

# **A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Theories of Spectator-Character and Actor-Character Identification in the Theatre**

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## **A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Theories of Spectator-Character and Actor-Character Identification in the Theatre**

From Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* to Brecht's formulation of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, theorists of the theatre have long engaged with the question of what spectatorship entails. Such question has, directly or indirectly, extended to the investigation of acting. In the wake of Brecht's critique of conventional theatre, emphasis has been put on the study of spectatorship from the point of view of its cultural determinants and its conscious cognitive aspects, while unconscious processes have been mostly ignored.

In this thesis I take a psychoanalytic perspective to analyse theories of the theatre that have investigated the process of identification of the spectator or the actor with the character. According to psychoanalysis, mechanisms of unconscious identification, such as projection and introjection, are fundamental to psychic development and to the construction of the self.

By analysing Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* through Freud's theory of transference, I propose a new understanding of spectatorship as transference dynamic. I then conduct an in-depth enquiry into eighteenth-century theories of acting which lead up to Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*. I investigate the paradox of the actor, in its fruitful tension between sensibility and understanding, from the perspective of Melanie Klein's concept of unconscious phantasy and Bion's theory of alpha-function. I hence interpret the art of the actor as the performing of alpha-function on the spectator's unconscious emotions.

The new insights afforded by a psychoanalytic perspective of spectating and acting illuminate the moral function of theatre and resolve some of the controversial points brought forward by various theorists, including Brecht and Rousseau. The moral function of theatre can be construed as a transpersonal process in which unconscious identifications between spectator and actor promote the development of a reflective view of the self.



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## PREFACE

The research presented in this thesis was carried out first at the Department of Theatre and Drama at Royal Holloway (University of London) and since 2013 at the Drama Department at the University of Exeter, where I transferred following my supervisor's change of post.

The project was born from my desire to understand the nature of the pleasure I felt when labouring as actress, or spectator, or indeed when I witnessed the pleasure of the children to whom I taught drama. While working as psychiatrist and training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, I gained the impression that a similar pleasure was sometimes afforded in sessions with patients. My previous studies at the 'Dipartimento di Musica e Spettacolo' (DAMS) of the University of Bologna, providing me with the background knowledge in theatre history and theories of the theatre, allowed me to formulate a preliminary proposal to frame the project. From there, the research grew into the exploration of theories of the theatre in different historical periods, affording exciting opportunities for in-depth samplings of theatre history. The application of psychoanalytic theory has grown organically with the research; not only has psychoanalysis been an opportunity for reading theories of the theatre afresh, but conversely, theories of the theatre have been the occasion to look at established psychoanalytic concepts in detail, so to extend their relevance to the understanding of theatre.

Although my research has remained within the scope of theory, my practice as actress and as psychoanalytic psychotherapist has had an important bearing on its development. In the text I have used some examples from my practice as psychotherapist to illustrate certain psychoanalytic concepts.

I have given some consideration to the question of how to use gender pronouns when writing in general terms, so as to avoid using the masculine as the universal gender. Any convention has got its limitations; my choice has been partly practical in terms of helping the reader to navigate the text more easily. I have used the feminine for the actor and for the analyst, and the masculine for the spectator and for the patient, and this convention mirrors the use of the

feminine for the mother and the masculine for the baby, when I am talking about the mother-baby relationship. Quotations or specific examples necessarily, and happily, escape from this system. As I will have the occasion to discuss in Chapter 1, my use of pronouns wishes to counterpoise the gender stereotyping that, through a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, assigns to the gaze of the spectator the masculine dominant status, in relation to the actor's feminine position of subordination. In opposition to this, and within the Kleinian framework of the mother-baby relationship, I allude to the 'she' actor as the bearer of the wise maternal function which sustains the emotional development of the fragile psyche of the 'he' spectator.

As concerns quotations, I have kept all the French quotations in the original given the relevance that the use of specific words has for my analysis. I have also kept the few Italian quotations in the original, but for those I have provided my own translation as a footnote. For quotations from texts originally written in German, such as Brecht's and Freud's, I have used translations from published English versions. In a minority of cases when the specific use of terminology was particularly significant to the discussion, and solely referring to quotations by Brecht, I have provided the original German text as a footnote.

In relation to the bibliography, I have used the official style required for citations from 'The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud'; this entails that each paper is quoted separately. I have followed a similar convention for what concerns Klein's and Brecht's essays, listing those that I quote in the text as single entries. Although I have used the collected versions of their essays, these writings were originally published individually. I believe that my choice will help the reader to follow more easily and with greater precision my exposition of these writers' theories.

The content of Chapter 2 has been published in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (April 2015, Volume 96, Issue 2, pp. 369–387).

I wish to thank my supervisor, Professor David Wiles, first of all for having trusted my ability to conduct this research and having accepted me as a PhD student, despite my unusual background, and then for having inspired and supported me during the course of my studies. I also wish to thank my husband Francesco and my son Giacomo for their loving encouragement and their patience.



# CHAPTER 1 – THEORIZING THEATRE SPECTATORSHIP

## SETTING THE QUESTION

Theatre masters and theorists of the distant or less distant past have always concerned themselves with spectators. Their preoccupations have been multiple: it might have been to dictate a measure for playwriting (Aristotle) or a measure for acting (Luigi Riccoboni); or it might have been to justify their condemnation of theatre (Rousseau) or to defend their reformation of it (Brecht). While the twentieth century has been particularly fertile in its attempts to theoretically redefine and practically reconfigure the relationship between theatre and audience, the audience has always been the point of reference against which theatre has defined itself (Freshwater, 2009).

The study of spectatorship, however, has been and remains hampered by a number of complications. The definition itself of what spectatorship entails is problematic. The audience can be seen as a collective entity, expressing group responses, or as a collection of individuals each presenting a subjective response. Moreover, the domains of enquiry have been and may be manifold. Scholars have investigated contingent factors which spectators (as individuals or as a group) carry with them to the theatre and which supposedly influence their reception: from intrinsic factors such as gender, race or sexual orientation, to cultural and political expectations, to more banal circumstances such as mode of travel to the venue or personal motivation for attending the performance (Bennett, 1997). On the other hand, alternative theories of spectatorship have departed from the assumption that theatre activates universal psychological processes, but often without clarifying whether they situate the response in the individual spectator or in the audience as a group. Another substantial variation has consisted in theorizing spectatorship as an intellectual or rather an emotional experience. Permutations within these themes are potentially infinite: the focus can shift in examining the spectator's response in relation to the plot versus the characters, or in concentrating on aesthetic questions versus moral or political ones.

Of course theatre reception is most likely to partake of all the elements just mentioned, and more; accordingly, it is not difficult to fall into the trap of confounding or conflating them. A relevant example is given by Joseph Harris (2014) in his study of theories of spectatorship in early modern France: in the early seventeenth century, theorists focussed especially on the spectator's intellectual experience of the play as a whole and were concerned with questions about dramatic illusion. By the end of the eighteenth century, an interest in the emotional participation of spectators and their engagement with the characters on stage had come to the fore. As this shift was developed, concepts related to spectatorship such as interest, illusion and the emerging notion of identification, changed their meaning, but their denotation could also differ between contemporary authors. Therefore any investigation of spectatorship has to deal with at least two complications: the necessity to define the more or less broad frame of reference within which it operates, and the need to remain aware of the permutations in meaning that certain words have endured.

In this thesis I will concentrate on that facet of spectatorship that has to do with the response of the individual spectator, for what pertains to the psychic operations which induce him to identify with the character(s). I will therefore exclude any consideration of the audience response as a group, despite recognizing that this must be an important aspect of the theatrical experience. Moreover, I will focus on identification as a universal aspect of spectatorship, again deliberately excluding a discussion of those contingent factors that may bear on spectators' idiosyncratic reactions. My approach will be entirely theoretical.

The question of the spectator's identification with the characters calls for the examination of its relation with the actor's impersonations. Although the extension of the field of enquiry from spectating to acting is not always applied by theorists of spectatorship, this is clearly the case with Brecht. In his conception of the epic theatre he advances a new theory of acting based on the *Verfremdungseffekt* precisely as an unfolding of his critique of spectatorship.

Considerations on acting which concern the ultimate effect on the spectator's identification with the character(s) will also be the focus of this thesis.

My research has developed a new approach to spectatorship, by using a psychoanalytic perspective to improve understanding of spectators' unconscious emotional engagement. While contemporary theatre studies have examined spectatorship from the perspectives of its socio-cultural determinants (Bennett, 1997), conscious cognitions (McConachie, 2008), and embodied perceptions (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), they have failed to explore the significance of the underlying unconscious mechanisms. Even approaches that have deliberately stressed the importance of broadening the research perspective beyond the material and visible factors influencing performance, like Phelan's (1993) theory of the 'unmarked', end by defining their field of enquiry within the boundaries of consciousness. Phelan, for instance, defines the 'unmarked' as 'a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility' (Phelan, 1993, p.19).

The neglect towards the exploration of the unconscious in theatre reception implies a tendency to underestimate the relevance of emotional aspects of spectatorship. This may seem surprising, given that since Aristotle and for many centuries, reflections on spectatorship generally took it for granted that the audience's emotional involvement was intrinsic to theatre reception. Considered from a psychoanalytic perspective, though, this is not unexpected because much emotional engagement happens at an unconscious level, while emotional awareness consists of the sparse epiphanies of the underlying continuous flow of the unconscious.

In a recent study focusing on performance at large, but also accounting for modern forms of participatory theatre that have emerged after the 1960s, Fischer-Lichte (2008) grounded her new aesthetics on conscious processes of reception, which she deems to entail conscious perceptions and the generation of conscious ethical acts in the audience. As she explicitly states: 'unconscious perceptions remain meaningless for the perceiving subject and cannot be taken into consideration [...] because nobody can claim any knowledge of them'

(Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p.4). Likewise, the insurgence of emotions in the audience is seen as secondary either to physical sensations or to a prior cognitive appraisal of the meaning of a certain situation. For instance, when discussing the emotions aroused in an audience witnessing an actor being subjected to self-inflicted injuries or to physical abuse by others, Fischer-Lichte (2008, p.153) suggests that 'the spectators experienced these emotions because violence against self and others had been charged and connoted with intense emotions for them prior to the performance', discarding the possibility of a primary emotional resonance between actors and spectators.

In contrast, I will emphasise the emotional ties which are primarily formed at an unconscious level between actors and spectators, and which can explain the current of communication between the stage and the auditorium in a bilateral direction. My illustration of what Fischer-Lichte (2008, p.39) calls the 'feedback loop' between actors and audience will therefore be very different from hers, based as it is on unconscious emotional mechanisms rather than perceptual and conscious ones. It must be said, however, that privileging one perspective over another does not necessarily make them incompatible, because in a complex phenomenon like theatre spectatorship it is likely that conscious, unconscious, and perceptive psychic mechanisms are activated simultaneously.

Another main difference between our focus of interest, partly determined by the fact that Fischer-Lichte refers to contemporary performances which have deliberately sought to make the spectator into a co-participant, is the emphasis on the role of the actors. While she argues that in participatory performances the actors tend to desist from transmitting predetermined meaning, restricting themselves to emitting sensual and material signals, which will stimulate the spectator to generate his own meanings (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 139), I analyse how the actor's choice of meaning influences the spectator's emotional process. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the actor's refraining from communicating meaning to the audience may hinder, rather than promote, the spectator's ability for processing meaning, particularly at an emotional level.



The contemporary trend towards discounting considerations of unconscious emotional processes in theatre spectatorship can, at least partly, be ascribed to Brecht and his bitter critique of the unconscious emotional involvement that theatre entails. In discussing Brecht's ideas on spectatorship, identification, and related questions of acting, I will argue that his antithesis between a passive and an active spectator is unsatisfactory and reveals a narrow view of identification which excludes careful consideration of unconscious dynamics in spectatorship. I will then consider how his perspective has unduly influenced contemporary scholarship to neglect unconscious aspects of spectatorship, by focussing on mainstream approaches to theatre reception: Susan Bennett's seminal work on the audience, the semiotic approach to theatre reception, McConachie's pioneering book on spectatorship from a cognitive science point of view. I will then introduce Freud's view of the unconscious as an essential principle of all mental life. I will conclude by outlining the questions about spectatorship that I propose to address in this thesis through a psychoanalytic approach.

## **STARTING WITH BRECHT**

Brecht sets the foundation of his reform of the theatre on his interpretation of conventional spectatorship as *katharsis*. Among theories of spectatorship, Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* is not only the most ancient, but also the most authoritative paradigm which has served as prototype, or as bone of contention, up unto the present (Elam, 1980; Fabbri, 2000). Brecht is exemplary in grounding his critique of traditional theatre practice on the assumption that spectatorship is bound to Aristotelian *katharsis*. Under the epithet of 'Aristotelian theatre' he portrays a certain effect on the spectator, consisting in enticing him into an identification with the characters of the play through which he is transported into their emotional states. Although the word 'identification' does not feature in Aristotle's text, the concepts of fear and pity on which it is based pertain to it, as I shall discuss in Chapter 2. Furthermore, Brecht decidedly interprets *katharsis* as entailing emotional identification.

Brecht maintains that Aristotelian or conventional theatre 'is based on the spectator's ability to be carried along, identify himself, feel empathy and understand'<sup>1</sup> (1929, p.25). To define emotional identification, he uses the German word '*Einfühlung*', which literally means 'feeling into', and whose most common English translation is 'empathy'.

Brecht equates the spectator's emotional identification with the character to a form of understanding which is undesirable, because it leads to passive and uncritical submission to the situation presented by the play; by maintaining that the audience's emotional identification amounts to becoming 'a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art' (1930, p.38), he establishes an abiding correlation between the concepts of emotional identification and passivity. Such notion will remain engrained in contemporary theories of spectatorship. For instance, Augusto Boal gives the following post-Brechtian description of theatrical empathy:

From the moment the performance begins, a relationship is established between the character, especially the protagonist, and the spectator. This relationship has well defined characteristics: the spectator assumes a passive attitude and delegates the power of action to the character. Since the character resembles us (as Aristotle indicates), we live *vicariously* all his stage experiences. Without acting, we feel that we are acting. We love and hate when the character loves and hates.

(Boal, 2008, pp.30-31)

The relationship between empathy and passivity is justified by Brecht's understanding of *katharsis*: his specific interpretation of the term, in line with the prevailing rendition of his times, is 'Reinigung' (purgation), and to this he adds implications which are specifically derived from his own presumptions: 'the catharsis of which Aristotle writes – cleansing by fear and pity, or from fear and pity – is a purification which is performed not only in a pleasurable way, but precisely for the purpose of pleasure'<sup>2</sup> (1949, p.181). The distinctive Brechtian

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<sup>1</sup> 'Unsere dramatische Form beruht darauf, daß der Zuschauer mitgeht, sich einfühlt, verstehen kann, sich identifizieren kann' (Brecht, 1963, *Schriften zum Theater. Vol.1-4*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, Vol. 1, p.208).

<sup>2</sup> 'jene Katharsis des Aristoteles, die Reinigung durch Furcht und Mitleid, oder von Furcht und Mitleid, ist eine Waschung, die nicht nur in vergnüglicher Weise, sondern recht eigentlich zum Zwecke des Vergnügens veranstaltet wurde' (Brecht, 1964, *Schriften zum Theater. Vol.5-7*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, Vol. 7, p.11).

reading extends the concept of purgation to mean that the spectator will undergo, through empathy, a wider cleansing not limited to his emotions, but comprising any tendency to political or social activism, or even awareness of their possibility. Conventional theatre is static, 'its task is to show the world as it is' (Brecht, 1935, p.79) because the audience needs to be kept in a state of intoxication which numbs their critique or dissent. Society uses this kind of entertainment 'to reproduce itself. This means that an innovation will pass if it is calculated to rejuvenate existing society, but not if it is going to change it – irrespective whether the form of the society in question is good or bad' (Brecht, 1930, p.34).

Because according to Brecht no theatre can ever be un-political (1963, p.151), the apparently innocuous 'purpose of pleasure' (1949, p.181) at the heart of Aristotelian theatre is a powerful device for social oppression. In his extension of the Brechtian interpretation of *katharsis*, Boal defines it as 'the purification of the extraneous, undesirable element which prevents the character from achieving his ends. This extraneous element is contrary to the law; it is a social fault, a political deficiency' (Boal, 2008, p.29). Therefore, *katharsis* is the instrument through which Aristotelian theatre becomes an 'extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the "bad" or illegal tendencies of the audience' (Boal, 2008, p.3).

A gripping and authoritative precursor to Brecht's analysis of *katharsis* is that of Rousseau, when he asks what the Aristotelian pity amounts to:

mais quelle est cette pitié ? [...] une pitié stérile qui se repaît de quelques larmes, et n'a jamais produit le moindre acte d'humanité. Ainsi pleurait le sanguinaire Sylla au récit des maux qu'il n'avait pas faits lui-même. Ainsi se cachait le tyran de Phères au spectacle, de peur qu'on ne le vît gémir avec Andromaque et Priam, tandis qu'il écoutait sans émotion les cris de tant d'infortunés qu'on égorgeait tous les jours par ses ordres.

(Rousseau, 2003, pp.72-73)

Brecht will echo Rousseau's sceptical view in one of his rather scathing portrayals of traditional theatre:

As for the world portrayed there, the world from which slices are cut in order to produce these moods and movements of the emotions, its appearance is such, produced from such slight and wretched stuff as a few pieces of cardboard, a little miming, a bit of text, that one has to admire the theatre folk who, with so feeble a reflection of the real world, can move the feelings of their audience so much more strongly than does the world itself.

(Brecht, 1949, p.187)

Emotions felt as part of the play function as an insulated experience which at the worst is corrupting, at the best is immaterial to human morality.

Brecht's understanding of *katharsis* as a form of purgation which implies passive emotional submission and results in socio-political inertia deserves some in depth analysis. Of course, the extension of the meaning of *katharsis* to encompass political submissiveness is linked to Brecht's aim to attack a bourgeois reactionary political agenda, as von Held has pointed out in her in-depth study of alienation in Brecht and Diderot: 'Brecht's appropriation of the *Poetics*, which overall had little in common with Aristotle's dramatic principles, serves to attack an essential mechanism activated by the bourgeois theatre that seeks to gratify a need for catharsis' (von Held, 2011, p.23). It is as an alternative to what he identifies as the aesthetic and political agenda of capitalism, that Brecht invents epic theatre:

In his anti-Aristotelian critique, the event of catharsis constitutes a 'commodity' 'trafficked' by a theatre 'apparatus' determined by the capitalist conditions of production. It serves the interests of a privileged capitalist spectator who uses the theatre as a retreat from the hostilities of a competitive capitalist world.

(von Held, 2011, p.23)

However, such a view is restrictive as it excludes the thorough consideration of the psychological premises on which his theory was based.

### **The epic theatre**

Brecht developed the idea of the 'epic theatre' in the early 1920s, in the context of his activity as playwright. The concept, which 'already enjoyed some currency' in the Berlin theatre scene before Brecht appropriated it (Parker,

2014, p.229) was originally dramaturgical, but Brecht soon made it pertinent to questions of acting and spectating.

As the Aristotelian theatre, in the Brechtian sense, is characterized by a strict correspondence between the process of emotional identification and *katharsis* intended as passivity and conformism, so the epic theatre is based on a causal relationship between the alienation effect and the spectator's active and socially critical response. The epic theatre

makes nothing like such a free use as does the aristotelian of the passive empathy of the spectator; it also relates differently to certain psychological effects, such as katharsis. [...] Anxious to teach the spectator a quite definite practical attitude, directed towards changing the world, it must begin by making him adopt in the theatre a quite different attitude from what he is used to.

(Brecht, 1933, p.57)

If Aristotelian theatre implies a correspondence between the spectator's empathy and socio-political inertia, in order to oppose the harmful cathartic effects of theatre it is necessary to dispel the audience's empathic response. Epic theatre is characterized precisely by its ability to break the emotional identification between spectator and character:

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up.

(Brecht, 1957a, p.71)

For the purpose of alienation, the whole apparatus which promotes illusion is deconstructed. Titles are used to break the continuity of the play (Brecht, 1931, p.43), actors' positions are organised so to avoid naturalistic grouping and to reveal instead the socio-historical context (Brecht, 1933, p.58). While these and other alienation devices are controlled by the playwright or the director, it is to the actor herself and her technique that the main responsibility for the alienation effect falls.

The implicit recognition of the actor as the principal vehicle of emotional identification between spectator and character justifies Brecht's appeal to her to mediate a different kind of experience for the spectator. From this concern originates the idea of the *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-effekt*, translated into English as alienation or A-effect:

It is well known that contact between audience and stage is normally made on the basis of empathy. Conventional actors devote their efforts so exclusively to bringing about this psychological operation that they may be said to see it as the principal aim of their art. Our introductory remarks will already have made it clear that the technique which produces an A-effect is the exact opposite of that which aims at empathy. The actor applying it is bound not to try to bring about the empathy operation.

(Brecht, 1951, p.136)<sup>3</sup>

It is of note that *Verfremdungseffekt* is Brecht's neologism, which he introduces in 1936, at a time when he sharpens his attention towards the function of the actor. Until then, Brecht had employed the conventional word *Entfremdung* referring to the usage of the concept in Hegel and Marx; as has been suggested, *Verfremdung* 'draws a clearer distinction between a sociological category of alienation and an aesthetic of estrangement' (von Held, 2011, p.25). Whereas Marxist *Entfremdung* entails the workers' dispossession of the fruits of their labour, resulting in their estrangement from their own humanity, through Brecht's *Verfremdung* the workers can enhance their social awareness by exploiting their emotional estrangement from the characters on stage. It is by refraining from portraying the characters in an empathic way, and thus at some level depriving them of their humanity, that actors promote political consciousness.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Der Kontakt zwischen Publikum und Bühne kommt für gewöhnlich bekanntlich auf der Basis der *Einführung* zustande. Auf die Herbeiführung dieses psychischen Aktes konzentriert sich die Bemühung des konventionellen Schauspielers so vollständig, daß man sagen kann, er erblicke das Hauptziel seiner Kunst nur darin. Schon unsere einleitenden Bemerkungen zeigen, daß die Technik, die den V-Effekt hervorbringt, der Technik, die die Einführung bezweckt, diametral entgegengesetzt ist. Der Schauspieler ist durch sie gehalten, die Herbeiführung des Einführungsaktes nicht zu betreiben' (Brecht, 1963, *Schriften zum Theater. Vol.1-4*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, Vol. 3, pp.156-157).

In an essay dedicated to his new technique of acting, Brecht explains the fundamental rules through which an actor creates the *Verfremdungseffekt*:

The first condition for the achievement of the A-effect is that the actor must invest what he has to show with a definite gesture of showing. It is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience. That being so, it is possible for the actor in principle to address the audience direct.

(Brecht, 1951, p.136)

There is in fact in Brecht's theory an assumption that the breaking of the fourth wall and the distancing of the actor from the character through 'observation', as opposed to empathy, are the synergic forces which create an alienated acting.

The actor portrays her character through symbolic gestures which allow her to maintain the function of actor as observer, rather than converting herself into the character through a process of emotional identification. Moreover, the function of actor as observer is fostered by her awareness of the presence of an audience who watches her. If emotional empathy is that situation in Aristotelian theatre which relies on identification between actor, character and spectator, observation is the new psychological process which links actor, character and spectator in the epic theatre:

The performer's self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely, i.e. to the point of giving up his own identity [...] Yet the spectator's empathy was not entirely rejected. The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on.

(Brecht, 1957c, pp.92-93)<sup>4</sup>

There are interesting facets to the *Verfremdungseffekt* for what pertains to identification. As von Held has argued, Brecht's definition of acting remains

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<sup>4</sup> 'Das Sich-selber-Zusehen des Artisten, ein künstlicher und kunstvoller Akt der Selbstentfremdung, verhindert die vollständige, d.h. die bis zur Selbstaufgabe gehende Einfühlung des Zuschauers [...] Auf die Einfühlung des Zuschauers wird trotzdem nicht verzichtet. Der Zuschauer fühlt sich in den Schauspieler als in einen Betrachtenden ein: so wird seine betrachtende, zuschauende Haltung kultiviert' (Brecht, 1993, *Schriften 2. Schriften 1933-1942*. Teil I. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, p.202).

grounded in 'a mirroring relation between actor and spectator. If the actor emotes, so does the spectator. If the actor remains rationally self-detached, the spectator, too, will be rationally detached' (von Held, 2011, p.43). Admittedly, the A-effect still engenders a form of identification between spectator and actor; but this is of a different kind to that of empathy in two ways. More obviously, it is based on observation and critical detachment, and hence divested of the emotional charge of empathy. But more strikingly, it is an identification which links actor and spectator with the exclusion of the character. The spectator is permitted to mirror the actor as she observes, and indeed the actor is permitted to invite the spectator to enter into her attitude, if not her feelings, as long as the character remains excluded from their psychological and aesthetic complicity. It is not surprising then that the best metaphor for the job of the actor is the eyewitness at a street accident (Brecht, 1950). The eyewitness invites bystanders to form an opinion about the accident: while he takes upon himself the task to demonstrate to them how the accident took place, he has no intention or desire to press them into re-experiencing the victim's feelings as the protagonists of the tragic scene.

### **The status of emotions**

Brecht conceives the emotional identification of spectators with characters as a passive experience because deriving from a submission to the theatrical illusion of the play that he defines as hypnotic (1935, p.78), and he condemns it because he believes it to result in a conformist attitude to society. In contrast, he demands that theatre find devices to break the illusion and ensuing emotional identification, and engage the spectators' reason in active criticism of society, ultimately inducing them to become actors of social change (1957a). Deprived of the possibility for emotional identification, the audience is left to grapple with the play through its rational faculties. As Brecht says, epic theatre appeals 'to reason' (1926, p.14).

Brecht's formulation of a dichotomy between a passive and an active spectator finds some correspondence with the view of a divergence between emotional and rational engagement, grounded 'within an Enlightenment tradition of



dramaturgical discourse that similarly theorizes the psychological processes at work in theatre production and perception as suspended between two poles: reason and feeling' (von Held, 2011, p.38). In fact, his theory of the theatre may appear to be founded on the opposition between feelings, somewhat vilified, and reason, which is contrasted to them and commended: 'Feelings are private and limited. Against that the reason is fairly comprehensive and to be relied on' (Brecht, 1926, p.15).

However this opposition is not absolute, and the role of emotions remains ambiguously formulated in his later theoretical developments. In an interview of 1952 he declares:

It is not true, though it is sometimes suggested, that epic theatre (which is not simply undramatic theatre, as is also sometimes suggested) proclaims the slogan: 'Reason this side, Emotion (feeling) that.' It by no means renounces emotion, least of all the sense of justice, the urge to freedom, and righteous anger; it is so far from renouncing these that it does not even assume their presence, but tries to arouse or reinforce them. The 'attitude of criticism' which it tries to awaken in its audience cannot be passionate enough for it.

(Brecht, 1952, p.227)

As has been pointed out (Bennett, 1997, p.29), Brecht's theatre reform does not exclude the spectator's emotional involvement; rather, the *Verfremdungseffekt* 'intervenes, not in the form of absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed' (Brecht, 1957c, p.94). In fact, the apparent ambiguity towards emotions finds a resolution if it is clarified that the undesirable emotions are those that the spectator feels in identification with the character, while the permitted or even desirable ones, are those that belong to the spectator as a detached observer of the character. Brecht distinctly illustrates this point in his essay *Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction*, where the feelings of the spectator in Aristotelian drama, here called 'dramatic theatre', are opposed to those of the spectator in epic theatre.

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems

the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.

(Brecht, 1957a, p.71)

The dichotomy between passive and active spectator is therefore not precisely the opposition between emotion and reason, but rather between an emotion which arises as a reflex to an identification unmediated by reason, such as *katharsis* seems to imply, and an emotion which arises as a consequence of a deliberate critical judgement, as is the case in the epic theatre. This distinction is crucial to the understanding of spectatorship and forms one of the focuses of my research.

### **Brechtian *katharsis* and the unconscious**

While Brecht confers a higher value to reason, he also recognizes a role for emotions. However this is restricted to those emotions which result from awareness, while no positive role is identified for those emotional processes which arise independently from the operations of rational judgement. His view that emotions originate from thoughts, intended as conscious ideas, leads him to entrust psychic change (and, most importantly for Brecht, the social and political change that ensues) to conscious thought. As he declares: 'People's opinions interest me far more than their feelings. Feelings are usually the products of opinions. They follow on. But opinions are decisive' (Brecht, 1926, p.16), although he admits that opinions, in turn, can sometimes be generated by experience.

In view of this, I would like to suggest that Brecht's preoccupation with the opposition between feelings and reason fundamentally reflects a preoccupation with the contrast between conscious and unconscious psychic processes. In fact, in his essay *On the use of music in the epic theatre*, he specifies: 'It is a frequently recurring mistake to suppose that this – epic – kind of production simply does without all emotional effects: actually, emotions are only clarified in

it, steering clear of subconscious origins and carrying nobody away' (1957b, p.88). Again, in a compilation of notes written in 1936, Brecht spells this idea out even more clearly:

A creation that more or less renounces empathy need not by any means be an 'unfeeling' creation, or one which leaves the spectator's feelings out of account. But it has to adopt a critical approach to his emotions, just as it does to his ideas. [...] But above all the actor must make certain that no worthwhile feeling is weakened when it is brought clearly and critically to the conscious level.

(Brecht, 1938, pp.100-101)

Brecht was not ignorant of the existence of powerful unconscious emotions which keep the human mind under their sway; on this supposition, after all, was based his whole critique of the Aristotelian theatre. But he chose to emphasize the power of reason, sometimes simplistically overstating the aptness of reason to override emotions. Thus he constructed a model of theatre spectatorship which, in acknowledging its unconscious aspects, at one and the same time dismisses them as an object worth of enquiry.

#### **OTHER MODELS OF SPECTATORSHIP**

While reflections on theatre spectatorship are at least as ancient as Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis*, the theory of the epic theatre may be credited with representing a turning point in the terms of reference. Generally, spectatorship had been conceived as entailing, at least in part, the audience's submission to the theatrical illusion and their emotional identification; Brecht instead converted emotional identification into an unwanted 'side effect' of theatre reception and laid the field open to novel theories of spectatorship.

The flourishing of different approaches to understanding theatre reception and the richness of their insights is welcome. However, there remains a fragmentation of discourses that cannot be integrated into a coherent system. That is why I believe that a new perspective into theatre spectatorship is necessary, and I propose to use psychoanalysis to construct a conceptual framework that will illuminate universal aspects of theatre reception so far neglected, embedded within our unconscious psyche.

Before entering into a discussion of my approach, I will briefly survey three contemporary key theories of theatre reception, showing how the unconscious has found hardly any claim in their discourses. These are:

- Susan Bennett's approach to spectatorship as cultural phenomenon, a theory of theatre reception which is considered a reference point in the field (Freshwater, 2009, p.3);
- the semiotic viewpoint on theatre as a global system of signification of which the spectator is the ultimate meaning-maker;
- McConachie's pioneering attempt at reading theatre spectatorship from the perspective of cognitive psychology.

### **Theatre spectatorship as cultural phenomenon**

Brecht's theory of the epic theatre did not just pose an alternative to traditional theatre, and to the cathartic effect that it supposedly entailed. It seemed also to create the opportunity for doing away with the very notion of *katharsis* or at least to expedite the arrival of new, '*katharsis-free*', conceptualisations of spectatorship. In particular, its emphasis on the socio-political context of theatre reception instigated a view of the audience's engagement as culturally and socially determined and prompted the surge in investigations of specific audiences, historically, culturally or socially situated.

Susan Bennett's (1997) attempt at creating a unified theory of spectatorship as a cultural phenomenon, grounds itself on at least two premises derived from Brecht's theory: the concept of the passive spectator, and the idea that theatre's value resides in its potential for instigating socio-political awareness. These two premises are interlinked and are ultimately based on the disavowal of unconscious mental processes as active components of productive reflection and psychic development.

Brecht's idea of the passive spectator coincides with a condemnation of the spectator's emotional identification with the character(s), which is considered a means to political subjugation, whereas moral value is assigned to a theatre

which deliberately seeks the spectator's critical engagement. In this sense Susan Bennett, in her theory of reception, can speak of the 'productive and emancipated spectator', a spectator 'who can think and act', as the subject of her study (1997, p.1).

Although it is not explicitly stated, the opposition between active and passive seems to imply a divergence between conscious and unconscious engagement. In epic theatre, feelings are derived from the awareness of social conditions, and audience participation is consciously constructed; in that disavowed theatre which promotes *katharsis*, emotions proceed from a hypnotic experience which arises involuntarily, outside the realm of the spectator's conscious control. Too hastily perhaps, unconscious phenomena perceived as outside the control of the spectator are dismissed, and unconscious engagement is construed to equate with middle-class pursuits.

It may be argued that the concept of *katharsis* fostered theories of reception which ignored the political and ideological implications of theatre spectatorship, or which appeared to conceal a bourgeois mind-set under the pretension of a supposed universalism (Elam, 1980, p.34). But on the other hand, focussing on the social and cultural markers of reception has obscured questions about the common psychological elements that transcend social class and cultural variation. Ultimately, Brecht's emphasis on the socio-political aspects of reception has justified not only a condemnation but also an outright denial of unconscious aspects of spectatorship.

In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud proposes that culture, intended in its broadest sense to include science, religion and art, is the work of the repression of unconscious instincts. As he declares, he disdains 'to distinguish between culture and civilization' (Freud, 1927, p.6) because he believes that both result from the transformation of unconscious repressed dynamics into conscious elaborations. Such conscious re-elaborations are also known in psychoanalytic terms as sublimations. So for instance long-established cultural practices such as sport competitions or artistic pursuits may represent sublimations of aggressive or erotic drives. If the purpose of culture is, as Freud maintains, to

express under disguise the relics of repressed unconscious processes, this would explain why cultural studies may naturally be blind to the workings of the unconscious, or perhaps be even incompatible as such with its study. Taking a psychoanalytic perspective, I will endeavour to address the unconscious dynamics of spectatorship as a complementary analysis to that of its cultural determinants.

### **Theatre spectatorship from a semiotic perspective**

Shortly after Brecht's formulation of the epic theatre, the 1930s saw the birth, within the Prague School, of theatre semiotics, which introduced opportunities to look at theatre reception from a systematic perspective. This new discipline, consolidated and expanded in the 1970s and 1980s, had the merit of establishing the distinctiveness of theatre as an art form and to encourage the differentiation of theatre studies from literary studies. The complexity of the theatrical performance as a system of communication which utilizes multiple sensory channels, compounded by its ephemeral status which effaces its availability for subsequent scientific enquiry, has represented one of the biggest challenges to the formulation of satisfactory theories of theatre reception and has undoubtedly contributed, historically, to the more convenient conflation of theatre with its literary texts (Elam, 1980).

The Prague School overcame the assimilation of theatre within literary studies and emphasized the complexity of theatre as a system of signs, as compared to other arts, including literature, music or sculpture (Veltruský, 1981). Theatre was regarded as a global system of signification, rather than a sum of semiotic subsystems, which pointed to its unique and peculiar nature: a pluricodified and multileveled organisation of heterogeneous components that are interdependent (Amossy, 1981). Although this conferred on theatre a differentiated status, the difficulty with making it the object of scientific enquiry remained.

While attempts have been made at constructing systems of analysis which embrace the semiotic complexity of a theatrical performance in its entirety (see

for instance Elam, 1980), other scholars have instead concentrated on distilling what may be peculiar about theatre compared to other forms of art. Eco (1977), for instance, has highlighted that the special semiotic property of theatre is to show, or ostend, real objects as signs. In this aspect, theatre differs from literature, where words are unambiguous artificial signs produced by man in order to communicate (Eco, 1977). It also differs from the visual arts (Helbo, 1985), and even from cinema, in as far as cinema is only a reflection of real presence:

Au théâtre, la fiction – c'est là sa force – se sert de choses réelles: la scène, l'acteur, pour prendre forme: il devient alors impossible de scinder ce qui dans la représentation appartient à l'un ou à l'autre, puisque la représentation théâtrale utilise des choses réelles pour parler de choses fictives.

(Pavis, 1985, p.73)

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure defined 'the sign as a two-faced entity linking a material *vehicle* or *signifier* with a mental *concept* or *signified*' (Saussure, 1915<sup>5</sup>, cited in Elam, 1980, p.6). In the 1970s the Polish semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan (1975<sup>6</sup>, cited in Bassnett-McGuire, 1980, p.49) distinguished

two kinds of sign – the *natural*, which includes phenomena unprovoked by man (e.g. thunder and lightning as the sign of a storm, skin colour as the sign of race, etc) and the *artificial*, which is created by living creatures in order to signify or communicate something.

(Bassnett-McGuire, 1980, p.49)

Eco disputed Kowzan's belief that theatre is made up entirely of artificial signs because, according to Kowzan's definition, the *mise-en-scène* is entirely a deliberate act. Notwithstanding, the presence of the actor, differently from a word or a picture, 'has not been actively produced (as one produces a word or draws an image) – it has been *picked up* among the existing physical bodies and it has been shown or *ostended*' (Eco, 1977, p.110). Theatre leaves open an ambiguity between the body of the actor as natural sign and the body of the actor as artificial sign representing the character. The actor plays 'a double game: In order to be accepted as a sign, he has to be recognised as a "real"

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<sup>5</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, 1915, *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot.

<sup>6</sup> Tadeusz Kowzan, 1975, *Littérature et spectacle*. The Hague/Paris: Mouton.

spatio-temporal event, a real human body' (Eco, 1977, p.111). Such double game opens a gap 'between the experience of an absence and the play with a presence' (Ubersfeld, 1982, p.128) which constitutes one of the sources of pleasure for the spectator. Such pleasure, based on an act of understanding, is the pleasure of 'doing' (Ubersfeld, 1982, p.132).

In an essay of 1956, Roland Barthes interpreted Brecht's theory of the epic theatre and the *Verfremdungseffekt* as altogether addressing this semiological problem: 'For what all Brechtian dramaturgy postulates is that today at least dramatic art should not so much express the real as signify it' (Barthes, 1979, p.28). Brecht's proposition of the epic actor 'holding himself remote from the character portrayed' (Brecht, 1957c, p.92) is conceived as an attempt at resisting the natural tendency of the theatrical system to conflate the artificial and the natural sign. In this sense, the epic theatre can be understood not so much to negate emotional identification between spectator and character, as to compensate for it (Ubersfeld, 1982, p.134). As we shall see, the fruitful dynamic between the natural and the artificial sign, will be crucial to a psychoanalytic theory of spectatorship.

Although the double game of the theatrical sign applies to all real objects on stage, including scenery and costumes, the element that is of interest to my research pertains specifically to the actor. As theatre semiotics acknowledged from its early days: 'all that goes on during the performance centers on the actor, so to speak. It is through him that the other components receive their theatrical function and meaning' (Veltruský, 1981, p.230).

On the other hand, theatre semiotics has focussed mainly on the study of theatre reception, emphasizing the spectators' active function as the recipients of the theatrical communication and the ultimate makers of its meaning. Moreover, as responders, spectators '*in turn* assume the role of transmitter of signals to the performers [...]. This feedback process [...] is one of the major distinguishing features of live theatre' (Elam, 1980, p.38). Semiotic attempts at defining the actor-audience transaction have had to contend with the difficulty raised by the French linguist George Mounin who challenged the notion of the



actor-spectator relationship as entailing communication, given that there is no sharing of a common communicative code and no reciprocation of roles between sending and receiving messages: in theatre, claims Mounin, actors remain the senders and spectators the receivers (Mounin, 1969<sup>7</sup>, cited in Elam, 1980, p.33). This claim has been rejected not only by theatre semioticians but also by scholars of other approaches, and, indeed, actors themselves. For instance, Bennett recognizes the reciprocal relationship between audience and performance 'even for the most "culinary" theatre' let alone for contemporary theatre events in which the audience is deliberately enticed into a productive role' (1997, p.21).

Dario Fo (1977, pp.54-55), the Italian actor-playwright who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997, and who has grounded his practice in Brecht's vision of the political significance of theatre, talks about the audience response to the actor in terms of laughter, breathing, uneasiness, as an instantaneous spur to the actor's own reactions.

While there is hardly any doubt that theatre spectators send live signals during a theatrical performance, the difficulties of semiotics have lain in deciphering the codes of such transaction, and semioticians have resorted to responding to Mounin's challenge by establishing that spectator-actor communication happens through a different set of codes from the counter-route of actor-spectator communication (Ruffini, 1974<sup>8</sup>, cited in Elam, 1980, p.34). I will argue that the unconscious emotional communication between actor and spectator can overcome this difficulty, because it consists precisely in a common code through which the reciprocal and productive communication between actor and spectator operates.

A preoccupation with the status of emotions in the spectator has led scholars of theatre semiotics to interesting conclusions, not dissimilar to those emphasized by post-Brechtian approaches to the theatre. In particular, De Marinis's (1985) attempt to formulate a 'cognitive semiotics' of spectatorship is symptomatic of

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<sup>7</sup> Georges Mounin, 1969, *Introduction à la sémiologie*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.

<sup>8</sup> Franco Ruffini, 1974, 'Semiotica del Teatro: Ricognizione degli Studi.' *Biblioteca Teatrale*, Vol. 9, pp.34-81.

this trend. De Marinis repudiates 'an ingenuous neo-romantic vision of theatrical emotion; a vision according to which it consists of an immediate, primary phenomenon completely independent of cognitive processes that take place during the reception of the spectacle' (1985, p.7). Although he acknowledges that there is a complex set of psychic processes that contribute to the experience of the spectator, and that emotive and cognitive aspects do not operate in opposition to each other, he concludes that the emotional experience of the spectator is regulated by cognition. As I have discussed earlier, the new aesthetics of performance proposed by Fischer-Lichte (2008) adopts the same notion.

De Marinis's suppositions are based on cognitive theories that presume that '*the emotions are largely determined cognitively*' (1985, p.10). As I shall discuss in the next section, departing from premises based on opposite cognitive theories, and despite a prejudiced aversion to semiotics, Bruce McConachie (2008) would not consider De Marinis's approach disagreeable. I suspect that both would find a point of resonance in their search for explanations that may do away with the significance of the spectator's unconscious.

### **Theatre spectatorship from the perspective of cognitive science**

Since the 1970s, cognitive psychology has exponentially grown as a scientific domain that investigates a wide range of mental processes, including memory, attention, language and perception. Among theatre scholars who have sought to assimilate these findings into their research, McConachie has undertaken an ambitious attempt at applying this knowledge to a novel approach to theatre spectatorship, in his book *Engaging Audiences* (2008).

McConachie's method consists in using scientific theories of cognition to inform a new understanding of spectatorship, which he claims to be the only valid approach, because 'grounded in falsifiable theories and empirical knowledge' (2008, p.14), in contrast with what he sees as unscientific and hence invalid theories derived from disparate disciplines such as semiotics, philosophy and psychoanalysis. He also downplays the significance of cultural determinants

and maintains that 'evolution, biology, and the cognitive structures of the mind/brain place limits on the extent to which society and history can shape individuals and cultures' (2008, p.4).

In common with many other theorists of spectatorship, he is moved by the same desire to discover those elements of reception which seem to establish the spectator as an active and conscious participant. For instance, he insists on attention as a conscious activity that spectators employ to make deliberate choices about what they watch and see: 'At one time or another, all theatregoers have trouble focusing their attention. More than simple awareness, attention requires conscious, selective effort' (McConachie, 2008, pp.23-24). On the other hand, he identifies in the unconscious process of cognitive blending the basis for the spectator's ability to 'comprehend and negotiate the "doubleness" of theatre – that is, the fact that a single body on stage can be both an actor and a character, simultaneously existing in both real and simulated time-space' (McConachie, 2008, p.7).

McConachie informs us that 'blending is learned in infancy and soon occurs automatically to generate complex cognitive concepts, mostly below the level of consciousness' (2008, p.42). However he is at pains to relate all aspects of spectatorship back to consciousness:

Spectators make some conscious decisions about what they will pay attention to on the stage. Even the cognitive concepts in their memories and their ability to blend actors and characters into single identities depend upon mind/brain dynamics that were once partly conscious before they became habitual.

(McConachie, 2008, p.56)

Seen from the perspective of psychoanalysis, there is a resistance to admit to the significance of unconscious mental processes for cognition, even if their existence is scientifically proven.

The concept of cognitive blending, which consists in the spectator perceiving the person on stage as a mixture of actor and character, addresses the same phenomenon that semiotics formulates as the double game of the theatrical

sign. It is perhaps a missed opportunity that McConachie chooses to dismiss other approaches, instead of seeking to integrate the knowledge derived from them. For Eco and other semioticians, the question of the ambivalence of the theatrical sign between its natural facet (the actor's body) and its artificial facet (the representation of character) is posed to interrogate the peculiar status of theatre as an object of communication, and ultimately to reveal new insights into our understanding of it. For McConachie blending is just one of many cognitive activities that, having been described as characteristic of human thinking outside theatre, he applies to theatre, in what he calls a 'page-to-stage' method (2008, p.19). What follows, is often a description in a new language (that of cognitive psychology) of phenomena which had been discovered by those disciplines that McConachie would like to exclude from theatre studies.

For instance, when McConachie only fleetingly touches on *katharsis*, he accepts the definition of emotional release that was established, as I shall show in the next chapter, in the nineteenth century and remained widely accepted including by Brecht. When he says: 'Crying as a means of helping to modulate our physiological thermostats may be the closest that cognitive science can come to the Aristotelian notion of catharsis' (2008, p.111), he is trying to fit an ancient and much debated theory, into a simplistic re-branding. Overall, insights from cognitive science lead him to conclude that spectators' cognitive abilities are employed to deal with understanding theatre, while there is no attempt at establishing whether theatre reception may have a special function in instigating psychic change. Thus, McConachie seems to miss that deeper link between life and theatre, whereby life may be construed, as Eco puts it,

as an instance of theatrical performance. This finally explains why aesthetics and criticism have always suspected that theatrical performances were instances of everyday life. It is not theatre that is able to imitate life; it is social life that is designed as a continuous performance and, because of this, there is a link between theatre and life.

(Eco, 1977, p.113)

From this perspective, one may argue with Brecht that it is theatre spectatorship to be useful to the investigation of psychic life.

Despite the many differences, there is however one element which tends to unify McConachie's approach to theatre reception with semiotics as well as with cultural perspectives: it is the tendency to conflate the 'active' spectator with the 'conscious' spectator. These diverse theories arrive at a common emphasis on the active and conscious spectator despite departing from opposite assumptions about the emotional and rational experiences of the audience. As I have shown in the previous section, this is for instance the case in point with McConachie and De Marinis. While De Marinis (1985) sees cognitions as primary and regulating the emotional response of spectators, McConachie prefers cognitive theories which 'affirm that emotional drives undergird and sustain even the simplest of intellectual tasks' (2008, p.3). Yet, they both equally dismiss the significance of unconscious processes.

I would like to conclude this section on cognitive studies of spectatorship, with a word of caution in response to McConachie's (2008, p.156) exhortation that theatre scholars should undertake collaborations with cognitive psychologists to run experiments on audiences and replicate the successful partnership practiced in music scholarship. Experiments in the cognitive basis of music-making have been criticized for leading 'to types of research projects that lack theoretical or practical interest and relevance; and to results that are, at most, common sense' (Regelski, 1996, p.11). While scientific insights should be welcomed, one should be wary of taking the slippery slope of scientism, by making wildly inflated claims for the explanations of modern science, while denigrating all other modes of understanding. Such attitude may be suspected of being a trademark of a capitalistic society's struggle to maintain cultural hegemony (Marcuse, 1964). As Marcuse points out, by banning any other form of knowledge as fallacious, the tyranny of scientism leads to a form of one-dimensional thinking which capitalistic ideology can exploit to secure its unchallenged dominion.

## SPECTATORSHIP AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

### The significance of the unconscious to mental life

Freud first glanced at the unconscious through hypnosis, the technique that he had learnt from famous contemporary neurologists, such as Charcot and Bernheim (Gay, 2006) and which, as a young doctor, he had employed in the cure of hysterical patients. Hypnosis had given him the proof that there were hidden aspects of the psyche which could be brought into focus through certain techniques:

The 'unconscious' had, it is true, long been under discussion among philosophers as a theoretical concept; but now for the first time, in the phenomena of hypnotism, it became something actual, tangible and subject to experiment. [...] From a theoretical as well as from a therapeutic point of view, psycho-analysis has at its command a legacy which it has inherited from hypnotism.

(Freud, 1924b, p.192)

Although he was left eager to understand the unconscious and its relationship to thinking and behaviour, he soon abandoned hypnosis as a technique; instead he gave birth to psychoanalysis, as a new 'science of unconscious mental processes' (Freud, 1925c, p.70).

During his entire career Freud remained acutely aware that his discoveries about the unconscious were running contrary to prevailing views of the mind in medical and scientific institutions of his time. As he wrote in 1926:

Psychology had barred its own access to the region of the id by insisting on a postulate which is plausible enough but untenable: namely, that all mental acts are conscious to us – that being conscious is the criterion of what is mental, and that, if there are processes in our brain which are not conscious, they do not deserve to be called mental acts and are no concern of psychology.

(Freud, 1926, pp.196-197)

Against the prevailing tide in medicine and psychology, he continued to examine and explain the prominence of unconscious processes within the psyche and he compared the significance of his discovery to that of Darwin's

theory of evolution. He once described psychoanalysis as ‘the *psychological* blow to men’s narcissism, and compared it with the *biological* blow delivered by the theory of descent and the earlier *cosmological* blow aimed at it by the discovery of Copernicus’ (Freud, 1924b, p.221).

Freud was convinced that much opposition to psychoanalysis, which is still prevailing today, sprang from resistance against the idea that an unruly unconscious holds sway over a relatively constrained conscious ego. In his criticism of what he calls Aristotelian theatre, Brecht is precisely concerned about the powerful dominance of unconscious aspects of spectatorship over conscious ones. Indeed, Brecht talks of the hypnotic state of the audience, when he describes the spectators’ passive submission to the cathartic effects of a play. As I have discussed, hypnotic in Brecht’s terms could be substituted for by ‘unconscious’. For Brecht the hypnotic state is synonymous with something that represents a threat and therefore needs to be avoided at all costs, in opposition to Freud who made of the unconscious a new field of scientific enquiry.

The significant divergence between Freud’s and Brecht’s attitude towards the unconscious, is illustrated by a curious instance, which can almost be construed as an indirect exchange of opinions between the two men. In his essay *The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre* (1930) Brecht uses a quotation from Freud, the only mention of Freud to be found among his writings on the theatre. The quote is from one of Freud’s works of maturity, *Civilization and its discontents* (1930), and Brecht uses it to support his claim that conventional theatre is functional to a society which employs art as a narcotic drug against critical engagement, ultimately leading to the abdication of social responsibility. The passage, following Brecht’s own omissions, runs as follows:

Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures. [...] There are perhaps three such measures: powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it. Something of the kind is indispensable. [...] The substitutive satisfactions, as offered by art, are

illusions in contrast with reality, but they are none the less psychically effective, thanks to the role which phantasy has assumed in mental life.<sup>9</sup>  
(Freud, 1930, p.75)

Freud seems to claim that art's ultimate aim is to furnish man with an escapist route into a fantasy world, and that is why, adds Brecht, art as traditionally intended, and theatre in particular, need to be radically reformed. It could be argued, in fact, that Freud's theorizing about artistic production and reception, taken at face value, corroborates Brecht's preoccupations about the function of art.

Freud had attempted his own formulation of a theory of spectatorship in an essay entitled *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage*, which he wrote in 1905 but, significantly, never published during his lifetime. Unsurprisingly taking Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* as his springboard, and following the accepted nineteenth-century translation of *katharsis* as purgation, he maintained that the spectator derived pleasure from the theatre by identifying with the sufferings of the tragic hero, but with the consolation that 'firstly, it is someone other than himself who is acting and suffering on the stage, and, secondly, that after all it is only a game, which can threaten no damage to his personal security' (Freud, 1906, p.306). It is striking how close this explanation is to Brecht's account of the harmful effects of Aristotelian theatre.

Despite the proximity of their conclusions on spectatorship, Freud and Brecht depart from very different premises. In particular, Freud could never endorse Brecht's proposition that the unconscious can simply be bypassed through reason and conscious purpose. As he maintains: 'psychoanalysis cannot situate the essence of the psychical in consciousness, but is obliged to regard consciousness as a quality of the psychical, which may be present in addition to other qualities or may be absent' (Freud, 1923, p.13). Because psychoanalysis puts the unconscious at the basis of all mental activity, including higher functions such as rational thinking, there can be no coherent picture of the

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<sup>9</sup> This English translation of Freud's words as quoted by Brecht is taken from the 'Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud', as per reference, and it is therefore slightly different from Willet's own translation.



operating of the mind in one particular context without some description of unconscious processes.

