators) maps on to this French queer literary network, thinking about how this mapping affects processes of adaptation. Whilst there is a certain terminological tension between “translation” and “adaptation” (Hutcheon 2006; Laera 2020), I opt here to think of Ostermeier’s productions as forms of “intermedial adaptation” (Laera 2014, 6) that incorporate acts of textual translation within their formation. For the purposes of this examination, the term “adaptation” will cover a usefully “wide variety of theatrical operations” from the
director’s work, the mise en scene of a production, as well as translators working to “transfer a text from one language to the other” (Laera 2014, 2). By shedding light on the interplay between transnational networks and adaptation, my work here seeks to delve into the “creative dialectic of collaboration” in order to “analyse the dynamics of power and solidarity involved in the collaboration of diverse profiles in theatre production” (Espasa 2017, 281), a challenge set by Eva Espasa to translation and adaptation studies research. This evaluation also builds on an expanding body of work examining the intersections of queer theory and translation studies (Epstein and Gillette 2017; Gramling and Dutta 2016; Bauer 2015). In particular, I take inspiration from Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl’s view of this “bringing together” as having the potential to “productively destabilize not only traditional models of representation […] but also the authorial voices and subjectivities they project” (2018, 1). Consequently, by viewing Eribon and Louis as representing a “collective minoritarian experience” based on and around their homosexuality, how their subjective experiences are mediated through an expanded network of creatives becomes a crucial question. To attempt to address it, I will first introduce the two overlapping literary-theatrical networks, exploring on what basis these networks were formed and how their construction affects the adaptation process. Secondly, I will engage in performance analysis of two productions directed by Ostermeier, Rückkehr nach Reims and Im Herzen der Gewalt, focusing in particular on how Eribon and Louis themselves as authors, and their subjective experiences, are represented on stage. Placing these two productions in fruitful comparison with each other will reveal how Ostermeier’s dialectical and discursive theatre aesthetic changes across both productions and provide fresh insights on Ostermeier’s self-positioning as a theatre-maker.

Both adaptations utilize the original texts in translation as part of the dramaturgy of production, but I will argue that their interventions into and explorations of narrative fidelity, authorial perspective, and subjective experience emerge through the aesthetics of performance. This makes performance analysis the most suitable methodological approach in this case. As the Schaubühne holds its own performance archive, I have been able to access recordings of both productions and will use these as the basis of my reading. By combining performance analysis with a focus on literary and theatrical networks, I aim to consider how minoritarian subjective experience are affected in processes of transnational circulation and adaptation. This evaluation thus draws inspiration from the work of Rebecca Braun (2016) and Benedict Schofield (2020) in examining how literary and theatrical networks come into contact across national borders. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s conceptualization of actor-network theory, Braun (2016, 458) considers “literary agency” by assessing the positioning of independent writers in relation to the “structural processes of the literary industry”. Braun combines aspects of Latour’s work with Fred Turner and Christine Larson’s idea of the “network intellectual” to critically examine the “links between authorship, celebrity and world literature” (457), showing across two interweaving case studies “how the fundamentally collaborative nature of authorship at both national and transnational levels can be uncovered and used to differentiate our understanding of how agency unfolds as literary celebrity travels” (472). Schofield applies Latour’s concept to theatrical networks between the UK and Germany in order to understand the “transnational value of German theater beyond Germany” (2020, 219). Considering how actors in this cross-cultural network
can be “porous” or “receptive” to German theatre (223), Schofield assesses the extent to which they are “influenced, appropriated, and transformed through their transnational circulation” (223). Both authors stress the value of this methodological approach in putting “human agency back at the heart of structural processes” (Braun 2016, 472), and for providing fresh perspectives on the roles of networks, institutions, and individuals in theatrical aesthetics, and the transnational circulation of literary and theatrical practice.

