

Ostermeier's Realism

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„Life is not what it `s supposed to be. It`s what it is. The way you cope with it is what makes the difference”²

Abstract: *The subject of this essay is the artistic work of director Thomas Ostermeier, whose presence as a theater director has brought a genuine breath of fresh air to German theater through his nonconformist approach. This essay aims to examine the parallel he draws between the Japanese art of kintsugi and his approach to theater. In examining the conflict the director has with the outdated deconstructivism of the present, he proposes an alternative in the form of socially engaged realist theater, in which the actor's art is not confined by the fourth wall. In this article, we seek to highlight the artistic techniques through which the director fragments and reassembles the play in order to give it its own unique theatrical form.*

Keywords: theater, deconstructivism, realism, story, actor, text;

Introduction

An unconventional artist within Berlin's largely experimental theatre landscape, Thomas Ostermeier advocates a vision of theatre grounded in conflict and narrative, positioning himself in opposition to the deconstructivist tendencies that have shaped much contemporary performance. For Ostermeier, storytelling remains the central function of theatre. Rejecting the fragmentation often associated with postdramatic aesthetics, he seeks instead to reconstruct dramatic meaning and restore the audience's engagement with narrative. This approach may be compared to the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, a practice that repairs broken ceramic objects with lacquer mixed with gold, emphasizing rather than concealing the traces of fracture. According to legend, the origins of *kintsugi* can be traced to the fifteenth-century shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, who commissioned Japanese craftsmen to restore a treasured ceramic vessel that had been broken. The repaired object, marked by visible golden seams, came to be valued even more highly than before. Beyond a restoration technique, *kintsugi* embodies a philosophy of renewal, suggesting that damage and repair become integral parts of an object's history and beauty. Ostermeier has frequently invoked this metaphor to describe his own theatrical practice. Reflecting on his relationship to deconstructionist theatre, he remarked: "I am, if you will, the younger brother of the deconstructionists: when the older brothers have demolished everything, someone has to come along to gather the shards and put them back together. I do that, but with the hope that the seams remain visible. In Japanese culture, there is a word for this: *kintsugi*. A ceramic vessel achieves its full beauty after it has been broken and glued back together"³. Through this comparison, Ostermeier argues for a theatre capable of reassembling the fragments left behind by decades of

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² (*Life isn't what it should be. It is what it is. How you handle it is what makes the difference* -trad.aut). Retrieved April 28, 2026, from <https://connect.mayoclinic.org/blog/living-with-mild-cognitive-impairmentmci/newsfeedpost/the-japanese-art-form-of-kintsugi-embracing-the-imperfections-of-life/>.

³ Gerhard Jörder. 2023. *Backstage OSTERMEIER*. București: Editura Cheiron, p. 10.

deconstruction while preserving the traces of rupture that reveal the complexities of contemporary experience.

1. Ostermeier's Realism

The growing interest in postdramatic and performative forms has increasingly marginalized the coherent and realistic language of theatrical narrative. As Thomas Ostermeier observes: "the concept of realism and its significance have sparked numerous debates in recent years. Moreover, it has fallen completely out of favor in an era that hails performative, post-dramatic, and deconstructivist forms as the only way to find pleasure in theater"⁴. Against this tendency, Ostermeier advocates a return to narrative clarity and dramatic conflict as essential components of theatrical experience.

In this context, George Banu recalls Tadeusz Kantor's well-known assertion that: "art is not a reflection of life, but its double, like the lining of a garment"⁵. For Ostermeier, theatre must not merely reproduce reality; rather, it must reveal the tensions and contradictions that shape human relationships in contemporary society. In a cultural climate increasingly characterized by informational overload, fragmented communication, and the erosion of shared meaning, theatre faces the challenge of restoring intelligibility to experience. The danger of allowing form to eclipse substance is that reality itself becomes flattened, reduced to a series of disconnected impressions. The uncontrolled flow of information⁶, combined with an overestimation of people's capacity to process and synthesize data, often leads to a sense of exhaustion and defeat. In such cases, theater tends to adopt a mimetic approach and may drift into a realm of philosophy where metatheatrical performance takes center stage. The logic of the text no longer matters; the characters, the setting, and the relationships between them are no longer essential. In other words, it is the concepts that must come to life on stage, not the actor-character. Ostermeier warns of the danger posed by the dehumanizing effects of postmodernism and what appears to be emerging as post-deconstructivism. Ostermeier is particularly critical of theatrical practices that privilege performative experimentation at the expense of dramatic structure. While acknowledging the historical importance of the avant-garde movements of the 1970s and 1980s, he contends that many contemporary practitioners merely reproduce their formal devices without understanding the intellectual and artistic rigor that originally informed them. While acknowledging the historical importance of the avant-garde movements of the 1970s and 1980s, he contends that many contemporary practitioners merely reproduce their formal devices without understanding the intellectual and artistic rigor that originally informed them. As he remarks, "All of this is just deconstruction clichés. Before you can deconstruct, you should master everything, to perfection, with theatrical mastery... Nothing but derivatives of derivatives... I reproach these people for doing nothing but endlessly regurgitating postmodern theater mechanisms and sets, copying their means and effects in the most simplistic way..."⁷. Their followers, lacking the experience of that arduous journey, merely adopted a form that pretended to be expressive and produced artistic substitutes

⁴ Peter M. Boenisch și Thomas Ostermeier. 2024. *Teatrul lui Thomas Ostermeier [Thomas Ostermeier's Theater]*. București: Editura Nemira, p. 48.

