

# **THE RETURN OF THE FLESH POETICS OF MALE HYSTERIA FOR THE STAGE**

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### Declaration

I hereby declare that no parts of this dissertation have been submitted towards a degree at any other institution other than CEU, nor, to my knowledge, does the dissertation contain unreferenced material or ideas from other authors.

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## Abstract

My thesis explores the conceptualization of the body on stage in the context of expressions of male hysteria and the deconstruction of sexual difference in canonical texts of Western theatre practice – ie those theories belonging to the modernist avant-garde. I argue that by re-reading the cases of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Artaud through the Freudian psychoanalytical discourse I can identify forms of a particular hysteria – male hysteria – which lies at the heart of these radical texts – allowing the chance for subversion, possibilities to question gender norms and to rethink the performing body when bringing theory into praxis on the stage. My thesis uses multidisciplinary methodological approaches - performance analysis, psychoanalysis, postmodern and feminist epistemology – in its attempt to further the existing discourses on theatre, body, masculinity and male hysteria.

The radical modernist theatre practice introduced changes at the level of approaching the body of the actor and the modern function of the director. Starting with the first modernist director, Konstantin Stanislavsky the body on stage is thought in hysterical terms in a spiraling identification actor-director. The linkage between theatricality and male hysteria can become a method of positively claiming the hysterical masculinity as a form of resistance to dominant forms of masculinity and a reevaluation of hysteria today. Male directors speak the language of theatrical hysterics in the sense of developing imaginary a unsteady body that resists representation while the rigorous demands of the symbolic and excitability are not synthesized and the consequence is to compromise through somatic symptoms, affective states and impossible fantasies.

The point is to read through hysteria the performing bodies as they are conceptualized in directors' canonical writing on theatre by exploring the symbolic coding of the body in avant-garde Western theatre practice. A re-reading of these male directors' texts has the potential to undermine the disciplinary forces that are inherent to any canon, to reveal the avoidance of commodification of new forms of radicalism, the undiscovered inherent transgressiveness of those texts and their radical potential invoked in reaching beyond the existing systems of formalized power by creating unimaginable forms of association and action.

The hysterical male was perceived historically in negative terms, as unmanly or feminine, as a dangerous denial of masculinity. The link between performance and male hysteria functions as an essential questioning of the body/mind and feminine/masculine dichotomies through a troubling sexual difference which I can relate to a confusion of masculinity and femininity in hysteria.

How do we understand acting and theatricality in contemporary Western theatre? A possible answer has to take into consideration the modern rhetoric and practice of rehearsal and training. By introducing the male hysteria element and the feminist psychoanalytical template, I attempt to connect theory to practice in an effort to locate the hysteric in modernist theorized practices of acting nowadays. By identifying the tensions generated by hysterical manifestations, I locate the theoretical points that generated change in the practice and conceptualization of theatrical performance and claim their radical instability in the present.

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## Introduction

If difference [...] is the sign of theft or of the purloined breath [souffle], it is primarily, if not in itself, the total dispossession which constitutes me as the deprivation of myself, the elusion of my existence, and this makes difference the simultaneous theft of both my body and my mind: my flesh.<sup>1</sup>

For my very first class of stage directing at the theatre school, our professor and supervisor for the next four years addressed the only woman in our year. The woman-to-woman advice accused my colleague of making a bad choice because directing is a job only for men, this *friendly* advice being based on her own experience as a woman director. My colleague left directing school after that first semester. I soon discovered that becoming a director was more a question of virility and not a matter of skills, creativity, sharing work and good audiences with actors, artistic vision or building theatrical communities. What mattered for theatre professors and critics, as they expressed it several times, was to prove that you, a masculinized director, can penetrate actors who are to be treated as *little women* while theatre history was presented as an exclusive chronology of great male directors. But if the history of Western theatre functions as a cult of the solitary male directors, how is it possible to escape its damaging effects for theatre nowadays? What types of gendered roles are projected by the canon and what does not fit into this construction and how is this missing part challenging the whole structure of the canon?

Canonization has the role of cutting out the radical edge of modernist theatre practice and theory. In order to prove this claim and re-discover their radical potential, I read particular cases of male directors and I deconstruct the trope of virility associated with these directors. The most important tool in this process of revealing is the concept of male hysteria, taken from psychoanalysis and feminist

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1 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 225.

theory.

By re-reading the particular cases of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Antonin Artaud through a feminist and psychoanalytical framework I identify forms of a particular hysteria – male hysteria – which lies at the heart of these radical texts – allowing the chance to subvert and question gender norms and also to rethink the performing body by bringing feminist theory on the modernist stage.

In my own work as a director, I realized that I could not fulfill the hyper-masculine demands required by the canonized theatre-making and I thought about alternative possibilities of producing performances that can use some of the modernist ideas of theatricality and embodiment but can also take further the existing knowledge in the field. In this dissertation I ask how male hysteria influenced the modernist plan of producing a fundamental re-thinking of the artist's practice beyond established understandings of embodiment, performance and sexual difference. Consequently, I ask two other important questions: how was this hysterical influence forgotten or erased and how can it be reclaimed today for specific political purposes?

For deconstructing canonization, my dissertation uses post-disciplinary methodological approaches coming from theatre practice, performance analysis, psychoanalysis, postmodern and feminist epistemologies, in its attempt to further the existing discourses on theatre, body, men, masculinity and hysteria. Through a gendered perspective and a feminist intervention<sup>2</sup> into theatre studies, I problematize the canon construction and I look for alternative readings that can move beyond the hegemonic discourse of virility<sup>3</sup> and the fixed disembodied subjectivity of the male director.

My first chapter “Struggling with eternal parents: the problem of the male director in modernist

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2 My analysis of theatre studies is heavily influenced by feminist scholars such as Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan or Hélène Cixous while my perspective on psychoanalysis and hysteria follows the feminist critique of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis of Julia Kristeva and Juliet Mitchell.

3 Virility is a significant term that includes the cult of youth, of work, of duty, of sacrifice, of heroism, of force, of conformity and of authority that characterizes masculinist discourses. Barbara Spackman introduces this term in *Fascist Virilities*.

theatre, the canon and feminism” focuses on the modernist canon of theatre practice consisting of theories on theatre practice from directors such as Konstantin Stanislavsky,<sup>4</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold,<sup>5</sup> Sergei Eisenstein,<sup>6</sup> Bertolt Brecht,<sup>7</sup> Antonin Artaud,<sup>8</sup> Peter Brook<sup>9</sup> or Eugenio Barba.<sup>10</sup> Theatres, universities and publishing houses institutionalized these authors and their ideas are highly influential in contemporary theatre. Moreover, the fear of theory explodes in theatrical circles as a pretension that psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, feminism, queer theory, post-colonialism and deconstruction never emerged or if they ever existed, now they are long buried and there is no need to address *those* issues, while the modernist canonical linearity is left untouched. However, obscured parts, now forgotten by theatre historian and practitioners, have the potential to transform the male-centred canon by affecting the way power relations and gender were taken for granted in Western theatre.

Western theatre history operates as a rarely criticized coherent narration and alternative readings coming from feminist theatre criticism, for example, are presented as incongruous with what counts as *theatrical worth*. Even more, European and North American theatre practice is highly influenced by canonical texts that are projecting basic rules of performance. The directing poetics of modernist male directors, the so-called *rebels*, *heretics*, *reformers*<sup>11</sup> or *pioneers*<sup>12</sup> of the theatre, radically transformed theatre practice for the last century and their methods are still studied in theatre schools. These modernist theories produced a change in previous understanding and application of theatre practice but also contain forgotten elements that can undermine the Western theatrical discourse from within.

In the second chapter, “Taking Freud from behind: poetics of male hysteria,” I introduce the concept of male hysteria through Sigmund Freud’s understanding of what he called *little hysteria* as the

4 Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage*.

5 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre* and Rudnitskii, *Meyerhold, the Director*.

6 Eisenstein, “Montage of Attractions.”

7 Brecht, *Brecht on theatre*.

8 Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* and Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*.

9 Brook, *The Empty Space* and Brook, *The Open Door*.

10 Barba and Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* and Barba, *Theatre*.

11 Concepts explored by Barba, *The paper canoe*, 5, 38.

12 Term used by Peter Brook, quoted in Kustow, *Peter Brook*.



starting point of my psychoanalytical framework of interpretation. By using his self-analysis, Freud suggested for the first time that male hysteria can be interpreted as a human condition, in order to challenge an anti-Semitic trope that feminized intellectual Jews at the end of the nineteenth century in Vienna. Freud's *little hysteria* gives a meticulous and painful account and also provides the coordinates in identifying it: an anxious and stimulating identification with someone else through whom the hysteric thinks and feels. Symptoms manifest through bodily expressions and acting out, while the other is constructed as a plagiarized self, in contradiction to a masculine individualistic construction of the self.

The clinical discourse from the end of the nineteenth century used women's hysteria as a strategic tool to respond to the increased demands for rights and social change coming from middle-class women in Europe and North America. Hysteria functions as an ideological construction of femininity that had direct social effects. The nineteenth century hysteria was actively used to marginalize different groups of men through similar mechanisms. These cases are easily forgotten nowadays by the new scholarship on hysteria and by the popular culture which keeps a strong fascination for hysterical representations. Hystericization of working class men, male immigrants, colonized men, sissies or Eastern European Jews served as a paradigmatic rhetoric of exclusion.

The particular relation between masculinity and femininity acts as the key element in approaching hysteria in Lacanian psychoanalysis and French feminism. In my dissertation, masculinity and femininity are conceptualized psychoanalytically by understanding subjectivity through sexual difference. Consequently I conceptualize hysteria as a confusion of masculinity and femininity. The connection between femininity and hysteria leaves men in a difficult position: they cannot achieve the good feminine end of patriarchy – the good charming mother and wife that hysterics were prescribed to become. Nevertheless, this connection also offers them the contradictory position of challenging the patriarchal status-quo while constructing it. The goal of feminizing hysterical men is to discredit them

in negative anti-social terms by using womanhood: as unmanly, as feminine, as sissies and as dangerous denials of virility.

The third chapter “Becoming a prick: hysterical discourse and modernist theatre” brings together modernism, psychoanalysis and theatre by close-reading theatre theories and practices from three authors (Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Artaud) through the lenses of the hysterical discourse. The modernist theatre practice introduced changes at the level of thinking theatrical communities, approaching the body of the actor and also introduced the modern function of the director. By connecting the modernist directors to the feminine and the hysterical discourse, I search for forms of resistance to the model of masculine canonical colonization.

In this chapter I focus on the hysterical discourse of the three main voices of modernist theatre and on their different methods of contesting and embracing at the same time the Law of the Father. I identify different strategies that male directors used to create believable actions on stage by exploring their own femininity, expressing their hysterical symptoms at the level of theatrical discourse and identifying with other directors, actors and spectators in order to avoid representation. The meeting point of these strategies is the body of the theatre-maker in the play of expressions that are breaking up with the perceived virility of the canon, in creating theatrical non-hierarchical communities and communicating with the spectator.

The modernist theatre canon uses the construction of the male director as a figure of authority, virility and artistic autonomy as one of the most opaque and enduring practices of the last century. This dissertation offers an answer by challenging precisely how the modernist theatre canon has constructed and promoted directorial virility as a stereotypical and intrinsic feature for male directors in order to integrate them in the canon and by reversing the blur of the hysterical discourse and manifestations of femininity-in-masculinity in staging and acting in the Western world. From textbooks to theatre histories and theatre practices, the legendary figure of the male theatre-maker is charged with

conservative metaphors of gender and sexuality in a process of covering up transgressive and gender-bending expressions of hysteria. This project functions also as a personal search for a different type of director after unlearning the canonical reading of modernist theatre and discovering hidden parts from the writings of its main figures.

The conceptualization of the acting body on stage and the very idea of a director employ expressions of male hysteria, as forms of a forgotten effeminacy of famous directors and can function as conceptual tools in breaking away from mainstream narratives. Staging, acting and writing about theatre through a hysterical discourse threatens the well-established canonical hierarchies based on strict gender relations and abstract detachment.

Starting with the first modernist director, Konstantin Stanislavsky, the body, the affectivity of the actor and the cooperation on stage are thought in hysterical terms in a spiraling identification between participants. The linkage between theatricality and male hysteria operates in my dissertation as a method of positively claiming the hysterical masculinity of modernist male directors and as a form of resistance to dominant forms of virility in the canon precisely through a reevaluation of hysteria. Male directors speak the language of male hysterics in the sense of imaginarily developing a hysterical body that is resistant to representation. The rigorous demands of the Symbolic and of phallic masculinity are not fully synthesized and alternative solutions to subjectivity construction are found through psychosomatic symptoms, plagiaristic identifications and impossible phantasies. In order to form a colonizing canon and to achieve a neutralized and universal discourse for theatre, the hysteric and the feminine within had to be repressed.

Furthermore, exploring a hysterical discourse, modernist directors' writings on theatre conceptualize performing bodies, relationships between theatre makers and radical understandings of representation. My re-reading of male directors' texts undermines the disciplinary forces that are inherent to canon formation, in order to avoid the commodification of their radicalism and to discover

the transgressiveness of those texts. Their radical potential of male hysteria offers models of theatre-making that can go beyond the existing systems of formalized power by creating unimaginable forms of association and action.

The last chapter “Let the right one slip in: what is left out of canonization” focuses more on the three author’s intimate struggles with male hysteria and the implications of these struggles on the modernist stage. Through linking modernist performance to male hysteria I positively claim the male hysteria of its leading modernist directors also as a reevaluation of hysteria today, as a possible understanding of the body/mind relation on stage and also as a specific feminist approach towards the body, sexual difference and representation.

My explorations of the theatrical canonical texts fail to distinguish “stable entities or guiding presences”<sup>13</sup> named Stanislavsky, Meyerhold or Artaud in those very texts. My project of decentring the canon focuses on how masculinity, femininity and subjectivity are constructed, or better say, misconstructed in the canonical texts, because the canon depends on fixed conservative hypotheses and modes of writing, acting and staging where ambiguity and hysteria do not have a place.

Through its specificity, the presence of the body on stage, live theatre escapes fixed definitions of gender roles or other socially constructed categories: “theatre is a practice in which societies negotiate around what the body is and means”<sup>14</sup> and these negotiations can have unexpected social and political implications. This dissertation explores some of these modernist negotiations in terms of bodily possibilities, and not necessarily mapping a modernist theatre history of actor training, directorial techniques or male-dominated structures.

Under the influence of postmodern theory and its critique of the modern subjectivity, my project can be read as a postmodern attempt to change the dominant in modernism by focusing on its theatre theories and fragmentation of the modern subject. The point is not to oppose the oppressive existing

<sup>13</sup> Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 143.

<sup>14</sup> Shephard, *Theatre, body and pleasure*, 1.

theatrical canon to a more acceptable postmodernist vision in an absolute antithesis, but to look for what connects them.

By rereading the texts of the modernist theatre canon in the theoretical context of psychoanalysis, postmodernism and feminism, I suggest to reconsider the innovation of the modernist theatre and the change it produced for the conventional constructions of the world of Western theatre and its gender roles. By theorizing the hysterical transformation of modernist theatre, I am interested in applying the ideas of male hysteria on stage nowadays and in observing how they still relate to contemporary theatrical practice<sup>15</sup> and theory. Nevertheless, the limitations of my project force me to leave aside the analysis of the usages of male hysteria in contemporary theatre as well as in other artistic forms. A future research might follow these hysterical explorations.

The feminist and psychoanalytical re-readings of the male modernist canon can be criticized for re-building a *Western alliance*<sup>16</sup> with the central texts of the canon but, more important, these re-readings have the potential to expose the unquestioned assumptions and the ideological prejudices of the canon's admirers and are indispensable in reversing the hegemonic logic of Western theatre. Feminist theatre criticism has the unique possibility of revealing and changing the ideological usages of canonical texts in theatrical education, practice and new theatre theories.

How do we understand acting and theatricality in contemporary Western theatre? A possible answer has to take into consideration the modernist rhetoric and practice of rehearsal and training and their institutional and disciplinary powers. How can we read the basic texts against the grain and how can we resist authoritative claims made in their name? And as feminist scholars, we should ask ourselves: who wants us to return to the traditional values of the canon in terms of writing, acting,

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15 My last directed performances *Queercore*, *Jehanne Unscharf*, *Jehanne Complex* and *Silent as the Grave* were made together with Jeanne Hamilton Bick, Catalin Jugravu, Deniz Gözler, Trevor Hagen, Yi Xing Hwa, Ellinor Middleton, Joseph Cauthery, Maia Oprea and The Exquisite Research & Performing Group. They were closely related to the topic of my dissertation and stand for a practical exploration on stage of my research over the last few years.

16 Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 144.

directing or theorizing? Who controls these texts and who speaks for them? Who canonizes and who gives the *right* interpretations?<sup>17</sup> My analysis of key modernist practitioners and theorists in their historical context challenges a ready-made outline of such a conceptual elaborated construction. By introducing the male hysteria element and the feminist psychoanalytical framework, this dissertation connects theory to practice in an effort to locate femininity-in-masculinity and the hysteric in modernist theorized practices of acting and staging. By identifying the tensions generated by hysterical manifestations, I map the theoretical points and situated knowledges that generated and encouraged further transformation in the practice and the conceptualization of theatrical performance. One of my key interests in re-reading modernist theatre theory is to avoid and to move away from authoritarian linearity and charming nostalgia the performance of the past and to reclaim its radical instability in the present. The need to get involved in reading and challenging the canon through a feminist perspective in order to de-familiarize and unlearn *our own* traditions can be effective especially in connection with the urgency of reading and promoting non-canonical or alternative theatre theories and contributions from outside the white patriarchal heteronormative capitalist perceptions and established theatrical settings.

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17 Foucault, "What Is an Author?" 113-38.

## Chapter 1

### Struggling with eternal parents: the question of the male director in modernist theatre

Who can they turn to when it's all crumbling around them, when they lose their confidence? No-one. Because they are the eternal parent. They need to remain always in control, strong and inspired.<sup>18</sup>

The male director is frequently presented as a solitary genius, disconnected from other artists or from politics and social issues. The theatrical canon constructs the virile director in a coherent cult of the eternal parent, the *dead white male*,<sup>19</sup> by using modernism as a historical period of origin for this archetype.

Two key questions are addressed in this chapter: where can we locate modernism within theatre practice and what is the connection between modernism, modernity and the theatrical explorations of the last century?

First, we have to take into account the prevalent terminology of modernism as it has been easily applied to drama and theatre in some of the most influential works of critical theory. Afterwards, by critically engaging with that tradition of scholarship (especially by getting involved in feminist theory), we can analyze what theatrical modernism might offer for social change nowadays when modernism in theatre and other arts is straightforwardly ascribed in relation to specific time periods and locations.

If modernist theatre functions as a rebellion but also as an exploration of the traditional theatrical context against which it rebelled, the aspects of the social, artistic and ideological revolt have to be taken into consideration. Why is theatre still politically relevant and what can modernist theatre still tell us today in terms of social change?

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<sup>18</sup> Irvin, *Directing for the stage*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> See DeShazer, *Rejecting Necrophilia*, 95 and Gilbert and Gubar, *Masterpiece theatre*, xxiv.

The history of Western theatre can be understood as a patriarchal practice but also as a setting to question the existing biases and conservative representations of the time. The return to the performances of the past creates a better understanding of the patriarchal, Eurocentric and colonial discourses of specific societies and offers the possibility of an alternative view on those forgotten histories. The basic assumption is that the role and potential of theatre nowadays stays precisely in its political immediacy. As Hélène Cixous explained: “I think that only in a tradition with a profoundly political message does the theatre have a reason for being. Particularly today, in quite an exceptional manner which distinguishes it from all other literary acts or practices, the theatre structurally carries a *responsibility in the instant*.”<sup>20</sup>

The modernist canon of theatre practice consists of theories from directors such as Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Sergei Eisenstein, Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba. By a close look at their works, one can observe that they do not actually fit into the canonical stereotype of the solitary genius. Instead of moving away from a canonical interpretation of modernist theatre, I claim a critical engagement with its legacy in an effort of finding alternative interpretations of the fetishised modernist directors. What comes out of this reading is a possible revitalization of modernist theatre for a critical re-imagination of the world.

Reading parts of the canon as potentially counter-canonical, I criticize its structure and usages and I focus on a radical transformation of its present practice. My historicization<sup>21</sup> of modernist theatre explores the imaginary and politics of bodily limits on stage. In this endeavour, my perspective moves beyond a disciplinary approach and is crucially present-oriented. Studies of modernist canonical texts struggle to situate them historically by depicting how these texts expressed or intervened in the intellectual, political and theatrical environment of their day. Reading these texts through a performing

<sup>20</sup> Fort, “Theater, History, Ethics,” 428; emphases in original.

<sup>21</sup> I perceive social relations from the past as being part of a moving unsteady dialectic of the present, for this reason I use historicization theory which puts a strong accent on change; see Diamond, “Brechtian Theory/ Feminist Theory,” 82-94.



historicization, the emphasis falls on the contemporary context for reading nowadays or “the cultural work that the texts can perform in the present.”<sup>22</sup> By employing a feminist perspective, I explore the problems posed by the theatre canon due to its virility, elitism, exclusionary interpretations, methodologies and conservative political usages.<sup>23</sup>

The canon is an ideological construction with social marginalizing effects produced by academics and theatre professionals. By reinventing the canon, the destructive past can be reversed and used transformatively. Observing and addressing social oppression through theatre/performance studies can move us away from the damaging outcomes of the canon. Stage practice, training, publishing and academia institutionalized the Western theatrical canon but nevertheless, this process of institutionalization brought “the question of a single standard of absolute, transhistorical artistic value embodied in the outstanding, exemplary, representative yet universalistic artist.”<sup>24</sup> This “universal” Western model produced new methodological, historiographical and theoretical problems.

The question of a feminist returning to the central texts of Western theatre is puzzling in terms of inevitability. Following James A. Winders, I am also “keenly aware of violating the historian's injunction to attempt to filter out all mediating factors that impose themselves between a text that has come down to us and the historian's hermeneutic attempt to grasp its meaning at the time of its composition.”<sup>25</sup> Theatrical tradition as an important part of modernity has to be re-visited in order to demonstrate its masculinist effects, unlearn them and revitalize theatre practice. Foucault's concept of *history of the present*<sup>26</sup> and Brecht's *historicization* prove to be useful tools in this particular case.

While scholars like Winders position themselves in analyzing the Western canonical construction

22 Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 20.

23 Griselda Pollock explores in a similar way the problems of canonicity in art history in *Differencing the canon*. Even if I am highly inspired by her sophisticated analysis, I have to acknowledge the differences of our two fields.

24 Pollock, *Differencing the canon*, xiii.

25 Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 21.

26 By writing *history of the present*, I interrogate important transformations in culture and theory in the move from the modern to the postmodern. By acknowledging the postmodern turn, the critical historical perspective connects the current moment to the past and to the anticipation of the future. See Best and Kellner, *The postmodern turn*, viii-xiv.

as postmodern readers (and are therefore caught between two separate paradigms), my reading is located theatrically, in the sense of the text's applicability and relevance on stage and based on the living proximity of theatre theory and the temporality of the corporeal act of reading. My feminist positionality helps me to interrogate the status of the subject in these texts and to expose the inherently male subjectivity emphasised by previous virile canonical readings.

Unlike Winders, I see continuities between a feminist and a postmodern theory of subjectivity in regard to modernist texts, which both work against conservative theatre critics and practitioners and their subtle usage of a right-wing political context for claiming and saving the canon. Using an example of how justification of nationalism and the canon work together, let us look at a 2009 textbook for students in Theatre and Performance studies. It starts the chapter on evaluating live theatre with: "visiting the theatre is a wonderful thing to do and an important part of our cultural heritage in Britain. We feel sure that there is nowhere else in the world where you can see the wealth and diversity and superb standard of live theatre than in Britain today. There are, of course, good productions abroad, but it is the sheer number of theatres and touring companies that makes it so easy for you to see so much."<sup>27</sup>

Against such nationalist views, Western live art from the 1970s and 1980s had an important role in challenging this type of traditional theatrical discourse.<sup>28</sup> Innovative ideas about performance (what does it mean; how does it re/produce gender roles, colonialism, authoritarianism; how are women present/ed and represented in these events) slowly migrated to mainstream debates about theatre, producing also a new language for discussion, under the influence of postmodernism and feminism. By constructing an argument precisely against the dream of the apologists of the *superb standards* and the representatives of a "white patriarchal culture that generated them and whose values are somehow automatically to be savoured and then universalized through new encounters with them,"<sup>29</sup> I employ

<sup>27</sup> Perks and Porteous, *AS drama and theatre studies*, 57.

<sup>28</sup> Leach, *Theatre studies*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 21 – 23.

specifically a feminist/postmodern critique.

Scholars have to question the canon not only for capitalist reasons like profit-increasing and efficiency but for subjectivity construction and socio-political alienation of the spectators. Feminist and queer criticism deals with the canon by avoiding its representations and by exposing its gaps. The theatre canon removes its curtains and gives space to expose its ideological plays. It offers the possibility to negotiate the dominant culture by reinventing, resisting and deconstructing it. For this purpose, performance has to be politicized and it can escape its elitist entrapment of the dominant class.

Modernist theatre especially constructs civilization and high brow taste but also leaves space for thinking about inequality and social change. By not questioning its canon of theory and methodology, theatre only confirms the privileges and the values of the upper-classes that it entertains. In order to become a place for asking radical social and political questions, theatre has to address its training, rehearsal and staging approach that promotes modernist ideals such as “the solitary genius”, “art for art’s sake”, “the calling”, “natural talent”, “originality” or “divine inspiration”.

The conservative authorities of the field choose white privileged males to represent the existing theatre canon and construct them in this image. My deconstructive critique focuses on one aspect that can prove the emptiness of this construction: the gender fluidity of the theatre-makers in question. The femininity-in-masculinity troubles the promoters of the status quo and reaffirms the queerness of modernist theatre in the struggle for cultural representation. The canon functions as a machine, in a permanent transformative search for new forms and contestations (including a feminist contestation of its virile representations and gendered symbolic economies).

Theatrical radicalism changed the body signification and introduced the modern director in theatre. The canonical texts made the connection between acting theory and practice. The theatre canon is used in defending nationalist, sexist, racist, classist and imperialist privilege as objective neutral artistic values and to discredit the critique of inequality, marginalization and social hierarchy as lacking

high cultural worth. This critique has the potential to expose the re/production of reactionary and discriminatory practices on stage.

The canonical subject is constructed as the inception, the solitary talented male totally detached from hard theory. This bourgeois process of social reproduction is criticized by performance studies, postmodernism and feminism. Theatrical radicalism as part of the canon brings the present-day social conflicts on stage as a cutting-edge revolutionary performance.

One of the methods of feminist theatre is to un-learn the canon and the existing theatricality, by using its premises to bring a new political and historical understanding that destabilizes representation. Materiality, embodiment and a focus on the present connect theatre to feminist theory. The being-there of the actor on stage cancels representation and exposes the fiction while it locates and constructs the actor's subjectivity in the present.

The anti-body of capitalism, the efficient body ruled by market values and profit-making, can be un-learned through a theatrical corporeality. Theatre theories of acting ontologically challenge the capitalist anti-body and an unified bourgeois self by bringing the model of the hysterical performative subjectivity.

The process of re-reading the learnt canon can have dramatic effects at the level of my own subjectivity and experience in theatre: I am moreover able to write in order “to get rid” of an internalized theatrical education by following Nietzsche’s comment from *The Gay Science*: “B: But why then do you write? – A: Well, my friend, to be quite frank: so far, I have not discovered any other way of getting rid of my own thoughts.”<sup>30</sup>

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30 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 146.

### Modernist impossibilities

But before going any further with the critique of the canon, there are some terms that have to be explained. Modernism is frequently understood as a cultural revolution within a strict time line (traditional criticism identifies the modernist period from 1890 to 1930, with some exceptional manifestations before 1890 and a constant disappearance after the 1950s).<sup>31</sup> As a cultural tendency, modernism expresses anxiety over the idea of modernity. Modernism reflects the bourgeoisie's discontent with culture and a materialization of the effects of the crisis of modernity. It treats the Enlightenment, modernity, reality, knowledge and humanism with a radical skepticism<sup>32</sup> but not rejection, while it remains a project of white Eurocentric and masculinist aesthetics.<sup>33</sup> Modernism is perceived as a cultural break with realism and a strong influence on postmodernism, a new tradition of the new.<sup>34</sup>

Modernism follows and also produces change in understanding reality, in understanding humanity and the human-non human relationship. *Human nature* acquires a non-human dimension by its connection to the animal, while the subject loses its point of perspective and becomes a fictional label denoting symptoms that cannot be expressed logically. In this sense, the feminist critic Marianne DeKoven discusses modernism in terms of ambiguity, undecidability or Kristeva's concept of an *impossible dialectic*<sup>35</sup> while Hofmannsthal expresses modernism at work with the phrase "I have utterly lost my ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all."<sup>36</sup>

Alisa Solomon discusses modernism and its debates and affirms that an important aspect such

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31 As the authoritative analysis of Childs, *Modernism*, explains.

32 Robert Pippin characterizes modernity through its claims: control against a contemplation of nature; the mathematical and logical reality; the progressive course of history; rejection of all final causes in explanations; the purpose of knowledge to achieve health, pleasure, and freedom from pain; the pursuit of scientific knowledge to provide outstanding social benefits. See Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 20.

33 For a description of modernism in literature as a white, male Eurocentric aesthetic, see Bradbury and McFarlane, *Modernism* and Ravenscroft, "A picture in black and white."

34 Childs, *Modernism*.

35 DeKoven, *Rich and Strange*.

36 Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter*, 19.

as gender is left aside when modernism is discussed.<sup>37</sup> While modernism answers to political, cultural and economic changes in modernity, it addresses also the gender changes that were taking place in the process. The transformation of traditional gender roles manifests also at the cultural level, women and feminized men being the preferred scapegoats for the unhappy hegemonic men that were facing radical social developments, women being targeted for the lack of freedom brought by modernity and as the main enemy of the status quo.<sup>38</sup> Certain modernists are considered directly responsible for re-inscribing reactionary notions of gender and sexuality<sup>39</sup> as a direct result of modern changes.

Certain narratives of Westernness and modernity (where women's rights are a central part and become incompatible with a racial or ancestral past) are analyzed by authors like Meenakshi Ponnuswami.<sup>40</sup> This formula was used by patriarchal forces to condemn feminism and women's rights as Western decadence, but also by Westerners who were using feminism to promote Western values world wide. In both cases, feminism is exploited to represent and to be represented by the West.

The construction of Western masculinity took into account the modern changes and modernism played an important role in dealing with gender roles. Besides the criticized modernist assertions about the universal man and the art that expresses *his* spiritual struggle, we can also identify in modernism a strong interest in the new woman. The universalism of the racial and man/woman stereotypes that are imposed by the canonical literature has been well criticized by feminists and cultural materialist critics.<sup>41</sup> But new outlooks emerge: modernism offers the opportunity to challenge and rewrite certain narratives about its own sexual politics.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, my plan is to explore the unchallenged field of masculinity construction of the modernist representatives through an alternative reading of the canon.

Modernism can also be understood as a further perpetuation of the crisis of modernity and its

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37 Solomon, *Re-Dressing the canon*.

38 Ibid., 28.

39 Parkes, *Modernism and the theater of censorship*, xi.

40 Ponnuswami, "Citizenship and Gender," 39.

41 See Solomon, *Re-Dressing the canon*, 139.

42 Parkes, *Modernism and the theater of censorship*, 19.

self-confidence. Modernism can be considered as having two paradoxical characteristics: it is modern and anti-modern at the same time by playing with the dissimilarity of *the present* from *the now*, of *the modern* from *the past* and *the old-fashioned* from the active *nostalgia of the present*.

Adam Parkes argues that “modernism demands a transformation of the critical narratives in which it has been inscribed, or incarcerated, by certain members of our own postmodern culture.”<sup>43</sup> Modernism’s significant features have been contested since its beginnings and its location in time and place have been redefined over the course of several decades, as have been its preoccupations and purposes, its preferred aesthetic forms, its political priorities or its canonical texts. The so-called *hard* characteristics of modernism can be read as flexible, uncertain or even impossible.<sup>44</sup>

Strongly disputed when it starts and where it ends (if it ends), modernism manifests itself as a collection of writers and performers with radical aesthetics. While it had a strong impact in poetry, painting or fiction, its impact in theatre and drama is considered limited<sup>45</sup> or even generated a popular anti-modernist theatrical agenda that was contradictory to literary modernism, as Christopher Innes suggests.<sup>46</sup> To use a telling example, Julia Kristeva wrote about the importance of modernist aesthetic practices that historically disrupted the social status quo,<sup>47</sup> but she excludes theatre from these practices. Kristeva bluntly affirmed that “modern theatre does not exist – it does not take (a) place”<sup>48</sup> suggesting that theatre did not manage to have a social function in modernity, failed to find a modern purpose for itself and ended up reinforcing a dominant ideology and serving a traditional limited and select audience.

By leaving the definition of modernism open, multiple modernist responses to the crisis of

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43 Ibid.

44 Ravenscroft, “A picture in black and white,” 233.

45 Childs, *Modernism*, 102.

46 Innes, “Modernism in Drama,” 130.

47 Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” 34.

48 Kristeva, “Modern Theatre,” 131; see also Auslander’s critique on Kristeva’s approach to theatre, *Theory for performance studies*, 114-115.

modernity can be taken into account. Nevertheless, in order to engage with the problems of modernity, modernism and what is modern we can not easily leave aside the theatrical avant-garde, modernist drama, modernist theatre or modernist theories of acting and staging.