To maintain this focus, whilst avoiding simply redeploying the approaches of these two scholars, this article moves beyond Latour to think about the interplay between networks and theatrical production through performance analysis. I am interested not only in uncovering various nodes in theatrical and literary networks, but also in identifying how these networks impact on cultural products themselves, using performance analysis to reveal how traces of these networks are made visible on stage. In order to maintain an interest in “human agency” (Braun 2016, 472) in these processes of adaptation, I will make use of Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of capital as a means of assessing how the perceived value of Eribon and Louis’s texts changes across space, time, and medium. There are many practical examples of how Bourdieusian theory can be applied to the theatrical field (Scholz-Cionca 2017; Serino, D’Ambrosio and Ragozini 2017; Lanier 2010; Adkins and Emmison 1992), and his theories have been drawn on in translation studies as a means of analysing the structure of the publishing industry in the context of the global market of translation, and as a way of understanding how the social trajectory of translators influences their work (Sapiro 2015; Snell-Hornby 2006; Gouanvic 2005). By bringing these two approaches together, this study analyses both the valuing and positioning of queer subjectivities in overlapping literary and theatrical networks, and how this positioning becomes manifest on stage (i.e. in the productions themselves). As a sociological concept, capital provides a way of understanding how social or cultural hierarchy is formed, and how (in this case, cultural) value is attributed in different contexts.

Douglas Lanier’s study of mutating cultural capital in adaptations of Shakespeare texts provides a useful model in this regard. He calls Shakespearean cultural capital “restless”, differing from Bourdieu’s assertion that cultural capital is a “relatively fixed marker of cultural difference” (Lanier 2010, 104). Lanier uses cultural capital to map how cultural authority can alter over time and place. Weaving the concept of capital through my reading of the overlapping of literary and theatrical networks similarly exposes the “restless” dynamics of power in the adaptation of literary texts for theatre – especially when those texts are themselves dealing with issues of minoritarian subjective experience.

Furthermore, by thinking about Ostermeier’s work through cultural networks, and critically assessing his role as mediator in these networks, my analysis here works alongside scholars such as Ramona Mosse to offer a fresh approach to the director’s oeuvre that expands on evaluations of his politics or theatrical aesthetics. Since the publication of two volumes dedicated to the theatre of Ostermeier, The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier (2016) co-written by Peter Boenisch and Ostermeier himself, and The Schaubühne Under Thomas Ostermeier (2021) edited by Boenisch, the directorial and curatorial work of the German director has been introduced in detail in the English language academic context. Both volumes focus ostensibly on the director’s aesthetics and politics in relation to his role as artistic director at the Schaubühne Berlin, building on previous work of scholars such as Marvin Carlson (2009) and Peter Boenisch (2010). Mosse,
writing in the latter volume, draws attention to Ostermeier’s role in curating “journeys from the local to the global” (2021, 23), arguing for the Schaubühne’s institutional role as a “launching pad for diverse forms of mobility” (36). By being institutionally “out of place” (36), Mosse sees the Schaubühne as able to critically engage with the theatrical mainstream in Germany through its engagement in transnational cultural networks. Mosse suggests the theatre’s international collaborations with a range of artists from outside of Germany offer “an urgently necessary valve for challenging the institutionally stratified and homogenous training and career paths in the repertory system in Germany, which continues to lack diverse ethnic representation among its actors and artistic staff” (33). Focusing here on the individuals and networks that made these adaptations possible similarly reveals both the potential of transnational collaboration and minoritarian affiliation to affect theatrical practice, as well as the transformations prompted by these collaborations.

As Eribon’s French queer literary and social network expands and joins with a theatrical network of international practitioners and institutions, this article pays attention to the individual and material conditions influencing modes of intermedial adaptation and translation. I utilise performance analysis to understand what happens when texts that engage specifically with subjective minoritarian experiences are adapted into new forms in new cultural contexts. My case studies are considered in succession, starting with Ostermeier’s production of Rückkehr nach Reims, followed by analysis of his production of Im Herzen der Gewalt. Both productions are referred to by their German-language titles, and book titles in their original French, to avoid confusion. As I am interested in the impact of these texts on practitioners working in different national contexts, I also consider reviews of, and media articles about the publications in both Germany and the UK to understand what types of symbolic and cultural capital are at stake in each case. Once the material conditions that led to the production have been established, my analysis of performance focuses mainly on aesthetic choices, and how the original authors and their subjective experiences are represented on stage. Considering these productions side-by-side establishes aesthetic links as well as dissonances, with each case study thematizing authorial perspective and the purpose of adaptation itself in differing ways.