It is of note that in *Civilization and its discontents*, the essay quoted by Brecht, Freud engages in a specific critique of communist ideology – possibly the reason why Brecht particularly took an interest in this work. Freud's main concern is that the communist ideology is based on the false psychological presumption that inequality and injustice among mankind is solely dependent on external or material factors. As he acknowledges:

I have no concern with any economic criticisms of the communist system; I cannot enquire into whether the abolition of private property is expedient or advantageous. But I am able to recognize that the psychological premises on which the system is based are an untenable illusion.

(Freud, 1930, p.113)

What the communist ideology fails to consider is the prominence of the unconscious psychic processes in determining human behaviour; and any system that ignores the unconscious foundations of social and cultural activities is flawed.

Whilst Freud's theoretical view of the function of art remained somewhat narrow, seemingly justifying a negative judgement about any unconscious aesthetic engagement, his broad discoveries about the unconscious, and their extension by his disciples, provide a crucial paradigm for the enhancement of our understanding of theatre spectatorship.

### **Psychoanalysis in context**

It has been argued (Anderson, 1980) that Freud's ideas about the unconscious are a plagiarism of those of Nietzsche's and that he built his defence of psychoanalysis as a science by denying his debt towards the intuitions of artists and philosophers. Freud, however, was well aware of the insights that artists and philosophers had contributed to the understanding of psychic functioning ahead of science in general and psychoanalysis in particular. He writes about

the merits of the creative writer: 'The description of the human mind is indeed the domain which is most his own; he has from time immemorial been the precursor of science, and so too of scientific psychology' (Freud, 1907, pp.43-44). Of his particular relationship to Nietzsche's philosophy, he confesses in a private letter: 'I have rejected the study of Nietzsche although – no, because – it was plain that I would find insights in him very similar to psychoanalytic ones' (Freud to Lothar Bickel<sup>10</sup>, cited in Gay, 2006, p.46).

While the existence of the unconscious and certain aspects of its functioning had been already anticipated by artists and philosophers, Freud must be credited with creating a method of observation of unconscious processes that allowed for their systematic study. The invention of psychoanalysis opened a new field of knowledge whereby the unconscious was methodically investigated through the collection of clinical data as well as methodical self-observation. It is only because of Freud's endeavours and discoveries that insights into the unconscious were accepted, although with much struggle, to bear on medicine and the treatment of mental illness. While Freud was keen for the scientific community to embrace psychoanalysis, it is well known that he was often ostracized or ridiculed by the medical and scientific establishment of his age. Incidentally, it was an age when being a Jew was not a recommendation. This contextualization may help understand why Freud may, at times, have yielded to the temptation of producing overbearing statements about psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline.

In this thesis I will use psychoanalytic theories which explore the unconscious mechanisms of identification at the basis of emotional development and ego-formation and I will draw mainly on the conceptualizations of Freud, Klein and Bion.

Psychoanalytic descriptions of the relationship between identification and identity have been harshly critiqued by humanities scholars, especially from a feminist perspective. These critiques have especially focussed on Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex, and on its further elaborations by Lacan. Butler (1999, p.56), for instance, has argued that through the Lacanian

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<sup>10</sup> Freud to Lothar Bickel, June 28, 1931.

perspective, the male gender comes to represent the conscious subject, while the female gender is reduced to serve the function of objectifying male's desire, thus providing a 'dialectical confirmation of its identity'. This rigid gender stereotyping resonates with some of Freud's own opinions about gender development. For instance, Freud's association of the male gender with activity and of the female one with passivity, presupposes a gender-biased approach to psychology, which justifies 'dividing up functions and sexual roles'(Irigaray, 1993, p.36) and the unequal distribution of privileges that this entails.

In this thesis I will not employ theories of gender-identity formation. Although the Oedipus complex becomes somewhat magnified by the intense scrutiny under which it has rightly been brought, its focus on gender-identity is at odds with many other psychoanalytic formulations of ego-development and unconscious functioning which are gender-neutral. Freud's theory of transference, which I will consider in detail in Chapter 2, Klein's concept of unconscious phantasy, and Bion's theory of alpha-function, both of which I will discuss in Chapter 5, are all instances of gender-neutral psychic processes.

In my discussion of psychoanalytic theories, while departing from Freud, I will particularly focus on Klein's elaborations of his ideas. Although outside the remit of my discussion, it must be emphasised that Klein's development of the theory of the Oedipus complex, very much in opposition to Lacan's, vindicated the significance of the female gender, emphasising the role of the vagina and its creative potential. Klein's insights into the operations of the unconscious are generally dissimilar to those of Lacan. Both give consideration to the development of the self in relation to the encounter with the other, a field of enquiry that Phelan (1993) rightly puts at the centre of any investigation of identification and identity; however, their perspective is very different. Within a Lacanian framework, it may be justified to accuse psychoanalysis of theorising a parasitic view of the other, whereby the other gets pushed in a subordinate position, in order to be exploited by the observing subject to reinforce its self-identity. On the contrary, for Klein there is no primary self outside the encounter with the other. In this sense any primary experience is fragmented and self-less and only through the sympathetic engagement of the other, can the subject

painstakingly construct its sense of self. The dynamic of power is reversed. Within a Kleinian framework, an a-gendered infant psyche is at the mercy of the maternal function. Although both male and female mature minds may perform the maternal function, the linguistic metaphor assigns to the female gender the active role of promoting the infant's psychic development. She is active, he (if we want, for the sake of simplicity, to give the baby a gender) is the passive one, at the mercy of his unconscious. The mother then is, yes, putting herself at the service of her a-gendered and vulnerable baby, but not reverentially, not in order to allow him (or her) the re-affirmation of an already established sense of self, but rather as an act of generosity that will promote the development and integration of the primitive and fragmented baby's mind.

As I have briefly indicated in the Preface, assigning the actor a female pronoun and the spectator a masculine one, is an allusion to the theory of alpha-function, which I will discuss in Chapter 5. Far from hinting at a predatory male spectator who exploits the female actor to satisfy his desire and cement his sense of self, my linguistic use of pronouns indicates a vulnerable spectator who depends on the actor's maternal function for his psychic development.

It must be stressed that my perspective on identification focuses on unconscious mechanisms, and these are not implied to be exclusive. Conscious mechanisms of identification, of voluntary resistance to identification (Phelan, 1993) or, indeed, conscious efforts at disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) are not incompatible with the complexities of psychic functioning, and are rightly given consideration by other scholars. My hope is that my novel approach to the study of spectatorship will serve as a complement to the analyses of performances and the formulation of theories of theatre reception, where active and conscious processes will also continue to be examined.

### **A psychoanalytic perspective of theatre spectatorship**

As I discussed above, Brecht's vision for a new theatre challenged established theatre practices and their approach to the audience. The twentieth century saw a flurry of experiments, as well as new theories, aimed at exploring and

exploiting new paradigms for engaging the audience. But despite the richness of the available perspectives, there are still a number of questions about theatre spectatorship that remain unclear or unanswered.

In this thesis I will use a psychoanalytic perspective to explore certain themes of contention raised by current scholarship about the spectator and about related aspects of theatrical processes which bear on the problem of reception. In particular, I will address:

- 1- The supposed opposition between a passive and an active spectator which parallels a perceived dichotomy between an emotionally engaged and a critically or intellectually engaged spectator;
- 2- The quality of emotional engagement, and the supposed distinction between a passive (or hypnotic) emotional engagement derived from identification; and a positive emotional arousal subordinate to a critical judgement and intellectual understanding of the play's messages. I will explore this aspect with regards to both spectator and actor;
- 3- The nature of identification in theatre and its unconscious facets. Again, I will explore this in both spectator and actor;
- 4- The significance of the double nature of the actor's status in relation to its effects on the spectator;
- 5- The nature of the reciprocity of communication between stage and audience, which is universally recognized but not coherently explained.

As I will have ample opportunity to illustrate, psychoanalysis shows that the unconscious works at an interpersonal level and our minds are born out of an intersubjective morass whereby 'self-consciousness emerges through contact with another' (Symington, 1986, p.187). Therefore, my study of theatre reception will address processes of unconscious emotional identification between spectator and character, actor and character, and spectator and actor.

Brecht's emphasis on the role of the actor in mediating the spectator's response, both at an intellectual and emotional level, rightly demands a complementary analysis of unconscious emotional processes in both actors and spectators. That is why in the course of the thesis I will probe the

psychoanalytic perspective against theories that have considered the spectator's or the actor's emotional engagement in depth. My choice of theories has been determined first by their prominence as discourses on the relevance of emotional processes for spectating and acting, and secondarily by their trans-temporal connection with Brecht. Unsurprisingly, Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* represents both a pivotal point of reference for reflections on spectators' emotional engagement with theatre, and the key conception of spectatorship against which Brecht launches his invective.

For what concerns theories of acting, although the twentieth century is not lacking in a rich debate and a flurry of experiments on the art of the actor, I chose to focus on the eighteenth-century theorists representing the background references to Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le Comédien* (1994), because they give thorough consideration to the significance and the modalities of the actor's emotional involvement. Not only does the *Paradoxe*, with its sources, represent a point of reference for future theorists, including twentieth-century theatre masters such as Stanislavski and Copeau, but it also establishes the prototype for Brecht's formulation of the epic actor.

Following this framework, in Chapter 2 I will engage with Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* as the classical theory of spectatorship. I will first re-consider the theory in the context of a re-evaluation of the meaning of *mimēsis*, fear and pity. I will then describe the evolution of Freud's theory of transference from his earlier conceptualisation of the 'cathartic method', the precursor to psychoanalysis. Through a comparative analysis between transference and *katharsis*, I will suggest how tragic *katharsis* may reveal the transference dynamic embedded in spectating.

In Chapter 3 to 5 I will shift my attention to the actor. I will depart from Diderot's *Paradoxe* as the emblematic theory of the actor which bridges the rich eighteenth-century debate on the art of the actor to twentieth-century formulations, most notably Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. In Chapter 3 I will give considerable attention to the eighteenth-century theoretical works on the actor which constitute the direct and indirect references of the *Paradoxe*. In doing this

I will describe the different interpretations that theorists have given of the relationship between sensibility and understanding in the actor's art. In Chapter 4, I will analyse the terms of contention about the actor's art (sensibility, understanding, and nature) with reference to the eighteenth-century cultural and philosophical context. I will first demonstrate that the paradox of the actor cannot be solved through the notion of 'double consciousness' as has been proposed, among others, by William Archer. I will then show how the shifting cultural paradigms of the Enlightenment, and in particular the emphasis on the possibility to study human nature and the philosophy of sensism have much in common with the debate on the art of the actor and provide a cross-reference to it. In Chapter 5 I will propose a psychoanalytic understanding of the dynamic between sensibility and understanding in the actor through the concept of alpha-function. First, I will summarize the key concepts in Freud, Melanie Klein and Bion, which describe the functioning of the unconscious in relation to mechanisms of identification, and the processing of emotions into self-reflections that promotes psychic development. It is the notion of alpha-function which precisely describes the interpersonal process through which raw unconscious emotional dynamics are transformed into conscious insights through the mind of another. In applying the notion of alpha-function to the art of the actor, I will show how it can resolve its paradox and provide us with a meaningful understanding of the dynamic between sensibility and judgement.

In chapter 6, I will return to the spectator in light of the propositions I made about the art of the actor and I will advance a new understanding of spectatorship according to the insights afforded by the psychoanalytic perspective. I will also discuss how unconscious processes of spectatorship may underpin theatre's moral value.

## CHAPTER 2 – TRANSFERENCE AND *KATHARSIS*, FREUD TO ARISTOTLE

### INTRODUCTION

Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* has been 'the most celebrated concept in the entire field of literary criticism' (Golden, 1976, p.437) and the subject of discussion and dispute at least since the rediscovery of the *Poetics* during the Renaissance and well into the twentieth century. Brecht took it as a point of reference for his condemnation of conventional theatre, in the context of his concern with the social and political function of this art. In doing so, he departed from the prevailing interpretation of *katharsis* as purgation and did not question its validity; instead he brought its implications to bear on his own theory of spectatorship. This amounted to an equation of *katharsis* with a hypnotic experience supposed to induce the spectator into a passive state and to inhibit his capacity for critical distance. Accordingly, Brecht's assumptions excluded the possibility that unconscious dynamics may contribute productively to theatre reception.

In this chapter I will challenge the interpretation of *katharsis* which formed the basis of Brecht's understanding of spectatorship, and against which he framed his reform. In doing so, I will examine unconscious aspects of spectatorship, so far neglected or denied, from a psychoanalytic perspective. In particular I will apply Freud's theory of transference to propose a new interpretation of tragic *katharsis*. First, I will illustrate and discuss Aristotle's theory of tragedy as pertains to the concepts of *katharsis*, *mimēsis*, fear and pity. Then, I will describe the evolutions of Freud's idea of how psychoanalysis relieves psychic sufferings, from the cathartic method to the discovery of transference and its further elaborations. Finally, I will propose an understanding of tragic *katharsis* as transference dynamic, highlighting it as a productive unconscious phenomenon which is conducive to self-analysis.



**Tragic *katharsis*: purgation or purification?**

Aristotle's *Poetics* presents a theory of tragedy comprising the most renowned pronouncement on spectatorship of all times (1449b24-28): tragedy is 'a representation [*mimēsis*] of an action which is serious, complete...and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions' (trans. Halliwell, 1987).

Despite giving the impression of clarity, this dense definition has been the subject of controversies and of many attempts at explaining what it means (Halliwell, 1992). In particular, what Aristotle 'meant in claiming that tragedy produces a *katharsis*, is a question which has dominated western philosophy and literary criticism since the Renaissance' (Lear, 1988, p.297). The debate has especially been engaged with the question whether he meant purification of the emotions (i.e. their sublimation or perfection within the mind) or purification of the mind from the emotions (i.e. their discharge or abreaction from the mind) (Halliwell, 1992).

This second meaning has been the most accepted of the last hundred years, hence the tendency to translate *katharsis* as 'purgation'. Nevertheless the controversy has never abated and questions regarding the emotional versus the intellectual nature of *katharsis*, its supposed or doubtful moral value, and the relative import of pity and fear, are still pending (Butcher, 1951; Leon, 1976; Fabbri, 2000). Some justification for this may be found in the suggestion that Aristotle, being most likely the first author to apply the idea of *katharsis* to the theory of tragedy (Halliwell, 2002), borrowed the term from the medical literature of his time (Jauss, 1982). A passage in the *Politics* (1342a4-14), where the philosopher is writing about *katharsis* in relation to the effects of music, affirms that in people whose soul is affected by strong emotions certain sacred melodies may induce a state of *katharsis* 'just as if they were receiving a medical treatment' (trans. Kraut, 1997).

Nevertheless, the understanding of *katharsis* as sublimation or moral perfection has been very popular until the last century (Halliwell, 1986). But in the nineteenth century, there was the reaching of a general agreement to the settling on *katharsis* as purgation although, as I said, this has never been universally accepted (see for instance Leon, 1976). One of the most important contributions to this rendition was a book by Jakob Bernays, originally published in German in 1857 (Bernays, 1880<sup>11</sup>, cited in Lear, 1988), who emphasized the medical origin of the term (Halliwell, 1992). Curiously, Bernays was Freud's wife's uncle, and Freud was well acquainted with his work (Stok, 2010). It seems therefore likely that the two physicians relied on his interpretation of *katharsis* when Breuer suggested that they call the first psychoanalytic treatment the 'cathartic method' (Freud & Breuer, 1895). I will come back to this point in the next section of the chapter.

In the *Politics* (1341b39-41), Aristotle anticipates that he would expand on what he means by *katharsis* in the future work of the *Poetics*, but unfortunately either this did not happen or we have lost the fragment which might have done so. Hence we have to rely solely on the discussion in the *Politics* to expand on Aristotle's views of some aspects of the cathartic effect.

In the *Poetics* (1449b24-28) Aristotle attributes the arousal of fear and pity to the mimetic character of tragedy, but he gives no explanation for this. In the *Politics* (1340a12-14), talking about music, he theorizes more openly that the mimetic quality of music is that responsible for the arousal of corresponding emotions: 'Furthermore, everyone who listens to representations [*mimēseon*] comes to have similar emotions, even apart from the rhythms and melodies of those representations' (trans. Kraut, 1997). If *mimēsis* is necessary for the arousal of emotions, a causal link is posited between *mimēsis* and *katharsis*. Applied to tragedy, this principle implies that *mimēsis* of tragic actions leads to the arousal of the emotions of fear and pity, which are then subject to the cathartic effect.

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<sup>11</sup> Jakob Bernays (1880), *Zwei Abhandlungen über die aristotelische Theorie des Drama*. Berlin: W. Hertz. A chapter of this book has been translated as 'Aristotle on the Effects of Tragedy' by Jonathan and Jennifer Barnes in: *Articles on Aristotle*, Vol. 4 (J. Barnes, M. Schofield & R. Sorabji eds., London, 1979).

*Mimēsis* being a necessary premise to *katharsis*, it is useful to illustrate some of its properties that contribute to the understanding of *katharsis*.

### The meaning of *mimēsis*

The concept of *mimēsis*<sup>12</sup> figures in the pre-Socratic tradition (Halliwell, 2002) and is amply used by Plato in a number of works and contexts, but most famously in his critique of it in the *Republic III* (386a-417b) and *X* (595a-621d). For what concerns the scope of this discussion, I will here consider the following three important properties of *mimēsis*:

- in the *Poetics* *mimēsis* means dramatic enactment;
- *mimēsis* is characteristic of human innate behaviour and it is a source of pleasure;
- *mimēsis* has a moral value.

The examination of these attributes will inform my comparative analysis between Aristotle's tragic *katharsis* and Freud's theory of transference in the last section of the chapter.

According to Aristotle all arts are forms of *mimēsis*. These include poetic arts such as tragedy, comedy, epic and dithyramb, as well as music and painting. In Aristotle's words: 'epic and tragic poetry, as well as comedy and dithyramb (and most music for the pipe or lyre), are all, taken as a whole, kinds of mimesis' (1447a 13-18, trans. Halliwell, 1987); and 'the poet, like the painter or any other image-maker, is a mimetic artist' (1460b 8-11, trans. Halliwell, 1987).

*Mimēsis* operates according to Aristotle as a key factor that distinguishes artistic creation from other forms of human intellectual activity. In reference to the art of the poet, he emphasizes that mistakenly the poet is attributed his title on the basis of whether he writes in verses, rather than according to the real criteria of whether he engages in *mimēsis*:

since, if a work of medicine or natural philosophy is written in metre, people still use these same descriptions. But Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except their metre; and so, while one must call

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of *mimēsis* and related referencing, see Halliwell, 2002.

the former a poet, the latter should be called a natural philosopher rather than a poet.

(1447b 16-20, trans. Halliwell, 1987)

Within the arts, however, the denotative attributes of *mimēsis* are less clear. Plato uses *mimēsis* and its related terminology in a wide range of contexts, in connection with epistemology, ethics, psychology, politics and metaphysics. Within the arts, like Aristotle, he applies it to both the musico-poetic and the visual arts (Halliwell, 2002). Yet this is not univocally true and in *Republic III* (392c6-394b2) Plato refers to a restricted meaning of *mimēsis* as specifically denoting dramatic impersonation. As has been suggested, it is possible that *mimēsis* 'as popularly applied to poetry, was [...] suggested to the Greeks by those dramatic forms of poetry in which acting or recitation produced an impression allied to that of mimicry' (Butcher, 1951, p.138).

In *Republic III* (392c6-394b2) the restricted meaning of *mimēsis* is specifically intended as personification in the dramatic art, i.e. the embodiment of a character, in opposition to narration [*diēgēsis*]. As explained through the words of Socrates, to whom Plato attributes the authority of his philosophy, poets can choose between two forms of telling their story: by narrating it or by talking as if they were the characters of the story. Tragedy and comedy are the paradigm of a poetic form entirely based on *mimēsis*, dithyrambs are based solely on narration, while epic poetry presents as a mixture of the two forms (394b6-c5).

Aristotle himself refers to this restricted meaning in the *Poetics* (1460a5-11), when he suggests that one of the reasons why Homer is such a superior poet is that he lets his characters speak for themselves, and only rarely engages in narrative. Here Aristotle, somewhat contradicting what he had said elsewhere in the *Poetics*, distinguishes the poetic form based on narrative to the one based on *mimēsis*, granting *mimēsis* a denotation of the dramatic as opposed to other forms of poetic composition.

Among Homer's many other laudable attributes is his grasp – unique among epic poets – of his status as poet. For the poet himself should speak as little as possible, since when he does so he is not engaging in mimesis. Now, other epic poets participate persistently, and engage in mimesis only to a limited extent and infrequently. But Homer, after a

short preamble, at once brings onto stage a man, woman or some other figure (and his agents are always fully characterised).

(trans. Halliwell, 1987)

It is often emphasized how Aristotle discounted dramatic representation as an essential component of tragedy, for example when he said that spectacle is not important (1450b16-20):

Spectacle is emotionally powerful but is the least integral of all to the poet's art: for the potential of tragedy does not depend upon public performance and actors; and, besides, the art of the mask-maker carries more weight than the poet's as regards the elaboration of visual effects. (trans. Halliwell, 1987)

One should be wary however of maintaining that by doing so he ends up equating tragedy to a literary form. Other literary forms in Aristotle's times were represented through public readings and hence what the dramatic performance is here contrasted to is not likely to be a silent reading, but rather a recitation. What Aristotle may well be rejecting are the decorative elements of theatre (like masks, as he specifically says, or scenery) rather than the enacted rendition of text. Incidentally, the history of twentieth-century theatre does not lack masters who have similarly deplored the decorative aspects of theatrical spectacle, while emphasizing the importance of the actor's embodiment. Suffice to think of Grotowski and his formulation of 'the poor theatre' (1975).

Talking about the composition of tragedy, Aristotle provides us with an important pointer to the central role of impersonation. Here there is an emphasis on enactment of gestures and arousal of affects with regards to the creative work of the poet (1455a22-34):

So far as possible, the poet should even include gestures in the process of composition: for, assuming the same natural talent, the most convincing effect comes from those who actually put themselves in the emotions; and the truest impression of distress or anger is given by the person who experiences these feelings.

(trans. Halliwell, 1987)

Within a far from unitary conception, *mimēsis* retains an area of meaning which refers to dramatic enactment. According to Plato, imitative poetry (*Republic*,

603c4-9) 'portrays men engaged in involuntary or voluntary actions, and as a result of their action believing that they have succeeded or failed, and either grieving or rejoicing in all these circumstances' (trans. Halliwell, 1988). In the *Poetics* Aristotle applies this definition to tragedy unquestioned (1449b36-1450a3):

Since tragedy is a representation [*mimēsis*] of an action, and is enacted by agents, who must be characterized in both their character and their thought (for it is through these that we can also judge the qualities of their actions, and it is in their actions that all men either succeed or fail).  
(trans. Halliwell, 1987)

As I discussed above, in the restricted meaning *mimēsis* stands for impersonation of a character in the dramatic form. More specifically, both Plato and Aristotle clarify that it refers to the impersonation of a character in action, whether such action is voluntary or not. Despite remaining influenced by the large semantic field of the word, in the *Poetics* Aristotle ultimately veers towards equating *mimēsis* with the impersonation of a dramatic role (Halliwell, 1986).

Whilst *mimēsis* refers to the activity of the artist, and especially of the actor, it is by no means confined to be a specialist skill; on the contrary, it is considered to be characteristic of human innate behaviour. According to Aristotle the peculiar character of artistic creativity, grounded as it is in *mimēsis*, derives from two natural causes: that man has got a natural propensity to *mimēsis*, expressed since childhood, and which facilitates his first steps in understanding; and that *mimēsis* is a universal source of pleasure for human beings.

Poetry in general can be seen to owe its existence to two causes, and these are rooted in nature. First, there is man's natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity (and this distinguishes man from other creatures, that he is thoroughly mimetic and through mimesis takes his first steps in understanding). Second, there is the pleasure which all men take in mimetic objects.  
(1448b4-10, trans. Halliwell, 1987)

Plato remarks on a related point, when in *Republic III* (395d1-3) he gets Socrates to ask: 'Or haven't you noticed that imitations, if they are practised much past youth, get established in the habits and nature of body, tones of

voice, and mind?’ (trans. Reeve, 2004). Here *mimēsis* is thought to be a natural predisposition that is responsible for acquired habits. The transformation of what is innate into what is acquired depends on the possibility to either foster or hinder the former in order to shape the latter. As the argument in *Republic III* goes (396a5-e2), this should be precisely the call of a proper education, which will foster good habits through the *mimēsis* of good models and hinder bad habits through the abolition of *mimēsis* of bad models.

Both Plato and Aristotle recognize an intimate link between *mimēsis* and pleasure. A passage in the *Poetics* (1448b9-13) underlies the ability of artistic representation to attach an experience of pleasure to things that we would find painful to look at in their actual form, such as unattractive animals or cadavers. Similarly, in the *Republic X* Plato speaks of the compelling enjoyment which tragic *mimēsis* provides to its audience, inescapable even by the most virtuous philosophers (605c10-605d5):

When even the best of us hear Homer, or some other tragic poet, imitating [*mimoumenou*] one of the heroes in a state of grief and making a long speech of lamentation, or even chanting and beating his breast, you know we enjoy it and give ourselves over to it. We suffer along with the hero and take his sufferings seriously. And we praise the one who affects us most in this way as a good poet.

(trans. Reeve, 2004)

A propensity to dramatic enactments is recognized as natural and innate, and part of human development. Even more significantly, it is considered the earliest form of meaning-making in human beings. Moreover, there is recognition that such enactment is a source of pleasure, so much so that it is difficult to subtract oneself from its allure. The attribute of being innate and the intimate link with pleasure seem, by implication, to grant *mimēsis* a certain compelling quality. Such quality will lead the two Ancient philosophers to opposite conclusions with regard to the ethical value of *mimēsis*.

Both Aristotle and Plato are interested in the debate about the ethical qualities of *mimēsis*, although for Plato these considerations are imperative while Aristotle places pleasure above moral instruction as the chief aim of poetry (Butcher, 1951). Nevertheless moral considerations enter into the *Poetics* and

their subordination to pleasure may be more suggestive of a particular belief about the way theatre affects moral improvement, than of a disregard for its relevance to the effect of tragedy. I will return to this discussion in Chapter 6.

As I have briefly anticipated above, in *Republic III* Plato distinguishes *mimēsis* on the basis of the objects that it sets out to represent, and proposes that it should be fostered for the good models but hindered for the bad ones (396c5-e2). Yet in *Republic X* he proceeds to condemn *mimēsis* at all levels, regardless of whether the models it portrays are good or bad. Here *mimēsis* is described as a most dangerous impediment to the education of citizens, and it justifies the total banning of poets from the ideal city. Tragic *mimēsis*, which induces the audience to partake in the hero's grief, is seen as particularly dangerous and irrational, taking us far from virtue and the Truth (*Republic*, 604d-e).

In the *Republic*, through Socrates' voice, Plato gives three justifications for the condemnation of *mimēsis*. At an ontological level, he engages in a long exposition (600e4-602c3) which aims at showing how the mimetic objects are twice removed from the Truth (602c1-3) and hence of limited value to the ideal city. At a psychological level, he maintains that mimetic poetry promotes a resonance in the audience with feelings that belong to the irrational character to the detriment of reason (604e1-5):

Now, this element – the one that gets irritated – admits of much complex imitation; whereas the wise and quiet character, which always remains pretty much selfsame, is neither easy to imitate nor easy to understand when imitated - especially not at a festival where multifarious people are gathered together in theaters. For the experience being imitated is alien to them.

(trans. Reeve, 2004)

The poets, interested in pleasing their audience, will naturally choose to represent the irrational (605a2-6). Finally, on the moral plane, it is the tight link between *mimēsis* and pleasure which causes Socrates to bring the harshest charge (*Republic*, 605c6-8): 'But we haven't yet brought our chief charge against imitation [*mimēsis*]. For its power to corrupt all but a very few good people is surely an altogether terrible one' (trans. Reeve, 2004). Because of the compelling nature of *mimēsis*, which enchants even the best citizens into giving



in to an irrational pleasure taken at the expense of reason, Plato ends up suggesting its global censure.

The Platonic overarching condemnation of *mimēsis* creates a precedent that cannot be ignored. Aristotle contradicts it by arguing that the link between pleasure and *mimēsis* constitutes one of the pillars on which the much-celebrated art of the poet stands, in no way alienating us from the truth. As he had explained in the *Politics*, the pleasurable or painful emotions experienced at the view of the representation is akin to feelings that might arise in consequence of the view of their corresponding real object, rather providing a faithful surrogate for truth itself (1340a23-28): ‘Someone who is accustomed to feeling pain and pleasure in things that are likenesses is close to someone who reacts in the same manner to true things’ (trans. Kraut, 1997).

In the last section of the *Poetics* (1461b26-62b15), Aristotle discusses the merit of tragedy as compared to that of epic poetry. Initially, he admits that if he were to judge the value of poetic genres on the basis of its spectators, tragedy would indeed be found to be the most vulgar. However, he refutes such criteria and attributes the vulgar effects of tragic performances to the clumsy attitudes of the actors.

The whole tragic art, then, is to epic poetry what these later actors were compared to their predecessors, since according to this view, epic appeals to a cultivated audience which has no need of actor's poses, while tragedy appeals to a lower class. If then it is vulgar, it must obviously be inferior. First of all, this is not a criticism of poetry but of acting: even in reciting a minstrel can overdo his gestures, as Sosistratus did, or in a singing competition, like Mnasiheus of Opus.

(1461b33-62a8, trans. Halliwell, 1987)

Aristotle's assertion that actors may spoil the performance of any poetry, including epic recitations, does not need to imply an overarching condemnation of acting. The history of theatre does not lack practitioners who set off to reform acting departing from a condemnation of the form it has taken. My discussion in Chapter 3 of theories of acting in the eighteenth century will provide many examples.

Aristotle then proceeds to list a number of technical reasons why tragedy is superior to epics, including its more condensed and unitary plot (1462b1-7). Finally, its higher value is also decreed by its superiority in attaining its aim (1462b12-15), which is to effect the *katharsis* of pity and fear, as long as these emotions have been aroused through *mimēsis*. Because a work of art cannot be separated from its effects on its recipients, effects which constitute its intrinsic quality (Butcher, 1951), the greatest merit of *mimēsis* is indeed to enable *katharsis*.

### **Pity and fear**

Pity and fear are the two emotions which are central and exclusive to Aristotle's definition of tragic *katharsis*. While the association of *katharsis* with tragedy was most likely Aristotle's original idea, the notion that pity and fear were central to the reception of serious poetry, including tragedy, was well established in ancient Greece, long before the *Poetics* (Halliwell, 2002, pp.218-219).

Aristotle does not discuss pity and fear anywhere in the *Poetics*, but their description is to be found in the second book of the *Rhetoric*, where he discusses a wide range of human emotions. In the section dedicated to it, fear [*phobos*] is described as 'a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future [...] only if they appear not remote but so near as to be imminent' (1382a21-26, trans. Roberts, 1954). Fear is about oneself, as Aristotle states: 'fear is felt by those who believe something to be likely to happen to them' (1382b34, trans. Roberts, 1954). In a later paragraph of the *Rhetoric*, pity [*eleos*] is defined as a 'feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon' (1385b13-16, trans. Roberts, 1954). Pity, differently from fear, is felt about someone else, as long as the situation presents enough similarities to one's own conditions that one can imagine the same event might happen to him. Yet Aristotle specifies that when we witness a harmful event occurring to someone who is very close to us, such as one's son, fear rather than pity ensues:

The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not very closely related to us – in that case we feel about them as if we were in danger ourselves. For this reason Amasis did not weep, they say, at the sight of his son being led to death, but did weep when he saw his friend begging: the latter sight was pitiful, the former terrible, and the terrible is different from the pitiful.

(1386a17-24, trans. Roberts, 1954)

As has been shown, there is a strict correlation between pity and fear and it is only when considering their reciprocity that Aristotle's notion of the effect of tragedy can be understood (Butcher, 1951). There are important similarities and differences between these two emotions. They both are forms of suffering in relation to some painful event, but while fear is aroused by the imagination of a personal direct involvement in a painful experience, pity is aroused by the vision of a painful experience happening to someone else. Importantly, Aristotle is quite specific in determining who this other person should be for pity to be aroused: close enough to our representation of the self, that one can imagine the same painful event could well be happening to him, but not too close to one's heart, like for instance one's son, in which case fear rather than pity ensues. There is an emphasis here on 'a rather delicate balance between psychological involvement and distance' (Halliwell, 2002, p.215) that needs to take place in pity. I will discuss in the last section of the chapter why this emphasis is crucial to the understanding of tragic *katharsis*.

## **FREUD'S THEORIES OF THE CATHARTIC METHOD AND THE TRANSFERENCE**

### **The cathartic method**

In 1895, a relatively unknown Viennese neurologist, Sigmund Freud, and his colleague Joseph Breuer, published *Studies on Hysteria*, a book which was later to become the foundation text of psychoanalysis, and a seminal work in its own right (Freud & Breuer, 1895). The book endeavoured to set forth a new scientific theory of hysteria, and for the first time, a clinical method to cure its symptoms.

Freud and Breuer proposed that each hysterical symptom originates in a psychological trauma. The trauma originally provoked an emotional response (for example disgust or anger) that for certain reasons could not be expressed at the time. Hence this emotional response was 'repressed', i.e. retained within the patient's unconscious psyche but lost to her awareness. The repressed affect (or strangulated, to use Freud's vivid metaphor) found a disguised way of expression through the body, in which it became a hysterical symptom (a paralysis, a spasm, the inability to speak, or any other).

Interlinked to the theory of the origin and meaning of hysterical symptoms was the discovery of how they could be cured. If it was a strangulated affect that caused the hysterical symptom in the first place, might the patient be liberated from the symptom if she eventually succeeded in giving expression to the affect? And how could this be obtained, given that the emotional response had at first been successfully repressed at the expense of the patient's health? Breuer discovered that through hypnosis, presumably because of the partly unconscious state that it produces, the patient could be induced to represent in her mind the original trauma and to re-experience it in its full emotional power. If under hypnosis the patient succeeded in expressing the repressed emotions, awakening from it she would be symptom-free. As Freud puts it:

For we found, to our great surprise at first, that each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words.

(Freud & Breuer, 1895, p.6)

In the detailed exposition of several case studies, Freud and Breuer gave numerous clinical examples of such curative process. For the purpose of clarification, I will illustrate one example taken from the case study of Anna O., the first patient to enter the history of psychoanalysis (Freud & Breuer, 1895). Anna was a young woman who had developed a plethora of hysterical symptoms around and following the death of her father, whom she had devotedly nursed for many months. One example of these was hydrophobia, a terror of drinking which resulted in Anna's refusal to drink any liquid. This had

been so debilitating that she suffered a tormenting thirst and could only take fluids by eating large amounts of fruit. The theory went that, if Anna could bring to her mind the original trauma and give expression to the repressed affect, she would be able to abreact the feeling(s) associated with the trauma and hence be cured of the symptom. In fact, under hypnosis Anna recounted with disgust that once she had seen her English maid let her dog drink from a glass. Inhibited by the duties of politeness, Anna had repressed her feelings and not said anything. Under hypnosis, however, she could express the disgust and rage that she had then felt towards her maid. Giving expression to these feelings meant abreacting them, hence, freed from the strangulated affects, she asked for a glass of water, drank profusely and woke up from the hypnotic state with the glass at her lips. The symptom had been cured.<sup>13</sup>

Breuer and Freud called this treatment the cathartic method, most likely because they were directly aware of Bernays's interpretation of Aristotelian *katharsis*, but anyway in line with their contemporaries' understanding of the Aristotelian theory of the effects of tragedy. Incidentally, we know that Freud was aware of Aristotle's theory at least as early as 1905 and that he translated *katharsis* as purging. In the opening paragraph of his introduction to *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage* (Freud, 1906), he writes:

If, as has been assumed since the time of Aristotle, the purpose of drama is to arouse 'terror and pity' and so 'to purge the emotions' [...] the prime factor is unquestionably the process of getting rid of one's own emotions by 'blowing off steam'.

(Freud, 1906, p.305)

In this passage he is clearly translating *katharsis* with purging. Like Brecht, '*Reinigung*' is the German word he employs.

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<sup>13</sup> At this very early stage of psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex had yet to be discovered. Hence, although it might be reasonably hypothesized that the development of hysteria in Anna O. is linked to her unresolved Oedipus Complex for her dying father, and the anxieties and conflicts that this would imply, Freud and Breuer's present theory does not contemplate this occurrence.

## **The discovery of transference**

At the point of publishing *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud & Breuer, 1895), Freud was already dissatisfied with some aspects of the cathartic method. Part of his dissatisfaction stemmed from the fact that he found hypnosis short of his expectations to bring people to the arousal and expression of their repressed affects. But this is not the whole story. Not yet aware of the significance of his observations, he was also discovering transference.

It is precisely in the last chapter of *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud & Breuer, 1895) dedicated to 'The Psychotherapy of Hysteria' that transference gets its first mention. At this point Freud considered transference to be a mere impediment to treatment and he was certainly not aware of the weight that this discovery would carry for his future theory and practice. It took Freud another fifteen years and a number of detours in his speculations, to eventually postulate that the analysis of transference is the principal factor involved in the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis. In Freud's own words: 'Transference, which seems ordained to be the greatest obstacle to psycho-analysis, becomes its most powerful ally' (Freud, 1905, p.117).

Freud defined transference as a new version of impulses and fantasies that have been awakened in the patient and brought to her awareness by the analytic process; their peculiar characteristic being that they replace some person who was familiar to the patient, with the person of the analyst (Freud, 1905). The repressed emotion which is being expressed is not an original emotion directed towards the therapist, but instead a reproduction of an emotion once directed towards a significant person in the patient's life. The critical difference with the cathartic method is that the representation and expression of the repressed emotion is here achieved not in the mind of the patient, but in a communicative re-enactment with the therapist.

Freud gave a significant example of his discovery of the transference as an important therapeutic tool in the famous case study of the Rat Man (Freud, 1909b). The Rat Man was a young man so nicknamed after one of his most

characteristic obsessional thoughts: that his deceased father might suffer a horrid torture implying live rats being made to enter the anus of the victim. This obsession was the more horrifying, as it seemed to imply an unconscious fancy of sadistic quality, which contrasted with the Rat Man's affectionate and devoted feelings for his father. These were the only feelings he could recognize in himself ever to have felt towards his parent.

In the course of therapy, an episode belonging to the Rat Man's childhood was unveiled. His mother had told the Rat Man that when he was about 3 years old he had been beaten by his father for having bit someone. To this he had rebelled so furiously, hurling insulting words at his assailant, that his father had stopped in astonishment and declared: 'The child will either be a great man or a great criminal!' (Freud, 1909b, p.265). The Rat Man had no personal recollection of such a memorable story. Not doubting the truth of his mother's words, he superficially conceded to Freud that this early scene bore some evidence of anger and revenge towards his father. Nevertheless his estrangement from any hostile feelings remained unshakeable, until when, and only when, these feelings eventually emerged in the transference.

Some time after the memory was reported in analysis, insults towards Freud and his family made their appearance in the Rat Man's associations, alongside impulses to punch Freud during the sessions, impulses that compelled the patient to walk around the room in an attempt to keep them at bay. The Rat Man was ashamed as he could not establish what might be the reason for his overbearing hostility towards his analyst. Prepared by observations that he had conducted with other patients, but not taken yet to their full consequences, Freud attributed this apparent nonsense to the transference. According to his new theoretical view of the transference, the Rat Man's hostile feelings for Freud were the representation of the long buried hostility for his father. The transference was the necessary medium for the re-experiencing of affects otherwise inaccessible, because only the actual re-experiencing of the hostile feelings could defeat the Rat Man's estrangement from them.

The Rat Man's experience of hostility for Freud in the transference was the necessary premise to his ability to acknowledge the repressed hostility for his father. Brought to his awareness from the recesses of his unconscious, such powerful emotion could be recognized as belonging to the forgotten past. The analytic work hence allowed, firstly, the arousal of the feelings themselves in the transference re-enactment, and, secondly, the recognition that they belonged to the Rat Man's past significant relationship with his father. Through this process, the feelings were finally deprived of their despotic power on the mind and the Rat Man could at last walk away freed of his horrific obsessions. The psychoanalytic treatment had proved successful.

### **Transference re-enactment and transference analysis**

According to Freud, the merit of the transference is to allow the representation of an emotion which would otherwise remain repressed and manifest itself as a symptom impinging on the patient's health (Freud, 1912a). Here Freud does not speak any longer purely of hysterical symptoms, but of any kind of symptoms, for example an obsession in the case of the Rat Man.

Freud understands this representation as a re-enactment: 'the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it' (Freud, 1914, p.150). This re-enactment of repressed emotions (for example the anger for the father in the Rat Man's case) is compelling and while it may get activated in any current situation which the patient finds himself in, it becomes particularly prominent in the course of the analytic treatment.

As long as the patient is in the treatment he cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering. [...] We must be prepared to find, therefore, that the patient yields to the compulsion to repeat [...] not only in his personal attitude to his doctor but also in every other activity and relationship which may occupy his life at the time.

(Freud. 1914, pp.150-151)



But for the scope of the successful outcome of the analytic treatment, the transference as means of representation and expression of the repressed, has only accomplished half of its task, and a dangerous albeit necessary half. It is in the response of the analyst to the re-enactment that lies the crucial outcome of the transference cure.

In a paper dedicated to the erotic transference and its management (Freud, 1915a), Freud warned against two equally detrimental and opposite tactics in which the analyst might respond to the transference: inviting the patient to repress her erotic longings for the analyst, or giving in to the temptation of satisfying them. It is in the transference that the patient mostly looks for surrogate satisfaction of her repressed desires and it is on this ground that the physician must leave her 'with unfulfilled wishes in abundance' (Freud, 1919, p.164).

Especially the risk of responding by what in psychoanalytic jargon has become known as 'acting in' on the part of the analyst represents the greatest hindrance for the progress of analysis. Again on the specific case of erotic transference, Freud writes:

If the patient's advances were returned it would be a great triumph for her, but a complete defeat for the treatment. She would have succeeded in what all patients strive for in analysis – she would have succeeded in acting out, in repeating in real life, what she ought only to have remembered, to have reproduced as psychological material and to have kept within the sphere of psychological events.

(Freud, 1915a, p.166)

Although Freud is here specifically talking about erotic transference, these reflections can be generalized to all transference situations.

In order for the re-enactment in the transference to effect a curative process, the analyst needs to engage in

a perpetual struggle with his patient to keep in the psychological sphere all the impulses which the patient would like to direct into the motor sphere; and he celebrates it as a triumph for the treatment if he can bring it about

that something that the patient wishes to discharge in action is disposed of through the work of remembering.

(Freud, 1914, p.153)

By avoiding 'acting in', the analyst allows the patient to recognize that the repressed affect belonged to a past relationship between him and another person: 'We soon perceive that the transference is itself only a piece of repetition, and that the repetition is a transference of the forgotten past' (Freud, 1914, p.151). It is such recognition, given through an analytic interpretation, which creates a healthy distance to be put between the emotion itself and the patient today.

The transference thus creates an intermediate region between illness and real life through which the transition from the one to the other is made. [...] From the repetitive reactions which are exhibited in the transference we are led along the familiar paths to the awakening of the memories which appear without difficulty, as it were, after the resistance has been overcome.

(Freud, 1914, pp.154-155)

I would like to exemplify the two facets of the transference by reflecting on the example of the Rat Man's obsession (Freud, 1909b). When the Rat Man started to hint at his aggressive impulses towards Freud, he was encountering the re-enactment phase of the transference, the one in which he was finally re-experiencing a long-repressed affect (anger and aggression). If Freud had chosen to ignore these hints, or dismiss them as senseless, he would have allied himself with the repressing forces. If Freud had instead been frightened or critical of them, he would have 'acted in', repeating the original response that the Rat Man's father had given to the Rat Man's anger (when he stopped beating the child and predicted he might be a genius or a criminal, showing a mixture of astonishment and concern about his son's strong, angry feelings). In both these cases, the re-expression of feelings would have likely led to the reinforcement of their repression.

Instead, by recognizing the feelings as part of the transference, the analyst can foster awareness of them in the patient. Ultimately, through the tool of interpretation, the analyst formulates and communicates to the patient his recognition of the feelings as part of the transference and their attribution to

their original situation. By doing so, he is hoping to make conscious what was unconscious, hence working against repression. When repression is eventually overcome, the patient is freed from the symptom that represented the disguised expression of the repressed emotions.

This final outcome remains similar to the one that Freud had theorized for the cathartic method; however not only has the technique changed, but also the related theory. In the cathartic method it was the discharge from the mind of aroused affects which was taken as the curative factor: here the emotions were presumed to be removed from the mind. In the transference it is the reattribution of the aroused affects to a past relationship which cures through an elaboration of meaning that allows the patient to take a view on his emotions from a distance wherein he can reflect on them as signifying a part of his history and re-evaluate their validity for the here and now. Here the emotions are presumed to be processed within the mind.

### **Repetition-compulsion – beyond the pleasure principle**

In a seminal paper with the suggestive title *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920) Freud turns to explore the significance of the compulsion to repeat, seen in the re-enactment phase of transference. He explains that he has also encountered this phenomenon in the way trauma is represented in patients' dreams over and over again, and in some instances of children's play. What Freud sets out to understand is why it appears that the repetition-compulsion associated with a traumatic experience takes precedence over the re-enactment of its pleasurable resolution. The importance of this question lies in the fact that it challenges the idea Freud held up to this point that the fundamentals of psychic life are organized by the pleasure and the reality principles, and that both of them, either directly or indirectly, have as their final aim the reaching of a state of pleasure (Freud, 1911b).

In order to illustrate his point, Freud gives a detailed observation of a game that his grandson has been engaging with at the age of one and half (Freud, 1920). The little boy, who was very obedient and showed little protest at times when

his mother would leave him for a few hours, had a habit of throwing objects into a corner of his room, while vocalising a long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o' which Freud could establish stood for the German word '*fort*', which means 'gone'. The child used to repeat this game untiringly, and without displaying any evident pleasure in it. However at times, but much less frequently, he also played a variant of the game, when a reel attached to a string was first thrown out of sight, coupled with the expressive 'o-o-o-o', but subsequently pulled back to its reappearance, which was accompanied instead by a joyful '*da*' [there].

Freud interprets the game as a re-enactment of the little boy's feelings about his mother leaving him. While the boy refrains from protesting at his beloved mother's leaving him behind, he stages her disappearance over and over by representing it with the throwing away of the objects. Interestingly, while this act of disappearance is staged relentlessly, the second act of making the object return is only rarely performed, despite being evidently the pleasurable part of the game and despite it representing what would seem to be the most desirable aim, the mother's return.

If one cannot maintain that the act of throwing away the object is acted out by the child as a preliminary to the enactment of the joyful satisfaction of getting it back, which alternative explanation can be given and how does it fit with the supremacy of the pleasure principle in Freud's theory of the psyche? Freud eventually comes to the conclusion (corroborated by a number of other observations) that there must be a principle of psychic functioning which lies 'beyond the pleasure principle' (Freud, 1920). In Freud's words:

one gets an impression that the child turned his experience into a game for another motive. At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not.

(Freud, 1920, p.16)

Freud's conclusion is that beyond the pleasure principle, at a more fundamental level, the psyche engages in repetition-compulsion to create bedrock for the pleasure principle, and only when the task of the repetition-compulsion has

been achieved, can the pleasure principle become the regulator of psychic process.

The repetition-compulsion which manifests itself in the transference re-enactment turns out to be the most fundamental phenomenon of psychic life. In reference to children's play, Freud states that the centrality of such phenomenon implies that 'that there is no need to assume the existence of a special imitative instinct in order to provide a motive for play' (Freud, 1920, p.17). In other words, if from a popular view, the motive of play may have been seen as imitation, from Freud's new perspective it may be regarded as the instinct for mastery of psychic pain through repetition-compulsion.

#### **AN INTERPRETATION OF TRAGIC *KATHARSIS* AS TRANSFERENCE DYNAMIC**

Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* is the most ancient and debated theory of the effect of the theatrical experience on the audience and it affirms that *mimēsis* (or representation) of the heroic actions in tragedy arouses fear and pity in the spectators and effects their *katharsis* (*Poetics*, 1449b24-28). Although we are forever intrigued by it, we cannot know for sure what Aristotle meant by tragedy effecting the *katharsis* of pity and fear, leaving this mysterious expression as an inexhaustible source of inspiration to new discoveries.

It is perhaps because *katharsis* talks about the way our mind deals with emotions and aims at explaining 'the relationship between the soul and the body' (Fabbri, 2000) that the introduction of the concept of *katharsis* from the realm of medicine to that of poetics operated by Aristotle (Jauss, 1982, p.25) has ignited our imagination for more than two thousand years. When Freud and Breuer used the term 'cathartic method' (Freud & Breuer, 1895) to describe their new cure of hysterical symptoms, they borrowed the term *katharsis* from Aristotle's *Poetics* or rather from the ample referencing that the term had long enjoyed. After it resided for many centuries in literary theory, Freud and Breuer returned the concept of *katharsis* back to medicine.

My historical description of Freud's journey, from the cathartic method to the transference, hints at Freud's struggle with the question of how a therapeutic technique can help our psyche process emotions: does psychoanalysis act as a purging effect (the cathartic cure) by releasing entangled emotions or, in a more complex but also finer way, does it promote working through the meaning of emotions causing our minds to shift from a compelling, irrational and unconscious stance to a reflective and conscious one? It is of course the second explanation which will be gradually unveiled and brought to the fore by the theory of transference. The parallel here with the debate around the Aristotelian meaning of *katharsis* is plain.

I will hereby suggest an interpretation of Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* based on Freud's theory of transference, as a way into understanding unconscious aspects of theatre spectatorship. In order to show how Freud's development of the theory of the cathartic cure into the theory of transference can contribute to our understanding of Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis*, I will start by suggesting that there are a number of parallel features between the two phenomena.

### **A comparison between tragic *katharsis* and transference**

Aristotle maintains that *katharsis* is possible only after the emotions of fear and pity have been aroused in the spectator by *mimēsis*. Although *mimēsis* is a complex concept, in the *Poetics* Aristotle mainly refers to it as meaning dramatic enactment (Halliwell, 2002). This is a first point of correspondence with the transference phenomenon: *mimēsis* intended as dramatic enactment functions for the spectator like re-enactment in the transference functions for the patient, in as far as both *katharsis* and the analysis of transference are possible only following the arousal of emotions through *mimēsis* or transference re-enactments respectively.

Moreover, the relation between *mimēsis* and transference re-enactment runs even deeper in as far as it is through an action that both processes allow emotions to be experienced, or more precisely through a surrogate action. In

the case of theatre reception, the surrogate action is the representation of the tragic actions by the performers, while, in the case of transference, it is the patient's re-enactment with the analyst.

Now, according to Freud, transference re-enactments are forms of repetition-compulsion and repetition-compulsion allows for representation of repressed emotions in action. In the example of the young child throwing away the cotton reel over and over again, this surrogate action is performed to represent the painful experience of his mother leaving him (Freud, 1920). In the transference, the surrogate action consists of the re-enactment of an emotional dynamic between patient and analyst, like the expressions of anger that the Rat Man enacted towards Freud (Freud, 1909b). Such a phenomenon is the departing point of analysis, what enables the repressed emotions to be aroused so that they can be subject to the analytic work. Like *mimēsis* enables *katharsis*, so transference re-enactments enable psychoanalysis.

Both *mimēsis* and transference re-enactments (intended as a form of repetition-compulsion) are fundamental phenomena of psychic life and have an intimate link with pleasure. According to both Aristotle and Plato, *mimēsis* is an innate principle of psychic development. Aristotle attributes to it the ability to facilitate a child's first steps in understanding, while Plato identifies it as the natural predisposition to the formation of habits. Freud believed that repetition-compulsion is an innate psychic process which gets activated each time that a repressed emotional experience needs to be made sense of, and in this way it equates, in psychoanalysis, to the birth of any understanding. In as far as repetition-compulsion is at the basis of unconscious representations of emotional dynamics (for example the Rat Man's anger for his father), it also represents the matrix of psychological 'habits', for example the tendency of a man like the Rat Man to re-enact anger towards surrogate figures who come to represent his father, like Freud in the transference or other significant people in his present life. Freud's case study talks of the Rat Man's unjustified aggressive fantasies towards his fiancée as a further symptom of his repressed emotions.