### **The modernist battles of the avant-garde**

If modernism engages a critical, celebratory or ironic approach to the experiences of modern life in both high art and mass/popular culture by means of subjective experiment and innovation, the avant-garde as a critical engagement with the rules, conventions and political assumptions of the ideologically dominant classes functions as an element of modernism. The difference between the two acts primarily as a matter of degree and attitude, rather than of time and content. In this sense, modernism incorporates the avant-garde. Modernism constantly elaborates new avant-gardes and new challenges within itself. The latest avant-garde will in turn be challenged by a *more avant-garde* form. In other words, avant-garde functions as the cutting edge of modernism.<sup>49</sup>

When modernism is separated from the radical avant-garde, only one account of modernism is taken into consideration: a *Modernism* that insists on artistic autonomy, aesthetic objectivity, excellence of form and an emphasis on art for art's sake. The direct result of such a monolithic understanding of modernism was the production of the *great* Modernist canon. Through its exclusionary effects, canonicity fades out or simply silences cultural explorations and artists, along with whole genres and artistic practices that do not fit the canonical agenda, but also gives evidence of the pragmatic political

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49 Peter Bürger's classic distinction between modernism and the avant-garde considers the typical avant-garde as a radical attack on the tradition and the institution of art, as well as the utopian effort to harmoniously connect art and life, which modernism sharply separates. For this reading of the avant-garde, see his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. On the other hand, Jürgen Donnerstag distinguishes between the two in terms of tradition and innovation. He defines modernism as a period, similar to romanticism, classicism, and realism, while the avant-garde is a movement within modernism, in "Was (Is) There an American Avantgarde." For Matei Calinescu, the avant-garde is just another facet of modernism (in *Faces of Modernity*), while Raymond Williams perceives only a provisional difference between modernism and the avant-garde in terms of temporality, in "Language and the Avant-Garde." For Christopher Innes, the avant-garde represents nothing less than the paradox of modernism in terms of politicization and socialization of aesthetics, in *Avant-garde Theatre*.



motivations at work in scholarly research.<sup>50</sup>

The avant-garde debate is important in analyzing theatrical modernism by its association with popular culture. Many theatre modernists were perceived or self-identified as avant-gardists. The specific cultural battles of modernism were fought precisely through various confrontations between the concepts of high/elitist and low/popular culture. Agitprop, theatre of cruelty, epic theatre and the feminist theatre of the 1970s were all exploring popular culture, rejected elitism and were treated as avant-garde movements. On the other hand, established modernists objected to the popular character of drama and theatre. They endeavored to produce an art form of *great* artistic worth, aesthetically higher than what could have been produced in a theatre where the main part of experimentation played with the role of the audience.

Various theatre makers attempted to create the public for the new (presumably *high*) art, with an almost messianic fervor. Most of them clearly assumed a *group* character of this advanced audience, as distinguished from the *mass* audiences of entertainment theatre. Nevertheless, looking for bigger audiences was a major task for elitist modernist theatre makers, from the belief that there was a wider public for the new offerings than initially expected. This dynamic of high, low, mass, popular and elitist immediately suggests that modernist theatre functioned as a site of cultural controversy in the vein of modernism.

### **Drama and theatre in the contest for modernism**

Theatre textbooks or historical accounts easily discuss modern/ist drama and theatre with an innocent simplicity where modern means only a specific period in Western history.<sup>51</sup> Drama and theatre

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50 The numerous attempts to elaborate a canon of *great* narratives or to stage the history of modernism through the limited conflict between *great* white males results in suppressions and silences within the complex and controversial phenomena of modernism. Feminist endeavors to redress the canon's gaps and exclusions produced new challenges to the *accepted* canon. See Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*; Gilbert and Gubar, "Introduction."

51 Ley, "Theatrical modernism," 531-544.

were connected to modernism from the beginning of the twentieth century. Together with the novel, poetry, music and painting, they became places of contest and played an important role in the cultural debates and movements of the Western world.<sup>52</sup> Henrik Ibsen initiated by the 1880s the move towards modernism in his plays that were asking the burning questions of the day about modern life, exploring new notions like heredity, environment, class division, women's oppression and resistance in bourgeois society, while modernist productions started to be associated by the same period with the innovative Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's German theatre company.<sup>53</sup>

When theatre joins the modernist debate, the modernist intention within theatrical production is tacitly situated in the notion of drama or the *staged* writings of specific authors.<sup>54</sup> Great modernist painters, writers and poets had an important role in constructing the Western self and its problems at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>55</sup> Even if plenty of research on modernism exists, studies on theatre and modernism are still limited, drama and theatre not being perceived as relevant in interrogating the identity crisis of the West like the modernist novel and poetry were able to explore. This approach towards theatre history gets stuck with the authoritative role of the dramatist who controls what happens on stage and addresses the audience directly through the actors' voices, where other mediations become irrelevant.

In order to understand the connection between modernism, Western theatre and drama, they have to be connected to the longer history of cultural modernity. Positioned in their historical context, they can be read as aesthetic responses to anxieties and fears that come with modernity. In this sense, modernism does not only fulfill an aesthetic depoliticized function of novelty (as traditional criticism assumes) but also plays the role of a cultural answer to the complex conditions of modernity.<sup>56</sup> The

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<sup>52</sup> See Leach, *Theatre studies*.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>54</sup> Ley, "Theatrical modernism: a problematic."

<sup>55</sup> See Parkes, *Modernism and the theater of censorship*.

<sup>56</sup> Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism*, 6.

relation between theatre and modernity has to be questioned, reformulated and re-addressed in order to understand the place of modernism in theatre and its history. The meaning of theatre or performance also changed at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe, especially through the new function that the director started to play,<sup>57</sup> taking a step further away from drama.

During the mid-nineteenth century, the director was only “an ideal projected by disgruntled critics of the chaotic Victorian theatre.”<sup>58</sup> Even if the concept was not actually established, *director* being used interchangeably with *producer*, *regisseur* or *metteur en scene* (in English), the appearance of the director at the end of the nineteenth century broke the hegemony of the playwrights in theatre.<sup>59</sup> Imagined first as a *disciplinarian* who could superintend the “whole conduct of a piece and exact a rigid but a just decorum” or a manager who could be “at one and the same time a poet, an antiquarian and a costumier,”<sup>60</sup> the director combined diverse arts into one performance, through numerous experiments and especially failures, becoming the main character who gave form and unity to the complex modernist theatre.

Specific dramatists (especially the pre-modernist Scandinavians Ibsen and Strindberg but also Wilde, Shaw, Pirandello, Ionesco, Beckett, Brecht) had a strong impact on shaping modernism across different genres.<sup>61</sup> But by moving away from the idea of theatre performances as simple illustrations of playwriting, the production of a performance made by the director together with actors challenges any analogy of theatrical modernism with the modernism of drama, poetry, the novel or painting. Practitioners of modernist theatre (Craig, Stanislavsky, Reinhardt, Meyerhold, Copeau or Artaud) were the first to question the status of the *fin de siècle* theatre and the lack of association between the play,

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57 Ley, “Theatrical modernism: a problematic.”

58 Krich Chinoy, “The Emergence of the Director,” 3.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Childs, *Modernism*, 103.

the production and the audience.<sup>62</sup>

While the beginning of the modernist theatre is established by some scholars in 1909 (when Stanislavsky founded the First Studio in Moscow),<sup>63</sup> various directors steadily replaced the nineteenth century paradigms of acting with modernist notions of theatre making: acting as realist characterization, performance as artifice, theatre-making as play through improvisation and games, performance as politick, acting as a rehearsal for social change, acting as an exploration of subjectivity, performance as a cultural exchange etc.<sup>64</sup> Concerning the relation between drama and theatre, they were treated more and more as different fields by following an anti-theatrical tradition.

One important challenge for theatre as a *serious art* comes from Nietzsche in his famous critique of Wagner from 1888. Theatre cannot be perceived as serious while it is just a form of degradation for its audience. The theatre, the mass, the woman and Wagner are all connected in a web of signification that for Nietzsche opposes *true art*: “No one brings along the finest senses of his art to the theater, least of all the artist who works for the theater – solitude is lacking; whatever is perfect suffers no witnesses. In the theater one becomes people, herd, female, Pharisee, voting cattle, patron, idiot – *Wagnerian*.”<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche does not attack drama or tragedy, which are perceived as masculine and high manifestations of Western culture. However, theatre as “revolt of the masses”<sup>66</sup> is nothing more than the decline of Western culture for encouraging a *slave morality* for spectators. His main argument is that valuable art does not need witnesses (spectators) and can be produced and appreciated only in solitude.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, theatre, unlike drama, was one of the few locations in Western culture which allowed women a predominant place in art production, exactly for the reason that acting was perceived

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Gordon, *Purpose of playing*, 6.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, 665.

<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 183.

<sup>67</sup> Auslander, *Theory for performance studies*, 23.

as unoriginal, imitative, second rate (in comparison to the originality of the written text) and simply reproductive with no artistic merit. When Nietzsche criticized Wagner for his feminization of music, he directly attacked his project of total theatre and expressed the well-spread bourgeois sexist prejudices regarding theatre.<sup>68</sup> As Jon McKenzie observes, Nietzsche's contestation of theatre is part of a bigger debate that was taking place at that time in Europe: "this play we find in Nietzsche, between the theatrical and antitheatrical, may very well mark the rupture of performance into modern thought, the emergence of performance as a problem, a site of contestation."<sup>69</sup>

One of the main representatives of modernist theatre, Antonin Artaud, entered the unsolved debate of theatricality in the 1930s when he explored in his *The Theatre and Its Double* the idea of the *theatre of cruelty* as a tool to show where Western theatre went wrong and to produce a radical change from within. Exploring Artaud's theatricality, Derrida promotes Artaud's writings and deliberates on Artaud's distaste for the logocentric character of Western theatre, and the way it reflects the Western tradition in general. Anat Matar explains Derrida's support of Artaud's ideas: "he agrees with Artaud's view that the Western theatre, with its emphasis on drama, i.e. the authority of the written text, was born anti-theatrical, because of the primacy it gave to speech over the stage. Artaud recklessly fights against *word-language*, which necessarily involves repetition and domination by a God, an always external 'author', dictating the events that occur on the stage, making everything that happens an 'interpretation'."<sup>70</sup>

For Artaud, linguistic representation is not an option for theatre of cruelty because the "stage ought to be allowed to speak its own concrete language."<sup>71</sup> His approach emphasizes non-linguistic presentation and expression as reactions against drama while he denies the traditional Western

68 Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman," 150-151.

69 McKenzie, "Democracy's Performance," 122.

70 Matar, *Modernism and the Language of Philosophy*, 46.

71 Artaud, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 25.

conceptions of thought and language as they are expressed and taken as given in Western drama. Artaud's concept of cruelty expresses the "*bodily and intellectual* yearning to feel, to think and to express those undercurrents of life, energy, that run beneath the stable actuality,"<sup>72</sup> that were apparently forgotten by Western drama. For Artaud the theatre of cruelty can have the role of a needed substitute for the hegemonic drama in Western theatre.

Artaud, as Derrida suggests,<sup>73</sup> was one of the few modernist thinkers who reflected on the traditional Western dichotomies and observed their entanglement (such as presentation and representation, becoming and being or life and death). In this line of dichotomies, Artaud places theatre and drama. For him, theatre is closer to poetry than drama and he acknowledges the limitations of a theatrical language: it "is less able to define a character, to narrate man's thoughts, to explain conscious states clearly and exactly, than spoken language."<sup>74</sup> Theatre and poetry function in a similar way for Artaud by being anarchic and questioning the relationship between meaning and form.<sup>75</sup> Spoken language is for Artaud not only everyday language but also discursive language which includes literature and drama: its main characteristic is to express "psychological conflicts peculiar to man and his position in everyday existence. His conflicts are clearly justifiable in spoken words and whether they remain in the psychological field, or leave it to pass over into the social field, drama will always concern morality . . . where words, verbal solutions, retain their advantage."<sup>76</sup>

Due to their emphasis on individual subjects and their effort to express emotions, literature and drama are deadly for Artaud through the usage of words, arguments and justifications.<sup>77</sup> Obviously, Artaud does not target all literature and dramas but mainly the modernist drama which characterized Western culture in the first half of the twentieth century. For Artaud, the language of theatre does not fit

<sup>72</sup> Matar, *Modernism and the Language of Philosophy*, 50.

<sup>73</sup> See Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.

<sup>74</sup> Artaud, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 28.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>77</sup> Matar, *Modernism and the Language of Philosophy*, 58.

the same category with literature and drama.

One of the most successful modernist dramatists and stage theoreticians, Bertolt Brecht, united drama and theatre in his Marxist explorations. By asserting that the role of theatre or drama is not to reflect social realities but to change them, he introduced a modernist radical aesthetics in drama and theatre making. His plays and ideas for an epic theatre had the effect to question and intervene into the life on stage and to challenge the status quo precisely through a modernist strangeness. Brecht is the perfect counter-example for the separation of theatre and drama and also for the myth that modernism lacked impact and popularity: Brecht was and remains one of the most popular dramatists and theatre makers globally.<sup>78</sup>

Theatrical modernism had another important shift through the work of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner who introduced a new approach to drama and theatre. Mainly as a new academic criticism of theatre and drama coming from theatre and drama departments in the United States, performance studies expressed a larger discontent with Western theatre, while other artistic mediums and other (non-Western) forms of theatre were perceived as offering a larger potential for a more egalitarian approach to performance. As Robert Leach observes, “in the 1970s and 1980s, many began to see the theatre as a privileged space for privileged people: ‘performance’ seemed to offer something more democratic, more egalitarian.”<sup>79</sup>

One of the defining characteristics of artistic modernism, as Peter Burger showed,<sup>80</sup> was autonomy. While modernist theatre makers championed the collective aspect in their practice, modernist theatre went to a steady process of individualization.<sup>81</sup> Against theatrical modernist atomization, the anthropological redefinition of performance as everyday activity includes theatre but is not reduced to it.

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<sup>78</sup> Childs, *Modernism*, 107.

<sup>79</sup> Leach, *Theatre studies*, 6-7.

<sup>80</sup> See Burger, *Theory of the Avant Garde*.

<sup>81</sup> Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism*, 9.

Starting with Victor Turner's explorations from the 1980s, performance studies became a discipline in its own right. For Turner, "cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances" while "a performance is a dialectic of "flow," that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and "reflexivity", in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action", as they shape and explain behavior."<sup>82</sup>

While traditional theatre still treated the spectator as a consumer and a customer to be satisfied, the classic stage was creating hierarchies between performers and audiences. Modernist theatre was perceived by performance studies researchers as exclusionary by keeping out women, non-whites or local communities. But through the idea of a new performance and the opposition to traditional text-based drama (which was still predominant in theatre at the end of the twentieth century), performance studies becomes part of the modernist project of theatre.

Performance studies is seen nowadays as the perfect mediation between performance theory and practice through what some authors call *enfleshment*<sup>83</sup> and by moving away from modernist theatre. As another theoretician of performance studies, Philip Auslander, explains: "performance studies is a paradigm-driven field, by which I mean that it takes the concept of performance as both its object of inquiry and its primary analytical concept. [...] Performance studies is theory: it is the myriad conceptual tools used to "see" performance."<sup>84</sup> While performance does not exist as an object to be analyzed but as an idea or as theoretical lenses through which everything around us can be analyzed.

Schechner conceptualized performance as a broad field and a cultural tool for potential change. By consciously moving away from theatre and drama traditions, Schechner saw performance as the location of cultural collisions, where a non-hierarchical multicultural exchange was possible.<sup>85</sup> The first

82 Quoted in Schechner and Appel, "Introduction," 1.

83 Leach, *Theatre studies*, 7; see also Lamm Pineau, "Critical Performative Pedagogy," 49-50.

84 Auslander, *Theory for performance studies*, 1.

85 Leach, *Theatre studies*, 7.



step was to abandon the white masculinist tradition of Western theatre and drama and to include elements of sociology, anthropology, fine art, semiotics, sports and psychology (that apparently escape a conservative agenda) in shaping performance as more inclusive and broader than theatre or drama. But as Lyotard stresses,<sup>86</sup> performance cannot be directly counter-hegemonic (especially through its acclaimed universalism that actually performs violence to performers that have to fit a Western understanding of their doings). Even if performance studies scholars emphasize the progressiveness of their theoretical framework, by engaging a postmodern performativity, in a Lyotardian sense,<sup>87</sup> in their research, they support rather than challenge the status quo and the neo-colonialism of the West. What is more curious is the fact that most theorists that are discussing performance use theatre as their reference point and they understand performance in terms of theatre or theatricality.

By focusing only on a definition of theatrical modernism as modernist dramaturgy where modernism functions as a major feature of dramaturgy in the twentieth century, many aspects of historical theatrical modernism are left aside. Dramaturgy by itself or the partial aspect of authorship of scripts for performance cannot express the historical process of the creation of a theatrical modernism.<sup>88</sup> What is at stake is not necessarily the capacity to identify *trustworthy* instances of theatrical modernism or to achieve a full list of white male theatrical modernists but the capacity to explore critically the scale to which the concept of modernism might contribute to an understanding of the theatrical practice of disputed Western histories.

Surrealist, futurist or Dada drama and theatre were not perceived as representing cultural movements, but just additional manifestations of already established aesthetics or mere curiosities. The theories and practice of modernist theatre makers like Edward Gordon Craig, Antonin Artaud,

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86 See McKenzie, *Perform or Else*.

87 In Lyotard's understanding, performativity functions as a measure of efficiency: "the principle of optimal performance maximizing output . . . and minimizing input" in *The Postmodern Condition*, 44. Performativity functions as the main legitimation in postmodernity.

88 See Ley, "Theatrical modernism."

Vsevolod Meyerhold or Konstantin Stanislavsky had a technical (sometimes very limited) impact mainly during their life time, influencing specific areas of stage production, acting or directing. Their influence rarely left the building of the theatre and the burning problem of defining an authoritative field of theatre was left unnoticed or innocently ignored in longer coherent histories of Western theatre that usually start with Greek tragedy and end with contemporary post-dramatic performances.

The production of a theatrical performance combines various artistic disciplines, bringing together the actor's body, stage objects, scenery and technical mechanisms (used to create visual impact), the physical space of the theatre and the presence of spectators.<sup>89</sup> Even if the role of the director was to put these disrupted elements together into one performance, the account of this process cannot be captured by dramatic scripts or director's logs because implementation played a crucial role in production. The paradox of modernist theatre's lack of popularity among cultural critics, scholars or thinkers has to do precisely with theatre's ephemerality, popularity, entertaining power and difficult emplacement.

The conventional theatrical vision at the end of nineteenth century Europe was characterized by the certainty and universality of certain bourgeois moral values and a trust in the inevitability of progress. However, at the turn of the century, the belief in doing what was just, true and decent was made considerably more vulnerable by the differences in opinion as to what exactly constituted *truth*, *justice* and *decency*. Theatre was the ideal setting to debate these concepts. The uncertainty of moral, social and cultural values received special attention in modernist theatre and drama.

For some Marxist authors like Georg Lukács, there is no place for uncertainty regarding what is modern and how we can locate modernism: for him, modern drama, the drama of individualism and the modern stage were all forms of bourgeois drama and could be equivalent in meaning.<sup>90</sup> To use another example, the cultural theorist Raymond Williams constructs an unproblematic distinction between

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Lukács and Baxandall, "The Sociology of Modern Drama," 146-170.

*modern naturalist drama and the contemporary theatre*, within a longer and coherent "complete history of the modern drama."<sup>91</sup> In a similar way, feminist critics discuss the undisturbed patriarchal discourse of modernist theatre while post-colonial critics read it through its untroubled whiteness, both constructing modernist theatre as a unified discourse with no places of resistance or alternative readings of its main representatives.

The role of the director as part of the achievements of theatrical production had a strong impact. Also an increasing impact of technology has immensely enhanced the function of design in theatrical production. The result of these two factors has been that criticism after 1945 has been prepared to write and speak of director's theatre and designer's theatre just as much as of playwright's theatre. In these circumstances, how does modernism function in relation to theatre? To locate it merely in some characteristics of the script, in analogy with modernist achievements in other literary forms expresses a limited understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, the visual or material connections between elements of theatrical design and identifiable traits of modernism in the visual or plastic arts prove to be an incomplete account of modernist theatre.<sup>92</sup>

These explorations were never easy, due to practical terms: many of the radicals (Meyerhold or Artaud, for example) found themselves in ambiguous positions, since they relied for their income on some of the institutions they were attacking. Often, even their most revolutionary ventures were sponsored by the despised bourgeoisie.

The modernist theatre helped establish the legitimacy of modernism and the avant-garde in the theatre and created a new dramatic and theatrical tradition, based on an abstract compatibility of life and theatre (theatre as the double of life and life as the double of theatre), the support of the communal spirit of theatre companies, the encouragement of experimentation and an audience-oriented

<sup>91</sup> Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, 15- 21.

<sup>92</sup> see Ley, "Theatrical modernism." On the other hand, an exclusive focus on the conception of modernist performance as detached from literature and fine arts (and missing any analogy to them) can bring only a partial and limited understanding.

performance philosophy.

The concept of being-modern has been central in the ongoing formation of a modernist canon of dramatists and theatre makers. A Marxist theatre critic like Eric Bentley, who was caught in this process, positions himself within the canonization and expresses his doubts: "a person like myself who has even lived a good part of his life with 'the thing', and with all the phrases use to describe 'it', such as 'theory of the modern stage', is all the more apt to suppose, first, that the thing is very much *there* and, second, that he very certainly knows what it is. Yet, when the moment comes, one wonders."<sup>93</sup> By questioning the uncritical acceptance of ready-made concepts like modern or modernity, he asks other relevant questions: "what *is*... modern?"; "what is theory?" and "what, the stage?" but even if he expresses his own uncertainty about modernism, he also acknowledges the easy way out that he refuses to take: "with the word 'modern' I had alternatives: the kind of drama we all call modern can be traced back, and often has been, to the middle of the eighteenth century, but generally we are thinking of Ibsen and after. For reasons of space I certainly had to think as we generally do, though I am glad to say that there is a good deal of referring back to the eighteenth century by the authors I have selected."<sup>94</sup>

With all its theoretical problems, modernism is still associated by Bentley with *the right chronological span* that covers roughly the period mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. When he writes about *Ibsen and after* he refers exactly to a distinction between drama and theatre making or theory which have to be questioned in their modern characteristics. In this particular example, modernism/modernity can be seen as a two-stage process: one in which a mid-nineteenth-century to mid-twentieth-century modernist theory can be connected to drama and theatre production, supported by the chronological limit of the eighteenth century that could not offer an earlier modern theory for theatre while he perceives drama also in connection to an earlier form of eighteenth century modernism, while theatre theory and production were not modern yet.

<sup>93</sup> Bentley, *Theory of the Modern Stage*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 9.

The famous manifestos and performances produced by modernist theatre practitioners have provoked argument, sometimes violent, even visceral. Nonetheless, some claims made in favor of modernism in theatre and its meanings have enjoyed a certain hegemony in theatre for a long time. While theatrical modernism was perceived as leading the way towards progress or as a method to keep the past alive, it is perceived nowadays as a past critique of Western history. While various forms of modernism rediscovered tradition, modernism can be historically read as the only strong critique of Western phallocentrism for refusing raced and gendered differences. Modernism has been read as conservative by conservatives, feminist by feminists, while for postcolonial critics, modernism disclosed the prevailing colonial and race relations.

The revolution in theatre for the first half of the twentieth century was considered a part of the overall social and cultural changes in the global North. Both the subjective perception of the new theatre proponents and the opinion of later critics and scholars converge in this evaluation. The transformation in theatre was strongly connected to the spread of cubism, futurism, constructivism and surrealism in the arts and of psychoanalysis, feminism, socialism and anarchism in understanding society. Even if the attacks on theatrical and dramatic traditions and conventions were part of the general dissatisfaction of the times, they were also specifically engendered by what was perceived as theatre's backwardness in comparison to social transformations but also to other cultural and artistic practices. What the modernists criticized specifically were the low and old-fashioned aesthetic standards of both drama and theatre.

Theatre critics and historians proposed a modernist canon and aesthetic ideal that still functions nowadays without dramatic changes: a conservative modernism, envisaged as an almost exclusively white male practice. Their "Modernism" upheld traditional values and carried the past forward. The modern theatre maker was by excellence the authoritarian, lonely artist, priest and prophet. Since the 1980s, interventions from feminist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and postcolonial critics have

countered this white male modernism particularly in literature and painting by reintroducing texts and writers that had been marginalized or excluded, notably on gendered and racial grounds. Against the hegemonic white male modernism, other definitions have produced modernism as feminine, or have identified its origins in African cultural forms and African–American folklore.<sup>95</sup> This process of identifying more inclusive forms of modernism was kept marginal in theatre studies.

### **Distorting the canon**

Western theatre from Greek tragedy to contemporary forms of postdramatic performance can be read in many cases as a patriarchal exercise for directors and actors,<sup>96</sup> but also as a framework to question its own historical biases and forms of representation by subverting and bringing into the spotlight the ideological construction that it seemed to support in the first place.

The first question related to the canon is who re/produces it? If we focus on academia, theatre and drama departments occupy ambiguous positions in terms of hierarchy and dominance. The insistence on subjectivity as a methodological approach makes academics from other disciplines treat theatre scholarship with scepticism and as *non-serious*<sup>97</sup> but also transforms theatre/performance studies into “interdisciplinary gold mines for scholars interested in the workings of culture.”<sup>98</sup> This scepticism becomes extremely active also at the level of drama/theatre departments by dividing practitioners from scholars in a constant struggle for recognition; while performers and directors look for recognition from the public, scholars receive rewards for writing texts and having better administrative positions at the departmental level: “that ambiguity reproduces itself within departments as a contentious divide

95 See the feminist critique of modernism, for instance, Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*; Scott, *The Gender of Modernism*; Griffin, *Differences in View*; Kristeva, *Desire in Language*; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*. The critique of modernism as being white and Eurocentric can be found also in Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* or Ravenscroft, “A picture in black and white.”

96 Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance*; Solomon, *Re-Dressing the canon*.

97 See Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s critique on Austin’s exclusion of theatre from the performativity debate on the basis on being non-serious in *Performativity and Performance*.

98 Dolan, “The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance,” 508.

between practitioners and scholars, such that each group jostles to privilege its mode of activity, and the insights of one often do not inform those of the other.”<sup>99</sup> The fixity of rules, universality and claim to objectivity in performance championed by theatre departments came under scrutiny in the West in the last 30 years, mainly through theoretical questionings that took into consideration gender, race, sexuality, class or disability.

The critical approach introduced by feminism, critical race studies, disability studies or queer theory functioned as an earthquake for the ideological assumptions of theatre studies. As Jill Dolan observed, the impact of feminism in theatre broke the idea of a universal man as the real objective subject of any contemporary or period performance. Forgotten histories of performing black-face, colonial fantasies or staging freak-shows were revisited in order to understand the erasure of non-white subjectivities or the enforcement of white imperial and patriarchal gazes. Scholars like Margaret Wilkerson emphasized the obligation for theatre scholars to look back and rethink the Eurocentric and colonial histories of the field and the way that theatre actually shaped the racist and patriarchal perceptions of certain cultures.<sup>100</sup> What feminism and critical race studies scholars proposed was a move away from the patriarchal Eurocentric canon of theatre making and a search for alternative models.

The construction of the canon functions within larger socio-political histories and ideologies. Academic and professional programs in theatre and performance produce the canon available *for everybody* interested in theatre and also as an exclusionary practice with immediate effects: “this continuing apartheid in an era when our scholars show increasing sophistication in national and multiethnic theatre history is unfair to students—and dishonest.”<sup>101</sup> The canon can be reinvented and used in a transformative way that should break with the destructive past. Otherwise the effects can be

99 Richards, “Writing the Absent Potential,” 67-68.

100 Wilkerson, “Demographics and the academy,” 239; see also Elam and Alexander, *The fire this time*; Hatch and Hill, *A history of African American theatre*; Uno and Burns, *The color of theatre*.

101 Hatch, “Here comes everybody,” 149.

quite dramatic: “those of us in theatre production programs will find ourselves increasingly marginalized or isolated in our institutions”<sup>102</sup> especially by excluding numerous students in theatre and future performers (that happen to be women, non-white or queer) and by moving away from relevant scholarship in other fields and from more progressive forms of knowledge.

Even after theatre/performance studies address social oppression in a progressive way (by including courses and performances that are critically debating gender, race, class, sexuality or the canon),<sup>103</sup> the practice/theory dichotomy maintains the problematic usage of canonical knowledge in academia and performance. The critical debates exist only at the theoretical level, without being integrated in theatrical practice and public performances, based on the wild guess of what the audience wants to see and what type of theatre can be available for larger non-professional theatergoers by imposing an elitist and offensive assumption that they would not understand sophisticated social criticism.

While theatre studies as a discipline has a short history dominated by struggles to move away from drama and language departments, as theatre scholars emphasized,<sup>104</sup> the isolationist logic cannot function anymore in present-day academia: “now, however, it is even more necessary to recognize and insist on the interdependency of a related series of disciplines and also on the role of performance in the production of culture in its widest sense.”<sup>105</sup> Theatre studies scholarship has the role to further emphasize the connection between theatre and other disciplines, its position in society at large, the influence it had on social processes and how theatre supported or questioned the dominant discourses of the day.

My own experience as a theatre major in Eastern Europe was full of institutional confusions: I

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102 Wilkerson, “Demographics and the academy,” 240.

103 See Dolan, “The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance.”

104 Reinelt and Roach, *Critical theory and performance*; Jackson, *Professing performance*; Bottoms, “The efficacy/effeminacy braid.”

105 Reinelt and Roach, *Critical theory and performance*, 5.



started my degree with the Letters Department and finished it at the Theatre and Television Department, going through major departmental changes in terms of approach towards theatre theory and practice. While the metaphysical debates on our superior talent and unique vocation as future theatre-makers flourished, the neoliberal arguments of efficiency and adaptation to the free market crept in. In the middle of all this puzzlement of what is practically and scholarly valued in terms of theatrical education, institutionalized theatre studies constantly constructs a modernist canon that is difficult to pin down.

Syllabi for theatre courses follow particular texts that can be identified as the canon in the Western or former Socialist bloc theatre/drama departments which continue to produce and promote theatre as high-art and an elitist enterprise, while they prepare students to work for nationalist official culture, to find a job at the national theatre (in the ex-Soviet bloc especially) and most important, to follow their *godly vocation*. The actor becomes the main target of these approaches by being taught through the canon to be a genius outside of history and theory, using only empirical skills to explore personal potential and narcissism. As some scholars observe,<sup>106</sup> theatre departments become educationally irrelevant by expressing naïveté in terms of scholarly explorations or the debates on the role of education or the university.

The isolation of theatre practice from theory had to deal with other new “perils”: a) performance became a buzz word in feminist and queer theory in the 1990s for understanding the construction of gender and sexuality as everyday performance, those theorists who borrowed the theatrical language of theatre were not giving any references by using an essential, universal and ahistorical form of acting and b) performance studies as a discipline used this opportunity in the mid-1990s to re-connect the new idea of performance to modernist theatre by using together with the (mainly critical) explorations of the modernist theatre canon, methods and theories coming from social sciences, cultural studies,

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106 Dolan, "The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance"; Loomba, *Gender, race, Renaissance drama*.

anthropology and literary criticism.

Richard Schechner insisted on the return of theatre to humanities and social sciences<sup>107</sup> by bringing an economic neoliberal argument: theatre students cannot be efficiently integrated by the theatre industry and they are prepared only for an illusion (i.e. finding a job in a theatre). By using a capitalist language where education is a plain business, he gave the following advice to theatre undergraduates: “get out of the phony training business and into the culture business.”<sup>108</sup> His pragmatic ideas were not resonating with the students first of all but with a number of scholars and practitioners in various international professional organisations that were ready to move from theatre into performance studies.

The new emerging field of performance studies took over the modernist theatre canon but let a chance for feminist and queer criticism to create a niche in the apparently resuscitated canon.<sup>109</sup> Following the existing disciplinary debates in appropriating the canon, the feminist readings criticized the phallocentrism of the canon, with the specification that “by feminist, one understands a way of reading texts that points to the masks of truth with which phallocentrism hides its fictions.”<sup>110</sup> My working definition acknowledges the feminist approach: the theatrical canon is a not-so-innocent ever-changing selective history of theatre practice that functions within strict phallocentric limits. In the words of the 2009 theatre studies textbook, this phallic history of theatre can be reduced to some of “the most frequently used practitioners[,] Brecht, Stanislavsky and Artaud.”<sup>111</sup>

Scholars have to keep questioning the existing modernist theatre canon not only in terms of the capitalist efficiency of convincing spectators to buy tickets<sup>112</sup> and making profits, but for what type of subjectivities it produces and what types of socio-political dilemmas it offers to spectators. In my

107Schechner, “Transforming theatre departments,” 8.

108 Schechner, “Schechner advocates radical rethinking,” 1.

109 See Dolan, “The Polemics and Potential of Theatre Studies and Performance.”

110 Kamuf, “Writing Like a Woman,” 286.

111 Perks and Porteous, *AS drama and theatre studies*, 53.

112 See Brecht’s critique to modern theatre in Solomon, *Re-Dressing the canon*.

reading, modernist theatre functions in its genealogy as a descriptive environment that struggles to show and not as a normative presentation of what should be done on stage and in theory. This characteristic of theatre offers the possibility of a feminist or queer critical interpretation by avoiding representation and by actually revealing its traps. In this sense, the modernist theatre canon removes the curtain to its own productive processes, reveals its own limits and makes possible the exposure of ideology that is rehearsed and recreated on stage.

No action can be equal to its repetition on stage, it cannot be performed identically and it has to be reinvented each time by performers.<sup>113</sup> The self-reflexivity of acting and staging processes casts a shadow of doubt over the unconditional support for artistic institutions and political contexts that make performance possible. In this situation, theatre can actually negotiate the dominant culture in which it interacts by reinventing and resisting it: the potential of theatre to deconstruct itself.<sup>114</sup> This process requires a politicization of performance that cannot function anymore as an elitist arena for the refined taste of the upper classes.