**Rückkehr nach Reims: Expanding the network**

Eribon sits at the centre of the literary and social network that incorporates him, together with Louis and de Lagasnerie. Although separated by ten years, both Louis and de Lagasnerie were Eribon’s students at university in Paris. Eribon acted as a sort of intellectual mentor to each of them, encouraging Louis to continue his studies at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, and inspiring him to write his first novel *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014; published in English as *The End of Eddy* in 2017). After introducing de Lagasnerie to Louis in 2011, the three formed a strong bond, becoming, as Elisabeth Zerolesky describes in *The New York Times,* “a kind of intellectual triumvirate, critiquing one another’s work and sometimes co-signing articles, but also taking vacations together, posting photos of their travels and street marches on Instagram” (2020). As listed on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Global Languages website, Harvard University gave the group the title of “The New French Intellectuals” for a seminar event in 2018, seeing the trio as a continuation of the intellectual traditions
established in France in the late-1960s. Similarly in the German context, the group are seen as spearheading a new, specifically French form of socio-political critique (Hayner 2018). This is therefore an internationally mobile network that has accumulated cultural and symbolic capital in the literary field through its engagement with intellectual critique and, as will be seen, their engagement with European politics and social inequality.

Eribon, the foundational member of the literary network, also provided the route for Ostermeier and his collaborators to enter into and expand the network through adapting the French author’s work. Eribon’s Retour à Reims was published in France in 2009, translated and published in German as Rückkehr nach Reims in 2016, and released in English as Returning to Reims in 2018. In the book, Eribon takes the death of his father as a starting point to consider his own relationship with his working-class family and his “break with the class background” from which he came (2018, 23). The book is a blend of autobiographical writing, detailing Eribon’s journey from his working-class upbringing in the homophobic environment of Reims to the intellectual circles of Paris, and socio-political reflection on how formerly communist working-class voters could come to vote for the far-right Front National. It “caused a stir in France”, selling around 90,000 copies (Willsher 2018), and became an “Überraschungserfolg” [a surprise hit] (Stephan 2016) in Germany, garnering what Kim Willsher describes as “cult status” for its “central premise that the mainstream left is to blame for pushing the working classes towards the far right and nationalism” (Willsher 2018). Eribon’s work has continued to be published in the German language ever since, with his La Société comme verdict being published in 2017 as Gesellschaft als Urteil (“Society as judgement”), suggestive of the continued popularity of the author’s socio-political commentary in the German literary context (the book is yet to published in English). Marina Benjamin suggests the publication of Returning to Reims in the UK needed the political upheaval of Brexit “to find a new audience eager to pick at its own painful scabs and hungry to understand why solid working-class socialists have swung so decisively to the hard right” (2018). The transnational success of Eribon’s book is thus seen as resting on its ability to speak to the political situations (or crises) of individual European countries at particular moments in time.