Both Plato and Aristotle recognize an intimate link between *mimēsis* and pleasure. For Plato, *mimēsis* has a compelling quality, the paradigmatic example being the virtuous philosopher giving himself over to the enjoyment of tragic representations of grief, even if rationally he recognizes them as inappropriate or undesirable. Here the parallel with repetition-compulsion is in the compelling quality of the arousal of emotions, which, despite appearing irrational, can take over even the most rational mind. Although *mimēsis* does not need to be identified solely with the irrational, as it is the case for the obligatory association between repetition-compulsion and the unconscious, Plato is clearly inclined to link *mimēsis* with lack of reason, one of the main motives for its condemnation.

For Aristotle, the link between *mimēsis* and pleasure is proved by the attraction which mimetic objects, by which he means works of art, exert on all human beings. He further specifies that the surrogate nature of *mimēsis*, as realized in all art, including but not limited to tragedy, allows us to feel pleasure in situations when looking at the real objects in their actual form, such as unattractive animals or cadavers, would prove painful.

The link between repetition-compulsion and pleasure, a complex one, reveals some correspondence with Aristotle's insights into *mimēsis*. Freud's first thorough model of the mind postulated the pleasure principle as the basic principle of psychic life (Freud, 1911b). However, Freud later found out that what he had imagined to be the ultimate drive of any human psychic activity, i.e. the search for pleasure, gets outclassed by the psychic mechanism of repetition-compulsion, which dictates psychic functioning 'beyond the pleasure principle' (Freud, 1920). In the psychoanalytic experience of the Rat Man, the child's murderous anger towards his father, memorable for the family history but personally forgotten by its protagonist because intolerably painful, is compelled to get re-expressed in the Rat Man's adult obsessions (Freud, 1909b). The Rat Man's childhood experience of his father's beating evoked powerful feelings of anger and a thirst for revenge, a desire of putting his father in the position of being the victim. His obsession of rats entering his father's anus is the representation of an action in which the Rat Man, with sadistic pleasure,



witnesses (or rather engineers in unconscious fantasy) the victimisation of his father. Repressed emotions are so powerful that they beguile the unconscious mind into an incessant repetition where pleasure and displeasure are interlinked and the mastering of pain is equated to a fundamental experience of pleasure.

In his first formulation of the theory of repetition-compulsion (Freud, 1920), while discussing its links with the pleasure principle, Freud inserted a short reflection hinting at the implications of his new theory for the understanding of theatre reception.

Finally, a reminder may be added that the artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which, unlike children's, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable. This is convincing proof that [...] there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind.

(Freud, 1920, p.17)

In this passage Freud comes closest to affirming that the principle of repetition-compulsion lies at the basis of the value of spectatorship. However, he does not further elaborate on this point, and instead he calls for a new system of aesthetics that would account for his new discoveries.

The link that both *mimēsis* and re-enactment have with pleasure poses the question, in the classical debate as well as in Freud, of their ethical value. Earlier I have illustrated the controversy between Plato and Aristotle: *mimēsis* can be seen as dangerous (Plato) in as far as it promotes in the audience the arousal of feelings which belong to the irrational character to the detriment of reason; but it is a precious and valuable process (Aristotle) in as far as it allows the arousal of truthful emotions and it constitutes the basis for *katharsis*. For Freud the value of re-enactment as a surrogate of a repressed emotional experience consists in putting unconscious unprocessed material at the disposal of analysis, which, if conducted properly, will lead to the proposition 'Where id was, there ego shall be', psychoanalysis being 'a work of culture' (Freud, 1933, p.80). Yet any re-enactment, being a surrogate of a true experience, is both truthful and deceitful. It is a self-deceit in as far as the

hysterical patient believes herself to be in love with her analyst or the Rat Man believes himself angry with Freud. If such re-enactments, with their compelling quality, manage to find an actualization without being subject to the analytic work, they represent dangerous distortions of the truth which lead to the replication of a past trauma. Instead, if they come to be helpfully seized as bedrock for the analytic work, they represent the golden road to the Truth.

### **Tragic *katharsis* as transference dynamic**

If we accept that the dynamic within transference between re-enactment and analysis can be a useful parallel to the dynamic between *mimēsis* and *katharsis*, I am now turning to look at how this parallel can help answer the question of what *katharsis* means – purgation or perfection? – and hence what might the effect of the theatrical experience be on the spectator's emotions.

Here it is useful to return to the other central point for the interpretation of Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis*: the specific reference to the emotions of pity and fear, which are exclusive to the definition of tragic *katharsis*. According to Aristotle, both these emotions are forms of suffering but, while fear is self-referential, pity implies suffering for someone similar enough to oneself, that one could imagine being this other person, but not so close to one's heart that fear instead would be aroused. There is a gap between fear and pity, which emphasizes the measure of one's 'distance' between the self and the representation of another as a possible self.

For the scope of my proposed interpretation of tragic *katharsis*, such a measure of distance is central to the understanding of the definition. Returning for a moment to reflect on transference, what determines its therapeutic effect is the ability to let repressed affects be aroused, and subsequently analysed. Both the arousal and the analysis are essential to the therapeutic process, as there would be no emotions available for analysis unless they were first aroused and experienced, but most importantly the arousal not followed by analysis would be anti-therapeutic. The transference re-enactment is therefore a double-edged sword: dangerous trigger to the repetition of traumatic experiences or unique

opportunity for the overcoming of compelling dynamics, which, lifted from the recesses of the unconscious, can be subject to reflection and understanding. It is the analysis of transference which puts the unconscious dynamic under the scrutiny of reason. Such scrutiny is based on the ability of the analyst to maintain a distancing and observing posture towards the re-enactment: interested in it enough but able to see it for what it is, a surrogate of truth. By interpreting the re-enacted emotion as alive in the present, but its meaning belonging to the patient's past, the analyst achieves a regulation of distance between the patient today and his previously repressed emotion(s), allowing a 'working through' from the unconscious to the conscious.

Similarly, *mimēsis* is the dramatic enactment which facilitates the spectator's emotional participation in the tragic events in full identification with the character(s), as if he was imagining himself personally involved in the tragic actions. At the same time, suggests Aristotle, tragedy also promotes a distancing effect between the spectator and the emotions of the tragic hero, as if his involvement in the painful experience is of a sympathetic witness. *Katharsis* is hence neither an immersive emotional identification with the hero which results in a release of tension, a sort of purgation of the emotions, nor a detached or rational re-elaboration of the meaning of emotions from an observing perspective; I argue that it is the fruitful dynamic between close emotional identification and sympathetic detachment which represents the quintessential meaning of tragic *katharsis*.

In conclusion, what in psychoanalysis is the dynamic between a compelling re-experiencing of powerful unconscious emotions, and the reflective distancing facilitated by the analyst, suggests a new interpretation of Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis*: that one fundamental process in theatre reception may be a form of self-analysis in which the spectator, having identified closely with the character's emotional dynamics, is led to take a meta-position with reference to himself, a look of sympathy which allows him to become aware of his repressed emotions through the representation of a character as a possible self. Reason can thus talk to feeling, in a relationship of mutual psychic growth, which overtakes the split between compulsive irrationality and a detached and

repressive rationality. According to this interpretation of Aristotle's theory, through transference, spectatorship can be an opportunity for psychic integration which favours the processing of unconscious emotions, and thus it may leave us unsurprised why Aristotle gave tragedy such a pre-eminence above all poetic arts.

## CHAPTER 3 – THE ART OF THE ACTOR IN DIDEROT’S *PARADOXE* AND ITS EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY REFERENCES

### INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I focussed on the analysis of the spectator’s theatrical experience with particular reference to Aristotle’s definition of tragic *katharsis*, departing from the proposition that tragedy through *mimēsis* effects the *katharsis* of fear and pity. I applied the psychoanalytic concept of transference to develop a more articulated understanding of *katharsis* and, by extension, of spectatorship. Interpreting *katharsis* as transference dynamic, I have illustrated its significance as an unconscious process during which the spectator shifts between the re-enactment of an emotional identification with the character(s) and a reflective stance which allows distancing from the re-enactment and generates new learning about his own unconscious.

In psychoanalysis the transference dynamic happens between the patient and the analyst, and the analyst’s response to the patient is the crux of the resolution of the re-enactment into an increased ability for self-reflection. Only when the analyst can maintain the patient’s unconscious identification within the psychic sphere and render it meaningful through an interpretation, the submission of the patient to the compulsion to repeat will have an opportunity to be worked through into self-reflection and psychic development.

When Brecht took issue against *katharsis* he interpreted this as a subjugation of the spectator into passive emotional identification with the character and disavowal of his critical distance. He also suggested that it is the actor and her own identification with the character that are the means through which the spectator’s hypnotic submission to the theatrical illusion is effected. Brecht typifies the essence of spectatorship as ‘a mirroring relation between actor and spectator’ (von Held, 2011, p.43) suggesting a tight correspondence between conscious and unconscious acting techniques and their conscious or unconscious (hypnotic, in Brecht’s terms) effects on the audience.

In this and the next two chapters, I intend to give in depth consideration to the actor's art and her approach to interpretation, in order to shed light on her function as the mediator of the transference dynamic within the spectator. For this purpose I will focus on eighteenth-century theories of acting, and in particular Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1994, pp.31-120) and those works which represent a direct or indirect reference to it. I will describe these theories within their historical context and their cross-referencing. In the next chapter I will formulate and analyse 'the paradox of the actor' in the context of the eighteenth-century cultural and philosophical context. In Chapter 5, I will use a psychoanalytic perspective to resolve the paradox of the actor and will argue that the art of the actor can be understood to correspond to the unconscious process of alpha-function.

### **The eighteenth century, an age of reflections about acting**

Although theories of acting can be found across all times, the eighteenth century is of particular interest because, for the first time in history, the actor becomes a privileged object of enquiry, as opposed to the preceding standpoint which considered acting to fall within the sphere of rhetoric (Mazzocut-Mis, 2010). Rhetorical theory, originated in Classical texts of Ancient Greece and Rome, stipulated that both the composition and declamation of a poetic or dramatic text required an emotional participation on the part of the author in its composition as well as of the orator or actor in its rendition (Vicentini, 2000, pp.5-6). This is paradigmatically exemplified by Aristotle's proposition, already discussed in Chapter 1, that a tragic poet creates more effective work when he experiences in himself the emotions that he intends to portray. Talking about the composition of tragedy, Aristotle writes (1455a22-34):

So far as possible, the poet should even include gestures in the process of composition: for, assuming the same natural talent, the most convincing effect comes from those who actually put themselves in the emotions; and the truest impression of distress or anger is given by the person who experiences these feelings.

(Poetics, trans. Halliwell, 1987)

Horace's famous passage in the *Ars Poetica*: '*Si vis me flere, dolendum est primum ipsi tibi*' (102-103)<sup>14</sup> is a common quotation in eighteenth-century treatises on the art of the actor, representing the relic of one of the mainstays of rhetoric.

Within the boundaries of rhetorical theory, the emotional participation of the author and actor/orator to the emotions of the characters is necessarily subservient to the actor's final expressive aim of reaching the spectator so that he will also feel the emotions displayed (Vicentini, 2011). While the tenet of a spectator who shall feel the characters' emotions is hardly challenged in the eighteenth century, it is the principle of an actor who feels which is for the first time put into question. In fact the eighteenth century will forever undermine the belief in the doctrine exemplified by Horace's quote and will represent both the cradle of a controversy and the springboard for a future contention. The text that best testifies to this transitional state is the famous *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (hereafter cited as *Paradoxe*).

The *Paradoxe* by Denis Diderot was published posthumously in 1830. The nearly 50 years which elapsed between the death of its author and the first edition, symbolize the bridging nature of this work, which projects itself into the future to become a seminal work for nineteenth- and twentieth-century actors and theatre scholars (Vicentini, 2000), but through its author's contemporary references, also roots itself in the theories which developed in the decades preceding its composition, representing the climax of a debate which travels across the eighteenth century and across Europe.

Famously, the *Paradoxe* proposes a theory on the art of the actor which demands that a good actor should not feel the emotions of the character he portrays: 'C'est l'extrême sensibilité qui fait les acteurs médiocres; c'est la sensibilité médiocre qui fait la multitude des mauvais acteurs; et c'est la manque absolu de sensibilité qui prépare les acteurs sublimes' (Diderot, 1994, p.46). Diderot calls as the privileged testimonies of his assertion the essay *L'art*

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<sup>14</sup> 'If you would have me weep, you must first feel grief yourself' (Horace, trans. Fairclough, 1970, p.459).

*du théâtre*, by François Riccoboni (1750), and the acting practices of David Garrick and Mademoiselle Clairon. On the other hand, he calls into question the validity of those theories or practices which he sees as privileging sensibility, such as the acting practices of Mademoiselle Dumesnil and Madame Riccoboni, and the theories of *Le Comédien* by Rémond de Sainte-Albine (1749) and, above all, of *Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois* (Sticotti, 1770), the very book which Diderot takes issue with in the *Paradoxe*.

In his references to the eighteenth-century debate on the art of the actor, Diderot sharply categorizes contributors as belonging to two strictly opposed camps: those like him who champion judgement and lack of sensibility as the basis of great acting, and those who, foolishly, plead the cause of sensibility. This neat contrast, which was later defined by William Archer, in his study on the psychology of acting, as the dispute between the emotionalist and anti-emotionalist positions (Archer, 1888), may well serve the purpose of making Diderot's argument clear and strong. However, as I hope to show, this antithesis does not do any justice to the complexity of the theories of the so-called emotionalist camp; rather, it is more truthfully the reflection of an opposition between Diderot's own views in the *Paradoxe* and his earlier views on acting.

Diderot had first touched on some critical ideas of the theatre in his 1748 novel *Les bijoux indiscrets* (1968), but it is in 1757, with the publication of his first play, *Le Fils naturel* (1939, pp.3-84), accompanied by a long commentary, the *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* (1939, pp.85-168) that Diderot's pursuit as a theorist of the theatre thrived. These beginnings testify to a desire for reforming the theatre along the lines of 'nature' and 'simplicity', very much within the eighteenth-century mainstream movements of other dramatists and reformers in France and Europe at large, including Goldoni in Italy. For the rest of his career Diderot takes an interest in theatrical matters, both as a dramatist and as a theorist, writing, eclectic as he is, on topics such as dramaturgy, directing and acting. As far as concerns acting, his views will change so drastically that he will eventually take a stance contrary to that of his former assertions. In 1757, in the *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* Diderot had claimed: 'Les poètes, les acteurs, les musiciens, les peintres, les chanteurs de premier ordre, les grands danseurs,



les amants tendres, les vrais dévots, toute cette troupe enthousiaste et passionnée sent vivement, et réfléchit peu' (Diderot, 1939, p.108). About twenty years later, in the *Paradoxe*, he took the exact opposite view: 'Les grands poètes, les grands acteurs, et peut-être en général tous les grands imitateurs de la nature [...] doués d'une belle imagination, d'un grand jugement, d'un tact fin, d'un goût très sûr, sont les êtres les moins sensibles' (Diderot, 1994, p.43).

I intend to explore Diderot's own paradoxical shift in his theory of the actor's art by placing it within the landscape of the wider contemporary debate, in particular by tracing the story of those eighteenth-century works which have a direct or indirect link with Diderot's.

#### **FROM SAINTE-ALBINE, THROUGH JOHN HILL, TO STICOTTI- GENETIC AND TRANS-EUROPEAN LINKS**

The stupefying argument of the *Paradoxe* had first been occasioned by the publication in 1769 of a treatise on the art of the actor called *Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois* by Michel Sticotti (1770- hereafter cited as *Garrick*). This is the book that inspired Diderot's invective, the book that he, as the *premier interlocuteur* of the *Paradoxe*, declares he takes issue with, when he says to the other speaker at the very beginning of the dialogue: 'C'est l'ouvrage de votre ami' (Diderot, 1994, p.33).

In a later passage of the *Paradoxe*, Diderot presents another reference to a contemporary debate on the art of the actor: 'la question que j'approfondis a été autrefois entamée entre un médiocre littérateur, Rémond de Sainte-Albine, et un grand comédien, Riccoboni (Diderot, 1994, p.101). Here Diderot refers respectively to two treatises on the art of the actor, *Le Comédien* by Rémond de Sainte-Albine, first published in 1747, and *L'art du théâtre* by François Riccoboni, published in 1750. François Riccoboni's book is called upon to testify of the correctness of his theory, while *Le Comédien* is confined to representing the fallacious argument that he sets out to refute.

In the *Paradoxe*, Diderot persistently refers to the eighteenth-century debate on the art of the actor as the opposition between those, like himself, who champion judgement, power of observation and lack of sensibility and those who support sensibility, by which, he says, they mean instinct, lack of understanding and lack of judgment. Diderot's binary divide, despite being mistaken, is helpful in that it establishes an affinity between *Le Comédien* and the *Garrick*, although the depth and details of such affinity were most likely unknown to Diderot himself as well as to other protagonists of the time. As first reconstructed by William Archer (1888), and further clarified by recent scholarly research (Valentino, 2011), these two treatises are joined by a direct genetic link which points to the cross-referential, if not always coherent, nature of the debate. Leaving the *Paradoxe* aside and following the trails of this link provides an amazing picture of the travelling through time and space of ideas on the art of the actor in the eighteenth century.

Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, a French journalist and author of a few plays, first published *Le Comédien* in 1747<sup>15</sup>, but the book saw a second, augmented, and definitive edition in 1749. As Sainte-Albine (1749) affirms in the forward to his second edition, his book had some success; perhaps, he claims, because he has been the first to try and set the language and the theory of the actor's art. As we shall see, his claim of primacy is, innocently or not, untrue. Nevertheless *Le Comédien* remains a cornerstone of the eighteenth-century debate on acting.

Continuing to remain a success, the second edition of the treatise was the subject, as early as 1750, of a translation and adaptation into English in a book called *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing. Interspersed with Theatrical Anecdotes, Critical Remarks on Plays, and Occasional Observations on Audiences*<sup>16</sup>. This work in turn also saw three possible new editions (Valentino, 2011) of which the first two are no longer extant and the last one was dated

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<sup>15</sup> M. Rémond de Sainte-Albine, 1747, *Le Comédien. Ouvrage Divisé en Deux Parties*. Paris: Desaint & Saillant.

<sup>16</sup> John Hill, 1750, *The Actor: a Treatise on the Art of Playing. Interspersed with Theatrical Anecdotes, Critical Remarks on Plays, and Occasional Observations on Audiences*. London: R. Griffiths.

1755 (Hill, 1755). All editions were published anonymously, which has generated some debate about their authorship and whether the various editions should be attributed to the same hand. Recent scholarship however has tended to settle on John Hill, an amateur actor, literary critic and botanist, as their identified and common author (Valentino, 2011). Analysis of the two surviving versions has shown a salient feature: that the 1755 edition differs substantially from the original. While the 1750 edition was an almost faithful translation of the French treatise, the 1755 one presents a number of novelties. The title itself, *The Actor: or a Treatise on the Art of Playing. A New Work, Written by the author of the former, and Adapted to the Present State of the Theatres* (Hill, 1755 – hereafter cited as *The Actor*), announces it as a new work. In fact, the organisation of the material loses the structure of divisions and chapters, as inherited by *Le Comédien*, and takes an original turn. Furthermore, there is the notable addition of a great profusion of illustrative examples taken from the English contemporary acting practice, as announced in the subtitle: *Containing Impartial Observations on the Performance, Manner, Perfections, and Defects of Mr. Garrick, Mr. Barry, Mr. Woodward, Mr. Foot, Mr. Havard, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Ryan, Mr. Berry, &c. Mrs. Cibber, Mrs. Pritchard, Miss Nossiter, Mrs. Gregory, Mrs. Woffington, Mrs. Clive, Mrs. Green, Miss Bellamy, &c. In their several Capital Parts*. Finally, there are some differences in the content of the theories exposed, whose implications I will discuss below.

The last passage of the genetic link is the loose translation of the latest edition of *The Actor* (Hill, 1755) into a French treatise entitled *Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois* (Sticotti, 1770 - hereafter cited as *Garrick*), which keeps to the structure and content of the source text, preserving the examples taken from the English stage. The main deviation from John Hill's book, besides the restyling of some of the passages, is the addition of notes which contain the translator's comments, as well as examples of acting practice taken from the contemporary French stage, mostly the *Comédie Française*. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the author of the *Garrick*, erroneously reputed to be Antonio Fabio Sticotti, is the actor Michel (Kelly) Sticotti (Meldolesi, 1969), Antonio's brother in fact. Michel and Antonio Sticotti are of Italian origins, born in France into a family of actors of the *Comédie Italienne*. Their parents had moved to France in 1716 following

a newly formed troupe which was being set up by the actor-manager Luigi Riccoboni. While Antonio pursued his career as actor and playwright within the walls of the *Comédie Italienne* and in close collaboration and competition with François Riccoboni, Michel failed his debut with the company in 1739 and went to perform first into the provinces and then abroad, including a short stay in London in 1749. Because Antonio was much better known in France, Michel's literary works, including his various theoretical works on the theatre, were attributed to his brother, before the mistake was rectified (Meldolesi, 1969)<sup>17</sup>.

It is thought extremely likely (Archer, 1888) that Michel Sticotti was unaware of the fact that the English source of his translation was itself an adaptation of a French treatise. At the same time, it is possible that he may have read *Le Comédien* without realizing its connection with *The Actor*. He certainly knew François Riccoboni's *L'Art du Théâtre* (Riccoboni F., 1750), and the writings of Luigi Riccoboni, as proved by one of the notes from his book (Sticotti, 1770, pp. 148-149, note 'n'). It has been suggested that he may have been strongly influenced by Luigi Riccoboni's theories on the theatre (Meldolesi, 1969).

The journey of evolution of the treatise *Le Comédien* across these five versions and adaptations by three different authors of three different cultural heritages lets us catch a glimpse of a web of links of extraordinary intricacy, which must be further discussed with reference to the Riccoboni family and to some other pivotal theatre figures which directly or indirectly participate in the debate of which the *Paradoxe* is the climax. Before plunging further into the historical background, I will describe the main concepts exposed in *Le Comédien*, *The Actor* and the *Garrick*.

For what concerns *Le Comédien*, I will refer exclusively to the second edition of 1749, which has four additional chapters as compared to the first one and presents a few corrections that the author accepted following the comments on

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Sticotti is also the author of other theoretical works, wrongly attributed to his elder brother Antonio Fabio, including: *Avis d'un comédien à sa fille*; *Epître à Monsieur Diderot sur la défense de continuer le Dictionnaire encyclopédique*; *Le sauvage en contradiction* (an invective against Rousseau); *Dictionnaire des passions, des vertues et des vices ou recueil des meilleurs Morceaux de morale pratique tirés des auteurs anciens & modernes, étrangers & nationaux* (Meldolesi, 1969).

his first edition of 1747. With respect to *The Actor*, I will refer to the 1755 edition, given that the 1750 edition is merely a translation of *Le Comédien*.

### ***Le Comédien***

Sainte-Albine introduces his book as the first attempt to fix the language and theory of the art of the actor, whose terminology and principles, he claims, have been so little developed. Later in the chapter, I will discuss the contributions to the subject by Luigi Riccoboni, Italian actor-manager of the *Comédie Italienne* and author of theoretical works on acting which precede *Le Comédien* by about two decades. As I will show, Sainte-Albine is probably malicious in proclaiming his work to be the first in its kind and therefore dismissing any knowledge of Luigi Riccoboni's contributions on the same topic. However his treatise contains an element of novelty in respect to Luigi Riccoboni's theoretical works, especially for its aiming at a comprehensive and systematic handling of the subject.

In his '*Avertissement de l'auteur*' prefaced to the second edition of *Le Comédien*, Sainte-Albine touches on the very question that constitutes the kernel of the debate about the art of the actor in the eighteenth century and far beyond: the relationship between sensibility and judgement, instinct and intelligence. In the first edition of *Le Comédien* of 1747, he had maintained that the actor needs to possess much '*esprit*' (translatable as 'reason, judgement or intelligence', as will become evident in the forthcoming discussion), to which critics had raised the objection that '*instinct et sentiment*' had been the recognized principal attributes of some good contemporary actresses. In the second edition, he responds to this point of contention by an intriguing remark: that in extremely sensitive souls '*le sentiment devient quelquefois esprit*' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.2). Sainte-Albine's observation may seem an attempt to pacify his critics, whose opinion reflects common contemporary assumptions about the subject, without renouncing his belief that the use of intelligence is fundamental to the actor's art. As I will show in the next chapter, it also points to a contemporary philosophical debate and the notion of a primacy of the senses over reason. Besides, it also gives us a first glimpse of how misled is the

*Paradoxe*'s contention that certain theorists such as Sainte-Albine have placed sensibility at the centre of the actor's art at the full expense of intelligence. There will be many other opportunities to bring evidence of Diderot's mistake.

The matter under study is recognized by Sainte-Albine as consisting of an array of truths which sometimes appear to contradict each other:

Pour répandre quelque lumière dans la théorie d'un Art de goût, il faut soumettre au raisonnement et à l'analyse diverses vérités, qui semblent n'être que du ressort du sentiment : il faut en concilier plusieurs, qui présentent en apparence des contradictions : il faut en même tems distinguer des idées qui ne diffèrent que par de légères nuances, et faire apercevoir ces nuances au Lecteur le moins clairvoyant. [...] Non seulement les uns rejettent des maximes que les autres donnent pour constants, mais on n'attache pas les mêmes significations aux termes qu'on employe.

(Sainte-Albine, 1749, pp.5-7)

Diderot will briefly put this same point at the beginning of the *Paradoxe*, where he attributes the contradictory nature of ideas and opinions on the actor's art to the vagueness and lack of specificity of the language employed. As I will discuss later, he will be guilty of contributing considerably to such confusion, especially when he insists on defining sensibility on his own terms, ignoring the fairly consistent tradition from Sainte-Albine to Sticotti. In fact, as I will discuss at the end of the chapter, Diderot's rendering of sensibility needs to be understood in the context of the proliferation of meanings that the word enjoyed during the eighteenth century (Csengei, 2011).

The discussion of *esprit* and *sentiment* takes up most part of *Le Comédien*'s first section. Both these terms are considered by Sainte-Albine to be natural endowments, although they need to be fostered in order to become accomplished: 'Il faut que la Nature ébauche le Comédien. Il faut que l'Art acheve de le former' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.16). Perhaps because they are considered natural talents, one might be deceived into thinking that their employment requires no effort, hence one possible explanation of the simplistic equation between sensibility and instinct. On the other hand, Sainte-Albine's description points in the opposite direction: both *esprit* and *sentiment* concern

the actor's ability to create a character which is beyond any equation with her person.

*Esprit* corresponds to the actor's ability to think, to reflect; an ability without which, Sainte-Albine insists, a good actor cannot do. Such skill consists in the actor's capability for observing and distinguishing the details of her role, relating the quality and degree of the different emotions to the circumstances of her character (the 'given circumstances' later embedded in theatrical jargon by Stanislavski, 1980, pp.50-52). The actor's ability to feel is far from enough, 'On veut qu'il ne se passionne qu'à propos, et dans le degré qu'exigent les circonstances' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.21). In its function to guide what in modern terms we would call the interpretation of a role, *esprit* is raised to the honours of helmsman of the actor's art: 'L'esprit est donc aussi nécessaire au Comédien, que le Pilote l'est à un vaisseau. C'est l'esprit qui tient le gouvernail ; c'est lui qui dirige la manœuvre, et qui indique et calcule la route' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.26).

Sainte-Albine concedes that a long experience of the theatre may sometimes make up for a lack of intelligence, and he admits the possibility that a great actor playing by instinct may fortuitously provide a correct interpretation, but such success will be short lived and soon her lack of command over her acting will become apparent. The cliché of the lack of consistency in the performance of actors who play by instinct will continue to be cited by a string of authors leading up to the *Paradoxe*. Diderot will bring the example of Mademoiselle Dumesnil as the actress whose instinctual playing condemns her to inconsistency, with one or two sublime moments interspersed within a shallow and incoherent performance. Diderot condemns acting by instinct on the very same basis on which Sainte-Albine has condemned it, and yet he does not acknowledge their common intent at all. On the contrary, Diderot makes his point appear to contradict the likes of Sainte-Albine, and in support of his crusade against them, again revealing some of the *Paradoxe's* mistaken presumptions.

As a final attempt at clarifying the contentious point of whether *esprit* should be considered an important component of the actor's art and why it has been often dismissed, Sainte-Albine offers the explanation of the different connotations that the word carries. In certain social gatherings *esprit* may signify 'wit', but such meaning is the most misleading if applied to the type of *esprit* that he requires of the actor: not a vain and superficial display, but a deep and useful form of understanding. It is of note how Sainte-Albine is attempting to shed some light on that imprecision of language which both he and later Diderot will identify as one of the causes of the confusion surrounding this subject. In the next chapter, I will expand on the semantic domain of the key words of the debate in the context of the eighteenth-century philosophical and cultural idiom.

If the discussion of *esprit* was already advancing the argument in the direction of explaining the attributes of the actor's art, Sainte-Albine's effort with regards to *sentiment* is even more thorough. *Sentiment* is not the actor's temperamental predisposition to soft feelings and easy tears, although this may be of use to tragic actors, as much as a natural predisposition to cheerfulness is useful to comic actors. 'La signification de ce mot a beaucoup plus d'étendue, et il désigne dans les Comédiens la facilité de faire succéder dans leur ame les diverses passions, dont l'homme est susceptible' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, pp.31-32). *Esprit* and '*cœur*' (*sentiment*) of an actor need to become 'comme une cire molle' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.32), as soft as wax, to allow themselves all the modifications appropriate to the interpretation of the role according to the author's text. This is the quality that an actor cannot be in want of.

Although this exposition appears in a chapter dedicated to *sentiment*, Sainte-Albine does not draw such a sharp distinction between the function of *sentiment* as opposed to that of *esprit*. Interestingly, as the theory will get transposed in subsequent treatises, the quintessential quality of the actor's art will be eventually identified as *esprit*, or rather 'understanding' or 'judgement' (the words used in the translations and adaptations of the *Comédien*), while sensibility will be pushed in second place; yet another instance which demonstrates Diderot's misled dispute against his supposed adversaries.



Taking up a notion that he has already offered under the chapter dedicated to *esprit*, Sainte-Albine assumes that the aim of the actor is to display ‘l’espece et le degré de sentiment’ (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.38), which she achieves through her ability not only to take on the different emotions but also to move swiftly from one to the other. Such ability will be much more easily exercised, says Sainte-Albine, if the actor does not allow any distraction by her personal feelings, and a tendency not to be affected by her own pains or joys will enhance the quality of her performance. The obvious implications of this conceptualization are that the actor’s easiness with feeling the character’s emotions (the right kind and degree) is in inverse proportion with her inclination to be sentimental with regards to her own affairs. If this is Sainte-Albine’s description of an actor who performs with *sentiment*, what could be more different from Diderot’s description in the *Paradoxe* of himself (with his tendency to be moved in a very personal way by all occurrences) as the specimen of someone who champions *sentiment*?

Following the discussion of *esprit* and *sentiment*, there is another quality which Sainte-Albine identifies as essential to the actor’s art, what he calls ‘*feu*’, and which represents the actor’s power of expression. *Feu* allows the actor to express effectively those character’s emotions that she has correctly identified with *esprit* and reproduced within herself with *sentiment*, accomplishing thereby her final aim to affect the spectator’s senses and emotions. Again, the description of *feu* is accompanied by the clarification that the actor’s emotions need to correspond to the quality and degree required by the expressive demands of the characterization of her role within the intentions of the play. Expressive capabilities are this way put at the service of verisimilitude: ‘le *Feu* dans une personne de Théâtre n’est autre chose que la célérité et la vivacité, avec lesquelles toutes les parties, qui constituent l’Acteur, concourent à donner un air de vérité à son action’ (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.44). On the other hand, the random expression of emotions out of context denotes lack of *feu*, and Sainte-Albine again clarifies a terminological inconsistency: what others have erroneously identified as instances in which an actor had too much *feu* were in fact situations in which actors had arbitrarily moved away from expressing the

character's emotions and into wrongly expressing their own personal feelings, with 'déraison et maladresse' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.46).

One reason why *Le Comédien* may lend itself to be misunderstood in its effort to systematize acting theory around an emphasis on the use of intelligent insight and controlled expression of feelings, against arbitrariness, personalism and instinct, may be due to the fact that following the first exposition of the principles I have discussed, the book (in the *Livre second*) proceeds to discuss other topics that contradict the earlier remarks. For example, as a legacy of the rhetoric tradition, *Le Comédien* stands by rules of propriety ('le sentiment fin des convenances', Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.21), which will necessarily be called upon to limit the actor's expression even at the expenses of truth (Fumaroli, 1993, p.704). Even more strikingly, the emphasis on the actor's ability to reproduce any emotions at will is visibly contradicted by Sainte-Albine's subsequent requirement that actors who will play the roles of lovers be lovers in their personal life, or that tragic actors be noble (Sainte-Albine, 1749).

This internal discrepancy may be partly due to the fact that *Le Comédien's* theory of *esprit* and *sentiment* is too irksome to be accepted with its full implications, and old stereotypes on acting continue to permeate the treatise (Wasserman, 1947) next to the new ideas which are just starting to germinate. Incidentally, one of the promoters of the new conception of acting was Luigi Riccoboni and below I will discuss his connections with Sainte-Albine and other protagonists of the debate. Because *Le Comédien* sits at a junction between an ancient acting theory based on Greek and Latin rhetoric and a new paradigm dedicated to the actor's art which will be projected into the future towards the twentieth century and beyond, perhaps it is not surprising that it contains both the germs of the new and the relics of the past. In particular, its strongest link with the past remains at the level of the theory of the spectator's emotional experience, with the rhetorical tenet that the actor/orator needs to feel the emotions that she intends to raise in the spectator. It is this inalienable principle that brings Sainte-Albine to declare:

Au théâtre, lorsqu'on n'éprouve pas les mouvemens qu'on a dessein de faire paroître, on ne nous en présente qu'une imparfaite image, et l'art ne tient jamais lieu du *Sentiment*. Dès qu'un Acteur manque de cette qualité, tous les autres présens de la nature et de l'étude sont perdus pour lui.

(Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.32)

From *Le Comédien* through *The Actor* to the *Garrick* there will be an increasingly stronger emphasis on the need for *sentiment* to be regulated by *esprit*, to the point that already with *The Actor*, *sentiment* will lose its primacy in favour of *esprit*, or rather 'understanding', as it will be translated in English. But despite the acknowledgement that the actor needs to be able to manipulate her sensibility sheltered from the influence of any personal or spontaneous feelings, the not unreasonable possibility that this may equate to emotional experiences feigned by a talented and artful actor is positively rejected by Sainte-Albine and by his translators, contrary to what will be claimed by François Riccoboni and eventually by Diderot. This is obviously the true kernel of the controversy.

Sainte-Albine discusses openly the objection that certain actresses are good at feigning passions in their personal life, when they trick a lover to believe that they love him. Voicing the possible contention from the point of view of his opponents, he writes:

Vous avez établi pour principe, que sur la scene on n'exprime qu'imparfaitement une passion, si on ne l'éprouve effectivement. Mais comment nous persuaderez-vous que des Actrices, qui savent si bien feindre en particulier des sentimens qu'elles n'éprouvent point, ne puissent les feindre en public, et qu'étant si habiles à se contrefaire avec des Amans, elles soient incapables de se contrefaire avec les Spectateurs ?

(Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.39)

His answer is that in personal life a lover may have a certain vested interest in being tricked and the lover's vanity will push him to believe more easily to be the object of the actress's love. On the other hand he thinks that spectators hold it more to their interest to find out those actors who feign, as an audience wants to be tricked through the theatrical illusion but not too grossly. The spectator's vanity pushes him to disbelieve rather than to believe:

La vanité du [spectateur] lui fait craindre de ne pas voir l' [actrice] telle qu'elle est [...] Il goûte [du plaisir] à montrer qu'il n'est pas le dupe du prestige, lorsque l'artifice est trop grossier pour lui faire illusion. Il consent d'être abusé, mais il veut que son erreur ait l'air raisonnable.

(Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.40)

Here the adherence to the rhetorical principle of the correspondence between actor's and spectator's feelings opens, perhaps unwittingly, a breach into the seemingly unquestioned tenet of the audience's submission to the theatrical illusion. Although such a principle will never be questioned by the authors that I discuss here, including Diderot, the analysis of the audience's response will increasingly be granted a more complex articulation, as will be evident in the next section dedicated to *The Actor*. The revised final edition of *The Actor*, which the author qualifies as a new work, will partly address questions and ambiguities left open by *Le Comédien*.

### ***The Actor***

The treatise of *The Actor* merits special attention because of the important function it serves in the transposition of ideas on acting across the eighteenth century. Despite its first edition being merely a translation of *Le Comédien*, it had the merit of spreading these new ideas in the English language. Its reworking into a renovated treatise in the second edition (Hill, 1755) provides a further articulation of the theories on acting and constitutes the substantial link between *Le Comédien* and the *Paradoxe* (Valentino, 2011), given that the *Paradoxe*, as I explained, is a response to the *Garrick*, itself a translation into French of the second edition of *The Actor*.

In the introduction to the 1755 edition of *The Actor*, Hill makes a considerable effort in explaining the rationale for his publication, so helping to clarify some of the questions left open by *Le Comédien*. Hill takes pain to specify that the treatise is written for the benefit of both actors and spectators, differently from Sainte-Albine who had only fleetingly mentioned his target audience and identified it principally with actors. This extension of address to spectators constitutes an important innovation, because it is grounded in the acknowledgement of the tight link between the actor's performance and the

audience's response. This link had already been anticipated by Luigi Riccoboni (Riccoboni L., 1728), as I shall discuss below.

At one level, the actor affects the senses and imagination of the spectators and this is in essence the principal aim of the theatrical undertaking. This concept, rooted in classical rhetoric theories, is already found in *Le Comédien*, but Hill will discuss its implications more in depth in later chapters. There is moreover another level of analysis, of the link between actors' performance and audience's response. This time it is the effect that the audience has on the actor that comes under scrutiny, with implications which are more revolutionary for theorizing on acting. Here, the audience's judgement is considered instrumental to the advancement of the actor's art, because, as Hill points out, when the audience judges badly, bad acting is encouraged and real talent may be lost or remain underdeveloped. The rules set out in the book should hence contribute to the improvement of acting not only by instructing actors on 'how they advance towards it' but also by instructing audiences when to dispense their applause and when their censure (Hill, 1755, pp.2-3).

There are three main consequences of placing the audience's judgement in such a prominent position. First, it is the acknowledgement that although the actor puts her spell on the audience, spectators are not entirely enchanted: their faculty of judgement remains active alongside their submission to the theatrical illusion. It is as if *The Actor*, by expanding its address from actors to spectators, is also granting emphasis to the rational faculties of the spectators. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, similar considerations partake of a parallel debate on the spectator's psychological status, anticipating later concerns, including Brecht's.

Secondly, there is a question of jurisdiction. If actors should raise the objection that no one who was not herself an actor should preach about their art, on which authority should playwrights or philosophers or anyone else take part in the debate? It seems that granting themselves such authority in the role of spectators is by far the preferred defence, as I shall discuss further in the next chapter.

Thirdly, when actors are described as the recipients of the judgement of spectators, the power of spectators to push changes in the actor's performance is emphasized. It follows that between the relative contribution of innate talent and artistic endeavour to the actor's art, the emphasis now falls on the significance of the artistic effort. Hill believes that acting depends so much on acquired skills, that while natural talents are important for principal players, most actors can just do with the sole contribution of art: 'while those [the capital performers] improve and perfect themselves by art, these [the others] may form themselves entirely upon it' (Hill, 1755, p.4).

The whole of the first chapter of *The Actor* is thereby dedicated to emphasizing the need for study in the actor's art. Garrick is described as the paradigmatic example of the talented actor who cultivates with 'indefatigable assiduity' (Hill, 1755, p.5) the talents that nature has endowed him with. Garrick, celebrated in *The Actor* for his dedication to studying his art, shall also be Diderot's example of the perfection of skilful acting, another point of consonance between Diderot and his alleged adversaries which invalidates once again Diderot's contention that they supposedly praise a form of acting based on wild spontaneity.

In fact, like it was for *Le Comédien*, the emphasis on the use of intelligence leads *The Actor* to the condemnation of spontaneity and instinct: when acting 'is ungoverned and undirected we may admire a flight, or stare at some unexpected stroke, but after that we are disgusted' (Hill, 1755, p.7). This passage, which runs from Sainte-Albine, through Hill and Sticotti into Diderot nearly unaltered, here is taken to more extreme consequences with the condemnation of acting by instinct as carrying the risk of extravagance, of which nothing can be more contemptible. In a way, the mistakes of a great natural talent who acts without art are less tolerable than the mistakes of untalented actors. 'Insipidity is the general character of inferior performers; and extravagance is too much that of the superior ones' (Hill, 1755, p.8). While uneducated audiences may be unable to discern, sophisticated spectators will be offended by both these faults, and their 'censure falls almost entirely upon the superior class: they pity what the others cannot help, but they condemn in these what their judgement ought to have taught them to avoid' (Hill, 1755, p.8).

Overall this pronouncement is not too far off the *Paradoxe*'s famous aphorism: 'C'est l'extrême sensibilité qui fait les acteurs médiocres; c'est la sensibilité médiocre qui fait la multitude des mauvais acteurs; et c'est le manque absolu de sensibilité qui prépare les acteurs sublimes' (Diderot, 1994, p.46). Obviously it is the third clause which is the exclusive trademark of the *Paradoxe*, while the first two are drawn from the tradition that Diderot professes to reject.

Extravagance derives from the lack of judgment which leaves sensibility unleashed. This points to the indissoluble link between sensibility and judgement in the actor's art, as already established by *Le Comédien*. But *The Actor* brings the argument full circle back to the effect on the spectator. The extravagance of uncontrolled sensibility not only induces the spectator to advance a negative judgement on the actor, but disgusts the spectator by forcing itself upon him and leaving him with a sense of untruthfulness and displeasure (Hill, 1755, p.11). It is in fact this effect on the spectator's sensibility that is ultimately the cause of the spectator's negative judgement. In both actors and spectators, thought and feeling, judgement and sensibility, are at their best when they work in unison.

As spectators, says Hill, 'we feel, as if they were our own, the sentiments and passions represented by a good writer, and animated by a performer who has judgement and genius' (Hill, 1755, p.10). Although sensibility and judgement have both got a place in *The Actor*'s theory, judgement clearly surpasses sensibility in the second edition of the treatise: 'So great an error is it that nature alone makes the player, and so vast the advantages which even the highest talents will acquire from regulation' (Hill, 1755, p.18). With Hill, the actor's art becomes 'a science, and is to be studied as a science' (Hill, 1755, p.12). What could be more opposed to Diderot's pretension that Sticotti, faithful translator of *The Actor*, glorifies acting based on natural instinct?

After taking great pain to explain the supremacy of judgement and art over sensibility and nature in Chapter I, *The Actor* dedicates the whole of Chapter II to illustrating the importance of understanding (or judgement), with lots of examples taken from the contemporary English stage. But what is it that the

actor needs to judge or understand? Again, it is Hill who clarifies and extends insights already mentioned by Sainte-Albine. The actor is expected to understand the ideas contained in the text which she receives from the author. These ideas are not descriptions of states of mind of the characters, but rather such states of mind are what the actor needs to derive from studying the text: 'Here it is that the greatest discernment of an actor is shewn, in understanding the intent of the author; and his highest judgement in representing the temper of his mind as the other intended' (Hill, 1755, p.14).

Understanding serves the purpose of distinguishing the passions in nature and degree according to the given circumstances (Hill, 1755, p.29) but also to mark the transitions from one to the other (Hill, 1755, p.37). This skilful activity will eventually lead the actor to the portrayal of feelings which solely will ring true to the audience, an important purpose of her effort if the stage is to represent the human mind (Hill, 1755, p.20). The actor is ultimately at the service of truth and although she is at the service of the playwright's text, she also has a duty to enhance those ideas where the author has been incomplete, becoming 'in some degree an author' herself (Hill, 1755, p.31).

Retaining the parallel argument of *Le Comédien*, Hill asks whether acting by imitation may 'supply the place of understanding' (Hill, 1755, p.21) and refutes such proposition more definitely than Sainte-Albine, adding the example of Garrick as proof of an actor who is so great and so original that it would be impossible to suppose that his greatness is due to imitation. Moreover, the supposition of imitation at the basis of acting would impede any scope of advancement in the discipline, because any bad practice would be perpetuated indefinitely.

The chapter dedicated to 'understanding' already contains mention of sensibility, to which Chapter III will be dedicated. This is because, as I have pointed out before, understanding and sensibility are interconnected, and their discussion needs to proceed interwoven. As it was for understanding, the discussion of sensibility is also redundant at times, with the same ideas reiterated in various manners. Such ideas are similar to those already asserted



by *Le Comédien*, the main difference being that in *The Actor* sensibility loses the parity with understanding and is pushed in second position, becoming the next most important requisite for the actor's art (Hill, 1755, p.48).

Following the rule of the Greek orator, Hill does not question 'that whatever passion we would raise by our discourse in others, we must first feel ourselves. The disposition to receive those impressions by which our own passions are affected, is this quality of sensibility' which men and actors may possess in variable degree and it is by Hill equated to 'the strokes of nature', a representation of feelings which are universally 'perceived and acknowledged among mankind' (Hill, 1755, pp.49-50).

Hill specifies that sensibility does not depend per se on understanding, and it can manifest in actors independently of it, but within the acting theory here proposed, these instances drive to the extravagance that displeases the audience (Hill, 1755, pp.51-52). As already emphasized by Sainte-Albine, sensibility unregulated by understanding runs the risk of misleading actors into exhibiting their own personal feelings: 'these people make a mistake when they suppose this is an excellence: The passion they exhibit is their own, and not that of the character' (Hill, 1755, p.34). And as a matter of fact *The Actor* defines sensibility as a 'disposition to be affected by the passions which plays are intended to excite' (Hill, 1755, p.48). For this reason an accomplished actor should be equally able to feel and express all emotions, and to make quick transitions between different emotions. Drawing on a metaphor from *Le Comédien*, her heart 'should be as the shapeless wax pliable' and 'ready to be moulded' at her pleasure (Hill, 1755, p.59).

In keeping with *Le Comédien*, Hill specifies that sensibility should not be conceived as restricted to 'the tender and melancholy passions' (Hill, 1755, p.75), a restriction that Diderot will apply in the *Paradoxe*, erroneously interpreting the meaning of the term in his references, as I will discuss later. Moreover, if the only true sensibility is a 'ductility of mind', Hill also keeps to the request that the actor's heart be free of any passion of its own, to be ready to receive any passion that the text requires (Hill, 1755, p.61). Again, among the

many examples taken from the English stage, Garrick stands out as the actor who 'runs from one passion into another, with a consummate ease' (Hill, 1755, p.69).

Although qualities of sensibility and understanding may often be disjoint in actors, it is sensibility piloted by understanding (the helmsman according to the metaphor in *Le Comédien*) which makes great acting: 'What we should wish in the perfect player is, that he has all the sensibility [...] and yet all the command of himself necessary to regulate its emotions' (Hill, 1755, pp.53-54). What Hill classifies as the perfect player is an actor who comprises in herself the emotional expression that in the *Paradoxe* Diderot assigns to Mademoiselle Dumesnil and the rational control that he grants to Mademoiselle Clairon. The great actor 'has both in such a degree, that while the judgement regulates the sensibility, the sensibility animates, enlivens, and inspires the understanding' (Hill, 1755, p.58).

In this cohabitation and collaboration within the actor's mind, sensibility and understanding lead to a form of feeling which is peculiar:

Here is the great perfection of the science: we would have him, while he feels all this, yet command his passions, so that they do not disturb his utterance, and yet we would not have that expression he keeps for himself take away the pain of it from us; we would have his manner of pronouncing the words take all that effect upon us, which the passage has on the most sensible reader; but we would not have it take that effect on himself.

(Hill, 1755, pp.54-55)

As I shall show in the next section, this description is not at all incompatible with François Riccoboni's theory of acting, supposedly based on the absence of sensibility, and ultimately not entirely at odds with Diderot's paradox.

Importantly, however, Hill preserves Sainte-Albine's argument against the idea that an actor may well be effective in feigning emotions, as much as women can feign love for a hidden purpose:

The lover is desirous to believe the lady is fond of him, and therefore he is easily made to receive the pretence of such a fondness: but an audience are unbiased; they look with eyes of impartiality; they will not allow what does not exist.

(Hill, 1755, p.77)

Keeping to the rule of the Greek orator, Hill maintains that 'what the actor himself does not feel, he will never make the audience feel, tho' he copy ever so perfectly the best player who ever pronounced a sentence' (Hill, 1755, p.92). This is the true measure of the schism between Diderot and what he considers his opponents: if excessive and unregulated sensibility is the enemy of good acting and understanding is the first quality of an actor, it is the cooperation between understanding and sensibility which leads the actor to her 'paradox': that she may feel while being in control of her feelings. Diderot's notion of the paradox of the actor entails instead that no feeling at all must occupy the psychological stance of the great actor's mind. Such a notion, albeit not fully original as admittedly inspired by François Riccoboni's *L'Art du Théâtre*, will lead Roach (1993, p.147) to attribute to Diderot the original formulation of the concept of dual consciousness, which William Archer will pronounce to be the resolution of the paradox. As I will show in the next chapter, dual consciousness, however, has little to offer to the explanation of the actor's art.

Returning to the discussion of *The Actor*, it is perhaps unfortunate that alongside the articulated analysis of the actor's art, the new edition also maintains in later chapters those contradictory remarks found in the *Livre second* of *Le Comédien*. Hence next to the increasingly coherent theory that Hill takes the pain to construct, there is a parallel perpetuation of stereotypes that the theorists have not been able to dispense of. If I have many times questioned Diderot's originality and attempted to show his debt towards earlier theorists, he must be granted the merit of having cut the umbilical cord with those ancient relics.

### ***Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois***

Because the *Garrick* is principally a translation of the final edition of *The Actor*, mostly its content is equal to what I have expounded in the preceding section.

Here I will therefore summarize the principal points that are paramount to discuss Diderot's response to the *Garrick* and add any significant information about the notes that Sticotti appended to his translation.

In the *Avant-propos du traducteur*, Sticotti (1770, aii-j-xij) comments that the necessity of a continuous enhancement and perfection in the actor's art is hindered by the obstacles derived from the prejudices and hostility against actors, which discourages the most talented to undertake this profession. He suggests that the situation of the theatre in England is the only favourable exception, in that actors are respected and more liberally treated. Although this remark appears irrelevant to the focus of my discussion, it anticipates an important aspect of its implications that I shall discuss in Chapter 6: the link between the person of the actor, her approach to playing her character and the ultimate effect on the spectator. If morally bad actors play themselves, then how they are in private life, or even how they are perceived to be, will be relevant to the spectator's experience of the character, including questions related to the ethical value of theatre.

In keeping with the remarks found in *The Actor*, the audience is granted the ability to respond both by submitting to the emotional identification with the characters and by being a sober judge of the actor's performance; from which follows the necessity to educate the spectators' taste to make them active contributors to the enhancement of the actor's art. The actor's first quality is, in accordance with *The Actor*, identified with '*intelligence*', *sentiment* being the second most important. 'De toutes les qualités naturelles à l'acteur, une heureuse intelligence est, sans contredit, la plus nécessaire' (Sticotti, 1770, p.25). It is of note that through the passage into English, Sainte-Albine's *esprit* becomes *intelligence*, and some of the time *jugement*, the two terms seemingly used as synonyms: 'Ceux qui prétendent qu'on voit de bons Comédiens privés de jugement, n'y font point assez d'attention; ces Acteurs ont plus d'intelligence qu'ils ne disent, ou ne sont pas aussi grands Comédiens qu'ils le pensent' (Sticotti, 1770, p.31). Importantly, *intelligence* and *jugement* will be the terms used by Diderot in the *Paradoxe*, while *sentiment*, surviving the transposition

from Sainte-Albine to Sticotti, will become *sensibilité*. I will take up again this semantic question in the next chapter.

The interplay between *sentiment* and *jugement* is also expressed as the intertwining of nature and art, again following an idea already present in *The Actor*: 'l'art porté à son comble devient nature, [...] les grands Acteurs ne l'abandonnent jamais; ils élèvent sur cette base un édifice, pour ainsi dire, plus naturel quel la nature même' (Sticotti, 1770, p.10). Here the actor's art grounds itself in abiding to the principle of a theatre which reflects nature. Sticotti further underscores this point in one of his notes: it is part of the actor's creative function to amend the author's possible affectation or lack of truthfulness through a performance which is natural and simple. In short, the actor's study and art are put to the service of a performance which is devoid of artfulness, but appears instead more natural than nature itself.

