

Fiction and the Real World: The Aesthetic Experience of Theatre

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In what sense can aesthetic experience be considered an opportunity for the development of personal identity, cognitive abilities, and emotions? Theatre proves to be an important field of investigation to approach this question. During a theatrical experience, the connection between fiction and reality can take the form of active cooperation between author, actor, and spectator. A better understanding of this point can be drawn by pointing out three kinds of spectator: we can distinguish a critical spectator, an emotional spectator, and an instinctual spectator, who respectively represent: the imaginative and hermeneutic attitude; empathy and fictional emotions; the unconscious satisfaction of drives. So far, a parallel can be established between literature and theatre. However, these two aesthetic experiences are profoundly different: the type of immersion provided by the theatrical experience differs from reading, because the presence of the characters is physical and actual. The pragmatic theatrical framework is the same as that which underlies childhood games. This means that the public too is to some extent called to play, i.e. to act. To appreciate the implications of this thesis, a preliminary analysis of the performance Reality (Deflorian and Tagliarini 2012) is offered, examining how its experience contributes to the development of the spectating subject.

Keywords: Fiction; aesthetic experience; theatre; performance; character; spectator.

1. *Fictional activities and subjectivation processing*

In what sense can the aesthetic experience be considered an opportunity for the development of personal identity, cognitive abilities, and the emotional sphere? Theatre proves to be an important field of investigation in order to probe this question. In principle, theatre obliges us to think of the connection between fiction and reality, not only in terms of truth content (that is, of the truthfulness, or verisimilitude, of the story represented), but also in terms of “truth effects” (or “reality effects”, that indicate the way the subject changes through fiction). Theatrical fiction interacts with reality through truth effects that affect the viewer, thus triggering certain subjectivation processes. The term “subjectivation” is here employed to indicate the process of becoming a subject, according to Foucault’s philosophy (Foucault 1982).

It would be useful to start from Kendall Walton’s ideas about imaginative activities in general (mimesis), so as to investigate the effects of theatrical representations, by entering the field of subjectivation processing. Although the term “subjectivation” never appears in Walton, he analyses the formation of subjectivity. Notably, he assigns mimesis a fundamental role in the formation of subjectivity, whose dynamics are traced back to games of “make-believe”. He suggests that engaging in make-believe “provides practice in roles one might someday assume in real life, that it helps one to understand and sympathize with others, that it enables one to come to grips with one’s own feelings, that it broadens one’s perspectives” (Walton 1990: 12). Mimesis and works of fiction are fundamental factors for empathy, for acquiring knowledge of oneself and others. Walton believes that “ordinary representational works of art [...] serve as props in games of make-believe” (Walton 2011: 53). Works of art are objects that shape fantasies, designed as supports for particular games in which fictional worlds are built. Just as a baby might play with a doll, we might play with a puppet or a mask, with a costume, or with a prop. Mimetic works have a culturally determined social function through conventions and rules concerning the way in which they are to be enjoyed. Without getting into the details of Walton’s argument, which is articulated in many categorical distinctions, it is important to emphasize that the imaginative activity aroused by mimetic works is described as a unique possibility to explore human resources: “Make-believe provides the experience— something like it anyway—for free. Catastrophes don’t really occur (usually) when it is fictional that they do. The divergence between fictionality and truth spares us pain and suffering we would have to expect in the real world. We realize some of the benefits of hard experience without having to undergo it” (Walton 2011: 68). *Make-believe* is a field of boundless enrichment of singularity and a powerful training tool: “objectivity, control, the possibility of joint participation, spontaneity, all on top of a

certain freedom from the cares of the real world” (Walton 2011: 68). Therefore, mimesis emerges as a valuable opportunity to undergo subjectivation processes: I can explore very different situations from the one in which I really find myself and test my behavioral skills without running any material danger. Mimesis plays a central role in human cultures. It is sufficient to think that, since the beginning of human history, fictional representations have been continuously produced and consumed. There must therefore be a fundamental need to which this type of work responds.