In this brief overview of the book’s reception, we see how its perceived political or intellectual capital outweighs Eribon’s considerations of coming-out, his descriptions of the gay community in Paris, and his unpicking of his own understanding of gay identity. As such, we can read this reception as diminishing what could be called the book’s “queer capital” (Kjaran and Jóhannesson 2016). I use this phrase following on from Jón Ingvar Kjaran and Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson’s work on queer sociability, and their study on how queer subjects distinguish themselves in heteronormative social situations. For them, the term “queer capital” refers to “ideas, looks, and behaviours that can be adopted as social strategies striving to gain symbolic value within the field of masculinity” (Kjaran and Jóhannesson 2016, 54). Transposing this onto Eribon’s work, I would argue his explorations of gay identity in Rétour a Reims gave the book a form of queer symbolic capital in the literary field. By drawing in writers such as Louis, who has noted the book’s impact on his life and writing (Willsher 2018), this queer capital aided the formation of his literary network and was thus a crucial factor in converting Eribon’s symbolic capital into social capital. Whilst the queer capital of Rétour a Reims and of Eribon as a writer
certainly affected the formation of his queer literary network, it is, as will be seen, the political and social themes within the book that drew in Ostermeier and his collaborators. The international co-production of Rückkehr nach Reims premiered in English at the Manchester International Festival in 2017, and it is the performances here that form the basis of this analysis. Ostermeier eschews adapting the book’s narrative into dramatic form to focus instead on Eribon’s political and sociological reflections, inserting new dialogue to thematise processes of adaptation as well. The setting for the production is a recording studio in an unknown location. German actor Nina Hoss plays Katy, an actor, who sits to record a voiceover for a filmed adaptation of Eribon’s book. For much of the production, Hoss sits centre stage, a spatial configuration that hints at how the narrative of the text will itself be re-centred for this adaptation. The text and recording equipment on a table in front of her, whilst the film for which she is recording her voiceover is projected overhead. This film, created by Ostermeier’s long-time collaborator Sébastien Dupouey, features Eribon himself recreating the journey to visit his mother after his father’s death, edited together with documentary, archival and news footage. Literally showing the audience Eribon’s “circle of friendship”, de Lagasnerie features in the video as well as a silent figure accompanying Eribon to the opera and to a café. The voiceover recording breaks down when Katy begins to have doubts over the adaptation of Eribon’s text she is reading and attempts to discuss the (on-stage, fictional) director’s adaptative choices. Paul, the director of the film, played by Bush Moukarzel, debates the cuts he has made to the original text with Katy, culminating in the session being called off and the video being re-edited and re-recorded a week later. Nevertheless, the performance ends with Katy and her director discussing how Eribon’s text and the director’s video end. Katy demands something more “hopeful” (Ostermeier 2017) than the ending provided in the film and original text. It is here that Hoss’s own family history becomes centred as she describes her father, Willi Hoss’s working-class upbringing and his decision to “not surrender to the circumstances”, resisting what she calls “social violence” (Ostermeier 2017) to enter left-wing politics and become a co-founder of the German Green Party. The documentary film becomes replaced with a live recording of the videos and photographs on Hoss’ phone of her father, in his early sixties, conducting humanitarian work in northern Brazil.

Hoss and Irish actor Bush Moukarzel collaborated with Ostermeier to create this production, with both actors referred to as co-devisors in the British arts media (Oltermann 2017; Cappelle 2017). Perhaps best known to international audiences for her work on the American television series Homeland (2014–2017), Hoss had worked with Ostermeier previously as an actor in The Little Foxes in 2014 and Bella Figura in 2015 (as listed on the Schaubühne website). Moukarzel’s theatre company Dead Centre performed their Hamnet at the Schaubühne’s Festival International New Drama (FIND) in 2017 – Rückkehr nach Reims marks his first collaboration with Ostermeier as a solo artist. Hoss and Moukarzel are joined on-stage by Ali Gadema, a Manchester-based actor and spoken word artist, who plays the studio’s sound engineer. These collaborators thus form a transnational theatrical network that (unsurprisingly, given its international agenda) centres around the Schaubühne theatre and its artistic director, and is suggestive of the way in which the Schaubühne, through collaborating with international co-producing partners, can discover and work with actors from outside of their ensemble. Gadema and Moukarzel’s routes into performing with the Schaubühne for this production suggest
the value of international festivals, such as the Manchester International Festival and the Schaubühne’s Festival of New International Drama (FIND), for introducing local artists to international companies and co-producing houses, as well as the potential use value of institutional festivals for discovering transnational theatre companies.

Both Hoss and Ostermeier have discussed their personal connections to the book as the reason for working on the adaptation, seeing it connect, or contradict with their own experiences as the children of working-class parents, in particular their respective relationships with their fathers (Oltermann 2017; Cappelle 2017). As such, the adaptation seeks to broaden the scope of Eribon’s social analysis. Whilst Eribon’s aim seems to be to connect his autobiography with wider questions of the positioning of the French Left and far-right in relation to the working-class, this production expands on this to make transnational connections between France, Germany, and Britain. This establishes a wider, pan-European critique of left-wing politicians and a consideration of the rise of the far-right in Western Europe. During this Manchester performance, for example, the audience were treated to the infamous clip taken of then Prime Minister Gordon Brown calling Gillian Duffy, a woman who accosts him on the street to berate his leadership of the British Labour Party, and who admits to having previously voted Labour, a “bigoted woman” during the UK’s 2010 general election. This clip sees what Eribon identifies (in both the book and in this production) as the failures of French left-wing political parties to relate to their historically working-class voter base mirrored in a British context. In the process of adaptation, the collaborators thus take hold of the seemingly local – or national – themes addressed in Eribon’s autobiographical essay and identify them not only in their own, German context, but in a British context too.