In another note to the text, close to the passage which states: 'L'art du Théâtre est une science, il faut donc l'étudier comme une science' (Sticotti, 1770, p.19), Sticotti emphasizes the link between the actor's *jugement*, and her ability to discriminate and express the nuances of the passions according to the necessity of the text: 'ce qui sert à déterminer leur espèce, est ce qu'on appelle génie dans le grand Auteur, et jugement dans l'habile Comédien' (Sticotti, 1770, p.20, note 'q'). Sensibility directed by judgement is the guiding principle of the actor to express all passions, in all circumstances and according to their infinite variety.

On voit des Acteurs pleurer lorsqu'il faut se mettre en colère. Il ne s'agit pas de chercher ici combien ils ont de sensibilité, mais comment ils doivent la gouverner. [...] On se trompe fort d'imaginer que ces pleurs si faciles sont une beauté; la passion larmoyante est souvent celle du Comédien, non pas celle du personnage.

(Sticotti, 1770, pp.44-45)

As I will discuss below, Diderot's own interpretation of sensibility is very much akin to what Sticotti here calls 'la passion larmoyante' and hence his objection to sensibility is based on a very different premise to that of the authors he argues against.

However, it is important to emphasize that as it was for Hill, and perhaps even more so, Sticotti could never conceive acting as deprived of *sentiment*. In one of his notes, in which he reinforces *The Actor's* principle that acting could never be based on imitation, he declares: 'Dans un art de sentiment on ne peut intéresser que par les propres mouvements de son cœur' (Sticotti, 1770, p.30, note 'c'). Even if faithfully keeping its source as a translator, Sticotti seems to feel the need, in his comment to the text, to rebalance the primacy between *jugement* and *sentiment*. In another note he states:

Un Acteur, quelque préparé qu'il soit, entre, pour ainsi dire, sur la scène à l'impromptu: ses talens dépendent des dispositions momentanées de son âme et de ses organes. Un rôle est composé à loisir; l'Acteur le plus consommé ne peut répondre, en se présentant au public, des moindres traits qu'il va rendre.

(Sticotti, 1770, p.40, note 'g')

His heritage of actor of the *Commedia dell'Arte* tradition weighs on his temptation to doubt the supposedly absolute influence of judgement on the actor's art, perhaps providing Diderot with a pretext for his critique that he would not have found in *The Actor*.

In a further note, Sticotti discusses the question of whether sensibility is important or detrimental to the actor in reference to the difference of opinion between Luigi Riccoboni and his son François. In doing so, he may well have pointed Diderot in the direction of François's book; he is also giving us proof of his own knowledge of the theories of the two Riccoboni's, with whom he was, as we know, closely acquainted. In considering their divergence of views, he tends to agree with Luigi:

Deux Comédiens célèbres, qui ont écrit en grands Maîtres de l'art du Théâtre, sont de sentiments contraires sur un point assez important: il s'agit du don de verser des larmes. Mr R.L. [Luigi Riccoboni] convient qu'elles mettent le comble à l'imitation parfaite, et Mr R.F. [François Riccoboni], croit qu'elles doivent la détruire, ou du moins la rendre très désagréable. Selon lui, *s'il tombe une seule larme de vos yeux, des sanglots involontaires vous embarrasseront le gosier, il vous sera impossible de proférer un seul mot sans des hoquets ridicules*. Cette observation fine, et généralement vraie pour la plupart des Comédiens,

paroit moins forte pour le grand Acteur, qui sait, dans le désordre même de ses sens, diriger ses organes sans sortir de la nature, ou la masquer. On sentira combien la chose est possible, si l'on se rappelle qu'on voit souvent des personnes dans le plus grand désespoir, se plaindre à demi-voix par égard pour quelqu'un, sans en être moins affligées: ce grand effort que l'on fait sur soi-même dans l'exacte réalité, prouve que l'Acteur peut donc aussi, sans cesser d'être fortement affecté, conduire sa voix dans tous les tons de la belle nature, même en répandant des larmes.

(Sticotti, 1770, pp.148-149, note 'n')

Sticotti's referencing demonstrates once more what a scholar has rightly called Diderot's 'considerably reductive reading of Sticotti' (Vicentini, 2012, p.19) and anticipates the question discussed by the *Paradoxe*. It also reveals Luigi Riccoboni as a pivotal figure in the debate on the actor's art, although Diderot was most likely unaware of this. In the next section I will turn to the theories of the Riccoboni and I will endeavour to show Luigi Riccoboni's great relevance to the debate and how his contributions link, directly or indirectly, to its other protagonists, including his son François.

#### **THE RICCOBONI, LUIGI AND FRANÇOIS, FATHER AND SON**

The *Paradoxe* identifies one of the closest allies of the anti-emotionalist cause in an actor called Riccoboni: 'la question que j'approfondis a été autrefois entamée entre un médiocre littérateur, Rémond de Sainte-Albine, et un grand comédien, Riccoboni. Le littérateur plaidait la cause de la sensibilité, le comédien plaidait la mienne' (Diderot, 1994, p.101). The Riccoboni here alluded to is François, actor and playwright at the *Comédie Italienne*, and author of a treatise on the art of the actor, *L'Art du Théâtre* (Riccoboni F., 1750), where he exposes the theory referred to by Diderot in the *Paradoxe*. Most significantly for this historical reconstruction, François is Luigi Riccoboni's son, and it is possible that in calling him 'un grand comédien', Diderot may have mistaken father for son (Archer, 1888, p.14). Actor within a family tradition of *Commedia dell'Arte*, manager, translator, playwright, Luigi Riccoboni is also one of the most prolific theorists of the eighteenth century to have written on the history of the theatre and on the art of the actor.

Both Luigi and François dedicated most of their lives to the theatre. Son of the *Pantalone* of the Duke of Modena's troupe, Luigi was an actor since his teenage years and became actor-manager at the early age of 22 (Courville, 1943, p.38). In the *Commedia dell'Arte* scenarios he played the stock character of the lover Lelio; however he also took on many principal roles in other dramas, such as tragedies, tragicomedies and authored comedies. He toured extensively across northern Italy with his *Commedia dell'Arte* troupe, attempting a reform of both tragedy and comedy in collaboration with Italian prominent men of letters. Maffei wrote his famous *Merope*, later emulated by Voltaire, for Riccoboni's troupe and specifically under the exhortation of the actor-manager who was endeavouring to resurrect Italian tragedy to what he conceived to be its former splendours of the Renaissance (Courville, 1943). Riccoboni's efforts were crowned by success until 1715, when his attempt to duplicate his accomplishments with tragedy in the sphere of scripted comedy failed miserably: the opening in Venice of *La Scolastica*, a Renaissance comedy by Ludovico Ariosto, ended in ridicule as the audience hissed the performance. Venice would have to wait another thirty years or so to give birth to the renovated Italian comedy: Riccoboni's dream would finally come true with the reformation by Carlo Goldoni, Riccoboni's spiritual heir (Cappelletti, 1986).

Perhaps partly motivated by the humiliation and demoralisation of this defeat, Riccoboni looked with renovated enthusiasm at the opportunity which in 1716 came from Philippe d'Orléans, Regent of France for Louis XV, who called on him to organize a troupe which would re-establish the Italian Theatre in Paris. The old *Comédie Italienne* had been shut down by Louis XIV in 1697, with the shameful expulsion of all its actors, following the announcement of a performance which was understood to be intended as a satyr of the King's wife (Courville, 1943, p.271). Louis XIV now dead, Paris and the court were ready for a re-opening.

Incidentally, it was in forming his new troupe in Italy before leaving for France that Luigi Riccoboni recruited Michel Sticotti's parents-to-be. They will remain at the *Comédie Italienne* for the rest of their careers and their sons, Antonio and Michel, will also see their acting debut there, although for Michel, as I described



previously, it will be a brief experience, a prelude to a career mostly outside of France.

Born in 1707, Luigi's only son François was nine years old when his family moved to France, country of adoption where he established himself for good. He made his debut at the *Comédie Italienne* in 1726, just two years before his father's retirement from the stage, and continued to work there for the next forty years, in the capacity of actor and playwright, making for himself an overall different career from that of his father. Despite his eclecticism, Luigi had kept his chief endeavours within the *Commedia dell'Arte* tradition, often performing the stock character Lelio and writing or adapting many *Commedia* scenarios. François also authored around thirty plays, but comedies were a minority, while he wrote or co-wrote many parodies, divertissements and ballets (Courville, 1945, p.275). Following the evolution of the repertoire of the *Comédie Italienne*, François chiefly performed in these new forms of drama, including as a ballet dancer, but he never got as far as gaining the reputation of the great actor. He was married to Marie-Jeanne de Laboras, actress and later a popular novelist, the same Madame Riccoboni with whom Diderot will exchange correspondence on matters of acting in his famous *Lettre à Madame Riccoboni* (Diderot, 1994, pp.121-143). Despite their correspondence, Diderot will mistake the lady's identity: he will believe her to be a Riccoboni by birth and will call her supposed father 'an acteur aimé' (Courville, 1958, p.43, footnote 63), hence proving to have an incorrect knowledge of the Riccoboni family, which may substantiate the hypothesis that he may have believed the same 'acteur aimé', surely Luigi, to be the author of the essay *L'Art du Théâtre*.

Luigi Riccoboni was actor-manager and lead actor of the *Comédie Italienne* from 1716 to 1728, year of his retirement from the stage. During these years, despite remaining within the tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, he continued his attempt at reformation, both in the direction of the repertoire as well as in the refinement of the acting style. In Italy, Riccoboni's troupe had succeeded in making modern and contemporary Italian tragedy triumph on the stage, but his wish to play tragedies was greatly limited in Paris by the public expectations about the Italian Theatre (Courville, 1945). He hence concentrated on

comedies, and within his adaptations of the repertoire mostly drawn from the scenarios of *Commedia dell'Arte*, he sought to emphasize the moral lesson, anticipating some of the features of the *drame bourgeois*. As his biographer, Xavier de Courville, points out:

Et voici, sans attendre Diderot, plus d'un drame bourgeois. Les scrupules de Léo le portaient instinctivement de ce côté : il sait, avant l'heure de la comédie larmoyante, doubler le titre de ses pièces d'un sous-titre qui en dit la moralité : il dit *Arlequin courtisan ou l'Ambition punie*.

(Courville, 1945, p.76)

One intriguing example of this attempted renovation of dramaturgy is the comedy *La Force de l'Amitié* [*La Forza dell'Amicitia*], performed by the *Comédie Italienne* on 6th February 1717 (Dict. Th. t. II pp.614-619<sup>18</sup>, cited in Courville, 1945, p.76, footnote 5). Riccoboni claimed the paternity of this scenario, which he intended to publish in a collection as an exemplar of the reformed *Commedia* (Riccoboni L., 1973). It is also the scenario on which Goldoni based *Il vero amico* (Goldoni, 1939), the comedy which Diderot was accused of plagiarising in his *Le Fils naturel* (Olsen, 2011). Although it is not known whether Diderot may have been aware of this scenario, which was played for a second time by the *Comédie Italienne* on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1748 (Dict. Th. t. VII p.530<sup>19</sup>, cited in Courville, 1945, p.77 footnote 3), the existence of such a curious point of reference between Riccoboni's and Diderot's dramaturgical reforms is indeed suggestive of a renovation of the theatre which was taking place at the crossroads between traditions of different cultural and national heritages.

Riccoboni will be among the first ones to greet with enthusiasm the thriving of a new dramatic genre, half way between comedy and tragedy, and to ascribe to Nivelle de La Chaussée as early as 1738 the merit of having created a good model for it (Riccoboni L., 1740, p.117). Nivelle de La Chaussée's invention, subsequently called *comédie larmoyante*, will also be cited in the *Garrick* (Sticotti, 1770, p.64, note 'z'), and considered the model of Diderot's *drame bourgeois* (Wilson, 1972).

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<sup>18</sup> *Dictionnaire des théâtres de Paris. Tome second*, 1756. Paris: chez Lambert.

<sup>19</sup> *Dictionnaire des théâtres de Paris. Tome septième*, 1756. Paris: chez Lambert.

Another curious dramaturgical event in the history of the *Comédie Italienne*, which happened in 1716, links Riccoboni to Rémond de Sainte-Albine, who was then a young intellectual participating in the fashionable literary circles which saw the birth of the first collaborations between the Italian theatre and French playwrights. The string of successes of the Italian troupe had spurred cynics and enemies to doubt the supposed improvised nature of the actors' performances. On the occasion of a particularly successful play, Sainte-Albine suggested challenging the Italian troupe to stage a scenario newly written for them and he composed the French scenario *Lélio Vainqueur des Epreuves de la Constance*, which was successfully performed by the troupe in Italian without previous rehearsals (Courville, 1945, pp.115-117).

This episode is an important proof of Sainte-Albine's acquaintance with the *Comédie Italienne* and with Luigi Riccoboni. Moreover, it bridges the question of dramaturgy with that of the art of the actor. As the renovation of dramaturgy and the experimentation with questions on acting were interlinked in Diderot's project, so they were in Riccoboni's. He wrote:

Mais lorsqu'un Auteur est parvenu à bien peindre la nature et que les Acteurs récitent la Piece dans son véritable ton, en sorte que l'esprit séduit agréablement, prenne la fiction pour la vérité même: alors on est obligé de convenir qu'une représentation Théâtrale est un amusement supérieur à tout autre Spectacle public tel qu'il puisse être, parce qu'en satisfaisant les yeux, il intéresse le cœur et l'esprit.

(Riccoboni L. 1767, p.323)

The staging of comedies which portrayed more realistic situations with a moral intent, by consequence, implied a naturalistic acting style which kept its distance from the farcical tone of the former Italian theatre in Paris. At the same time, given that the reformation was springing from actors who were masters of extempore performance, their acting was also very different from the renowned declamatory style typical of many tragic actors of the *Comédie Française*.

In January 1717 the *Nouveau Mercure's* magazine wrote about the Italian troupe:

On ne peut rien désirer en eux du côté de l'action, du naturel, de la présence d'esprit ; ils sont au qui va là toujours à propos ; ils ont l'art d'animer, de passionner tellement ce qu'ils jouent, qu'ils se rendent maîtres du sentiment, et saisissent l'attention malgré le voile des paroles, et renvoient les auditeurs presque aussi contents que s'ils sortaient d'une comédie française où l'on a tout compris.

(*Nouveau Mercure*, janvier 1717, cited in Courville, 1945, p.46)

Luigi Riccoboni in particular would acquire fame as a great actor, reputed to be 'un des plus grands savants et des plus grands comédiens de l'Europe' (*Mercure*, juin 1716, p.22, cited in Courville, 1945, p.46). After his retirement from the stage, in 1728, Riccoboni would begin to put his forty years of experience as actor on paper, writing several theoretical works on the theatre, making him a central protagonist of the eighteenth-century debate on the art of the actor and the renovation of the theatre, linked directly or indirectly with many of the other theorists.

Why has he then remained relatively overshadowed? Although there may be many reasons for it, it is likely that the intense rivalry between the Italian and the French theatres in Paris, which was continuous during the first half of the eighteenth century, will have contributed to the temptation to downplay or ignore his contribution. The antagonism had deep roots and the *Comédie Italienne* had its detractors, among which the prominent voice of Voltaire, whose tragedies had seen many parodies on the Italian stage. Whereas Voltaire consistently took a position of disdain towards the Italian theatre, which he 'n'eut pas de peine à imposer, dans l'histoire officielle de la littérature' (Courville, 1945, p.158), there were also those who declared the *Comédie Française* defeated. As early as 1716, the *Mercure's* magazine, a loyal supporter of the Italian troupe, wrote: 'La Comédie Française languit à la vérité bien fort; d'autres disent qu'elle est à l'agonie; d'autres ajoutent qu'elle expire; d'autres enfin font courir le bruit qu'elle n'est plus' (*Mercure*, juillet 1716, p.28, cited in Courville, 1945, p.48).

In years to come, the favours of the King would have to be contended for between the two companies, with the Italian troupe being invited to take a leading position in the celebrations for the coronation of Louis XV in 1722 and

being granted the privilege of regular residential performances for the Court at Fontainebleau, between 1724 and 1726. Luigi Riccoboni, his wife, and son, were conferred the honour of French naturalization in 1723 (Courville, 1945, pp.231-240). If many fruitful crosspollinations exist between the European traditions and especially between the French and Italian ones, it has to be acknowledged that they were somewhat obscured by rivalry and animosity. Moreover, the tendency of scholarly studies to place their focus within the boundaries of national history is particularly disadvantageous for the theatre history of this lively age, being prone to overlook important developments at the cross-roads of national cultures.

Luigi Riccoboni's published contributions to the history and theory of the theatre span the period from 1728 to 1743. Because of their author's intention to address an international audience (Cappelletti, 1986), they are nearly all written in French, with the notable exception of *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa*, which is most probably, albeit largely unacknowledged, the first eighteenth-century work on the art of the actor. Its author's claim for primacy may be taken more seriously than Sainte-Albine's:

Per lo spazio di molti anni, o cortese Lettore, sono andato frà mestesso pensando, che non essendo mai fin ad ora stata data regola alcuna a' Comici per ammaestrarli nell'esercizio del'Arte loro ben fatto sarebbe che si trovasse alcuno, che desse mano ad una tal Opera.<sup>20</sup>  
(Riccoboni L., 1728, 'A lettori')

As I have discussed earlier, Sainte-Albine declared his book published in 1747 to be the first to address specifically a discussion of the art of the actor and made no mention of Luigi Riccoboni's contributions. However, by 1747 Luigi Riccoboni had published a copious body of five theoretical treatises and two books on the history of the theatre.

Riccoboni's historical works are the *Histoire du théâtre italien* of 1728 (Riccoboni L., 1730) and the *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différens*

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<sup>20</sup> For the duration of many years, kind Reader, I have been pondering that, as no rule has yet ever been given to Actors to instruct them in the practice of their Art, it would be a good thing to find someone who could turn his hand to such a Work.

*théâtres de l'Europe* of 1738 (Riccoboni L., 1740), this second book being the first comparative history of European theatre traditions (Courville, 1943, p.8), including an historical account of theatrical practice in Italy, Spain, France, England, Holland and Germany, and testifying to the breadth of Riccoboni's knowledge, both formed through scholarship and based on first hand experiences.

The most copious of his other theoretical efforts are dedicated to dramaturgy and reveal the author's ambition to carry out a systematic reformation of the theatre. His analysis of tragedy is expounded in the *Dissertation sur la tragédie moderne* (Riccoboni L., 1730), a work that he published in 1728 as an accompaniment to his history of the Italian theatre, while on comedy he wrote the *Observations sur la comédie et sur le génie de Molière* (Riccoboni L., 1736). His ideas are clearly the result of his practical attempt at reformation of both comedy and tragedy as an actor-manager working in northern Italy; this is attested by his *Discorso della commedia all'improvviso* (Riccoboni L., 1733), an essay written around 1721-22, but discovered and published posthumously. His last published essay, *De la Réformation du Théâtre* of 1743 (Riccoboni L., 1767), intended as a synthesis of his previous efforts, insists on a call for moral reformation which entails the necessity for actors and actresses to conduct a morally irreprehensible private life (a request which Riccoboni had always imposed on his troupe actors), the nearly complete banning of love plots from all plays, and the regular donation of any profits to charity. It is a curiosity that Riccoboni dedicated this final work to the Empress of the Russian empire, Elisabeth I, anticipating Diderot in entrusting Russia with that renovation of theatre that Russia will eventually deliver, albeit two centuries later.

### **Luigi Riccoboni's writings on the art of the actor**

Despite Riccoboni (1767, p.64) believing that the reformation of the theatre needed to be dramaturgical in its essence, he also put great emphasis on the reformation of acting, writing two works dedicated to this subject: the poem *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa*, published in 1728, and the essay *Pensées sur la Declamation* (Riccoboni L., 1740), of 1738. The merit of Riccoboni's reflections

on acting is suggested by an anecdote about Stanislavski. While reading extracts from the *Pensées sur la Déclamation*, the Russian master ‘trembled with excitement. “Oh, the darling, the darling!” he exclaimed in a voice of infinite tenderness, stretching out his arms as though he could actually see the old Italian actor before him and wished to press him to his heart’ (Magarshack, 1950<sup>21</sup>, pp.336-337, cited in Cappelletti, 1986, p.15). Stanislavski had realized that nearly two centuries earlier Riccoboni had been his forerunner.

*Dell’Arte Rappresentativa* was written in verse, supposedly following the suggestion of friends, while Riccoboni’s original intention had been to write the treatise in prose and in a dialogical form, a striking foreshadowing of the *Paradoxe*. The poem, written in Italian by the actor-manager of one of the most prominent theatres in Paris, was published in London, with a dedication to Lord Chesterfield, its international character testifying once more to the webs of cultural referencing across eighteenth-century Europe.

The existence of this work seems to have been mostly ignored by its contemporaries and up to the most recent scholarship (Chaouche, 2007). Even François Riccoboni failed to mention *Dell’Arte Rappresentativa* in his essay *L’Art du Théâtre*, while he cited his father’s *Pensées sur la déclamation*. Albeit concealed, *Dell’Arte Rappresentativa* is a forerunner of the incipient tradition of essays dedicated exclusively to actors, pointing to Luigi Riccoboni’s timely awareness of the emerging of the art of the actor as an ‘autonomous object of study’ (Vicentini, 2011, p.11).

Published ten years later as an accompaniment to his history of the European theatres, the essay entitled *Pensées sur la Déclamation* (Riccoboni L., 1740), in French prose, was more readily accessible to a wide audience but constituted a more traditional treatise, concerning itself with declamation as an art which is of interest to all rhetorical practice, in continuity with the longstanding custom of considering acting a branch of oratory. Nevertheless, the *Pensées sur la Déclamation* is still innovative and anticipates some of the important concepts of

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<sup>21</sup> David Magarshack, 1950, *Stanislavsky: A Life*. London: Macgibbon and Kee.

essays such as *Le Comédien* and the like. This work enjoyed a better fortune and was translated into English as early as 1741 (Cappelletti, 1986, p.14).

In the *Pensées sur la Declamation*, Riccoboni states that the most important tool for the actor/orator is study, as opposed to natural gifts, anticipating the view expressed by *The Actor* and the *Garrick*. Natural gifts, as a matter of fact, can be fully supplanted:

On a vu très souvent, et on le voit tous les jours, qu'un homme à qui la Nature n'a point donné les talens nécessaires, ni d'inclination pour l'exercice de la profession qu'il a embrassée, parvient avec le travail presque au même degré de perfection que celui qui y est porté par goût, et à qui la Nature a prodigué tous les dons.

(Riccoboni L., 1740, p.244)

Rhetoric and acting require a long course of study and labour, but it is not – like in seventeenth-century treatises on oratory – a matter of learning fixed rules or set forms of expression. Human expressive capabilities are so varied that no rule could capture them; on the contrary an orator needs to find the truth of the expression according to the subtleties of each individual situation. And the means he suggests to reach this aim is for the orator to plunge himself into an introspective act. Riccoboni attributes the primary act of introspection to poets and writers:

L'enthousiasme des Poètes, et les profondes réflexions des Savans dans les tems qu'ils composent, ne sont que l'effet dans grand recueillement de leur esprit, qui examine la source des sentimens intérieurs et des passions de l'ame: c'est alors qu'ils voient la colère, la compassion, la vengeance, la tendresse, et le reste des passions en elles-mêmes: en sorte que la peinture qu'ils en font ensuite, est tellement vive et véritable, que les Lecteurs n'y trouvent rien à retrancher, ni à ajouter.

(Riccoboni L., 1740, p.251)

In this he echoes Aristotle's idea that poets' creative work is grounded in their ability to experience the emotions they want to portray.

Riccoboni extends the rule of introspection to the orator as by necessity:



Or comment pourroit-on réciter ou déclamer de tels Ouvrages, autrement qu'avec les tons de l'ame aussi? C'est pour cela qu'il me paroît inévitable que les Orateurs, les Savans, les Poëtes, &c. entrent aussi en enthousiasme en déclamant, de la même façon qu'ils ont fait en composant. Si l'ame qui en a inspiré les pensées en dicte pareillement la prononciation, les tons seront vrais & variés à l'infini, depuis l'héroïque le plus élevé, jusqu'au familier le plus simple.

(Riccoboni L., 1740, pp.252-253)

The final expressive deed for the orator remains an act of sentiment: 'Sentir ce que l'on dit, voilà les tons de l'ame [...] Il faut pour cela qu'il [l'Orateur] déclame si naturellement, qu'il force, pour ainsi dire, les Spectateurs à croire que tout ce qu'il dit il le pense dans l'instant même' (Riccoboni L., 1740, pp.263-264). Although still imbued with rhetorical principles, Riccoboni introduces the dynamic relationship between *esprit* and *sentiment*, which will be essential in the understanding of the art of the actor from *Le Comédien* onwards. And it is in his earlier essay on the subject, *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa*, that Luigi Riccoboni will indicate more clearly, albeit in a less accessible style, his views on the actor's relation with her own feelings.

*Dell'Arte Rappresentativa* is written in response to the perceived lack of rules that has brought acting to its decline, and the corresponding corruption of the audience's taste. Hence, anticipating *The Actor's* line of reasoning on the interdependence of spectators' judgement and actors' performance, Riccoboni addresses his pledges to both actors and spectators, and moreover he wishes that his work will urge others to follow in his steps, an entreaty which will be amply yielded to.

The principles of Riccoboni's reform, as we have seen, are along the lines of an acting style which is more naturalistic ('l'oro puro della semplice Natura' [the pure gold of simple Nature], Riccoboni L., 1728, 'A lettori'). He has very harsh words for the monotonous style of declamation, which he calls 'cantilena' [singsong] (1728, p.42), used in France and in the Italian Academies following the French example: 'Ella ti ucide, ti sfibra, ti svena' [it kills you, it wears you out, it bleeds you] (1728, p.42). To promote a naturalistic acting style he is probably the first to suggest a self-absorption of the actors on stage, which

anticipates the rule of the fourth wall, subsequently formulated by Diderot in *De la poésie dramatique*:

Nel arte de la Rappresentazione/ La prima delle regole è il supporre,/ Che tu sei solo fra mille persone;/ E che l'Attore che teco discorre/ È il solo, che ti vede, e ch'egli solo/ I veri sensi tuoi deve raccorre.<sup>22</sup>

(Riccoboni, 1728, p.53)

This idea is linked to the necessity for the actor to harmonize her body language to the meaning of the words she is pronouncing, being constantly aware of her bodily stage presence including times when she is not speaking. In pursuing a naturalistic performance which encompasses the delivery of the words as well as the posturing of the body, he proscribes actors from using a mirror when studying a character, and he wishes he could 'cut off' those limbs which are used in a stereotyped or disorderly manner (Riccoboni L., 1728, p.15) perhaps here thinking of the excessive gestures of a certain unbridled style of *Commedia*. These principles will be repeated word for word by François Riccoboni in *L'Art du Théâtre*, the striking similarities pointing to François being a good student at his father's school, if not to a direct but unacknowledged familiarity with *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa*.

According to Luigi Riccoboni, the aim of a naturalistic style of performance is its ability to entertain the spectator within the norm of truthfulness ('dilettare col vero' [to please with the truth], 1728, 'A lettori'). The relationship between the actor's performance and the spectator's experience remains within the canons of classical rhetoric, the actor feeling the emotions of the character so that the audience can be under the illusion that she is experiencing the character's passions in the first person: she has to 'si ben cercare/ Di sentire la cosa, che ci esponi,/ Che si creda esser tuo l'altrui affare' (1728, p.17)<sup>23</sup>. However there are limitations within which this relationship needs to be bounded. First of all, following the rule of classical *decorum*, which he rebrands as 'buon senso' [common sense] (1728, p.46), Riccoboni prescribes the absolute abstaining

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<sup>22</sup> In the art of Representation/ The first rule is to imagine,/ That you are alone among a thousand people;/ And that the Actor who converses with you/ Is the only one who can see you, and that he alone/ is to gather your true meanings.

<sup>23</sup> try so carefully/ to feel the matter that you exhibit,/ that we believe someone else's concern to be yours.

from excesses: 'Natura si, ma bella dee mostrarsi' [Nature indeed, but its appearance must be pleasing] (1728, p.25). Secondly, there may well be situations in which it becomes impossible for the actor to reach the extent of the feeling required. In this case, the actor's effort is to make the audience believe in her feeling, even if she does not actually experience it: 'E sia fittizio il Ver s'altro non puoi' [let Truth be feigned if you cannot otherwise] (1728, p.34).

The considerations about the limits of the actor's sensibility take Riccoboni on the path of exploring the intriguing dynamic between truth and pretence. He describes the not uncommon situation of an actor who is portraying a character who is feigning a feeling before another character, for example a lady who simulates despair with her lover to keep him enthralled: such actress will have to show the other character the signs of a credibly felt desperation while indicating to the spectator the feigned nature of her feelings. This is ultimately the sign of great acting: 'Son queste le reti, e son gli aguati/ Ove il Comico attende i Spettatori/ Per renderli confusi, edificati' (1728, p.36)<sup>24</sup>. And as models for her endeavours, Riccoboni points to courtiers, flatterers and hypocrites, all of whom know very well how to feign a passion to the point that it is experienced as real by their target audience (1728, pp.36-37). In this formulation Riccoboni sets the foundations of the paradox of the actor which will be addressed with special interest by future theorists up to the *Paradoxe*.

### ***L'Art du Théâtre* by François Riccoboni**

*L'Art du Théâtre* is François Riccoboni's only essay on the theatre. Publishing it in 1750, under friendly solicitation (or so its author claims, similarly to what his father had declared about his poem on the actor's art), François reveals to have written it years before (Riccoboni F., 1750, 'Avant Propos'). It is in French and dedicated to an anonymous actress, who, it is claimed, has approached the author to ask for his advice (1750, p.2). François recommends his father's *Pensées sur la Declamation* as a work which contains fine reflections on acting, but which lacks in setting down the most basic principles (1750, pp.3-4), and

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<sup>24</sup> These are the nets, and the snares/ Where the Actor waits upon the Spectators/ To make them confused, edified.

this is what he proposes to do himself. He then proceeds to discuss a long list of topics in a systematic and at times dogmatic way, and in some of the content he repeats ideas that can be found in *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa*: he proscribes the use of the mirror, he warns against the excessive movements of the limbs, he criticizes the monotonous declamatory tone of the French style and he refers to the need of the actor to be absorbed by what happens on stage.

Similarly to Luigi, he emphasises the necessity of studying, and formulates with precision the object of study, with a description of what Sainte-Albine (1749, p.21) had already called 'les circonstances':

Il ne suffit pas d'entendre les discours qu'un Auteur a mis dans notre bouche, et de ne pas les rendre à contresens. Il faut concevoir à chaque instant le rapport que peut avoir ce que nous disons avec le caractère de notre rôle, avec la situation où nous met la scène, et avec l'effet que cela doit produire dans l'action totale.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, p.31)

Walking in his father's footsteps, whose legacy he acknowledges, his points of reference are nature and truth, but moderated by the relics of the classical *decorum*, which he calls 'verniss de politesse' (1750, p.43):

Mon père a coutume de dire, que pour être frappant, il faut aller deux doigts au-delà du naturel; mais que si l'on passe cette mesure d'une ligne, on est sur le champ outré et desagréable. Cette façon de parler explique à merveille le danger où l'acteur est continuellement d'exprimer ou trop ou trop peu. Examinons cependant si l'on ne pourroit pas trouver dans la nature, des modèles, qui parfaitement suivis, donneroient l'extrême vérité accompagnée de la vigueur nécessaire.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, p.42)

The rule of rhetoric determined that the spectator or auditor should bring to feel, and to this end, the actor or orator should also feel. 'La seule règle à suivre est celle que nous prescrit le sentiments que nous avons à rendre' (1750, p.26) writes François, and in this he is still following a predictable trail. But what makes him a distinct voice, skilfully picked by Diderot to represent his controversial view, is his willingness to break the supposed continuity between the spectator's and the actor's emotional state. As I have amply discussed already, most theorists acknowledge the complexity of such continuity and

especially they do not allow, despite Diderot's insinuations, for an easy solution for the actor. The actor has to work hard with her intelligence and rational judgement, to create the conditions to express emotions which will be compellingly felt by the spectators. François Riccoboni instead denies that such continuity ever existed:

L'on appelle expression, l'adresse par laquelle on fait sentir au spectateur tous les mouvements dont on veut paroître pénétré. Je dis que l'on veut le paroître, et non pas que l'on est pénétré véritablement. Je vais à ce sujet, Madame, vous dévoiler une de ces erreurs brillantes dont on s'est laissé séduire, et à laquelle un peu de charlatanisme de la part des Comédiens peut avoir beaucoup aidé. Lorsqu'un Acteur rend avec la force nécessaire les sentiments de son rôle, le Spectateur voit en lui la plus parfaite image de la vérité. Un homme qui seroit vraiment en pareille situation, ne s'exprimeroit pas d'une autre manière, et c'est jusqu'à ce point qu'il fait porter l'illusion pour bien jouer. Etonnés d'une si parfaite imitation du vrai, quelques-uns l'ont prise pour la vérité même, et ont cru l'Acteur affecté du sentiment qu'il représentoit.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, pp.36-37)

This is the paradox of acting, says Diderot, the severing of the tie between the actor's and the spectator's emotional states.

And yet, François Riccoboni's formulation is interesting more because of its difference than its similarity with Diderot's assumption. Diderot depicts the profile of crafty actors, almost cynical in their shrewd approach to performance. François instead talks of an impossibility:

si l'on a le malheur de ressentir véritablement ce que l'on doit exprimer, on est hors d'état de jouer. [...] Si dans un endroit d'attendrissement vous vous laissez emporter au sentiment de votre rôle, votre cœur se trouvera tout-à-coup serré, votre voix s'étouffera presque entièrement; s'il tombe une seule larme de vos yeux, des sanglots involontaires vous embarrasseront le gosier, il vous sera impossible de proférer un seul mot sans des hocquets ridicules.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, pp.37-38)

To avoid being trapped by the real emotions, the actor is left with little choice, but to work on herself to reproduce the signs of feeling without experiencing the feeling itself.

Such work is costly for the actor, not just in terms of the physical effort, but also emotionally:

Je ne dis pas qu'en jouant les morceaux de grand passion l'Acteur ne ressent une émotion très-vive, c'est même ce qu'il y a de plus fatiguant au Théâtre. Mais cette agitation vient des efforts qu'on est obligé de faire pour peindre une passion que l'on ne ressent pas, ce qui donne au sang un mouvement extraordinaire auquel le Comédien peut être lui-même trompé, s'il n'a pas examiné avec attention la véritable cause d'où cela provient.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, p.41)

Far from Diderot's actors, who tease each other with ease while they also perform a love scene, François Riccoboni's actors labour emotionally and physically to keep themselves passion-proof.

Great connoisseur of the human heart, the actor knows how to make the spectator believe her feigned feelings to be true.

Il faut connoître parfaitement quels sont les mouvements de la nature dans les autres, et demeurer toujours assez le maître de son âme pour la faire à son gré ressembler à celui d'autrui. Voilà le grand art. Voilà d'où naît cette parfaite illusion à laquelle les spectateurs ne peuvent se refuser, et qui les entraîne en dépit d'eux.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, p.41)

While Luigi Riccoboni would have never renounced the rhetoric dogma of 'Sentir ce que l'on dit' (Riccoboni L., 1740, p.263), his description in *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa* of the actor who portrays a character who feigns a feeling, or his pointing to courtiers, flatterers and hypocrites as models of great acting (Riccoboni L., 1728, pp.36-37), is the closest one can get to François's conceptualization.

## **DIDEROT'S THEORY OF ACTING- A TRAJECTORY**

### **Diderot's earlier theories**

Diderot's significance to the history of theatre grounds in his attempts to establish a new form of drama, that he calls *le genre sérieux* as opposed to the

classical taxonomical genres of comedy and tragedy. His project is that of a playwright and of a theorist. In 1757 he writes his first play, *Le Fils naturel*, followed the next year by *Le Père de famille* (1939, pp.169-298). Both plays are accompanied by significant expositions of theory, respectively in *Les Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*, a triplet of dialogues supposedly between Diderot and Dorval, author of the play, and in *De la poésie dramatique* (1939, pp.299-394), a more conventional treatise on theatrical matters addressed to his friend Grimm. Because the discourse in these works is somewhat dominated by dramaturgy, it must be specified that within the wider scope of a general reform of the theatre, the preoccupation with acting is fairly marginal. Nevertheless, it is significant.

As I have discussed earlier, there are a number of intriguing parallels between Diderot's project and Luigi Riccoboni's pioneering endeavours. Indeed there is the perhaps accidental, nevertheless noteworthy fact that *Le Fils naturel* is the grandchild of one of Riccoboni's scenarios, which he considered a normative example of the new style of comedy that he wanted to promote towards his proposed renovation of theatre. As I shall discuss below, the passage from Riccoboni's scenario to Diderot's play is mediated by one of Goldoni's comedies, which took the scenario as its source and became in turn a source for Diderot's play. Aside from the common rooting of their plot, most importantly what joins together Riccoboni, Diderot and indeed Goldoni, is a preoccupation with the renovation of theatre that stemming from dramaturgy inevitably falls into generating theories of acting.

The first accomplished expression of Diderot's ideas on the theatre comes with the *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*. Diderot's spokesman is Dorval, the supposed author of *Le Fils naturel*, an amateur playwright eager to promote a view of the function and scope of playwriting centred on *vraisemblance*. The quest for truthfulness extends to the various levels of dramatic composition, from thematic choices, which need to reflect real and realistic facts, to the details of the dramatisation, being inclined to favour the Aristotelian unities, in as much as they are at the service, not the disservice, of realism. Following a domino effect, *vraisemblance* becomes a concern in relation to acting; and what could be more

apt to study the scope of this subject than Dorval's project, to put actors in the condition to play themselves? The ploy of *Le Fils naturel* is that Dorval has based the play entirely on a true fact which has occurred to him and his family and that he has called the life-protagonists of the event to become protagonists on stage of the dramatisation of the event itself.

Diderot's game between fiction and reality (Hobson, 1974) is already a paradox: the play itself and the dialogues which accompany it are fictional but they represent Dorval/Diderot's experimentation with the absolute correspondence between fiction and reality, both on the plane of dramatic writing and on that of acting. While the play, as declared in its *Introduction* (Diderot, 1939, pp.19-21), is supposed to be the dramatisation of a real event, it is in fact the adaptation of a subplot of the Italian comedy *Il vero amico* by Goldoni (1939), first published in 1751. The actors are supposed to be people made of flesh and blood, who have lived through the events described in the play as well as performed them, while their reality is twice removed because their existence is only based on the sparse references of the *Entretiens* (Hobson, 1974). The *Entretiens* are supposedly the transcription of Diderot's conversations with Dorval, Diderot even scrupling to point out that such transcription may not do justice to Dorval's impromptu words. In fact, they are Diderot's lucubrations with himself.

The circular cross-referencing between fiction and reality justifies the question of what might be Diderot's intention. It could be argued that Diderot's wish to emphasize *vraisemblance* may have induced him to hide the fictional source in order to make plot and actors appear as truthful as possible. If this was the case, it still begs the question of why Diderot chose to base his play on a comedy by Goldoni rather than a news story, for instance. On the other hand, it has been suggested (Mittman, 1973) that calling his play a true story was Diderot's device to hide the plagiarism. I will discuss the relation between Diderot and Goldoni more in detail later in this chapter. In particular I will emphasize how Diderot's most significant borrowing from Goldoni, is perhaps not that of the plot, but rather of his poetic motives. As has already been shown (Cederna, 2007), Goldoni's substantial contribution to the development of the *genre sérieux* as championed by Diderot, has long remained unacknowledged



partly because of that rivalry between the French and Italian theatrical traditions which was particularly felt in eighteenth-century Paris. Moreover, as I have already hinted at, historical studies concentrating on national landscapes have tended to perpetuate such lack of recognition.

Unsurprisingly, the *Entretiens* present, within a wider emphasis on *vraisemblance*, an emerging theory on the art of the actor which endorses the need for a realistic performance. Dorval's entreaty is that his play be judged according to the standards of domestic truth ('*le salon*', literally the sitting room), not those of established theatrical conventions. He hence deplores the habit of actors who perform the most dramatic lines disposed in a symmetrical semicircle facing the audience. Here the critique against the declamatory style of the actors of the *Comédie Française* is not new, for example having been voiced by both Riccobonis (Riccoboni L., 1740, pp.266-269; Riccoboni F., 1750, pp.20-23), although it is somewhat unusual in coming from a very French quarter. Dorval's insistence on the importance of gesture as an expressive means, along with his emphasis on the global visual effect, as realized by the *tableau*, while testifying to Diderot's cultural background as a prolific art critic, resonates, again, with a similar concern found in both Riccobonis (Riccoboni L., 1728; Riccoboni F., 1750, pp.4-5), and, more in general, within the *Commedia dell'Arte* tradition.

Alongside these motifs, there are other intriguing remarks on acting, like for example Dorval's observation that his fellow actors were influenced in their performance by their present feelings even if they were asked to act according to their feelings in a not very distant past. He gives the example of how the acquired tenderness for each other following the forming of romantic bonds between himself and Constance and between Clairville and Rosalie, leads to a mellowing of their interpretation of past vicissitudes during which their real sentiments had been somewhat sharper. It is worth noting the colossal difference between this imaginary experiment on acting in which the coincidence between actor and character is taken to extremes, and Diderot's later theoretical formulation in which the absolute distinction between actor's and character's feelings becomes a paradox.

How to find the truth of emotional expression for the characters, both from the perspective of the playwright and the actor, is a matter of interest, and Dorval's solution is – again, not an absolute novelty – that the characters need to be placed in the given circumstances: 'il ne faut point donner d'esprit à ses personnages; mais savoir les placer dans des circonstances qui leur en donnent' (Diderot, 1939, p.103). So established, and re-emphasizing that the expression of feelings lies in their connection with gesture and visual representation, the theory concludes by giving prominence to sensibility in the art of the actor. An actress of mediocre intelligence but great sensibility can reach the heights of emotional expression: she finds 'sans y penser, l'accent qui convient à plusieurs sentiments différents qui se fondent ensemble, et qui constituent cette situation que toute la sagacité du philosophe n'analyserait pas' (1939, p.108). Here lies the already quoted Dorval/Diderot's assertion 'Les poètes, les acteurs, les musiciens, les peintres, les chanteurs de premier ordre, les grands danseurs, les amants tendres, les vrais dévots, toute cette troupe enthousiaste et passionnée sent vivement, et réfléchit peu' (1939, p.108), nothing more distant from the theory of the *Paradoxe* where sensibility is an absolute hindrance to good acting and only the intellectual faculty of analysis befits the great actor.

In *De la poésie dramatique*, the treatise which accompanies *Le Père de famille*, other significant passages on acting can be found. One of the most striking is Diderot's demand that both author and actor forget the audience: 'Imaginez, sur le bord du théâtre, un grand mur qui vous sépare du parterre; jouez comme si la toile ne se levait pas' (1939, p.345). This may well be the first ever explicit formulation of the rule of the fourth wall, which will become established more than a century later with Antoine (Artioli, 2000).

As I have previously described, the rule of the given circumstances had already been recommended by previous essays on the actor, especially the couplet *Comédien-The Actor* (The *Garrick* was yet to come) while the concept of the fourth wall was already present in its embryonic form in *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa* and in *De l'Art du Théâtre*. Were it possible that Diderot

ignored these background references, it is most probable that he would have encountered them in Goldoni, of whom, as we have seen, he knew at least one play. 1750 saw the Venetian first edition of Goldoni's collected plays, which was followed shortly afterwards, in 1753, by a Florentine edition. Both editions included Goldoni's (1983) play-manifesto *Il teatro comico* which contains passages that describe theatrical rules akin to the given circumstances and the fourth wall. Hereafter, I shall discuss the relationship between Diderot's and Goldoni's ideas on the theatre by taking a closer look at various aspects of their theories.

### **Diderot and Goldoni**

Shortly after the publication of *Le Fils naturel*, the polemicist and journalist Élie Fréron reviewed the play in the June 1757 issue of the *Année Littéraire*. In the July issue he proceeded to publish the summary of Goldoni's *Il vero amico*, thus revealing the fictional source of Diderot's play and preparing the ground for subsequent accusations of plagiarism (Olsen, 2011), such as the one by Palissot, in his November 1757 publication *Petites lettres sur des grands philosophes* (Palissot, 1777, p.149). There is no doubt that Diderot's play follows Goldoni's quite closely (Mittman, 1973). However, in his vehement self-defence in *De la poésie dramatique*, Diderot rejects the accusation on the basis that his work is substantially different from Goldoni's at the level of plot, definition of characters and overall genre. Goldoni's comedy is dismissed as a farce, while Diderot's is of course the paradigmatic example of the new *genre sérieux*.

It is a point of note, that Diderot became very bitterly enraged with Goldoni himself, despite Goldoni having had no part in the accusation in the first place. Goldoni gave his version of events first in 1764, in the preface of *Il vero amico* (1939, pp.573-575) published in the Paperini Edition, and then in 1787, in his French *Mémoires* (1935, pp.456-458). Published thirty years after the quarrel about *Le Fils naturel*, Goldoni's account in the *Mémoires* shows how afflicted he had been by Diderot's unfair scorn towards him. Goldoni had always been unconcerned about the borrowing from his play, and was anxious to excuse

Diderot on all fronts, except the fact that in *De la poésie dramatique* (1939, pp.337-339) the *philosophe* had called his comedies 'farces', showing an utter disregard for his stature as playwright and theatre reformer. This was despite the fact that he had been praised by many, including Fréron, and most flattering, Voltaire<sup>25</sup>. Since his move to Paris in 1762, Goldoni had hoped to be able to explain himself in person to Diderot, but his failed attempts left him with the impression that the *philosophe* was perhaps purposefully trying to avoid meeting him. Eventually a short meeting took place at Diderot's home and seemingly peace was made (Goldoni, 1935, pp.456-458).

Despite Diderot's protestations against Fréron's accusations, the script of *Le Fils naturel* is very similar in structure to *Il vero amico* (Mittman, 1973). However, as Diderot pointed out in his defence, the borrowing of material from author to author was a very common practice in the eighteenth and earlier centuries: Molière did it many times, says Diderot, and Goldoni himself took half the plot of *Il vero amico* from Molière's *Avare* (Diderot, 1939, p.337). In fact, Goldoni often employed *Commedia dell'Arte* scenarios as his sources and in this instance there is indeed a corresponding scenario entitled *La force de l'amitié*. This had been composed by Luigi Riccoboni and played at the *Comédie Italienne* in Paris in 1717 and 1748 (Courville, 1945, pp.76-77). Riccoboni (1973) considered it a model comedy and intended to publish it alongside other five comedies in the appendix to his treatise on the reformation of *Commedia*, which remained unpublished.

Although Luigi Riccoboni had been the forerunner of the attempt at cleansing the *Commedia dell'Arte* from immorality and coarseness, Goldoni's reform of comedy within Italy was without doubt the most influential and successful, so much so as to grant him the epithet of 'Molière d'Italie', first given him by Fréron in 1763 (Olsen, 2011). In the presentation of his works to the reader (Goldoni, 1971), starting from the Venice Edition of 1750 and reproduced in subsequent editions, Goldoni was introducing himself as a reformer of the theatre and was indicating the thread of his conduct. In 1751 his play *Il teatro comico*, which is

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<sup>25</sup> In his letter to Albergati. Voltaire's *Correspondence*. Edited by Theodore Besterman. Vol. XLII. Letter 8242, p.140. Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire. Les Délices.

the manifesto for his poetics, was also published. In line with many of his contemporaries, Goldoni's emphasis was on nature and 'verosimiglianza' (the Italian for *vraisemblance*), and his intention was to write comedies which would be of moral instruction to the spectators, in particular with regard to the condemnation of vice and promotion of virtues that were the domestic concerns of his bourgeois audience. He hence strove to remove all farcical elements from his plays, which explains why Diderot's remark on him had been particularly felt.

As Goldoni declares in *Il teatro comico*, one of the routes he employed in order to follow nature and *vraisemblance* was to slowly but surely lead his *Commedia dell'Arte* actors to give up the traditional masks and to perform following a script rather than impromptu. Through the voice of his alter-ego, the actor-manager Orazio, he also talks of the importance of placing the characters with their virtues and vices within the specific circumstances (1983, pp.86-87), although this is a reference to dramaturgy rather than acting. Orazio also exhorts actors to imagine, while they perform, that they are alone on the stage and that no audience is there to see them, an anticipation of the 'fourth wall':

E non vedete, che col popolo non si parla? Che il comico deve immaginarsi, quando è solo, che nessuno lo senta e che nessuno lo veda?<sup>26</sup>

(Goldoni, 1983, p.75)

It is not known for sure whether Diderot knew these declarations of poetic principles by Goldoni. However, it does not seem at all unlikely that the edition of Goldoni's works where he read *Il vero amico* may have also put at his disposal *Il teatro comico*. Diderot's project of reformation of drama initiated with *Le Fils naturel* and the *Entretiens* has many points in common with Goldoni's poetics. Might this be the 'plagiarism' that, consciously or unconsciously, preoccupied Diderot most and lay behind his exaggerated denial of Fréron's accusation and his unjust hostility towards Goldoni?

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<sup>26</sup> And can't you see that one should not address the audience? The actor must imagine, when he is alone on stage, that no one can hear him and no one can see him.

If some of Goldoni's ideas may have been an important source of Diderot's theories, it must be remembered that most of these notions are not Goldoni's original inventions, but rather leitmotifs which run through the eighteenth-century debate on theatre, especially but not solely in works of the Italian heritage. Dario Fo (1977, p.98-99) for instance maintains that the invention of the fourth wall is due to the actor-manager Francesco Andreini and may date as early as the mid sixteenth century, at a time when Andreini and his company were playing for the King of France, initiating the tradition of Italian Commedia being played in Paris. Andreini initiated a change of acting style when the company was performing in theatres as opposed to street stages: he incited his actors to ignore the presence of the audience and banished the established custom to address spectators directly through the 'aside'.

While a slow process of evolution is a most likely explanation, Luigi Riccoboni was instrumental in consolidating these principles in theoretical works. It is therefore possible that his endeavours represent one of the indirect but essential roots of Diderot's, which seep into the encyclopaedist's theoretical system both through the mediation of Goldoni and through the French writers who studied and worked with Luigi Riccoboni, such as Sainte-Albine, Sticotti, and Riccoboni's own son François.

The context of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' theatrical vicissitudes in Paris, characterized by a relentless rivalry between its major theatres and uppermost between the *Comédie Française* and the *Comédie Italienne* – the official and powerful representative of *Commedia dell'Arte* in France – may further justify the supposed emulation of and antagonism towards Goldoni, that might have played a part in Diderot's early theatrical works. Diderot makes a rare mention of the Italian troupe in Paris when, in *De la poésie dramatique* (1939, p.377), he talks about their superiority compared to the French actors in the ease with which they use bodily expression (*'pantomime'*) on stage and in their performance being more respectful of the fourth wall. Aside the various demeaning comments that accompany the praise, a glimpse of the pressure that a French intellectual might have felt in writing in approbation of the Italian actors is given by Diderot's allusion when he anticipates that many readers will

be disgusted by his comment. As I have discussed above, many were the borrowings and cross-referencing between the Italian and French tradition which were kept quiet or fell into obscurity.

It is ultimately the *Paradoxe* that acts as an undeclared but exemplary synthesis of the trans-European debate on the art of the actor that I have so far considered. In discussing this masterpiece in the next section, I will have the opportunity to draw further conclusions about its direct or indirect cross-referencing.

### **The *Paradoxe sur le comédien***

The composition of the *Paradoxe* may be dated to the years between 1770 and 1773 (Wilson, 1972, p.620), since Diderot informed Madame d'Épinay in August 1773 that a 'certain pamphlet sur l'art de l'acteur est presque devenu un ouvrage' (Abirached, 1994, p.206). It had been occasioned by the publication, in 1770, of the treatise *Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois* (Sticotti, 1770) which Diderot reviewed in an article published in the *Correspondance littéraire*<sup>27</sup>, an article which anticipated the argument of the posthumously published essay. Despite being written as a dialogue between two *interlocuteurs*, the first of whom is supposedly Diderot himself, the arguments and counterarguments of the *Paradoxe* are predominantly carried by this first speaker, while the second one has mostly the function of attentive listener, who facilitates the unfolding of Diderot's reasoning through his docile questioning.