⁵ George Banu. 2021. *Povestirile lui Horațiu [Horace's Stories]*. București: Editura Tracus Arte, p. 153.

⁶ („The need for information is enormous. We complain about it, yet we go along with this acceleration, fascinated and intoxicated by the speed and the pressure in which we feel the intensity of our experience. We produce more and faster so we can keep up. But that is an illusion.”) Thomas Ostermeier. 2024. *Theater and Fear*, translation Vlad Russo, texts compiled by George Banu și Jitka Goriaux Pelechova. București: Editura Nemira, p. 49.

⁷ Gerhard Jörder, *op.cit.*, pp. 102-103.

devoid of vitality and substance. In an interview with Gerhard Jörder⁸, Ostermeier further criticizes what he perceives as the cultivated incompleteness of contemporary avant-garde theatre. Productions often appear intentionally unfinished or amateurish, presenting fragmentation as an aesthetic value in itself. Against this tendency, Ostermeier proposes a theatre grounded in precision, craftsmanship, and social responsibility. For him, the stage must continue to tell coherent stories capable of engaging contemporary audiences while remaining attentive to the complexities of present-day reality. "Today's avant-garde theater aims to be unfinished, and in some cases amateurish. The fractures must appear every few meters; theater shows us that we cannot, that we do not want to be able to..."⁹. He believes in a theater that is socially responsible, one that draws its inspiration from a concave-lens analysis of immediate reality. In this regard, critic George Banu states: "The stage becomes a concave lens of the world and invites us to see its entire reality in a nutshell, as Hamlet said in his time. Not from a panoramic, vast, and vague perspective, but from a local one, in micro-sociological situations..."¹⁰. George Banu characterizes this approach by describing the stage as a "concave lens of the world," one that allows spectators to perceive broader social realities through concrete and localized situations. Rather than offering panoramic representations of society, Ostermeier focuses on micro-social conflicts in which larger political and psychological forces become visible. His theatre functions as an analytical instrument, examining reality through carefully constructed dramatic situations and exposing the contradictions embedded within everyday life.

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⁸ Retrieved April 28, 2026, from <https://tdz.de/person/0df5ac6e-cb5d-4b93-ae8d-992330e49e91>.

⁹ Gerhard Jörder, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁰ Thomas Ostermeier, *op.cit.*, pp. 18-19.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² ("I am absolutely convinced that if you explore a dramatic situation in all its depth, with complete integrity and complexity, everything will unfold naturally and organically simply by using that clearly defined dramatic situation as a springboard....If you find the right situation, everything else will follow and fall into place on its own") Peter M. Boenisch și Thomas Ostermeier, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

¹³ Retrieved April 29, 2026, from <https://festival-avignon.com/en/artists/krystian-lupa-9073>.

stance toward the experience of reality becomes perceptible and conveys our astonishment and unease at the contradictory ways in which our behavior can shift from one moment to the next"¹⁴. For this reason, the actor occupies a central position within Ostermeier's theatrical practice. While many contemporary performances foreground metatheatrical devices and conceptual frameworks, Ostermeier remains committed to storytelling and character construction. His actors inhabit a dual position that recalls Brechtian distancing: they are simultaneously performers and characters. As Krystian Lupa suggests, acting emerges from a continuous movement between proximity and distance, immersion and reflection. Theatrical truth arises precisely from this tension.