The construction of “civilization” and the “highbrow taste” was the main project of the Western theatre for a long period, but at the same time, the theatre could offer tools for thinking about social structures, inequality and social change. By maintaining an unquestioned canon, the scholars involved in theatre studies preserve performance as an exclusionary and socially irrelevant exercise for confirming undeserved social privilege, a form of entertainment for white upper-classes that only promotes their own values. The site of the performance can work as a community building unit, where important social questions are asked, where social and political problems are debated and thought about through performing, bodily presence and active participation from theatre-makers and audiences. These changes have to take place first of all at the level of training, rehearsals and staging where notions such as “art for elites”, “originality”, “genius”, “divine inspiration” or “natural artistry” have no place. As

<sup>113</sup> Roach, “Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World”, 46.

<sup>114</sup> Solomon, *Re-Dressing the canon*, 2.

long as acting and directing are perceived as “natural talents” and “divine gifts” and not as labor and modes of production, institutionalized theatre will remain a conservative bourgeois enterprise.

In rereading the modern theatrical canon, by the simple gesture of looking up for who’s considered part of the theatrical canon by institutions like theatres, publishing houses or universities, we are moving towards a very troubled past, where conservative authorities are judging who are the great theatrical figures by not forgetting to make them always white, always male, nearly always privileged in some way. Emphasizing the statement that “transvestite theater is the *norm*, not the aberration”<sup>115</sup> in modernist theatre, I question in this dissertation the way that theatre-making is institutionalized through the formation of the canon by looking at one important aspect: the gender fluidity of the stage and its participants.

The femininity-in-masculinity of the modernist director (or what I will later call *male hysteria*)<sup>116</sup> is an important tool in re-affirming theatre as the queerest art that troubles the promoters of the status quo. The canon formation, as an exercise of cultural authority and struggle for legitimacy, serves “the scene of *competition* for the power to grant cultural consecration.”<sup>117</sup> In understanding the scene of the canon, I follow Michel Berube’s definition: “canons are at once the location, the index, and the record of the struggle for cultural representation; like any other hegemonic formation, they must be continually reproduced anew and are continually contested”<sup>118</sup> because “[l]ike its military homonym, the canon is a machine: a form. Its main function is to place, to order, to establish things (texts) in relation to one another... Like Spam, the canon is resilient and, for planners of curricula, cheap.”<sup>119</sup> Western theatre is attached to the chronological ordering of great male directors, a “dominated canon of performance traditions” with important contributions to “the symbolic economies of gender

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115 Garber, *Vested Interests*, 39.

116 See chapter 2

117 Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods”, 24.

118 Berube, *Marginal Forces*, 4-5.

119 Stacey d’Erasmus quoted by Winders in *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 3.

oppression.” What I find as an academic opportunity is “a combined challenge to the status of the theatrical canon, and male-centred representations”<sup>120</sup> in the modernist theatre in order to continue a feminist process of canon transformation.

The radical modernist theatre practice introduced changes at the level of approaching the body of the actor and the modern function of the director. In the modernist tradition,<sup>121</sup> theatrical radicalism was incorporated without difficulty in the canon of theatre practice. Starting with the first modernist director, Konstantin Stanislavsky and ending with a contemporary extension of modernism represented by Peter Brook or Eugenio Barba, the body on stage is thought through the mutating actor-director identifications.

The canonical texts do not signify only technical handbooks of modernist theatre practice but radical challenges by relating “theory and practice in an effort to locate the theorized practice (praxis) that manifests itself in the various modes of acting.”<sup>122</sup> The specificity of the targeted texts is frequently lost at the level of generalization on which theoretical debates in relation to performance are carried out. After all, a “production [that] was presented at the National Theatre” has always the conservative implication that “it represented the best that the country had to offer”.<sup>123</sup> The theatre canon is treated with detachment in terms of equality of representation or accountability readings, but at the same time with other heavily charged political implications as defence for nationalism, sexism, white supremacy, class privilege and Western cultural imperialism presented as the “objective” “neutral” support of artistic values, defending the integrity of “impartial” aesthetics against those who politicize the theatre i.e. feminists, Marxists, non-white, non-Westerners. Precisely this discreditable process of politicizing theatre has the possibility to bring a more enriching perspective on present-day theatre criticism and

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120 Aston and Harris, *Feminist Futures?*, 88-89.

121 Already well established in literature and art.

122 Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing*, 5.

123 Perks and Porteous, *AS drama and theatre studies*, 65.

practice, to question the inequality<sup>124</sup> produced by theatre and to actively explore formerly unexamined affinities for knotty and marginalizing Western cultural assumptions which are reproduced on stage.

This canonical subject is cheered by conservative theatre practitioners and critics in strong relation to the claim of “return to origins”, where there is no need for “the heavy baggage of theory.”<sup>125</sup> The contemporary questioning of the canon (with its subjects and usages) is influenced by a postmodern performance studies approach, which was adopted at various levels in academia and theatre practice. Feminist theatre criticism adds to this critique the important problematization of the autonomous male subject of theatre theory and practice, untouched by the Symbolic order or social codes.

What the conservative construction of canonical subjectivity leaves out is precisely the theatrical radicalism still present in the canon, or in Baz Kershaw’s words, those performance theories “deeply rooted in the conditions of the contemporary,” because this type of projected performance “always participates in the most vital cultural, social and political tensions of its time.”<sup>126</sup> Various contradictory directions within those theories show how the historical avant-garde theatre is a much more ambiguous phenomenon that we might think.

Following Walter Benjamin's reading, one can see how also in theatre "liberal historiography conspires with bourgeois society to establish the status quo of social reproduction at the cost of proletariat revolution. The de(con)struction of that historicism is thus crucial to the critical transvaluation of history."<sup>127</sup> Taking into consideration theatrical radicalism, “the avant-garde serves as the political and revolutionary cutting edge of the broader movement of modernism, from which it frequently appears to be trying with difficulty to free itself.”<sup>128</sup> By rereading the male texts of the

124 For a similar process in academia see Mitchell, “Scholars Need to Explore”, B1-3.

125 See Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 4; Jameson, "Symptoms of Theory or Symptoms for Theory?"; Dolan, "Rehearsing Democracy."

126 Kershaw, *The radical in performance*, 7.

127 See Chisholm, *Queer Constellations*, 255.

128 Murphy, *Theorizing the avant-garde*, 3.

radical modernist theatrical canon and its complex dynamics through the perspective of feminist, postmodern and psychoanalytical theories, my research radically challenges the theatrical, canonical, counter-revolutionary, civilizing objectives and generates its transformation by complicating more its undertheorized presuppositions. By exposing the emptiness of unproven claims made on behalf of the *great male directors* I plan to depict the masculinist project behind their historical canonization.

In further chapters I read Stanislavsky, Meyerhold or Artaud as examples of dominant modern figures, with the aim of finding “subtler ways in which these important texts are skewed and decentered by linguistic, cultural, ideological aspects of gender.”<sup>129</sup> In Spivak’s terms, my project avoids “to refute and endorse” with the main purpose to “produce a new politics of reading.”<sup>130</sup>

A postmodern feminist reading of the modernist canon has the possibility to “undo the deadly dichotomy between tradition and its critique, and, in the process to reopen the question of the relation between continuity and discontinuity over time.”<sup>131</sup> I see as counter-productive a complete rejection of the modernist canon or a contestation based on a binary supposition. The theatrical field can be re-imagined as a space for co-habitation with contradictions and differences which, first of all, challenges a phallogentric order that offers only two possibilities: assimilation or omission from the canonical theatrical norms.

The “wholesomeness” and “juridical” understanding of the canonical texts perplexes canon construction as a fictional “massive body of self-congratulating ideas”<sup>132</sup> that are rarely questioned by practitioners and theoreticians. Directors and actors suggest that a monolithic and coherent history of theatre (“the basic timeline [...] of the major movers and shakers in theatrical terms, many of whom

129 Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 18.

130 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Deconstruction in Exile”, paper presented at Duke University Program in Literature conference “Convergence in Crisis: Narratives in the History of Theory”, 1987, quoted by Winders in *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 18.

131 LaCapra, “*Madame Bovary*” on *Trial*, 10.

132 Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, 178-225.

still influence the work we do today”<sup>133</sup>) or a sort of a high cultural club exists: most practitioners “working in the mainstream and in establishment institutions often support the status of the canon in their work, and do not challenge a male-centred version of history, or necessarily overtly engage with the question of gender. If gender is negotiated in their work, this exploration generally takes place within the auspices of the ‘greatness’ of the canon.”<sup>134</sup> The illusory practicalities give the main reasons for this conservative gendered construction: it is “easier to talk in terms of specific movements and particular practices, which is perfectly acceptable.”<sup>135</sup> Of course, one might ask for who's benefit and for what purposes do we have to accept a certain simplistic narrative.

Furthermore, how to misread the theories of the canon and how to avoid those aspects of canonicity that make them “perfectly acceptable” for the conservative mainstream? Said’s concept of “contrapuntal reading” can prove extremely useful. A concept taken from music, contrapuntal reading can expose the canonical interpretations and usages of parts of modernist theatre theories. A contrapuntal reading not only reveals the canonical perspective on the text, but also offers the possibility of finding forms of resistance, the counterpoints, that can be part of the same account. In Said’s opinion we have to “read the great canonical texts [...] with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented”.<sup>136</sup> In practice, says Said, reading contrapuntally means to understand how an author is used by canonicity and what is left out, what is forgotten and for what reasons.

I am interested in challenging and perverting the historical and contemporary usages of Western canonical texts, with a possible transgressive reading of those very texts, exposing how the “theatrical laws” operate, by returning to them and exposing their confusions, instabilities, conflicts and anachronisms. I do not want to imply that all contemporary theatre movements are necessarily

133 Perks and Porteous, *AS drama and theatre studies*, 97.

134 Aston and Harris, *Feminist Futures?*, 90.

135 Perks and Porteous, *AS drama and theatre studies*, 97.

136 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66.



connected to the canonical historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century.<sup>137</sup> By focusing on chronologies of theatre theory, one can fall into the historiographic trap of not recognizing the full range of “the radical new relationships that have been forged between art and the social, performance and culture,”<sup>138</sup> including here Brechtian theatre with queer/feminist/anti-racist/anti-fascist/anti-capitalist agendas, where I locate myself as a practitioner.

In mainstream theatre we can identify the imposition of the idea of a passive audience and what Brecht calls “culinary theatre” where the audience is seduced into an ecstasy of sensory indulgence characterized by social docility and catatonia.<sup>139</sup> The culinary element plays a significant role in sketching the canonical feature of mainstream Western theatre. But on the other hand, the theatre canon acts as a cannibalistic machine, aimed to assimilate new or alien bodies.<sup>140</sup> Its patriarchal conservatism capitalized the whiteness and maleness of its authors to strengthen its position, in connection to a permanent search for legitimacy from the existing order. The process of normalizing the canonical select membership is based on covering up its re/production of systemic inequality. The purpose is to fit all members of the canon into the prototype of the modern knowing subject: the Western, heterosexual, white, urban, middle-class male.<sup>141</sup> All contradictions to the prototype are to be erased, lost, not considered important or just presented as ephemeral in order to make the select members fit the frame. The old-style universalism of the theatre canon neglects other experiences that fail to fit the Procrustean bed of whiteness, masculinity, ableism, heterosexuality and westernness. What scholars and artists can do is to continuously question who gains positions in the traditional canon, how those authoritative positions based on excellence and cultural value can be distorted, what is left out and how those positions are constructed and sustained.

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137 I include here also contemporary experimentalists like Peter Brook or Eugenio Barba who position themselves as an extension of the modernist avant-garde tradition.

138 Murphy, *Theorizing the avant-garde*, 60.

139 Brecht, *On Theatre*, 89.

140 See Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 33.

141 Ibid.

My thesis is part of a continuous challenge and perversion of canonical texts (not limited to theatre studies but vastly needed here). By revealing complications and contradictions, by questioning how meaning is produced by these texts and how certain interpretations were naturalized in educational and theatrical settings, new possibilities open in terms of practice, theory and their in-between.

Universities play a crucial role in defining and maintaining the canons (but also in making explicit what *official* theatre means): acting schools, drama, performance and theatre departments are playing the main role of *institutions of consecration*<sup>142</sup> in constructing theatrical hierarchies that are reproduced in theatres.<sup>143</sup> The canon can be found at work in the curricula of colleges and graduate schools, part of the syllabi as the official version of the modernist theatre that inculcates the university-educated theatre makers and critics.<sup>144</sup> A contrapuntal reading of modernist directors' canonical texts has the potential to undermine the disciplinary forces that are inherent to any canon, to avoid the commodification of new forms of radicalism, to discover the inherent transgressiveness of those texts and their radical potential invoked in reaching beyond the existing systems of formalized power by creating unimaginable forms of association and action. Moreover we should ask not how theatre can *represent* this transgression but how radical performance can *produce* transgression and *answer* “the need for vigorous and fundamental change”<sup>145</sup> by undermining the forces of canonicity.

How is it possible to “avoid working in the hierarchical, competitive structures which characterize the male-dominated established theatre”<sup>146</sup> or even more, how is it possible to change its rules and structures from inside? The canonical texts that I am reading were connected to unjustified assumptions and claims about a linear theatrical history that they presumably inaugurated.

142 See Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods”.

143 See DiMaggio, “Social structure, institutions, and cultural goods,” 135-155.

144 The similar process of canonical inculcation in American and Canadian literature is explored by Corse, *Nationalism and literature*.

145 Williams, *Keywords*, 210.

146 Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 230.

Cynical/militaristic terms justify the “survival of the fittest” exclusion: “theatre history is littered with the casualties of shifting tastes and advancing ideas of what constitutes entertainment. For every playwright whose name we know, consider how many others there are who have disappeared into the dustbin of history.”<sup>147</sup> What was more at stake in promoting theatre theories as canonical had to do more with proving institutional and disciplinary authority, coming up with a coherent discourse and history and did not necessarily have to do with an intrinsic *theatrical worth* to the used and abused texts.<sup>148</sup> The canon apologists do not force us *to like* the theatrical worth, just to recognise it. By refusing to read them as recommendations for a masculinist world of stability and order, paradoxically untouched by any theory, one has to reposition oneself in relation to modernism and also to contemporary cultural circumstances. In order to avoid the basic gesture of modernist art, I neither propose a rejection or break with the past nor a post-modern relocation on the margins of mainstream culture (from where the patriarchal culture can be attacked) but a positive form of canonical *garbage recycling*.

### **Feminist unbecoming and the theatrical canon**

In order to recycle the canon, my tool of choice is feminist theory/practice. Theatre had a strong connection to feminism from the early instances of demanding women’s vote, when suffragettes invented performance arts as an inevitability of their activism.<sup>149</sup> But what drives the feminist fascination for theatre? In one of her interviews, Cixous explains her love for theatre: “*I love dialogue (this is why I love theatre)—work, dance, groping, rectification, repentirs, misunderstandings—(portrait of dialogues)—assault and battery—duet*”.<sup>150</sup>

The following pages explore the troubled and questionable relation between theatre and

147 Perks and Porteous, *AS drama and theatre studies*, 97.

148 Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 142.

149 Hill, “Suffragettes Invented Performance Art,” 150-156.

150 Italics in the original, Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints*, 17.

feminism.<sup>151</sup> In her influential book, *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue Ellen Case explains the connection between theatre and feminism precisely through

the radical way in which feminism has affected all aspects of theatre, changing theatre history and becoming a major element in twentieth-century theatre practice. The feminist critic or practitioner need no longer adopt a polemic posture in this art, but can rely on the established feminist tradition in the theatre, with its growing number of practitioners and adherents.<sup>152</sup>

To use Hélène Cixous's example, her shifting affiliation with the theatre illustrates this idea of a non-polemic posture. Starting as a dramatist who challenged the dramatic conventions of the male authors and the idea of representation, through her cooperation with the *Théâtre du Soleil*, and its director, Ariane Mnouchkine, Cixous showed over time a growing interest in the theatrical conventions, practice and rehearsals,<sup>153</sup> maintaining a constant political interest in the possibilities of social change coming from drama and theatre. Mnouchkine and Cixous strongly influenced each other and their collaborative work transformed their perception of theatre making, history of theatre, process of rehearsals, writing plays and knowledge production. For Cixous, theatre combines writing and performance in an immediate way that brings new types of relationships between self and other, which can be politically articulated in a much stronger way than in other artistic mediums.<sup>154</sup> In a sense, instances such as the gestures of extreme actuality<sup>155</sup> characterize feminist theatre and its potential for social criticism.

The close relation between theatre and feminism is not accidental, theatre being the only institution in the Western world free of misogyny, according to Cixous. In her argument she connects schools, universities, parliaments and other *democratic* institutions sick with misogyny to symptoms like "stiffness, blindness, treachery, uneasiness, hypocrisy, death and rape drives, denial."<sup>156</sup> Theatre

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151 Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris explore this relation for the twenty first century theatre in Aston and Harris, *Feminist futures?*

152 Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 4.

153 Dobson, *Hélène Cixous and the theatre*, 10-12.

154 Ibid., 11.

155 Cixous, *Stigmata*, 26.

156 Ibid., 112.

operates as the only exception with the lowest (or even missing) incidence of such symptoms because the engaged authors, actors, directors and spectators have to renounce their selves in order to be part of the performance. In this process of renouncing the self, actors and directors play active roles as agents in a process of unbecoming or what Cixous calls *Heorshe*, someone who no longer is self, someone who becomes nobody by breaking the boring rules of a single self, a single sex and strict gender roles.

Feminist studies move away from the existing scholarly traditions of reading. Feminist knowledge was institutionalized through activism and by avoiding becoming just a part of academic disciplines. Scholarly practice was re-thought for practical political reasons.<sup>157</sup> By tracking the source of academic feminism in activism, a strong connection with performance functions in terms of producing embodied knowledge. While in theatre, training and rehearsal institutionally use the marks of the body, in feminism, the embodied social activism generates scholarship. This connection between the two practices goes beyond a simple disciplinary question.

From the early 1980s, feminist theatre occurred as a popular form of cultural criticism in the West, with strong connections to the modernist experimental theatre and to the activism of the women's movement from the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist performances, writings and critical positions greatly focused on deconstructing the gender binary and on undermining patriarchal power structures.<sup>158</sup> Some feminists perceived theatre as the utopian medium where communication across nations, genders, classes and languages was possible.<sup>159</sup> Particular feminist theatre groups were absorbed by the dominant culture in a process of tokenism, various (mainly) US feminist plays and directors became part of the mainstream commercial theatre, while spectators and major critics recognize and applaud them as feminists,<sup>160</sup> their political positionality adding more value to the cultural merchandise in a process of capitalist fetishization.

<sup>157</sup> Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance*, 101.

<sup>158</sup> See Keyssar, *Feminist theatre and theory*.

<sup>159</sup> See de Gay and Goodman, *Languages of Theatre Shaped by Women*, 1-10.

<sup>160</sup> Keyssar, *Feminist theatre and theory*, 1.

Theatre practice proved on many occasions a certain failure of communication between different feminist groups<sup>161</sup> but nevertheless remained a space where diversity and difference could be embraced, explored and positively articulated. Performance was and is still used as a feminist practice for achieving political ends and creating group solidarity, moving beyond a traditional understanding of making politics into corporeal expression and new forms of communication in terms of identity, struggle and empowerment.

Feminist theatre maintains some particular characteristics in its practice even today by paying attention to “feminist content and methodologies; the extensive use of improvisation; multi-racial casting; the support of younger writers through extensive and open-ended workshops of new work; use of alternative performance venues.”<sup>162</sup> Criticizing gender binaries and analyzing intersectionalities between gender, race, class and sexuality, feminism still searches for better forms of expression and languages. Nevertheless, Case’s apprehension of using the language of theatre<sup>163</sup> still haunts radical performances due to its inescapable representability, patriarchal conventions of theatrical sign-systems and textocentrism that construct women not as subjects but as objects and speak for women instead of letting them speak.

For authors like Goodman feminist theatre manifests primarily as being anti-canonical because it questions “all of history as presented in standard texts... [since history] may represent a genealogy of ‘false fathers’”<sup>164</sup>. This is one major reason for theatre studies to keep feminism out of its genealogies and greatly unmentioned in theatre history. The repression of feminist theatre mirrors the fear of taking feminist arguments seriously because that would imply a questioning of the masculinist canon in theatre as the core of Western theatre history.

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161 See de Gay and Goodman, *Languages of Theatre Shaped by Women*, 1-10.

162 Fischlin and Fortier, *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, 215-216.

163 Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 120.

164 Goodman, “Women’s Alternative Shakespeares and Women’s Alternatives to Shakespeare in Contemporary British Theatre,” 220.

Against the odds, feminist theatre criticism flourished, as in Helene Keyssar's opinion specifically due to the success and maturation of feminist theatre, where "most writing about feminist theatre was a matter of identification, recognition, definition and contextualization."<sup>165</sup> If in the first phase of feminist theatre criticism, the focus was on recuperation, discovery and celebration of feminist theatre, it later became a criticism of analysis, due to the decreased mainstream negative criticism on feminist theatre. The new feminist criticism introduced innovative feminist criteria of evaluation for theatre, more specific in comparison to earlier writings based on non-gendered theatre theories. In this wave of criticism three styles of making theatre with feminist potential stand out: realist, Brechtian non-realist and unconventionally-staged performances. These demarcation lines are not clear-cut but key distinguishing marks can be identified.

Realist theatre functions mainly as "a matter of style and content: it is a representation of recognizable settings, characters and events re-accentuated by the newness of the material to the stage; it is typified by the juxtaposition along with continuity of the incident from scene to scene."<sup>166</sup> Catherine Belsey's concept of classic realism fits this theatrical direction: realist performances transmit "the authority of an apparent familiarity" which inclines "to efface their own textuality".<sup>167</sup> The border between stage and audience disappears and the world on stage gets easily incorporated into the world of the audience: we, spectators, start living it as we live our own lives into one indisputable reality.

On the other hand, the playwright Djanet Sears explains the importance of realism for the oppressed people and her particular need for representation: "I have a dream... that one day in the city where I live, at any given time of the year, I will be able to find at least one play that is filled with people who look like me, telling stories about me, my family, my friends, my community. For most people of European descent, this is a privilege they take for granted".<sup>168</sup> The main problem for realism

<sup>165</sup> Keyssar, *Feminist theatre and theory*, 2.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>167</sup> Belsey, "Constructing the Subject," 45-65.

<sup>168</sup> Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 14.

persists in this sympathetic approach also: by the way that realist theatre disguises the construction of the world, on the realist stage everything that is presented appears or should appear *natural* and *appropriate*.

Brechtian theatre differentiates itself from realist theatre by two main techniques: engaging spectators in observation rather than playing with their feelings and by using arguments instead of suggestions. Characters are seen as alterable and able to alter in relation to the spectator, not fixed and controlled by destiny or undefeated forces.<sup>169</sup> Brechtian non-realist theatre and its feminist version or what Janelle Reinelt calls the “feminist transformation of Brechtian technique”<sup>170</sup> focus on conventions such as *gestus*, one symbolic gesture for each character that connects the audience to the actor as character, or *historical allegory* for current issues or events.

Historicization, a Brechtian convention frequently used by feminist theatre means first of all a reclaim of history on stage for non hegemonic points of view, a promising feminist transformation. Brechtian techniques have the purpose to theatrically expose what hides behind the illusion of representation. Brecht and his followers emphasize the necessity to break with “the emotional attachment to so-called great men”.<sup>171</sup> For example, Ernst Shürer sees this break as a requirement in relation to a whole “romantic view of history that was prevalent in bourgeois society; his [Brecht’s] intention was to destroy the aura of greatness surrounding dictators, statesmen, politicians, who were often no more than political criminals.”<sup>172</sup> Feminist Brechtians closely adopted this direction by producing characters on stage “whose destinies are controlled not by fate or their own personal characters or actions but by the behavior of collectives, large masses, social classes”.<sup>173</sup> Brechtian theatre concludes with “an open-ended call to action: an intolerable situation has been presented; the

169 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 37.

170 Reinelt, “Beyond Brecht”, 35-49.

171 Fischlin and Fortier, *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, 125-126.

172 Ernst Shürer quoted in *ibid.*, 126.

173 Heinemann, “How Brecht Read Shakespeare”, 229.



audience is left with the question as to what to do about it”.<sup>174</sup> In epic theatre, performers do not deliver answers for spectators’ problems but leave them the idea that the shared critical debate that was just taking place in front of them was useful in understanding everyday oppression in their own contexts.

Another relevant approach to theatre production for this debate, unconventionally-staged performances draw a great amount of inspiration from a psychoanalytical understanding of representation, explorations of the unconscious, surrealism, historical models of community theatre, but also cinema, television and digital media. Non-narrativity functions as a tool of reflexivity. While the audience is actively present, it plays a central character and has the role of a reflexive self for the characters on stage.<sup>175</sup>

Different forms of feminist theatre have in common the need to “critique those masculinist strategies of legitimation in the theatre institution that allow for the marginalization of alternative theatre, and, in particular, certain kinds of feminist theatre practices by dismissing them as illegitimate and therefore improperly ‘theatre’.”<sup>176</sup>

Too many writers on theatre theory and genealogies paid homage, or what James A. Winders calls *homme age*,<sup>177</sup> to modernist theatre without taking into consideration its existing critiques. There is a continuous fascination with the writings of the *eternal parents* and their solutions to staging and acting, a fascination that keep a blind eye to the existing feminist criticism. By bringing together feminist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytical readings of the modernist theatrical canon, I plan to engage in the following chapters precisely in this critique of legitimacy.

The institutionalized theatre practitioner is familiarized with certain paragraphs, repetitive images and techniques in a specified historical/artistic framework (nineteenth century Russia, Elizabethan theatre, French surrealism, Bolshevik propaganda agitation, Marxist political theatre). The great white,

174 Fischlin and Fortier, *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, 126.

175 See Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints*, 101-102.

176 Kruger, “The Dis-Play’s the Thing”, 49-77.

177 Winders, *Gender, Theory and the Canon*, 28.

dead, male artistic figure does not contradict but seemingly transcends the influential artistic movements of his time. Working in theatre, I am conscious about the oversimplified, squeezed-together elements of theatre histories and their solitary “great male” exceptions.

The notion of *acting a role* is deeply embedded into Western theatre and culture, where gender roles are present in the very understanding of culture itself as male subjects in opposition to womanized bodies. Actors are to be tamed and controlled in a directorial gesture of inscribing culture into performance. From this perspective, cultural authority occupies the same patriarchal position of excluding women and marginal subjects.

Theatre history (as presented in textbooks) fits Foucault’s characterization of the role of the university: “the institutional apparatus through which society ensures its uneventful reproduction, at the least cost of itself.”<sup>178</sup> Acting and directing schools taught us world wide that educated European and North American men own the theatrical culture: they inherited it from their intellectual forefathers, previous directors that formed a tradition of approaching performance and preparing performers and their bodies. The theatre student receives the theatrical ideas as beyond controversy in a steady continuum, beyond any questions. The critical guard is easily put at rest because there are always other more important issues to deal with than the inadvertences or the dissimilar bits of unconnected theatrical events and ideas.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Cixous criticizes the “false theatre of phallogentric representationalism” that is able to stage only dramas of exclusion<sup>179</sup> to which she offers the possibility of a women’s drama of limitless solidarity that can actively criticize the hegemony of hostile and harmful ideologies, a drama that can offer feminist models for strategic alliances. Cixous offers a way out for theatre, following Genet: to *burn* knowledge and theatricality in order to un-learn or “to learn

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178 Foucault, “Revolutionary Action”, 224.

179 See Gasbarrone, “The Locus for the Other”, 8.

how to know nothing.”<sup>180</sup> One method to burn knowledge and theatricality on stage is to play with history: Cixous uses theatre to create historical analysis. For her, theatre can offer the structure, the scene and the needed metaphors to explore contemporary politics.

The present as “the time of the theatre” produces the main attraction for theatre: this discovery came for Cixous while she was working in theatre and discovered “the singularity of this genre that invents, invents for us, incessantly, a time without time.”<sup>181</sup> Cixous and Mnouchkine used historical settings to create performances that consciously played with poetry, the mixture of proximity and distance, subjectivity and collectivity in period performances that actively used psychoanalysis: history was reworked as a psychoanalyzed dream.<sup>182</sup> For Cixous, historical performances can use history as dream work through methods of condensation and displacement in order to construct contemporary criticism. The performance deliberately creates historical confusions in order to produce a sort of hallucination for the audience. The cultures are presented on stage fragmentarily, continuously changing and as parts of a scenic process.<sup>183</sup> This particular approach to theatre making destabilizes cultural representation as a form of imitation or showing and functions as a dynamic method of performing cultures.

The body of the actor has the possibility to make Cixous’s “single gesture [...], but one that can transform the world”<sup>184</sup> and to avoid the illustrative and imitative gestures. The ability to successfully inform the spectator and make her express doubt depends on the scenic presence of the actor, what the actor has to do in order to create a centre of attention for the spectator during performance. A transformation in the body of the actor is the first step in making active this identification on stage.

Theatre is connected to feminist theory through its materiality, physicality and present-

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180 Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, 155.

181 Cixous, *Stigmata*, 30.

182 Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, 189.

183 Ibid., 195.

184 Quoted in Dolan, *The feminist spectator as critic*, 8.

orientation: Cixous perceives theatre as “the *scene* of the body”<sup>185</sup> or even further, she considers that “*the whole body, the whole being is a theatre*”.<sup>186</sup> Embodiment, movement, physical exchange and flow of energies remain key elements in theatre making. By occupying the same space and time as the audience, the body on stage differs from the bodies represented in other media. While in cinema, for example, the body of the actor represents only the character that is acted and not the actor, on stage, the actor’s *being-there* reminds the audience of the fiction and the director by “juxtaposing the body that is signified, performed, with the real signifying body of the performer.”<sup>187</sup> The challenge of subjectivity in theatre presents itself in practice: through the exploration of theatricality on stage, the body of the performer and her subjectivity are located in the present.<sup>188</sup> Nevertheless, the stage incorporates with difficulty the bodily experiences of actors and spectators have difficulties in reading the bodies on stage.<sup>189</sup>

The body “to which we constantly refer” in Western culture functions as a productive model also for stage. The capital constructs the energy of labor power and the “body we dream of today as locus of desire and the unconscious.” Baudrillard calls this body that became a process ruled by market value forces an *anti-body*.<sup>190</sup> Starting with the body of the actor, theatre theories offer an alternative reading of corporeality and the possibility to un-learn the anti-body. They offer an ontological challenge that displaces the bourgeois notion of Self as unique, long-lasting and uninterrupted with a Self associated with the corporeal performative, hysterical, improvisational, irregular Self. The non-unified constituted Self in the process of performance is connected to training techniques and acting styles for stage.

In the next chapters, I follow what Sue-Ellen Case calls “the mytho-historical account”<sup>191</sup> of this

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185 Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints*, 89-90.

186 Ibid., 103.

187 Counsell and Wolf, *Performance Analysis*, 125.

188 Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints*, 171.

189 See de Gay and Goodman, *Languages of Theatre Shaped by Women*, 3.

190 See Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 24-25.

191 Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance*, 102.

process of un-learning the anti-body through a new questioning of what we mean by performance, subjectivity, masculinity and embodiment.

## Chapter 2

### Taking Freud from behind: poetics of male hysteria

I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous too, because it resulted from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed.<sup>192</sup>

#### The formless, empty beginning of a chapter<sup>193</sup>

One of Freud's children, namely his personal *little hysteria*, is a monster, long killed and buried by psychoanalysts. Little hysteria offers a detailed exploration of an intimate manifestation of male hysteria at the end of the nineteenth century. Starting with Freud's example, I conceptualize male hysteria as a project of redefining male subjectivity. Male hysteria disturbs the healthy ego and challenges the gender dichotomy by rejecting the taken for granted masculinity. Male hysteria denies the sexual difference, it blurs the fixed sexual identities and anticipates a social model with loose gender roles. The under-construction subjectivity of the male hysteric oscillates between the masculine and the feminine in a never-ending search for a body and the presence of the Other. Freud's hysteria is the source of analyzing the clinical, political and theoretical discourses on female and male hysteria in Western Europe. Like a mother re-giving birth, Freud re-adopts in the next pages his own zombie child through Lacan, feminist psychoanalysis and contemporary readings of male hysteria.

Kristeva pointed out in one of her interviews that "the Freudian message, to simplify things, consists in saying that the other is in me. And instead of searching for a scapegoat in the foreigner, I must try to tame the demons that are in me."<sup>194</sup> The Freudian message sets the framework for dealing with such a controversial and complex disappeared illness as male hysteria. By taking Freud from behind, I also explore with fear and excitement my own little hysteria in writing about *his* little

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192 Deleuze quoted by Žižek in the chapter *Hegel 1: Taking Deleuze from Behind*, which explains, in Žižek's interpretation, the troubled relation between Deleuze and Hegel. In Žižek, *Organs without bodies*, 46.

193 Braidotti writes "the beginning, like all beginnings, can only be formless and empty" in *Nomadic Subjects*, 213.

194 Guberman, *Julia Kristeva*, 35.

hysteria. Reading Freud, I felt like slipping continuously from the text, finding hidden intimate issues (which were long time buried) and difficulties in approaching an overrated psycho-legend and eventually I started a close relationship with Freud's personal early letters, written long before he became a father. This chapter of my dissertation can be considered an exercise in plagiarism,<sup>195</sup> by moving beyond a detached reading of his self-analysis into a more hysterical engagement: I closely identify with Freud and his self-analysis in a situated concrete enactment of hysteria on the page. My project refrains from an abstract rhetoric and Adrienne Rich's *politics of location*<sup>196</sup> or Donna Haraway's *situated knowledges*<sup>197</sup> are useful concepts for my theoretical endeavor: this process of writing is not arrogantly "universalized, objective and detached, but rather one that is situated in the contingency of one's experience, and as such it is a necessarily *partial* exercise."<sup>198</sup> It is a crucial acknowledgment to formulate here, because this partial exercise clashes directly with what Braidotti calls "the abstract generality of the classical patriarchal subject."<sup>199</sup> What we are dealing with is a contradiction of two radical ways of legitimizing theoretical statements. My theoretical exercise is limited by my body, by putting words on the page I reaffirm that the subject that is writing is not an abstraction, but struggles with corporeality: in front of the laptop screen I perceive that I am a material, embodied writer or, in most cases, I look to find my own embodiment through writing.

