

McCready on Martin (2013)

Martin, Roxane. *L'Émergence de la notion de mise en scène dans le paysage théâtral français (1789–1914)*. Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2013. Pp. 257. ISBN: 978-2-8124-2114-3

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In this groundbreaking book, Roxane Martin traces, from the Revolution through the long nineteenth century, the theatrical and political developments that led, slowly and not quite in a straight line, to our modern concept of *mise en scène*. While she gives André Antoine his due, calling his 1903 *Causerie sur la mise en scène*: “l’acte de naissance de la mise en scène moderne” (10), she shows that the seeds of Antoine’s movement were sown more than a century earlier on the politicized stages of the Revolution. Divided into four chronologically organized but thematically coherent chapters, Martin’s book deploys careful readings of theatrical and para-theatrical texts to show how the lowly *régisseur*, whose contribution to the play was technical, mechanical, and decidedly subordinate to the author’s text, could evolve into “the *metteur en scène*,” a theatrical artist in his own right, coequal with the playwright.

The entire book is worth reading, but Martin’s analysis of the Revolutionary period is particularly brilliant. When the Revolutionary government abolished privileges and democratized access to theatrical creation, it politicized the stage, turning it into a propaganda machine. Martin argues that as the stage became “un outil pour transformer la société” (48), new esthetic imperatives were in force. What emerged under the Revolution was an esthetic that privileged the “message” and performance of the play over its literary source text, thus creating a space for the *metteur en scène* to practice an “écriture scénique intégrée à la dramaturgie” (48). Although almost universally dismissed by literary scholars in the period following the Revolution, the plays of this period were, as Martin demonstrates, politically charged and potentially dangerous. The very term *mise en scène* came into circulation at this precise moment, born, according to Martin, “du besoin de maîtriser le spectacle” (47).

Martin goes on to argue that in abolishing privilege and asserting a shared, democratic ownership of the *repertoire*, the Revolutionary government established a new and enduring relationship to canon. The “classics,” once kept pure of contemporary allusion and reserved for a select group of initiates, belonged from that point on to everyone and to every present moment. Going forward, staging the classics would therefore be inherently politicized and often contested, forcing the *metteur en scène* at various times in various ways to articulate the rights and responsibilities of the director with respect to classic texts. According to Martin, this shared stake in the canon meant that by the second half of the nineteenth century debates about *mise en scène* were most intense not over new plays but when they involved productions of the classics.

In the second and third chapters Martin examines theatrical practice in the first half of the nineteenth century in more depth. She cites developments in the *drame romantique* and especially the plot-driven melodrama that heightened the importance of *mise en scène* and the prestige of the *metteur en scène* since “le succès des pièces reposait en grande partie sur les moyens du spectacle” (65). It was during this period that the first lawsuits were brought (unsuccessfully) to claim extra-textual elements of a production as intellectual property.

The fourth chapter charts the rise of the modern *metteur en scène*, examining both the critical writings and theatrical innovations of Antoine, of course, but also bringing forth lesser-known figures such as Eugène Bertrand and Albert Vinzentini. Martin concludes with a discussion of the long struggle for juridical recognition of the work of the *metteur en scène*, a struggle impeded by, among other forces, the powerful Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques (founded in 1777 by Beaumarchais), which maintained that the *mise en scène* was nothing more than the material expression of the immaterial text. This essentially Platonic prejudice was longstanding and difficult to overcome. In fact, it was not until 1956 that French law established *mise en scène* as intellectual property.

Martin is an excellent writer; her prose is sharp and clear and her argument is compelling. She demonstrates what is at stake in the emergence of *mise en scène* from its origins under the Revolution and then methodically follows the artistic, juridical, and cultural implications of these developments up to the Great War. After the war, superstar directors Jacques Copeau and the Cartel would lay the groundwork for contemporary dramaturgy. Martin’s book clarifies the long evolution that made their work possible.

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