Jean-Marie Schaeffer attempted to investigate the anthropological foundations of this need in the text *Why fiction?* In this work, he provides various references to the developmental psychology, mental attitudes, psychological mechanisms, and pragmatic assumptions that underlie fictional activities. When human beings find themselves immersed in a work of fiction and are carried away by imaginary passions, they instinctively feel a mixture of fascination and distrust. Rational control runs the risk of being neutralized by fiction to such an extent that it is sometimes necessary to interrupt it, in other words to break the effect of reality and impose a certain distance from the representation. In the absence of such interruptions, there would appear to be the danger of some confusion between fiction and reality. In his condemnation of mimesis, Plato’s *The Republic* insists precisely on this hypothesis. However, as Schaeffer notes, Plato’s controversy does not take into account the real dynamics that govern the use of fictional works. One can be immersed in a work of fiction and fall victim to an illusion of cognitive attention, without replicating any specific content of the fiction in real life. A theatrical example may be the following one. While watching Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, I may become totally absorbed in Macbeth’s drama, I may feel anxious and be moved by the progress of the story, without however nurturing, in my daily life, any desire for power or any violent instinct.

However, I may also decide to imitate certain behaviors I derive from mimetic works, even knowing perfectly well that I am imitating works of fiction. For example, while knowing that Romeo is only a fictional character, I may wish to emulate his madly amorous disposition.

Moreover, Schaeffer suggests that nothing can be emulated except what is likely, namely what is already an emulation of reality in a work of fiction: “Of course, life imitates art (mimetic), but it only imitates what in art (already) imitates life—which always continues to imitate itself” (Schaeffer 1999: 40). In other words, if I decide to imitate Romeo, it is because a romantic attitude was already present in me, even before my encounter with this character. The emulation is not a danger in itself.

Therefore, the risk concerns not those who immerse themselves in fiction, but those who have an underdeveloped imaginative capacity, as some research on developmental psychology has shown. People who

have little imagination and are not used to experimenting with fiction have a more limited space for learning and personal development.

In general, mimetic behaviors favor the development of psychological attitudes from early childhood to adulthood. Mimetic contagion is a form of knowledge, even more fundamental than dialectical reason or rational persuasion. Mimesis is the basis of individuals' mental life, of the humanization of social relations and of the cultural development of society. Far from being a primitive instinct, mimesis is something that contributes to evolution and is present in the world of life in countless forms. Projection activities, make believe, role play, dreams, reveries, fantasies, are all things that can be traced back to mimetic instincts.

2. *Literary characters and theatrical characters*

Let us now carry out a theoretical experiment. We will try to analyze what Vincent Jouve calls the *effet-personnage* ("character-effect"), i.e., the status of the literary character in terms of its truth effects, to underline consonances and dissonances with respect to the truth effects of the theatrical character. First of all, Jouve notes that narratology, formalism and structuralism have always provided a strictly functional definition of the character, thus reducing it to the textual elements that compose it. This operation aims to move beyond the idealistic illusion of the traditional novel, for the character is structurally defined only by the role it plays within the action. According to Jouve's perspective, this approach is not exhaustive, since the character always refers to something which is located beyond the text. In particular, he focuses not on the relationship between author and character, but rather on the relationship between character and reader: an element less widely investigated by standard narratology. Jouve proposes to create a method to carry out his investigation by guaranteeing the intersubjectivity of his results, so that the reception of the character by the reader will not be considered an exclusively private and subjective experience. From the methodological and formal point of view, this theoretical attempt is a paradigm that we can transpose almost literally into theatrical terms, by focusing on the relationships between character and spectator (rather than the reader of the novel).