The first step in my partial exercise is to identify a Freudian epistemology based on plagiarism and hysteria, or more specifically, to identify what symptoms are used by Freud, how he conceptualized them and how he perceived hysteria within a specific historical framework and social context. I follow and transform this epistemology over the next pages. With Freud's style of writing and theorizing in

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195 I use plagiarism in its psychoanalytical understanding as a hysterical form of identification (which excludes theft) and not for its academic meaning as a form of modernist originality or the production of new ideas that are not taken from someone else.

196 Rich, *Arts of the Possible*.

197 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."

198 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 237.

199 Ibid., 238.

mind, a short history of hysteria offers the chance to locate the hysterical discourse or the politically engaged poetics of hysteria.

Charcot's experiments with hysteria and celebrity at Salpêtrière<sup>200</sup> introduce the anti-hero of male hysteria: Sigmund Freud. The conceptual move towards male hysteria made by Freud was not innocent but it offered a good example of how clinical theory and politics communicate: he counterattacked the Viennese anti-Semitic context at the end of the nineteenth century clinic and the feminization of Jews precisely through male hysteria.

Psychoanalysis and Freud's work on hysteria (as it can be found especially in his early works) lead me to Freud's own hysteria, or what he called *little hysteria*. In relation to his self analysis, I investigate, following closely Juliet Mitchell's Marxist feminist return to Freud, specific hysterical symptoms which can prove useful in counterbalancing a phallogentric dogmatism that connects a fractured subjectivity to "the performative illusion of unity mastery, self-transparency."<sup>201</sup> This exploration has a practical function in the economy of my dissertation by providing the basis for my analysis of the modernist male director for the next two chapters by focusing on some relevant concepts developed here: the Hamlet complex, seduction, hysterical identification or femininity.

Having the Freudian male hysteric as referent and critically reading hysteria with Charcot and Freud, I move to another historical hysterical impresario: Jacques Lacan. His rereading of Dora's case is crucial in introducing the radical concept of counter-transference while another conceptual tool introduced by Lacan proves relevant in exploring male hysteria: the hysterical discourse as epistemology and research style.

Psychoanalysis (but also a larger public discourse) used femininity as a key concept in discussing hysteria. Lacan's connection of femininity and masquerade followed the hysterical path and received a strong feminist critique. By developing misrecognitions, dominant fictions and the acclaimed mirror

<sup>200</sup> Micale, *Hysterical men*, 1.

<sup>201</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 12.



stage, two other burning issues in connection to male hysteria are explored by Lacan: the *body-in-bits-and-pieces* (the opposition of the famous Artaudian concept of the *body without organs*) and a new type of subjectivity (based on a Lacanian understanding of *extimacy*).

After introducing some relevant notions and theoretical tools, I move to a fundamental theme of this dissertation: sexual difference in hysteria, continuing the focus on Freud and Lacan's works in an open dialogue with their feminist critique. The hystericization of French feminism and the implications of a more positive claim of hysteria in the 1970s follow the trajectory of Freud and Lacan's theories of hysteria in a more sophisticated manner. Decades-long struggles for hysteria's denial and revival bring into focus the contemporary usages and emergences of hysteria. As a form of knowledge, hysteria continues nowadays to fool around with ideological constructions of illnesses through postmodernism e.g. the surprising return of a hysterical syndrome - clownism, an efficient tool in reading present-day advertising.

If in various forms of feminism one can observe a construction of femininity versus masculinity in a mirrored way, the uncertainty of sexual difference that appears in hysteria asks for less strict gender relations. Writing about a male analyst, Kristeva finds a place where masculinity and femininity meet: "the analyst situates himself on a ridge where, on the one hand, the 'maternal' position – gratifying needs, 'holding' – and on the other the 'paternal' position – the differentiation, distance and prohibition that produces both meaning and absurdity – are intermingled and severed, infinitely and without end."<sup>202</sup> The male hysteric occupies exactly the position of the ridge, where fixed sexual identities become blurred, they are transcended: he can be masculine and feminine, maternal and paternal.

Taking the example of the male analyst given by Kristeva, Stephen Frosh asks the basic questions: "One might ask what magic is this that desexes the analyst? When is a man not a man? The

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<sup>202</sup> Kristeva, "Freud and Love," 246.

conventional answer is that with the denial of sexual difference we are in the arena of hysteria; does this make all analysts into hysterics?”<sup>203</sup> His anticipated answer is insufficient in the sense that he claims that we can never be certain in matters of sexual difference but an interesting hypothesis emerges: the space and time that the analyst and patient share has the potential to change sexual difference into something else: “something fluid and subversive, questioning whatever it is that the protagonists might bring.”<sup>204</sup> My question at this point is if the theatrical space and time are not similar to the ones in a psychoanalytical session and actually encourage male hysteria to manifest itself, to challenge sexual difference and to make subject positions unstable. The comparison theatre – psychoanalytical session is not an innocent one: the network of signifying relations that give meaning to symptoms, discourses, subjectivities, images and stories in a theatrical or psychoanalytical event is a *convention*, or what Kristeva calls a *theoretical construction*, “nevertheless the only reality in which psychic life can be manifested and developed.”<sup>205</sup>

By positively claiming the male hysteric and before closing the chapter, I get engaged in a political agitation at the micro level, just in order to set the ground for my re-theoretization in context: the hysterical discourse of the modernist theatre.

But first, let us return to Freud:

### **Plagiarizing Freud**

By hysterically identifying with a young Freud, still uncertain about himself and his theories, at struggle with his plagiaristic relations, masculinity and his little hysteria, I enter a crowd of

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203 Frosh, *Sexual Difference*, 123, this approach towards hysteria is not a common place in psychoanalysis. For example, Teresa Brennan writes “obsessional neurosis is the quintessential masculine neurosis, just as hysteria is condensed femininity”, *Interpretation of the Flesh*, 105.

204 Ibid.

205 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 32-33.

philosophers, psychoanalysts, literary critics and feminists who were greatly troubled by the dense textuality of Freudianism. Countless tensions, contradictions, rejections, unfinished and unjustified speculative processes in Freud's work articulated a bizarre, untried process of knowledge production. This type of epistemology was neglected by many Freudian followers in their adding, always necessary to an unfinished theory, or their empirical limitations when they simply apply psychoanalysis to their own particular research. Acknowledging and avoiding the Freudian psychoanalysts which shadow "the Freudian Master-Text in order to legitimize their own algebraic fantasies and diagrammatic knots,"<sup>206</sup> I get away from Freud's theories just in order to get closer, to let him say all that I want him to say and to continue a creative writing identification. The complexity of too many "returns to Freud," as Lacan described his own approach, has recurrent elements: to make those views more respectable in academic circles, to leave them untouched and to repeat some problematic elements in Freud's text such as phallogentrism, the subversion of the unconscious for all meanings, and his absolute trust in psychotherapy.<sup>207</sup> What Freud can offer to a feminist reader is exactly the possibility to escape the Oedipal/hierarchical plot of academia, a break with the rational masculine identification of high theory,<sup>208</sup> a break with the phallogocentric monologues of male philosophers, disloyalty to masters and disrespect for respectable academic or clinical authorities.

Regarding my own plagiaristic approach to Freudian texts, I celebrate and discover his collapse and abandonment together with the demythologizing fun of reading the "father" of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, this plagiaristic exercise develops in relation to the French analyst and enfant terrible of Freudianism, Jacques Lacan. His reading of Freud has the quality of stressing the innovation, subversiveness and hysterical intensity of Freud, together with a possibility of detouring psychoanalysis in feminist directions as Grosz emphasized in her feminist interpretation of Lacan.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>206</sup> Bersani, *Freudian body*, 2.

<sup>207</sup> See Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and gender*.

<sup>208</sup> See Miller, *Getting Personal*.

<sup>209</sup> Elizabeth Grosz emphasized the impossible break with Lacan for feminists interested in subjectivity in her

French feminism comes into play as my next tactical maneuver in approaching Freudian hysteria.

Bersani, writing about the Freudian body, put it simply: “the psychoanalytical authenticity of Freud’s work depends on a process of theoretical collapse.”<sup>210</sup> Without necessarily looking for an illusionary authenticity, the theoretical collapse haunts any possible return to Freud and psychoanalysis. Lacan named the play of fruitful oppositions and uncertainties in a strong connection to the uncanny as the hysterical discourse. Working the scheme of oppositions in my own involvement in the psychoanalytical game, I discovered the hysterical possibilities of collapse as an academic method or the epistemology that obstructs or undermines itself.<sup>211</sup> By doing this, I have two urgent questions to answer: first, what were the clinical discourses that Freud modified and continued and second, what was hysteria for Freud?

### **Finding the hysteric**

In order to *cure* women from it, hysteria needed to be clearly differentiated from other types of mental illnesses and from the existing standards of normalcy. The clinical discourse from the nineteenth century desperately focused on distinguishing the hysteric.<sup>212</sup> If until the seventeenth century, in Western societies being hysterical was associated mostly with women and was considered to have its source in the womb, there were also recorded cases of male hysterics and they were not treated as problematic or as a contradiction because the emotional self was not always connected to the body historically or culturally.<sup>213</sup> In specific contexts, bodies or their parts are taken plainly, as having a mind

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quintessential book, *Jacques Lacan*.

210 Bersani, *Freudian body*, 3.

211 The purpose is to treat psychoanalysis as a living discourse, not “out of some nihilistic contempt for all things western or masturbatory fascination with groundless intellectual free play, but in order to destabilize assumptions enough to open up spaces for continued reflection and the possibility of innovation and creative thinking.” Auslander, *Performance Studies*, 91. By paying a deconstructive alert attention to basic texts of Western thought, I explore the Derridean possibility „to reveal the uncertainties, instabilities, and impasses implicit in our intellectual traditions, moving us to the edges of knowing.” Auslander, *Performance Studies*, 91. This is the place where what was certain in the past is exposed as being precarious in the present.

212 Matlock, *Scenes of seduction*.

213 See Gilman et al., *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, viii.

of their own: the thief steal with his hands, so the hands are punished and are cut off while the womb can travel inside the body.

When hysteria became a case of the nervous system and brain, its femininity had to be reaffirmed, it had to be re-feminized. During the eighteenth century, the brain of high-class Western women presumably produced vapors, even if some physicians argued that the second source of vapors was the womb. The vapors were defined as depressive, hypochondriac, feminine and inevitably hysterical.<sup>214</sup> In nineteenth century vapors became nerves, but the conceptualization was similar: women were not only differentiated biologically through nerves, but the scientists of the day used the idea of the nerve to feminize them. The association between hysteria and a problematic womb cleared the way to an ideological construction of femininity that had direct social effects, mostly harmful for women.

In the case of hysteria, because of the difficulty of diagnosis and an insufficient inventory of symptoms, sophisticated examinations and captivating narratives were required in a construction of what Jann Matlock calls the poetics of hysteria, “in which doctors articulated the relation of gender, class, sexuality, and heredity to the politically charged plots they had already become accustomed by telling.”<sup>215</sup> Women’s sexuality, reproduction, marriage, motherhood, education, labor, leisure activities and class were all part of the poetics of hysteria at a time when voting, divorce, property control, signing contracts, high-school diplomas and university attending were all forbidden for women. Hysteria was constructed as “a philosophical category rather than as a medical diagnosis or set of therapies.”<sup>216</sup> The poetics of women’s hysteria can be considered a strategic patriarchal political response to the increased vocal demands for rights and social change coming from Western middle-class women. Throughout its history, and especially during nineteenth century, hysteria has been primarily constructed as a female illness. Men were affected by it but their cases were ignored or

214 For a brief history of hysteria, see Mitchell, *Mad Men*.

215 Matlock, *Scenes of seduction*, 126-27.

216 Porter and Rousseau, “Introduction”, xii.

transformed into other disease paradigms.<sup>217</sup> Nineteenth century medicine constructs a very specific discourse on hysteria with clear-targeted political implications. In one particular case, this social project found its peak: the asylum of Salpêtrière.

Michel Foucault associates the gaze of the clinic with a new connection between “words and things, enabling one to see and to say” by becoming “not longer reductive, it is rather that which establishes the individual in his irreducible quality.”<sup>218</sup> This new gaze was used by doctors to create a comprehensive narrative of women’s bodies to justify and understand the patterns of their control. Hysteria narratives centered on sexual difference in an orchestrated task to locate women’s desire. The moralization of women in society depended on the observation and diagnosis produced inside clinics.

Between 1872 and 1893, the French public asylum of Salpêtrière became a center investigating and codifying the photogenic and theatrical characteristics of the hysterical. Jann Matlock called this period “the golden age of hysteria,”<sup>219</sup> when a collective medical fantasy about hysteria was produced. Salpêtrière, “a kind of feminine inferno, a citta dolorosa confining four thousand incurable or mad women,”<sup>220</sup> was first of all a place of display.

“We are in possession of a sort of living pathological museum” proclaimed Charcot, the master of ceremonies. The clinic of Salpêtrière offered him the possibility to produce a special form of performance arts with an established audience. Charcot’s lectures drew the fascination of numerous doctors, writers and intellectuals, including Freud, who had him as PhD supervisor. Charcot was identified by the nascent father of psychoanalysis as *un visual*.<sup>221</sup> The tabloids of the day covered the public and extravagant *bals de folles*. The usage of photographs and theatrical exposure represented a move from written to visual observation. This new form of knowledge was synthesized by Charcot

217 Micale, *Hysterical Men*, xiv.

218 Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, xii-xix.

219 Matlock, *Scenes of seduction*.

220 Didi-Huberman, *Invention of hysteria*, xi.

221 Freud, “Charcot” in *Standard Edition*, vol.3, 3-4.

analyzing the photographs of hysteric women and exclaiming: “Voilà la *vérité*!”

The images that are still available nowadays contain “poses, attacks, cries, *attitudes passionnelles*, *crucifixions*, *ecstasy*, and all the postures of delirium”<sup>222</sup> in a visual link between the fantasy of hysteria and the fantasy of knowledge represented by the “increasingly theatricalized body.”<sup>223</sup> From a body narrated by men, the hysterical woman became a popular icon photographed by men. Masterplots of gender, class or sexuality were projected through the diagnosis of hysteria and were transformed into popular photographic theatre, the so-called “spectacle of pain, [...] the extreme visibility of this event of pain, the all too evident pain of hysteria.”<sup>224</sup>

The symptoms of hysteria have turned into structures of moral degradation and reasons for keeping women sheltered from the influence of passions and society’s vices. The emphasis in curing hysteria was put on safe, ordered and moral roles of women within the framework of motherhood, family and under the surveillance and protection of the honorable man (father or husband). In the process of curing hysteria, clinicians reduced women to aberrant bodily functions and corporeal failures to fulfill their proper and acceptable socio-material roles. In order to keep women out of the peril of abnormality, the narrative of what might drive a woman hysterical was based on her relation to the outside world. From this particular narrative, “a semantics of femininity came to be generated whose influence went far beyond the asylum.[...]The hysteric’s desires – or those medical observers gave her – came to anchor political as well as interpretative systems.”<sup>225</sup>

Hysteria suited best the clinical gaze and offered a perpetuation of it. As Matlock observes, the label of hysteria became a “political vehicle upon which the Salpêtrière doctors could transport themselves into notoriety.”<sup>226</sup> The narratives they visually constructed around their women patients

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222 Didi-Huberman, *Invention of hysteria*, ix.

223 Ibid.

224 Ibid., 3.

225 Matlock, *Scenes of seduction*, 132.

226 Ibid., 139.

participate in larger systems of meaning, respecting political and cultural moral conventions and codes. Physicality is transformed in this process into a morality play that extrapolates an essential femininity. Women patients of Salpêtrière were diagnosed as unproductive, inefficient, dangerous, immoral, abused and unfit to be virtuous or maternal. Hysterical madwomen are seen by nineteenth century doctors as incoherent and dreamy, controlled by duplicity and deceit, putting on travesty, not knowing the difference between reality and imagination. Their life is seen as a continuous lie.<sup>227</sup> Women's desires were moralized in a specific context and redirected: feminine fantasy was seen as the main source for hysterical illness.

The purpose was not to necessarily find a cure but to separate these *dangerous* women from anyone that can be *infected*. This type of damaging discourse was used in particular cases also for men by imposing the exclusionary practices related to femininity construction. European Jews represented for clinicians a group of men that was allowed and encouraged to become hysterical. Freud was one of the directly affected men of these tactics of anti-Semitism in nineteenth century Vienna.

### **Male hysterics as feminized Jews**

Sigmund Freud's interpretation of the ancient Greek myth of the wandering womb is a telling example of the problems which appeared in finding the male hysteric. In Freud's autobiographical description forty years after the event, he remembers the bad feedback to his initial paper on male hysteria, now lost, when he presented it before the Viennese Society of Physicians on 15 October 1886.<sup>228</sup>

Returning from Paris, where he worked with Charcot, Freud presents his new insights on male hysteria to his home audience in Vienna. He remembers later that his audience thought that what he presented "was incredible. . . . One of them, an old surgeon, actually broke out with the exclamation:

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>228</sup> Sulloway, *Freud: Biologist of the Mind*, 592.



'But, my dear sir, how can you talk such nonsense? *Hysteron* [sic] means the uterus. So how can a man be hysterical?'"<sup>229</sup> It was hysteria (the trademark of a new clinical science) that Freud wished to rescue from the Viennese medical establishment.

The hysteric had the role of a *prima donna* in the imaginative world of Freud, being connected to his self-definition. At the end of the nineteenth century, the image of the hysteric was analogous to the image of the European Jew— and even more specifically, the male Jew.<sup>230</sup> "Freud's understanding was that hysteria did not manifest itself as a disease of the womb but of the imagination."<sup>231</sup> Women remained the dominant target for hysteria, but the idea of a pathological imagination scientifically replaced the image of the floating womb as the fundamental etiology of hysteria. Freud challenged in his post-Paris understanding of hysteria the construction of another social group, the Jews, that was presented in the anti-Semitic medical environment as hysterical. Even if the representation of the hysteric in nineteenth century images and clinical texts was an image of womanhood, its sub-text contained that feminized male (especially the male Jew) which could be also read as hysterical, without changing the growing feminization of the disease. Not surprisingly, for this period of time, Sander L. Gilman claims that "the face of the Jew became the face of the hysteric."<sup>232</sup>

For exploring this turn in understanding the construction of the hysteric, I will return to Charcot and his well-known case from February 1889 of a Hungarian Jew named Klein, "a true child of Ahasverus"<sup>233</sup> that is presented as a typical example of male hysteric. Klein had a *hysterical contracture* of the hand and an extended numbness of the right arm and leg. In his lecture, Charcot focused on one detail: Klein's limping. Klein "wandered sick and limping on foot to Paris" from Hungary. He arrived at Salpêtrière with "his feet so bloody that he could not leave his bed for many

229 Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 20, 15.

230 For this link between the Jew and the hysteric see Townsend, "Stereotypes of Mental Illness," Goodman, *Genetic Disorders* and Gilman et al., *Hysteria Beyond Freud*.

231 Gilman, "Image of the Hysteric," 402.

232 Ibid., 405.

233 Ibid., 406. All quotations are from Gilman's presentation of the case.

days." Klein "limped at the very beginning of his illness." Charcot stressed to his audience that Klein "is a Jew and that he has already revealed his pathological drives by his wanderings." His "travel-mania" could be observed in the fact that "as soon as he was on his feet again, he wanted to go to Brazil." Klein had the standard numbness specific to hysterics on half of the body. Following the myth of the wandering Jew, in Charcot's analysis, wandering and limping mark the hysterical Jew as diseased in relation to an incestuous intermarriage. Even if women were the predominant patients, over the years there are more and more cases of male hysterics at Salpêtrière and they are connected to a similar process of "feminization" of the male Jew in the context of explaining hysteria.

Another of Freud's teachers, Moriz Benedikt, links the urban life style with the appearance of hysteria in men, a disease that he understood as uniquely feminine nervous affection. The struggle for life in the city causes the madness of the same stereotype, the male Jew: "Mental anxiety and worry are the most frequent causes of mental breakdown. They are all excitable and live excitable lives, being constantly under the high pressure of business in town." The reason for this inability to cope with the stresses of urban life lies in "hereditary influences" (that is the condition of being-Jewish).<sup>234</sup> Freud tried to escape these anti-Semitic and sexist connections between the feminized Jew and the hysterical women through the possible non-Jewish male hysteric but the reactions from his anti-Semitic peers were violent, so he backed off and dropped the case.

### **A couch for the hysteric**

Sigmund Freud entered the discourse of the clinical gaze as a fascinated witness of the theatrical form of hysteria at Salpêtrière. Even if the popular understanding of hysteria associates its beginning and history mainly to Freud, he rather represents the end of a long wave of clinical gaze. For Octave Mannoni, "Freud had arrived at Salpêtrière as a neurologist; he left it a 'hysteric' – having found that

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<sup>234</sup> Beadles, "The Insane Jew," 736 and Hyde, "Notes on the Hebrew Insane," 470.

he was just hysterical enough to identify with Charcot's patients. This identification is the origin of the discovery of psychoanalysis, since it made possible Freud's 'self-analysis' with Fliess."<sup>235</sup>

The launching of psychoanalysis on the basis of hysteria (as it was construed in the late nineteenth century) does not bring a new form of hysteria, but a selection of medical narratives of an already richly explored area. "In the popular imagination hysteria begins and virtually ends with Freud, his antecedents and sequels accorded relatively minor consequence; much cultural history is conceptualized and written out as if all psychiatric thought before the 1890s consisted of footnotes leading up to the work of the one—and only one—great transformer, Sigmund Freud."<sup>236</sup> Besides acknowledging the magnitude of the conventional psychoanalytical discourse on hysteria, I am interested in a less legendary and less heroic Freudian approach towards hysteria.

"Anna O", the first historical case of psychoanalysis, a true legend for all psychoanalytical believers, represents, first of all, a major shift from an analysis of the hysterical symptoms to an extended description of a life story. The shift has at its base the same theatricality of hysteria but clinical answer to it differs: the hysteric acts or performs and when Anna O started to talk instead of showing the scenes of her fantasies and told Breuer that *her* symptoms were performing, she basically invented "the talking cure."<sup>237</sup> In order to prevent thought, as prerequisite of language, the hysteric acts, enacts, performs or uses spastic communication such as glossolalia or screaming. The main problem for the analyst was how to deal with the acting out of the hysteric or how to cure it by transforming it into language.

Hysteria slowly changes in psychoanalysis from a disease to be cured to a mode of behavior. What seemed to be a more humane and compassionate process, in practice it mainly changed the clinical model of the doctor-patient relationship. This important change in the explanatory paradigm is

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235 Mannoni, "Psychoanalysis and Decolonization," 93.

236 Porter and Rousseau, "Introduction", ix.

237 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 72.

exemplified by other unforgettable cases, such as “Dora”, where a patient (supposed to present a disease to a medical doctor) becomes a victim (who narrates a story to a counselor).

A central element in explaining hysteria in the early years of psychoanalysis, sibling relations were connected by Freud to the existence of male hysterics. Hysteria, once central in psychoanalysis through its substantial examination, had to disappear through the effects of new narrative forms, connected to the repression of sibling relationships.

In order to keep alive the connection between women and hysteria, psychoanalysis excludes the male hysterics right after it became interested in them, by supporting through analysis and theory the primacy of the relations with parents and not with siblings (who remain crucial in a psychoanalytical explanation of hysteria).<sup>238</sup> This separation between the two, made by Freud, brings the issue of the historical struggle of focus and abandonment of hysteria in psychoanalysis. In his *self-analysis*, Freud’s own *little hysteria* is a key element and a possible starting point in analyzing hysteria through its repressions (starting with the male hysterics).

The hysteric lives through the other; the manifested hysteria has to be seen. The hysteric makes a show of the self, employing theatrical actions and the exposed feelings and stories have dramatic elements. The histrionic ingredient of hysteria (that was later isolated from it) claims the main stage. In popular terms, the attention-seeking part of hysteria becomes its innermost element. That was the card that Charcot voyeuristically played at Salpêtrière and offered popular admiration, he emphasized the theatrical element of hysteria in a sort of medical show with large audiences, a perfected form of scientific entertainment. Freud was fascinated by his method and Charcot became his mentor.

In his letters to Fleiss, Freud constructs a hysterical type of vital audience in a creative relationship: “I am so immensely glad that you are giving me the gift of the Other, a critic and reader – and one of your quality at that. I cannot write entirely without an audience, but do not at all mind

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 42.

writing only for you.”<sup>239</sup> These letters offer a passionate exploration of a very personal theoretization in the process of self-analysis.

Primarily, hysteria means relationship, it cannot exist in solitude. It needs the other through acceptance or even active rejection of the relationship. Becoming-a-spectacle occurs when the other refuses to join “the free flow of mutual identification”<sup>240</sup> or the so-called *folie a deux*. For Charcot, hysteria meant a staged performance with public or a photo exhibition of performing bodies, while for Freud, the symptoms of hysterical attacks are actions, in the conditions of a participating other, the audience. Mentioning Peter Brook’s classic understanding of theatre as the relationship between a spectator and an actor who is crossing an empty stage,<sup>241</sup> theatricality manifests as hysteria at its purest.

### Little hysteria

By acting out what he calls *little hysteria* in relationships to his friend Fleiss or his patient E, Freud gets the needed material to understand his hysteria and to get rid of it.<sup>242</sup> Julia Kristeva explains acting out as an elusion of conscious defenses and a manifestation of a desire for an “immediate gratification of desire (like a fantasy that is “enacted” and that is no longer seen as a fantasy, but as “magic”). In reality, it is a manifestation of an *immediately satisfied demand* that occurs before the *mediation of language* and *the other* even begin.”<sup>243</sup>

In order to understand his railway phobia, Freud used E’s own railway phobia which he decoded as getting to the table and getting the food first (before other siblings are there). As Mitchell suggests, one can identify in Freud’s relationships a common hysterical Don Juanism: the need to get all the women and all the food before the others.<sup>244</sup> Because Freud was focusing on his own performances in

239 Masson, *Complete letters*, 311.

240 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 59.

241 Brook, *The Empty Space*.

242 See Masson, *Complete letters*.

243 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 48.

244 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 73.

his self-analysis of little hysteria, he thought that he had cured it. But by connecting it to his friends and patients with whom he identified, he was just acting it therefore not thinking it.<sup>245</sup>

By paying attention to how the cure developed, one can acknowledge that Freud's treatment in itself was acted out or hysterical, the theory reflecting his or his patients' actions as cure to the point that working on little hysteria self-destructs itself as therapy. This self-annihilating potential is present in Freud's following theory of infantile sexuality, where the child *thinks* about the father's seduction and the concept of *deferred action*<sup>246</sup> comes into play: what a child sees or hears without understanding gets a peculiar meaning when the child grows up.

The dream and hysterical symptoms function in a similar way: we know they are not true but they realize our wants immediately, they avoid thoughts in reality. I want not to see it happening, so I become hysterically blind to accomplish my desire. As a stage director you know that you are making things up, but, as the first-spectator, you believe in the world of lies that you have created (together with actors and stage designer). Hysteria rejects the distinction between fiction and reality: "in hysterical behaviour fantasies are lived as though they were reality."<sup>247</sup> Fantasizing experience or acting a fictional subjectivity is a type of defense or defiance against truth-seeking thinking or intellectualizing processes.

Freud's *little hysteria*, a key concept in understanding male hysteria, gives a detailed and painful description of how male hysteria works and also provides the coordinates in identifying it: an anxious and stimulating identification with someone else through whom the hysteric thinks and feels. Symptoms are not manifested through thinking or speaking but through bodily expressions. A significant element comes into play: the identification is not an objectifying relationship; the other is not a separate subject, but a plagiarized self. Freud's *little hysteria* disappeared simultaneously with

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245 Ibid.

246 Blum, "Seduction Trauma".

247 Ibid., 74.

the disappearance of hysteria from the West, around 1900. What followed immediately was an over-valuation of thinking over acting out and the required speaking-as-cure in the practice of psychoanalysis.

In Freud's relation to little hysteria, a dramatic character becomes the archetype of the male hysteric: Hamlet. But not for long, his place in theory was taken by another dramatic figure for some very pragmatic purposes.

### **Oedipus vs. Hamlet**

In the Oedipus Complex, the indispensable notion of psychoanalysis, men desire their mother and have to destroy that desire. In the negative Oedipus Complex a man hysterically identifies with his mother and desires his father. The fused identification with the mother became slowly the pathologized *femininity* of hysteria in boys and girls. The negative Oedipus Complex was not given consideration in psychoanalytical theory and became part of the unconscious.<sup>248</sup> In a similar way to the negative Oedipus Complex, hysteria disappeared in a process of the normalization of femininity. The resistance to male hysteria in psychoanalysis is ironically connected to the discovery of the Oedipus Complex through male hysteria. The *love object* in hysteria as child, man or woman, is not desired as an act of objectification but for the intention of identification.<sup>249</sup> Another element that is resisted and easily repressed in the hierarchical intergenerational Oedipus complex is the sibling relationship. But this exclusion was not a smooth process for the inexperienced Freud.

Freud was highly preoccupied of his relationship with his dead brother, Julius, and his sister, Anna, reflecting back to his childhood years in Freiberg, as part of his self-analysis of the active *little hysteria*.<sup>250</sup> That was the moment when, connecting the present to the past, Freud got into the

248 See for example Loewald, "The Waning of the Oedipus Complex" or Parens et al., "On the Girl's Entry Into the Oedipus Complex."

249 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 75-80.

250 Diaz de Chumaceiro, "Hamlet in Freud's Thoughts."

significance of the Oedipus story. Freud's letters to Fleiss represent the first text that discusses the hints for what later became the Oedipus complex.

Hamlet was a continuous source of inspiration for Freud in the early days of psychoanalysis. Freud associated the myth of the child's desire for the mother with Hamlet and Oedipus. Further on, Freud labeled Hamlet as hysteric and chose Oedipus as the norm.<sup>251</sup> This decision is a crucial one: as a personal choice, the male hysteric disappears to free the way for the universal Oedipus.

Concerning Hamlet, Freud considered that "sexual alienation in his conversation with Ophelia is typically hysterical." Similar to Don Juan in his actions, Hamlet identifies with Ophelia and murders Polonius, Ophelia's father, in a gesture which signifies killing his own father. Hamlet's culpability manifests at the unconscious level because he wants exactly what Claudius, his uncle, did already, to kill his father: "and does he not, in the end, in the same marvelous way as my hysterical patients, bring down punishment on himself by suffering the same fate as his father of being poisoned by the same rival?" or in the same line of argument "how does Hamlet the hysteric justify his words, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all?" How does he explain his irresolution in avenging his father by the murder of his uncle the same man who sends his courtiers to their death without a scruple and who is positively precipitate in murdering Laertes?"<sup>252</sup>

Freud's analysis of Hamlet shows the weight of sibling competition in his approach towards hysteria: Hamlet's father, also surprisingly called Hamlet, is murdered by his opponent brother, who desires his wife and position, in order to become him: the presence of lateral rival desire for the same woman and killings between brothers decode the male hysterics of the Shakespearean play.

If Hamlet comes to be the typical male hysteric, it is partly because Shakespeare's play makes a more coherent case study than any other confusing clinical attempts of Freud's early years of practice.

The analysis of the male hysteric, which Freud did not even try to explore clinically at this point in his

<sup>251</sup> Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 75-80.

<sup>252</sup> Masson, *Complete letters*, 272-273.



career, possibly owes more to Hamlet than to Freud's patients. Unfortunately this path was soon abandoned. By 1901, when *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published, Freud explicitly chooses to identify with Shakespeare, who was mourning his father when he wrote the play and not with a hysterical Hamlet.<sup>253</sup> The *little hysteria* was solved already, with the cost of changing male hysteria for an unresolved Oedipus complex in relation to the father. When hysteria reappears for Freud, it is an exclusively women's business.

The Oedipus complex and the castration complex erased the sibling competition from psychoanalysis because it just could not fit the new hierarchical schema. By constructing an interpretation based exclusively on intergenerational types of relations and oedipal fantasies of incest, the role of siblings and their connection to hysteria has been constantly underrated in psychoanalysis.

### Seduction

Another key element of hysteria that Freud was working on was seduction, where the little hysteric thinks that he is seduced in order to avoid thinking about sexuality. Being seduced by the other, he can experience sexuality without thinking about it. The experience in sexuality can be easily called fantasy, where the question is not about the falsity of experience, but to enjoy a particular version of events that can be even terrifying. The body comes into place exactly in fantasy, because it can replicate what the hysteric wants to happen as experiential. Freud connects dreams and hysterical symptoms to fantasy and to the process of getting what one wants.<sup>254</sup> In theatrical terms, even if we know that the performance is not a real event but an embodied illusion, during the show we experience its reality and we even become part of its reality when an actor is addressing us directly or returns the spectatorial gaze.

Baudrillard sees the privilege of interpretation over seduction in late psychoanalysis as a wrong

<sup>253</sup> Freud, *Interpretation of dreams*.

<sup>254</sup> See Eissler, *Freud and the seduction theory*.

turn. Seduction represents the pre-eminence of the symbolical over the real, “the mastery and strategy of appearances against the power of being and the real.”<sup>255</sup> In the exercise of seduction, the hidden meaning becomes the pertinent element in psychoanalysis, while in Baudrillard’s case, seduction, surfaces and appearances constitute the existence, where no latent and more profound meaning is possible.<sup>256</sup>

Bell argues that Freud’s decision to treat hysterical symptoms as manifestations of suppressed problems coming from sexuality meant that those symptoms were secondary to their meaning and a personal turn away from hysteria was necessary in this situation.<sup>257</sup> But the new psychoanalytical reading moved away from a mastery of symptoms that meant taming the unruly uterus of the hysterical woman or her wild genitals. The hysterical patients from *the golden age* were working class and poor in comparison to the new patients of psychoanalysis that had the knowledge to read and think their own difference.<sup>258</sup> If in Charcot’s clinical time, the doctor was giving all the readings, making up her symptoms and her narrative story based on a body ready to be represented and unable to speak, the psychoanalyzed patients were taking the talking cure. Considering all these differences in approach, the question remains: what if the hysterical symptoms are the primary phenomenon and the psychoanalytical interpretation is just a tendency to control those symptoms by imposing a hidden cause, the libido, which establishes a phallogentric and antifeminist theory of femininity?