As I have previously described, references to previous theories are scarce and tend to be unhelpfully categorized into polarities: Sticotti and Sainte-Albine versus Diderot and François Riccoboni, the first two representing the old-fashioned mistaken assumption of an emotionalist theory of acting (to use Archer's (1888) later terminology), while Diderot, following in the footsteps of François Riccoboni, appears to open the new path of an anti-emotionalist theory of the actor's art. In reality, many ideas of the *Paradoxe* that get discussed by

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<sup>27</sup> In: *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm et de Diderot, depuis 1753 jusqu'en 1790*. Nouvelle édition. Tome septième, 1770-1772, pp.73-84 + pp.94-105. Paris: Furne et Ladrance, 1829.

the first *interlocuteur* seemingly as if they were his original intuitions, had been anticipated by previous writers, and particularly by Luigi and François Riccoboni, Sainte-Albine, Hill and Sticotti. The *Paradoxe*, as well as being an inspiring and intriguing work of genius, is also an inaccurate piece of scholarly critique, where the misrepresented points of contrast with the *Garrick* and its related references are in fact points of difference or frank oppositions to Diderot's earlier theories.

In the *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* the encyclopaedist had derived his rules of acting through the supposed experiment of untrained actors endeavouring to perform themselves. In 1758, shortly after the publication of *Le Père de famille* and *De la poésie dramatique*, Madame Riccoboni, François Riccoboni's wife, had written to him a letter (Diderot, 1994, pp.121-143) correcting what she perceived to be his mistaken assumptions on acting and gently accusing him of lacking the specific knowledge of the craft. Diderot, she claimed, did not have first-hand experience of the stage and hence could not understand the rationale behind some of the acting devices that he criticized or wanted to modify. In particular, she was sceptical of the emphasis he put on following the rules of nature:

La nature est belle, mais il faut la montrer par les côtés qui peuvent la rendre utile et agréable. [...] La scène ne peut jamais devenir aussi simple que la chambre; et pour être vrai au théâtre, il faut passer un peu le naturel.

(Diderot, 1994, p.126)

Neither in his response letter to Madame Riccoboni, nor in later writings, will Diderot admit heeding Madame Riccoboni's advice, and in the *Paradoxe* he will actually take an opportunity to name her, perhaps maliciously, as 'une des plus mauvaises actrices qui aient jamais paru sur la scène' (Diderot, 1994, p.102) on account of her excessive sensibility. However, in the *Paradoxe*, he will eventually resolve the opposition between nature and art in decisive favour of art. For instance, in one of its passages, the first *interlocuteur* declares: 'portez au théâtre votre ton familier, votre expression simple, votre maintien domestique, votre geste naturel, et vous verrez combien vous serez pauvre et faible. Vous aurez beau verser des pleurs, vous serez ridicule, on rira' (1994,



p.47) and later on: 'un moyen sûr de jouer petitement, mesquinement, c'est d'avoir à jouer son propre caractère' (1994, p.71).

The *Paradoxe* establishes acting on the firm grounds of a theory which emphasizes study as opposed to nature as the principal maker of a great actor. While the first *interlocuteur* grants nature a part to play in endowing actors with gifts such as looks, voice and intelligence, he affirms that art only can put those gifts to use, through the learning and practice of a craft which requires the study of other actors' models, the experience of the stage, as well as the study of the human heart through observation of human behaviour in society (1994, p.36). Perhaps unwittingly, Madame Riccoboni's reproach had been taken on board.

Besides, in emphasizing the importance of study over the consideration given to natural talents, the *Paradoxe* is stating a principle already firmly established by the triplet *Comédien-The Actor-Garrick*. It is not a novel idea, except in relation to the earlier writings of Diderot himself. However our author chooses to misrepresent the sources he makes reference to, denying any consonance of his theories to those of the *Garrick* which he calls an 'ouvrage, écrit d'un style tourmenté, obscur, entortillé, boursoufflé, [...] plein d'idées communes' (1994, p.36). As we shall see, many more will be the unacknowledged similarities with the *Garrick*, but expressed with such unlikeness of language to uphold the suspicion of difference. Incidentally, at the opening of the *Paradoxe*, the first *interlocuteur* warns against the vagueness and flexibility of the technical language of theatre, indirectly providing some justification for the many misunderstandings of previous scholarship that travel across the essay: 'il y a dans la langue technique du théâtre une latitude, un vague assez considérable pour que des hommes sensés, d'opinions diamétralement opposées, croient y reconnaître la lumière de l'évidence' (1994, p.38). In particular, as I will discuss below, this vagueness will underlie his critique of '*sensibilité*', a term used by other authors in a system of cross-references that is different from Diderot's and which he partly genuinely ignores and partly, perhaps, chooses to overlook.

This point is particularly important because the contrast between sensibility (*sensibilité*) and judgement is the crux of the *Paradoxe*. As specified by the first

*interlocuteur*, there is one point at least on which Sticotti's views are completely the opposite to his:

Mais le point important, sur lequel nous avons des opinions tout à fait opposées, votre auteur et moi, ce sont les qualités premières d'un grand comédien. Moi, je lui veux beaucoup de jugement; il me faut dans cet homme un spectateur froid et tranquille; j'en exige, par conséquent, de la pénétration et nulle sensibilité, l'art de tout imiter, ou, ce qui revient au même, une égale aptitude à toutes les sortes de caractères et de rôles.  
(Diderot, 1994, pp.38-39)

According to Diderot there are hence two distinct types of actors, and by implication, of people: those ruled by sensibility and feeling, and those governed by their rational judgement. 'L'homme sensible obéit aux impulsions de la nature et ne rend précisément que le cri de son cœur' (1994, p.68). Equally, an actor who bases her performance on sensibility is equated by Diderot with an actor who acts out her personal feelings, leading to incoherence and unpredictability:

Si le comédien était sensible, de bonne foi lui serait-il permis de jouer deux fois de suite un même rôle avec la même chaleur et le même succès? Très chaud à la première représentation, il serait épuisé et froid comme un marbre à la troisième. [...] S'il est lui quand il joue, comment cessera-t-il d'être lui?  
(Diderot, 1994, p.39)

Instinct, sensibility, nature, become, in that vagueness of language which Diderot has warned us against, synonymous with an actor who does not make much effort in learning her part, nor applies her reason to the understanding of it. The paradigmatic example of this acting style is the actress Dumesnil, of whom the first *interlocuteur* says: 'Elle monte sur les planches sans savoir ce qu'elle dira; la moitié du temps elle ne sait ce qu'elle dit, mais il vient un moment sublime' (1994, p.42).

Poles apart is the man of genius: 'La sensibilité n'est guère la qualité d'un grand génie. [...] Ce n'est pas son cœur, c'est sa tête qui fait tout' (1994, p.43). The equivalent actor is the one who measures, combines, learns, arranges her performance to a degree of precision that can only increase with repetition and

never risk being random or unequal: 'le comédien qui jouera de réflexion, d'étude de la nature humaine' (1994, p.40). Mademoiselle Clairon is indicated as the epitome of this acting style and Diderot, seemingly giving in to an excessive confidence in his intuitive abilities, goes as far as presuming a specific acting technique, by which a great actress such as Clairon first imagines her role as an ideal model and then endeavours to comply with it (1994, pp.40-41). While the first *interlocuteur* grants that Clairon, master in an acting style deprived of sensibility, may well feel tormented by feelings in her first approach to a part during the rehearsal stage, he affirms that eventually her struggle will undoubtedly be superseded by the mastery of her role without any emotional involvement. What ensues is a status akin to what Archer (1888, p.150) has called dual consciousness: at the point of her utmost performance, Clairon 'est double: la petite Clairon et la grande Agrippine' (Diderot, 1994, p.41).

Sainte-Albine, Hill and Sticotti had imperatively condemned acting by instinct or an actor acting her personal feelings very much along the same lines and nearly with the same words as in the *Paradoxe*. Moreover, they had arrived at a conceptualization of acting as principally based on study, while natural talents remained useful for a handful of great actors but not at all necessary for the vast majority. And the actor had been described as controlling the expression of feelings in her role through the application of understanding and judgement very much like Diderot recommended.

While the emphasis on study or use of judgement constitutes a similarity between the *Paradoxe* and the *Garrick*, it must be admitted that Diderot, along the lines anticipated by François Riccoboni, strikes a fundamental point of difference in his absolute condemnation of sensibility although, as I shall further discuss, this is a matter of a difference in the meaning given to the word, more than a contrast of the underlying conceptions. And besides, even Diderot at times seems compelled to make concessions to sensibility, especially in his more explicit references to real actors. For instance, in calling the example of Garrick (meaning here the actor proper rather than the essay which bore his

name) to substantiate his theory, he has to concede that he is a great actor although he openly declares himself to feel deeply:

Je te prends à témoin, Roscius anglais, célèbre Garrick [...] Ne m'as-tu pas dit que, quoique tu sentisses fortement, ton action serait faible, si, quelle que fût la passion ou le caractère que tu avais à rendre, tu ne savais t'élever par la pensée à la grandeur d'un fantôme homérique auquel tu cherchais à t'identifier? Lorsque je t'objectai que ce n'était donc pas d'après toi que tu jouais, confesse ta réponse: ne m'avouas-tu pas que tu t'en gardais bien, et que tu ne paraissais si étonnant sur la scène, que parce que tu montrais sans cesse au spectacle un être d'imagination qui n'était pas toi?

(Diderot, 1994, p.81)

This long passage suggests that Diderot may have been inspired by Garrick in his proposed conceptualization of an acting technique which endeavours to comply with an ideal model. Besides, it shows Diderot's persistence in equating his invective against 'sensibility' with a disdain for actors who 'play themselves', once more highlighting how Diderot's indictment against sensibility is primarily a sturdy rejection of his first theories on acting, those based on Dorval's experiment with actors who play themselves.

*Sensibilité* had been described by Sainte-Albine, Hill and Sticotti as the faculty of the actor which allows her to express all the nuances of the character's emotions, the skill by which the actor, far from acting herself, manipulates her feelings at the service of acting the character in the given circumstances. Diderot does not accept this definition: 'Ce serait un singulier abus des mots que d'appeler sensibilité cette facilité de rendre toutes natures' (1994, p.77). Appealing again to the example of the actor Garrick, he denies that it may be possible to move from emotion to emotion in the short space required by artificial performances:

Garrick passe sa tête entre les deux battants d'une porte, et, dans l'intervalle de quatre à cinq secondes, son visage passe successivement de la joie folle à la joie modérée, de cette joie à la tranquillité, de la tranquillité à la surprise, de la surprise à l'étonnement, de l'étonnement à la tristesse, de la tristesse à l'abattement, de l'abattement à l'effroi, de l'effroi à l'horreur, de l'horreur au désespoir, et remonte de ce dernier degré à celui d'où il était descendu. Est-ce que son âme a pu éprouver toutes ces sensations [...]? Je n'en crois rien, ni vous non plus.

(Diderot, 1994, p.62)

Diderot instead conceives *sensibilité* as idiosyncrasy, organic feebleness, madness (1994, pp.43-44):

La sensibilité, selon la seule acception qu'on est donnée jusqu'à présent à ce terme, est, ce me semble, cette disposition compagne de la faiblesse des organes, suite de la mobilité du diaphragme, de la vivacité de l'imagination, de la délicatesse de nerfs, qui incline à compatir, à frissonner, à admirer, à craindre, à se troubler, à pleurer, à s'évanouir, à secourir, à fuir, à crier, à perdre la raison, à exagérer, à mépriser, à dédaigner, à n'avoir aucune idée précise du vrai, du bon et du beau, à être injuste, à être fou.

(Diderot, 1994, p.77)

Far from being the ability to mould one's feelings, it becomes a narrow repertoire of emotional weakness that hinders the interpretation of many characters. On the other hand, it is the lack of sensibility that grants the actor the ability to be a faithful and ductile interpreter of the character:

Quelle est donc la qualité acquise ou naturelle qui constitue le grand acteur dans l'Avare [...] et tant d'autres caractère tragiques ou comiques, où la sensibilité est diamétralement opposé à l'esprit du rôle? La facilité de connaître et de copier toutes les natures.

(Diderot, 1994, p.76)

But this easiness in copying all natures, which the first *interlocuteur* places in opposition to sensibility, is precisely what Sainte-Albine and Sticotti call *sensibilité!*

And yet, even Diderot fleetingly acknowledges the distinct and contrasting connotations that the notions of sensibility and feeling may acquire; in a passage towards the end of the *Paradoxe* the first interlocutor says: 'C'est qu'être sensible est une chose, et sentir est une autre. L'une est une affaire d'âme, l'autre une affaire de jugement' (1994, p.109). It appears that although Diderot remains adamant that sensibility is not for the actor, he still has to concede that feeling may, as long as it is dependant on judgement.

In pushing his crusade against sensibility to the extremes, making it the emblem of mediocrity and incompatible with genius, Diderot takes us by surprise when he admits that 'si la Nature a pétri une âme sensible, c'est la mienne' (1994, p.98) and he describes an episode when he expressed his sensibility in an enthusiastic and deeply affected response to hearing of the success of one of Sedaine's plays:

je jette mes bras autour de son cou; la voix me manque, et les larmes me coulent le long de joues. Voilà l'homme sensible et médiocre. Sedaine, immobile et froid, me regarde et me dit: «*Ah! Monsieur Diderot, que vous êtes beau!*» Voilà l'observateur et l'homme de génie.

(Diderot, 1994, p.64)

The sensitive man becomes equated with the raw material which author and actor peruse to create or impersonate their characters: 'Les hommes chauds, violents, sensibles, sont en scène; ils donnent le spectacle, mais ils n'en jouissent pas. C'est d'après eux que l'homme de génie fait sa copie' (1994, p.43) while 'Le grand comédien observe les phénomènes; l'homme sensible lui sert de modèle, il le médite, et trouve, de réflexion, ce qu'il faut ajouter ou retrancher pour le mieux' (1994, p.69).

By the same token that the sensitive man is degraded to an object of curiosity at the most, the dispassionate rationality of the man of genius, whether great actor or great playwright, is not spared a similar debasement. The detachment of the actor, guarantee of a perfected and consistent performance, comes to correspond to the ability to be deceitful: 'Qu'est-ce donc qu'un grand comédien? Un grand persifleur tragique ou comique' (1994, p.63). Diderot, alongside most other eighteenth-century theorists and practitioners of the theatre, does not doubt that the spectator experiences the feelings portrayed by the character. But the spectator, under the spell of the character's feelings, is fooled in supposing that the same spell is also experienced by the actor: 'tout son talent consiste non pas à sentir, comme vous le supposez, mais à rendre si scrupuleusement les signes extérieurs du sentiment, que vous vous y trompiez' (1994, p.45). Probably inspired by a similar passage from *L'Art du Théâtre* (Riccoboni F., 1750, pp.36-37), Diderot proposes that actors are well aware of such rift between what they appear to feel and what they truly do not feel at all,

but they guard it as their secret: 'Ces vérités seraient démontrées que les grands comédiens n'en conviendraient pas: c'est leur secret' (1994, p.44).

This method of acting costs the actor a great deal of exertion, so to make her tired at the end of the performance, but untouched by the feelings:

Le socque et le cothurne déposé, sa voix est éteinte, il éprouve une extrême fatigue, il va changer de linge ou de se coucher; mais il ne lui reste ni trouble, ni douleur, ni mélancolie, ni affaissement d'âme. C'est vous qui remportez toutes ces impressions. L'acteur est las, et vous triste; c'est qu'il s'est démené sans rien sentir, et que vous avez senti sans vous démener.

(Diderot, 1994, p.46)

The actor is tired, the spectator unhappy: an idea clearly inspired by François Riccoboni's suggestion that the signs of fatigue in the actor at the end of a performance should be attributed to her physical and not her emotional exertion (Riccoboni F., 1750, p.41).

In a further passage Diderot arrives to a striking description of the actor in full consonance with Luigi Riccoboni's (1728, pp.36-37) notion of the courtier as the quintessential actor:

il pleure comme un prêtre incrédule qui prêche la Passion; comme un séducteur aux genoux d'une femme qu'il n'aime pas, mais qu'il veut tromper; comme un gueux dans la rue ou à la porte d'une église, qui vous injurie lorsqu'il désespère de vous toucher; ou comme une courtisane qui ne sent rien, mais qui se pâme entre vos bras.

(Diderot, 1994, p.46)

The paradox of the actor, to make the spectator feel what she herself should not and would not feel, becomes an act of conscious deceit. From this conclusion to a moral condemnation of the actor reminiscent of Rousseau's, there is but a short step:

Dans le monde, lorsqu'ils ne sont pas bouffons, je les trouve polis, caustiques et froids, fastueux, dissipés, dissipateurs, intéressés, plus frappés de nos ridicules que touchés de nos maux; d'un esprit assez rassis au spectacle d'un événement fâcheux, ou au récit d'une aventure

pathétique; isolés, vagabonds, à l'ordre des grands; peu des mœurs, point d'amis.

(Diderot, 1994, pp.83-84)

The effort by Sainte-Albine-Hill-Sticotti to build a theory which drew together sensibility, understood as the ability to adapt oneself to the expression of all emotions, with judgement, intended as studying and applying a correct interpretation of the role, had travelled in the direction of shaping acting as a morally useful enterprise, very much along the lines indicated by Luigi Riccoboni in his efforts to reform theatre in its artistic and moral aspects. The schism announced by the *Paradoxe* between a sensibility reported to be at the mercy of idiosyncratic emotions, and a rational detachment conceived as ultimately manipulative and malicious, risks plunging theatre and acting back into an aura of antipathy and distrust.

The detailed analysis that I have dedicated to Diderot's use of the words 'sensible' and 'sensibilité' has been restricted to his critique of acting, because I have particularly contrasted it with the connotation given to the same words by those theories of the actor's art against which the *Paradoxe* places itself. However, Diderot's controversial rendition also reflects the parable of meaning that 'sensibilité' withstood in the eighteenth century.

Originally used to define a certain sentimental quality in the behaviour of the upper classes, ambivalent attitudes towards its elitist overtones became apparent in some French literary works (Vila, 1998). A case in point is Prévost's (1759) novel *Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, in which the male protagonist is the paradigm of sensibility. Des Grieux, in the novel, describes this quality, which he skilfully employs to move other men to sympathise with his pleas, as an indisputable sign of a man's 'grandeur' (Prévost, 1759, p.108). Sensibility is certainly effective in warranting him the solidarity of his aristocratic peers, but its positive value becomes problematic in relation to Des Grieux's immoral behaviour, which reaches peaks of treachery, debasement, and even criminality. Because his sensibility is an effective means of exciting the sympathy of other characters, despite his persistent misconduct, it reveals itself as a deceitful sentimental double-talk (Vila, 1998, p.113).



This problematization of sensibility tended to remain intrinsic to the meaning of sensibility, despite the evolution that this term underwent during the Enlightenment. As I will discuss more in detail in the next chapter, the birth, in the eighteenth century, of the philosophical theory of sensism meant that the senses were granted primacy over religious belief and even rational judgement, in determining all knowledge, including moral principles. Therefore sensibility gained a positive connotation in as far as it stood for the means through which human beings could access their 'natural goodness, benevolence and compassion' (Csengei, 2011, p.5). Nonetheless, sensibility carried an intrinsic ambivalence, implying

a potential dangerous quality that could lead to emotional excess, moral degeneracy, and physical debilitation. At the height of its conceptual popularity, therefore, sensibility was situated somewhere between enlightenment and pathology: it was seen as instrumental in the quest for reason and virtue, but was also implicated in the epidemic of nervous maladies that seemed to be overtaking the population of France and of Europe in general.

(Vila, 1998, p.1)

Diderot's use of the term seems to waver between these positive and negative renditions of sensibility. On the one hand, he despises actors who, because of their great sensibility, are culpable of an excess of unregulated feeling that gives them the mark of mediocrity. On the other hand, while he praises the absolute lack of sensibility in great actors, he ends up linking it to their depravity. If for Prévost, sensibility did not guarantee moral conduct, for Diderot it is lack of sensibility that seems to grant mankind a presence of mind and a want of compassion.

Ultimately, the debate about sensibility and judgement in the art of the actor, not only reflects, but also deepens, the examination of sensibility in its relations with morality. Because the conundrum of the actor poses the question of the moral status of the theatre, establishing the principles of the actor's art becomes essential in understanding the function and the value of theatre for society. Unsurprisingly, this will constitute a central point of controversy within the eighteenth-century debate.

## CHAPTER 4 – THE PARADOX ANALYSED

### INTRODUCTION

The title of Diderot's seminal text, *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, is not only paradigmatic of a question central to theories of the theatre in general, but also of a flurry of ideas specific to the eighteenth-century debate. It could be argued that the eighteenth-century theorists, while all agreeing that there is something peculiarly interesting in the art of the actor that merits close examination, and generally identifying the area of interest as the workings of feeling versus those of judgment, arrive at a number of formulations that may best be termed 'the paradoxes of the actor'. In this chapter I will dissect this question from the point of view of the eighteenth-century cultural and philosophical background, in preparation for a psychoanalytic interpretation that I will propose in the next chapter. By placing the points in question within the philosophical and cultural context of the eighteenth century, I will show how the careful consideration given to the actor reflects a similar preoccupation with the functions of the human mind at large.

The dichotomies raised by the eighteenth-century debate on the actor's art are multiple. Indeed, the one highlighted by the *Paradoxe*, between an actor who feels and one who does not, polarizes the argument into what William Archer (1888, p.11) will helpfully call the emotionalist versus the anti-emotionalist position. In the next section I will particularly address this question in the light of Archer's analysis and of wider references. There are, though, other interesting polarities, which get obscured in Diderot's argument, but afford critical insights into the mystery of the actor's art. Of particular relevance is the distinction between an actor who plays her own feelings and one who plays the character's feelings, and the somewhat related contrast between an actor who studies her role versus one who plays it by some form of instinct or superficial imitation. As I will endeavour to demonstrate later in the chapter, it is only when these aspects are considered simultaneously that the paradoxes may indeed admit of a resolution.

## DUAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ACTING

### William Archer – the paradox put to the test

In 1888, only fifty years following the publication of the *Paradoxe*, but more than a hundred after its composition, William Archer, a drama critic and writer, put Diderot's theory to a sort of experimental test. His preoccupation with the *Paradoxe* had brought him to question the validity of a theory that sprang out of a dialogue between 'a dogmatic First and a docile Second', rather than, as he puts it, between 'a trained psychologist and an experienced and versatile actor' (Archer, 1888, p.3). In Archer's view, Diderot's dialogue was the rambling speech of a philosopher who, dissatisfied with his own theory, was not prepared to admit it and rather imposed his ideas on the reader as the first *interlocuteur* of the *Paradoxe* forces them on the 'dumb' second.

Archer's appraisal of Diderot's work is clearly limiting given the enormous influence that the book has had on future scholarship, 'by establishing itself as the paradigmatic text in its field' (Roach, 1993, p.117). However it is in turn consequential at least for two reasons: first, it reveals and dismantles some of the key errors in Diderot's argument; secondly, it calls on the authority of actors to address the conundrum of their art in a systematic way.

That Diderot used some of the terminology in a problematic way, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, is a strong objection of Archer's. In particular it is the use of the term '*sensibilité*' that rightly disturbs him. If sensibility is what Diderot assumes it to be, 'Hysteria, surely, is a much apter name for the disease' (Archer, 1888, p.36). Incidentally, it needs to be clarified that Diderot's understanding of '*sensibilité*' as excessive and misplaced feeling did not have a connotation of femininity as the term 'hysteria' used by Archer seems to imply. As has been shown,

French writers did not polarize sensibility in relation to sex and gender nearly as much as did their British counterparts, at least not until the last few decades of the century; rather, even the most hard-boiled philosophes prided themselves on their sensibility and saw nothing unmanly about cultivating this quality.

(Vila, 1998, p.3)

The main difficulty with Diderot's rendition of '*sensibilité*' is perhaps his forced assumption that the only alternative to his ideally unfeeling and expressive actor is an actor so engrossed in feelings (or rather hysteria) that her power of expression gets overthrown. As Archer points out:

the use of inward emotion is to reinforce, not to supplant, outward expression. No one has ever doubted that the actor must be able to express what he feels, or feeling will avail him to nothing. The question at issue is whether he ought, or ought not, to feel what he expresses.

(Archer, 1888, p.89)

To avoid these errors and more, Archer wished, as I mentioned, for a constructive dialogue between a psychologist and a distinguished actor. Despite being no psychologist, he believed that by interrogating actors he could at least avoid that mistake, which Diderot makes all too often, of making assumptions about actors' methods. Suffice the example of Garrick, about whom Diderot was misinformed, as I shall discuss below. Moreover, Archer does not concede to the objection that actors lie about their art either deliberately or because they are unaware of it. By interrogating as many as he can reach, he hopes to arrive at more reliable conclusions than Diderot's.

Through his systematic collection of responses from eminent actors, he establishes that great actors (or indeed the majority of them) do actually feel while they act and that they consider this 'feeling' status to be their most powerful means of communicating with the audience. In order to invalidate the objection, already advanced by François Riccoboni and adopted by Diderot, that actors may think they feel or perhaps may like to mislead others into thinking it, but in reality they don't, Archer asks actors to report about physical signs of emotions during their performances. He believes that signs like shedding tears, speaking in a broken voice, or, even more characteristically, blushing or paling, cannot be feigned; their abundant presence, testified by lots of his respondents, proves beyond question that actors in performance are truly feeling.

Having established that the actor feels, Archer asks a second crucial question; in his words: 'In the first place, there were two questions at issue – a question of fact and a question of theory: do actors feel? and ought they to feel?' (1888, p.195). The importance of the second question lies, in essence, with what Archer identifies as the problem of expression: actors ought to feel if by doing so they enhance their expressive capabilities and ultimately their effect on the spectators. His respondents are vastly in favour of this notion, providing Archer with a solid argument to dismantle Diderot's paradox of an actor who does not feel in order to make a spectator feel. Such operation re-establishes order into a theory which goes back to Roman rhetoric and poetics (Horace's 'Si vis me flere, dolendum est/ Primum ipsi tibi') and has been universally adhered to, including by Shakespeare, as Archer is eager to point out (1888, p.44).

But dismantling a paradox may sometimes have the effect of generating a different one, and such is the case here. Archer does not wish to object to Diderot's illustrations, of which there are several in the *Paradoxe*, of the actor's ability to control her performance with a degree of shrewdness. For instance, during an intensively dramatic moment of a performance, an actress, piqued by the burst of laughter in the audience, turns to harangue them: 'la Duclos, qui faisait Inès, indignée, dit au parterre: "Ris donc, sot parterre, au plus bel endroit de la pièce." Le parterre l'entendit, se contint; l'actrice reprit son rôle, et ses larmes et celles du spectateur coulèrent' (Diderot, 1994, p.69). Examples such as this pose the dilemma whether a state of awareness of one's surroundings and even some preoccupation with personal matters extraneous to the performance, are compatible with the actor feeling her character's emotions. As I will discuss below, Archer puts this question to his respondents. Before returning to how Archer proposes to solve the actor's dilemma, and how his solution has roots in the eighteenth-century debate itself, I will briefly consider how eighteenth-century theorists examined the question of a possible paradox for the spectator.

## The paradox of the spectator in the eighteenth century

There is a fairly unanimous presumption in the authors whose theories on the actor I have analysed, including Diderot, that the actor is to induce the spectator to feel the character's emotions. In this sense the spectator is supposed to succumb to the theatrical illusion. This presumption, however, is not fully straightforward, as exemplified by the controversy between two eighteenth-century English men of letters.

In his *Preface to Shakespeare* of 1765 Samuel Johnson affirms: 'The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players' (Johnson, 1765, p.14) to which William Kenrick replies:

We do not pretend to say that the spectators are not always in their senses; or that they do not know (if the question were put to them) that the stage is only a stage, and the players only players. But we will venture to say they are often so intent on the scene as to be absent with regard to everything else. A spectator properly affected by a dramatic representation makes no reflections about the fiction or the reality of it, so long as the action proceeds without grossly offending or palpably imposing on the senses.

(Vickers, 1979<sup>28</sup>, cited in Sidnell, 1994, p.85 footnote 27)

It is evident that the contention is not so much about whether a spectator is so engrossed in the theatrical illusion that he suffers a psychotic episode, but rather what one chooses to emphasize as the crux of the spectator's experience: his awareness of fiction and capacity for detachment or, on the opposite front, his entrancement and emotional participation in the drama. For what concerns all the authors whose texts I have analysed in Chapter 3, the emphasis of the theatrical effect remains on the need for emotional identification between spectator and character, by which is meant the need for the spectator to be made to feel the character's emotions as if they were his. However, running a somewhat parallel course, in those same authors there is also a vigorous call for the function of the spectator's rational judgement, in order that he can be critical of the actor and thus promote her improvement.

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<sup>28</sup> Brian Vickers, editor (1979), *Shakespeare: the Critical Heritage*. Vol. 5, pp.1765-1774. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

As I have hinted at in the previous chapter, one reason for giving prominence to the spectator's judgement on the actor's art is the need for some of the theorists to avail themselves of the status of spectators to justify their incursions into the debate. Sainte-Albine had already pre-empted the possible objection to his entitlement to write on the art of the actor, given that he was not himself an actor, although as a playwright he could claim some acquaintance with the subject at stake. That specific objection would be raised to Diderot, the playwright, by Madame Riccoboni, the actress, in her famous letter to him (Diderot, 1994, p.126): 'Vous avez bien de l'esprit, bien des connaissances; mais vous ne savez pas les petits détails d'un art qui comme tous les autres a sa main-d'œuvre'. This admonition is the epitome of what most actors probably thought about the competence of others to judge about their art. As Dumesnil (1823) describes in her *Mémoires*, actors act as tyrants in their theatres and warn playwrights not to overstep the mark.

Sainte-Albine had justified his infringement declaring that anyone can write on the actor's art because: 'sur les Arts, qui puisent leur principes dans la nature et dans la raison, tout homme sensible et raisonnable a droit de hasarder ses conjectures' (1749, p.8). Moreover, he had also advanced the suggestion that one should be more suspicious of judgements coming from actors themselves as pertains to their craft, as they may have a vested interest in describing it as they personally profess it, rather than as it should be. This criticism of the incompetence of actors to judge of their art is a perfect antidote to the censure that actors may wish to impose on others on the same subject, and it will be favoured in many corners. Diderot, for instance, will accuse actors of a calculated self-interest in keeping their secrets: 'Ces vérités seraient démontrées que les grands comédiens n'en conviendraient pas; c'est leur secret' (Diderot, 1994, p.44). He is echoing a similar observation made by François Riccoboni against his companions:

Etonnés d'une si parfaite imitation du vrai, quelques-uns l'ont prise pour la vérité même, et ont cru l'Acteur affecté du sentiment qu'il représentoit. Ils l'ont accablé d'éloges, que l'Acteur méritoit, mais qui partoient d'une fausse idée, et le Comédien qui trouvoit son avantage à ne la point détruire, les a laissés dans l'erreur en appuyant leur avis.

The status of the spectator as judge of the actor's art is hence partly a question of authority and ultimately of professional rivalry. However, calls for spectators to be critical about the actor's craft came sometimes from actors themselves. Luigi Riccoboni dedicates his pioneering attempt to reform the art of the actor, the poem *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa*, to both actors and spectators, because of the acknowledgement that there is interdependence between the good habits of actors and the taste of spectators. The one has the power to elevate the other or similarly to corrupt it, in a reciprocal influence.

In fact, the two aspects of the spectator's experience, his detached judgement on the actor's performance and his surrender to the theatrical illusion, are more intertwined than appears at first sight. Until perhaps more recent experiments – I am thinking, for instance, of Grotowski's (De Marinis, 2000) – it is a cliché that the chief purpose of the actor's art is to be exercised for the benefit of the audience. Referring back to 'Horace's dictum in the *Ars Poetica* that poetry should mix the "pleasing" and the "instructive" ' (Harris, 2014, p.174), such benefit may entail enjoyment, moral improvement, or both. Luigi Riccoboni, alongside many of his contemporaries, including Diderot, regarded pleasure and moral instruction as the intertwined desirable effects of theatre on audiences (Cappelletti, 1986). Precisely because spectators need to be granted the appropriate experience and by consequence the desired psychological response (be it enjoyment, moral improvement or both), it is in their interest to retain some control over such an important matter, especially where moral improvement is concerned. Hence the capacity for detached critical evaluation will act as a guarantor for the quality of the experience during the succumbing to the illusion. I will indeed dwell on the moral question in Chapter 6. For the purpose of this discussion what needs highlighting is the complexity of the problem.

### **The actor's double feeling**

Although the contention about the spectator brings to the fore the value of his rational judgement, the belief in the benefit of the spectator's emotional



identification with the character is not at stake: Brecht is a long way off. The debate rather establishes that spectators' brains can engage in what William Archer (1888, p.150) called, in reference to actors, a double or multiple action: they can feel the character's emotions while also being aware of their surroundings and conscious that they are a different person from the character. This is what Archer proposed to be the solution to the actor's paradox: 'The real paradox of acting, it seems to me, resolves itself into the paradox of dual consciousness' (1888, p.150).

As Kenrick points out in response to Johnson, the spectator can well be in his senses while being fully captivated by the emotional experience of the character. Hence, one could presume, like Archer does, that such an assumption may be the solution to the paradox of the actor as well as to that of the spectator. But I argue that this may rather be a red herring, simply pointing to an obvious psychological truth (the brain's ability to engage in multiple actions), which has got little to do with the question of sensibility and judgement in the actor's art. This error is what Diderot ultimately falls into when he describes the actors as the cynical masters who bicker about their own marital discords while playing the characters of two tender lovers (Diderot, 1994, pp.57-60).

The same misleading solution to the paradox of the actor, was indeed offered by James Boswell in his essay *On the profession of a player* (1929) published in *The London Magazine* in 1770, the same year that saw in France the appearance of the *Garrick* (Sticotti, 1770). Boswell, like Sticotti, takes Garrick's practice as the quintessence of great acting. In affirming that Garrick feels while he acts, he also claims that the great actor would easily admit to it:

I am persuaded that Mr. Garrick will tell us, that it is easy to him to play a part in which the passions display themselves naturally. In such a part, when he is once entered into the character, its different effusions are like the effusions of his own mind.

(Boswell, 1929, p.13)

In fact we know from his correspondence that Garrick was an emotionalist. In a letter of 1769 he wrote:

Mad<sup>m</sup> *Clairon* is so conscious and certain of what she can do, that she never (I believe) had the feelings of the instant come upon her unexpectedly. –but I pronounce that the greatest strokes of Genius, have been unknown to the Actor himself, 'till Circumstance, and the warmth of the Scene has sprung the Mine as it were, as much to his own Surprize, as that of the Audience–

(*Letters 2*, p.635, Garrick, 1963<sup>29</sup>, cited in Roach, 1993, p.96)

Incidentally, yet again Diderot is contradicted as pertains the reliability of his referencing: as I have discussed in the previous chapter, in the *Paradoxe* (1994, p.81) he employs the example of Garrick's practice as illustration of an anti-emotionalist position, equating it indirectly with Clairon's style and craft. Perhaps Garrick would have hardly felt flattered if he had known Diderot's opinion of him.

Boswell was therefore in the right as far as Garrick's views of the actor feeling her part were concerned. Despite this, he shared Diderot's misgivings about taking the emotional identification between actor and character as an absolute state of mind.

I am aware that my proposition, that a player is really and truly the character in which he appears, may be misrepresented; and I remember to have heard the most illustrious author of this age, whose conversation is thought by many even to excel his writings, exert his eloquence against this proposition, and with the luxuriance of humour for which he is distinguished, render it exceedingly ridiculous: "If, sir," said he, "Garrick believes himself to be every character that he represents, he is a madman and ought to be confined. Nay, sir, he is a villain, and ought to be hanged. [...] If, sir, he has really been that person in his own mind, he has in his own mind been as guilty as Macbeth".

(Boswell, 1929, pp.14-15)

I have cited this passage at length to show how the question whether emotional identification is equivalent to a psychotic state, is posed for the actor as it was for the spectator (incidentally, again by Samuel Johnson, who is the illustrious author cited in the quotation above), and similarly refuted.

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<sup>29</sup> David Garrick (1963), *Letters*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Belknap Press.

Boswell's response to the absurdity of an actor who has fallen mad is the concept of 'double feeling':

If I may be allowed to conjecture what is the nature of that mysterious power by which a player really is the character which he represents, my notion is, that he must have a kind of double feeling. He must assume in a strong degree the character which he represents, while he at the same time retains the consciousness of his own character. The feelings and passions of the character which he represents must take full possession as it were of the antechamber of his mind, while his own character remains in the innermost recess.

(Boswell, 1929, pp.17-18)

The concept of double feeling is very similar to William Archer's idea of double consciousness (Archer, 1888, p.150) and possibly its precursor. Archer collects a series of illustrations from his respondents about situations in which they were acting in full emotional identification with the character while also entertaining other extraneous thoughts on their minds. One case in point is about an actress whose little daughter was seriously ill while she was playing Juliet:

Never, she says, did she enter more thoroughly into the part, and never did she play it with greater effect. She was strung up by excitement to a higher emotional pitch than she could ordinarily attain. And all the time the best part of her mind was with her child.

(Archer, 1888, pp.157-158)

A more trivial incident was reported by Salvini, who once found himself in the embarrassing situation of feeling the belt of his trousers giving away during a passionate scene; artfully, 'he dashed at a tiger-skin which covered the divan and swathed it round his body [...] "I was told," he says, "that I had never played the scene with greater intensity of rage, irony and despair" ' (Archer, 1888, p.163). Supplying plenty of similar examples, Archer demonstrates that actors may indeed, during a performance, engage in activities which are simultaneous but extraneous to the performance, such as removing a diamond earring from the stage or quarrelling with one's spouse, but this is no proof that the actor is not feeling the character's emotions.

The supposition of double feeling or double consciousness in the spectator and in the actor may well state a psychological truth about the human mind, and in

fact both Boswell and Archer emphasize that this phenomenon pertains to all human beings, not just the actor. As Boswell puts it: 'The double feeling which I have mentioned is experienced by many men in the common intercourse of life. Were nothing but the real character to appear, society would not be half so safe and agreeable as we find it' (Boswell, 1929, p.19).

Archer's declaration as to the universality of double consciousness is even more unequivocal:

I looked upon the double action of the brain as a matter of universal experience, a thing to be assumed just as one assumes that the normal man has two legs. I did not regard it as a tendency peculiar to actors, but common to all men.

(Archer, 1888, p.151)

Although he maintains that this activity must take a special form in the actor, his affirmation begs the question of how double consciousness would be the core of the actor's art, if it is as universal as having two legs.

#### **THE CONFLUENCE OF FEELING AND UNDERSTANDING IN THE ACTOR'S ART**

Archer's (or indeed Boswell's) solution to the actor's paradox, aimed at confuting Diderot's thesis, advances a psychological explanation that is not that different from the *philosophe's* own suggestions. Actors are deemed to be champions in dissociating their feelings from their consciousness, whether they do it to obliterate them completely (Diderot) or to let them flow without disturbing the rational mind (Archer).

But the actor's paradox, falsely solved by Diderot and Archer, may neither be that she does not feel while the audience feels, nor that she feels in a dissociated way. Perhaps the truest paradox is best described by John Hill: that the actor feels, but she does so in a peculiar way. In a passage already quoted in Chapter 3, he writes:

Here is the great perfection of the science: we would have him, while he feels all this, yet command his passions, so that they do not disturb his utterance, and yet we would not have that expression he keeps for

himself take away the pain of it from us; we would have his manner of pronouncing the words take all that effect upon us, which the passage has on the most sensible reader; but we would not have it take that effect on himself.

(Hill, 1755, pp.54-55)

According to many of the authors that I have amply considered in Chapter 3, the actor feels through a special form of sensibility which is guided by judgment and understanding. Such judgement and understanding originate in the study that a good actor always applies to the character she needs to impersonate; the need for study and understanding are conspicuous clues to the insight into the actor's art. This is because of an apparently simple fact: that the actor does not play her personal feelings, she plays those of the character. As Boswell says of Garrick: 'when he is once entered into the character, its different effusions are like the effusions of his own mind' (Boswell, 1929, p.13). As I have already shown, according to Luigi Riccoboni (1728, p.17), the actor must endeavour to feel what she represents so that what is another person's concern may be believed to be her own. Her act of feeling is neither the abandonment to a spontaneous self-expression, nor an act of feigning for the purpose of an abstract representation. It is an act of study and understanding at the service of the feelings of another: the character. Such act we call an interpretation, and I shall discuss in the next chapter the strong parallels with the use of the word in psychoanalysis.

### **Diderot's investigation on acting as trajectory**

It could be argued that the trajectory of Diderot's writing on the theatre exemplifies the examination from these different perspectives of the actor's mystery of how she comes to interpret her character. In the project of *Le Fils naturel* and the associated *Entretiens*, the dilemma of the relationship between actor's and character's feelings prompts the solution of an absolute correspondence between the two, because actor and character are in fact the same person. If it were true that this project reveals a particular preoccupation with the status of the actor's feelings, it would be easier to make sense of Diderot's game with fiction and reality that characterizes the play and the accompanying dialogue.

In an intermediate period, represented by the ideas he expresses in one of his *Lettres à Mademoiselle Jodin* (1994, pp.145-197), composed in 1766, Diderot touches on the conviction that feeling and understanding in actors must go hand in hand, coming the closest to the theories of his supposed adversaries:

Un acteur qui n'a que du sens et du jugement est froid; celui qui n'a que de la verve et de la sensibilité est fou. C'est un certain tempérament de bon sens et de chaleur qui fait l'homme sublime; et sur la scène et dans le monde, celui qui montre plus qu'il ne sent, fait rire au lieu de toucher. Ne cherchez donc jamais à aller au-delà du sentiment que vous aurez; tâcher de le rendre juste.

(Diderot, 1994, p.158)

This is certainly the formulation which is most akin to that of Sticotti and his predecessors, and it leaves us to wonder why Diderot neglected it in his theoretical writings. Seeping through the letters is mistrust for the morality of actors, which he insightfully links to the problem of sensibility. In another letter to Jodin, he states: 'Il y a bien de la différence entre jouer et sentir. C'est la différence de la courtisane qui séduit, à la femme tendre qui aime et qui s'enivre elle-même et un autre' (1994, p.160). Perhaps it is the preoccupation with keeping the character's feelings secured from the risk of contamination by those of the actor that brings Diderot to his last theoretical deflection.

Ultimately, as we know very well, the dilemma of the relationship between the emotional life of the actor and that of the character is made explicit and solved in the *Paradoxe* by attributing to the actor the ability to display a feeling which she does not feel. By this point, the moral preoccupations about actors have given place to a frank and cynical mistrust towards them. It seems that Diderot's extensive explorations on the subject would not allow him to reconcile a craft based on the ability to control and manipulate the arousal and expression of feelings with the presumption of honesty and integrity. If the actor feels, she must be a bad actor; if she does not feel, she must be a bad woman. Chapter 6 will give me ample scope to discuss the relationship between the actor's art and the moral status of the theatre and to propose a solution. In the meantime, it is of note that it is precisely because the moral question is a constituent feature of

the issue at hand that the debate on the art of the actor must be of past and present concern.

The dissociation of feelings between actor and character posited by Diderot, is decisively refused as a solution by the 'emotionalist' theorists. Nevertheless, many of these authors toy with the notion of feeling as feigning. Sainte-Albine for instance distinguishes a lover from a spectator in that the lover may allow for being grossly abused by feigned feelings which flatter his vanity, while the spectator consents to be deceived only up to a point: 'Il consent d'être abusé, mais il veut que son erreur ait l'air raisonnable' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.40). Likewise, Luigi Riccoboni will allow the actor to feign only when all attempts at feeling have failed her: 'E per arte forzando i sensi tuoi,/ O senti, o fallo credere all'astante;/ E la tanto vantata ignota a Noi/ Arte Mimica cerca, pensa, inventa,/ E sia fittizio il Ver s'altro non puoi' (1728, pp.33-34)<sup>30</sup>. The preoccupation with the special status of the actor's feelings as pertains to truth versus feigning runs through Luigi Riccoboni's entire poem on the actor's art, as testified by his labouring with the distinction between the concepts of false and feigned.

La principale, e necessaria parte  
Del Comico è di far chiaro vedere  
Che da la Verità non si diparte.  
Così facendo, quasi persuadere  
Potrai che non sia falso quel che è finto,  
E se fin là non vai non puoi piacere.

(1728, p.17)<sup>31</sup>

Luigi Riccoboni dwells on the tension between false and feigned in other passages; at one point he supposes a dramatic situation in which an actress has to portray a female character who feigns crying in order to deceive a male character into believing that she loves him. This actress, he maintains, will have to represent the subtle nuances of a credible but faked sadness, so that the male character may perceive as real what the audience understands as feigned (1728, p.35). For Riccoboni this is precisely the core of the actor's art:

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<sup>30</sup> And artfully forcing your feelings,/ Either feel, or make the audience believe you do;/ And look for, think about, invent, the Mimetic Art/ so much vaunted and ignored by us,/ and let Truth be feigned if you cannot otherwise.

<sup>31</sup> The principal, and necessary role/ Of the Actor is to show clearly/ That there has been no departure from Truth./ In so doing, you can almost convince/That what is feigned is not false,/ And if you don't get that far, you cannot please.

Sono queste le reti, e son gli aguati  
Ove il Comico attende i Spettatori  
per renderli confusi, edificati.  
Poiché d'un doppio finto ammiratori  
Veggon, che senza ancora il sentimento  
Fingi il pianto, e da vero t'addolori.  
In ciò consiste l'Arte, ed il talento.

(1728, p.36)<sup>32</sup>

And who better than courtiers, with their constant hiding of their true feelings under feigned ones, can be teachers of the actor's art? Again, the subtleties of the argument risk making it collapse backwards into an anti-emotionalist position, and yet it shall not be so. Understanding the peculiarities of the actor's feelings entails diving into the depths of a psychological process that, far from being as simple as a man having two legs, does nevertheless illuminate hidden functions of the human psyche at large.

### **The actor's art and the question of nature**

As I discussed in Chapter 3, eighteenth-century theories of the actor's art, renouncing the rhetorical tradition of the expression of emotions through fixed gestures, identify the peculiarity of the actor in coming to feel the character's emotions through study and understanding, rather than by some spontaneous reaction or personal impression – the instinctual acting condemned by Diderot and many others. Therefore the investigation of what the actor needs to study and understand must now come into focus. This I will call, by employing a suggestive word from the debate on the actor, the question of nature.

The specific reference to nature as intending to reflect the study of the naturalistic expression of emotions is exemplarily expressed in *The Actor* under the heading of *Concerning what is called natural playing*:

The term, Playing Naturally, is very frequent in the mouths of actors and of critics; but they have not ascertained its meaning. If, by playing

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<sup>32</sup> These are the nets, and the snares/ Where the Actor waits upon the Spectators/ To make them confused, edified./ As admirers of a double fiction/ They can see that even without feeling/ you feign crying, and you truly suffer./ The Art, and the skill consist in this.



naturally, be meant the acting up to nature in the several characters that are given to be represented, doubtless it is the consummate point of theatrical excellence; and all that has been written in this treatise tends to it: but many express by it another thing [...] faulty in the greatest degree, [which] depends upon an error already mentioned, the actor's feeling for himself, and not as his character; and tho' called by this name, nothing can be more unnatural. Natural playing, when it flows from a perfect understanding of the whole art and the rules of the profession is the excellence of the theatrical representation; but those who use the term, generally employ it to express that dependence upon nature, which excludes all the assistance of art: and it has been observed before, that such nature will never make a player. That playing which appears natural, because it is divested of all pomp and ceremony, is the greatest that is possible; but natural as this appears, it is the result of perfect art.

(Hill, 1755, pp.258-259)

As well explained by Hill, the word 'nature' is used by most authors in two different ways. One way is to mean natural endowments, those skills of the individual actor that do not derive by any study but are instead part of her inborn personality. In this sense, nature is akin to the concept of 'playing by instinct' in as far as it means a faculty which is given and cannot be modified or controlled in any way. But there is another conspicuous definition of nature, the one which is given prominence by the cultural and philosophical debate of the eighteenth century, and which is essential to my analysis. It is this second meaning of nature that Luigi Riccoboni applies when he exhorts the actor to study the natural expression of emotions through observation guided by consulting her reason (1728, pp.14-15).

The notion that the actor should endeavour to study the expression of emotions in real life in order to transpose them on the stage is valid beyond the dilemma of the *Paradoxe*, of whether such transposition is created through sensibility or is purely an artefact. In point of fact, even the anti-emotionalist François Riccoboni professes the principle of naturalistic expression. Like his father, he urges the actor to study mankind, which is probably the most precise translation of what François calls 'le monde'. With reference to the impersonation of characters, he writes:

On peut, en lisant, apprendre comment pensent les hommes suivant leurs différens caractères, mais ce n'est qu'en les voyant que l'on peut

connoître la manière dont ils expriment leurs pensées. Il faut, pour se former en ce genre, beaucoup d'étude du monde.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, p.60)

In another passage he uses 'nature' and 'monde' almost as synonyms:

Examinons cependant si l'on ne pourroit pas trouver dans la nature, des modèles, qui parfaitement suivis, donneroient l'extrême vérité [...]. Observons le monde: je ne dit pas seulement ce monde choisi qui se pique du bel air; je dit le monde en général.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, p.42)

The idea that the actor should study human nature is almost universal among these thinkers. Boswell admits to the observation of mankind as a form of knowledge peculiar to actors:

it must be observed, that knowledge is not to be circumscribed to what we learn in books and schools; a great variety of it is picked up in the practice of life; and however ignorant low comedians may have been in a relative sense, it may be affirmed that none of them, who have excelled, have been destitute of discernment and observation in the sphere in which they have moved; so that they cannot be said to have been ignorant of their *own subjects*, if that term may be used here.

(Boswell, 1929, p.9)

David Garrick himself, in his short *Essay on Acting*, writes:

The only Way to arrive at *great Excellency* in *Characters of Humour*, is to be very conversant with *Human Nature*, that is the noblest and best Study, by this Way you will more accurately discover the *Workings of Spirit* (or what other Physical Terms you please to call it) upon the different *Modifications of Matter*.

(Garrick, 1744, pp.9-10)

As late as the *Paradoxe*, Diderot – incidentally, echoing once more Goldoni's own dictum – writes in support of the actor perfecting her talents through the study of mankind and the practice of the craft. Goldoni (1983, p.114) had famously claimed that his two guidebooks as a playwright had been 'Mondo e Teatro' [the world and the theatre], and like for François Riccoboni, 'mondo' is best translated as mankind. Diderot similarly declares about actors: 'C'est à l'étude des grands modèles, à la connaissance du cœur humain, à l'usage du

monde, au travail assidu, à l'expérience, et à l'habitude du théâtre, à perfectionner le don de nature' (1994, p.36).

According to these authors, the study of human nature corresponds to the understanding of the determinants of the different manifestations of feeling. Such understanding, as I have amply shown in Chapter 3, is to be reached through the study of those 'given circumstances' which will become unconditionally valued only two centuries later by Stanislavski (1980, pp.50-52). In the next chapter, I will discuss how a psychoanalytic perspective can illuminate the significance of the study of the given circumstances in order to interpret feelings; I will also explain how this particular emphasis on the reaching of feelings through understanding brings the actor's art into a perspective which is utterly relational.

But before entering into such repercussions, I will next highlight some crucial cross-referencing, within the eighteenth-century cultural milieu, between these novel theories of the theatre and paradigmatic developments within science and philosophy. In order to do so, I will concentrate my attention on the concepts, central to the debate on the actor, of nature, sensibility and '*esprit*'. Although it could be maintained that the new scientific discoveries and philosophical ideas unilaterally condition the new aesthetic theories (see Roach, 1993), the complexity of the cultural context seems to suggest that both aesthetic and scientific/philosophical innovations are co-implicated in the shift between the old and the new theories of the human mind.

## **THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHICAL AND CULTURAL DEBATE**

### **Nature**

The focus on the need of the actor to study the expression of emotions in human nature places the debate on the actor in the context of the birth, during the eighteenth century, of a new science of the mind, through which the value of a psychological approach to truth becomes preponderant. At the same time, the debate on the actor, with the pretext of the theatre, will become an opportunity

to engage with the philosophical enquiry of what it is to be human, and will extend to questions about society and the underpinnings of morality in general. In this respect, the eighteenth-century preoccupation with the actor anticipates a comparable surge of interest in the twentieth century, and not solely on the part of Brecht.