The *effet-personnage* basically depends on the indications contained in the literary or theatrical text, which is always addressed to an implicit reader, or audience. Indeed, the identity of the character arises from the active cooperation between the reader / spectator and the author: "the character, even if it is given by the text, borrows a certain number of its characterizations from the reader's world of reference" (Jouve 1992: 29). There is a space of uncertainty in the layout of the *personnage* that must be filled by the reader/spectator, owing to the formal and structural limits of both the book and the stage. In order to get an idea of the character, the reader/spectator is forced to draw on his experience, as well as on an inter-textual dimension, namely on other

systems of signs in which he has always been immersed. However, it is never a matter of random uncertainty. The empty spaces are the result of the reflection developed by the author, who sometimes deliberately proceeds in an evolutionary sense, tracing an idea of the character that is gradually filled in only at the end of the narration. Let us think of Simenon's Maigret. The writer only gradually reveals not just the culprit's identity, but also the inspector's personality and in general the real nature of the environment that constitutes the setting (and often the cause) of the crime. In theatre, the most obvious example is Oedipus, whose tragedy is retrospectively reinterpreted in the light of the final revelation of the truth.

The ontological depth of the characters, then, depends on a range of variables which are the same for the literary and the theatrical character. Its essence varies depending on the nature of representation (for the fictional dimension can be more or less accentuated), and the degree of realism put into work (for there are historical characters, and characters whose existence may be probable, possible, or completely improbable). Other factors are the proximity to the reader's culture, the reader's distance from or familiarity with the storytelling style, and the legibility of the characters. Within the literary genre of the novel, there are enormous differences. For example, the incompleteness of fictional universes is deliberately accentuated in Kafka and minimized in Balzac. Likewise, let us think of the different characterizations of Beckett's characters, whose psychology is completely impenetrable, and of Chekhov's characters, with their bursting interiority.

What we have argued so far equally applies to literary and theatrical storytelling. However, there are specific traits in theatrical fiction which clearly distinguish it from literary experience. First of all, text is not an all-embracing factor in theatre. Theatrical mimesis mix (at least) two components: the text and the representation, i.e., the game. The playful element at the basis of theatre is evident—even more so than in the Italian term *gioco*—in the French *jeu*, the English *play*, and in the German *Spiel*. According to Schaeffer's schematization, playful theatricality is qualified by the vector of immersion "substitution d'identité physique" (physical identity substitution), while the immersive disposition is defined as "identification allo-subjective actantielle" (actantial allo-subjective identification) (Schaeffer 1999: 225). This means that in the theatre there is a substitution of physical identity via identification with another acting subject. The spectator identifies with the actor who is performing. The pragmatic theatrical framework is the same as that which underlies childhood games (the actor plays, acts, pretends to be Hamlet), but the purpose is different from normal games. After all, theatre's playfulness is addressed to an audience, and must therefore communicate something also to people who are not participating directly in the game.

3. *The actor and the imagination*

It is very significant that Schaeffer defines the type of immersion provided by the theatrical device as “actantielle”. Indeed, by contrast to the novel and the cinema, theatre is centered on action, the physical and actual presence of the characters. I do not have to imagine Hamlet: I can see and feel him. Theatrical imagination is stimulated by an action performed by bodies in flesh and blood. The staging is the actualization of a textual fiction; conversely, the theatrical text is the virtualization of a stage actuality. The actualization or the presence of a performative corporeality is configured as a specific trait of the theatrical representation, which is not shared by other mimetic forms.

In order to better define the theatrical character, it is useful to bear in mind that it derives its identity from the cooperation between the author and the spectator, as it is the case with the reader for the literary character. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that in theatre there is the decisive mediation of the actor. The character is not linguistically mediated to the spectator (at least it is linguistically mediated to the actor, as the dramaturgy contains indications on the character), through the linguistic support of the book, but actively mediated, through a representation that unites different voices and bodies in action. One does not get an idea of the theatrical character on the basis of one’s imagination. Rather, the inverse process occurs: it is the character represented on stage who becomes part of the spectator’s imagination. Of course, this return movement from the work of fiction to the individual imagination can also be found in the literary dimension. However, in theatre this is the only direction that can be taken since the spectator must first of all interact with the concreteness of the actor’s voice and features. It is plain that the spectator can add imaginary features to the character, but always on the basis of the body on stage, which immediately embodies it. The spectator may witness various versions of the same play in which the same character is played by different actors, but each time the spectator will immediately have to deal with their individual bodies.