The next aspect of hysteria that I will look at is hysterical identification, one of the richest concepts in my project of positively claiming male hysteria via Freud:

### **Hysterical identification**

“As for me, I note migraine, nasal secretion, and attacks of fear of dying... although [a friend]

255 Jean Baudrillard, quoted in Bell, “Stendhal’s legacy,” 24.

256 See Bell, “Stendhal’s legacy.”

257 Ibid., 24.

258 Matlock, *Scenes of seduction*, 160-161.

Tilgner's cardiac death is most likely responsible for this than the date",<sup>259</sup> Freud wrote in his letters from 1896, hysterically identifying himself with a dead friend. This type of identification manifested through fits or paralysis is frequently present in the history of hysteria. The hysterical identification can be produced by the death of a sibling or a close person that has a close age rather than from the death of an older person. When a sibling dies, the hysteric becomes the favorite dear child and takes the dead rival's position in a corporeal way. Through mourning, the dead is physically gone forever, and a representation takes over one's presence, used as a memory of the dead. The internalization of the dead through representation in mourning is opposed by the hysterical identification that negates any loss or representation. Ambivalence plays an important role in how a hysteric reacts to close ones: Freud explained through the mixed feelings of love for those they actually hate. But instead of projecting the ambivalent feelings in relation to death, the hysteric becomes them, experiencing bodily what they imagine as the dead experiences. There is no place for representation here.

The hysterical identification signifies "an unhappy confusion or happy fusion between self and other"<sup>260</sup> which is "heavily invested with libido"<sup>261</sup> but the question is not who's feelings, bodies or ideas do we get at the end of the day but how hysteria works not as a pathological phenomenon but as a "supreme means of expression" in Aragon and Breton's words from *Surrealist Revolution*.<sup>262</sup>

Freud was highly concerned about the plagiaristic element of little hysteria, especially in relation to his friend Fleiss. Plagiarism as a hysterical action manifests as a taking over of the other, their erasure, their becoming non-existent. The *bisexuality quarrel* between Freud and Fleiss haunted Freud for a long time. Fleiss introduced the term that became increasingly popular in psychoanalysis afterwards and he felt used and betrayed in a clear case of plagiarism.<sup>263</sup> As a response to this situation,

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259 Masson, *Complete letters*, 181.

260 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 60.

261 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 195.

262 Quoted in Hunter, "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism," 465.

263 Sulloway, *Freud: Biologist of the Mind*, 183-185.

Freud became exceedingly insistent in attributing credit to whoever was accountable for any new idea. He always embarrassed Josef Breuer, who was working with Anna O, by calling him many times the originator of psychoanalysis.<sup>264</sup> Conscious or unconscious plagiarism differs from stealing through its blurring of the boundaries, by expressing through taking something that is not yours like it is yours. It can be stopped only by becoming stealing, when the act of taking from someone else is thought, when someone else enters the picture (that someone that is different than the plagiaristic self).

Freud was struggling with his plagiarism and his dreams from that time express this great effort. In *Three Fates*, a Fate is rubbing her hands to make dumplings or *knodel*. Professor Knodel was a famous plagiarist of the time. Freud remembers how his mother was showing him how rubbed skin, like the Fate is rubbing her hands, produces the dirt that one becomes in death. Freud is a thief in this dream and he steals overcoats from lecture halls in order to wear another person's identity. In this particular dream, Freud makes the important switch from plagiarism (professor Knodel) to stealing (the overcoats). In another dream he wants to wear someone else's shoes and in an earlier dream he identifies with his nurse, Monique Zajic, who steals a purse. His nurse supposedly stole his pocket money as a child. The connection between an identification related to death and plagiarism are recurrent, but even if Freud identifies with Zajic through plagiarism, as another person, he consciously steals, by Zajic wanting something that does not belong to her.<sup>265</sup>

Mitchell finds two directions in the hysterical identification: one is the pathological one, multiple personality syndrome being the closest manifestation, the other is a creative experience named *negative capability* by Keats.<sup>266</sup> In negative capability, the artist experiences the world through an intense process of becoming what is imagined, as a sort of Bulgakov's dog becoming human. Should we be surprised that in "Heart of a Dog" the end of hysterical identification is generated by a doctor through

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<sup>264</sup> Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 61.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> For hysterical identification and ambivalence see *ibid.*, 56.

brain surgery and a radical treatment? Hysterics oscillate between the two extremes of pathology and creativity, imagining themselves as other persons, partly conscious and partly unconscious. The creative identification requests potential hysteria of all persons involved in the creative process. Through transference the hysteric is never alone. This particular form of identification was used to negate the existence of the male hysteric who can only identify with a female hysteric: "one must hypothesize that there was some degree of female identification among the men who assumed a hysterical role."<sup>267</sup> From this perspective, male hysteria is simply a form of female hysteria, and the male hysteric imagines female motives and behaviors.

Freud considered his relation with Fleiss *feminine*, by imagining it as a bodily unity of mother and child. Freud was the baby without words to describe his feelings so that the mother can understand by transferring them to herself: he was thinking through Fleiss. The plagiaristic identification, as in Freud's case with Fleiss, a real creative engine in their friendship, became problematic and unsolvable for both through the form of transference that implied unity of thought. The hysterical transference in this specific case was characterized by mixture, the subject had a totally plagiaristic position where one could not be differentiated from the other and could not be sure of what belongs to whom: "I still do not know what has been happening in me. Something from the deepest depths of my own neurosis set against any advance in the understanding of the neuroses, and you have somehow been involved in it... I have no guarantees of this, just feelings of a highly obscure nature. Has nothing of this kind happened to you?"<sup>268</sup>

The only way out for Freud was to renounce their friendship and to get away from his little hysteria by becoming a father, both to his own children and to a movement called psychoanalysis. By postponing the Dora case, Freud was in Mitchell's opinion, not postponing his hurt feelings or an inappropriate form of therapy or theory, but the self-analysis of his little hysteria and the decipher of its

<sup>267</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 331.

<sup>268</sup> Masson, *Complete letters*, 255.

meaning.<sup>269</sup> After his unfortunate relation with Fleiss, Freud kept away from his plagiaristic identification by making a clear demarcation between him and Dora and was not willing to think through the other. That's why he withdrew Dora's case from publication and was relieved of its rejection.

Pseudologia fantastica, bovarism and plain lying in relation to subjective construction are all closely connected to hysterical identification, and can function as useful tools in creatively exploring one's spiral of identifications.

### **Pseudologia fantastica or bovarism**

Stories of hysteria have been named in psychoanalysis *pseudologia fantastica* or *bovarism* and were considered pure fantasies taken as reality. In an 1898 letter to Fliess, Freud presents the case of his brother in law, Moriz Freud, who was a distant cousin married to his sister Marie. Moriz Freud is described as *half-Asian* and suffering from *pseudologia fantastica*.<sup>270</sup> His half-Asian association is related to his place of origin, Bucharest, while his disease represents "the psychiatric diagnosis for those mythomaniac patients who lie in order to gain status."<sup>271</sup>

Pseudologia fantastica operates as another key syndrome in defining hysteria. Alexander Pilcz characterizes it at the beginning of the twentieth century in these terms: "an extraordinary vanity forms the motor, the need for the extraordinary, the need to appear more than one is, to have experienced more than one has, more than one can experience, in the course of daily life... The pleasure that accompanies such vacillation is so great that it cannot be controlled, even when the substance of the lie is immediately evident; it is simply impossible for such characters to stay with the truth."<sup>272</sup>

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269 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 63.

270 Masson, *Complete letters*, 311.

271 Gilman, *Freud, Race and Gender*, 165.

272 Alexander Pilcz quoted in *ibid.*, 165.

When he wrote *Madame Bovary*,<sup>273</sup> Flaubert studied himself and instituted hysterics to create his character. Bovarism has a close connection to pseudologia fantastica – self-referential narratives where subjects try to draw attention from other people through lying.<sup>274</sup> Madame Bovary's behavior, her bourgeois status, her ambitions grown by various escapist readings, her unsatisfying marriage, as well as her wish to change just for the sake of change have created a new paradigm of the imaginary. That paradigm has become bovarism, the psychical challenge that pushes Emma to settle a distance between what she is and what she thinks she is.

Emma uses novels to escape from her own present into another imaginary present. Books dominate her life. She entertains the young clerk, Leon, with the fashion magazines she has brought along. He "sat beside her and they looked at the engraved plates together and waited for each other at the bottom of the page. Often she would ask him to read her some poetry.... And so between them arose a kind of alliance, a continual commerce in books and ballads."<sup>275</sup> When a certain novel starts a fashion for cactuses, he buys some for her in Rouen. The book overshadows all and directs much of the course of events for those who immerse themselves in it. This gives rise to a dependency on fiction, to a devaluing of Emma's own life story, a certain type of desire to become someone else, living in luxury. Bovarism was associated with *women in idleness*, and Flaubert portraying Madame Bovary reveals his own ambivalence toward pseudologia fantastica; he is consciously playing with what he calls his own "feminine disposition."

Pseudologia fantastica is a term still applied by psychiatrists in relation to regular or compulsive lying. Pathological lying can be seen as an extensive misrepresentation with no narrative end.<sup>276</sup> What is common for these stories is that they are usually told to present the author in question in a good light as a form of self-protection against the listeners. The invented stories have parts that are irrefutable and

273 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*.

274 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 35.

275 Goody, "From Oral to Written," 25.

276 Micale, *Hysterical Men*, 146.

parts that are completely imagined (and they can be easily recognized as untrue by the story-teller in a case of dissension). Lying has a long historical relation to hysterical behaviour. The lie in hysteria can be understood through an unconscious desire that can be easily prohibited and for this reason it contains its own annihilation, an avoidance of its own materialization.

Pseudologia fantastica is just one of the many devices that hysterics use to capture the attention of others, offering themselves as spectacles, presenting dramatic episodes of extreme sickness and pain, the well-known and despised attention-seeking of hysteria. The problem in psychoanalysis is not to make a clear distinction between reality and fiction, but to see how seduction and fantasy are affecting subjectivity. Charcot was one of the first witnesses of these devices at Salpêtrière in a long and strongly engaged voyeuristic exercise. Hysteria necessitates spectators, at least one, there is no such thing as a solitude hysteric. It exists in relationship: it engages the other, either through acceptance and reciprocity or rejection.

After exploring some of the crucial elements in relation to the construction of a hysterical discourse for nineteenth century women, the role of male hysterics and the concept of Freudian little hysteria with its main symptoms, I move to another well-known figure of psychoanalysis and his own exploration of Freudian hysteria: Jacques Lacan.

### **Through the looking glass: male hysteria with Jacques Lacan**

After Charcot and Freud, the most popular “hysterical impresario”<sup>277</sup> became Jacques Lacan who founded his own psychoanalytical school in Paris in 1964. Rereading Freud, Lacan reused hysteria as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon of hyperfemininity. Like Charcot’s Paris from 1880s and Freud’s Vienna from 1890s, Lacan’s Paris from 1970s became a location for popular theories of hysteria. The timing was perfect in the sense of the collapse of the student revolution and the assimilation of

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<sup>277</sup> Showalter, *Hystories*, 46.



Marxism and radical political movements into psychoanalytical discourse. From an unknown psychiatrist, Lacan became over night “the iconoclast doctor of a society sick with its symptoms, its mores and its modernity.”<sup>278</sup> He was playing the Charcot character and resemblances were easily observed: an aesthete, *un visuael*, charismatic and, more than ever, a connoisseur of the arts. Besides psychoanalysts and curious students, writers and actors were attending regularly his Wednesday seminars. The theatrical atmosphere of the weekly event was exploited by Lacan in the spirit of Charcot and hysteria was not missing from this picture. His return to hysteria was first at the level of hysterical discourse, through playfulness, word-play, mystery and theatricality and second, at the theoretical level, by knotting together hysteria, women and femininity by identifying the hysteric with a woman struggling with her sexual identity.<sup>279</sup>

One of the most fruitful contributions of Jacques Lacan in approaching hysteria and identification is the concept of countertransference, after a vigilant reading of Freud’s interpretation of Dora’s case.

### **Transference and countertransference**

Sigmund Freud’s approach to his cases of hysteria was mainly a clinical one, with the main purpose of finding cures. This type of approach was used also for his own *little hysteria*, even if it involved a more personal and poetic perspective. The abandonment of hysteria had clinical reasons also: psychoanalysis failed to offer therapeutic help for hysterics. An unexpected resurrection of hysteria comes from Jacques Lacan who, by raising hysteria to the category of speech, subsequently conceptualized and framed it in close relation with psychoanalytical speech. The psychoanalytical discourse becomes through Lacan a conscious hysterical discourse. Hysteria was considered by Lacan as embodying “a unique configuration with respect to knowledge”<sup>280</sup> but eluding discourse defined as

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<sup>278</sup> Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 420.

<sup>279</sup> See Showalter, *Hystories*.

<sup>280</sup> Fink, *Lacanian subject*, 134.

what is reflected, articulated or accessible (as thought, expression and communication) by moving to the area of images and hallucination.<sup>281</sup>

The hysteric questions the consistency of the patriarchal law, demanding authority to prove itself. In Bruce Fink's words "the hysteric pushes the master – incarnated in a partner, teacher or, whomever – to the point where he or she can find the master's knowledge lacking... In addressing the master, the hysteric demands that he or she produces knowledge, and then goes on to disprove his or her theories."<sup>282</sup> As Elisabeth Bronfen observes "this dialectics subtends Freud's entire project of psychoanalysis, given that his discovery of the unconscious emerged from listening to hysterics even as they insisted on refusing his solution, thus proving to him the inadequacy of his knowledge."<sup>283</sup>

Starting with Dora's case, Freud identified a fluidity of hysterical identifications which proved that "sexual difference was a psychological problematic rather than a natural fact"<sup>284</sup> and a main concern for the new-born psychoanalysis. Dora's case expresses Freud's interpretation in relation to his own little hysteria associations, a reading of "hysterical discourse by experiencing its source within himself."<sup>285</sup> Obstacles in interpretation soon arrived as the analyst was becoming as uncertain of the analyzing process as the analysand. Its *great defect*, as Freud thought, was the difficulty to control the transference: he acknowledges that he took the role of Dora's father and Herr K. but he did not consider her place in his unconscious and her role in his interpretation.<sup>286</sup>

Jacques Lacan is the first psychoanalyst who explains the relation transference – countertransference in which both the analyst and patient are involved. In his 1951 article, "Intervention on the Transference," transference is nothing more than a reaction to the analyst's countertransference, "a knife that cuts both ways." In Freud's case, he identified with a masculine

281 Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, 60.

282 Fink, *Lacanian subject*, 134.

283 Bronfen, *The knotted subject*, 39.

284 Kahane, "Introduction," 22.

285 Ibid.

286 See Muslin and Gill, "Transference in the Dora Case."

father-like image of Herr K. and didn't want to get out this identification in order to offer Dora a way to recognize her desire.<sup>287</sup> The distinction between the penis as organ and the phallus as signifier is played by Lacan here as the difference between the actual father, who becomes irrelevant, and the paternal metaphor, the name of the Father in the Symbolic order as it appears in language: "it is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the Symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law."<sup>288</sup> But through the spiraling identification of the hysteric, the father's role cannot stay fixed or unchanged for the male hysteric. Lacan's Father is a figure of a function that plays at the Imaginary level in the relation between self and other-as-the image-of-self. Lacan identifies Freud as the Symbolic Father for Dora, the figure of paternity, who was capable to help her to achieve her place within the law of sexual difference through a dialectical game. But Freud also hysterically identified with Dora's Herr K., an identification that he couldn't escape from and therefore became unable to facilitate a positive transference for her in order for her to enter the Law of the Father.

Lacan describes the trajectory that a hysteric takes in a psychoanalytical session: the patient starts talking about herself but not to the therapist; afterwards she talks to the therapist but not about herself. The goal of the therapist is to get the patient to the point where she talks to the therapist about herself - the moment of self-reflection. This linguistic exercise is not successful in the case of hysterics because the needed language is parallel with the corporeal identification of a hysteric: from whole body to absent body and back again. When the analyst faces the same problems of getting into the language, the cure becomes even more improbable.<sup>289</sup> In Freud's identification, Lacan sees more potential than simply helping Dora to enter the patriarchal law: Freud uses the hysterical discourse of his patients to discover his own unconscious. Failure to cure does not necessarily mean disclaiming the theory behind, it can

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287 This article is critiqued by Kahane, "Introduction," 23.

288 Lacan, *Language of the Self*, 41.

289 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 268.

indicate personal limitations to which Freud was subjected and the unimaginable potential for theory and difficulty to explain hysteria. Shoshana Felman explains Freud's influence on Lacan as a methodological outcome: "The discovery of the unconscious is therefore Freud's discovery, within the discourse of the other, of what was actively reading within himself: his discovery, or his reading, of what was reading – in what was being read. The gist of Freud's discovery, for Lacan, thus consists not simply of the revelation of a new *meaning* – the unconscious – but of the discovery of *a new way of reading*."<sup>290</sup>

Kristeva, a practicing analyst, follows Lacan's work and considers countertransference "the driving force behind the analytic profession"<sup>291</sup> and an important tool in an experimental reactivation of hysteria in analytical treatment. For her, when an analyst identifies with patients and adopts their anxieties and excitability in order to make their work easier, the analyst "render[s] transference hysterical."<sup>292</sup> From this point of view, countertransference becomes a discrete way to positively use the hysterical identification as a form of knowledge, based on the analyst's capacity to adopt the double of their patient. Kristeva goes even further than this, by claiming that the history of culture and of psychoanalysis is "peppered with the impasses and splendors of this close connection between hysterics and their beloved, both of whom could be diagnosed as incarnations of countertransference."<sup>293</sup> But at this point, a return to Lacan and his feminist followers is demanded by looking at the hysterical discourse.

### **The hysterical discourse**

If French feminists saw in hysteria a sign of women's silencing within various male institutions such as language, culture or psychoanalysis, Lacan argued several times that women spoke the

<sup>290</sup> Felman, *Writing and Madness*, 164.

<sup>291</sup> Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 86.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

discourse of the hysteric rather than the discourse of the master. The feminist Lacanian followers “proposed to speak directly from the place of the hysteric as it was formulated in Lacan’s theory... to question psychoanalytical theory from within psychoanalysis itself.”<sup>294</sup> What Lacan and French feminists forget about is the case of the male hysteric (that apparently cannot speak hysterics). Of course, Freud’s case makes us think otherwise but again, psychoanalysis is constantly questioning and contradicting its discoveries, as it happened right from its beginning.

The connection between hysteria and femininity is not intended to represent a break with hysteria for Jacques Lacan. His reading of Freud has the quality of stressing the innovation, subversiveness and hysterical intensity of Freud, together with a possibility of detouring psychoanalysis in feminist directions as feminist authors emphasized (Elizabeth Grosz’s writings on Lacan being one of the most convincing examples).<sup>295</sup>

Freud brought a research style which was developed further by Lacan. It outraged philosophers, clinicians and social scientists “who expected a clear, unequivocal model and terminology, and theory as a ‘straight-forward’ statement explaining ‘facts.’”<sup>296</sup> The form of hysterical discourse that psychoanalysis adopted is first of all provocative, difficult, uncanny and impossible to master. Lacan explains: “Every return to Freud that occasions a teaching worthy of the name will be produced by way of the path by which the most hidden truth manifests itself in the revolutions of culture. This path... is called a style.”<sup>297</sup> The hysterical discourse of psychoanalysis functions like an illogical logic of a dream or what Vergote calls a rebus.<sup>298</sup> A rebus or a picture puzzle cannot make sense only if the focus is on its component parts. Relations between parts and not their totality provide the rebus with meaningful content. In hysterical discourse the hermeneutical circle as a conventional textual criticism cannot

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294 Noel Evans, *Fits and Starts*, 203-204.

295 Elizabeth Grosz emphasized the impossible break with Lacan for feminists interested in subjectivity in her quintessential book, *Jacques Lacan*.

296 Ibid., 17.

297 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 458.

298 Smith and Kerrigan, *Interpreting Lacan*, 217.

function: the parts do not reveal the whole and the whole does not make sense through its parts. According to Kristeva, the artist discharges the identificatory hysterical symptom into a creative discourse – the style. In creating a style, “the artist is constantly generating identifications.”<sup>299</sup> The style can offer a phantasmatic transfusion between body and meaning, a transfusion that can guarantee the real and unlimited flexibility and theatricality of the subject.

French feminists locate the origin of hysterical discourse in the pre-Oedipal phase that has a particular linguistic character, including orality, rhythms, intonations, screams and babbles. In French feminism, “the hysteric occupies the place of female absence in linguistic and cultural systems.”<sup>300</sup> For Luce Irigaray it is “precisely the silence of the female produced by the absence of femininity in representational systems of language and logic which has defined women as hysterics.”<sup>301</sup>

The silent body language of hysteria can be seen as a contestation of patriarchal culture and its representations. But this conceptualization of a hysterical language of the body had bizarre reverberations in French psychoanalytical circles. When in 1972, French feminism entered its hysterical phase and at a famous meeting in Paris feminists chanted “Nous sommes toutes des hystériques!” the answer from the Lacanian psychoanalytical establishment came like thunder: excommunication.<sup>302</sup> From this example we can see how claiming hysteria is not a prudent tactic in terms of psychoanalytical success.

The histrionic behaviour of the hysteric can be seductive, funny or attractive but hides, in Juliet Mitchell’s interpretation, a body which is missing from the scene, what was seen as an ego with a “weak level of consciousness”<sup>303</sup> or what Breuer was calling a “hypnotic ego” that can easily facilitate Charcot’s concept of “plastic incarnations.” Pierre Janet considers that the hysterical ego is too weak to

299 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 180.

300 Showalter, *Hystories*, 57.

301 Noel Evans, *Fits and Starts*, 210.

302 Showalter describes this case in *Hystories*

303 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 68.

affirm “I no longer see.” The process that takes place disregards *I* and *no longer* and what is left is *see* – a sensation localized in the unconscious. In this case, hysteria is a “malady of representation.”<sup>304</sup> Or to use another example, Monique David-Menard calls it a body which cannot be symbolized.<sup>305</sup>

If repressing oedipal desire contains the repression of the representation of the idea of desire, that representation becomes unconscious and its effects are transmitted through the body.<sup>306</sup> In the case of the hysteric, there is no form of representation: pain actually affects the body. Even if it is consciously made-up, through acting out or dramatization, the hysteric throws out fantasies that become actions of the body. “Hurt feelings are presented as physical wounds. One of my patients saw his leg weep – this was a painful pun on the idea that a physical sore ‘weeps’ and that, being a man, he must not weep in his distress.”<sup>307</sup> The weeping leg is an example of the anti-Cartesian non-separation of mind and body where bizarre symptoms are forms of bodily transformation and distortion. Hysteria challenges the body/mind dichotomy like psychoanalysis which had a long reputation of an anti-Cartesian science, mainly because of the Freudian suggestion that something like the unconscious can exist; it destroys the illusion of a Cartesian subject: the overlap of subject-consciousness.

Freud distrusted the centrality and givenness of consciousness by looking at it as an effect of psychical agencies rather than their cause. The human subject as a conscious rational being becomes suspect, the individual vanity of self-knowledge and self-mastery are irremediably decentered. For Freud, the consciousness and its self-certainty can be one result of “unconscious psychical ‘defences’ – denial, disavowal, resistance. That is, consciousness is identified with a certain mode of self-deception. The subject cannot know the material, linguistic, economic, or unconsciousness structures on which it relies and over which it may have little or no effect.”<sup>308</sup> As a Deleuzian nomad, the hysteric has the life

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304 Janet, *Mental State of Hystericals*, 486.

305 See David Menard, *Hysteria from Freud to Lacan*.

306 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 34.

307 Ibid.

308 See Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 1-2.

of “the intermezzo... a vector of deterritorialization.”<sup>309</sup> Even if the subject is affected by these structures, there is no certainty that it can be in charge of them; one can identify a hysterical consciousness that resists politically to hegemonic forms of subjection. The hysterical discourse can be a nonphallogentric way of thinking through its epistemological position: moving from one discourse to another, contradicting all of them, blurring well-established boundaries, spreading confusion, resisting discursive assimilation, avoiding dominant forms of representation or self imaging. The hysterical discourse is always on the move, “creating connections where things were previously dis-connected or seemed un-related, where there seemed to be “nothing to see.” In transit, moving, dis-placing – this is the grain of hysteria without which there is no theorization at all.”<sup>310</sup> This type of theoretization brings new possibilities to relate concepts, to connect notions through an intentional misreading or misinterpretation and offers a location from where one can demystify phallogentric categories.

Problematizing Cartesian dualism and the reevaluation of the body pose a number of intolerable questions to liberal humanism and empiricism, exactly those questions related to the history of subjectivity that cannot be asked if the conscious subject is taken as unquestionable. If Descartes marks a modern conceptualization of subjectivity, Freud initiates a postmodern understanding of it through unconscious desire. De-naturalization and de-centering of the knowing subject through unconsciousness and the body introduce a proto-postmodern approach. By introducing the uncertainty in knowledge – subjectivity relations, Freud opens the Pandora’s Box of reconceptualizing consciousness, knowledge and subjectivity by new methods not so much centered on the subject as a knowledgeable being.<sup>311</sup> Gender identity, bodies, libido or sexuality are all loci of inquiry opened by Freud’s new and complex discursive field, psychoanalysis. Excitability, resistant to language and representation, the core of hysteria, brings forth the two main exclusions from representation: affects

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309 Deleuze and Guattari, *Nomadology*, 44.

310 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 93.

311 See Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*.



and drives. By focusing on the unconscious and producing its whole analytical device, psychoanalysis introduced a theoretical model that approached the hysterical effort to explore excitability and signification and offered a way to the inner life of the hysterics.

When Freud was invited for a series of lectures in the United States in 1909 he was delighted but also worried about American reactions. He told Jung, with him on the ship to the United States: “They don’t realize we’re bringing them the plague.”<sup>312</sup> Besides the plague, Freud brought also a style which was developed further by Lacan.

If I can find Lacan’s input on hysterical discourse highly useful in my endeavor of reading hysteria as a revolutionary form of knowledge, I cannot ignore his very problematic approach to femininity, based also on reading hysteria’s path into psychoanalysis and its formal disappearance.

### **Femininity a/is masquerade**

If the first relationship, the incorporation of the mother, is an easy step, making the identification with femininity uncomplicated, achieving masculinity is the more demanding and difficult realization, according to Stephen Frosh.<sup>313</sup> The distancing from the mother and finding a father to identify with, in an oedipal way, requires much effort and becomes the boy’s main task in a social context where gender development and self-assertiveness go together: “Lacan points to the exceptional anxiety involved in taking on a masculine identification. Indeed the figure of the male qua male might be called the cultural lie which maintains that sexual identity can be personified by making difference itself a position.”<sup>314</sup> Masculinity is constructed through a de-identification with what the child knows (the mother and the feminine), through a separation and a distancing from the feminine in a process of “linking identity, discourse and sexual apparatus to a fantasy of superiority qua difference.”<sup>315</sup> This position of excluding

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312 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 116.

313 Frosh, *Sexual Difference*, 109.

314 Ragland-Sullivan, “The Sexual Masquerade,” 51.

315 *Ibid.*, 59.

the other, apparently inescapable for masculinity, is in a constant danger of falling under the spell of the fantasy of an inclusive femininity. The male hysteric finds himself in this situation of not possibly resisting the magic charm of femininity and not getting into a defensive state of being defined by a masculinity based on difference. In achieving masculinity, the boy has to differentiate from the mother and enter the oedipal fantasy of a masculine law that dominates the feminine, in which he can grow a phallus of his own and achieve mastery.

Joan Rivière, a British analyst analyzed by Freud, introduced the concept of *femininity as masquerade*, by talking about a special type of women for whom femininity is nothing more than an act.<sup>316</sup> Lacan easily adopted the concept but with a slight change: for him femininity *is* masquerade,<sup>317</sup> repeating the Freudian inaccuracy of conflating femininity and hysteria and his gesture of its universal repudiation. This is the point where Braidotti sees “psychoanalysis as a patriarchal discourse that apologizes for metaphysical cannibalism: the silencing of the powerfulness of the feminine.”<sup>318</sup> By criticizing the process of male thinkers to become “feminized” she conflates hysteria with femininity once again. She identifies the “pheminists” as “those white, middle class, male intellectuals who “have got it right” in that they have sensed where the subversive edge of feminist theory is”<sup>319</sup> with a very interesting term for this research: *the new hysterics*.

In a chapter of *Nomadic Subjects* that starts with a quote from Valerie Solanas that I reduce here to “being an incomplete female, the male spends his life attempting to complete himself, to become female,” Rosi Braidotti brings the new character, the new hysteric, on stage. The *new men* in a postfeminist context are the best male friend for feminists but not necessarily what feminists hoped for, because “they have not inherited a world of oppression and exclusion based on their sexed corporal

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316 Riviere, “On Jealousy.”

317 Lacan, “Intervention on Transference.”

318 Braidotti, *Nomadic subjects*, 139.

319 Ibid., 138-141.

being.”<sup>320</sup> Because the phallogentric discourse is based on the woman’s body, her absence and disqualification, a little good will is not enough to fix this exclusion. Braidotti identifies the emergence of a “return to the feminine” in Lacan’s assertion that woman cannot speak because of her ex-centricity vis-à-vis the phallogentric discourse. The feminine can function as “a powerful vehicle for conveying the critical attempts to redefine human subjectivity.”<sup>321</sup> She includes in this line of male thinkers that became hysterics, because of their interest in the feminine, Lyotard (with the feminine as a male disease expressing the critical state of the postmodern condition), Derrida (with the feminine as the most pervasive signifier) and Deleuze (with his notion of becoming-woman). Her criticism of the feminization of the postmodern subject attacks the maneuver of the same old metaphysical cannibalism: the male desires to continue a hegemonic tradition and a new form of uterus envy. By conflating *becoming feminized* with a male form of hysteria, Braidotti repeats *the original sin* of Freudian psychoanalysis: the fusion of hysteria and femininity.

If male hysterics can represent a reevaluation of the construction of masculinity, Lacan considered male hysterics to be always more seriously sick than female hysterics in a line of hysteria ranging from normal to mad while associations of masculinity and femininity are superimposed in this relation. A man identifying with the mother appears more disturbed than a woman thinking she is her mother.<sup>322</sup> The theme reemerges in a contemporary crisis of masculinity which presents men as insecure and victims of social changes where technology, gays and women make them lose their male advantages. The good-old masculinity reclaim functions as a popular form of drama present in popular culture and especially theatre,<sup>323</sup> as a form of melancholia for a disappeared world where men were real

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320 Ibid., 138.

321 Ibid.

322 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 320.

323 I can use the example of the emerging new theatricality coming together with a fresh generation of playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Joe Penhall, Phyllis Nagy, Patrick Marber and Sarah Kane. Masculinity in crisis is a major dramatic, post-dramatic and performing theme for the in-er-face theatre, the British “New Brutalism” or the German “Blood and Sperm Generation.”

men and women were hysterics. Lacan's cry for the vanishing golden age of hysteria with its divas of the nineteenth century is becoming popular again: "Where have they gone, the hysterics of yesteryear... these marvelous women, the Anna Os, the Emmy von Ns?"<sup>324</sup>

By paying attention to male hysterics I am not interested in a popular contemporary form of masculinity crisis where egosyntonic masculinity is supposed to be unquestionably desired and where the dramatic element emerges from its loss. If I want to approach the concept of masculinity in crisis, I would focus on the notion of masculinity itself, how it is presented in psychoanalysis as a comment of its patriarchal significance and how it is socially constructed as "theoretically and historically troubled."<sup>325</sup>

The approach towards a revision of masculinity has a short history, not earlier than the 1980s, as a direct reaction to the feminist movement and theory. Masculinity, like Lacanian femininity, is being understood more as "an effect of culture – a construction, a performance, a masquerade – rather than a universal and unchanging essence."<sup>326</sup> By not considering masculinity or male subjectivity historically stable, ideologically fixed, but permanently constructed and reconstructed, hysterical masculinity can enter the interrogation of the egosyntonic claim on masculinity. By looking for multiple or alternative masculinities in theatre and by focusing on the construction of femininity as an exclusionary practice, a broader insight into masculinity is targeted together with the shaky alignment of men on one side of the power line and women on the other. In her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Silverman explores masculinities that are marginal to the norms of non-problematic/phallic masculinity: hysterical masculinity can enter this line of non-phallic masculinities.<sup>327</sup> The most imperative element in these deconstructive tactics is to expose the fictionality of phallic masculinity which is based in Silverman's opinion upon the denial of passivity, masochism and specularly.

324 Quoted by Showalter, *Hystories*.

325 Penley and Willis, "Editorial: Male Trouble," 4.

326 Cohan and Rae Hark, *Screening the Male*, 7.

327 Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*.

If there is any escape from a phallic dominant fiction, possibilities can come at this point through a hysterical misrecognition and an intimate battle with organs that leads us to Lacan's mirror stage. Silverman explains the images and stories through which a society finds consensus as dominant fictions.<sup>328</sup> The ideological game of relating to any form of reality is highly connected to the imaginary: the consensus of *what is reality* is not much of a matter of rational agreement but more of an imaginary affirmation, a form of misrecognition. This type of misrecognition is for Lacan the basis for ego, formed during the mirror stage, where the child identifies with an outside image (its reflection in the mirror). Like the subject of ideology, the child has the sensation "Yes, it really is me!"<sup>329</sup> But this recognition of the image acts as misrecognition because the image is complete and coherent unlike the child who experiences itself as fragmented. Lacan calls the child's glorious identification with a mirror image *capitulation*, in order to explain the child's captivation by the imaginary. Capitulation emerges in various social identifications produced by the subject in relation to cultural representations of itself. The subject misrecognizes itself in the mirror stage as the beginning of a long series of misrecognitions through which the ego is constituted: it cannot be real or core identity, but only an illusion.<sup>330</sup> The narcissistic ego, described by the mirror stage, is oriented to object relations and represents "the originating script for poststructuralist and postmodern approaches," by focusing on "the intersubjective space between people as one of cultural desire."<sup>331</sup>

### Hysterical organs

The body as a whole gets recognized in the mirror phase: "the total form of the body through which the subject overtakes in a mirage the maturing of his potency is only given to him as a Gestalt, i.e. in an eternity in which, to be sure, that form is more constituting than constituted but where,

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328 Ibid., 24-42.