The philosophical and cultural movement of the Enlightenment, within which the eighteenth-century debate took place, had one of its most pregnant roots in the influence that the theories of Newton and the English empiricists such as Locke and Hume, wielded on French philosophical thought during a time of crisis of religious orthodoxy (Wade, 1971). In the seventeenth century, Descartes's emphasis on reason had displaced the quest for truth from religion and God, to man and his capacity for thinking. Albeit unintentionally, Descartes's philosophy greatly contributed to the dismissal of religious belief as a possible source of knowledge.

The eighteenth-century concept of nature exemplifies the contrast between the old metaphysical theories and the new philosophy. As beautifully illustrated by the entry in the *Encyclopédie* (Vol.11, pp.44-45), in its metaphysical connotation '*naturel*' is that which is distinguished from the '*surnaturel ou miraculeux*', in as far as it is governed by laws which can be comprehended by man. On the other hand, '*naturel*' is also that which is distinguished from '*artificiel*', in as far as it is not produced by human craft or will. Yet a further clarification specifies that: '*Jamais ce qui est surnaturel et miraculeux ne sauroit être dit naturel; mais ce qui est artificiel peut s'appeler naturel, et il l'est effectivement en-tant qu'il n'est point miraculeux*'. The three planes of the definition of *naturel*, that which is governed by apprehensible laws, that which is not artificial, but also the artificial in as far as it is not supernatural, correspond to the prismatic view of what is intended by nature in the actor's art.

The laws of nature, as they were studied by the natural philosophers, starting with Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, and leading to Boyle and Newton, apply to the physical world, but they also pertain to 'the science of human nature', as Hume called moral philosophy (Ayer, 1980, p.24). In moral philosophy, the

emphasis on the natural as distinct from the supernatural tallies with the idea of a human psychology responding to laws which are determinable, hence dismantling the notion of differences based on divine rights in favour of a view of human nature as 'socially' determined. While the emergence of this new conception corresponds to the preoccupations of a bourgeois audience and anticipates the more radical ideas of naturalism in the next century, it also leads to wider implications.

In as far as humanity is part of nature, it is possible to subject it to systematic study like any other science. Hume for instance maintains 'that the custom of drawing inferences from past to future experience, as well as the assumption of firmer regularities than we have actually discovered, occur no less in the social than in the natural sciences' (Ayer, 1980, p.76). In his *Enquiry concerning human understanding*, he writes:

Where would be the foundation of morals, if particular characters had no certain or determinate powers to produce particular sentiments, and if these sentiments had no constant operation on actions? And with what pretence could we employ our *criticism* upon any poet or polite author, if we could not pronounce the conduct and sentiments of his actors, either natural or unnatural, to such characters, and in such circumstances? It seems almost impossible, therefore, to engage, either in science or action of any kind, without acknowledging the doctrine of necessity, and this *inference* from motives to voluntary actions; from characters to conduct.

(Hume, 2007, [90] p.65<sup>33</sup>, cited in Ayer, 1980, p.76)

Hume talks of the possibility to study the normative principles of feelings and behaviours in accordance to character and circumstances. Although he is not specifically talking about the theatre, he is clearly referring to fictional characters and to the impression they make on the literary critic of either being natural or unnatural as a proof that such normative principles actually must exist. The philosopher, or indeed the actor, can study the laws of human nature, but such study is not an invention, an act of arbitrary or wilful creation (hence the distinction between the *naturel* and the *artificiel*); to stay within nature means to observe and discover what is already given; it means to understand the

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<sup>33</sup> David Hume, 2007, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

functioning of human nature, which is an object of study in its own right and not some idiosyncratic and subjective proposition of the philosopher or the actor. As Sticotti puts it, translating from Hill's *The Actor*: 'L'art du Théâtre est une science, il faut donc l'étudier comme une science' (Sticotti, 1770, p.19).

Nature intended as natural talent and nature intended as 'human nature', as pertains to the distinct uses made by the eighteenth-century theorists of the theatre, become hence intimately linked within the art of the actor: human nature does express itself spontaneously albeit according to its laws. But the question of nature for the actor is to resist giving effect to her own peculiar instinct in order to represent the nature of another: in this sense the art of the actor is not spontaneous while it remains natural. As Sticotti poignantly remarks: 'l'art porté à son comble devient nature, [...] les grands Acteurs ne l'abandonnent jamais; ils élèvent sur cette base un édifice, pour ainsi dire, plus naturel quel la nature même' (1770, p.10). When the actor reproduces nature, trespassing in the realm of the artificial, he needs to follow the laws of nature as he has observed them in mankind, and not act in an arbitrary fashion. In this way the artificial of the actor's art remains natural, or indeed, more natural than nature itself.

Following the principle of nature consists, for the actor, in the operations that *esprit* or understanding apply to the raw material of *sensibilité* or sensibility. *Sensibilité* is the '*cire molle*' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.32), which ties the human nature of the actor to that of all mankind. *Esprit* aptly modifies it in precise reproduction of the natural laws under study. Here we can see the conflation of all the meanings of 'natural'. Sensibility is natural in as much as it is the raw material (the capacity for feeling) in each actor as a human being; but it is also natural in as much as through study it is modified to reproduce emotions at will, under the guidance of study and rational understanding. Nature is hence the domain of the actor's art where sensibility and understanding interact in their dynamic relationship and it points to a fundamental principle: human nature must be understood and the actor can serve this function. As we shall see in the next chapter, according to psychoanalysis 'to be understood' is a structural need in psychic development that grounds the relational nature of the psyche.

In this sense, it is the principle which underlies the moral imperative of the actor's art.

### **Sensism, *sensibilité* and *esprit***

The philosophy of the Enlightenment had its roots in the seventeenth-century movements of English empiricism and Descartes's rationalism. Overall, however, Descartes's emphasis on the capacity of reason to reach knowledge was set aside by empiricism and its attribution of primacy in knowledge to the facts of experience rather than to reason. John Locke, partaking of the cultural milieu in which eminent scientists such as Newton and Boyle were conducting their scientific discoveries, formulated a theory of human knowledge entirely based on experience (Sini, 1986).

In particular Locke identified two distinct categories of knowledge: sensation, based on the experience of the outside world, and reflection, based on the experience of one's own mind. While consolidating the central position of the human mind in the pursuit for knowledge, and placing experience at the core of it, he maintained a certain dualism in his distinction between the psychic processes of sensation and reflection (Cassirer, 1951).

Further developments of Locke's thought went in the direction of overtaking such dualism, arriving at the most radical conclusion that all psychological reality is ultimately based on sense perceptions and that 'what we commonly regard as the "higher" powers of the mind, contrasting these powers with sensation, is in reality only a transformation of the basic element of sense perception' (Cassirer, 1951, p.25). Eminent elaborations of this kind were carried out during the Enlightenment by Condillac in France and David Hume in Britain. Condillac was the philosopher mostly responsible for disseminating Locke's ideas in France and was closely associated with Diderot, Rousseau and d'Alembert for a period of his life (Wilson, 1972). David Hume, a major exponent of the Scottish Enlightenment, lived in Paris between 1763 and 1766 where he had the opportunity to befriend the circle of the *philosophes*, and he

continued to be a correspondent of Diderot's after his return to Britain (Zaretsky & Scott, 2009).

Condillac's starting point was Locke's theory that human knowledge is ultimately based on experience, but he had some reservation about the distinction between sensation and reflection as two separate operations. In his masterpiece, the *Traité des Sensations*, published in 1754, one of the major contributions to the theory of sensism, Condillac proceeds to argue that all knowledge derives from sensation, including all other psychic operations including reflection (Sini, 1986). Again taking inspiration from Locke's idea that the onset of human will is a remembrance of displeasure and uneasiness, which the mind tries to avoid, Condillac extends it to all operations of the mind.

Uneasiness (*inquiétude*) is for him not merely the starting-point of our desires and wishes, of our willing and acting, but also of all our feeling and perceiving and of our thinking and judging, indeed of the highest acts of reflection to which the mind can rise.

(Cassirer, 1951, p.103)

In the seventeenth century Descartes's philosophy had placed reason at the centre of human mental activity, attributing to it the ability to regulate the senses and their appetites, and considering the accompanying 'affects as "perturbations of the mind" (*perturbationes animi*)' (Cassirer, 1951, p.105). In the eighteenth century, the advent of sensism identified the affects as the original and indispensable impulse behind all the operations of the mind (Cassirer, 1951, pp.105-106). Hume's notorious pronouncement that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them' (Hume, 1982<sup>34</sup>, p.415, cited in Ayer, 1980, p.19), in full harmony with the principles of sensism, turns the Cartesian hierarchy between reason and feelings upside down. Like Condillac, Hume places sensations and feelings at the basis of all mental activities, including abstract ideas, reasoning and even moral behaviour (Sini, 1986).

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<sup>34</sup> David Hume, 1982, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Diderot himself was permeated by these philosophical ideas. In his *Philosophical Thoughts*, an early work of 1746, he fully endorses the notion that reason is founded on feelings, and he maintains that:

It is of no avail to oppose the passions, and it would be the height of the ridiculous to try to destroy them since in so doing we should undermine the proud foundations of reason. Everything excellent in poetry, painting, and music, everything sublime in art and morals, is derived from this source. Hence the affects must not be weakened but strengthened; for the true power of the soul springs from the harmonious balance of the passions.

(Cassirer, 1951, pp.107-108)

During the age of Enlightenment, reason undergoes a fundamental permutation of meaning. In the seventeenth century Descartes had celebrated reason as the means to acquire knowledge, but then reason 'had meant the possession of a number of innate and transcendent ideas, much like the highest category of knowledge or reason described by Plato in *The Republic*' (Wilson, 1972, pp.191-192). In the eighteenth century reason came to be seen as a point of arrival, rather than a point of departure: 'the eighteenth century regarded reason as a sort of energy, a force, a means by which to do something. It was not so much an essence as it was a process' (Wilson, 1972, p.192).

This semantic change reflects similar preoccupations and solutions to the functioning of the human psyche that we encounter in the debate on the actor: the philosophical shift in ideas about the relationship between reason and sensation parallels the theatrical debate on sensibility versus judgement in a striking way. In order to explore the associations between the philosophical and the theatrical arguments, I will now consider the definition of '*esprit*' and '*sensibilité*' as given in the *Encyclopédie*.

'*Esprit*', we shall recall, is the term used by Sainte-Albine (1749) to describe the rational element of the actor's art as opposed to '*sentiment*'. As I have illustrated in Chapter 3, '*esprit*' will be translated as 'understanding' or 'judgement' in John Hill's treatise *The Actor* and will be returned to the French language through Sticotti's *Garrick* as '*jugement*' or '*intelligence*'. '*Jugement*' will also be used in the *Paradoxe*. '*Sentiment*' will be translated into English as

'sensibility' by John Hill (1755) and returned to French as '*sensibilité*' by Sticotti (1770). Diderot will also use it in the *Paradoxe*.

In the entry in the *Encyclopédie* (Vol.5, pp.972-976), composed by Voltaire, *esprit* partakes of the wider semantic field comprising words such as *jugement* and *intelligence*. In discussing its meaning, Voltaire distinguishes between the realms of metaphysics, philosophy and chemistry. In metaphysics *esprit* defines a thinking and intelligent being, which in the tradition of the Christian philosophers is differentiated in three kinds: God, the angels and the human *esprit*. This latter coincides with rational thinking, as opposed to the divine *esprit* which amounts to intuition. In philosophy *esprit* is a quality of the soul and can signify a number of different mental operations such as judgement, talent, taste, discernment, intelligence and so on, and needs to be specified by an accompanying adjective: 'C'est un mot générique qui a toujours besoin d'un autre mot qui le détermine' (Vol.5, p.973). Voltaire suggests as its synonym that of '*raison ingénieuse*'. For the purpose of my discussion, it is significant that *esprit* sits at the boundary between metaphysics and philosophy, as this is evocative of that displacement of the seat of truth from religious orthodoxy to a human act of enquiry.

The *Encyclopédie* (Vol.15, pp.38-52) has one single entry for the concepts of *sensibilité* (the word used by Sticotti and Diderot) and *sentiment* (the equivalent word used by Sainte-Albine). This indicates the overlap between their semantic fields. The entry was compiled by the physician Fouquet. As *esprit* is a quality of the soul, *sensibilité* is a property of the body. It denotes '*l'animalité par excellence*' (Vol.15, p.38), assimilating human beings into the animal kingdom, in the same way as *esprit* was a function of the similarity between man, angels and god. As the most basic animal function, it is a way of perceiving the impression left on them by the objects of the external world and determining their quality, whether good or bad, as a consequence of which the body accordingly moves towards or away from the objects. It is, in other words, a 'principe impulsif inséparable de la vie, et qui dans chaque individu est la source de tous les mouvements qui conspirent à la durée de l'être et à sa

conservation' (Vol.15, p.39). Sensibility denotes the area of the senses which is at the basis of all human knowledge according to sensism.

#### **THE DEBATE ON THE ART OF THE ACTOR IN LIGHT OF THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHICAL AND CULTURAL DEBATE**

Comparing the theatrical with the philosophical concepts of nature, sensibility and *esprit* brings to the fore interesting considerations. The empiricists' proof of the existence of determinable laws which man can discover and use to describe the workings of nature within the natural sciences, prompted the presumption that similar laws could be inferred for what concerns human nature. This implied the belief that human psychology can be subjected to study as much as any other field of knowledge. It is this notion that legitimizes claims that the actor can arrive at an expression of feeling through her observation, study and understanding of the operations of the human mind: by studying the given circumstances, the actor can reach an understanding of the character and ultimately arouse the feelings which are congruent with such circumstances.

There is here, it seems, a primacy of reason, which is endowed with the function of overseeing and understanding the whole of the mind, including feelings and their particular manifestations according to the given circumstances. On the other hand, the principles of sensism and the interpretations of the words *sensibilité* and *esprit* in the *Encyclopédie* point to the notion that sensations and feelings are the building blocks of all mental operations, including rational thinking and moral judgements. In this sense, the primacy falls on feelings, which are thus entrusted to give meaning to the workings of reason.

These propositions imply a problematic contradiction, in face of which it is not surprising that the question of the relationship between feelings and reason has turned into an everlasting controversy. This is still the case today, if one thinks, for example, of the opposite models of spectatorship that I discussed in Chapter 1, as put forward by the semiotician De Marinis (1985), who grounds spectatorship on the notion that emotional responses are regulated by

cognitions, and by the cognitivist McConachie who emphasizes cognitive theories which put emotions at the basis of any intellectual task (2008, p.3).

In the next chapter I will analyse the relationship between emotional arousal and rational understanding through a psychoanalytic perspective. Feelings – rooted in the body and its instincts, and which psychoanalysis locates in the unconscious mind – and reason - rooted in consciousness – are mutually engaged in fostering psychic development from infancy into adult life. Through a fundamentally interpersonal process, the primitive language of feelings can be developed into reason through contact with the mind of others. In this sense, the self as character can have its feelings promoted to reason via the interpretation of the other as actor; conversely, the self as actor can apply its understanding to the feelings of another as character to promote their psychic development. It is the unravelling of this relationship which, I will argue, can ultimately dissolve the actor's paradox.

## CHAPTER 5 – THE ART OF THE ACTOR AS ALPHA-FUNCTION

### FREUD'S THEORY OF EGO FUNCTIONING

#### **The transition from the topographical to the structural model of the mind**

Freud's greatest contribution to the study of the mind was the re-discovery of the unconscious. Not so much its discovery, but its appropriation from the realm of poetry and philosophy into the sphere of the medical sciences (Gay, 2006, pp.127-128). Johann Friedrich Herbart, a prominent German psychologist and philosopher, had, in the early nineteenth century, recognized the important part played by the unconscious in mental life, and to his views Freud had been exposed. Despite these antecedents, however, no one before Freud had ever examined the unconscious in detail, showing 'how it worked, how it differed from other parts of the mind, and what were its reciprocal relations with them' (Freud, 1915c, p.164).

In *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud and Breuer, 1895) and in subsequent works on the neuroses, Freud had proved the relevance of unconscious mental life for explaining and for curing common neurotic disorders. But it was with the *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900) that he proceeded to show how the unconscious was the dominant aspect of all mental life, not just of its pathology. For this reason he considered this book his most important contribution to psychology. As he declared: 'From the date of *The Interpretation of Dreams* psycho-analysis had a twofold significance. It was not only a new method of treating the neuroses but it was also a new psychology' (Freud, 1924b, p.200).

Freud's study of depth psychology in his clinical practice, led him to propose theoretical systems that could explain the functioning of the mind accounting for the unconscious as well as the conscious phenomena progressively unravelled by psychoanalysis. As he continued to revise his theories of mental functioning to make them consistent with new clinical findings, he came to realize that not only does the unconscious dominate mental life, but also that consciousness is better understood as an accidental property of psychic phenomena. In the

introduction to *The Ego and the Id*, James Strachey, the eminent editor of the English 'Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud', explains how Freud had reached the conclusion that

the criterion of consciousness was no longer helpful in building up a structural picture of the mind. Freud accordingly abandoned the use of consciousness in this capacity: 'being conscious' was henceforward to be regarded simply as a quality which might or might not be attached to a mental state.

(Freud, 1923, p.7)

The earlier Freudian model of the mind, called the topographical model, had been based on the assumption that the psyche is simply divided into an unconscious, a preconscious and a conscious area (Freud, 1915c). Conscious wishes or memories, according to this model, can become repressed under certain conditions (for example when considered unacceptable, such as in the case of the traumatic memories of the hysterics). Through repression they become unconscious, but this does not mean that they are at rest; on the contrary repressed wishes and memories continue to push for conscious representation, and because repression counteracts this tendency, they manifest themselves under disguise, such as in a hysterical symptom. I have given examples of this phenomenon in Chapter 2.

In the topographical model, the preconscious represents an intermediary area between the unconscious and the conscious, and it therefore regulates the communication between the two. The preconscious contains unconscious material that is very different from that contained in the unconscious. While the unconscious proper is the haven of all repressed ideas and affects, sheltered there against the force of repression, the preconscious harbours all those unconscious contents which are not under the thumb of repression, and hence could easily become conscious, but at any given moment are not immediately present to awareness. An example would be all those memories of recent events, which can promptly be recollected at will, but which currently are not within awareness because they are of no present interest. Hence, as Freud warns, it is important

to distinguish two kinds of unconscious – one which is easily, under frequently occurring circumstances, transformed into something conscious, and another with which this transformation is difficult and takes place only subject to a considerable expenditure of effort or possibly never at all. [...] We call the unconscious which is only latent, and thus easily becomes conscious, the 'preconscious' and retain the term 'unconscious' for the other.

(Freud, 1933, p.71)

The topographical model had the advantage of a relative simplicity and seemed to work well to explain repression, symptom formation and the relieving of symptoms in the cathartic method. However, as Freud penetrated the depth of normal and pathological mental phenomena through his extensive clinical work over two decades, he revised his theories. In particular, he came to realize that the linear explanations provided by the topographical model, despite their appeal of simplicity, did not hold true because the psyche proved to be more complex than expected. As he writes, with his characteristic enthusiasm:

We shall defend the complications of our theory so long as we find that they meet the results of observation, and we shall not abandon our expectations of being led in the end by those very complications to the discovery of a state of affairs which, while simple in itself, can account for all the complications of reality.

(Freud, 1915c, p.190)

It is the seminal writing of *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1923), which marks the transition to what we know as Freud's structural model of the mind. The dynamic principles established in the topographical model remain valid, in as far as the relationship between conscious, preconscious and unconscious goes, and their definitions. But the structural model provides a new perspective on the mind, which is now conceptualized as divided into three different agencies, the id, the ego and the super-ego<sup>35</sup>. The most important innovation is that none of these agencies can be simplistically equated with consciousness. The id is entirely unconscious and the seat of the instincts, the super-ego, comprising conscience, is also largely unconscious, although part of it operates within consciousness. And, even more strikingly, the ego, the agency for awareness, conscious will, and rational judgement, presents substantial unconscious

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<sup>35</sup> Freud, writing in German, called these three agencies, Es, Ich and Über-Ich, whose exact English translation would have been 'It, I, Over-I'.

portions, especially as it is the seat of repression, which is an unconscious mental operation.

Despite the emphasis on the unconscious as domineering over the psyche, Freud remains interested in consciousness, not least because it is the only *modus operandi* in which we can be aware of ourselves and our minds: in a way the unconscious would not be known or be recognized unless there was a consciousness which brought it to its epiphanies. On this point, he states with humour:

And it is indeed the case that large portions of the ego and super-ego can remain unconscious and are normally unconscious. That is to say, the individual knows nothing of their contents and it requires an expenditure of effort to make them conscious. [...] At first we are inclined greatly to reduce the value of the criterion of being conscious since it has shown itself so untrustworthy. But we should be doing it an injustice. As may be said of our life, it is not worth much, but it is all we have. Without the illumination thrown by the quality of consciousness, we should be lost in the obscurity of depth-psychology.

(Freud, 1933, pp.69-70)

### **From the psychology of impulse to the psychology of the ego**

Freud's focus on the unconscious had led him to investigate instinctual life extensively. In the first place, this resulted in his formulation of what is universally known as the libido theory, according to which unconscious drives, ultimately linked to a primitive sexual energy, are the foundation of all mental life, and determine the development of the child into the adult. Instincts need to negotiate their encounter with actual reality, and Freud conceptualized this as the continuous negotiation between two principles: the pleasure principle, which is the law of the instincts, and the reality principle, which must be the rule of the ego, if the ego's adaptation to reality is to be successful.

To do justice to the wide implications of libido for all mental life, Freud was aware of needing to emphasize the distinction between libido as he understood it and a restricted view of libido as genital sexuality. In his words:



what psycho-analysis called sexuality was by no means identical with the impulsion towards a union of the two sexes or towards producing a pleasurable sensation in the genitals; it had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-preserving Eros of Plato's *Symposium*.

(Freud, 1925a, p.218)

As he modified his model of the mind into the structural model, he also changed his theory of the instincts until he arrived at his definitive formulation, first presented in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920). Here Freud maintained that all human instincts are ultimately ascribable to either 'libido', the creative force of life and represented by Eros, or 'destructiveness', the annihilating force of death, ultimately leading all organisms to their dissolution, but also put at the service of the destruction of others through aggression. Thus the negotiation between pleasure and reality is complicated by the conflict between Eros and the death instinct.

As Freud proceeded to recognize the ego as the negotiator of the different forces which made psychic life so complex, he gradually shifted his interest from the study of the instincts towards the study of the ego and its mechanisms. In doing so, he adumbrated many of the developments that some of his followers, and especially Melanie Klein and her circle, accomplished in psychoanalytic theory.

In particular, in his shift to the structural model, Freud indicated and attended to three areas of unconscious psychic functioning, which would be brought together into a coherent theory by Klein and her collaborators:

- In the first place, he became more and more interested in the functioning of the ego, as he recognized its central role in mediating between the force of the instincts and the constraints of reality.
- Secondly, he revised his libido theory with the introduction of the death instinct and came to the radical classification of instinctual life as fundamentally reducible to a perpetual struggle between Eros and the death instinct.
- Thirdly, he introduced the idea that processes of identification were at the basis of the formation of the ego and the super-ego (Freud, 1923).

I will now outline Freud's insights into these areas, so that in my subsequent discussion of Klein's theory, the points of continuity with Freud's ideas will become apparent.

### **The relationship between the ego, the id, and reality**

Freud saw the ego as a specialized development of the id, which comes into being as the id is obliged to grapple with reality and adapt to it, if the baby is to survive. For example, the baby's need for food and warmth, generating from the baby's id, needs to be negotiated with the limitations that the environment, in the case of the baby especially represented by the mother, put on the satisfaction of such needs. The way the baby adapts to such limitations will ultimately affect his development. The ego, that is, develops as the instincts meet the objects of their satisfaction or, indeed, of their frustration, in the environment.

In his seminal paper on the ego, Freud writes: 'It is easy to see that the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world' (Freud, 1923, p.25). The mediation that the ego effects between the instincts of the id and external reality is also a mediation between unconscious and conscious, in as far as the external world is apprehended through sense-perceptions which are conscious, while the instincts operate at an unconscious level. It is in this way that the ego, departing from the need to manage internal drives and respond to external perceptions, enriches and develops.

Whilst the ego strives to keep control over the whole of mental life, it is not always successful. The relationship between id and ego is depicted by Freud using a metaphor which reminds us of Plato's charioteer allegory in the *Phaedrus* (246a–254e, trans. Rowe, 1986, pp.60-77). The ego is

in its relation to the id [...] like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse [...] The analogy may be carried a little further. Often a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id's will into action as if it were its own.

(Freud, 1923, p.25)

If one remembers that Plato's allegory depicts two horses which adumbrate Freud's division of the instincts into Eros and the death instinct, this metaphor casts a light on the delicate dynamic at play between the id (with its opposing forces within) and the ego.

### **Identification through introjection and projection**

Freud suggests that both ego and super-ego (which he conceives as a specialized part of the ego) form through cycles of identification:

Thus we have said repeatedly that the ego is formed to a great extent out of identifications which take the place of abandoned cathexes<sup>36</sup> by the id; that the first of these identifications always behave as a special agency in the ego and stand apart from the ego in the form of a super-ego, while later on, as it grows stronger, the ego may become more resistant to the influences of such identifications.

(Freud, 1923, p.48)

While he put forward a number of mechanisms through which these identifications come to be, he never brought these to bear on the formulation of a systematic and coherent theory. This will be developed instead by Melanie Klein, as I shall discuss in the next section. However he foreshadowed both projection and introjection as the two fundamental procedures underpinning identification:

Under the dominance of the pleasure principle a further development now takes place in the ego. In so far as the objects which are presented to it are sources of pleasure, it takes them into itself, 'introjects' them (to use Ferenczi's term); and, on the other hand, it expels<sup>37</sup> whatever within itself becomes a cause of unpleasure.

(Freud, 1915b, pp.135-136)

It is important to note that introjection and projection are unconscious mechanisms and the resulting identifications, are equally unconscious.

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<sup>36</sup> In psychoanalytic terms 'cathexis' means the investment of libidinal energy onto an object, for instance the desire for the breast that the baby experiences as part of its instinctual constitution, or the desire for the mother's love which is a prototype for all future loving relationships.

<sup>37</sup> As a note to the text indicates, 'expels' here has to be understood as equivalent to 'projects'.

For what concerns introjection, Freud suggests that when the instincts from the id remain frustrated in their aim of obtaining the object conducive to their satisfaction, the ego can cope with the frustration and protect itself against the pain of it, by introjecting the object and identifying with it. In this way the ego can tease the id into believing that its frustrated libidinal energy (i.e. its abandoned cathexis) can now obtain satisfaction by moving its aim from the unavailable object to the ego itself. An example of this would be what happens when grieving for the loss of a loved person:

it may be said that this transformation of an erotic object-choice into an alteration of the ego is also a method by which the ego can obtain control over the id and deepen its relations with it—at the cost, it is true, of acquiescing to a large extent in the id's experiences. When the ego assumes the features of the object, it is forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id's loss by saying: 'Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object.'

(Freud, 1923, p.30)

Freud first describes this mechanism in relation to melancholia (what we nowadays call depression); in a paper dedicated to it, he explains that the self-reproaches of the depressed person are often perceived as bizarre because in actual fact they are the expression of complaints towards an internalized object with which the depressed person has identified (Freud, 1917). It is important to remember that the identifications in question are unconscious, and the depressed person is not aware of them, unless these are brought to light by psychoanalysis. I will illustrate this with an example from my clinical practice.

A depressed man was often hospitalized when his behavior became bizarre: he would crawl all over her house, and instead of speaking, he would emit shrieking sounds. The impression that he gave to his family was that in those moments he was behaving like a toddler, and when asked whether he knew why he was behaving like that, he would say that Goldilocks came to live inside his body and compelled him to do so. His symptoms had made their appearance following his wife's recovery from a stroke that had made her unable to walk and talk for a period of time. It eventually transpired that his depression was linked to his deep-seated conflict with his wife, who had been

unfaithful to him for many years, but without this ever being openly acknowledged between them for the sake of their three children and to keep up appearances. Following the stroke, which happened when the youngest of their children was fourteen, he had nursed his wife patiently for nearly two years. Once recovered, she had become much more attached to him and, in his words, now 'wanted to play the happy couple for real'. This new and unexpected situation had left him ambivalent; during the time preceding the stroke he had somewhat entertained the idea that they would separate for good once all the children had left the family home. Now he was stuck with a wife that he was not sure he wanted any more, while he unconsciously felt he had lost her anyway at the time of her first extramarital affair, many years ago. The only way he could negotiate the painful conflict between his sense of duty to continue acting as a devoted husband, and his deep-seated feeling of loss, was to introject his wife: Goldilocks living inside him symbolized this introjection. His ensuing identification with her was represented by his crawling and shrieking, which were close enough symbols of his formerly ill wife, when, during the time following the stroke, she had been neither able to walk nor speak.

The other mechanism through which identification takes place is that of projection. Freud's first encounters with projection had been in his study of paranoia (Quinodoz, 2005, p.105). In general he considered projection to be a characteristic of all psychoses. In one of his case studies dedicated to the investigation of paranoia (Freud, 1911a) he gives several examples of this phenomenon. One of them is what happens in erotomania, a psychotic disorder in which a person believes without foundation that someone (typically a famous person to whom they are unknown or a slight acquaintance that in their eyes is of high-status, such as a teacher, or a politician) is in love with them. Such belief is held with delusional intensity, i.e. it is held despite all proof of the impossibility of the situation. Freud suggests that the delusional belief of erotomania may be explained through a process of identification involving a projection: the ill person had fallen in love with the famous person, but his awareness of the impossibility that his love may be reciprocated was too painful to bear. His desire to be loved, which would have to remain frustrated and cause great pain, is hence projected from himself into the object, so that he

loses any awareness of being himself in love. Unconsciously he has identified with his object and therefore he can now safely believe that it is his object, the famous person herself, who is in love with him:

Many cases of erotomania might give an impression that they could be satisfactorily explained as being exaggerated or distorted heterosexual fixations, if our attention were not attracted by the circumstance that these infatuations invariably begin, not with any internal perception of loving, but with an external perception of being loved.

(Freud, 1911a, p.63)

The same process happens in paranoia, where the patient's delusions of persecution often derive from his projection of his own hostile feelings towards someone. I will illustrate this with another example from my clinical practice. A woman was referred to the psychotherapy clinic following a nervous breakdown. She had lost her job of many years and following a year of unemployment and unwise investments she was nearly bankrupt. She was convinced that there had been a conspiracy against her at work, which had led to her dismissal, in which her boss and some other colleagues were implicated. She had always been a hard-working professional woman, and her career had been the highlight of her life; she had been married for many years to an idle man who was completely dependent on her for his maintenance. They had no children.

During therapy it emerged that her problems at work had started one year back, shortly after the separation from her husband. She had then discovered that he had a relationship with another woman, but had been willing to forgive him if he only were to stop the affair. Unfortunately for her, her husband chose to stay with his lover and asked instead for a divorce. Despite the shock, my patient maintained a detached and friendly attitude towards her husband and consented to the divorce. Her hate for her husband's new partner remained unacknowledged, but during psychoanalytic treatment it emerged that the patient had harboured a secret wish that this woman may be ruined and lose everything, so that her husband would not be interested in her any longer. These hateful and vengeful desires were incompatible with her view of herself as a kindly and generous person and had to be repressed. In doing so, she

projected them into her boss and her colleagues, who were in an ideal place to receive the projection, as they were perceived to be successful women and her 'rivals' at work. Although she had apparently forgotten that she hated her husband's new partner, she had instead been convinced that it was her boss and colleagues who hated her and were conspiring against her. These beliefs brought her to the verge of collapse and her proficiency at work fell so miserably that in the end she was dismissed. By projection she had put her boss in her place as the hateful avenger and herself in the place of her hated rival as the defenceless victim; the wish that the rival may be ruined had turned upon the self.

Although introjection and projection are mostly described by Freud with reference to pathological states, he also describes introjection as the basis of the formation of a person's character, and sees it as especially intense during childhood. As he writes:

We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that [in those suffering from it] an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego — that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is. Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its 'character'.

(Freud, 1923, p.28)

While introjection was explored by Freud in relation to both pathology and normal development, his descriptions of projection are more sparse. Yet, somewhat unwittingly, he gives a most interesting example of projection as a form of identification in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), when he describes the mechanism of repetition-compulsion in the reel-game. I say unwittingly, because in this paper Freud mentions projection as a way in which the ego deals with unpleasure by projecting the unacceptable desire or feeling (for example the unfulfilled love of the erotomanic patient or the unacceptable hate of the paranoid patient) into an external object, but he does not connect this explicitly to identification nor to normal development. He writes:

a particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside [...] This is the origin of projection, which is destined to play such a large part in the causation of pathological processes.

(Freud, 1920, p.29)

As we shall recall from Chapter 2, Freud had observed his grandson's repetitive playing with a cotton reel, throwing it away from himself, and pulling it back. Freud had interpreted the game as a re-enactment. Every time his mother went away leaving the child behind for a few hours, the little boy showed little distress but engaged with the game of throwing away objects, of which the reel-game was a variant. The reel was thrown away and regained by pulling it back. As such it could represent the mother leaving the child and coming back again. But most likely, it also represented the child himself, being left behind and re-found. The little boy, losing the beloved mother through her departure, introjects her in order to avoid the pain of having lost her. Now he is unconsciously identified with her and he is the one in control of the partings and reunions. Conversely, his sense of frustrated desire for the mother and his vulnerability is projected into the cotton reel, which unconsciously becomes identified with the child himself through projection.

This example gives a very useful picture of how the ego uses unconscious identifications by introjection and projection to mediate between the instincts of the id and the necessity to adapt to reality. As Freud explains in his comment on the reel-game:

one gets an impression that the child turned his experience into a game for another motive. At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part.

(Freud, 1920, p.16)

Freud describes the psyche as caught within a dynamic between passive and active mental processes: the ego can both be the passive recipient of instinctual forces from the id, which may risk to overwhelm it, and also has a capacity for re-acting to this situation, by taking an active stance towards the instincts in an attempt to master them. Through the reel-game, the child has overcome



passive submission to reality, such as could have been expressed by giving in to despair and crying, and has instead engaged with an action which not only represents the reality of the mother leaving him through the surrogate object of the reel, but also offers opportunity for experimenting with such reality, insofar as the reel can be thrown away but also pulled back. In this way, the re-enactment represents the first step taken by the ego towards the reality-principle, considering that it is a very basic attempt at mastering the overpowering displeasure of a frustrated instinct or need. Not least, the game permits for positions to be swapped: the reel can represent the abandoning and rejected mother, but also the abandoned child. The child, in identification with the introjected mother, and through his mastering of his actions with the reel, can experiment with the idea of sending the projected child (the reel) away. This allows for the elaboration of feelings very different from those of him as the child left behind by the real mother.

These operations of projection and introjection will be described by Melanie Klein as cycles in which the exchange between self and other through unconscious identifications is the basic mechanism in the formation of the ego and its development throughout life. In the Kleinian theoretical system projections and introjections will act through a process of splitting of the ego, necessary if the ego can place parts of itself in others, or take parts of the others into itself. Although Freud never fully developed this concept, he recognized it in his clinical practice (Quinodoz, 2005, p.151) and towards the end of his life, he postulated that it is a feature of psychotic as well as neurotic disorders:

The view which postulates that in all psychoses there is a splitting of the ego could not call for so much notice if it did not turn out to apply to other states more like the neuroses and, finally, to the neuroses themselves.

(Freud, 1938, p.202)

In conclusion, while it will have to be left to Melanie Klein to explain in a systematic way the interplay between instincts, adaptation to reality, and the mechanisms of projection and introjection, Freud had already foreshadowed it by:

- recognizing the importance of unconscious identification for the formation of ego and super-ego, and ultimately of character;
- establishing introjection and projection as the two mechanisms through which unconscious identification is effected;
- noticing splitting of the ego as an unconscious process of mental life.

As I will discuss in the next section, all these psychic operations – the unconscious functioning of the ego in the regulation of instincts with respect to reality, the significance of the conflict between death and life instincts, the splitting of the ego, and the mechanisms of projection and introjection as the basis for identification – became the pillars of Klein’s theory of the ego’s unconscious functioning. Taking Freud’s structural model as a starting point, she succeeded in equipping psychoanalysis with a coherent model of ego organisation, through the theory of object-relations and the concept of unconscious phantasy.

## **KLEINIAN THEORY OF OBJECT-RELATIONS**

### **Historical introduction**

The theory of object-relations was developed principally by Melanie Klein and her collaborators, who started from Freud’s latest interest in the functioning of the ego with respect to its role of negotiator between instincts and reality. Klein accepted the division of all drives into the life and death instincts. She also followed Freud in the idea that the ego is fundamentally pleasure-seeking, in as much as it strives for satisfaction of the instincts and wants to get rid of pain and frustration, but it can only achieve its objective by adapting to reality. The conflicts between the life and death drives on one hand, and between the drives and the limitations of reality on the other, determine the development of the ego.

By focusing on their objects instead of the instincts themselves, Klein and other object-relations theorists opened up a new way of looking at the operations of the mind. As Fairbairn put it, ‘the point had now been reached at which, in the

interests of progress, the classic libido theory would have to be transformed into *a theory of development based essentially upon object-relationships*' (Fairbairn, 1984, p.31).

Melanie Klein started her career as a child psychoanalyst, encouraged by Sandor Ferenczi, who was one of Freud's earliest and closest disciples. During her analysis with him, he suggested she dedicate herself to the analysis of children, and so she became one of the pioneers of child analysis (Grosskurth, 1995, p.74). Although Freud had himself once been involved in the analysis of a child's phobia, in the renowned case of Little Hans (Freud, 1909a), he had generally inferred his theories of child psychic development from his analysis of adults. Even in the case of Little Hans, he had met with the child only once and had de facto conducted his analysis at one remove, basing it on the observations and interventions of Hans's father, who regularly consulted with him during the period of the treatment. Klein instead developed her theories on the wealth of first hand direct analysis of children from very young ages, including toddlers. As Hanna Segal eloquently put it: 'Freud discovered the repressed child in the adult. Investigating children, Melanie Klein discovered what was already repressed in the child – namely the infant' (Segal, 1989, p.49).

What allowed Klein to move psychoanalytic investigation from adults to children was the development of a specific technique, which used observation of and participation in the child's playing activity on the part of the analyst.

Taking her cue from Freud's (1920) observation of the child's play with the reel, Melanie Klein saw that the child's play could represent symbolically his anxieties and phantasies. Since small children cannot be asked to free-associate, she treated their play in the playroom in the same way as she treated their verbal expressions, i.e. as symbolic expression of their unconscious conflicts.

(Segal, 1988, p.2)

In child-analysis, the child is given free access to a variety of tools, such as small toys, paper, and crayons, and the analyst observes his play activity in the same way as the adult's analyst would listen to her patient's free associations. The most striking aspect of Klein's technique entails that the play activities are

systematically interpreted as transference situations (Klein, 1997), therefore preserving the significance of transference re-enactments for the analytic procedure and its success. While the analyst may be represented in the child's play through the use of dolls or other toys, there are times when the transference re-enactments become alive in the session, by the child actually casting the analyst in a specific role. For instance, Klein talks of a little patient, the 6-year-old Erna, who would often make Klein be the child, while Erna played at being the mother or the teacher (Klein, 1929, p 199).

One interesting feature of children's play is that in it '*acting* plays a prominent part' (Klein, 1926, p.135). Her extensive experience with the play technique led Klein to the conclusion that personification in children's play was, in fact, the same phenomenon at the basis of transference re-enactments (Klein, 1929, p.207). This resonates with the notion that I discussed in Chapter 2, that transference re-enactments may be equivalent to the Greek concept of *mimēsis* inasmuch as *mimēsis* means an innate propensity to dramatic enactments, which promotes human development. That is to say, the personifications and impersonations inherent in much of children's play, a certain meaning of *mimēsis*, and transference re-enactments, are in essence the same phenomenon. What characterizes their common nature is the way in which cycles of unconscious identifications are realized through the mental operations of projection and introjection. Klein and her close collaborators describe these unconscious mechanisms under the denomination of 'unconscious phantasy', as I shall presently consider.

### **Unconscious phantasy**

Like Freud, and always preoccupied to situate her clinical and theoretical work within the legitimacy of the Freudian legacy, Melanie Klein was interested in unravelling the mysteries of the unconscious, in the belief that it was the fundamental site of psychic processes. Joan Rivière, a Kleinian psychoanalyst and one of her close collaborators, explains:

the unconscious is not a vestigial or rudimentary part of the mind. It is the active organ in which mental processes function; no mental activity can

take place without its operation, although much modification of its primary activities normally ensues before it determines behaviour in an adult. The original primary mental activity which usually remains unconscious, we call unconscious 'phantasy'. There is, therefore, an unconscious phantasy behind every thought and every act.

(Rivière, 1989, p.16)

By unconscious phantasy, a word purposely spelt with a 'ph' to denote its unconscious nature as opposed to 'conscious fantasy', Klein and her collaborators came to define the complex process by which psychic reality is formed through the meeting of inside impulses with their outside objects. Freud had already recognized that the interaction between internal and external reality is one of the foundations of the psyche, by stating that the ego is formed to effect the negotiation between the unconscious impulses from the id and the reality that these need to confront for their satisfaction. Departing from these premises, Klein extended the psychoanalytic understanding of this process, describing systematically the mechanisms at its core.

As well as being the bedrock of all mental phenomena, unconscious phantasy is the primary content of the baby's mind. As soon as the baby is born, he is under the sway of powerful instincts and at the same time he has to deal with the impact of reality on the gratification of such instincts (Segal, 1988). In keeping with object-relation theory, Klein believes that instincts are always represented in unconscious phantasy as linked with the objects at which they aim for their satisfaction. For the newly born baby the first object is typified by the mother or, rather, by the mother's breast. As Klein explains:

the tiny child is only concerned with his immediate gratification or the lack of it; Freud called this the 'pleasure-pain principle'. Thus the breast of the mother which gives gratification or denies it becomes, in the mind of the child, imbued with the characteristics of good and evil.

(Klein, 1936, pp.290-291)

The baby desires the breast and perceives it as the source of goodness through the gratification of a good feed. At the same time he will experience frustration from the breast, when left to scream in hunger by the absence of it. However, the undeveloped psyche of the infant is not capable of comprehending absence, and hence construes it as badness. Hence the two opposing aspects

of the breast will form separate phantasies of two breasts, one which gives milk, pleasure and love to the baby (the so called 'good breast') and one which withholds milk, causes pain and ultimately is perceived as hateful towards the baby (the so called 'bad breast'). In Klein's words:

I have often expressed my view that object-relations exist from the beginning of life, the first object being the mother's breast which to the child becomes split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast [...] I have further suggested that the relation to the first object implies its introjection and projection, and thus from the beginning object-relations are moulded by an interaction between introjection and projection, between internal and external objects and situations.

(Klein, 1946, p.2)

### **Projection and introjection**

In unconscious phantasy, the goodness attributed to the good breast is a mixture of the child's loving feelings for it (part of his Eros) and the experience of satisfaction coming from the real feed; conversely the badness attributed to the bad breast is a mixture of the child's aggressive feelings (part of his death instinct) and the experience of frustration. The wish for the baby to have goodness inside himself, will result in the good breast being introjected (i.e. perceived as inside) by the infant's mind so that he can take the goodness inside him to warrant it always being available and secure. At the same time, in response to the threat of annihilation posed by the bad breast, the infant's mind will project the bad breast into the actual breast (the mother's breast), perceiving it as outside of itself.

As I have shown, Freud had anticipated the existence of the mechanisms of projection and introjection as operations that influence the development of the ego. In a description of how the primitive ego conceives the instincts and their objects, his view comes to be strikingly similar to that of Melanie Klein:

Expressed in the language of the oldest—the oral—instinctual impulses, the judgment is: 'I should like to eat this', or 'I should like to spit it out'; and, put more generally: 'I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.' That is to say: 'It shall be inside me' or 'it shall be outside me'. As I have shown elsewhere, the original pleasure-ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is

bad. What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical.

(Freud, 1925b, p.237)

According to Klein's theory, and resonating with Freud's own suppositions, introjection and projection's basic function is to allow the baby's ego to free itself from its own aggressiveness (corresponding to its death instinct), and retain the goodness derived from the life instinct inside. However the state of things is not so simple. Because the mother's breast has been imbued with badness and aggressivity by projection of the bad breast, the baby feels that the mother's breast has become threatening, capable of attacking him and giving him a sense of persecution. Hence, at times when the baby is under the influence of such powerful persecutory feelings, his psyche will project the good breast into the mother's breast with the aim of placing it outside, where it may be kept safer. Equally, the bad breast, which is apprehended as a persecutor, may be introjected, taken inside, as a way of gaining control over it, although this introjection makes the baby feel bad himself.

These movements of objects outside and inside the baby's psyche are continuous: the new born infant, who has become an individuated body through the rupture of the fusion with his mother and the expulsion from her body, now confronts the task of becoming an individuated mind. To use a bodily metaphor, it is like the baby's mind has retained after birth an umbilical cord attached to his mother's mind, through which 'objects' move in and out, to and fro, and are gradually used to build the baby's own individuated mind. As Kristeva elucidates: 'the fragile ego is not truly separated in the sense of a "subject" separated from an "object", but it incessantly consumes the breast from within and ejects the breast into the outside world by constructing-vacating itself while constructing-vacating the Other' (Kristeva, 2001, pp.62-63).

In her paper *On identification* Klein explains that 'introjection and projection operate from the beginning of post-natal life and constantly interact. This interaction both builds up the internal world and shapes the picture of external reality' (Klein, 1955, p.141). Through the processes of projection and

introjection, in unconscious phantasy objects become the basis of identification between the baby and the mother.

In these various phantasies, the ego takes possession by projection of an external object – first of all the mother – and makes it into an extension of the self. The object becomes to some extent a representative of the ego, and these processes are in my view the basis for identification by projection or ‘projective identification’. Identification by introjection and identification by projection appear to be complementary processes.

(Klein, 1952b, pp.68-69)

Identificatory mechanisms start in the infant’s psyche in relation to the breast, but continue throughout life, first in relation to the mother and gradually to the father and other people (Klein, 1936). In Klein’s words:

My analytic experience has shown me that processes of introjection and projection in later life repeat in some measure the pattern of the earliest introjections and projections; the external world is again and again taken in and put out – re-introjected and re-projected.

(Klein, 1955, p.155)

Object-relation theory places unconscious phantasy, and the mechanisms of projection and introjection underpinning it, at the core of all psychic phenomena, even when this is not apparent, as is the case in most adult psychic activity. According to Klein and her collaborators, unconscious phantasy constitutes the basis of all psychic development and represents the ‘effective source of all human actions and reactions’ (Rivière, 1989, p.2). This is most evident in the baby and the young child, where other more sophisticated psychic processes such as language, rationality and critical judgement have not yet developed. Nonetheless the mechanisms of unconscious phantasy are absolutely relevant to the adult, because they ‘exert a continuous and powerful influence on the emotional and intellectual life of the individual’ (Klein, 1936, p.290).

Paradigmatically, unconscious phantasy gets expressed in the transference and projection and introjection are the mechanisms underpinning its unconscious re-enactments (Klein, 1952a). The analyst has therefore a privileged viewpoint into unconscious phantasy and its functioning in the adult’s mind through transference.



## Ego-splitting and integration

The psychic situation in which projection and introjection take place, is a peculiar one, because the binding between the instincts generating from the baby's id and the objects of the external world is so tight that the primitive ego needs to lose a part of itself whenever he projects the object outside. This means that the splitting of the object into good and bad (the good and the bad breast) corresponds to a parallel splitting of the ego (Klein, 1946), whereby the aggressive impulses follow the fate of the bad object (whether this is projected or re-introjected) and the life instincts move in and out of the mind bound with the good object. As Melanie Klein explains:

I believe that the ego is incapable of splitting the object – internal and external – without a corresponding splitting taking place within the ego. Therefore the phantasies and feelings about the state of the internal object vitally influence the structure of the ego. [...] The processes I have described are, of course, bound up with the infant's phantasy-life; and the anxieties which stimulate the mechanism of splitting are also of a phantastic nature. It is in phantasy that the infant splits the object and the self, but the effect of this phantasy is a very real one, because it leads to feelings and relations (and later on thought processes) being in fact cut off from one another.

(Klein, 1946, p.6)

Freud had also noticed the phenomenon of ego-splitting and had presumed the possibility that identificatory mechanisms could result in 'conflicts between the various identifications into which the ego comes apart, conflicts that cannot after all be described as entirely pathological' (Freud, 1923, p.31). Freud had therefore adumbrated the possibility that split off parts of the ego may exist side-by-side, causing internal conflict, even in healthy minds. These split off parts remain as unconscious mental objects and get expressed in repetition-compulsion, forming the basis for transference re-enactments.

Although the mechanism of splitting is predominant in the first few months of life, due to the fragility of the infantile ego and its as yet scant ability to deal with external reality, the introjection of the good object and the tendency of the life instinct to promote integration, concur to the development of the ego: 'This first

internal good object acts as a focal point in the ego. It counteracts the processes of splitting and dispersal, makes for cohesiveness and integration, and is instrumental in building up the ego' (Klein, 1946, p.6).

Klein devises her own terminology to describe this shift. She names the psychic situation of when the ego is dominated by splitting, the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1952b). The term indicates both that the fragile ego is split in phantasy (schizoid) and also that within this split, the ego feels at the mercy of the perils posed by the bad object (paranoid), because the bad object is either felt to be threatening it from the outside, or filling it with badness from the inside. As I mentioned earlier, it is the inability of the baby's mind to comprehend absence that created the phantasy of the bad object: the frustrated instinct cannot be conceived to have been left without an object because that feeling would imply the appraisal of a separation between the absent object and the baby's instinct itself. Hence the frustrated instinct coupled with the absent object is construed in phantasy as a bad object.

The introjection of the good breast enhances the ego's possibility to tolerate frustration and perceive the absence of the object. This psychic state is defined by Klein as the depressive position<sup>38</sup> (Klein, 1952b). The perception of absence allows the baby's mind to understand that the good and bad breasts are indeed one and the same. The bad breast is nothing else but the absent good breast. Klein believes that this recognition makes the baby sad (hence the name depressive position) because he realizes that his aggressive impulses have been directed towards the one and the same breast that he also loved. He now feels less persecuted by the object, because the all-bad breast does not exist as such, but he also has lost the idealized all-good breast. He is left with a more realistic object, a 'good enough' mother (to use Winnicott's (1953) phrase), which can satisfy his needs but can also at times frustrate them by being absent.

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<sup>38</sup> The depressive position (psychic state) should not be confused with depression (clinical disorder); in psychoanalytic terms, depression is considered a defence against transition into the depressive position.

This new psychic state is hence dominated by the fear of having damaged the object and of losing it. However at the same time, it also allows for a number of positive developments: the integration of the object promotes the integration of the ego. This in turn increases the ego's capability of perceiving external reality, what in Freud's terms would correspond to the predominance of the reality principle. Finally, the integrated ego and its increased capacity for perceiving reality establishes the capability to distinguish between the self and the other:

The very experience of depressive feelings in turn has the effect of further integrating the ego, because it makes for an increased understanding of psychic reality and better perception of the external world, as well as for a greater synthesis between inner and external situations.

(Klein, 1946, p.14)

The phenomenon of integration is a progressive one and the baby moves from a relationship to the breast to the perception of the mother as a person, and, gradually, of the father and other people around him: 'Out of the alternating processes of disintegration and integration develops gradually a more integrated ego. [...] The infant's relation to parts of his mother's body, focussing on her breast, gradually changes into a relation to her as a person' (Klein, 1952b, p.71).

### **The birth of the self**

Ultimately the distinction between the paranoid-schizoid positions and the depressive position resides in the fact that only in the depressive position is psychic reality acknowledged as such, and it is because of this recognition that one's own selfhood can be distinguished from that of others. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the inability to understand one's own mind results in the use of the primitive functions of projection and introjection as the basic solution for disencumbering the ego from painful feelings and appropriating an inner sense of pleasure. This however is never definitive, because new frustrations are bound to generate yet more pain and need for projection and introjection. In these cycles the ego becomes split and ultimately pleasure is forestalled. In the paranoid-schizoid position:

the bad object is not only kept apart from the good one, but its very existence is denied, as is the whole situation of frustration and the bad feelings (pain) to which frustration gives rise. This is bound up with denial of psychic reality. [...] It is, however, not only a situation and an object that are denied and annihilated – *it is an object relation* which suffers this fate; and therefore a part of the ego, from which the feelings towards the object emanate, is denied and annihilated as well.

(Klein, 1946 p.7)

It is only in the depressive position that acknowledgment of the absence of the object will allow for recognition of one's own psychic reality as distinguished from that of the other. But in fact, the depressive position can only come about as a consequence of the paranoid-schizoid one. Repeated cycles of projection and introjection are necessary to establish the dynamic relationship between internal and external reality, before these can be construed as distinct.