Eribon’s localized “circle of friendship” is thereby extended in this adaptation through what could be called a socio-political affinity network. Rather than based on what Eribon described as a “common sexuality”, this network is bound by a shared experience of growing up working-class, and the impact of this upbringing on the individuals’ political beliefs. As on-stage director Paul says to Katy when they begin recording a new edit of his film: “I’ve taken Eribon out and now it’s more into the politics” (quoted from recording: Ostermeier 2017). This essentially mirrors the work of the theatrical adaptation too. Part of the film but not the live action on stage, Eribon is at once present and distanced, his subjective and autobiographical narrative largely subsumed into Paul’s (and indeed Ostermeier’s) theoretical treatise on Western European politics. In interviews, both Ostermeier and Hoss have noted how much of their own lives they read in Eribon’s book (as referenced in Zarin 2018; and in a blog post on the Schaubühne website 2017), reminiscent of Louis’s identification with the book a few years earlier. This process of affiliation becomes a part of the production, when Katy (a.k.a. Hoss) begins talking about her father in response to the text’s original ending. By bringing her own family history into the narrative, the borderline between Hoss and the character of Katy begins to blur, and the fictional network of adaptors on stage merge with the theatrical network behind the production. Assessing the interaction between the performers on stage and the source text, we can see that Eribon’s narrative is (literally) displaced as Katy/Hoss uses his work to begin her own process of minoritarian “resubjectivation”, drawing on her own experiences to discuss her father’s political career.

For Peter Boenisch, this moment ends the production “with a positive counter-narrative to Eribon’s story, which had left its readers with a frustrated and frustrating analysis”
The inclusion of Hoss’ personal story forms a part of what Boenisch calls Ostermeier’s “reflexive realism” (108). The term denotes a distinct phase in the development of Ostermeier’s theatre aesthetic that looks to directly address the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, “society’s discontents, and its effect on people” (Boenisch 2020, 108). Boenisch describes this aesthetic as developing “a fluid shifting between the worlds of representation (fiction), of theatrical presentation (performance) and the present (the time of the theatre event/audience/everydaylife)” (108). This technique becomes a means of establishing “the act of theatre as an event, as if there were still some form of a relational totality, as if there were still a “common” ground of community in the contemporary, singularized world” (117–118). The political and personal “‘common’ ground” found in this production opens up new discursive possibilities for theatrical adaptation of literary texts, which, as shown through the more recent iterations of this production with different actors, allows different collaborators to offer new readings or find new affiliations with Eribon’s text.

Ostermeier’s Rückkehr nach Reims thus begins with the personal and the local, as represented by the video and voiceover recording of Eribon’s narrative, which then expands to include a transnational network of collaborators responding to the source material, and returns once again to the personal through Hoss, who uses her own experiences to critically engage with Eribon’s text. As a subjective figure, however, Eribon becomes literally displaced on stage, and his gay subjective experience becomes varnished over in the process. The focus shifts instead towards building a shared minoritarian experience based around class and political affiliation, embodied through the figures of Hoss and Ostermeier as agents adapting Eribon’s work. Whilst this creation of a literary-theatrical network loses sight of the “common sexuality” underpinning Eribon’s intellectual and social “circle of friendship” with Louis and de Lagasnerie (the book’s queer capital), it seeks to create space for new commonalities that give the text (and production) the potential to continue circulating across borders, taking on a varied afterlife including a multiplicity of voices and new meanings as it gets adapted afresh for every production run and with each new collaborator in each new national or institutional context.