329 Ibid., 20.

330 Lacan, *Ecrits*.

331 Campbell, *Arguing with the phallus*, 63.

above all, it appears to him in a relief of stature which fixes it and in a symmetry which inverts it, as opposed to the turbulence of movement with which he feels himself animate it.”<sup>332</sup> Somehow, the hysteric is trapped in the phase of discovering that the body image is just an image, he realizes that there is no body behind the mirror but he continues to search for a materialization of this absent body. The point of identification with the image is never achieved, the unified self’s image, producer of identity, is misrecognised and the unified consciousness, the producer of language, remains just another fake image for the hysteric. “What makes the *moi* an imaginary construct” is not fooling the hysteric, who continues to disbelieve the ego as “an *Idealisch*, another self.”<sup>333</sup> Because he cannot achieve the total image of the body, he is incapable of getting to what Allon White calls “the moment of production and structuration of an identity through the mediation of the body image.” The realist ego or “the transcendental ego necessary to logical and rational communication”<sup>334</sup> refuses to come into play for hysterics.

“The hysteric plays to the extreme with the feeling of elasticity”<sup>335</sup> in a sort of mortal game with organs taken to their extreme function, organs which “should be called unreal,” evaginated or turned inside out in a process of “coming and going,”<sup>336</sup> until extenuation. In Lacan’s reading these organs are machines of pleasure and pain.<sup>337</sup> The hysterical body tries to get to the final point of extenuation through grand gestures, spontaneous and numerous, mixing cruelty with desire, aggression with caring, a multiple presentation of oppositions “an object of anxiety in the gestures of *jouissance* – the *jouissance* in which everything is there – presented, open, offered. Inaccessible.”<sup>338</sup>

A Lacanian “body-in-bits-and-pieces” is an uncoordinated aggregate, a series of parts, zones,

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332 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 95.

333 Anthony Wilden’s commentary in Lacan, *The language of the self*, 160.

334 White, *Carnival, hysteria, and writing*, 77.

335 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 848.

336 *Ibid.*, 847.

337 *Ibid.*, 774.

338 Didi-Huberman, *Invention of hysteria*, 263.

organs, sensations, needs and impulses rather than an integrated whole. Each part struggles for its own pleasure with no concern for the unified body. There is no experience of corporeal unity or occupying a fixed position within a bodily enclosed space. Sensory reactions which may animate certain organs or bodily parts cannot be attributed to a continuous subjectivity.<sup>339</sup> The image of a broken fallen body, *le corps morcelé*, the Lacanian body-into-bits-and-pieces, emerges in “dreams, fantasies, certain types of schizophrenia, experience of drugs and art and literature.”<sup>340</sup> To give just a few examples, this type of body can be found in the works of Antonin Artaud, Salvador Dali or Hieronymus Bosch as an internal struggle with organs and body parts.

The bodily disintegration is felt by the hysteric who cannot achieve the constitution of the whole body from the mirror stage and tries to find other ways to achieve the body without organs. The struggle with organs is vital because the otherwise impossible unified and transcendental ego of the hysteric is threatened with complete disappearance. The embodiment of the hysterical subject, as “a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolical and the sociological”<sup>341</sup> is not yet figured. Lacan’s concept of the image of the whole body as necessity in creating a rational unity is canceled by the hysterical fantasy of the broken body which supports a breakdown of an autonomy based on reason. In both cases it is important that the image of the complete or fragmented body is the one which mediates thetic harmony of the self and its dissolution.

### **A new type of subjectivity**

The body without organs, an absent desired body, cannot be represented by a figurative substitute, it remains a lack and its images of representation cannot function. In this hysterical case, speech cannot fill the lack of the absent body. The “lack of an object” is the epistemological gap in the signifying

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339 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 4-5; 167.

340 White, *Carnival, hysteria, and writing*, 77.

341 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 4.

process which the subject tries to fill at the level of bodily signifier.<sup>342</sup> In the process of identification, “the gap between the imaged ego and instinctual motility” is filled by “what Lacan calls the place of the Other as the place of the signifier. The subject is masked by ‘an even purer’ signifier, but the lack of presence confers on *another* the role of holding the possibility of signification.”<sup>343</sup>

Through identification, the hysteric makes external something intimate and is exactly the process that Lacan calls, by coining a new term, *extimacy*: “the most intimate is at the same time the most hidden... The most intimate is not a point of transparency but rather a point of opacity... Extimacy says that the intimate is Other – like a foreign body, a parasite.”<sup>344</sup> The blurring of boundaries between internal and external body spaces and selves makes “metaphor-become-flesh,” materiality becomes hallucination and the phantomatic is embodied with physical and somatic reality.<sup>345</sup>

In hysteria, saying is doing, words have a painful reality. Lacanian naming of the phallus as the primary signifier due to its lack of relation to any object that it signifies, or the absence of the signifier, has the role of showing that its significance exists only through language. The hysteric regresses from a linguistic position to a blurry position on the borders of language. The performative language of the hysteric uses words and speech in order to act, for the sake of their musicality and intonation, to get what is wanted, to throw out only what is strongly felt. The hysterical words are not part of a signifying chain: they are reduplicated things beyond representation and have full materiality.

The most intimate part of subjectivity and the body without organs become foreign bodies which terrorize to disperse the subject whom holds them together. The process of hysterical identification opens a new conceptualization of subjectivity, by embodying a certain degree of detachment in special social locations that can bring radical changes. In Kristeva’s terms, this type of subjectivity manifests through a new poetic language: “In art in general there is constituted a language which speaks these

342 White, *Carnival, hysteria, and writing*, 78.

343 Kristeva quoted in White, *Carnival, hysteria, and writing*, 78.

344 Miller, “Extimité,” 123.

345 Bronfen, *The knotted subject*, 385.



sites of rupture which economistic class-consciousness represses, sites of rupture corresponding to the desire of the masses but unexpressed and perhaps inexpressible by them in productivist capitalist society in the state of industrialization, sites of rupture which are therefore withdrawn into the experience of the cultural elites and, within those elites, accessible to rare subjects in whom these breaks incur the risk and advantage of radicalizing themselves into madness and aestheticism and so of losing their ties with the social change. That is what we wish to suggest.”<sup>346</sup> Through the process of hysterical identification in the realm of the imaginary the thetic may be transgressed to give a new and distinctive form of subjectivity. This subjective transgression is what Kristeva calls *forclusion*, following Lacan’s translation of *Verwerfung* (*rejection*), and can determine a particular type of subjectivity based on finding corporeality and plagiaristic identification, knotting together conflict and sexual differences, rejecting and accepting the law of the Father, in a contradictory position and a perpetual renegotiation of relations to others. These rejections and changes take “the shape of performing the question, What am I? concerning sexual designation and contingency in being.”<sup>347</sup>

The hysteric produces a continuous change of spiraling identifications, a “seemingly infinite array of self-representations”<sup>348</sup> in a process where inconsistent identities or social masks reveal the emptiness of the symbolic system based on the law of the Father. By using so many masks, the hysteric proves how difficult it is to determine the subject behind, because it is possible to observe, as Žižek did, that “behind the multiple layers of masks there is nothing; or, at the most, nothing but the shapeless, mucous stuff of the life-substance.”<sup>349</sup> But maybe exactly these moments of extimacy, when the flesh is discovered, are revealing for the hysteric: “You are this, which is the farthest away from you, which is the most formless.”<sup>350</sup> Using Lacan’s formulation, the hysteric uses the interpellation of

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346 Kristeva, *Revolution in poetic language*, 48.

347 Bronfen, *The knotted subject*, 120.

348 Ibid., 39.

349 Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 150.

350 Lacan, *The Seminar. Book II*, 186.

the Other to perform scenarios based on the question *What am I?*, in relation to the sexual designation and contingency of the body. The oscillation between masculine and feminine expresses the subjective indecision and unfixity in a similar way to the oscillation between the infallibility of a perfect body, an untroubled happiness, an eternal existence and the troubled knowledge of fragility, mortality and a disappearing body.

I identify the hysterical response to the patriarchal law in Lynda Zwinger's expression: "I tell and don't tell you that I know and don't know what I can't and can tell."<sup>351</sup> Hysterical discourse plays at its best with duplicity: in its spectacles and intensities, it uses a language that reveals the presence in absence of something that is unrepresentable. The uncontrolled manifestations of hysteria give way to what Lacan calls "the indirect, faltering, fettered initiative of a crisis that exceeds the spectacle."<sup>352</sup> The hysterical discourse uses those elements that "[have] been repressed from speech and [are] spoken in between in 'hieroglyphic symptoms'."<sup>353</sup>

The hysterical subjectivity stands in my opinion as an alternative figuration, as what Braidotti calls "a way out of the old schemes of thought."<sup>354</sup> By providing new patterns of interconnectedness, the modernist avant-garde played a key role in creating this type of plagiaristic subjectivity, for being what Allon White calls "the *practice* of those inner unconscious movements of which *psychoanalysis* is the theory."<sup>355</sup> Theories of the modernist theatre practice, read through their hysterical element, have the features of a poetic language, analyzed by Kristeva, by bringing the threatening and transgressive elements in a constant dialogue with the Symbolic.<sup>356</sup> Unable to answer to the rigorous demands of the Symbolic, the hysteric tries to find compromises: signs, objects and words are invested with desire and sensuality, they become performative, direct agents of hysterical intensity, causing gaps in the realm of

351 Zwinger, *Daughters, Fathers and the Novel*, 122.

352 Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, 64.

353 Luce Irigaray quoted in Ender, *Sexing the mind*, 18.

354 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 3.

355 White, *Carnival, hysteria, and writing*, 83.

356 See Kristeva, *Revolution in poetic language*.

established knowledge production.

What the hysterical avant-garde can offer is exactly “what the theory of the unconscious looks for, within and against the social order: the ultimate means of its mutation or subversion, the conditions for its survival and revolution.”<sup>357</sup> The Lacanian “language of the unconscious” is vital in pursuing the ideas of performance in avant-garde theatre theories that have effect and function beyond the limitations of consciousness and are “not accessible to a ‘commonsense’ rational analysis.”<sup>358</sup> Unconscious desire brings a “somnambular logic” without dissolving language but a replacement of a possible evaluation of its discourse.<sup>359</sup> This marks the radical theatre theories as uncanny, in connection to the abject and a form of psychoanalysis in practice.

In the next pages I will focus more on the conceptualization of masculinity and femininity in relation to hysteria in Freudian psychoanalysis, moving to Lacan’s adding with a constant view through the feminist critical lenses. I re-affirm the partiality of my own reading, my own theoretical bric-a-brac.

### **Bric-a-brac<sup>360</sup> of masculinity and femininity. From Freud to Lacan and further on**

To start with Freud, and more than 100 years later, “it is important to understand clearly that the concepts of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, whose meaning seems so unambiguous to ordinary people, are amongst the most confused that occur in science.”<sup>361</sup> The elucidation of the two trickiest concepts in psychoanalysis is still in the phase of a project. Many interpretations over the decades offer contradictory approaches towards grasping masculinity and femininity. The situation becomes even more complicated in analyzing hysteria in relation to them because there is an uninterrupted switch of

357 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 79.

358 Brook, *Feminist Perspectives*, 114.

359 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 73.

360 Jacques Lacan analysis the unified entity of the self in terms of bits and pieces put on top of each other mainly by chance, in order to cover the emptiness beneath: “the ego is like the superimposition of various coats borrowed from what I will call the bric-a-brac of its props department” in *The Seminar. Book II*, 155.

361 Freud, “Three Essays on Sexuality” (1905) in *Standard Edition*, vol. 7, 219.

identifications at play in this case. I will focus on their usages in psychoanalysis which read subjectivity through sexual difference and can relate to a confusion of masculinity and femininity in hysteria.

First of all, Freud's use of feminine is not necessarily connected to women's characteristics, as it was confused and misrepresented afterwards.<sup>362</sup> For example, when he talks of feminine masochism, he clearly discusses it in relation to men.<sup>363</sup> He constantly warns against the assumed meanings of masculinity and femininity, especially equating masculine with active and feminine with passive: "the contrast between the sexes fades away into one between activity and passivity, in which we far too readily identify activity with maleness and passivity with femaleness"<sup>364</sup> or "psycho-analysis cannot elucidate the intrinsic nature of what in conventional or in biological phraseology is termed 'masculine' and 'feminine': it simply takes over the two concepts and makes them the foundation of its work."<sup>365</sup> Freud tried constantly over decades to distance himself from the connections masculinity-activity and femininity-passivity. This distancing proved to be a difficult game, so he came up with the position that masculinity is activity plus *n*, and femininity is passivity plus *n*, where *n* is established by the Oedipus Complex, even if there is no knowledge concerning the properties of *n*.<sup>366</sup>

With all Freud's effort, in psychoanalysis masculinity connects a rationalized mind to a fetishized activity that can be easily read ideologically: progress, efficiency, conquest of the future, development, competition, lack of emotions, enlightenment, objectivity, equidistance, criticism, self-assertiveness, freedom and independence. The obstacle in achieving these masculine ideals is the body, feminine par excellence, something that can be owned, tamed, seen but never intrinsic.<sup>367</sup> Beyond the body, there is the masculine freedom, where subjectivity lacks and absolute mastery is achievable. Coming from

362 For a Freudian approach towards femininity and masculinity in both sexes see Brennan, *Interpretation of the Flesh*.

363 Breen, *Gender conundrum*, 2-3.

364 Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents" (1930) in *Standard Edition*, vol. 21, 106.

365 Freud, "The psychogenesis of a case of homosexuality in a woman" (1920) in *Standard Edition*, vol. 18, 171.

366 Brennan, *Interpretation of the Flesh*, 8-9.

367 On masculinity and the body but also masculinist ideology in psychoanalysis, see Frosh, *Sexual Difference*, 99-105.

Freud, without further explanations, masculinity is ego-syntonic, in harmony with the ego, while femininity is not. If masculinity represents a healthy ego, femininity is the pathology. These obscure presuppositions can be easily followed in the long history of psychoanalysis and are usually taken as given.<sup>368</sup>

In relation to the feminine, Grosz explains: “the masculine can speak of and for the feminine largely because it has emptied itself of any relation to the male body, its specificity, and socio-political existence... It gains the illusion of self-distance, the illusion of a space of pure reflection, through the creation of a mirroring surface that duplicates, re-presents everything *except* itself.”<sup>369</sup> This hot body through its materiality and particularities contradicts abstractions of pure thought, experience being symbolized by something messier, mixed-up, chaotic and beyond control. The hot body symbolizes “not the possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine,”<sup>370</sup> the body filled with emotions, pains and its own language. This hot body, unavoidable for hysterics, is rejected by masculinist ideology in its aspiration for domination, structure and control. The cool masculine decisions, uninfluenced by bodily desires and subjectivity, avoid any emotions or passion in their objectivity and follow the demands of production and profit. In this process of abandoning the hot body, “we lose any sense of grounding ourselves in our own embodied experience as we identify our sense of masculinity with being objective and impartial.”<sup>371</sup> By distancing from the body, the male subject tries to separate the body and repress it: the male body is deleted from experience and acknowledgement. With the body left out of it, “experience is left unconstruable because masculinity is based on its repression.”<sup>372</sup> If culturally the dichotomy masculinity-rationality/femininity-body is the main equation, the issue is how this becomes experience in everyday

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368 Brennan, *Interpretation of the Flesh*, 30-31.

369 Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 173.

370 Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 160-61.

371 Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity*, 129.

372 Frosh, *Sexual Difference*, 104.

life. The psychoanalytical answer to this dilemma is object relationship.

In a simple algebra, the mother becomes the object of desire and possibly conquered, the father becomes the subject of desire in whom he recognizes himself. This is exactly the point when “separation-individuation becomes a gender issue, and recognition and independence are now organized within the frame of gender.”<sup>373</sup> Mother and father become maternal and paternal metaphors, where one is devalued and the other idealized: “the phallus acquires its power as a defensive reaction to maternal power.”<sup>374</sup> This step of entering the Symbolic order is considered in psychoanalytical discourse a necessity for mental health,<sup>375</sup> the step that the hysteric refuses to take.

The mandatory masculinity for the boy cannot tolerate any ambiguity of mother and father, but empowers one and sanctions the other: “the paternal metaphor names the child and thus positions it so that it can be replaced discursively by the ‘I’, in order to enter language as a speaking being” and requests the denigration of the mother: “the child can only accede to the paternal metaphor by acknowledging (maternal) castration or privation.”<sup>376</sup> The male hysteric, by refusing phallic order and masculinity in favor of femininity enters a dangerous game: “the boy’s repudiation of femininity is the central thread of the Oedipus complex, no less important than the renunciation of the mother as a love object. To be feminine like her would be a throwback to the preoedipal dyad, a dangerous regression.”<sup>377</sup> But on the other hand, the male hysteric has the possibility by plagiaristic identifying with a woman to escape another danger in entering the phallic order: “never again to be caught in the same place, in the same desire as the woman: this is the main driving force of the man’s misogyny.”<sup>378</sup> Hysteria cannot be seen only as a disease of femininity,<sup>379</sup> as it can be easily read, because it addresses

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373 Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 104.

374 Ibid., 123.

375 Frosh, *Sexual Difference*, 111.

376 Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 104.

377 Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 162.

378 Olivier, *Jocasta’s Children*, 41.

379 Frosh, *Sexual Difference*, 127.

numerous other questions related to sexual difference, identity, power, bodies and language, all so important for a masculine order.

The borders of masculinity are extremely easily broken and intimacy means danger and difficulty in keeping the borders intact: “the vulnerability of masculinity that is forged in the crucible of femininity, the ‘great task’ of separation that is so seldom completed, lays the groundwork for the later objectification of women. The mother stands as the prototype of the undifferentiated object. She serves men as their other, their counterpart, the side of themselves they repress.”<sup>380</sup> Of course, in the negative Oedipus complex, the hysteric doesn’t escape the mother figure so easily and cannot enter the realm of proper masculinity, being attached to his bisexuality. Ironically, but with a bitter taste, this fragility explains the incredible rigidity of masculinity and also the stiff fantasy of femininity: “the Madonna/whore division that parcels out the safe sphere of nurture from the demonic sphere of the erotic, with its accompanying imagery of devouring and being devoured. As he gets close to her, so the man is faced with the potential loss of his identity; sexual rage is never far away.”<sup>381</sup>

The masculine man idealizes and fears women because of sexual desire which is terrifying by having the threat of fusion, being sucked into the maternal womb and destroying the elaborate masculinity: “there is no greater threat to the man than the express desire of the woman, which for him invariably takes on the form of an evil trap (evil because linked to the desire of the all-powerful mother).”<sup>382</sup> The disturbing elements of sexuality attack the fragility of masculinity. In order to be in charge of it, he has to become master, to live on the rigidity of masculinity and to maintain his control.

Becoming aware that he cannot possibly achieve the phallus, being completely rational and masterful, all he is left with is the delicate cover of masculinity, maintained through repression of emotions, desire or intimate relations to others. In order to construct masculinity, femininity is excluded

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380 Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 77.

381 Frosh, *Sexual Difference*, 113.

382 Olivier, *Jocasta’s Children*, 96.

in a process of fixing the limits to an unstable identity. “The master’s denial of the other’s subjectivity leaves him faced with isolation as the only alternative to being engulfed by the dehumanized other.”<sup>383</sup> Because he is in fear of disappearing into the other, as he would disappear in the case of hysterical identification, the worst nightmare, he creates a negative identity based on difference. The other is denied in masculinity in order to create outer limits to an incoherent self, where femininity is the ultimate frontier, the contrast, its negative side that makes a masculine subject feel safe and sound.

Lacan himself, claiming to know more about women than they know themselves, identifies himself as a hysteric in order to know men and women also: “the male analyst understands women and speaks in her place, is the perfection of the hysteric, no symptoms, save only mistakes in gender, the misidentifications indeed, running in and out of her from his position, miss-takes but perfect.”<sup>384</sup>

After this long trip into Freudian psychoanalysis and the Lacanian update to it, I will move to another phase of psychoanalysis, its French feminist one, by keeping my focus on hysteria and its theoretical avatars.

### **French feminism and hysteria**

A new interest in hysteria arrived at the beginning of the 1970s in France from feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clement, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray (who were followed by other feminist scholars in the Western world: Elisabeth Bronfen, Janet Beizer, Evelyn Ender and Claire Kahan). Their attention to hysteria was motivated by the possibility to discuss through it the exclusion of women in patriarchal culture.<sup>385</sup> Feminists concerned with hysteria “moved beyond historical analysis and celebrated nineteenth-century hysterical women as heroines, sisters, and political martyrs” as Showalter observes.<sup>386</sup> What I identify as their key input concerning hysteria was their analysis and

383 Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 65.

384 Heath, “Male Feminism,” 7.

385 Bronfen, *Knotted Subject*, xi.

386 Showalter, *Hystories*, 56.



criticism of psychoanalytical models of subjectivity in relation to sexual difference together with a rediscovery of female hysteria and hysterical discourse.

Almost a century after Freud, Dora started to live the life of a star: she became an icon in various theatre plays, she appeared in movies about Freud and “for many feminists who write about hysteria, Dora is all they know.”<sup>387</sup> Claire Kahane wrote in her best-seller feminist anthology “In Dora’s Case” from 1985 that for feminist scholars Dora is “an urtext in the history of woman, a fragment of an increasingly heightened critical debate about the meaning of sexual difference and its effects on the representation of feminine desire.”<sup>388</sup> The 1980s feminist fascination with Dora seems to have the goal of retroactively healing Dora as Mandy Merck suggests when she describes “the critical cult of Dora,”<sup>389</sup> in a process of redefining and even denying Dora’s hysteria. We can identify in this sudden interest in Dora’s case also a form of scholarly revenge, with a focus on Freud’s hostility towards Dora and his incapacity to deal with femininity (read hysteria), where feminist scholars are doing “to Freud what Freud did to Dora ninety years ago.”<sup>390</sup> In this type of rereading of Dora’s case, another image of Freud comes into the picture, the hidden hysteric, an untrustworthy analyst: “We cherish the Dora case because it proves that Freud, who told us such unpleasant truths about ourselves, was himself just another pitiful, deluded, dirty-minded neurotic.”<sup>391</sup>

Together with Noel Evans, we can identify a “hysterical phase of French feminism,” where the focus is on “the hysteric as the representative of femininity.”<sup>392</sup> Sometimes defined as post-Lacanian,<sup>393</sup> French feminists follow Lacan’s theory of sexuality and identity in terms of the Symbolic and language with the twist that Western knowledge is gendered and oppressive, identity being structured as part of a

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387 Ibid., 57.

388 Claire Kahane, “Introduction,” 27.

389 Merck, *Perversions*, 33-44.

390 Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 84.

391 Malcolm, “Reflections,” 305.

392 Noel Evans, *Fits and Starts*, 205.

393 Campbell, *Arguing with the Phallus*, 102-103.

patriarchal symbolic. Lacan's binary of phallic language and the feminine maternal body is followed at different levels by the French feminists, precisely with the purpose of challenging the repressive masculine symbolic order. By trying to find a feminine language, spoken from a maternal (and opposed to a paternal) place, they follow two different directions: theorizing a pre-oedipal space outside language, an infantile fusion with the mother, or theorizing the place of the mother within language, seen as a form of feminine positivity. From my perspective, both ways of female symbolical oppositions, closely connected to nineteenth century hysteria, risk reimposing the phallus. As an example, I will focus on Cixous' writings, where hysteria is seen as significant for women's silencing within language, psychoanalysis and culture and it is precisely the locus from where women's speaking is possible: "directly from the place of the hysteric as it was formulated in Lacan's theory... to question psychoanalytical theory from within psychoanalysis itself."<sup>394</sup>

In Cixous' writings there is a continuous combined interest in hysterical discourse, psychoanalysis, theatre and the acting body, all of which are relevant elements for my research project. Even if Cixous deliberately criticizes Freud's dogmatism and misogynistic world-view,<sup>395</sup> she returns to whom she later calls *uncle Freud*<sup>396</sup> for the inspiration and usefulness of his work because "we live in a post-Freudian, Derridean age of electricity and the aeroplane. So let's do as modern people do, let's use the contemporary means of transport. We owe Freud the exploration of the unconscious."<sup>397</sup> Just like Cixous, I bet on the worst, the Lacanian *parier sur le pire*,<sup>398</sup> in this case, the total catastrophe, the worst possible theoretical framework: Freudian psychoanalysis, in comparison to which no other framework can work better in approaching the male hysteric.

In the 1970s, for French feminists such as Cixous or Clement, hysteria became a political cause.

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 203-204.

<sup>395</sup> Especially in Cixous, *Sorties*.

<sup>396</sup> Cixous, "Coming to writing," 51.

<sup>397</sup> Sellers, *Writing Differences*, 144-45.

<sup>398</sup> Žižek, *Looking awry*, 28.

Following a Lacanian hystericization of psychoanalysis, they applied hystericization to the feminist movement. Nineteenth-century hysterics offered a model of discourse and action based on classic symptoms: “the feminist aim became to recover this lost language which would reconnect their bodies and minds, and women to each other. Indeed, the feminist effort to establish a female descendancy took the precise shape of claiming their inheritance as speakers of a hysterical mother tongue.”<sup>399</sup> Hysteria became a feminine language closely related to one specific body: the maternal one. The silent or corporeal language of hysteria is reevaluated by French feminists as a Mother Tongue that challenges patriarchy. The political implications are quite drastic: dividing knowledge into masculine and feminine and preserving the mystifying effects of this division. To accept uncritically the imposed femininity on nineteenth-century hysterical women and to champion the feminine values of hysteria is just to reinforce the distinctions between masculine and feminine as constructed by patriarchal society.<sup>400</sup> Patriarchal ideology becomes unequivocal in the definition of hysteria as femininity, precisely the feminine epistemology that the French feminists try to embody.

In order to actually undermine a form of phallogentric epistemology there is a need to expose its lack of *natural* foundation. I follow Toril Moi in this direction: “the attack upon phallogentrism must come from within, since there can be no “outside”, no space where true femininity, untainted by patriarchy, can be kept intact for us to discover. We can only destroy the mythical and mystifying constructions of patriarchy by using its own weapons.”<sup>401</sup> We cannot be deceived that there are other tools waiting for us somewhere out there, as French feminists thought about the hysterical language as the feminine alternative.

In her classic and highly literary essay “The Laugh of Medusa” from 1975, Cixous comes with an ultimatum to her female readers: they can read it and remain locked in their own bodies as an effect of

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399 Ibid., 205.

400 Moi, “Representation of Patriarchy,” 198.

401 Ibid.

a patriarchal language that restricts expression, or they can start to communicate with their bodies.<sup>402</sup> Similarly to Luce Irigaray and Michele Montrelay, she connects the hysteric's silence, symptoms and distorted speech to female symbolism, language and wordless verbalization.<sup>403</sup> The revolutionary language based on the female body has the purpose of verbalizing the silent discourse of what she calls "the admirable hysterics." She brings hysterics into her text as prior examples of women who write "sexts," in a gesture of writing their bodies as texts of *l'écriture féminine*. She creates her own return to Freud, with a special focus on his earliest works on hysteria, mainly on female hysterics. The body producing a symptom that stands for a repressed idea is taken by Cixous as a central concept in developing her project of *l'écriture féminine*: the body of the hysteric "speaks" what the conscious mind cannot say and the unconscious is written out by the body itself. By taking the idea of the direct connections between the unconscious and the body as a mode of "writing", Cixous and the followers of *l'écriture féminine* are directly involved in developing a hysterical form of knowledge, or what Lacan calls the hysterical discourse.

In "The Laugh of Medusa" another important concept is introduced: *l'autre bisexualité*. It stands for a form of openness to the other in the construction of subjectivity able to question the stability of what Butler later calls the heterosexual matrix.<sup>404</sup> The hysterical bisexual identification troubles the exclusions of heterosexuality and intersects various sexualities without excluding among them. Cixous comes back to this concept in her later works, especially the more poetic ones, in connection to an erotic telos. The dichotomy self/other is identified by Cixous as the starting point for all other types of dichotomies. Reminding us of the Lacanian extimacy, Cixous introduces *l'autre bisexualité* as a persuasive deconstructive force able to erase the slashes in all structural binary oppositions.<sup>405</sup>

In her essay, Cixous develops a critique of the Freudian nuclear family based on oedipal

402 Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 875-93.

403 Showalter, *Hystories*, 56.

404 Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

405 Showalter, *Hystories*, 56.

hierarchical relations,<sup>406</sup> mainly on the ideas of castration and lack which form the basis for the concept of femininity in both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Her intention is to break from these "old circuits" in order not to recreate the family structures which contain and reinforce a phallogentric symbolic order every time a child is born. I take her point in criticizing the limits and oppressions of the oedipal family for women and men alike, and her demand to "demater-paternalize" it. However, she misses out on the possibilities of transgressing it through hysteria, which she nevertheless invokes. Through a focus on more horizontal relations, such as those between siblings, a crucial element in hysteria, the idea of breaking hierarchical family structures can function precisely through a hysterical demater-paternalization.

Also in 1975, Cixous publishes another key essay, "Sorties", where she unequivocally identifies with hysterical women: "The hysterics are my sisters... I am what Dora would have been if woman's history had begun."<sup>407</sup> It is here that she asks the dramatic question "What woman is not Dora?" by marking the construction of *Dora* as a cult heroine, the definitive diva, a feminist martyr and the most famous hysteric of all times.

Feminist theatre employed extensively the dramatic elements of Freud's treatment of hysteria. In Cixous's more developed return to Dora, the play called plainly *Portrait of Dora* from 1979, Sharon Willis identifies a staged encounter between psychoanalysis and feminism. Freud and his hysteric patient become characters in a fragmentary play written in the incoherent style of hysteria, as a collage of "events, memories, fantasies and dreams"<sup>408</sup> which functions first of all as an exercise of writing with the body. The meeting point between psychoanalysis and feminism is none other than the theatre, where the female hysteric is a spectacle for being theorized by the male psychoanalytical gaze. Because *Portrait of Dora* "reframes Freud's text in a way that puts into question the theatrical frame, and the

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406 Already discussed in the Freud section of this chapter.

407 In Cixous and Clement, *Newly Born Woman*, 99.

408 Noel Evans, *Fits and Starts*, 216-17.

body staged within it, it becomes exemplary of the critical operations of certain feminist performance practice.”<sup>409</sup> The reframing of Freud’s text focuses on the hysterical refusal to enter the patriarchal oedipal discourse, where Dora’s femininity and hysteria are presented as valid ways of “thinking, feeling and acting.”<sup>410</sup> Dora’s case can be read like a detective novel, where Freud plays the role of Sherlock Holmes trying various interpretations around the clues he uncovers in the hysteric’s symptoms and dreams. Freud constantly pushes the construction of a narrative in his analysis of Dora’s case, in order to transform the hysterical symptoms into a coherent discourse. His anxiety to “get the story straight” is particularly intense because hysterics are marked by their inability to give complete and logical accounts; their narratives are full of gaps and blockages with no dramatic end.

In its urgency to unravel the enigma of Dora’s symptoms and to demonstrate in an irrefutable theoretical formulation the sexual aetiology of hysteria, the case produces remarkable narrative effects. But this narrative strategy of recovery and disclosure is linked in Dora’s case to a certain blindness on Freud’s part: he ignores his own hysteria and the hysterical element of his own narration. *Portrait of Dora* plays with hysterical identifications, where the interference effect of multiple voices undermines Freud’s search for the narrative referent and announces his participation in the line of identifications: “Who stands for whom in this story?”<sup>411</sup> as a question that goes further to the spectator in a performing situation. This play follows Cixous’ theatrical proposal of “going beyond the confines of the stage,”<sup>412</sup> in an excessive break with narrative closure. Dora is the paradigm of this theatrical gesture of “disorder which throws into disarray the conventional cultural and signifying systems.”<sup>413</sup> Dora refuses to remove herself as an obstacle for the sake of Freud’s narrative achievement, in a hysterical gesture that disrupts the realist narrative and defers the reinscription of the patriarchal discourse. Her desire goes beyond a

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409 Willis, “Helene Cixous’s “Portrait de Dora”,” 288.

410 Noel Evans, *Fits and Starts*, 216-17.

411 Benmussa, *Benmussa Directs*, 53.

412 Cixous, “Aller a la Mer,” 547.

413 Belsey, “Constructing the Subject,” 53.

realist representation which can silence her, fragmenting identification processes and coherent unified identities. The spectator is forced to face the difficulty of identifying with the characters through an effort towards “the instability of the text’s point of address...insisting on performance *as* address”<sup>414</sup> because “the body cannot be entirely given over to spectacle.”<sup>415</sup> In expressing a hysterical theatricality, like in *Portrait of Dora*, plots are no longer necessary, “a single gesture is enough, but one that can transform the world.”<sup>416</sup>

With all too many different readings over the last decades and the celebrity boost, Freud’s analysis of Dora remains the most articulated study of a hysteric. Dora expresses and also resists the Law of the Father. Her strategy to escape the exchange between men that objectify her is seduction, or what Elizabeth Grosz calls *prick-teasing*, breaking the Law while gaining pleasure, at the expense of men’s dignity or self-image.<sup>417</sup> The strategy to challenge the seriousness of phallic authority through a conscious play of femininity, used both by Cixous in her paper “Castration or Decapitation”<sup>418</sup> from 1981 and by Irigaray in the face of male philosophers<sup>419</sup> is Dora’s laughter, disinvestment of interest or indifference masked as commitment.