While Klein, departing from her work with children, arrives at a description of the beginnings of psychic life intended in developmental terms, her theory, supported by extensive analytic work with adults conducted by her and her collaborators, establishes that the fluctuation between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position is the foundation of all mental activity throughout life. In Klein's words: 'The tendency towards integration, which is concurrent with splitting, I assume to be, from earliest infancy, a dominant feature of mental life' (Klein, 1955, p.144).

Reality-thinking, as the predominant modus operandi of the mature ego and hence of the adult's mind, still '*cannot operate without concurrent and supporting unconscious phantasies*' (Isaacs, 1989, p.109). Moreover, 'the broader expressions of character and personality [...] are always found in analysis to be related to specific sets of varied phantasies (Isaacs, 1989, p.101). Projection and introjection, as processes of unconscious identification which confuse self and other, ultimately lead to the formation of the self, that is, of one's conscious sense of identity.

For the purpose of spectatorship, aside from the significance of projection and introjection as identificatory mechanisms at the basis of psychic development,

there is another aspect which is of note. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the inability of the ego to distinguish between internal and external reality entails a sense of omnipotence for which the infantile ego believes itself in control of its objects and such control is construed as an action. Because the ego is not aware of the psychic aspect of these operations, it understands them as 'deeds'. Talking about the child's earliest unconscious phantasies, Susan Isaac, one of Klein's closest collaborators, writes:

In his earliest days, his own wishes and impulses fill the whole world at the time when they are felt. It is only slowly that he learns to distinguish between the wish and the deed, between external facts and his feelings about them.

(Isaacs, 1989, p.85)

Freud had a similar conception of the most primitive and unconscious mental processes being experienced as actions when he talked of repetition-compulsion as the psychic activity 'beyond the pleasure principle' (Freud, 1923). Bion will further elaborate on this aspect of unconscious phantasy by which primitive psychic processes are in fact more akin to actions than to thoughts.

There is another aspect of Klein's theory which Bion will be instrumental in expanding and elucidating, the mechanisms by which the mother's mind promotes psychic development in the baby. Or, to put it another way, while Klein focussed on the development of the self and the mental operations that ground it, Bion will extend the enquiry into that psychic process in the 'other' which is instrumental for the development of the self. This he will call an alpha-function, as I shall discuss next.

#### **BION'S THEORY OF ALPHA-FUNCTION**

Like Klein, and being himself part of her circle in the first part of his career as psychoanalyst, Bion starts from Freud's idea that the ego develops from the id with 'the function of establishing contact between psychic and external reality' (Bion, 1984a, p.25). Still occupying himself with the unconscious processes that contribute to the development of the ego, he extends the enquiry from the

mechanisms inside the baby's mind (unconscious phantasy and the intrinsic mechanisms of projection and introjection) to the occurrences in the mother's mind. These must be essential to the development of the baby's ego, if it is true that the mind of the baby grows not independently of what happens outside of it, but in a mutual and continuous interaction with the mind of the mother, and indeed of that of other people who take care of him.

Melanie Klein had moved the focus of enquiry from the relationship between the id and the ego, to the relationship between the ego and its objects. Her description focused on the vicissitudes of the objects in the baby's mind, such as the introjection and projection of the good and bad breast in unconscious phantasy. While she acknowledged the importance of external factors in determining the development of the ego and the shift between the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive position, she did not describe the processes in the mother's mind which promote or hinder this development.

### **Projective identification**

Bion takes a particular interest in identification by projection, or 'projective identification'. Melanie Klein (1946, p.8) had used this term to emphasize the fact that projection does not only allow the ego to get rid of painful or unwanted objects, but also results in a sense of identification with the object into which the projection is effected. However, she restricted the experience of identification to the child's unconscious, and did not explore whether the projection would also induce a sense of identification in the mother herself. Bion, as we shall see, reads projective identification not just as a psychic act of representation - the child or the subject representing to himself the evacuation of an internal object in unconscious phantasy - but also as an act of communication through which the projection effectively speaks to the other person's unconscious. Bion maintains that:

There is a field of emotional force in which the individuals seem to lose their boundaries as individuals and become 'areas' around and through which emotions play at will. Psycho-analyst and patient cannot exempt themselves from the emotional field.

(Bion, 1984b, p.146)

Projective identification is in effect an unconscious communication between two minds, a phenomenon whose existence Freud had envisaged. In a paper aimed at instructing physicians on the technique of psychoanalysis, he gave the following advice to the analyst: that 'he must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient' (Freud, 1912b, p.115). The phenomenon of projective identification has since been recognized as having a great bearing on what goes on during a psychoanalytic session, representing the way in which the analyst can understand her patients' unconscious communication, beyond the words that they speak. I will give an example from my own psychoanalytic practice.

A young woman had been referred for psychotherapy because of marital difficulties and a past history of sexual abuse as a child. During many sessions, I found myself noticing the attractiveness of this woman, her elegant way of dressing, her impeccable make-up. The room filled with the pleasant scent of perfume as soon as she stepped in. She always wore a dress with a skirt above her knee and high heels. Her long dark and curly hair looked as if she had just walked out of a hairdresser. I noticed a fleeting feeling of being attracted to her because of her physical appearance. This feeling sat uncomfortable with me, because it was unusual – in general I hardly notice people's attire or hairstyle – but also because it came with a sense that there was something 'wrong' in the way I felt towards her. It was an intriguing situation, and I often thought about it, but for a long time it seemed to make no sense. One day, though, during a particular session, the nature of my feeling was revealed: it was in fact a projective identification from the patient. She revealed how she had always felt awkward in her relationship to other women, especially women she liked. With men, she tended to be flirtatious, but with women, this did not seem to her an appropriate attitude, it felt 'wrong'. And because using her physical attractiveness was the only way in which she knew how to get close to people, she ended up having no close relationships with other women and her intimate friends were all men.

There was now a clear explanation for my feelings towards her: my being attracted to her and the sense of awkwardness that went with it were her unprocessed emotions, which she had placed within me through projective identification. While her projection was a mechanism for ridding herself of her uncomfortable impulse of wanting to get close to me through physical seduction, it also acted as a powerful communication, in making me feel what she felt, or, as Bion would say, in making me 'become' that feeling. Following the session during which her projected feelings were revealed, and made conscious, one of those extraordinary transformations that sometimes happen in psychoanalysis followed. The next session the patient came in a tracksuit and without make-up. Her appearance had markedly changed and the awkwardness and physical attraction had completely dispersed.

The projection of the objects into another person (specifically the mother in the case of the baby, or the analyst in the case of the patient), is for Bion a communicative experience: projective identification is a communication to the mother of unmanageable feelings in the hope that she will experience them, understand them and give them back in a manageable form (Bion, 1984b). Therefore, according to this model, not only the recipient of the projection feels what is projected into her, but also she can act on the projection and transform it, through what Bion will call an alpha-function. Reading Bion's theoretical system through Klein's terminology, it could be argued that unconscious phantasy is the realm of unconscious communication and meaning-making, effected through projective identification and alpha-function.

### **Alpha-function**

In order to understand what Bion means by alpha-function it is useful to explain his theory of thinking and the specific terminology he employs. According to Bion, the primitive form of experiencing an emotion is of a thing-in-itself (the bad or good object in Kleinian terms). This mode of psychic functioning is what Melanie Klein described for the paranoid-schizoid position: the baby experiences the distress caused by the absence of the breast when he needs it for comfort or feeding, as a bad breast, a concrete object, a thing-in-itself. It is



only with the shift to the depressive position that the baby, learning to understand absence, can integrate the split parts of the objects and apprehend the difference between self and other. Filling the gaps in understanding left by Klein's theory, Bion proposed that the transition between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position is characterized by the development of a thinking apparatus that can transform things-in-themselves into thoughts.

Bion postulates that things-in-themselves are 'thoughts without a thinker' (Symington J. & N., 1996, p.102) and 'thinking has to be developed as a method or apparatus for dealing with "thoughts" ' (Bion, 1984a, p.83). Things-in-themselves are primitive forms of emotional experience that lack a thinker, because the ego has not yet developed the capability of thinking about them. 'Thoughts without a thinker' are only fit for projective identification and are called by Bion 'beta-elements' (Bion, 1984a, p.6). It is because beta-elements (or things-in themselves, thoughts without a thinker, concrete objects, whichever we choose to call them) cannot be thought about, that they are only

suitable for use in projective identification. They are influential in producing acting out. They are objects that can be evacuated or used for a kind of thinking that depends on manipulation of what are felt to be things in themselves as if to substitute such manipulation for words or ideas.

(Bion, 1984a, p.6)

By placing beta-elements into the mother, the baby is not only getting rid of them from his own mind, but also communicating them so that they can be transformed into thoughts. As Bion explains: 'Projective identification makes it possible for him to investigate his own feelings in a personality powerful enough to contain them' (Bion, 1984b, p.106).

The beta-element placed in the mother's mind is transformed, through alpha-function, into an alpha-element, which can then be returned to the baby as a thought. According to Bion:

alpha-function must operate on the awareness of the emotional experience; alpha-elements are produced from the impressions of the experience; these are thus made storable and available for dream thoughts and for unconscious waking thinking. [...] Alpha-function is

needed for conscious thinking and reasoning and for the relegation of thinking to the unconscious when it is necessary to disencumber consciousness of the burden of thought [...]

(Bion, 1984a, p.8)

Although Bion does not specifically say this, what he means is that once the beta-elements are processed through alpha-function and are transformed into alpha-elements, they become available within the ego, where they can be used in conscious thought, or they can be stored as preconscious elements; their new nature does not make them conscious at all times, but easily available for conscious thought when needed, as it is the case for preconscious ideas.

The transformation of beta-elements into alpha-elements is essential for psychic development as much as food and drink are essential for physical growth:

A central part is played by alpha-function in transforming an emotional experience into alpha-elements because a sense of reality matters to the individual in the way that food, drink, air and excretion of waste products matter. Failure to eat, drink or breathe properly has disastrous consequences for life itself. Failure to use the emotional experience produces a comparable disaster in the development of the personality.

(Bion, 1984a, p.42)

By the re-introjection of alpha-elements, which have been produced in the mother's mind by the transformation of the baby's beta-elements, the infant's psyche can develop the capacity for thinking. Its emotional experience is no longer a concrete, unthinkable 'thing-in-itself' but rather a thought, an abstraction that has given meaning to the emotion. 'Alpha function endows the mind with a sense of subjectivity. Now the mind can think about itself and have a personal response to emotional occurrences. It is able to transform the basic emotional experience into thought' (Symington J. & N, 1996, p.63).

Because the new-born baby has hardly any capacity for alpha-function, his mother's alpha-function will be crucial for his psychic survival. However, repeated cycles of introjection of alpha-elements will trigger the development of the baby's own alpha-function, which he can then gradually apply to his own emotional experiences, becoming partly independent from the mother. Through projective identification,

the infant communicates his emotional state to his mother. Her ability to tolerate and process these feeling states, especially the frightening ones, enables the infant to take them back in a manageable form and also gradually to introject this capacity to process emotional experiences.

(Symington J. & N, 1996, p.154)

The development of the baby's own alpha-function probably underpins the value of play. As brought to notice by Klein and her circle, from the first few weeks of life, 'the infant spends an increasing amount of time in experimentative play, which is, at one and the same time, an attempt to adapt to reality and an active means of expressing phantasy' (Isaacs, 1989, pp.97-98). By projecting his objects into the external world, like Freud's grandson did with the cotton reel, the child experiments with unconscious identifications in phantasy. His own alpha-function is then set in motion in relation to the raw emotional experiences represented by the objects, and used to produce meaning. According to Bion's theory, this would only be possible inasmuch as the child has already introjected alpha-elements in relation to this particular emotional situation (for instance, in the case of Freud's grandson, the situation of being left by the mother) and hence has developed at least a rudimentary ability for alpha-function. Freud's grandson might have experienced previous partings from the mother, when as a baby she left him in his cot, and her return to sooth him might have provided the alpha-elements necessary for the processing of later emotional experiences of similar kind.

The work with patients in psychoanalysis shows two important aspects of alpha-function. On the one hand, cases when alpha-function hardly develops at all are rare, and present themselves as serious psychotic illnesses, in which emotional experiences are not understood and remain as things-in-themselves that haunt the patient in the forms of delusions and hallucinations. On the other hand, neurotic patients and even healthy people have areas of their personality which remain 'psychotic', or split off from the integrated ego. These areas harbour beta-elements for which an internal capacity for alpha-function has not developed (although alpha-function may be well developed with regards many other forms of emotional experience). These beta-elements are then expressed as re-enactments and become evident as such in the transference.

Anyone, including the mother, or indeed the analyst, had a need as a baby for other people to perform alpha-function on their behalf; moreover, even in their maturity, anyone is most likely to harbour beta-elements in their psychotic area of the personality, where alpha-function is inoperative. Because alpha-function is established and promoted through the 'other', its interpersonal aspect is crucial. That explains why psychoanalysts need to undergo their own analysis for many years during their training, and they tend to return to analysis as patients, from time to time, during their working life.

### **The double nature of alpha-function**

Alpha-function is the capacity to apply one's understanding to an emotional experience: 'An understanding mother is able to experience the feeling of dread, that this baby was striving to deal with by projective identification, and yet retain a balanced outlook' (Bion, 1984b, p.104).

In order to be subjected to alpha-function, the beta-element, in projective identification, must be experienced by the mother as if it was her own feeling. When the baby projects the bad breast into the mother, the mother feels the distress of the baby as if it was hers; in fact in projective identification she has 'become' it. Bion distinguishes between a situation when a psychic reality corresponding to a beta-element is inferred and a situation when it is intuited. If the mother knows that the baby is in distress because she sees him crying and hears his screams, this is very different from a situation when the mother intuits the baby's distress because she becomes it. Only in this second case can alpha-function be put into effect, because it is provided with the raw material necessary for its operation.

To return to the example of my patient, my feelings of being attracted to her were in fact an intuition through projective identification. By sojourning inside my psyche, those intuited feelings were transformed through my thinking process (my alpha-function). They could then be returned to the patient in the form of thoughts which she was eventually able to think, as happened in the

session I described. This process would not have occurred if my understanding of the patient had been reached through my observations of her. For instance, my noticing her stylish attire could have made me suppose that she was trying to impress me in some way, and I could have deduced that this was her way of relating to women in general. The content of this understanding would have been similar to the one reached via projective identification and alpha-function, but the outcome would have been very different. According to psychoanalytic theory, no transformation would have been effected. Should I have chosen to discuss my deductions with the patient, it might have resulted in a reinforcement of her repressed unprocessed emotions.

The emotional understanding that alpha-function fosters is therefore of a very special kind, and should not be confused with a rational appraisal of a situation. I want to stress this point once more, with a quotation from a book on Bion written by two eminent psychoanalysts:

The case where you see someone blushing and infer shame is quite different to the one where the analyst *intuits* shame. In the one case it is outside and in the other the analyst has *become* it. A psychic reality is only known by being 'become' first. What we have said of shame goes for grief, joy, envy, love, hatred, gratitude, meanness, anxiety and all the emotions.

(Symington J. & N., 1996, p.167)

The reason why I insist so much on this point is because it will be an essential parameter in the discussion of the art of the actor.

In operating alpha-function, the mother (or the analyst) has to become the emotional experience in order to abstract it into a thought and make it available for emotional development. In this sense, alpha-function can be described as having a double nature, one of feeling and one of thinking, which are not in opposition to each other and do not represent alternative modalities. On the contrary, the emotional experience and the understanding of it are in a reciprocal dynamic relationship; one could not exist without the other.

The theory of alpha-function posits therefore a particular form of connection between feeling and thinking: in developmental terms, thinking emerges from

feeling, and in this sense it underpins a philosophy of the mind much similar to the eighteenth-century theory of sensism. On the other hand, the generation of thinking out of feeling is only possible by the interposition of a function that is in itself a form of thinking. The main difference from sensism, is that the theory of alpha-function places the fruitful dynamic between feeling and thinking in the special context of interpersonal relationships.

Bion borrowed the term alpha-function from the language of mathematics, for which he had a fascination. But he also chose it as a deliberately neutral term to emphasize that he did not know the nature of this entity (Bion, 1984a, p.26). This attitude of 'not knowing', which he generally praised very much in all contexts that have to do with acquiring knowledge, allowed him the freedom to reach new decisive insights. I am therefore reluctantly going to label 'alpha-function' as 'sympathy', because it will be useful to do so, in order to relate it to the wider debate on spectatorship and the art of the actor that I engage with in this thesis.

According to Melanie Klein, who explored most extensively the idea of projective identification in her paper *On Identification*, projective identification is 'the projective mechanism underlying empathy' (Klein, 1955, p.143). Although she only hints at it, she also suggests that sympathy is slowly developed out of cycles of projective identification and introjection. To use Bion's terminology, it is the projection of beta-elements in projective identification and the re-introjection of alpha-elements that supports the development of sympathy.

The terms of empathy and sympathy have a range of different definitions, their meaning is sometimes swapped and they have also been used as synonyms. For the purpose of my analysis, I suggest following the lines indicated by Melanie Klein and to call empathy a state of unconscious emotional identification in which a person experiences a feeling which is not hers, but has been projected into her through projective identification. I propose to call sympathy a state of conscious emotional identification in which a person understands what another is feeling, because she also understands the meaning of such feeling. With this definition, while an aspect of empathy (the

'feeling in unison') would also be part of sympathy, only in sympathy is there an awareness that what one feels is not one's own feeling but belongs to someone else. In this sense, empathy would correspond to the notion of 'fear' and sympathy to the notion of 'pity' in Aristotle. I will return to this point in Chapter 6.

### **When alpha-function goes wrong**

Because of its complex nature, alpha-function is not always operative and can be disrupted. This may depend on a number of factors. An extreme situation is when the projective identification cannot be intuited, and hence the mother (or the analyst) cannot 'become' it. The classical example in psychoanalysis is that of a depressed mother, whose internal state of self-preoccupation makes her impermeable to the emotions that reach her through a projection. The depressed mother can still see and hear her baby's signs of emotions, for instance she may see and hear her infant crying, but she cannot 'become' it. Although her practical response to the baby may be very similar to that of a mother who is emotionally tuned in, for example picking up the baby or giving him milk, her alpha-function will not be operative, and while her baby's physical needs will have been attended to, his psyche will remain starved.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are situations when the beta-elements projected into the mother may be intuited but do not encounter a capability for alpha-function, because the mother lacks such capability. The extreme case would be that of a psychotic mother. However, as I have anticipated, even healthy people may have areas of their personality which are filled with beta-elements and which lack a capacity for processing particular forms of emotional experience. This phenomenon is one of the causes of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. As Bion writes: 'If alpha-function is disturbed, and therefore inoperative, the sense impressions of which the patient is aware and the emotions which he is experiencing remain unchanged' (Bion, 1984a, p.6). Not only will the baby be returned his own beta-elements as they stand, but he may in turn be subject to the projection of the mother's own beta-elements, greatly hindering his capacity for thinking in this emotional area.

One of my patients, a mother of three, was well-functioning in most areas of her life, but she felt also deeply unhappy. She had found it difficult to bond with her second child, a little girl who was now three years old, while she was closer to her elder son. The relationship between her and her daughter was getting increasingly hostile, and conflicts arose especially because of the child's rivalry with her one-year-old little sister. My patient was the eldest of two daughters, and memories from her early childhood included what she called her mother's 'screaming fits'. These would happen when her and her sister, perhaps during a game, would end up fighting. If this situation occurred when the father was not at home and the mother was the sole carer in the house, the mother would lock the girls in the bathroom. My patient would then hear her scream loudly. Only when the screaming ceased, would the girls, now comprehensibly frightened, be allowed out of the bathroom again. This is a somewhat extreme example of what an absence of alpha-function and re-projection of beta-elements might look, and feel like. The patient's mother, emotionally incapable of sustaining the conflict between her daughters, not only had no soothing or understanding to offer them, but becoming aroused in her own psychotic part of the personality, she would then project her own despair into her daughters through her screams. My patient, otherwise a mature and competent woman, still harboured those beta-elements in herself, and was unable to 'retain a balanced outlook' (Bion, 1984b, p.104) on her own daughters' rivalry.

The case of the depressed or the psychotic maternal response can apply to psychoanalysts as well. Although analysts are trained to accept the patient's projections and to maintain a balanced outlook, they always need to be alert for times when they may become impermeable to the projections of their patients' beta-elements or for times when they may be tempted to 'act in'. As I discussed in Chapter 2, these are the detrimental responses that Freud (1915a) warns against, when talking about the erotic transference: either inviting the patient to repress her erotic longings for the analyst, or giving in to the temptation of satisfying them. What the analyst needs to do to bring the transference cure to good effect (or, in Bion's terms, to perform her alpha-function for the patient) is to accept the expression of the repressed emotions and to interpret their meaning in the context of the transference and the past history of the patient.



Bion talks of another situation when the mother's alpha-function may be disrupted, this time because of an obstacle in the baby, rather than the mother; this is the case of envy. Melanie Klein introduced and explored the notion of envy as part of the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1957). She maintained that envious impulses, which express the desire to damage or destroy the good object, were part of the death instinct, and were particularly prominent in situations when the death instinct prevailed over the life instinct in the baby's psyche. She contrasted envy with gratitude, which is instead part of the life instinct, and leads to desiring, loving, and introjecting the good object. When envy and the death instinct prevail, integration of the good and bad breasts is hindered and the object remains split into an all-bad breast and an all-good breast. The all-good breast is unrealistically idealized and as such it may be introjected with the projection of the all-bad breast:

Some people deal with their incapacity (derived from excessive envy) to possess a good object by idealizing it. This first idealization is precarious, for the envy experienced towards the good object is bound to extend to its idealized aspects. The same is true of idealizations of further objects and the identification with them, which is often unstable and indiscriminate.

(Klein, 1957, p.193)

Bion maintains that when envy prevails in the baby, due to the operations of the death instinct, his projections into the mother have a peculiar quality which disrupts alpha-function. In this case the result of projective identification is felt by the baby to be a further depletion of meaning and a destruction of the thinking process (Symington J. & N., 1996). When this happens in analysis, it may manifest as a resistance on the part of the patient to the analyst's interpretations. The patient is not interested in the analyst's capacity for thinking and alpha-function; on the contrary he wants to destroy it. In this attempt, he may chose to concentrate on asking the analyst questions about her private life or on dismissing the analyst's attempts at understanding as pointless, stupid, or fake.

A middle-age man was referred for psychotherapy and came for his first assessment. Following my invitation to tell me what brought him to the session,

instead of responding, he asked me whether I was qualified for the job, how long had I been working as a psychotherapist and demanded to be seen by the most senior clinician in the department. He also requested to see my manager immediately. By doing so, he was desperately trying to stop me from thinking about him. When I said so, he calmed down and became tearful. He then proceeded with the assessment. Further engagement with therapy showed that many of his difficulties in life, characterized by frequently losing his job and his friends, had to do with his unconscious envious attacks on people whom he perceived to be taking advantage of their knowledge of him. He could not conceive or tolerate that other people had a genuine interest in his welfare and he utterly refused to listen to their advice, which he perceived as patronising and belittling. As the therapy progressed, after much toing and froing, his inner psychic change manifested as a sense of gratitude towards his therapist. By entrusting the therapist with his beta-elements, he was eventually able to experience her alpha-function, which resulted in a sense of being understood, and made him feel grateful.

As I said, a situation of envy may arise because of the prevailing force of the death instinct over the life instinct in the baby or the patient. However, it is hardly ever a primary situation. Most often, it is the result of previous experiences of failure of alpha-function, which then make the baby (or patient) suspicious about the possibility that the mother (or analyst) may have something to offer. According to Bion, the relationship between the baby and the mother during alpha-function is 'commensal', because both the baby and the mother gain in psychic growth: 'the mother derives benefit and achieves mental growth from the experience: the infant likewise abstracts benefit and achieves growth' (Bion, 1984a, p.91). On the other hand, an encounter characterized by envy 'precludes a commensal relationship' (Bion, 1984a, p.96), and leads to experiencing confusion and meaninglessness. In the most extreme cases, the fragmentation of the ego that results from such psychic transaction leaves the baby filled with a 'nameless dread' (Bion, 1984a, p.96).

## **AN INTERPRETATION OF THE ART OF THE ACTOR AS ALPHA-FUNCTION**

So far in the chapter, I have delved into the psychoanalytic descriptions of the unconscious psychic processes underpinning alpha-function in detail. Because these processes happen at a psychic level which is far removed from consciousness, they are difficult to grasp outside specific contexts such as the psychoanalytic setting. Although they operate in everyday mental activity, it is easy to be blind to them or to dismiss them as unintelligible.

Freud's distinction between the unconscious proper and the preconscious helps to clarify the difference between psychoanalytic investigation and other forms of scientific insight into the operations of the unconscious. For instance, when McConachie talks of the unconscious aspect of cognitive blending, as I discussed in Chapter 1, he emphasizes that although blending takes place 'mostly below the level of consciousness' (2008, p.42), it was once a conscious process which subsequently became 'habitual' (2008, p.56). In psychoanalytic jargon, we may call this a preconscious psychic mechanism, which can easily be brought to awareness. On the other hand, the identifications that occur through projection and introjection in unconscious phantasy have to be understood as belonging to the unconscious proper: their conscious recognition is only possible after they have been submitted to a process of analysis involving considerable psychic effort.

Having illustrated the *modus operandi* of unconscious phantasy and alpha-function, I now propose to indicate how these concepts may shed light on the art of the actor as described by the eighteenth-century theories which I investigated in depth in Chapter 3 and 4.

The eighteenth-century debate on the art of the actor was particularly concerned with the status of the actor's emotions in relation to those of the character. Most theorists were keen to underline the delicate balance that the actor needs to achieve between sensibility and judgement, and they described in detail what was meant by these terms. Sensibility is the actor's ability to arouse in herself any emotion in the specific nature and degree required by the

rendition of the character. Such arousal is greatly favoured by the actor steering away from her own personal feelings, so that her sensibility, as soft as wax, can be subjected to all the modifications appropriate to the interpretation of the character. The actor's sensibility therefore is put at the service of the emotions of 'another'.

Judgement (or esprit) is instead that quality of the actor which serves the purpose of regulating her sensibility. It is the actor's ability to reflect, so that she can regulate her feelings at the service of the interpretation of the character. Such regulation entails distinguishing the nature and degree of the emotions on the basis of the given circumstances, and it is ultimately an act of understanding. It is acquired and perfected through the study of human nature, so that the actor's artificial act of interpretation may become a rendition more natural than nature itself.

Three important aspects of acting can be identified in the above description:

- the particular relationship that feeling and understanding enjoy in the art of the actor;
- the crucial circumstance that acting is at the service of the emotions of the character, and has therefore a transpersonal dimension;
- the fact that the purpose of acting is in relation to the study of human nature.

In the following sections, I will focus on all these three aspects from a psychoanalytic perspective. While I will turn immediately to the first two points, I will leave the third topic for discussion at the end of the chapter.

### **The relationship between sensibility and understanding**

The relationship in the art of the actor between sensibility and judgement, feeling and understanding, can be illuminated by the theory of alpha-function. Alpha-function processes emotional experience through an act of understanding which gives it meaning, but in order to be subjected to alpha-function, an emotional experience needs to be 'become' first: a compelling dynamic between emotional arousal and understanding is at its foundation.

Beta-elements, the unprocessed 'things-in-themselves' of the infant's emotional experience, are projected into a mind, that of the mother, that can become them while keeping a balanced outlook. There they can be processed into alpha-elements, which will be returned as thoughts suitable for thinking, fostering the infant's capacity for his own alpha-function and promoting his sense of self.

In the actor, the emotions gathered by sensibility need to be subjected to an act of understanding; as Hill explains: 'What we should wish in the perfect player is, that he has all the sensibility [...] and yet all the command of himself necessary to regulate its emotions' (Hill, 1755, pp.53-54). Actors may possess sensibility and understanding in different degrees, and they may employ them in a disjointed fashion, but in these instances the actor displeases the audience. Sensibility and understanding need to cooperate in a fruitful and dynamic process, in order to fulfil their function in the actor's art. As Hill maintains, the great actor 'has both in such a degree, that while the judgement regulates the sensibility, the sensibility animates, enlivens, and inspires the understanding' (Hill, 1755, p.58).

Perhaps the most suggestive description of the actor's alpha-function is given by Sainte-Albine, when he writes that under certain conditions 'le sentiment deviens quelquefois esprit' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.2). The actor David Garrick has also given us a depiction of acting evocative of alpha-function:

Wou'd a Player perform [...] excellent in *his* Profession, let him be introduc'd into the World, be conversant with *Humours* of every Kind, digest 'em in his *Mind*, let 'em be cherish'd by the *genial Warmth* of his *Conception*, *transplanted into the fair Garden* of his *Judgment*, there let 'em *ripen to Perfection*, and become *his own*.

(Garrick, 1744, p.10)

The dynamic between sensibility and understanding in the art of the actor can thus be construed as an alpha-function: her becoming the emotions of the character through her sensibility yields an act of understanding. Crucially, such understanding is directed at the character's emotions, not her own, according to a process which is known, in theatre jargon, as an 'interpretation'. The parallel

with the work of the analyst is strikingly plain: the analyst must 'become' the patient's emotions which she has intuited through projective identification, in order to submit them to alpha-function. If she succeeds in giving them meaning through her reflective process, these emotions can be returned to the patient in a 'thinkable' form, and this operation of meaning-making and restitution happens, in psychoanalysis also, through the work of interpretation.

Not all the utterances that the analyst makes during a session should be considered interpretations in the strict sense of the term. While the analyst may provide other forms of useful information for the patient, through stimulating conscious or preconscious activities which build understanding on the basis of observation or inference, only understandings which derive from an experience of 'becoming' are truly transformative of the unconscious ego, promoting integration and developing subjectivity. If it is admitted that a similar distinction may be valid for the art of the actor, further clarification makes it necessary to bring the nature of the spectator's experience into the equation.

### **Transpersonal alpha-function and the spectator's experience**

Theatre spectatorship is indisputably an opportunity for emotional arousal. At an unconscious level, this amounts to the activation of unconscious phantasy, including those 'psychotic' parts of the personality which contain unprocessed beta-elements. In unconscious phantasy, the spectator's beta-elements are projected into the character(s) through a process of ego-splitting. In the mode of functioning of the paranoid-schizoid position, beta-elements are split off into 'psychotic' parts of the ego and as such can be projected into the character(s).

The ability of the characters to receive the projections and to 'become' them depends, of course, on the actors who play them. A passage in Hill's *Actor*, highlights that particular feature of sensibility which allows the actor to become the receptacle of emotions coming from another: there he specifies that sensibility is the 'disposition to receive those impressions by which our own passions are affected' (Hill, 1755, p.49). An actor who 'becomes' the emotions she portrays uses her sensibility to receive the spectator's projection. The

principle that the actor's sensibility should be at the service of the emotions of another is of course greatly emphasized through the insistence that she should avoid being distracted by her personal feelings, in order to concentrate on those of the character.

The transpersonal dimension of alpha-function and the mechanisms of projection and introjection in unconscious phantasy, substantiate the existence of a reciprocal code of communication between actors and spectators. As I discussed in Chapter 1, despite actors testifying to their sensing the audience's presence and reactions, the impossibility of identifying a common communicative code between stage and auditorium has cast doubts on the nature of the actor-spectator transaction. Albeit at an unconscious level, projective and introjective identification in unconscious phantasy provides proof of that common code of communication between spectators and actors.

A good actor plays the character through the interpretation that she has carefully prepared. It is through her interpretation, that the actor will subject the spectator's beta-elements to alpha-function and return them to the spectator as alpha-elements, which will be re-introjected to give meaning to his emotional experiences. Effecting a transition of the spectator's psyche into the depressive position, the actor's alpha-function promotes his ego integration and sense of self. If this is the case, one need hardly wonder why spectators, as advocated by John Hill and others, should take a keen interest in the art of the actor.

### **Alpha-function and the actor's double game**

The interpretation of the art of the actor as alpha-function elucidates the significance of what Eco has called the double game of the actor as theatrical sign. The receiving of the spectator's projective identifications is dependent on the actor's physical presence: as the psychoanalyst 'must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient' (Freud, 1912b, p.115), so the actor must use her personal unconscious to receive the spectator's projective identifications. This operation is contingent on the actor's extemporaneity. On the other hand, it is the portrayal of the

character, constructed through her interpretation, which contains the reflective understanding necessary for alpha-function.

While even anti-emotionalists like Diderot have admitted to the necessity that the actor engages with her own feelings during the preparation of her interpretation, the anti-emotionalist argument has rested upon the claim that the actor should not experience emotions during the performance itself. Suffice that she portrays those external signs of emotions which she has fixed during rehearsals. The theory of alpha-function establishes a distinction between the actor feeling the emotions of the character for the purpose of her interpretation tout court and for the purpose of receiving the spectator's projective identifications and becoming them. It is this second situation which demands of the actor to intuit the emotions anew at each performance. Therefore, if technically a good actor may leave behind her feelings once arrived at a valid interpretation, she will also leave behind her alpha-function if she does so.

While I will not address this particular theme in this thesis, it could be said that the bodily presence of the actor on the one side (for the purpose of the extempore intuition of emotions) and the intellectual operation of her interpretation on the other, represent the conjunction which makes alpha-function possible. If we circumscribe our analysis to those forms of acting in which the use of language is pivotal to the reaching of an interpretation, it is possible that the actor's double game reflects a dynamic between embodiment and language, making this the distinctive feature of theatre as a form of art. I will briefly re-consider this point in Chapter 6.

### **Disruptions of alpha-function in the art of the actor**

With an actor who plays herself, or with an actor who refuses to 'become' the spectator's projective identification, the double game is broken. This disruption is precisely what happens for what I will tentatively call the psychotic and the depressed actor.



As the eighteenth-century theorists have aptly described, there are situations when actors displease, either because they play their feelings instead of those of the character, or because they fake the character's emotions instead of truly experiencing them. As Hill explains, 'Insipidity is the general character of inferior performers; and extravagance is too much that of the superior ones' (Hill, 1755, p.8). Of the two, extravagance is the most intolerable.

Situations in which actors express their own personal feelings instead of those of the character are caused by the application of sensibility without judgement. They entail that form of 'playing by instinct' unanimously deprecated by all eighteenth-century theorists. The actor who plays by instinct, or, to put it another way, who plays her own feelings, is like a mother who responds to the baby's beta-elements with the psychotic part of her personality. By withholding understanding, she will not be able to subject the spectator's beta-elements to alpha-function and will bounce them back as unprocessed emotional experiences. Moreover, the actor may take the performance of the character as an opportunity to re-enact her own unprocessed emotional experiences and in turn project her own beta-elements into the audience. As Hill lucidly expounds, the extravagance of uncontrolled sensibility not only disgusts the spectator but also induces him to 'despise the player who forces it' upon him (Hill, 1755, p.11). Like a psychotic mother, the actor appears inconsistent, incoherent, extravagant. Like a baby at the hands of a psychotic mother, the spectator will be forced into becoming confused, disgusted, overwhelmed.

The actor who plays by resisting the arousal of feelings within herself is like a deceiving mistress, or a skilful courtier, who feign emotions which they do not feel. While the spectator may be able to tolerate a certain degree of artfulness, ultimately he does not admit that this is in his best interest: 'Il goûte [du plaisir] à montrer qu'il n'est pas la dupe du prestige, lorsque l'artifice est trop grossier pour lui faire illusion. Il consent d'être abusé, mais il veut que son erreur ait l'air raisonnable' (Sainte-Albine, 1749, p.40). The actor who feigns, like a depressed mother, makes herself impermeable to the spectator's projective identifications. As I said earlier, a depressed mother may remain competent on a practical level, because inferring the baby's needs from external signs. Her responses to

the baby may therefore appear indistinguishable from those of a healthy mother.

Like a depressed mother, an actor who refrains from using her sensibility may appear competent. She can construct an understanding of the character's emotions that may be indistinguishable from the one expressed by a feeling actor. But according to the theory of alpha-function, the unconscious experience that she grants the spectator is of a very different kind to that of an actor who can couple understanding with feeling. Because her understanding is based on inference, rather than intuition, and she has not become the emotions, the spectator's unconscious psyche will be left to starve. Although on an intellectual plane the character's interpretation may leave the spectator enriched with conscious information about emotions, no alpha-function will be available for his projected beta-elements.

It seems that overall the eighteenth-century theorists are more tolerant of the 'depressed' actor than of the 'psychotic' one. Luigi Riccoboni, as we have seen, admits to feigning in situations when it becomes impossible for the actor to reach the extent of the feeling required. Although feeling is always preferable, feigning is an acceptable if undesirable expedient. In negotiating the dynamic between feeling and feigning consists, according to Luigi Riccoboni, all the greatness of the actor's art.

On the other hand, the actor who solely feigns is the prototype of acting championed by Diderot's *Paradoxe*, and also a foreshadowing of Brecht's A-effect. According to Diderot, acting regulated by judgement but deprived of sensibility is the epitome of great acting. As I have shown in Chapter 3, however, even Diderot admits that emotional arousal may be an essential part of the preparation that a great actor makes during the rehearsal stage. Moreover, he remains ambiguous with regard to the distinction between sensibility (that in his definition equates to playing by instinct) and a form of feeling regulated by judgement. While he bans the first from the art of the actor, he concedes to the second.

There is an important point to be made with reference to the actor who feigns. Alpha-function, while needing to originate in an encounter with the other, subsequently develops as an internal operation that one can apply to one's own emotional experiences. This happens already in the very young child, when through play he activates unconscious phantasy and uses inanimate objects as the receptacles of his projections. The spectator, therefore, has inevitably developed some capability for alpha-function to a lesser or greater extent. Surely, a theatre performance, like a novel or a painting, may set in motion the spectator's own alpha-function: in this sense, an actor who does not feel the emotions she portrays, while starving the spectator with regards to the provision of her own alpha-function, may still furnish an opportunity for the activation of the spectator's personal alpha-function. This may explain why a 'depressed' actor may be tolerable, while a 'psychotic' one is hardly so.

### **Brecht's theory of the actor in relation to alpha-function**

Brecht's theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt* proposes that actors should remain impermeable to the emotions of the character, along similar lines of those of the *Paradoxe*. Whilst Brecht's preoccupation with the mirroring of experience between actor and spectator is very different from Diderot's implicit assumption that a degree of emotional identification with the character is inherent to spectatorship, they both depart from an aversion for the 'psychotic' actor. Brecht expresses this pointedly in his *Conversation about being Forced into Empathy*:

In [a] well-known passage Gottsched cites Cicero writing on oratory, describing how the Roman actor Polus played Electra mourning her brother. His own son had just died, and so he brought the urn with his ashes on to the stage and spoke the relevant verses 'focusing them so painfully on himself that his own loss made him weep real tears. Nor could any of those present have refrained from weeping at that point?' I must say there is only one word for such an operation: barbaric.

(Brecht, 1957d, p.270)

If the spectator has to risk being overwhelmed by the actor's beta-elements, it is preferable that he relies on his own reflective capabilities, not those of the actor. In explaining his ideas about theatre reception, Brecht hints at this point: 'The

one tribute one can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent. It is utterly wrong to treat people as simpletons when they are grown up at seventeen. I appeal to reason' (1926, p.14). Although it may be far-fetched to imply that Brecht meant to appeal to the spectator's own alpha-function, in a passage to be found immediately after, he states: 'The audience has to be a good enough psychologist to make its own sense of the material I put before it' (1926, p.14).

There is another indication that Brecht's theory of spectatorship may point in the direction of privileging the activation of the spectator's alpha-function rather than the spectator having to depend on that of the actor: it is his urge for the 'literarization of the theatre' against 'the fact that the theatre can stage anything: it theatres it all down' (1931, p.43). Brecht hopes that through the more literary means employed by the epic theatre, such as the use of titles and film projections,

the spectator adopts an attitude of smoking-and-watching. Such an attitude on his part at once compels a better and clearer performance as it is hopeless to try to 'carry away' any man who is smoking and accordingly pretty well occupied with himself.

(Brecht, 1931, p.44)

As I briefly suggested earlier, the activation of transpersonal alpha-function may well be peculiar to the theatre among the literary arts, as no other form, including cinema, features the live presence of the artist. It remains questionable, whether other 'non-literary' performing arts such as music and dance may also presuppose alpha-function; this point would merit special attention, which is outside the remit of my research.

It is significant that towards the end of his career, Brecht changed his view of the role of empathy in the theatre. By then, he had an extensive experience of the theatre not only as playwright, but crucially, as director. In a series of notes that were written as an appendix to *A Short Organum for the Theatre* and which remained unpublished during his lifetime, he declares:

The contradiction between acting (demonstration) and experience (empathy) often leads the uninstructed to suppose that only one or the other can be manifest in the work of the actor (as if the Short Organum concentrated entirely on acting and the old tradition entirely on experience). In reality it is a matter of two mutually hostile processes which fuse in the actor's work; his performance is not just composed of a bit of the one and a bit of the other. His particular effectiveness comes from the tussle and tension of the two opposites, and also from their depth. The style in which the S.O. is written is partly to blame for this.

(Brecht, 1964, pp.277-278)

A long acquaintance with the practice of the theatre seems to have persuaded Brecht that the art of the actor is characterized by the fruitful dynamic between empathy, intended as emotional identification, and acting, intended as the portrayal of the character. As Brecht worked more and more with real actors, it is possible that he became more trusting of their dispositions and also that he understood better the special role that transpersonal identifications play in spectatorship. Perhaps it could be insinuated that alpha-function could not elude his sharp intelligence.

### **Spectatorship- envy or gratitude?**

Earlier I proposed to apply Klein's terminology to Bion's discovery and to call alpha-function an act of sympathy. Through repeated cycles of projection and introjection, which Klein hints to be the basis for sympathy, 'enrichment and deepening of the ego comes about. In this way the possession of the helpful inner object is again and again re-established and gratitude can fully come into play' (Klein, 1957, p.189). If sympathy engenders gratitude, it is possible that the rounds of applause that close a theatrical performance are partly occasioned, perhaps especially in their warmest and most spontaneous manifestations, by the sense of gratitude that the audience feels for the gift of alpha-function.

It is, however, not uncommon, at least in psychoanalysis, that past experiences of disrupted alpha-function, the prevailing of the death instinct, and the resistances against ego integration that this entails, provoke the surge of envy. According to Klein, 'a patient's co-operation has to be based on a strong determination to discover the truth about himself if he is to accept and

assimilate the analyst's interpretations relating to these early layers of the mind' (1957, p.232). Similarly, it may be argued that a spectator needs to be animated by a desire to understand himself, if he is to allow the actor's alpha-function to operate on his projections. Envy, and the resulting disruption of alpha-function, may represent a tempting alternative solution.

As we have seen, envy is characterized by the internalization of an idealized object, which provides a fragile and unstable identification. An idealized object is a split off all-good object that cannot be integrated within the ego and remains as a psychotic fragment of the personality, a beta-element not fit for thinking. On this basis, I would like to suggest that such a phenomenon might explain certain forms of curiosity that spectators take in actors' private lives. Focussing on the person of the actor outside her function of interpreter of the character may help spectators elude the actor's alpha function. Interestingly, actors often enjoy, in these instances, a form of idealization, which is fragile and unstable and may easily be turned into disparagement. As Klein writes: 'The former idealized person is often felt as a persecutor (which shows the origin of idealization as a counterpart to persecution), and into him is projected the subject's envious and critical attitude' (1957, p.193).

This theoretical formulation suggests that there may be a strong link between the phenomenon of the 'star actor' and spectators' unconscious envy. Although such proposition would need to be verified with future studies, a few provisional points may be inferred. First of all, the mutual exclusion of envy and alpha-function would mean that any activity which triggers interest in the private affairs of the actor or which encourages idealization (or indeed denigration) of her as a person would inevitably enhance envy and hinder alpha-function. During the actor's performance, spectators would be distracted by preoccupations with her person and therefore disrupt the unconscious identification with her interpretation of the character which is necessary for alpha-function to be effected. It would follow that performances which particularly attract an audience by featuring one or more star actors in the cast, may unconsciously invite spectators to actively impede alpha-function.

If envy impedes alpha-function, it may also be possible that actors who are particularly poor at alpha-function may be especially prone to engendering envy and therefore to becoming idealized or denigrated. For instance, becoming a star actor may be facilitated in the cinema because film actors are exempt from the extempore performance of alpha-function on spectators. It would be interesting to research whether 'psychotic' actors or 'depressed' ones are also more easily casted in the role of stars.

### **The fourth wall**

The question of the fourth wall pertains to the art of the actor inasmuch as it is a potent device to promote emotional identification of the spectator with the character(s). That is why it is championed by the eighteenth-century theorists who take empathy as a necessary aspect of the spectator's experience. As I proposed before, I use the term empathy to signify unconscious emotional identification, as intended in psychoanalytic terms, although for the eighteenth-century theorists of the theatre it was rather conceptualized as the spectator giving in to the theatrical illusion.

If the fourth wall enhances empathy, it is not surprising that Brecht urges actors to ignore its rule:

The first condition for the achievement of the A-effect is that the actor must invest what he has to show with a definite gest of showing. It is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience. That being so, it is possible for the actor in principle to address the audience direct.

(Brecht, 1951, p.136)

Similarly, Dario Fo talks about the necessity to destroy the fourth wall. He bases this on the argument that the fourth wall produces in the spectator the attitude of being a 'voyeur' who spies a narrative which he is not part of. The spectator comes to the theatre to steal a story that belongs to someone else (Fo, 1977, pp.93-94). Bringing his vision to bear on Brecht's, it appears that the fourth wall achieves empathy by distancing the spectator from the stage.

It is somewhat counterintuitive to think of a 'wall' as enhancing, not hindering, unconscious communication between auditorium and stage. However, reflecting on the nature of the unconscious communication and focussing on the idea of projection, may help understand how this process works. The fourth wall, excluding the spectator from conscious communication with the stage, allows him to sit back in his chair and relax, similarly to what happens to the patient on the analyst's couch. Because the characters do not seem to be concerned with his presence, and they do not call him to pay conscious attention to anything in particular, he can slip into a state of 'passivity', a quasi-hypnotic state, as Brecht would have it, whereby his resistances lessen and his unconscious phantasy can prevail over other mental activities. The apparently distancing effect of the fourth wall brings unconscious phantasy to the fore.

As many theorists have argued, one should not fall into the mistake of thinking the spectator out of his senses; as Samuel Johnson points out, the spectator remains aware of being at the theatre. Theatre does not obliterate reason, or other conscious faculties, but rather tips the delicate balance between consciousness and unconscious in favour of the latter. Thus the apparent 'passivity' of the spectator masks a surge of unconscious activity with the arousal of unconscious phantasy and projective identification.

### **Spectatorship- passive submission or active engagement?**

It should be clear by now that what Brecht and subsequent theorists have identified as the passive spectator, is in fact a spectator whose unconscious phantasy is very active. This is true whether or not the actor responds to the spectator's projective identification through alpha-function. It should also be added that in that case when alpha-function is disrupted by the spectator's own death instinct through the arousal of envy, the unconscious of the envious spectator is also well alive and active. However, as Bion has explained, while the outcome of transpersonal alpha-function is a commensal relationship resulting in mutual psychic growth, a disrupted alpha-function causes the spectator to suffer ego-fragmentation. This ultimately results in unavoidable



discomfort, and on this count the spectator's experience could be construed to be the passive suffering of a psychic trauma.

On the other hand, the successful attainment of alpha-function consists in ego-integration and the development of subjectivity, a psychic activity at least as significant as those which are visible at a simply conscious level. What appears as a passive aspect of spectatorship is in reality an active operation of psychic development. It is here that I finally turn to the question of nature.

### **Alpha-function and the study of human nature**

The eighteenth-century cultural and philosophical debate foregrounded the idea that human nature could be subject to systematic study and that it would be possible to discover the normative principles of feelings and behaviours in accordance with character and circumstances. As I discussed in Chapter 4, many eighteenth-century theorists exhort actors to study human nature so that they can reproduce it on stage. In his *Essay on Acting*, the actor David Garrick affirms that 'to be very conversant with *Human Nature* [...] is the noblest and best Study, by this Way [the actor] will more accurately discover the *Workings of Spirit* [...] upon the different *Modifications of Matter*' (Garrick, 1744, pp.9-10).

The actor's sensibility allows her to express human nature in its great variety of feelings; her understanding regulates the expression of such feelings according to the study of the character's given circumstances. Ultimately, through her alpha-function, the actor applies her understanding of nature to the spectator's emotional experience and she gives them meaning.

According to the theory of alpha-function understanding emotions is a primary need in psychic development. As we have seen, such understanding is not a form of inference or deduction; it is a peculiar transformation of intuited emotions into thoughts. There is here a crucial distinction to be made. Understanding human nature in alpha-function is based on a primary emotional and unconscious experience and has got a transpersonal quality. It is based on intuition and it is a subjective operation, by which a person, through the

encounter with another, develops his own sense of self. On the other hand, understanding human nature from a cognitive perspective has a very different meaning. It is based on a primary cognitive experience grounded in inference or deduction; it is conscious or preconscious; it is generally thought to occur within the individual's mind, though possibly with external help or facilitation. Furthermore, it aims at being an objective operation, which develops a sense of outer rather than inner truth.

As I shall discuss in the next chapter, a psychoanalytic perspective on spectatorship generates new opportunities for appraising the function of theatre; if acting and spectating concern universal psychic processes, their implications are necessarily linked to wider concerns about humanity at large.

## CHAPTER 6 – SPECTATORSHIP AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

### THEATRE AND ITS MORAL FUNCTION

The interest that theorists of the theatre manifest towards the status of spectatorship and of acting can, at least in part, be ascribed to their concerns about the moral value and function of the theatre. Brecht is the paradigm: his theoretical preoccupation with the effect of theatre on spectators and the ensuing creation of a new model of acting was strictly tied to his appraisal of the socio-political harm that traditional theatre is supposed to produce. His response was a life-long venture to reform theatre in the direction of making it a tool for political awareness and the amelioration of society.

Diderot's project of theatrical renovation was similarly coloured by ethical considerations; his active engagement as playwright and theorist, was grounded in his belief that theatre had a role to play in the promotion of moral habits. As has been suggested, 'The [...] principal object of Diderot in writing *Le Fils naturel* and in expounding his doctrines was to make the theater an institution for teaching morality' (Wilson, 1972, p.270). Diderot's own claim in the *Entretiens* that the object of drama 'C'est, je crois, d'inspirer aux hommes l'amour de la vertu, l'horreur du vice' (1939, p.149) is telling.

By the time he wrote the *Paradoxe*, Diderot's interest in dramaturgy had become secondary to his radically transformed view of actors. If the fictionalized actors of *Le Fils naturel* were involved in the writing and performing of plays of direct relevance to their immediate social context, the skilful but cynical actors of the *Paradoxe* were 'polis, caustiques et froids, fastueux, dissipés, dissipateurs, intéressés, plus frappés de nos ridicules que touchés de nos maux' (Diderot, 1994, p.83). Far from being vehicles for teaching morality, actors were now conceived as detached observers of human passions and utterly unconcerned about the amelioration of their fellow men and women:

Jamais on ne se fit comédien par gout pour la vertu, par le désir d'être utile dans la société et de servir son pays ou sa famille, par aucun des motifs honnêtes qui pourraient entraîner un esprit droit, un cœur chaud, une âme sensible vers une aussi belle profession.

In spite of Diderot's later distrust for actors, both his and Brecht's criticism of the theatre entailed a design to contribute to its reformation, and the same could be said for all the theorists that I have considered so far, with the notable exception of Plato. But in this chapter I will introduce one particular eighteenth-century voice that condemned theatre at all levels without the possibility of appeal. That is the voice of Rousseau. His arguments against the theatre will serve as a useful counterpoint to a wider discussion of the moral question.

Rousseau (2003) must be credited with one of the most famous invectives against the theatre, his *Lettre à D'Alembert*. Published in 1758, the *Lettre* was a response to D'Alembert's article for the VII Volume of the *Encyclopédie* (Vol.7, p.578) on the Swiss city of Geneva, of which Rousseau was a native. As a city-state, Geneva had an independent statute which banned the performance of plays. In his article, D'Alembert advocated the future establishment of a theatre in the city, adducing its many advantages. In doing so he may have been under the influence of Voltaire, who had established a private theatre in his Geneva residence (Buffat, 2003).