The variety of the performers—an instance of a pivotal distinction between the theatrical character and the cinematographic one—does not contradict the immediacy of the audience’s perception. This immediacy is entirely lacking in the literary character, who lives in the reader’s mental images.

On the other hand, theatre does not give you access to the characters’ thoughts. The novel is a privileged gateway to the protagonists’ interiority, while in theatre we only know what the character says or does. A staged character is developed as an absolute exteriority. This exteriority is not contradicted by particular dramaturgical strategies that have the function of suggesting, and making us privy to, the protagonists’ inner thoughts—I am referring here to monologues exclusively addressed to the public and not heard by the other characters.

There is always a voice we can hear and a body we can see, nothing has to be imagined. The novel represents characters' inner life and conscience since, in its fundamental grammar, it is a long prose-story that aims to reveal the protagonists' psychology. By participating in the characters' deepest thoughts and emotions, the reader develops a feeling of intimacy and proximity with respect to them. On the contrary, in theatre we immediately have the body, not soul, of the character.

In conclusion, theatre displays different yet active imaginative function, or different reality effects and subjectivation processes (Rancière 2008). In this sense, it is impossible for us to leave a performance unchanged—and this is always the case, not only with those contemporary performances that call for the spectator's direct participation. We will have changed somehow even if we have simply been sitting in an armchair watching a show for a couple of hours, without actually "doing" anything. The so-called inactivity of the audience proves to be a form of collaboration in the work, it indicates an essential relational pole of the event, as already stressed by eighteenth-century French aesthetic theories on the relationship between actor and audience—primarily those developed by Diderot. The spectator's gaze is his particular dramatic action.

4. *How many spectators are there?*

Given these premises, we can now focus on the formal position of the reader / viewer by setting out from the following statement by Jouve: "the reader is always, more or less confusedly, shared among three attitudes of belief: he knows that he deals with an imaginary world; he pretends to believe this world; he actually believes this world at a level he is unaware of" (Jouve 1992: 82). These three distinctions correspond, in technical terms, to the following tripartition: *lectant*, *lisant*, and *lu*. According to Jouve, when we are reading a work of fiction, one of these positions is always privileged. Depending on the context, one can be a *lectant*, a *lisant* or a *lu*. Of course, there is no rigid distinction between these figures. There may be a shift in perspective during the reading, depending on whether the author, at a given moment, is seeking to achieve a didactic or realistic effect, to elicit empathy or to create a sense of alienation. These figures can also coexist at the same time: the emotional engagement can make the reader more intensely interested in technical aspects, for example.

The *lectant* embodies the intellectual curiosity of the critical approach which, in relation to the text, always bears the author's presence in mind. Schaeffer distinguishes the *lectant jouant* from the *lectant interprétant*. While the former is involved in the construction of the novel's narrative strategies, the latter is committed to deciphering the overall meaning of the work in a hermeneutic direction. The *lectant* perceives that the character is a pawn of the author, whose moves can be predicted on the basis of verisimilitude, but also of conformity to the

conventions governing the various narrative genres. The author orients the reading and imposes his own power through a strategy of persuasion. In theatre, the *lectant* finds an emblematic counterpart in the figure of the critic and expert. When he/she sees a stage play, he/she pays attention not to be carried away by emotional involvement, but instead remains constantly attentive to the overall vision of the work, to the acting techniques, the style of direction, dramaturgy, and the technical choices in terms of scenography, lighting, and music. This figure is a busy spectator who anticipates narrative developments (*jouant*) and interprets the hermeneutical meaning of the work (*interprétant*), from an exclusively critical and intellectual perspective.