**Subjectivity and narrative control in Im Herzen der Gewalt**

Whereas Ostermeier’s Rückkehr nach Reims created space for new networks, new affinities, and new meanings, his adaptation of Édouard Louis’s Histoire de la violence (German title: Im Herzen der Gewalt; literally “in the heart of violence”) thematizes the dynamics of power in the recounting of minoritarian experiences themselves. The production continues Ostermeier’s interest in working within the “circle of friendship” that includes Eribon, Louis and de Lagasnerie. Although the producing theatres extend from Berlin through Brussels to New York, the core creative team is made up of artists that work regularly with Ostermeier at the Schaubühne and collaborated on Rückkehr nach Reims: Sébastien Dupouey (video), Nina Wetzel (set and costume design) and Nils Ostendorf (music). Whilst Rückkehr nach Reims provided an opportunity for Ostermeier to work with new collaborators and artists, this international co-production model does not automatically expand the artistic network already in place at the Schaubühne. Just as Eribon played a (literal) role in the stage adaptation of his book, Louis was directly involved in the creative process of Im Herzen der Gewalt, joining
Ostermeier’s theatrical network as a key collaborator. As Ostermeier explains in a blog-post written by Joseph Pearson for the Schaubühne website in 2017, “[er] war zu Beginn bei den Proben dabei […] wenn es nötig war, hat er neue Dialoge für uns geschrieben” [he was at rehearsals at the start and when it was necessary wrote new pieces of dialogue for us]. Joseph Pearson furthermore suggests Louis was often literary present at the Schaubühne “da das Buch seines Freundes […] vom Thomas Ostermeier für die Bühne adaptiert wurde” [as his friend’s book was adapted for the stage by Ostermeier] (Pearson 2018), suggesting Ostermeier’s collaboration with Eribon became the springboard for this adaptation of Louis’s work. Eribon’s localized “circle of friendship” thus becomes the starting point for an extended professional and creative network of Franco-German collaborators that centred around the Schaubühne theatre as a mediating institutional space.

Im Herzen der Gewalt is an autobiographical story in which Louis recounts his personal experience of sexual assault. After chatting up a Kabyle man, Reda, on Christmas Eve in Paris, Louis invites him back to his apartment where they spend the night together. After discovering his phone and iPad in Reda’s coat, Louis accuses him of attempted theft. Reacting aggressively to this accusation, Reda pulls a gun on Louis, threatens to kill him, and sexually assaults him. The novel explores the prejudicial behaviour of the Parisian police as Louis reports the crime and retells his experience to them. In Ostermeier’s adaptation, the story is told through multiple narrative layers, told firstly through Louis’s sister, with Louis himself correcting her narrative, battling to retain control over his version of events by speaking directly to the audience, and through his statement to the police. As such, the adaptation utilizes this same framework to explore narrative fidelity and the effect of social or administrative settings on the retelling of traumatic events, whilst at the same time contrasting the environment of Louis’s working-class upbringing with his middle-class life in metropolitan Paris. The cast is made up of regular Schaubühne ensemble members, with Laurenz Laufenberg playing the character of Édouard in this production, and Reda being played by Renato Schuch.

Designer Nina Wetzel creates a relatively bare stage set made up of a square playing area backed by a large white projector screen. Boenisch described this space as a “boxing ring” (2020, 114), a phrase that perhaps aggressively pre-empts the violence and conflict at the heart of the story, and it is here that the narrated events are acted out, with props designating the performance environment: a shower, an armchair, a waiting room. Microphones placed downstage left allow Édouard and other characters to step forward and narrative their version of event, their voices rising above one another as if trying to assert some sense of narrative dominance, or to indicate a shift in temporal or physical setting. These microphones are also portable. They are taken up and passed around from character to character depending on whose narrative perspective is being focused on. They also provide the opportunity for some sort of formal, direct audience address. There are two main areas separated from this space creating “off stage” areas in which Thomas Witte plays live drums (a musical choice utilized previously in Ostermeier’s production of Richard III) and a space where actors make use of a table to assemble objects and film footage that is projected live onto the back screen of the space. As such, there are many aesthetic similarities to Rückkehr nach Reims, not least through a shared use of pre-recorded and live-streamed video to thematize the power dynamics of
narrating subjective experiences, and Boenisch goes so far as to call this a “companion production” (2020, 114) to *Im Herzen der Gewalt*.