Kristeva, unlike Cixous or Irigaray, takes a particular anti-essentialist view on femininity. She does not give credit to the woman’s body or to a pre-oedipal mother beyond the authority of the phallus. She identifies these positions as part of an Imaginary location in the form of a false male authority. A powerful phallic mother as part of the language easily becomes rigid and oppressive. For Kristeva, there is no experience or identity that can be outside the Symbolic or can represent a challenge to the phallic order. As long as there is representation, there is also absorption into the phallocentrism: “once represented, be it under the aspect of a woman, the truth of the unconscious

414 Willis, “Helene Cixous’s “Portrait de Dora”,” 294.

415 Ibid., 300.

416 Cixous, “Aller a la Mer,” 547.

417 Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 186-187.

418 Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation.”

419 Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 150.

passes into the phallic order.”<sup>420</sup> Not trying to look for a mirage, a feminine language, Kristeva emphasizes women’s need for the paternal language, the necessity to enter the Symbolic phallic order just to secure themselves. What she identifies as an alternative is a double discourse, a fluid identity, masculine and feminine at the same time, inside and outside of the Symbolic, between order and disorder.

Kristeva’s position on femininity is unique in French feminism: she considers it fluid, multiple, existing both in men and women. Even the whole category of women is rejected as an entirely patriarchal construction that manifests its oppression in the very simple act of naming women as a distinct category. Femininity is redefined as marginality, a concept that encapsulates the unconscious, repression, unspoken and a constant disruption, challenge and refusal of a fixed meaning. She suggests an alliance between women and anything which is marginalized by the patriarchal order, anyone who is dissident to the traditional categories of knowledge and language. The perfect example for this type of alliance is the one with avant-garde artists and surrealists, who, for Kristeva, work in an unconscious space on the fringes of patriarchal culture and embody a fluidity of sexual identification, whether they are men or women. This type of hysterical identification helps them to turn consciousness inside out and challenge the mainstream values of rationality and coherence in their art, literature, music or theatre. Male artists such as James Joyce, John Cage or Antonin Artaud can be considered, in Kristeva’s opinion, *honorary women*, by occupying the same space in culture as women and by offering patterns for free unmastered forms of subjectivity.

Over the years, Kristeva continuously focuses on revolt and the perils of its extinction, especially in her 2000 book, *Crisis of the European Subject*. Her interest is in “a revolt against identity: the identity of sex and meaning, of ideas and politics, of being and the other.”<sup>421</sup> This type of revolt is embodied, in my perspective, by male hysterics and in some cases it manifests through their art. The

<sup>420</sup> Kristeva quoted in Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, 181.

<sup>421</sup> Kristeva, *Crisis of the European Subject*, 18.



hysterical subject “competes against maximal symbolic performance,” as performed by the Father. The result is “an abundant discourse, an intellectual curiosity, and a quest for knowledge. <<Tell me what I know. If not, I will not tell it to you>> – witness hysterical blackmail.”<sup>422</sup> Its potential is to crack the phallic discursive framework with which hysterics play but constantly counteract with their *exuberant affect*.<sup>423</sup>

The male hysteric as an *honorary woman* has the symptomatic position of the stranger or the outcast of phallocentrism, a position that can be considered a politically subversive tool. Their revolt and self-location on the margins of the existing order designates a possibility for social criticism and resistance to representation.<sup>424</sup> In her later works, Kristeva distinguishes between psychological and societal revolt, but considers them both vitally important: “Unlike most theorists of political revolution, Kristeva points to the fundamental necessity of psychological revolt – revolt against identity, homogenization, the spectacle and the law.”<sup>425</sup>

The *jouissance* emerging from being in excess to the Law, from escaping phallic masculinity and fully embracing femininity, acts as the seductive political element of hysterical discourse. Being seduced by historical hysteria as Irigaray, Kristeva, or Cixous are, is a strategic political move. Irigaray expresses it in her relation to male philosophers: “Thus it was necessary to destroy, but...with nuptial tools. The tool is not a feminine attribute. But woman may re-utilize its marks on her, in her. To put it another way: the option left to me was to have a fling with the philosophers, which is easier said than done...”<sup>426</sup> Seduction is never an easy or clear game: seduction in hysteria is ambiguous; you never know exactly who is seducing whom. French feminists can be seduced by Lacan but it can be the other way around, they are the ones who seduce and laugh as Dora. Via Elizabeth Grosz’s view on this issue

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422 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 70.

423 Ibid.

424 Cooper on Kristeva, *Relating to queer theory*, 141-161.

425 McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 118.

426 Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 150.

we can understand seduction as “a strategy... for u-tool-izing a ‘machinery’ hostile to one’s interests so that it works against itself... the hysterical inversion of its goals.”<sup>427</sup>

This understanding of the relation to psychoanalytical theory is vital in terms of my own research and position towards Freud, Lacan and feminist readings of hysteria: I am seduced by their theory only in order to strategically subvert it and persist in my own hysterical discourse shaped as a Lacanian rebus. By acknowledging my floating position as a lumpen Eastern European feminized hysterical male in gender studies, psychoanalytical theory, feminism and theatre practice, I slowly become a stranger in revolt against phallogentrism by embodying critical theory and hysteria.

### **Becoming discrete**

The popular usage of the term hysteria changed its association with a troubling disease. By becoming a story, a form of lying or an eccentric histrionic behaviour, a trait of character or just another alternative medical term (all accepted by the community), in spite of everything, hysteria didn’t disappear but became what Mitchell calls “a new discreet illness.”<sup>428</sup> Psychiatry reclassified it into its isolated parts, relabeled and threw them on the market as eating disorders or multiple personality, all of these units being fit for drug treatment. The histrionic was left out for arts, literature, family care or behaviour counselors.

Psychiatrists hastily and gloriously announced the death of hysteria decades ago. Ilza Veith was writing in 1965 about the “nearly total disappearance”<sup>429</sup> of the infamous sickness. At Roberta Satow’s question, “Where has all the hysteria gone?”, many answers were connected to the fact that modern medicine conquered hysteria and it became simply an unrecognized organic disease, a Victorian idiosyncrasy and a women’s reaction to social repression and restrictions that was not needed anymore

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427 Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 186-187.

428 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 17.

429 Veith, *Hysteria*, 273-74.

after modern feminism.<sup>430</sup> In the twentieth century hysteria declined dramatically as a medical diagnosis and its disappearance was considered by psychiatrists a sign of social change. After 1980, with the publication of the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the American Psychiatric Association officially changed the diagnosis of “hysterical neurosis, conversion type” to “conversion disorder.”<sup>431</sup> But hysteria still has an aura of myth in clinics and popular culture<sup>432</sup> even as a misdiagnosis and it is difficult to sustain its miraculous vanishing: it just changed its name to impenetrable names for various syndromes such as Briquet’s Syndrome for example or the mentioned conversion disorder.

Over the last fifty years, the word hysteria has been used less and less outside popular culture. The studies on hysteria are considered by medical scientists as “of poor quality”, often employing “a vague definition of hysteria.”<sup>433</sup> Hysteria, seen as a nineteenth-century Victorian extravagance, “was useful for literary analysis but surely out of place in the serious reaches of contemporary science.”<sup>434</sup>

Hysteria cannot be simply dismissed as a forgotten disease of the past: there are new uses and new shapes for it today, especially engaged in order to keep gender segregation active and its patriarchal service of reducing women’s oppression and silence to individual neurosis and madness. What continues its troubled history as a disease is the failure to make sense of hysteria. George Swetlow expressed this failure in 1953: “a strange disorder in that it takes a position midway between truth and deceit – not only may hysterical symptoms caricature almost any known disability due to actual tissue alteration, but at the same time it presents features hardly distinguished from fraud.”<sup>435</sup> Unofficially, inoffensive synonyms for hysterical symptoms have appeared: functional, nonorganic,

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430 Satow, “Where Has All the Hysteria Gone?”; Showalter, *Hystories*.

431 Kinetz, “Is Hysteria Real?”.

432 For more details on the culture of hysteria see Morris, *Culture of pain*.

433 Stone and Smyth, „Systematic review of misdiagnosis.”

434 Kinetz, “Is Hysteria Real?”.

435 Swerlow, “Hysterics as litigants,” 3-9. Swetlow is a professor of medico-legal jurisprudence at the Brooklyn Law School that is quoted in Maines, *Technology of orgasm*, 45.

psychogenic, medically unexplained. Nevertheless, in 2006, Patrik Vuilleumier, a neurologist at the University of Geneva considers that “the symptoms themselves have never changed. They are still common in practice.”<sup>436</sup>

Hysteria was recognized by doctors as the disease that combined the pejorative elements of femininity and the irrational that nobody can escape from.<sup>437</sup> Hysteria was a paradigm that explained everything and therefore nothing, and this approach became unacceptable in clinical circles. As a disease, we can accept it had a short and unsuccessful history in terms of medical curing, and we can consider that its categorization as a curable disease came to an end, in a similar way to *the diagnosis* of witchcraft or possessions at different moments in history. The mimetic characteristics of hysteria can explain the forms that hysteria can take in relation to different social contexts over time, together with a change of prevailing characteristics, more adapted to present-day conditions.<sup>438</sup> The word itself kept a legend of misogynistic connotations and also a direct connection to its theorizing of the not-so-fashionable Freud.

On the other hand, hysterics were any good clinician’s enemy because they showed the limitations of their craft: “We don’t like them,” Deborah N. Black, an assistant professor of neurology at the University of Vermont said in an interview in 2006, “somewhere deep down inside, we really think they’re faking it. When we see a patient with improbable neurological signs, the impulse is to say: ‘Come on, get off it. Sure you can move that leg.’ The other reason we don’t like them is they don’t get better, and when we can’t do well by them we don’t like them.”<sup>439</sup>

Before coming with better solutions, hysterics had to go underground, to become invisible. For the sake of medical health professionals, neuroscientists came with the resolution that can bring hysteria back to the clinic: the complex techniques of brain images that allow scientists to see

436 Kinetz, “Is Hysteria Real?”.

437 Bronfen, “Performance of Hysteria,” 153-169.

438 Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, ix.

439 Erika Kinetz, “Is Hysteria Real? Brain Images Say Yes”.

disruptions in brain function, which helped them to sketch a physical map of what might be going on in the minds of today's hysterics. Many questions remain unanswered still, but their results have begun to suggest ways in which emotional structures in the brain might modulate the function of normal sensory and motor neural circuits and start to offer an illusory cure for hysteria. The social implications of such a disease are neglected again and its understanding goes back to where it was left fifty years ago. What these new studies on neurosciences and brain images in connection to hysteria are trying to say is that there is a new beginning in solving hysteria.<sup>440</sup>

If by the mid-nineteenth century, the appeal of hyperfemininity was hysteria,<sup>441</sup> twentieth century ideas moved to consider the hysteric a person with a strong personality rather than medical symptoms. The notion of hysteria was replaced with terms such as *histrionic*, characterized by a “constellation of traits – excessive display of emotion, self-dramatization, emotional lability, ingratiation, need for attention, unlikeability, insincerity and self-deception”<sup>442</sup> that could easily simulate other diseases. By not being an object of comprehension and just a form of aberrant behavior, hysteria became a description of the character of an individual. The colloquial use of the term *hysterical* permitted hysteria to disappear into the public, as narration, *hystory*, histrionic behavior, rage, compulsive lying or artistic practices.<sup>443</sup> But this changeability in expressions did not exclude its troubled past and its patriarchal authoritative construction.

Nowadays, with all its changing forms and names, when we analyze the connotations of hysteria we are facing similar difficulties that remained unanswered. For example, when Michel Foucault was superficially addressing what he called “the hysterization of women’s bodies” in a broader aim to examine extensive social and medical trends, he left out of the picture some key elements. For him, through hysteria, “the female body was integrated into the sphere of medical practice by reason of a

440 Hallett and Cloninger, *Psychogenic Movement Disorders*; Black and Seritan, „Conversion Hysteria,” 245-251.

441 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 11-12.

442 Ibid., 14.

443 See Showalter, *Hystories*.

pathology intrinsic to it [...] The Mother, with her negative image of “nervous woman,” constituted the most visible form of this hysterization.”<sup>444</sup> But without insisting on the topic, he failed to question the disease paradigm itself. In relation to this issue, Maines asks a crucial question: “Why is this disorder so elastic in its boundaries that it can encompass such a broad spectrum of social goals?”<sup>445</sup> The issue is not that the mother is hysteric, she can be, but the main problem remains the marginalization through feminization of the hysteric and its social mechanisms, not that the feminine is made hysteric. In similar contemporary situations, this process still functions and keeps alive its masculinist power plays.

The association between hyperfemininity and hysteria or other constellation of traits that are coming from it, takes out the male hysterics, who cannot achieve the good femininity end: the charming mother, the good wife or the domesticated faithful subject that women hysterics were prescribed to become a while ago. Besides male writers and artists, who operated beyond socially accepted limits and were usually associated with hysteria, the hysterical male is still seen in negative terms, as queer, unmanly or feminine, as an imposed denial of masculinity. The male hysterical traits were easily blurred into various psychotic disorders, especially schizophrenia or borderline disorders.<sup>446</sup> The purpose of this social mechanism was to avoid the increased feminization of hysterical males and to transform hysteria into untroubled and unmedicalized femininity, to get rid of it as a disease.

A remarkable and more affirmative revival of hysteria comes from an atypical theoretical linkage between hysterical discourse and postmodernism. I will explore some of its facets in the next paragraphs.

### **Hysteria fools around with postmodernism**

The linkage between theatricality and male hysteria can become a method of positively claiming

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444 Foucault, *History of sexuality*, 104.

445 Maines, *Technology of orgasm*, 46.

446 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 18.

the hysterical male and reevaluating hysteria today. Showalter<sup>447</sup> considers one of the main factors in hysteria to be the response to a situation experienced as untenable. The contemporary hysterics are creative, seducing, lying, not putting any meaning in death and producing confusion and agitation wherever they go. This contemporary creative agenda is identified by Mitchell with the performative preoccupations of postmodernism, where the unconscious elements of hysteria are consciously put into effect.<sup>448</sup> What can be considered a radical postmodern manifesto for hysteria is one of Jean-Francois Lyotard's claim that "the stakes of postmodernism as a whole [are] not to exhibit truth within the closure of representation but to set up perspectives within a return of the will."<sup>449</sup> Postmodernists speak the language of hysterics in the sense of developing an imaginary "spastic body, a somatic memory that is resistant to representation"<sup>450</sup> because the rigorous demands of the Symbolic and excitability are not synthesized. The consequence is to find "compromise solutions as anxiety, somatic symptoms or irreconcilable fantasies".<sup>451</sup> The failure of answering the Symbolic and the excitable demands introduces a fragmentation of subjectivity which manifests through role playing, masks, multiple personalities and simulacra of realities. These characteristics can be read as identity stabilizers in case of emotional or anxious attacks that are represented as fantasies and are embodied in a number of characters that cannot be synthesized by the subject.

The male hysteric becomes the project of searching for a postmodern subjectivity, a contemporary dandy, a radical chic, the phallo-centric unstable subject, always out there, always ready to perform, always at trouble with the two crucial issues of postmodernism: identification and representation.<sup>452</sup> The male hysteric holds a key role in a time when the Western subject is overwhelmed by images that sell, images that "carry you away, they replace you, you are dreaming. The rapture of the hallucination

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447 Showalter, *Hystories*.

448 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 38.

449 Ibid.

450 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 68.

451 Ibid., 71.

452 See Felman, *Literary speech act*, Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 39 and Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 187.

originates in the absence of boundaries between pleasure and reality, between truth and falsehood.”<sup>453</sup> The show on the screen is like living a dream where subjects cease to exist: aesthetic expressions are standardized, the discourse is normalized. Images heal wounds, as Kristeva told us, before any psychic space comes into discussion. Images on the screen are harnessing anxieties and desires: they reduce their intensities and empty them of any meaning. All that is left is solved by “somatic symptoms (getting sick and going to the hospital) and the visual depiction of [...] desires (daydreaming in front of TV). In such a situation, psychic life is blocked, inhibited, and destroyed.”<sup>454</sup> By questioning their emptying of the subject, the new hysterics can offer a political tool in handling the current transformations of psychic life, dealing with metaphysical anxieties and a need for meaning. The contemporary hysteric in a search for interiority and “a name” for himself<sup>455</sup> denies the role in the baroque spectacle where sumptuous sets are burned after the show to inform the audience that nothing was true except God, everything else is staged.

As Christopher Bollas describes hysterics as constantly struggling with their unsatisfying bodies, sexual demands and repression of sexual ideas; they overidentify with the other; they express themselves in a theatrical manner; they prefer the illusion to the sophistication and mundaneness of the serious man.<sup>456</sup> According to Bollas, psychoanalysis has turned away from hysterics towards a fascination with *borderlines*, *false personalities*, *wounded narcissisms* and so on: my project is exactly this possible political return to a new hysteria in the contemporary milieu of an emptying of the subject and an inability to represent because hysteria can offer a subtle and subversive answer to it. Why? Because I don’t think that a pill and a screen are the only possible answers.

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453 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 8.

454 Ibid.

455 Torso de Molina calls Don Juan “the man without a name,” the image of the man without interiority, looking for his name with skillful inconstancy. Quoted in Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 143.

456 Bollas, *Hysteria*.



### **The return of the clown**

Getting closer to the end of the chapter, I will focus now on one surprising hysterical syndrome from Charcot's era that some scholars rediscovered in contemporary advertising. The purpose of this insertion here is to keep the discussion on hysterical discourse open, to think about its theoretical potential and its kaleidoscopic surfaces in the many present-day returns to it. What I also point out is the fragility of this concept that has, as I tried to show in this chapter, a troubled history with painful moments, intimate dramas and misogynistic, classist, racist and homophobic exploitations. Any return to a hysterical discourse has to be made with care, being aware of its uneasy genealogy and its strong discriminatory usages over time.

Charcot identified a second phase of hysteria that he called "the phase of clownism", later known as the buffoonery syndrome. Protracted movements, big gestures and excessive behaviour were the main symptoms. Mady Schutzman explored extensively this phase of hysteria in contemporary advertising.<sup>457</sup> Hysterical joy, full blasted energy and euphoric uprising appear in hundreds of commercials in relation to a product to be consumed in contemporary capitalism. Bodies of women in commercials adopt the mask of hyperfemininity and are manifesting the buffoonery syndrome. Hysteria in its theatrical visualization can be used in popular culture as a critical tool in reviewing the construction of hyperfemininity as a clown discourse. If Charcot's patients were considered "sublime comediennes" and studied by actors like Sarah Bernhardt for their melodramatic roles, the popular hyperfemininity can be read as a radical potential of buffoonery inspiration. The hysterical spectacle is an act of self-mockery, where subjectivity is replaced with something bigger, something oversignified, a suggestion of hypersubjectivity. The becoming of a clown implies the abandonment of consciousness that is understood as a lie, a myth that is to be avoided.

The clown manifests hysterical symptoms especially in the area of gender identification. The

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457 Schutzman, "A Fool's Discourse," 131.

male clown acts his desire to be the female, the desire for women's clothing. In the Marx Brothers' film *A Night at the Opera*, Harpo is caught wearing the clown costume of an opera singer. When he is ordered to take it off, he reveals the uniform of a naval officer, and from beneath it, a woman's dress. If the naval uniform is the sign of masquerade, the dress underneath stays on, the unlayering goes no further.<sup>458</sup> If the uniform used by the clown is a mockery of male authority which the hysteric rejects, the dress is the fantasy of femininity attached to the male imaginary, where sexual difference cannot function anymore. The story of the hysteric is as controversial as the story of circus clowns. They both had to disappear in the twentieth century, due to their elaborated refusal of mastery but their contradictions can be revalued and used in capitalism's dynamic of internal contradictions. As Mady Schutzman observed, the clown is back, especially in advertising, while hysteria is back in neurosciences.

By becoming controversial, hysteria was slowly forgotten during the twentieth century by medicine, where the main search was for a neurological basis for this type of illness. Surprisingly, hysteria came back into medical discourse a few years ago, starting in 2005, when capturing images of the brain in action has begun to change that situation. The fight for curing hysteria is back on, if it ever disappeared. Functional neuroimaging technologies like single photon emission computerized tomography (or SPECT) and positron emission tomography (or PET) had a crucial role in its resurrection by monitoring changes in brain activity in relation to hysterical symptoms.<sup>459</sup> Although the mechanisms behind hysterical illness are still not fully understood by clinicians, new studies have started to bring back the idea that hysteria can be cured by contemporary medicine. To a greater extent, these studies also offered so-called physical evidence of one of the most elusive and annoying illnesses.<sup>460</sup> In its struggle for mastery, medical sciences could not leave this shameful chapter closed

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458 Ibid., 141.

459 Kinetz, "Is Hysteria Real?"

460 Hallett and Cloninger, *Psychogenic Movement Disorders*; Black and Seritan, "Conversion Hysteria."

and came back to solve it once and for all even if the new clinicians that are trying to find a cure for it are rarely taking into account its troubled history. Already known patterns in its approach come into play: “Hysteria, to me, has always been a pejorative term, because of its association with women,” affirmed Dr. William E. Narrow, associate director of the research division of the American Psychiatric Association.<sup>461</sup>

As Anna O taught Freud, hysteria, first of all, helps to tell a story.<sup>462</sup> As our infamous disease moved from clinic to library, from the psychoanalytical couch to the novel, from Shakespeare to Fleiss via Freud’s letters, from page to stage, it enlarged its own stereotypes, characters, plots, scripts, gags and biomechanics. Many of the patterns that can be found in the cases of male hysteria start in psychoanalytical mythology, popular culture, media and literature. Little hystories from modernist stage have correspondences in the contemporary theatre milieu, they are retold and produce hysterical identifications and in the end, they must be true somehow. A while ago, the little hysteric Freud himself insisted on the fact that the stories told under hypnosis by his patients must be truth considering “the uniformity which they exhibit in certain details.”<sup>463</sup>

This chapter of my dissertation was intended to be an exercise in plagiarism. My intimate reading of Freud’s self-analysis was written as a form of lived experience, located and written *for* the body. From Charcot to Freud to Lacan to Kristeva and Cixous, I got closer to psychoanalysis and Freud’s work on hysteria, using feminist critical tools. From the Hamlet complex to Lacanian hysterical discourse as epistemology, my endeavor was to construct a partial genealogy of hysteria. For understanding this situated genealogy, the crucial elements at work were the affirmative rediscovery of hysteria by French feminists and the contemporary discourses on hysteria.

Before closing this chapter, one last detail in my positive claim of the male hysteric, intentionally

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461 Quoted in Kinetz, “Is Hysteria Real?”.

462 Showalter, *Hystories*, 6.

463 Freud, “Aetiology of Hysteria,” in *Standard Edition*, vol.3, 205.

left here at the end, as a paradoxical new beginning:

### **The politics of male hysteria**

Teresa de Lauretis uses a quote from David Cronenberg in one of her articles that connects male hysteria to politics: “There is no politics without human desire and madness.”<sup>464</sup> Reading psychoanalysis and modernist theatre theory I see the similarities of these two Western discourses: they try “to counterbalance truth and jouissance, authority and transgression.”<sup>465</sup> What I read as a hysterical discourse takes its vitality and radicalism from what Kristeva calls “the immanence of death (the discourse of knowledge) and resurrection (the discourse of desire).”<sup>466</sup> The result in both cases is what Freud calls *the plague*, the upset of the social contract, with no respect for it, anyway a contract that is founded, according to Freud, on an act of murder. I do not plan to ignore the construction of male analysts and stage directors as “dead fathers of knowledge,” but, more important, I plan to look also at “subjects of affect, desire, and jouissance.”<sup>467</sup>

My hysterical subjects are part of a process of feminist figuration; subjectivities are explored in a struggle with language, representation and masculinism in order to produce revolt and social change. The genealogy of feminist subjectivities that I follow includes Monique Wittig’s *lesbian*,<sup>468</sup> Judith Butler’s *parodic politics of the masquerade*,<sup>469</sup> Nancy Miller’s *becoming women*,<sup>470</sup> Teresa de Lauretis’s *eccentric subjects*,<sup>471</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *inappropriated others*,<sup>472</sup> Julia Kristeva’s *honorary women*<sup>473</sup> or Rosi Braidotti’s *nomadic subjects*.<sup>474</sup>

464 de Lauretis, “Popular Culture, Public and Private Fantasies,” 303.

465 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 35.

466 Ibid.

467 Ibid.

468 Wittig, *The Straight Mind*.

469 Butler, *Gender trouble*.

470 Miller, “Subject to Change.”

471 de Lauretis, “Eccentric Subjects.”

472 Minh-ha, *Woman, native, other*.

473 Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, 182.

474 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*.

Hysterical discourse through a psychoanalytical reading produces what Kristeva calls “politics at the micro level.”<sup>475</sup> I follow her challenge of displacement of the political from the universal public domain to the singular and intimate spaces of signification. Political theory has yet to accommodate psychoanalytical and theatre theories. If in the 1930s and 1940s, surrealists approached hysterical discourse through psychoanalysis as a challenge to bourgeois life and repression of sexuality, in the 1960s and 1970s, feminism looked at psychoanalysis also in order to question bourgeois society and its sexism but in a more sophisticated way.<sup>476</sup> From this line of thought, Mitchell and Kristeva developed a new kind of Freudianism that I am following in my research.

My involvement with psychoanalysis and male hysteria is politically motivated. I am not trying to come up with a new theory of theatre aesthetics or one that is re-read in a psychoanalytical framework and then to situate it in a political context, but to continue the Kristevan project of displacing politics from the public to the intimate domain, by supporting the internal contradictions of unconscious desire and conscious political actions. The male hysteric is a situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject, a myth and another political fiction, a move against established conventions of theoretical, philosophical or theatrical thinking.<sup>477</sup> The radicalism of such a political project that looks back at the construction of femininity and hysteria, takes the form of negativity of movement and change, a hysterical discourse that plays with drives, bodies, language and meaning. The unconscious as a political tool marks the break subject/consciousness and ruins the possibility of imposing just another monolithic political subject. This form of negativity is produced at the level of each subject and not exclusively at the inter-subjectivity level. The margins of modernist theatre practice can offer a political coming out that explains politics through the negative forces operating in the subject, besides the complexities of economic or historical conditions.

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475 McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 9.

476 Sjöholm, *Kristeva & The Political*.

477 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 4.

My interpretation of psychoanalysis and deconstruction of theatre theory in the following chapters are produced as negative operations that go beyond the sole rationale to tear down, but they instead perform a Derridian close analysis that tries “to understand how an ‘ensemble’ was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end.”<sup>478</sup>

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478 Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” 4.

## Chapter 3

### Becoming a prick: hysterical discourse and modernist theatre

Isn't acting just getting on stage, or in front of a camera, and saying your lines, then going out and meeting your public to sign autographs?<sup>479</sup>

In this chapter I re-read the modernist theatre canon through the lenses of a hysterical discourse. I focus on three authors who wrote extensively about theatre, representation, acting and modernity and developed different styles of writing: Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Antonin Artaud. There have been numerous readings of these basic texts and their authors are highly respectable personalities in academic or theatrical circles. These readings repeat problematic and reductive canonical interpretations, with an absolute trust in the canonical method of understanding these writers. My new reading of these basic texts of theatre offers the necessary escape from the masculinist plot of theatre history, a break with the rational masculine identification of serious theory,<sup>480</sup> a break with the uninterrupted phallogocentric monologues of male directors, disloyalty to theatrical masters and disrespect for respectable artistic or academic authorities.

In a simple understanding, modernism expresses obsessions with novelty, art made to shock and to break rules. As Habermas explains, “modernity unfolded in various avant-garde movements and finally reached its climax in the Café Voltaire of the Dadaists and in surrealism. Aesthetic modernity is characterized by attitudes which find a common focus in a changed consciousness of time.”<sup>481</sup>

An important part of modernism is the activity of the avant-garde or what Matei Calinescu calls “the experimental edge of modernity” with its historical “double task: to destroy and to invent.”<sup>482</sup> My

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479 Wood, Jr., *Hollywood Rat Race*, 4.

480 Miller, *Getting Personal*.

481 Habermas, “Modernity – An Incomplete Project,” 5.

482 Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 275.

purpose in addressing modernism is not to contribute to what has become a hegemonic theory of modernity in theatre studies and to offer a certain understanding that has its source in a detached contemporary position. Modernist theatre has to be rethought as a discursive and historical field.

The personal writings on theatre practice and theory that I focus on have the form of the manifesto, the “undertheorized genre on the catalogue of modern discursive forms.”<sup>483</sup> The manifesto characterizes the historical avant-garde from the first decades of the twentieth century, with its revolutionary discourse of the aesthetic texts<sup>484</sup> (as in the case of dada, futurism, surrealism or constructivism). Etymologically, manifesto might come from the Latin composite *manus* and *fectus*, meaning “hostile hand.”<sup>485</sup> This understanding characterizes a genre that gives materiality to the writing, standing for “both threat and incipient action.”<sup>486</sup> The theatrical avant-garde follows the political and aesthetical rhetoric of other artistic mediums by discussing the problems of modernity on the same tone: “no-nonsense genre of plain speech” or “the genre that shoots from the hip.”<sup>487</sup> The theatrical manifestos participate in a widespread ideological critique of modernity as poetics of novelty. The paradox of the manifesto emerges in modernist theatre texts as a search to negotiate between form and content, representation and personal independence, politics and aesthetics or rationality and the unconscious. The theatrical manifestos discussed in this chapter express the deferral of modernist promises through the uncertainty and practical failure of these theories. Their authors discuss only a plan that is to be put into practice in the future and their complete faith in this future.

According to Robert Leach, modernist theatre is understood canonically as “the theatre of the first fifty or so years of the last century, when Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, and Artaud flourished.”<sup>488</sup> The modernist ideas of these theoreticians/practitioners are still influencing contemporary theatre and

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483 Lyon, *Manifestoes*, 1.

484 *Ibid.*, 2.

485 Burnett, “Sexual Rhetoric and Personal Identity,” 44.

486 *Ibid.*, 14.

487 *Ibid.*, 2.

488 Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre*, 1.



theatre training. My own analysis of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Artaud intends to trouble and to unsettle an easy narrative of modernist theatre and to reconnect theatre practice to modernist discourses.

The canonized modernist theatre is seen today as strikingly original or authentic while other contemporary forms of theatre are described as derivative, deviant, old-fashioned and second-rate (for example, feminist theatre is often described as a pale copy of Brechtian theatre). The main reason to keep the primacy of originality or novelty is to assure the existence of various hierarchies through the discourse of modernism. The binary opposition original/copy functions in theatre as a complex mechanism with exclusionary effects, “for differentiating between and evaluating various forms of deviance and marginality.”<sup>489</sup> One of the effects of original/copy dichotomy marks the masculinity/femininity separation and becomes essential in masculinist reconstructions of the modernist theatre. Rosalind E. Krauss<sup>490</sup> identifies the theme of originality as the only constant in the discourse of the modernist avant-garde. From her perspective, modernism depends exactly on the repression of the second term of the binary. Originality, daringness or being-interesting are valorized in the modernist discourse as masculine features with no critical attention to the social implications of such reconstructions. While the unoriginal or repetitive work was feminized, modernist avant-garde was constructed in the masculine. The margins of contemporary theatre follow the modernist formula and become feminized while those actors, directors or dramatists remain insignificant unless they accept a masculine individualist approach and produce acceptable original work.

Modernist theatre reacts to the nineteenth century realism (perceived as a specific type of representation with no attention paid to acting, style, scenery, musicality, language, perception and narration). All these details become relevant from a modernist approach and the modernist theatre makers respond also to the content of theatrical fiction and not only through a fetishization of form.

489 Elliott and Wallace, *Women artists and writers*, 34.

490 Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 151-170.

The increased exigencies of content and not the exclusive desire to alter the form of theatre production forced the modernist innovation. Modernist theatre breaks with the traditional forms of theatre by “questioning the basic certainties which provide the foundation for social organization, morality and concepts of self.”<sup>491</sup> Modernist experimentations were not produced solely from a conscious desire for experiment or from clear aesthetic agendas. Modernist procedures and assumptions have the main characteristic of provisionality, in terms of aesthetic explorations, social structures, concepts of identity and self.

The radical political attitude characterizes various avant-garde projects: it focuses on a revolutionary future, where traditional aesthetics, formalist conventions, accepted structures and logic, bourgeois values and Western civilization stand on the side of the counterrevolution. Modernist theatre follows the political discourse of the avant-garde even if its critique survived mainly on depoliticized terms. The Bakunian terminology and ideas of non-conformism, heresy, dissent, controversy, personal rebellion and civil disobedience had an important impact on the ideological construction of the avant-garde but nevertheless they were easily forgotten.<sup>492</sup> As Svetlana Boym mentions, “reading Bakunin, I suspect that, had he been born some eighty years later, he might have been a radical practitioner of the avant-garde or a performance artist and not a political revolutionary.”<sup>493</sup> The aim of the theatrical avant-garde, understood as part of a bigger aesthetic revolution was to anticipate social revolution.<sup>494</sup> The avant-garde theatre is characterized exactly by “the rejection of social institutions and established artistic conventions”<sup>495</sup> and especially by the open opposition towards the audience (because they are the embodied representatives of the status quo).

The process of depoliticizing the avant-garde ignores precisely its struggle against the existing

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491 Elidge Miller, *Rebel women*, 7.

492 *L'Avant-Garde* was Bakunin's short-lived anarchist journal published in Switzerland in 1878 where he introduced the modernist idea of the avant-garde; for the relation to experimental art see also Boym, *Another Freedom*..