The position of the *lisant* is completely different, for it embodies the kind of reader who is the victim of the novel's illusion. Of course, the *lisant* is not naive. He/she does not believe in fictitious truths as a matter of blind faith, but rather participates in a fragile, temporary and limited illusion. His/her reading is that of the child who has survived within the adult. At the core of the *lisant*, the emotional engagement prevails over the critical part, which has been anesthetized. This attitude is connected to the perception of the character as a different person with a life of his/her own. This type of reading tends to assign the character an autonomous existence. The author uses certain techniques of seduction, rather than persuasion, in relation to *lisant*, thus concocting a system of sympathy in the construction of the text. For instance, characters almost always have a proper name and a credible existence, and their actions are consistent and goal-oriented, even though they often turn out to be unpredictable. All this gives the impression of an actual otherness. Moreover, the characters' concreteness is heightened by the fact that the novel evokes their inner life, thoughts, emotions, and passions. The *lisant* intimately shares the characters' suffering, love, dreams, and childhood memories. The theatrical counterpart to the novel's *lisant* consists in the spectator who forgets all about the author and the director, the acting strategies and the stage techniques. He/she is carried away by the story and puts himself/herself on the level of the events. This spectator undergoes catharsis, that purification of the passions which produces an organic effect of relief. Although the spectator does not have access to the intimacy of the character's thoughts and emotions, given the above-mentioned regime of absolute theatrical exteriority, he/she feels a degree of compassion, whereby he/she senses that the character's fate concerns him/her deeply.

Finally, different still is the position of the *lu*, which refers to the satisfaction of the reader's unconscious instincts. In this sense, the character is the support that allows us to satisfy at an imaginary level the unconscious desires that are repressed by our social life. The *lu* is connected to the perception of the character as a ghost that the text awakens in the reader: an echo of the author's ghosts. The censorship of the superego is suspended, because we affirm that what we are

reading is just a work of art. The more the content refers to cultures that are distant from our own, the more the superego's control is overcome. The author orients the *lu*'s desire through a strategy of temptation, rather than persuasion or seduction. He/she tempts the reader to positively repeat, in an imaginary or playful way, already experienced traumas, allowing the *lu* to overcome them and rediscover his/her past or unknown self. In order to tempt the reader, the author can stir up three forms of *libido*: the desire for feeling (*sentiendi*), for domination (*dominandi*), and for knowledge (*sciendi*). This last *libido*—what we might call a voyeuristic drive—is the one prevalent in the grammar of theatre. Indeed, the audience has the possibility to discover bodies that are present and indifferent to external gazes. The innocence of the image allows us to witness otherwise forbidden scenes, whether they be erotic, criminal, or simply situations in which bodies in action seem not to care about the viewer. In this respect, Freud traces the voyeuristic drive back to the primal scene (*Urszene*), in which the child wishes to discover the sexual secrets of adults, and especially those of his/her parents (Freud 1918).

5. *Let's play Reality*

Finally, let us try to apply this theoretical framework to a specific case study: the performance *Reality* by Deflorian/Tagliarini (2012). The protagonist is Janina Turek, a Polish woman who has filled 748 notebooks with random notes on her life: 38,196 phone calls, 23,397 “good mornings”, 1,922 appointments, and so on. Janina writes down the facts of her life in the form of data, she strives to get a grasp on reality by noting everything that happens to her, without adding any personal thoughts or feelings. This strange activity, which can even be compared to a daily mission, is defined as a sort of “recording” based on “attempts of description of reality”. No doubt, there is some madness in this ‘stalking of life’, yet the spectator of the performance *Reality* is unlikely to conclude that Janina is suffering from obsession. There is a sense of beauty, or a form of amazement in the face of the endless elusive details of reality and the protagonist's effort to grasp them as much as possible. In a radical rejection of all hierarchy, it is impossible to accord more or less importance to any single event: the play offers a celebration of coincidences, chance, discovery, and surprise. Janina's attempt to represent reality reflects a survival instinct which pushes her to record the world in order to learn how to inhabit it. *Reality* represents the reality of a woman who has done nothing but represent reality. However, the performance does not ultimately amount to a form of meta-theatre, because it proposes a very stratified intertwining between the reality of theatre and the theatricality of reality. Deflorian and Tagliarini suggest that “[i]f one wants to pretend well, everything must be true”, when they take turns at playing Janina and, from time to time, at telling her story.