About an hour into the performance, we are introduced to Reda as Édouard invites him into his apartment. Lying on his bed, Édouard takes up the microphone and hands it to Reda, who begins to speak about his own life and heritage, narrating his father’s journey to France from Algeria. This moment is initially filmed on Édouard’s phone, showing both men’s looming faces on the back screen. However, as the narration continues, this is replaced by images of deserted, mountainous landscapes. Édouard stands, watching the screen, and moves to the “off stage” table to begin drawing the route Reda’s father took on his journey through Paris the day he arrived. By handing over the microphone and using video to aid Reda’s story, Édouard uses his own tools of subjectivation to grant space to Reda’s narrative. Reda’s voice becomes a voiceover to the images that dominate the performance space, a choice that once again mirrors the aesthetic in *Rückkehr nach Reims*. As Reda sits on the bed talking, we see Édouard’s large hand projected on screen as it literally draws in buildings and roads to supplement Reda’s narrative. This action places the body of Louis as victim in a dominant position above the seemingly diminished figure of Reda as perpetrator. Édouard, through this video, remains in control of the space and thus the way in which Reda’s own narrative is shared. Despite offering a sense of agency to Reda, or an opportunity for subjective expression, Édouard in fact remains a dominant figure in control of how the narrative unfolds. This control, seen through the figure of Laufenberg, brings to mind Louis’s role as collaborator. In a 2018 blogpost on the Schaubühne website, Joseph Pearson sees Laufenberg as embodying “eine glaubhafte, dramatisierte Version Louis” [a believable, dramatized version of Louis] and could barely tell the two apart. We can therefore see an attempt to narrow the distance between the character of Édouard and his real-life counterpart, as well as a layering of different identities in one figure on stage: the fictional Édouard, Louis as real-life victim of assault, Louis as author, and Louis as theatrical collaborator.

What does this mean in relation to the role of Ostermeier as co-adaptor of the text? For Boenisch, this aesthetic of “exposed narration” foregrounds the “processing, the drama of making sense, the tragedy of coming to terms – thus the reflection, instead of presence, absorption, identification” (2020, 115). In contrast to *Rückkehr nach Reims* however, where reflection and dialogue were utilised by creative artists to think about the power dynamics of adaptation, and the potential of adaptation as a way of expanding meaning and affiliation, the reflective or discursive elements imposed by the aesthetic form of this production remain somehow internalized within the play’s narrative world. It becomes a battle for subjectivation and frames the gay subjectivity as being constantly under pressure from social structures: the family unit, the police, and even the health authorities. However, just as Ostermeier “[took] out” Eribon in *Rückkehr nach Reims*, to use Paul’s phrase, in order to create space for Hoss’s subjective experience, this production attempts to construct a narrative space in which Reda’s subjective experiences can come to the fore – without compromising Louis’s own narrative standpoint or dominant position in the process.

Tilman Krause, reviewing the show for German newspaper *Die Welt*, questions this part of the production. He mocks Louis’s attempt at establishing “eine Solidarität der Underdogs” [a solidarity amongst underdogs] (2018) and the character’s assertion that
the police are more of an enemy to him than Reda was. Krause points here towards the fallibility of establishing a collective minoritarian experience that glosses over difference. Louis as author and Édouard as character both attempt to make connections with Reda, thinking about how each of them as gay men from poor backgrounds are victims of the violence of social structures. In the staging, however, this moment of affiliation in fact highlights a further structural inequality. As a racial minority, and played by Renato Schuch, the production’s only non-white actor, we are made aware of Louis’s comparative privilege as a figure holding enough cultural, social, and economic capital to hold a dominant narrative position in this production. This moment of affiliation is reflected in Ostermeier’s reasons for adapting the book. In a blogpost on the Schaubühne website, the director speaks about what he sees as the responsibility of people in society to defend one another (“dass wir einander verteidigen”; 2018). Ostermeier is here referring to what he calls his responsibility to defend the rights of gay people facing injustice, regardless of his own sexuality (2018). His self-positioning as a defender of minoritarian rights affects how we can understand his role as adaptor here, especially when considered in comparison to his work on Rückkehr nach Reims. Whereas in the latter production Ostermeier’s aesthetics allowed space for new experiences to query, probe, and expand on Eribon’s narrative and theories, Im Herzen der Gewalt sees him stage one minoritarian subjective experience, narrowing the discursive possibilities as a means of expressing queer solidarity. In doing so, Ostermeier acquires some of the queer capital seemingly lost in the process of adapting Eribon’s text. On the one hand, this speaks to Ramona Mosse’s assertion that the Schaubühne can become a “launching pad” for diverse, minoritarian groups to acquire international mobility (2020, 36). On the other, Ostermeier’s work here alongside Louis also demonstrates the ways in which networks, and the individuals within those networks, can narrow the discursive potential of adaptation.