D'Alembert argued especially against the supposed immorality of actors, which he presumed to be the main reason behind the proscription of theatre in the city-state. His plea stemmed from the conviction that actors' immoral conduct derived from their marginalisation in society, which incited disrespect, prejudice, and disdain against them. D'Alembert maintained that if only Geneva could adopt an enlightened attitude towards actors, perhaps compounded by strict laws to regulate their behaviour, she would surely soon be provided with the best acting troupe in Europe and could eventually spread her example to other nations. As I will discuss later, his claim may not be completely groundless.

Rousseau's response was prompt and fierce. Outraged by this public appeal, he took it upon himself to defend his city from the moral debasement that a theatre would threaten to plunge her into. If Plato had wished to ban poets and actors from his ideal city, Rousseau was determined to support the ban already in effect in his city-state.

## Theatre, pleasure, and moral instruction

Rousseau attacks the status of the theatre on its long-standing claim that its aim is to please and instruct. This idea derives from Horace, who in his *Ars poetica* (333-334) had written that poetry should either please or instruct, or both: 'Poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life' (trans. Fairclough, 1970, p.479). The notion that the purpose of the theatre is entertainment and moral improvement has travelled across the centuries, and the question posed by the relationship between these two purposes is epitomised by the title of one of Brecht's essays: '*Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction*' (1957a), in which he explains the aims for the epic theatre in relation to knowledge and social reform.

According to Brecht, the epic theatre has wrongly been accused of over-moralizing. Its aim in portraying social conditions and increasing social awareness is 'not just to arouse moral objections to such circumstances [...] but to discover means for their elimination' (1957a, p.75). In this sense, Brecht clarifies that

We are not in fact speaking in the name of morality but in that of the victims. These truly are two distinct matters, for the victims are often told that they ought to be contented with their lot, for moral reasons. Moralists of this sort see man as existing for morality, not morality for man.  
(1957a, p.75)

The morality acquired through spectating at the epic theatre should promote a degree of freedom, according to the principle that it is not mankind who exists for a morality based on predetermined ideas about ethical values, but rather morality which exists for mankind, to guide their endeavours to improve society. Because Brecht could not imagine any desirable function for theatre outside its potential for instigating social change, he perhaps implicitly rejected the idea that the moral purpose of the theatre could be attached to a static vision of society and its values. Spectators should be placed in the position to judge for themselves if what they see on stage – the epic theatre's truthful depiction of social conditions – is to be changed or not. As von Held explains:

In the age of science and technology, theatre must appeal to the spectator's rational and cognitive rather than emotional interests. Just like a scientist, who with objective distance and cool curiosity observes her research material in order to discover the hidden principles behind it, Brecht wants his spectator to explore sociology through drama.

(von Held, 2011, p.21)

The insistence on the primacy of reason in mediating theatre's political effect, is related to Brecht's particular view of the status of emotional engagement in spectatorship: whether emotions derive from reason or arise independently of it, makes all the difference. The empathic emotional identification of the spectator with the character(s) entails a noxious effect of social submissiveness and conformism, whereas emotions ensuing from intellectual engagement with the play and detached observation of the characters' social condition foster a desirable commitment to the reformation of society. This distinction leads Brecht to differentiate between two forms of theatrical pleasure. On one side is the pleasure of empathy, utilized by the Aristotelian theatre to hypnotize the audience and render it acquiescent to the status quo (Brecht, 1930). On the other side, the pleasure afforded by the epic theatre, altogether rejecting empathy, derives from 'the wisdom that comes from the solution of problems, [...] the anger that is a practical expression of sympathy with the underdog, [...] the respect due to those who respect humanity' (Brecht, 1949, p.186).

Brecht's theory of pleasure in theatre is based on a sharp separation between a pleasure derived from instruction, and a pleasure independent of it; only the first condition endows theatre with its ethical and socio-political value. Interestingly, the supposition that instruction needs to generate pleasure for theatre to accomplish its moral purpose is squarely antithetical to Aristotle's conception of the effect of tragedy. This should not surprise, given that Brecht's formulation is openly in opposition to that of Aristotle. However, I think that this antithesis needs unravelling, if our understanding of spectatorship is to be enhanced.

Aristotle professed that the first aim of poetry (dramatic and non) is to give pleasure, and moral teaching is at best relegated to be a secondary aim (Butcher, 1951). This is often misapprehended, because Horace's dictum about

the moral purpose of poetry was so influential 'that even writers focussing on Aristotle rather than Horace tended to project back onto the theory of catharsis moralistic aims that might appear quite alien to the Greek philosopher' (Harris, 2014, p.174). Nevertheless, Aristotle's theory maintains a link between tragedy's aims of aesthetic pleasure and of moral improvement. As a scholar of Aristotle has pointed out:

The aesthetic representation of character he views under ethical lights, and the different types of character he reduces to moral categories. Still he never allows the moral purpose of the poet or the moral effects of his art to take the place of the artistic end. If the poet fails to produce the proper pleasure, he fails in the specific function of his art. He may be good as a teacher, but as a poet or artist he is bad.

(Butcher, 1951, p.238)

This reading of Aristotle may suggest that the Greek philosopher simply did not see pleasure and moral improvement as mutually exclusive, but still granted pleasure a much higher stake in representing theatre's purposes. However, as Lessing has insightfully indicated, it is possible that Aristotle had a particular view of the relationship between pleasure and moral improvement which is opposite to that proposed by Brecht. Giving his own interpretation of Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis*, in article 78 of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lessing reads *katharsis* as the transformation of pity into virtue: 'whoever has endeavoured to arrive at a just and complete conception of Aristotle's doctrine of the purification of the passions will find that [...] this purification rests in nothing else than in the transformation of passions into virtuous habits' (Lessing, 1890, p.421). The pleasure implicit in tragic *katharsis* may therefore be construed as the necessary premise to the moral effect of theatre, in contrast with Brecht's notion that theatrical pleasure inherent to *katharsis* is an obstacle to the moral function of the theatre.

Perhaps it should puzzle us that Brecht turned his own theory on its head at the end of his career. In a note of 1952, appended to the published version of one of his writings, he declares:

Recently [...] we have given up examining works of art from their poetic (artistic) aspect, and got satisfied from theatrical works that have no sort of poetic appeal and from performances that lack virtuosity. Such works

and performances may have some effect, but it can hardly be a profound one, not even politically. For it is a peculiarity of the theatrical medium that it communicates awareness and impulses in the form of pleasure: the depth of the awareness and the impulse will correspond to the depth of the pleasure.

(Brecht, 1952, p.230)

Here it is not awareness which provokes pleasure, but pleasure which engenders awareness. This shift in Brecht's view comes around the time when he also changes his appraisal of the role of empathy in the theatre. As I showed in Chapter 5, he eventually came to recognize that a fruitful dynamic between empathy and interpretation is necessary to the art of the actor. Albeit in the passage quoted above Brecht does not intimate that the spectator's pleasure must be connected with empathy, he is explicitly stating that, without inherent pleasure, theatre cannot instigate political change, except for the possibility of a 'shallow' effect.

This is a completely opposite view to that of Rousseau, who not only denies any positive moral effect of theatre, but does so especially because of the link between theatre and pleasure. Rousseau starts from the assumption, in keeping with the Aristotelian perspective, that the principal aim of the theatre is to please, because only in this way will the spectators' interest be engaged. He then turns the implications of this argument upside-down by claiming that spectators will only be pleased by what reinforces their values and beliefs: 'Il faut, pour leur plaire, des spectacles qui favorisent leur penchants, au lieu qu'il en faudrait qui les modérassent' (Rousseau, 2003, p.66). At best theatre will reinforce already established good habits, at worst it will strengthen existing bad habits: 'la comédie serait bonne aux bons et mauvaise aux méchants' (Rousseau, 2003, p.68). Therefore, the need for theatre to please is precisely what hinders its potential to morally instruct.

As is the case with regards to the contention between Aristotle and Plato, the recognition of a link between theatre and pleasure remains throughout history a thorny question. The pleasure implicated in spectatorship can justify the condemnation of theatre (Plato and Rousseau), be taken as a primary effect which is necessary for the ensuing moral effect (Aristotle and the late Brecht) or



be thought to be useful insofar as it is generated by an intellectual engagement (Brecht's epic theatre). As indicated by Brecht, the question of pleasure links to the question of emotions, and it is the judgement on the value of emotional identification that ultimately will guide theories about theatre's moral function.

### **Theatre and emotions**

If for Aristotle the emotional engagement at the basis of tragedy represents its highest value, Rousseau contends that the problem with theatre is precisely that theatre reception is about emotions, not reason. He ridicules the idea that through *katharsis* it may be possible to rescue the mind from the grip that the represented emotions have on spectators: 'Je sais que la poétique du théâtre prétend [...] purger les passions en les excitant: mais j'ai peine à bien concevoir cette règle. Serait-ce que pour devenir tempérant et sage, il faut commencer par être furieux et fou?' (Rousseau, 2003, p.68).

Like Plato, Rousseau understands emotional arousal as irrationality, madness even, and sees it as a perilous undercurrent which can amplify itself to a dangerous degree:

Ne sait-on pas que toutes les passions sont sœurs, qu'une seule suffit pour en exciter mille, et que les combattre l'une par l'autre n'est qu'un moyen de rendre le cœur plus sensible à toutes ? Le seul instrument qui serve à les purger est la raison, et j'ai déjà dit que la raison n'avait nul effet au théâtre.

(Rousseau, 2003, p.69)

Reason only is capable of overcoming irrational emotionality, but there is no place for reason in the theatre: 'Il n'y a que la raison qui ne soit bonne à rien sur la scène. Un homme sans passions, ou qui les dominerait toujours n'y saurait intéresser personne' (2003, p.66). If there is no place for reason, there is therefore no scope for moral instruction.

For Rousseau, like it was for Plato and would be for Brecht, theatre immorality ensues from the dangerous cocktail of emotional identification and pleasure that spectatorship entails. In contrast, other theorists, in the first place Aristotle, see

in the link between pleasure and emotional engagement the very essence of the theatrical effect on the audience. This is true for instance of the eighteenth-century theorists I have considered, from the so-called emotionalists to the anti-emotionalists, all of whom demand and expect that the spectator will submit to the theatrical illusion and enter into the characters' feelings. Luigi Riccoboni (1928, p.17), in his poem on the art of the actor, hints at the link of emotional identification with pleasure as a desirable effect, when he claims that the actor cannot please unless she entices the spectator into the theatrical illusion.

The question of the link between pleasure, emotional engagement, and the moral value of theatre becomes clearer if one can shed light on underlying assumptions about the psyche and the way emotions and reason are believed to related to each other. Theorists like Rousseau and the Brecht of the epic theatre insist on reason's superior claims and wish to subject all other mental activities to its rule, especially for what concerns the purpose of moral improvement. Brecht declares: 'The one tribute one can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent. [...] I appeal to reason' (1926, p.14). As we have seen, this attitude derives from Brecht's conviction that emotions are secondary to reason, and therefore appealing to reason will lead to a modification of emotions and to behavioural change: 'People's opinions interest me far more than their feelings. Feelings are usually the products of opinions. They follow on. But opinions are decisive' (Brecht, 1926, p.16).

On the other hand, according to the eighteenth-century theory of sensism, a philosophical system which attributed to sensations the primacy over all other mental processes, reason develops from sensation and feeling, and is therefore dependent on their stimulation. From sensism derived Diderot's idea in the *Philosophical Thoughts* that the emotions must not be weakened but strengthened, because intellectual abilities proceed from the harmonious balance of the passions (Cassirer, pp.107-108). Theatre and other forms of art have therefore an important role to play precisely because they are sources of emotional engagement. This view tallies, of course, with the psychoanalytic description of the mind.

## UNCONSCIOUS PROCESSES OF ACTING AND SPECTATING

### Emotional processing in alpha-function

As human beings, our psychic development is as crucial as our physical one for our survival. Emotions and our ability to make sense of them are the primary nourishment of our minds, which allow them to grow and mature. However, while emotions are, with sensations, the primary content of our psychic experience, we are not born with a thinking apparatus ready to process them and make them available for psychic growth. Such apparatus needs to be established through the caring function of the mother, as much as our other physical needs make us also, as infants, dependent on the mother.

As the mother's milk provides the infant with the first necessary nutrients for the development of his body, so the mother's psyche endows him with the rudimentary thoughts necessary for the growth of his mind. Slowly developing a capacity for self-care will eventually make the child virtually independent with regards to his physical needs, although, of course, he will have to rely on the environment, and on social cooperation at various levels, for survival. On the other hand, emotional processing will always remain at least partly dependent on the mind of the other, whilst an increased capacity for inner alpha-function will guarantee a partial degree of autonomy<sup>39</sup>.

Children use the personifications and impersonation of play to stimulate and develop their autonomous alpha-function. Adults can employ, among other things, works of art. Freud drew a direct comparison between the playing of children and the creative process of artists:

The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from

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<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to engage with the observation that the need for social cooperation intrinsic to the survival of the human species may justify, from an evolutionary perspective, why it is advantageous that psychic development remains partly determined by interpersonal dynamics: if human beings are psychologically dependent on each other, they will tend to stick together, even if they could, at least in theory, choose to live in isolation. This will make them stronger as a species. Further analysis of this supposition is outside the remit of this thesis.

reality. Language has preserved this relationship between children's play and poetic creation. It gives [in German] the name of 'Spiel' ['play'] to those forms of imaginative writing which require to be linked to tangible objects and which are capable of representation. It speaks of a 'Lustspiel' or 'Trauerspiel' ['comedy' or 'tragedy': literally, 'pleasure play' or 'mourning play'] and describes those who carry out the representation as 'Schauspieler' ['players': literally 'show-players'].

(Freud, 1908, p.144)

Although Freud is specifically talking about the writer, the reader and the spectator also invest their emotions in the fiction of the book or the play. In doing so, they engage their unconscious phantasy which can in turn activate their personal alpha-function. In this sense it can be argued that all art stimulates unconscious phantasy and fosters autonomous alpha-function.

There are however situations when one's own personal alpha-function is not fit for purpose and one needs to turn to 'another' for the processing of the beta-elements. The projection of one's own beta-elements into other people happens continually in personal relationships through re-enactments, which are a feature of everyday life, though it is psychoanalysis that particularly puts them under the spotlight. As Freud says:

We must be prepared to find, therefore, that the patient yields to the compulsion to repeat [...] not only in his personal attitude to his doctor but also in every other activity and relationship which may occupy his life at the time.

(Freud. 1914, p.151)

The activation of transpersonal alpha-function is characteristic of psychoanalysis: through transference re-enactments the patient projects his beta-elements into the analyst, who 'becomes' the unprocessed emotional experience through projective identification. By resisting censure at the one end, and 'acting in' at the opposite end, the analyst strives to keep the beta-element in the psychic sphere, so that she can give meaning to the unprocessed emotional experience through her understanding and interpretation. The work of analysis transforms the beta-element into an alpha-element which will be introjected by the patient and increase his self-awareness.

In drawing a parallel between the work of the analyst and the art of the actor, I have proposed that the actor's art consists of performing transpersonal alpha-function for the spectator's beta-elements projected into her. This is achieved through the dynamic tension in the actor's double game between being a real person on stage who can respond with emotional arousal to the spectator's projective identifications, and her portraying a fictional character through the intellectual activity of her interpretation. In semiotic terms the actor operates both as a real sign and as an artificial one, and it is precisely this doubleness which raises a number of questions related to the moral function of the theatre.

### **The severing of transpersonal alpha-function**

The crucial problem with alpha-function is its availability, as starvation of alpha-function equates with repetition of splitting and fragmentation. The absence of transpersonal alpha-function in the theatre poses the additional threat that the spectator's unconscious phantasy may be further burdened by the beta-elements projected by an actor who operates in a psychotic mode. An actor deprived of alpha-function may use the excuse of her performance to project her own beta-elements into the audience. In such cases, not only do the spectator's psychotic beta-elements remain unchanged, but, as Rousseau points out, they swell into greater irrationality and even madness.

To avoid the risk of re-traumatization, falling short of the more drastic solution of banning theatre tout court, theorists have proposed expedients to preclude spectators from having to rely on transpersonal alpha-function, with the risk of being subjected to the actor's own beta-elements. Spectatorship thus gets confined to the activation of autonomous alpha-function. Brecht's A-effect is the most lucid attempt in this direction.

According to Roland Barthes (1979), Brecht's project of the epic theatre, including the invention of the A-effect, addresses the semiological problem of the double game of the actor and, more generally, of all theatrical signs. Brecht's intention would have been to compensate for the spectator's emotional identification rather than to negate it. Reading Barthes's proposition in the light

of the theory of alpha-function, it could be argued that while epic theatre obliterates transpersonal alpha-function, the A-effect still allows for intra-psychic activation of the spectator's autonomous alpha-function. In other words, the epic theatre does not aim at impeding the spectator's identification with the character, but rather at breaking the unconscious emotional resonance between actor and spectator in projective identification.

The project of the epic theatre entails a 'literarization' of the theatre which turns spectators and actors into observers. In alpha-function terms, conventional theatre, which 'theatres it all down' (Brecht, 1931, p.43), imbues the spectator with thoughts through the actor's alpha-function, while the literarization of the theatre puts him in the position to think for himself, to employ his own alpha-function. Although Brecht's formulation is peripheral to considerations of alpha-function because his model of spectatorship does not distinctly recognize the relevance of productive unconscious processes, he uses a suggestive expression to indicate the actor's emotional engagement: 'has one the right to offer others a dish that one has already eaten oneself?' (1931, p.45). In alpha-function, the actor returns to the spectator an emotional experience which he has previously 'digested' on his behalf, and in Brecht's opinion this operation is illegitimate.

The distinctive feature of the disruption of transpersonal alpha-function by the A-effect is that the actor, while keeping herself impermeable to the projections of the spectator, invites the spectator to adopt a reciprocal attitude: both actor and spectator are complicit in exploiting the character as the object of their observation; neither of them is placed in the vulnerable and reciprocal position of the infant-mother couple. On the other hand, the proposition of eighteenth-century anti-emotionalists entails a very different situation, in which the severing of alpha-function by a depressed actor happens in the face of a spectator whose unconscious phantasy has been exposed. The spectator is here put in a position akin to that of a vulnerable and emoting baby handled by an unreceptive mother.

## The depressed actor and the manic position

François Riccoboni was an unusual eighteenth-century voice in insisting on the lack of the actor's emotional arousal during performance. It is debatable whether his conviction followed the need for protecting the spectator from a 'psychotic' actor, or rather from a preference for a 'depressed' style of acting. François is not preoccupied, like Brecht is, with the emotional arousal that an actor can effect in the audience. On the contrary, he specifies that the actor needs to make the spectator feel what she herself does not: 'L'on appelle l'expression, l'adresse par laquelle on fait sentir au spectateur tous les mouvements dont on veut paroître pénétré. Je dit que l'on veut le paroître, et non pas que l'on est pénétré véritablement' (Riccoboni F., 1750, p.36). On the other hand, he describes his uneasiness about an actor who feels, his anxiety being that she may risk becoming overwhelmed by her emotions:

Si dans un endroit d'attendrissement vous vous laissez emporter au sentiment de votre rôle, votre cœur se trouvera tout-à-coup serré, votre voix s'étouffera presque entièrement; s'il tombe une seule larme de vos yeux, des sanglots involontaires vous embarrasseront le gosier, il vous sera impossible de proférer un seul mot sans des hocquets ridicules.

(Riccoboni F., 1750, pp.37-38)

In psychoanalytic terms, depression is a protection against deterioration into a psychotic breakdown. By keeping herself impermeable to the baby's projections, the mother is unconsciously striving to avoid becoming psychotic. François Riccoboni's depressed actor seems to be engaged in a similar struggle to deflect the spectator's beta-elements in order to avoid activating her own psychotic ego-fragments. Her ego is too fragile to be made available for the benefit of the spectator's psychic development. Like in the case of the epic theatre, the spectator will have to activate his own alpha-function or remain psychologically starved.

Diderot's elaboration of François Riccoboni's theory is interesting because with the *Paradoxe* the impossibility of a transaction in feelings between actors and spectators becomes a clear-cut division between spectators who merely feel and actors who merely think, and such a distinction extends to human beings at

large. Diderot's actor is not, like François Riccoboni's, on the verge of an emotional impossibility; she is indeed deliberately deceitful. Safe in her awareness of superior power, instead of putting her alpha-function at the service of the other, she is withholding it wilfully in order to let the spectator seethe with his own emotions, while she remains detached and controlled.

Departing from Freud's idea that mania is a mechanism by which the unconscious mind evades depression (Freud, 1917), Melanie Klein described the manic position as a form of defence against the depressive position. The transition from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position entails ego integration, but it is also characterized by the painful realization that the bad object towards which the baby's aggression was directed is one and the same with the good object. If the ego is too fragile to bear this painful realization, it may either revert back to the paranoid-schizoid position or escape into the manic position. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the ego is trapped in fragmentation and continues to project and introject its split objects in unconscious phantasy. In the manic position, the ego employs a '*sense of omnipotence* for the purpose of *controlling and mastering* objects' (Klein, 1935, p.277). In unconscious phantasy the ego feels that it is above the influence of objects and it is instead in full control of them:

This *disparagement of the object's importance and the contempt for it* is, I think, a specific characteristic of mania and enables the ego to effect that partial detachment which we observe side by side with its hunger for objects. Such detachment, which the ego cannot achieve in the depressive position, represents an advance, a fortifying of the ego in relation to its objects.

(Klein, 1935, p.163)

Although Melanie Klein does not expand on these points, two aspects of her description are interesting for my discussion. Firstly, the manic position allows the ego to feel in control and fortified with respect to its objects. Its being 'impermeable' to projections is not any more a strenuous struggle to keep itself from slipping into psychosis, but rather a triumphant sense of being in control and beyond reach of the dangerous effects of the projections. Secondly, the manic ego is simultaneously 'hungry' for objects, precisely because it believes itself above their power. Likewise, the actors described in the *Paradoxe*, are



always eager to observe the passions and even the madness of others, by which they remain emotionally untouched:

Les grands poètes, les grands acteurs, et peut-être en général tous les grands imitateurs de la nature, quels qu'ils soient, doués d'une belle imagination, d'un grand jugement, d'un tact fin, d'un goût très sûr, sont les êtres les moins sensibles. Ils sont également propres à trop de choses; ils sont trop occupés à regarder, à reconnaître et à imiter, pour être vivement affectés au-dedans d'eux-mêmes. Je les vois sans cesse le portefeuille sur les genoux et le crayon à la main.

(Diderot, 1994, p.43)

The manic position helpfully explains the nuanced differentiation between François Riccoboni's and Diderot's description of the unfeeling actor, the first endeavouring to shield herself from madness, the second triumphantly delighting in the madness of others. Although both models of actors equally deprive the spectator of transpersonal alpha-function, the actor of the *Paradoxe* adds to her emotional unavailability a malicious ascendancy on the spectator, which risks justifying an outright condemnation of her profession.

### **The envious spectator**

Diderot's notion of the paradoxical actor is not flattering and leads him to describe actors with disparaging words, despite his assertion that he loves and esteems their profession. In the same passage in which he affirms that actors are 'hommes d'un talent rare et d'une utilité réelle, [...] prédicateurs les plus éloquents de l'honnêteté et des vertus' (Diderot, 1994, pp.82-83), he writes of them:

isolés, vagabonds, à l'ordre des grands; peu de mœurs, point d'amis, presque aucune de ces liaisons saintes et douces, qui nous associent aux peines et aux plaisirs d'un autre qui partage les nôtres. J'ai souvent vu rire un comédien hors de la scène, je n'ai pas mémoire d'en avoir jamais vu pleurer un.

(Diderot, 1994, p.84)

From Diderot's to Rousseau's disparaging description, it is but a short step:

je vois en général que l'état de comédien est un état de licence et de mauvaises mœurs; que les hommes y sont livrés au désordre; que les femmes y mènent une vie scandaleuse; que les uns et les autres, avares et prodigues tout à la fois, toujours accablés de dettes et toujours versant l'argent à pleines mains, sont aussi peu retenus sur leurs dissipations que peu scrupuleux sur les moyens d'y pourvoir. Je vois encore que, par tout pays, leur profession est déshonorante, que ceux qui l'exercent, excommuniés ou non, sont partout méprisés, et qu'à Paris même, où ils ont plus de considération et une meilleure conduite que partout ailleurs, un bourgeois craindrait de fréquenter ces mêmes comédiens qu'on voit tous les jours à la table des grands.

(Rousseau, 2003, pp.127-128)

Diderot's conception of the paradoxical actor accords well with Rousseau's belief that the actor's predicament derives from her double game:

Qu'est-ce que le talent du comédien? L'art de se contrefaire, de revêtir un autre caractère que le sien, de paraître différent de ce qu'on est, de se passionner de sang-froid, de dire autre chose que ce qu'on pense aussi naturellement que si l'on le pensait réellement, et d'oublier enfin sa propre place à force de prendre celle d'autrui. [...] Quel est donc, au fond, l'esprit que le comédien reçoit de son état? Un mélange de bassesse, de fausseté, de ridicule orgueil, et d'indigne avilissement, qui le rend propre à toutes sortes de personnages, hors le plus noble de tous, celui d'homme qu'il abandonne.

(Rousseau, 2003, p.132)

As far as Rousseau is concerned, there is no actor without double game, and because the double game is corrupting of moral values, there should be no actors.

Rousseau, although clearly despising the actor's ability to transform into the character, has yet trouble to justify his straight censure of it. He pre-empts his critics' objection that the actor is not 'un fourbe qui veut en imposer' (Rousseau, 2003, p.132): because the spectators know that the actor is feigning, her deceit is inherently harmless. His condemnation therefore has to take an indirect route: actors are culpable of changing themselves into characters as their purpose is that of making money, effectively putting their own person publicly on sale (2003, p.132). Furthermore, their ability to deceive, whilst innocent perhaps at the theatre, becomes the blemish of their personal character:

Aussi ne l'accuse-je pas d'être précisément un trompeur, mais de cultiver pour tout métier le talent de tromper les hommes, et de s'exercer à des habitudes qui, ne pouvant être innocentes qu'au théâtre, ne servent partout ailleurs qu'à mal faire.

(Rousseau, 2003, pp.132-133)

The censure towards the art of the actor drifts inevitably into a criticism of her person.

Following the theory of alpha-function, this shift can be construed as an unconscious envious attack. Rousseau's misgiving about the possibility of a transpersonal commensal relationship, whereby a shared emotional experience in alpha-function can foster psychic development, drives him to distrust the actor and pre-empt her motives as expedient, exploitative, or at best ungenerous. In psychoanalysis the patient's suspicions that the analyst may just be helping 'for the money', or that she unscrupulously exploits the patient's vulnerability to rejoice in her triumph over him, are powerful defences against the work of analysis. Although it is not impossible that the analyst may be incompetent or corrupted, this is a different situation from when it is the patient's unconscious envy that results in the super-imposition of degrading attributes to the person of the analyst.

Radical reading of the theory of alpha-function implies that the deceitful yet competent actor is a phantasy created by the spectator under the impulse of envy. The actor can either be deceitful, in which case she is not competent; or if she is competent, her supposed fraudulence is an unconscious construction on the part of the spectator. It is the ineffectual use of alpha-function that marks the incompetent actor, and this happens when the actor is either psychotic or depressed (with the variant of the manic position). In such cases, her psychic operation is ultimately deceitful, as it does not promote the spectator's psychic development. But there are situations when the actor's competence is rendered useless by the disruption of alpha-function through the spectator's envy. In such cases, the deceitfulness of the actor is only apparent: the competent actor is made incompetent in spite of herself. However, all these situations are difficult to distinguish, because the competence of the actor acts on unconscious processes which are concealed from awareness.

## **The person of the actor**

If the availability of the actor's alpha-function is so crucial for fostering the spectator's psychic development, at least for those beta-elements for which he does not possess an autonomous alpha-function, it should not surprise that the art of the actor creates such an aura of controversy.

While the spectator may unconsciously disrupt alpha-function from the surge of his envious impulses, it is ultimately the responsibility of the actor to make her alpha-function available for the spectator's psychic growth. Her ability to distance herself momentarily from her personal preoccupations, generously putting her mind at the service of the emotions of another, is central to her art.

The art of the actor seen in the light of alpha-function is not an easy labour. It is not an over-statement to compare her dedication to the other, her self-denial, her generosity, to that of the mother for her baby. But it is no wonder if, like in the case of the mother, the intensity, and sometimes the violence, of unprocessed emotional experiences overwhelms her ability to fulfil her task.

As we have seen, the actor's art depends on a delicate dynamic between her real presence, necessary for her to receive the projective identifications, and her portrayal of the character through her interpretation. In both these domains, her person will influence the ensuing operations. It is after all from her ego, and the sense of self that she has constructed, that she gives effect to alpha-function. Both her ability to accept the projections and her competence in giving them meaning are operations of her own mind. It is therefore no wonder that the actors' reputation outside the theatre comes under scrutiny. While the spectator needs to be free from preoccupations about the actor's private life during her performance, so that transpersonal alpha-function is not disrupted, a reassurance that the actor is morally credible will facilitate the spectator's trustful engagement that this process entails.

This perspective lends some credit to D'Alembert's belief that a respectful attitude towards actors, coupled with laws that regulate their conduct, may be conducive of excellence in their profession. Similarly, it justifies Sticotti's (1770, aiiij-xij) assertion that prejudices and hostility against actors hinder the enhancement and perfection of their art. Diderot's letters to Mademoiselle Jodin, a young actress towards whom he assumed the role of a fatherly figure, are full of exhortations that she may build for herself 'la reputation d'une bonne et h nn te cr ature', not only for her personal benefit, but also for that of her audience (1994, p.153).

Luigi Riccoboni, who had always been concerned with guarding the reputation of his actors, wrote a book dedicated to the reformation of theatre, which includes a list of regulations that he recommends to be imposed on actors. Interestingly, among these advisable rules, there are two which forestall Rousseau's objections against actors' moral standards. Riccoboni proposes that actors should have a proven record of honourable conduct (they even need to present a certificate of good standing!) and that they should not profit from their work. As he explains: 'le Roy ordonneroit qu'on ne re t point d'Acteur qui ne f t connu pour homme d'honneur, et, comme tel, avou  de sa famille. A cet effet il seroit oblig  de produire des t moins et de pr senter des Certificates en bonne forme' (Riccoboni L., 1967, p.100). Moreover, 'La recette entrera toute entiere dans la caisse; et,   la fin de l'ann e, ce qui restera, tous frais payez, sera employ  en  uvres de piet ' (Riccoboni L., 1967, p.105).

While Rousseau's preoccupations about the moral conduct of actors eloquently epitomise a habitual eighteenth-century concern, his proposition of abolishing the theatre stimulated counterarguments and alternative proposals. For instance, in Restif de la Bretonne's novel *La mimographe*, the female protagonists proclaim that the theatre is necessary to humanity, inasmuch as 'l'homme est n  spectateur, l'appareil de tout l'Univers, que le Cr ateur semble  taler pour  tre vu & admir , nous le dit assez clairement' (Restif de la Bretonne, 1770, p.52). Besides, the theatre's ability to engage the spectators emotionally is deemed essential to its function. And yet, it is precisely this ability to move that represents the danger of theatre: there is something alluring in the

emoting actor, which induces men to approach actresses to make them their lovers. The solution, like it was for Luigi Riccoboni, can only reside in a reformation of the actor, rather than the theatre. And the proposed remedy is strikingly ingenious if unpractical: all young people shall be actors once in their life. Let professional actors be abolished and 'des Acteurs & des Actrices-citoyens' (Restif de la Bretonne, 1770, p.202) replace them, but only for a short period of time and only to play a single role.

From paradox to paradox, the actor risks having to submit to a monastic rule in order to safeguard her function and pre-empt the risk of banishment. While the spectator should take no interest in the actor's private person during a performance, yet, her personal morality will be an inducement to entrust her with one's own projective identifications. An upright personality will guarantee emotional competence, generosity, and make it less likely that she may fall into the temptation of abusing her position of power in order to triumph over the spectator in a manic position.

## **SPECTATORSHIP AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **The actor's interpretation and her moral values**

The person of the actor is not only relevant to her function as natural sign, linked, as we have seen, to her generous dedication to the psychic growth of the spectator. There is yet another important correlated issue, which has to do with her function as artificial sign.

When the actor prepares her interpretation, she will need to make choices based on her understanding of human nature. Eighteenth-century theorists almost unanimously recommend that the actor should study human nature for what concerns the normative principles of the expression of emotions in relation to the context in which they arise, the so-called 'given circumstances'. Such study is not only serving the interest of the actor insofar as she employs it towards her successful interpretation, but being at the basis of the way in which

the actor understands the character, it will also be transferred to the spectator through her alpha-function.

The actor's choices in relation to the rendition of the character will be influenced by her moral views. For instance, in interpreting the Roman emperor Titus in Racine's *Bérénice* (an example inspired by Rousseau's discussion of this theme in the *Lettre à D'Alembert*, 2003, pp.104-105), an actor may reach a very different interpretation whether he believes that Titus should sacrifice his love for Berenice to his duty as statesman or whether he is convinced that love should triumph over national interest. His interpretation may be coloured by considerations derived from his personal values as well as those of the society he belongs to. The interpretation of a character will bear the signs of the cultural identity and moral beliefs that imbue each particular actor. Such supposition begs a crucial question: does the actor's interpretation consist in nothing more than her conformism to socially accepted morals, which she unconsciously reinforces in the spectator through her alpha-function? If this were the case, Brecht's horror for the capacity of acting to induce socio-political compliance and to hinder social reform would be amply justified.

Incidentally, the link between alpha-function, the understanding of human nature, and the transmission of social values calls into question the role of the playwright. Many eighteenth-century theorists insist on the actor's duty to consider the author's intentions to inform her interpretation: 'Here it is that the greatest discernment of an actor is shewn, in understanding the intent of the author; and his highest judgement in representing the temper of his mind as the other intended' (Hill, 1755, p.14). However, they also concede that the actor, using her creative faculties, always adds her own to the author's perspective. The actor is ultimately at the service of truth and although she must take into account the playwright's text, she also has a duty to enhance those ideas where the author has been incomplete, becoming 'in some degree an author' herself (Hill, 1755, p.31).

Although the issue of the playwright is outside the remit of this thesis, its close connection with the question of the actor's art is also demonstrated by the fact that in many theorists, including Luigi Riccoboni, Diderot and Brecht, the

reformation of acting goes hand in hand with that of dramaturgy. The significance of the text and the playwright's alpha-function for spectatorship remains an interesting field for future research.

The conundrum of the link between the actor's own cultural and moral values and the general function of the theatre for moral development, needs unravelling. To this purpose, what is intended by moral development needs to be scrutinized and understood. Brecht suggested that his conception of the socio-political value of the theatre did not entail that the theatre should force spectators into taking a particular view. It was rather that it should put spectators in the position of judging for themselves whether the social conditions portrayed on stage were to be accepted or objected to. This attitude sees the moral value of the theatre in increasing socio-political awareness (whatever that may look like) in order to enhance people's freedom to be active participants of their destiny.

It could be argued that such value-free morality may hardly be attainable, and perhaps not even desirable; moreover, considering Brecht's political beliefs and activism, it is doubtful whether he would fully abide by a value-free approach to socio-political engagement. Nevertheless, the perspective suggested by Brecht remains very different from that of Rousseau, who departs from an explicit conception – his own – of what an ideal society should look like. As has been pointed out, Rousseau understands morality 'as something given, something fixed, rather than as something to be explored and reevaluated' (Barish, p.266<sup>40</sup>, cited in Harris, p.210). Theatre is immoral insofar as it teaches children to rebel against the authority of their parents or women to seek amusement outside the confinement of their domestic duties as mothers and wives. In criticizing Molière, he exclaims:

Voyez comment, pour multiplier ses plaisanteries, cet homme trouble tout l'ordre de la société; avec quel scandale il renverse tous les rapports les plus sacrés sur lesquels elle est fondée; comment il tourne en

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<sup>40</sup> Jonas Barish (1981), *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.



dérision les respectables droits des pères sur leurs enfants, des maris sur leurs femmes, des maîtres sur leur serviteurs!

(Rousseau, 2003, p.84)

Moral development can therefore be understood at one extreme as a set of established rules which must govern human behaviour at all costs; and at the other extreme as a continuous re-evaluation of social circumstances which engenders idiosyncratic responses according to the particular viewpoint of the appraiser. The actor, needing to consider the playwright's text and the given circumstances of the character, alongside her duty to abide by the truth of what she apprehends to be universal human nature, is in a privileged position to negotiate between these two extremes. Her need to be faithful, at least to a degree, to the playwright's text pulls her in the direction of compliance with the normative principles of a pre-given frame of reference. On the other hand, her study of the character and her duty towards 'truth' will make her approach to interpretation inevitably inquisitive and open to new insights. The necessity to locate her own understanding into the constrictions of the text creates the conditions for the fruitful tension between being the receptacle of the text and appropriating it through her personal insight.

According to a psychoanalytic perspective, it will be the adoption of this receptive and reflective position which will be transmitted to the spectator and foster his moral development. To illustrate this point, I will now consider the psychoanalytic view of the relationship between psychic growth, moral development and spectatorship.

### **Alpha-function and moral development**

According to the structural model of the mind, Freud had divided the psyche into three agencies, the id, the ego and the super-ego. The super-ego, which he conceived as a specialized part of the ego, is formed through identifications with external figures, particularly the parents. This mechanism explains how morality develops: prohibitions and injunctions, originating in sanction from external people, are internalized (introjected) and become the voice of conscience. In Freud's words, the super-ego is 'the representative of our relation to our

parents. When we were little children we knew these higher natures, we admired them and feared them; and later we took them into ourselves' (1923, p.36).

In Freud's model, the super-ego is conceived as separate from the ego, and pressurizes the ego into following its precepts. Freud's super-ego is not always coherent or constructive and when it is too harsh, it can be at the origin of pathological states, including sadism. While the super-ego fulfils the vital role of inducing the ego to abide by the rules of communal living and civilization, it also has another facet, and may 'become harsh, cruel and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge' (Freud, 1924a, p.167). Consequently, the super-ego can represent morality either as constructive social adaptation or as the cruel imposition of the law of retaliation.

Klein modifies the theory of moral development and makes it consistent with her model of ego-formation. She distinguishes between a morality of the paranoid-schizoid position, in which there is a clear separation between the good and the bad object that tallies with a black and white view of good and bad: an inflexible system determines what is definitely good and what definitely bad, and moral values would remain set in stone if it were not for the sudden swings of idealization or denigration that the fragmented objects may have to endure following operations of projection, introjection and splitting. She believes that 'super-ego' functioning corresponds to this situation.

On the other hand, the shift into the depressive position and the integration of the good and bad object leads to a different moral sense characterized by the lessening of aggressive impulses, the abating of persecutory fears, a feeling of greater security and a drive to make reparation. With Klein, true moral development becomes a function of the ego. As she explains: 'good and bad internal objects come closer together – the bad aspects being mitigated by the good ones – the relation between the ego and super-ego alters, that is to say, a progressive assimilation of the super-ego by the ego takes place' (Klein, 1952b, p.214). Moral development is thus not the imposition of a set of rules or values,

but the capacity for reflection and emotional processing that consists of alpha-function itself. Alpha-function, in short, is moral development.

### **Empathy and sympathy**

The reading of alpha-function as moral development explains the Aristotelian notion that the pleasure inherent in *katharsis* is conducive to the moral effect of theatre. The fruitful dynamic between the actor's sensibility and her understanding effects transformation of the spectator's beta-elements into alpha-elements, which can be returned to the spectator through his introjective identification. This results in ego integration and the growth of his sense of self. The spectator experiences within himself the shift between a situation of empathy with the character (the Aristotelian fear), whereby he is unconsciously emotionally identified with her, and a situation of sympathy (the Aristotelian pity), whereby he gives meaning to his own feelings through the representation of the character as a possible self.

In article 75 of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lessing gives an interpretation of Aristotelian *katharsis* strikingly similar to the one I propose in this research. He affirms that according to the theory of tragic *katharsis*, fear and pity were not to be aroused in a disjointed way: 'this was not Aristotle's reason; according to his definition of compassion, it of necessity included fear, because nothing could excite our compassion which did not at the same time excite our fear' (Lessing, 1890, p.409). Moreover, in article 76 Lessing specifies that, according to Aristotle, pity is in actual fact best understood as self-referential: 'Compassionate emotions unaccompanied by fear for ourselves, he designates philanthropy, and he only gives the name of compassion to the stronger emotions of this kind which are connected with fear for ourselves' (1890, p.412).

If fear is the necessary root of pity, no act of sympathy can be achieved without previous empathy, and therefore one would have to answer affirmatively to Rousseau's question: 'Serait-ce que pour devenir tempérant et sage, il faut commencer par être furieux et fou?' (2003, p.68). Introjected as alpha-elements, the new thoughts made available through alpha-function override

repetition-compulsion and increase self-awareness and reflexivity. It is therefore wrong to suppose, like Rousseau does, that empathy with negative characters will inevitably result in the encouragement of vice: if alpha-function is effected, the split off 'bad objects', useful only for acting out, will be transformed into thoughts, freeing the mind from the compulsion to repeat and placing the aggressive or destructive impulses under the control of reason.

Diderot conveyed this positive ethical repercussion of sympathy in his essay *De la poésie dramatique*:

Le parterre de la comédie est le seul endroit où les larmes de l'homme vertueux et du méchant soient confondues. Là, le méchant s'irrite contre des injustices qu'il aurait commises; compatit à des maux qu'il aurait occasionnés, et s'indigne contre un homme de son propre caractère. Mais l'impression est reçue; elle demeure en nous, malgré nous; et le méchant sort de sa loge, moins disposé à faire le mal, que s'il eût été gourmandé par un orateur sévère et dur.

(Diderot, 1939, p.312)

On the other hand, Rousseau upholds a quite opposite view of the effects of sympathy on morality: he believes that to sympathize at the theatre is tantamount to dispensing with one's own responsibilities in real life:

Au fond, quand un homme est allé admirer de belles actions dans des fables, et pleurer des malheurs imaginaires, qu'a-t-on encore à exiger de lui ? N'est-il pas content de lui-même ? Ne s'applaudit-il pas de sa belle âme ? Ne s'est-il pas acquitté de tout ce qu'il doit à la vertu par l'hommage qu'il vient de lui rendre ? Que voudrait-on qu'il fît de plus ? Qu'il la pratiquât lui-même ? Il n'a point de rôle à jouer : il n'est pas comédien.

(Rousseau, 2003, p.74)

As will be clear by now, the possibility that unconscious identifications result in ego development depends on the availability of the spectator's or the actor's alpha-function: when alpha-function is not available, the re-introjection of beta-elements will result in increased ego-splitting and fragmentation of self. The ultimate effect on the bloodthirsty Sylla will depend on the actor's art.

The actor who acts instinctively, without having prepared her interpretation through study and reflection, will inevitably project her idiosyncratic feelings into

the spectator, leaving him filled with unprocessed emotions that have a compulsive quality. Brecht calls this operation barbaric and gives the example of the Roman actor Polus who cried on his dead son's real ashes to arouse the grief through which he intended to represent Electra mourning her brother (Brecht, 1957d, p.270). Thus the bloodthirsty Sylla may be moved to tears at the witnessing of an onstage slaughter, but his fragmented and violent self will remain untouched or possibly strengthened.

Conversely, a meaningful interpretation of Electra's grief, which proceeds from the study and understanding of her 'given circumstances', would implicitly endow the spectator with enhanced reflective capability and desire for reparation that constitutes true moral development and consists in the ability to reconsider and reevaluate principles of moral conduct on the basis of a balanced outlook grounded in reality.

Rousseau however does not admit to the function of theatre in improving morality. His absolute mistrust in the effects of theatrical sympathy on morality may be explained by his attitude towards alpha-function; in particular I have suggested that one of his main reasons for his anti-theatrical stance is his unconscious envy for the function of the actor. This also tallies with his call for the abolition of theatre, in contrast with most other theorists, including Brecht, who depart from similar concerns about the function of the theatre but seek its reformation, not its eradication.

## **EPILOGUE**

Starting from the interpretation of moral development as alpha-function, it is possible to analyse the controversies over the moral function of the theatre and shed new light on the relationship between morality, emotions, and pleasure in spectatorship.

## Reason and emotions

Theorists of the theatre have debated whether reason or emotions are responsible for the moral effect of theatre. Whilst some have claimed that the audience's emotional engagement is necessary for their moral development, others have insisted that emotions are incompatible with it.

The theory of alpha-function distinguishes between two kinds of emotions: beta- and alpha-elements. Beta-elements are raw emotional experiences, which constitute the building blocks of the psyche and from which the ego and its moral views and attitudes must be constructed. In this sense, raw emotional experiences are primary to any psychic development including morality. However, raw emotional experiences per se are only fit for re-enactment and projective-identification. It is through their processing in alpha-function, that they contribute to ego development and hence morality. Thus alpha-elements, as sympathetic emotions, are secondary to understanding and represent the constituents of the integrated ego and its moral standing. Raw emotions, if not transformed by alpha-function, are incompatible with moral development.

Alpha-function is a peculiar form of understanding through which intuited emotions are given meaning and are modified into thoughts. This operation of meaning-making is not a conscious intellectual activity, but rather an unconscious process which proceeds from an emotional experience. Therefore it should not be equated to what some of the theorists of the theatre call 'reason'. Brecht's revision of his theory of spectatorship illustrates this point.

When Brecht theorized the primacy of reason in the fruition of the epic theatre, he maintained that unconscious emotional arousal was completely redundant to spectatorship and noxious to the moral effect of theatre. The 'reason' Brecht was thinking about was one based on inference, whereby the conscious imparting of information about social processes would enhance socio-political awareness. Later in his career, however, he realized that unless theatre took advantage of the fruitful dynamic between empathy and interpretation in the art of the actor, its moral effect would at best be shallow. Coming close to

Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis*, he recognized that only intuition of emotions could lead to a transformative experience, and that the spectator's pleasure was inherent to the moral function of the theatre.

### **Spectatorship and pleasure**

The theory of alpha-function affords a particular view of the question of pleasure in spectatorship, and its relation to morality. If alpha-function represents the transition from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position, pleasure comes into its operations in two ways. From a Freudian perspective, it allows the overcoming of repetition-compulsion, which is a phenomenon 'beyond the pleasure principle'. By integrating the split-off objects into the ego and making them available for thinking, alpha-function fosters the psyche's ability to control its impulses and to adapt to reality. The mind can therefore be rescued from the compelling force of re-enactments and acquire a degree of freedom in choosing its actions, now placed under the rule of the reality principle.

From a Kleinian perspective, the transition to the depressive position entails the overcoming of the all-good and all-bad psychotic objects, and the internalization of an integrated 'good-enough' object, which enhances the ego's sense of love and security, by protecting it from fragmentation and enhancing its ability to successfully adapt to reality. This transition, which allows for an increased capacity to distinguish the self from the other, marks the insurgence of feelings of gratitude towards the actor, who has endowed the spectator with the gift of sympathy. Such gratitude may partly underlie the motivation for the round of applauses at the end of a performance.

### **The actor and the moral function of theatre**

The actor's moral function is accomplished as far as she has applied her alpha-function to the spectator's projections. As I have illustrated, disruptions of the moral function of theatre happen any time that the actor withdraws her alpha-function. The actor who plays her own feelings through a spontaneous or

instinctual performance, risks overwhelming the spectator with unprocessed emotional experiences that will reinforce psychotic fragmentation of his ego. Likewise, the actor who withholds her emotional engagement leaves the spectator to his own devices for emotional processing. For those emotional experiences where the spectator's alpha-function is not available, the spectator's ego is left dealing with cycles of fragmentation.

Although the incompetence of the actor justifies concerns about the possibility that theatre may result in the reinforcement of irrational and immoral attitudes, criticism of the actor's profession dictated by unconscious envy may in turn hinder the moral function of theatre. By departing from an unconscious distrust for transpersonal emotional processing, it is the spectator himself who impedes the actor's alpha-function and moral development. Rousseau is the paradigmatic theorist of this position.

### **The transpersonal dimension of spectatorship**

Brecht's project of the epic theatre starts from a distrust for transpersonal emotional transactions, and invites spectators to use their own autonomous alpha-function for emotional processing. The notion of a 'literarization' of theatre is revealing. While any form of art engages unconscious phantasy and hence promotes psychic and moral development through autonomous alpha-function, transpersonal alpha-function is specific to the theatre. This may explain why, as Aristotle implied for tragedy, theatre is superior to other forms of art in its effects on psychic life.

Alpha-function as a transpersonal process, and its rooting in the double game of the actor, may also provide a solution to semiotics' strivings to define the distinctiveness of theatre. As I have suggested in Chapter 5, it may be that theatre distinguishes itself from other non-performative arts because of the transpersonal nature of its alpha-function, and from other forms of performative arts, because of the way in which the actor's double game happens within a dynamic between embodiment (intuition in projective identification) and language (linguistic aspect of the text and of the rendition of the text in



performance). This dynamic may be a fruitful subject for further investigations, also taking advantage of psychoanalytic insights about the relationship between body and language.

Any philosophical approach that denies the relevance of unconscious processes is bound to be blind or frankly reject the moral function of the theatre. The inherent transpersonal nature of psychic development substantiates Eco's claim that it is psychic life that needs theatre, not vice versa, a point which is completely missed by McConachie's approach to spectatorship. For instance, McConachie recognizes 'the "doubleness" of theatre – that is, the fact that a single body on stage can be both an actor and a character, simultaneously existing in both real and simulated time-space' (2008, p.7) and he attributes to cognitive blending the spectator's capability to perceive such doubleness. While his supposition may reassure us that our mind is equipped with the capability of sustaining the perception of the actor's double game, it does not even attempt to explain how or why such double game may be particularly relevant to theatre spectatorship. Insisting on the conscious or preconscious nature of such phenomenon bars access to precious insights into theatre reception.

Making alpha-function the core process in spectatorship, entails placing the unconscious at its core. There are important peculiarities to alpha-function that make it distinctive in relation to other forms of conscious learning. Because alpha-function results in self-sympathy and personal psychic change, its moral effect is not about teaching rules or determining principles for the regulation of other people's attitudes and behaviours. It is first and foremost about the transformation of the self. Nevertheless, personal development in alpha-function fosters the growth of inner alpha-function, which can be put at the service of the processing of emotional experiences of other people. In this sense, it has a wider social significance.

Because theatre spectatorship happens in a group situation, elements of the audience's communal experience may also contribute to its wider social significance. Although the question of group psychological processes was not addressed in this thesis, spectatorship in alpha-function points to their

relevance to the study of the theatre: while unconscious phantasy is operative at a personal level, it always entails a transpersonal element.

In most theatrical performances, a number of actors are faced with projections from a collective of spectators called an audience: the unconscious identificatory processes are bound to be, at some level, also group identifications. Moreover, the actor not only receives the projections of multiple individuals, but also returns her interpretation simultaneously to the whole audience. Therefore questions of how the group unconscious phantasy leads to the development of a group sense of self should also be explored. Psychoanalytic theory has a concept of the group unconscious as distinct from the personal unconscious, a topic which I have not dealt with, but which should be explored in future research.

### **Identification and identity**

The transpersonal aspect of alpha-function typical of the theatre emphasizes the relational character of moral development, embedded in social processes and impossible without them. In transpersonal alpha-function the ego is constructed through a blending of the unconscious of the actor with that of the spectator. It is out of this blending in projective identification that a sympathetic view of the self emerges. Transpersonal alpha-function is an interpersonal process where selves and identities are dismantled and re-formed.

The consideration of questions of identification and identity connects to considerations of theatre reception as cultural phenomenon. The process of alpha-function, departing from projective identifications, highlights the fluidity of the ego in constructing the self, by transitions from fragmentation to integration. Such transitions consist in unconscious communications between audience and actors, providing an explanation for the perplexing phenomenon of the reciprocal code of communication between stage and auditorium. Unconscious identifications are based in unconscious phantasy and remain hidden from awareness despite having a vital impact on psychic development and ultimately on the personality.

Alpha-function challenges the tenet of the passive spectator. If it may appear that in transpersonal alpha-function there is an element of surrender of the unprocessed emotional experiences to the mind of another, which could be construed as 'passivity', this is followed by a flurry of unconscious activity that results in sympathy and moral development. The blending of the spectator's and actor's unconscious emotional processes in projective identification results in sympathetic identifications which foster ego development and the enrichment of one's sense of self.

By focussing on conscious aspects of identity, studies that emphasize spectatorship as a cultural phenomenon, remain blind to such processes. While there is no doubt that spectatorship is a multifaceted phenomenon, and that elements of cultural identity will influence theatre reception, consideration of unconscious mechanisms should be a welcome complement, especially because analysing the unconscious aspects of spectating and acting has revealed universal psychic phenomena which ground a novel appraisal of the ethical value of theatre.

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