The position of the spectator vis-à-vis *Reality* is paradoxical. The critical viewer or theatrical *lectant* is faced with a short-circuit. The *jouant* or the viewer who attempts to anticipate narrative developments cannot make any assumptions: since the performance opens with an attempt to represent Janina's death, we already know from the start how everything will end. The *interprétant* or spectator committed to interpreting the hermeneutic-intellectual meaning of the work will soon discover that form and content coincide. After all, the performance represents the reality of a woman who does nothing but represent reality. The emotional spectator or theatrical *lisant* lives Janina's story, growing fond of her and all her details, and placing her on the same level as the events and objects that surround her. Therefore, Janina's story once again becomes part of her representation of reality. Finally, the instinctual spectator, the equivalent of the *lu*, observes a stage that itself represents the observation of the world—the voyeuristic enjoyment of voyeurism, the innocence of the image in the mirror, *libido sciendi* in its highest degree. The relationship that this performance establishes with the spectator is deep and complex, especially since it revolves around a subjectivity that desperately seeks what is other than itself, yet without knowing how to find it: Janina's notebooks are all written in the third person and can be interpreted as a way by which this woman entrusts her own truth to otherness. Together with the notebooks, there are also some postcards that Janina has sent to herself and kept. These are the only traces of her voice in the first person. In one postcard, the woman wonders if she is living, or just pretending to live. Is this life real, in which all she does is represent reality? Janina does not answer the question, and neither can we. However, we can repeat the question—and no one can find a better place for repeating it than theatre.

6. *Conclusion: a fictional truth*

In conclusion, the present paper has sought to outline the nature of theatrical fiction. It invites us to think about the processes of subjectivation via a constant redefinition of the boundaries between real experience and the cultural imaginary. The fictional universe contributes to affective, intellectual, and instinctual enrichment.

In disclosing a cultural horizon, the theatrical aesthetic experience also has the education function of obliging the spectator to combine the different points of view and levels of meaning within the plot. It is as if there were an implicit agreement, an *a priori* pact, whereby the spectator lends himself/herself to playing his/her role and to believing in fictions, thus demonstrating his/her trust in the author/actors. In order for any work of fiction to work—not just a realistic work—it is necessary for the reader/spectator to believe in a preliminary source of authority and to accept what is written or staged as the truth, albeit a fictitious truth.

Unlike philosophical truth, fictional truth lacks a verifiable objective referent. Nonetheless, there is an objective concreteness to the experience that is made when one attends a performance. It is an intellectual and emotional game, in which, for example, a story is followed with anguish and satisfaction. At the origin of playful curiosity lies the promise of some instinctual pleasure and of a certain degree of intellectual freedom. And when we get lost in something other than ourselves, but which at the same time concerns us, this generates the pleasure of theatrical vision. A character may serve as an inspiring *exemplum*, or even as a figure with which we identify; but it can also be constituted only as an otherness that we freely meet and that, through its thoughts or conduct, mixes its own feelings with those of the reader or spectator. As Jouve puts it, “the affective connection between fictitious beings and the reader makes the latter like a stranger to himself” (Jouve 1992: 221). The encounter with the character is an opportunity to discover oneself through difference. This encounter does not consist in the acquisition of knowledge, but in a process of subjectivation, in which knowledge arises as if by refraction. To quote Jouve one last time, “the Self is inseparable from the Other [...]. The *alter* acts as a bridge between the inner world of the subject and the outer world” (Jouve 1992: 221). This is why fiction turns out to be not a closed and separate world, but a fundamental resource for freely interacting with other, different spheres of reality.

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