The theatrical truth that emerges is the result of this balance between theater and reality. Lars Eidinger¹⁵ In the production of *Hamlet* at the Schaubühne, there are moments when it breaks the fourth wall, challenging the audience to react. And this way of expressing himself in no way detracts from the charm of the stage performance. The actor has the freedom to step in and out of character in order to create the most realistic portrayal of the character possible. Hamlet's madness, used as a protective mask and stemming from his fear of ending up on Claudius's suspicion, is what drives him to overplay his character. He plays his madness so well that he himself loses his mind. As a result, everything falls apart, and this is how the characters' duality makes sense: Gertrude is also Ophelia, Polonius is also Osrick, Claudius is also the Ghost. It should be noted that in the cast¹⁶ in this production, the play is performed by six actors; the only actor who plays a single character is Lars Eidinger, so Hamlet is portrayed on stage by the actor himself. In this paranoid world driven by fear, anything is possible, which is why the actor is compelled to blur the line between the character and himself. In this regard, in an interview in which Ostermeier is criticized for the actor playing the lead role's lack of connection to the text, he states: "But that's exactly what we agreed on: he must feel constantly threatened, and as a result, he spots enemies even in the theater... have you ever seen an actor give such a wild performance as a madman?... one who actually takes the line seriously: "My own madness is my poor Hamlet's enemy"?"¹⁷ That border¹⁸ the permeable nature of the performance space is part of the concept that defines the director's work in the Shakespearean production at the Schaubühne. Breaking with the theatrical convention of the proscenium stage heightens the audience's interest, compelling them to feel like active participants in the story. That "*Who's there?*", the opening line of Shakespeare's play, provides the key to understanding the structure of the production. Starting from this question, the director breaks down the play's material to scrutinize it through the lens of his criminal investigator's dialectic. Ostermeier views theater as a scientific laboratory in *stoff-ful*¹⁹ the material or raw material represented by the dramatic text) is analyzed, as he states, using the inductive method borrowed from Brecht²⁰. He takes the dramatic text he intends to convey and aligns it closely with current events, preserving its spirit while overlaying it with a credible reality. With this *Who's there?* (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 1), Ostermeier breaks down the scenes to feel their pulse the spark that ignites conflict. The possible answers help us understand just how important the issue of doubt is regarding the identity of Shakespeare's heroes. Thus, what appears to be the case is not necessarily the truth. Is Hamlet being sincere or playing a role when he rejects Ophelia, and

¹⁴ Thomas Ostermeier, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹⁵ Retrieved May 3, 2026, from <https://www.schaubuehne.de/en/people/lars-eidinger.html>.

¹⁶ Retrieved May 4, 2026, from <https://www.schaubuehne.de/en/productions/hamlet.html>.

¹⁷ Gerhard Jörder, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.116 .

¹⁹ ("Stoff" describes the material, texture, substance, fabric, and subject matter. The term immediately makes it clear that the play, as a starting point for the director's work, is much more than just words on paper. It has substance, texture, and a tangible concreteness that you can perceive, touch, smell, and feel) Peter M Boenisch și Thomas Ostermeier, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²⁰ Bertolt Brecht. 2014. *Brecht on Theatre*. London: Ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn, pp. 211-212.

if he is playing a role, what motives might he have? Why doesn't Ophelia act as her heart dictates when she meets him? This way of questioning breaks the play down into fragments that offer the opportunity to find your own truth in Shakespeare's texts: "Shakespeare's scenes are like glass cubes with one, two, five, or six sides, through which you can look. These multidimensional glimpses are both the beauty and the challenge"²¹ The director employs the same techniques in plays such as *Richard III*, where the main character openly declares to the audience that he will put on a mask to pretend to be in love. He himself is surprised by the effect produced by his theatrical effort to convince others that he is affectionate in love. In this approach to double theatricality, Ostermeier finds a solution for the Shakespearean play. We also encounter this pattern of "playing at theater" in *Othello*, where Iago makes the audience his accomplice by feigning friendship with Othello. This aspect lends authenticity to situations in which the characters must play the role dictated by the situation, and whose credibility whether poorly or well performed only serves to make it genuine. Through this unique system of deconstruction, the actor comes to understand that it is not the performance itself that matters, but rather how one acts within the given situation. The puzzle presented by the show's creator gives you the opportunity to perform as freely as possible and at the same time, as authentically as possible within the existing dramatic situations. Ostermeier takes the fragments and rearranges them into a story in which the joints (much like those of repaired ceramic vessels) make them even more valuable, precisely because they reveal a necessary reality that aligns with our existence. And if I began this article with Virginia Satir's reflection on what life is and should be, Ostermeier, a proponent of kintsugi art, comes to complement this and tell us that in art, to reveal the truth, one need not imitate reality: "Realism is much more than a mere imitation of the world, as it might seem at first glance....The aim of realism is to show the world as it is, not as it appears to be"²².

The realism that Ostermeier pursues is therefore neither naturalistic nor documentary. It is a realism of condensation and intensification. Reality must be transformed through theatrical means in order to reveal its hidden contradictions. The theatrical truth that emerges is the result of a delicate balance between reality and representation, observation and artistic construction.

2. Conclusions

Ostermeier's theater is a laboratory where the art of acting is the central focus of how this rebellious artist of our time seeks to tell stories to the world. A world of seemingly simple realism born of an analysis worthy of a forensic investigation, in which dialogue and dramatic situations are designed to heighten the conflict and reveal the truth as the result of these forces. His artistic work speaks to an audience eager for rebellion, seducing them and treating them as partners. With the delicacy and patience of an archaeologist, the German director searches for the truth in the deepest layers of the dramatic text—the raw material—which he breaks down and reassembles together with the actor, who, burning with intensity, creates unique and spectacular forms.

²¹ Gerhard Jörder, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²² Peter M Boenisch și Thomas Ostermeier, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

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