Conclusion: Space, affiliation, and “queering” transmedial adaptation

This article has shed light on the ways in which transnational literary and theatrical networks operating across France, Germany and the UK affect processes of adaptation and the representation of queer subjectivities on stage. In doing so, it has revealed the importance of directionality in the mapping of adaptations. It introduced a local, literary, and social network based on a “common sexuality”, the “circle of friendship” that includes Eribon, Louis and de Lagasnerie. Recognizing their own working-class experiences in Eribon’s autobiography, Ostermeier and his collaborator Hoss expanded this network to establish a political affinity network with a transnational scope. For my second case study, there was a smaller theatrical network of collaborators with a localised direction of travel between Germany and France, and a more direct involvement of Louis in the adaptation of his work. By bringing in performance analysis, I have shown the ways in which intermedial adaptation can become a means of establishing transnational solidarity, but also highlighted the role of individuals within these networks as gatekeepers. Whilst Peter Boenisch has argued that both productions studied here represent “projects that open up spaces for critical reflection and for shared public understanding” (2020, 118), I would argue that this applies most strongly to Rückkehr nach Reims. Ostermeier’s staging of Im Herzen der Gewalt, in contrast, is more interested in thinking about the
societal pressures applied to gay subjects expressing their own subjective experiences and opening up space for this subjectivity to be expressed, than critically (or discursively) engaging with the dynamics of power in the mediation of personal experience. Furthermore, by recognising a responsibility to “defend” certain minoritarian subjects, Ostermeier’s self-positioning highlights the potential of adaptation as a means of establishing transnational solidarity with minoritarian subjects. At the same time, this raises questions as to whose voices become amplified in these processes, and which other minority groups are thereby excluded by these choices.

I have demonstrated that Ostermeier is far more convincing as regards to opening space for critical reflection in his work on *Rückkehr nach Reims*. Whilst the gay subject (Eribon) becomes displaced and indeed overwritten in this production, with the queer capital of the book giving way to political capital on stage, Ostermeier’s adaptation creates the opportunity for a discursive piece of theatre with the potential of having as many re-stagings as there are collaborators interested in bringing their own experience to the production. It, therefore, welcomes new minoritarian experiences into a social and political affinity network, inviting a multiplicity of voices to contribute new readings of the text for each new staging in each new institutional, national, or temporal context. In this regard, the theatre production follows how the book itself accumulates capital, with the stage adaptation too finding new audiences and collaborators discovering connections with the text in different national contexts and at different points of time. I, therefore, view Ostermeier’s production as “queering” Eribon’s text. Following on from Fatima El-Tayeb’s use of “queer” to indicate “the tension of living supposedly exclusive identities and transforming it into a creative potential, building a community based on a shared experience of multiple, contradictory positionalities” (2011, xxxvi), Ostermeier shifts Eribon’s focus on gay subjectivity to invite an open-ended number of positionalities into a growing transnational literary-theatrical network, drawing in female and other marginalized voices as the production circulates across time and space.

In both these examples, then, the subjective experiences of Eribon and Louis face mediation as they become adapted for the stage. In this process, however, the value of networks in the formation of minoritarian identity, as argued by Eribon, remains imperative. Whilst *Im Herzen der Gewalt* highlights the challenge faced by marginalized individuals as they seek to affirm their subjective position and to have their experiences heard in the context of a heteronormative and discriminatory society, Ostermeier’s “queering” of *Rückkehr nach Reims* suggests this affirmation must not come at the cost of marginalizing other minoritarian experiences. In fact, this “queering” opens up the possibility for minoritarian connections across time and space, meaning new “circle[s] of friendship” can be formed on the basis of new affinities. Rather than relying on figures like Ostermeier to come to “defend” marginalized groups then, charging them with the task to create space for connection and critical (self-)reflection may provide a useful format for future collaborations.

**Notes**

1. This quotation is taken from *Le Monde* in English, an uncredited translation of an article by Zineb Dryef. All following translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.
2. These recordings were provided by the Schaubühne with the permission to use for academic purposes. The recording of *Rückkehr nach Reims* was taken in Manchester in 2017 and so represents the English version of this production. Later iterations of the production may have altered certain aspects of the performance. The recording of *Im Herzen der Gewalt* was taken at the Schaubühne Berlin in 2018.

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