493 Boym, *Another Freedom*, 146.

494 Innes, *Avant garde theatre*, 1.

495 Ibid.

social order and inequality. For example, Christopher Innes, an historian of the avant-garde theatre associates it primarily with an apparent neutral and innocent mysticism or primitivism.<sup>496</sup> The avant-garde theatre is understood as a cultural movement towards disembodied abstraction which in defining itself as anti-theatre denies anything that might be identified as an ideological position: the paradoxical “theatre of pure form”<sup>497</sup> or Ionesco’s misleading idea of a theatre “that cannot serve any other kind of truth but its own” with only the elitist function of exploring “the fundamental laws of [dramatic] construction.”<sup>498</sup> Nevertheless, the position of the avant-garde artists counterbalances such conservative views. For example, Artaud’s perspective on the avant-garde is heavily influenced by other artists: for him, the *suicided-by-society* Van Gogh serves as a prototype for the modern artist while “the incoherent scream of protest” becomes “the official voice of the avant-garde.”<sup>499</sup>

In its canonical readings, the radical modernist theatre was distorted into a depoliticized theatre where form becomes more and more important over considerations of content, to the point where radical experimentation with form *is* modernism while the political content becomes superfluous. These disciplinary distinctions have material effects and they reinforce a formalist hegemony of techniques, authors, images and texts while others become unavailable (eg.: the popularization of Stanislavsky’s psychological experiments in theatre and the disappearance of Sergei Eisenstein’s theatre of attractions). In the particular case of theatre, one can find inspiration in what Habermas had advised: “instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs”<sup>500</sup> (such as the canonization of form and the depoliticization of modernist theatre).

Many practitioners and theatre scholars characterize the modernist theatre in very similar ways

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496 Ibid.

497 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz quoted in Lehmann, *Postdramatic theatre*, 64.

498 Eugène Ionesco quoted in Innes, *Avant garde theatre*, 9.

499 Ibid.

500 Habermas, “Modernity – An Incomplete Project,” 12.

(where modernism is constructed as an easy and accessible history) and they self-consciously participate in the construction of a range of hegemonic modernisms. Modernist theatre operates first of all as a discourse, and not simply as a list of techniques, performances, texts and old images. A large number of cultural agents such as directors, actors, critics, writers, publishers, editors, theatre owners, intellectuals, academics and theatre-goers produce and re-produce this discourse of modernist theatre in an uncritical way. A hegemonic form of modernism dominates especially academia, a discourse that “makes some questions inevitable and others unthinkable,”<sup>501</sup> it privileges some acting methods, texts and aesthetics while others are forgotten. The modernist discourse has authorizing power and this is one of the reasons for strategically keeping the term modernism in my research. My appropriation of the term teases its aporias and masculinities by exploring its constructions for a feminist agenda of political transformation.

The Bakunian understanding of the avant-garde pays attention to the construction of subjectivity in the process: “all set rules that prescribed behaviour (‘being’) had to be discarded for a fluid sense of individual fulfillment (‘becoming’).”<sup>502</sup> The process of becoming is the main engine and the main area of inquiry in the distinct texts that I analyze in this chapter.

Taking the example of Antonin Artaud (who could be read as the “last modernist” figure<sup>503</sup>) and his permanent modernist concerns for novelty, Maurice Blanchot makes the following comment: “the importance of these preoccupations for Artaud cannot be overstated. Certainly he is not a professor, an aesthetician, or a man of serene thought. He is never on sure ground.”<sup>504</sup> Blanchot’s description of Artaud’s interference with theatre, culture, metaphysics and language can be applied also to Stanislavsky and Meyerhold and comes from the “sure ground” of the self-sufficient male professor. My own position in writing about theatre theory, modernism and psychoanalysis is very similar to

501 Elliott and Wallace, *Women artists and writers*, 15.

502 Quoted in Innes, *Avant garde theatre*, 5.

503 Matar, *Modernism and the Language of Philosophy*, xiii.

504 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 295.

Blanchot's description: I do not write as a man of serene thought, a professor or "on sure ground", but as a modernist male hysteric who has to dispute the master (or the professor of sure ground).

The Lacanian hysterical discourse stands for the divided subject or the exposed unconscious in a process of challenging the master to produce knowledge. Lacan mentions that the hysteric is also a mastering subject, because s/he is the agent of the discourse. Lacan explains this type of discourse as manifesting and gradually intensifying uncertainty and the impossibility of identification with an audience.<sup>505</sup> The struggle to find a good personal identification brings the inquiry to anyone who can be in the place of the master. Because we are talking of a discourse, it implies at least two partners, with the particularity that Lacan emphasizes: one of the partners is a divided subject. Modernism is an answer to the uncertainty and fragmentation of the modern experience. Modernist theatre makers answer in various ways to fragmentation and they reproduce it in their writing in the attempt to master it. My three examples from this chapter, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Artaud never succeeded. Their methods were different in dealing with fragmentation: "Stanislavsky wanted to heal it"; "Meyerhold wanted to make it cohere beyond the stage in the spectator (in Roland Barthes' sense, he wanted 'the death of the theatre artist')" and "Artaud wanted it to cauterize."<sup>506</sup>

The modernist theatre deals with fragmentation in a hysterical way: it is a question of subjectivity; it deals first of all with the division of subject. The hysterical question addressed in the basic texts of modernist theatre is repetitive, contradictory, unrealistic, delusional, hypochondriac, unstable and especially troublesome. Hysterical writing violates textual and disciplinary codes, rules, conventions, modes of production, technologies of knowledge and discursive limits. Hysterical writing is self-contradictory and uninformed. Hysterical writing always asks the subjectivity question but not in a direct way: these authors rarely say "Who am I?" or "What is Being?"; they always raise other questions or silences in order to complicate and alienate well-established technologies of knowledge

<sup>505</sup> Quackelbeen, "Hysterical Discourse," 129-137.

<sup>506</sup> Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre*, 3.

and identity.

For a hysterical writer, desire emerges as a questioning of the construction of subjectivity. It is the insatiable desire that gets one into trouble in society. Cixous observes the social role of the hysteric as a universal scapegoat accused of pretending, of hypochondria, of manipulation, of masochism, of selfishness, sadism, inconstancy, irrationality and bad social skills.<sup>507</sup> These characteristics define modernism through one unifying concept: “The whole idea of the “genteel” against which Modernism defined itself seems to be inextricably bound to... contradictory, even schizophrenic, notions of femininity.”<sup>508</sup> Modernist theatre theory under the sign of hysteria and femininity can be described best as Laplanche’s “kaleidoscopic play” where the series of permutations evokes less the evolution and enrichment of thought and more “versions of what Levi-Strauss designates as wild thought”.<sup>509</sup>

In challenging the canonicity by rereading the successful modernist theatre makers, I am looking for the feminized failure and abandonment as methods of writing about theatre and hysterical subjectivities. The complexity, social relevance and epistemic value of canonized theatre theory depend exactly on a process of theoretical collapse. This failure or the Lacanian hysterical discourse facilitates the return to modernist theatre by engaging the reader in a play of fruitful oppositions and uncertainties together with the emergence of the uncanny. Working the scheme of internal oppositions, there is a whole new world to be discovered: the possibilities of collapse as method in theatre practice. Upsetting the signifying practices of the dominant social order does not stand only for finding new forms of acting, directing, writing and making theatre but for the construction of new meanings, identities and communities.

Hysteria is a relevant concept in analyzing modernist theatre theory because, as Lacan explains, it embodies “a unique configuration with respect to knowledge”<sup>510</sup> by eluding discourse defined as what

507 Cixous and Clement, *Newly Born Woman*.

508 Schenck, “Exiled by Genre,” 228-229.

509 Laplanche, *Life and death in psychoanalysis*, 2.

510 Fink, *Lacanian subject*, 134.

is reflected, articulable, accessible (as thought, expression and communication) to move to the area of images and hallucination.<sup>511</sup>

The hysterical discourse can be a nonphallogentric way of thinking through its epistemological position: moving from one discourse to another, contradicting all of them, blurring well-established boundaries, spreading confusion, resisting discursive assimilation, avoiding dominant forms of representation or self imaging. The hysterical discourse is always on the move, “creating connections where things were previously dis-connected or seemed un-related, where there seemed to be “nothing to see.” In transit, moving, dis-placing – this is the grain of hysteria without which there is no theorization at all.”<sup>512</sup> This type of theoretization brings new possibilities to relate concepts, to connect notions through an intentional misreading or misinterpretation and offers a location from where one can demystify phallogentric categories.

Unable to answer to the rigorous demands of the symbolic, the theatrical hysteric tries to find compromise solutions: signs, objects and words are invested with desire and sensuality, they become performative, direct agents of hysterical intensity, causing gaps in the realm of established knowledge production. What hysterical modernist theatre can offer is exactly “what the theory of the unconscious looks for, within and against the social order: the ultimate means of its mutation or subversion, the conditions for its survival and revolution.”<sup>513</sup> The Lacanian “language of the unconscious” is vital in pursuing the ideas of acting and directing in avant-garde theatre theories that have effect and function beyond the limitations of consciousness and are “not accessible to a ‘commonsense’ rational analysis.”<sup>514</sup> Unconscious desire brings a “somnambular logic” without dissolving language or modernism and “the animism of objects” replaces a possible evaluation of its discourse.<sup>515</sup> This marks

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511 Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, 60.

512 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 93.

513 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 79.

514 Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, 114.

515 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 73.

the modernist theatre manifestos as uncanny: they represent a form of psychoanalysis in practice.

The male modernist emerged in close relation to the artist's cult of personality (highly visible in the famous cases of Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso or Antonin Artaud). The narcissism of the male artist, his tragic or heroic originality and his self-sacrifice to his art are prominent features of the modernist theatre maker also. The male originality and heterosexual lifestyles are the paradoxical and unchallenged characteristics of the dominant bourgeois culture of the time. The modernist director is the Father, representing the Law and the Canon, but also a delinquent or a pervert who betrays the Law, “something more than just phallogentric. He is also phalloeccentric. Or, in more pointed language, he is a prick.”<sup>516</sup> We should not be fooled, the male hysteric is not outside phallogentrism, he is both phallus and prick, authority and excess, Law-giver and laughter at the Law. The *jouissance* emerging from being in excess to the Law, from escaping phallic masculinity, more pointedly the *jouissance* of the prick, is the transgressive element in modernist theatre theory as a form of Lacanian hysterical discourse.

### **Konstantin Stanislavsky**

Konstantin Stanislavsky was a Russian actor and director who highly influenced the theatre practice in the Western countries and the socialist block throughout the twentieth century, generating various readings of his theories. Nowadays he can be considered outdated<sup>517</sup> but nevertheless canonized by the theatre educational system globally. Stanislavsky was most famous in the 1950s -1960s as the conceiver of *Method Acting* in the Western world and the theoretical source of realistic acting in socialist countries. He became more unpopular in the twenty-first century in Western theatre through the institutionalization of postmodern forms of theatre (in opposition to a modernist approach) and the rise of performance studies. For example, one preeminent Russian director, Adolf Shapiro, sees

<sup>516</sup> Gallop, “Nurse Freud,” 35-36.

<sup>517</sup> Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in focus*, 1.



nowadays Stanislavsky's techniques based on emotions as "insufficiently vivid and expressive, even boring."<sup>518</sup>

The canonization of theatre makers excludes any trace of hysteria in the complex operations of masculinization and whitewashing its select members. Already during his lifetime, Stanislavsky became part of the theatrical Western and socialist canon and became in his own words "quite a profitable business" for his proponents. But as he explained "a formal approach to our complicated creative work and a narrow elementary understanding of it is the greatest danger to my method."<sup>519</sup> Stanislavsky strongly rejected the canonization process and institutionalization of his research and practice, observing the perils of such a direction: "What a temptation to the exploiters of my system! But there is nothing more harmful or more stupid so far as art is concerned than a system for the sake of a system. You cannot make it an aim in itself; you cannot transform a means into an end. That would be the greatest lie of all!"<sup>520</sup> This prediction haunted not only his own research but also the work of the other two theorists that I am dealing with in this chapter, Meyerhold and Artaud.

The project of a new theatre (described by Stanislavsky as *revolutionary* and started together with the theatre critic and playwright Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1897) was a reaction to the nineteenth century style of professional acting, insufficient rehearsal time and poor standards of scenic design. As Stanislavsky explained later: "We protested against the old manner of acting, against theatricality, against false pathos, declamation, against overacting, against the bad conventions of production and design, against the star system which spoils the ensemble, against the whole construct of the spectacle and against the unsubstantial repertoire of past theatres."<sup>521</sup>

As an actor, Stanislavsky had always interrogated his own style of acting but he tried to theoretically explore acting with the ensemble only after the summer of 1906. The moment was a

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<sup>518</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky on the art of the stage*, 50.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Quoted in Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in focus*, 28.

special one: he was just returning after the company's first successful tour to Europe and was physically and emotionally exhausted. He retreated to Finland for vacation where he spent all his time in "a half-darkened room, writing, and smoking for whole days."<sup>522</sup> New questions appeared. His disturbing lack of "joy in creating" generated the whole process of thinking of a new approach to acting: "Why was it that earlier I was bored whenever I didn't act, and now it's just the opposite. I am happy when free from performing?"<sup>523</sup> were ones of the first questions. The process of questioning, thinking and writing about acting in the summer 1906 was his first attempt to link theory to practice.

Stanislavsky's dominating image in theatre studies is still one of a dictatorial, patriarchal director, manager and teacher, exceeded by his privileged position in the production of Soviet state culture.<sup>524</sup> According to this image, the actors produced by his *system* should be weak, ready-made for directors to use in performances, emotionally instable, hysterical and highly feminized.<sup>525</sup> Common knowledge based on theatrical anecdotes, fragmentary readings and so-called Stanislavskian techniques creates a terrifying myth. Sharon Marie Carnicke identifies the sources of this mythical construction being "enthusiastic Americans, who gravitated toward his early teachings" and Soviet propagandists "who insisted that his intuitions about the biological/physiological underpinnings of acting were as absolute as the laws of reflexology, discovered by the Nobel Prize winning scientist Ivan Pavlov."<sup>526</sup> Ironically, during the worst period of the Cold War, the American *Method Acting* and the Soviet *Method of Physical Actions* established in a similar way a canonical approach towards Stanislavsky.

Nevertheless, Stanislavsky's ideas about training and rehearsal represent the first identifiably modern theatre theory, where the art of the actor is the foundation of dramatic performance. As Robert Gordon observes,<sup>527</sup> the main problem for theatre-makers and scholars in approaching his so-called

<sup>522</sup> Vinogradskaia quoted in *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>524</sup> See Fitzpatrick, "Culture and Politics under Stalin," 211-231.

<sup>525</sup> Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 122-23.

<sup>526</sup> Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in focus*, 3.

<sup>527</sup> Gordon, *Purpose of playing*, 58.

system is given by the fact that Stanislavsky kept changing his working practice and modifying his ideas in relation to the difficulties that himself or the actors came up against in training or performance.

Concerning his style of making theory Stanislavsky explores the unconscious as an epistemology: “I have to talk to you about something I feel but do not know.”<sup>528</sup> He openly employs his emotions as an ineffable knowledge production. The theatrical explorations in writing invoke one of his basic methods: “to go from practice to graphic example and from my own experience to theory.”<sup>529</sup> Stanislavsky does not write about a single right way to act. There is nothing final about his contradictory theories and techniques for acting and staging a performance. The hysteric subjectivity in modernist theatre theory stands as an alternative figuration or what Braidotti calls “a way out of the old schemes of thought.”<sup>530</sup> By offering new patterns of interconnectedness, modernist theatre theory holds an important role in creating this type of plagiaristic subjectivity.

### **Return of the affect**

The contemporary interest in affect evidences dissatisfaction with poststructuralist approaches to power (framed as hegemonic in their negativity) and insistence on social structures rather than interpersonal relationships as formative of the subject. The poststructuralist oppositions of power/resistance or public/private are not enough to explain subjectivity. Affectivity offers a conceptual alternative model of subject formation.<sup>531</sup>

The hysteric psychically surrenders to the object by passivity and by waiting for the other to act upon. Self-knowledge cannot be an option in this situation because he feels that creativity and affectivity are missing in him. In struggling with the symptom, the male hysteric tries to rediscover the

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528 Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, 199.

529 Quoted in Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in focus*, 14.

530 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 3.

531 Hemmings, “Invoking Affect,” 548-567.

affect and to move away from the condition of being absent and blank.<sup>532</sup> The way to acting crosses affectivity as a possible solution in finding a cure.

The actor, in Stanislavsky's view, must welcome affectivity and definitely on no account suppress it. As an actor, he felt empty and blank and had difficulties in showing his emotions on stage. His theories of acting are focusing on various occasions on expressing feelings, emotions and impossibility of faking affectivity.<sup>533</sup> Stanislavsky's personal struggle with showing emotions was also a struggle with a certain type of actor: that is what Stanislavsky called the "mechanical actor." Mediocrity for Stanislavsky was given by the impossibility of showing affectivity and the struggle to act it. Stanislavsky associated mechanical acting with usages of facial expressions, mimicry, intonations and gestures to present a dead mask of feeling. *Indicating*, one of Stanislavsky's terms, means trying to express a feeling which is not affecting experience by simply using body and voice devices to represent some particular emotion. The deliberate decision to evoke a specific emotion precedes indication of emotion and not the actual experience of emotion, as Stanislavsky was teaching.<sup>534</sup> Affect can place the subject in a circuit of feeling and response, rather than opposition to others.<sup>535</sup> Stanislavsky advocates a return to the ontological and intersubjective through affect,<sup>536</sup> by focusing on its capacity to link actors creatively to others. This link between various affects is merely a theoretical projection of future explorations, Stanislavsky not being able to investigate it rigorously.

Other theatre theoreticians, such as Augusto Boal, took emotional exploration further. In this particular case, following Stanislavsky's theories, emotions become "dialectic processes" and the emphasis is on the "flow of emotions." Boal borrows the concept from Mao Tse-tung, who is quoted in *Theatre of the Oppressed*: "No more lakes, but rather emotional rivers."<sup>537</sup> The main difficulty

532 Yarom, *Matrix of hysteria*, 100.

533 Comey, *The Art of Film Acting*, 151.

534 Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*.

535 Hemmings, "Invoking Affect," 552.

536 Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 17.

537 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 192.

observed by Boal in using the laws of dialectics in regards to emotions on stage is application: they were used mechanically.

Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares* is seen by canon apologists as a milestone in setting up various "systems of theatre with an attractive semblance of completeness"<sup>538</sup> where the only element of contradiction that can bring a different perspective is in relation to other "systems of theatre" i.e. Brecht, Grotowsky, Brook etc. In Mitter's opinion, these "manifestos and autobiographical assessments have the virtue of consistency, the product of the refraction of a number of concepts through the filter of a single authoritative sensibility"; they are expressing conceptual lacks that can be answered only by other systems. At the end of the day we can get a linear and coherent system that includes a "multiplicity of opinions and interpretations that characterizes a healthy understanding of ideas."<sup>539</sup> This type of interpretation avoids a critical reading of each text, ignores the inner contradictions and leakages in the system. Stanislavsky's writings reveal exactly this type of incongruities and disagreements. Instead of looking for comparing differences between various authors, I am looking at the contrasts and variations for each author. What I can see as resonating between them is exactly a similar type of failure in the system, a hysterical type of knowledge.

### **Making reality on stage**

Stanislavsky writes about an actor trying to know what is real and what is fake on stage: "I know that everything by which I am surrounded on the stage...is all make-believe. But if it were real...this is how I would act...'. And from the instant that his soul is aware of the magic phrase 'if it were,' the actual world around him ceases to interest him, he is carried off to another plane, to a life created by his imagination."<sup>540</sup> Stanislavsky suggests that the actor has to accept that the objects on stage are only

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538 Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal*, 2.

539 Ibid.

540 Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky's Legacy*, 188–9.

stage properties; they are a fiction in a fictional world. As he writes in *An Actor Prepares*, the actor makes sure that the audience knows that everything in front of them is “clear, honest and above-board.”<sup>541</sup> After clarifying this part for the reader, Stanislavsky contradicts his earlier argument as being too *crude* and *having no significance*.<sup>542</sup> He focuses further on the actor’s fantasy or the imaginary situation, the one that depicts the world of the character. The contradiction between the conscious simulacrum of the character and the materiality of the stage is inescapable and unsolved by Stanislavsky. The two separate claims do not cancel each other but function as excessive to one another in a hysterical narrative of argumentation, very far from the ideal of a unified and well-structured system.

By recognizing the materiality of stage, the actor can have access to the “magic if” which is actually denying this recognition. The result is an incoherent, evasive, fragmented and ambiguous identification with the character. The actor is caught in the difficult position of constructing the reality of the character on the unreal *magic if*. But how does the *magic if* work?

The transformative effects of *if* on an actor’s subjectivity can place the actor in a virtual situation. The road to the character’s affectivity is similar to the reality of dreams and fantasies. The emotions of characters can be found through a similar psychoanalytical search for the unconscious.<sup>543</sup> What Stanislavsky calls *the inner truth* is similar to the unconscious and his search for a technique is similar to the Freudian project of therapy. Stanislavsky explores the relation between the unconscious and emotions for his own self-analysis, his own cure of male hysteria. The talking cure for the hysteric becomes the *magic if* for the character’s world. The creative unconscious of the actor can find a conscious narration through the *magic if*. The performer’s emotions come out conveyed as reflections of the character’s feelings of sorrow, anger, joy etc. Emotions are understood in this case as intentional,

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<sup>541</sup> Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, 44.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

<sup>543</sup> Edwin Wilson makes this connection in *The Theatre Experience*.

they involve a way towards an object.<sup>544</sup> They are about the world of the actor, a personal understanding, participation or negation of the Symbolic order.

The fragmented subjectivity of the actor designates the logos of the Western modernist performance (“The problematic of self is, of course, central to performance theory”). Philip Auslander discusses Stanislavsky’s experiments in theatre as part of an exploration of subjectivity: “the actor’s self precedes and grounds her performance” and this is “aptly summarized by a sentence of Joseph Chaikin: “Acting is a demonstration of self with or without a disguise.””<sup>545</sup> Auslander considers the Russian director to privilege the actor’s subjectivity over the character to the point that the only role that actors can play is their own.

The emotional actors masquerade various stage identities that are different than their own, without necessarily excluding Stanislavsky’s advice for the actor: “Always act in your own person . . . You can never get away from your own self.”<sup>546</sup> The actor’s relationship to a character in connection to fictionality and subjectivity shifts over the years in Stanislavsky’s writing and it deeply troubled him both as actor and director. The character is perceived as a fragmented/nomadic entity in symbiosis with the actor’s shifting subjectivity, the outcome of an emotional affinity between the two. The performance is based on this never-ending interaction, the goal being a paradoxical form of anti-acting. As Stanislavsky explains, when “the actor ceases to act, he begins the life of the play.”<sup>547</sup>

The object in *magic if* can miss materiality, can be fully based on an imaginary trigger but nonetheless it generates feelings by contact with fantasy. Sara Ahmed’s example<sup>548</sup> of the child and the bear proves to be useful in this case. This often used example in the literature on emotions functions as a primal scene in the psychology of emotions: the child sees the bear and is afraid, the child runs away.

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544 Parkinson, *Ideas and Realities of Emotion*, 8.

545 Auslander, “Just be Yourself,” 60.

546 Stanislavsky, *An Actor’s Handbook*, 91.

547 Ibid., 121.

548 Ahmed, *Cultural politics of emotion*, 7.

What an evolutionary psychologist would explain as a form of survival, in the sense that fear is an instinctual reaction that proves adaptation and natural selection<sup>549</sup> is more complicated than that. The child is afraid because she must know that the bear is frightful, it is not her decision to be afraid, it is not necessarily related to lived experience and maybe this is the first time she has seen the bear. The bear is not essentially frightening, but is frightening in relation to the child: cultural stories and images are telling her the bear is terrifying. The emotion comes in contact with the bear and is not produced by the bear itself. Previous histories of frightening bears, probably fantasized, are letting her know that the bear in front of her is frightful. And she runs. The bear is the object of these emotions and emotions of fear are projected upon the bear. In Stanislavsky's case the bear is the actor's construction of the character that apprehends hidden emotions. As in Freud's case of Little Hans, where the horse leads us to the father, the character as object of emotions is never simply present on stage.

Stanislavsky encourages the exploration of subjectivity and sets the emotions and the unconscious as foundations for acting on stage.<sup>550</sup> *Magic if* is a possibility for actors to investigate their unconscious through the character, the Other that is inside. The actor, according to Stanislavsky, by using *if* in the first instance ("If I was the character I would..."), can get to the point of being on stage "without dividing his creative problems into "I" and "if I"."<sup>551</sup> Following Braidotti and contrary to Lacan, the ex-centricity of the character or the Stanislavskian *if I* vis-à-vis the system of representation points to a new logic. *If I* grows in relation to other *if I*-s on stage in a further attempt of redefining the subject. *If I* becomes an ontological precondition for a conscious becoming of the subject: finding the Other in I.

The continuous play between I and *if I* is the classical struggle of a hysterical subjectivity where the Other is plagiarized to the impossible differentiation for the two: a "merging of yourself and the character of your part."<sup>552</sup> This process of becoming-character is never completely fulfilled because, as

549 See Strongman, *Psychology of Emotions*.

550 Mally, *Culture of the Future*, 149.

551 Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage*, 193.

552 Ibid.



Luce Irigaray explains, “to become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being. Obviously, this road never ends.”<sup>553</sup>

In a hysterical manner, Stanislavsky denies his theories later. At the end of his career, in a rehearsal of *Tartuffe*, Stanislavsky ends up saying “Art begins when there is no role, when there is only the ‘I’.”<sup>554</sup> The struggle to solve the modernist conflict between reality and fiction as irreconcilable oppositions haunts Stanislavsky’s writing. This conflict generates an ultimate failure in his late writing. Performing the role is for the actor the staged reality and truth. The unsolved paradox which equates *truth* and *reality* with *theatricality* can actually open the door to an aesthetics based on the unconscious.

A resolution for the I/if I association can be precisely the continuous play between the two, the constant undermining of each other and a regular recognition/misrecognition. When Stanislavsky states that “the actor’s belief in his own action places him on the path of truth,”<sup>555</sup> he explores exactly this play between I/if I with no decisive end, with no intention of “convincing the audience of the truth of something that is ‘actually’ untrue.”<sup>556</sup> Through the play of I/if I the actor manages to *create reality* on stage. As David Magarshack observes, for Stanislavsky “the actor had to believe in what he did or said on stage and that truth on the stage was merely what the actor believed in.”<sup>557</sup> The action is real on stage because the actor invests emotions in it and believes it is real. The world of the stage becomes real through acting by the actor becoming the character. These ideas contradict also the canonical reading of Stanislavsky’s *realism* as an imitation of everyday life and reality: they are talking more about the construction of a reality based on the unconscious and the emotions, “a reality which we desire precisely because it is ‘other’.”<sup>558</sup> The corporeality of this emotional reality or the materiality of affects represents for Stanislavsky the possibility of becoming other on stage: “Anybody can imitate an

553 Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 61.

554 Toporkov, *Stanislavsky in Rehearsal*, 156.

555 Ibid., 124.

556 Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal*, 7.

557 Magarshack, *Stanislavsky*, 305.

558 Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal*, 7.

image but only a true talent can *become* an image.”<sup>559</sup>

The exploration of the I/if I is a personal search for Stanislavsky’s own *becoming-character*: “for in this role (although it was almost the only one) I had become Rostanov, while in my other roles I merely copied and imitated the necessary image.”<sup>560</sup> *Becoming-character* stands for a continuous process through which actors and directors can make non-hierarchical connections on building a performance together. Deleuze explains the concept of *becoming* as “neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between.”<sup>561</sup> The actor or the director never finally becomes anything in the stage process but is constantly in a state of creative becoming.

Stanislavsky sees in acting a new type of knowledge based completely on emotions: “in the language of the actor *to know* is synonymous with *to feel*.”<sup>562</sup> By exploring their affectivity, actors get in touch with a special form of knowledge production: in creating reality on stage, actors are performing in order to know. Through becoming character the actor struggles to get in touch with the unconscious and hidden emotions. Becoming character goes beyond mimesis by implying the reality of emotions, more precisely the actor’s subjectivity is fragmented and in-between by the other of the character, giving an *if body* to the hystericized actor. To use an example, the android character of Data in television’s *Star Trek: The Next Generation* studies Stanislavsky in order to understand human emotion through acting.<sup>563</sup>

In the case of not knowing their character or of not having the experience to become the character in various portions of the performance, Stanislavsky comes with a solution for the actor in difficulty: “All such portions must be studied to disclose what materials they possess to incite him to ardour.”<sup>564</sup> Action and process are preferred over finished product and performance ready for consumption. This

559 Quoted in Edwards, *The Stanislavsky Heritage*, 49.

560 Ibid.

561 Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 293.

562 Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 5.

563 Philip Lazebnick quoted in Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in focus*, 9.

564 Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 10.

type of exploration contradicts a popular assumption in theatre practice that Stanislavskian actors lose themselves in their roles and forget that they are on stage. Stanislavsky's emphasis on becoming-character as an exploration of emotions and an end in itself contradicts a canonical reading of modernist theatre where the actor seeks to represent a fictional character who is somehow living in the reality of the text or its psychology.

David Mamet develops a strong critique on the coherence of Stanislavsky: "The Stanislavsky 'Method,' and the technique of the schools derived from it, is nonsense. It is not a technique out of the practice of which one develops a skill—it is a cult."<sup>565</sup> The Stanislavsky cult as modernist canonicity had geopolitical implications: *Method Acting* in the US and the *Method of Physical Actions* in the USSR were two consistent universal acting systems that heavily mythologized their guru. From New York and Moscow, where followers established schools based on his cult, two similar traditions spread like a virus: to Western Europe (especially Great Britain and Scandinavia) and to Japan, on one side and to Eastern Europe and Germany,<sup>566</sup> on the other side. Both traditions invented their own master in the image of Stanislavsky.

Stanislavsky's elaboration of a contradictory method of psychophysical actions focused on the emotional and embodied details of the process of approaching the otherness of the character. His research heavily influenced in various fragmentary readings many acting theories and methods and can be tracked in contemporary acting teaching and experimentation. But as Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento observes, a supplementary significant outcome is that "because Stanislavsky took upon himself the double role of director and pedagogue, his trajectory led to a naturalized assumption that the professional relationship between director and actor must follow a teacher–student paradigm."<sup>567</sup> This connection in the actor-director cooperation haunts critics, theoreticians, audiences and practitioners in

<sup>565</sup> Mamet, *True and False*, 6.

<sup>566</sup> See Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in focus*.

<sup>567</sup> Tatinge Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders*, 54-55.

their understanding of power relations on stage and in the creative process.

Stanislavsky's work as a director is closely related to his work as an actor and the cooperation with actors to the point of an impossible separation between acting and directing. The subject positionality in his writings follows his acting experience and cooperation with other actors on stage. Various synergistic partnerships effectively shaped the course of theatre training and are on many occasions neglected by critics and theatre theoreticians.<sup>568</sup> Such forgetting can be easily connected to a canonical understanding of power relations on stage based on a hierarchical teacher–student alliance between director and actor: the effects of such an understanding tend to minimize the actor's part in the creation of a performance, even in those cases when the director openly gives credit to actors for their input. Stanislavsky's writings offer various examples of intimate professional relationships that do not follow the well-spread misconception of actors being limited to play the role of their director's innocent pupils.<sup>569</sup>

Another common canonical misreading of Western actor training depicts the repetition of form as central to modernist performance aesthetics (e.g. Stanislavsky's firmness on the actor's repeatable score of physical actions or Meyerhold's biomechanics). This misreading places the director in the central role of artistic innovation and creativity on stage while the actors can prove only the physical or emotional skills of reproducing what the director instructs. This approach towards performance is often compared to a romanticized idea of Eastern dance-theatre training, which focuses on physical instruction and choreography as a way "to shape one's body towards virtuosity and sustain tradition,"<sup>570</sup> the actor being caught between the two discourses of the canonical East or West.

Stanislavsky's early work on affective memory insisted on a connection between the actor's experience and the character's actions. Acting as a creative process involves and gives agency to the

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<sup>568</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid., 55.

actor who doesn't pretend to be someone else on stage. Eastern dance-theatre acting is constructed by Western theoreticians as based on formalism, virtuosity and a different work ethic which influenced Western avant-garde practitioners such as Antonin Artaud or Bertolt Brecht, to cite just two.<sup>571</sup> These so-called Eastern influences are endlessly affirmed and rediscovered in connection to Western *physical theatre*, *intercultural theatre* or *dance-theatre* as forms of a subaltern theatre, following the same colonial pattern: "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history, and cannot speak"<sup>572</sup> or the Western practitioner can explain it on Western terms.

The so-called "cross-cultural influences" or "Eastern forms" are seen as positive in theatre studies because they led to "a progressive transformation of realistic theatre to today's highly hybrid performance forms" and they "taught Western practitioners that mastering the art of acting demands practice and discipline,"<sup>573</sup> to the point of altering the performative principles of the Western theatre. This type of reading is remarkably uncritical and ignores the process of othering and collaboration with a colonial discourse involved in such a reading. Spivak explains "othering" as an ideological process that isolates groups that are seen as different from the norm of the colonizers. For Spivak, othering is the way in which imperial discourse creates colonized subaltern subjects.<sup>574</sup> The colonizing subject is created at the same moment as the subaltern subject. In this sense, othering expresses a hierarchical, unequal relationship. In her research into this process, Spivak makes clear that othering is embedded in the discourse of various forms of colonial narrative, fiction as well as non-fiction, cross-cultural theatre discourse being part of it.

The effects at the level of the actor's body are similar to those constructed by Western theatre in relation to the Stanislavskian emotional actor. Zarrilli explains the prevalence of a "Euro-American experience of the dichotomy gap thought to exist between the cognitive, conceptual, formal, or rational

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571 Ibid., 56-57.

572 Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 28.

573 Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders*, 56-57.

574 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?".

and the bodily, perceptual, material, and emotional. The consequence of this split is that all meaning, logical connection, reasoning, and conceptualization are aligned with mental or rational operations, while perception, imagination, and feeling are aligned with bodily operations.”<sup>575</sup> Canonical associations of the Western actor’s work solely with the body and feelings, while charging the director with the intellectual decision-making process in theatre, has problematic implications: it inevitably places the actor in a feminized and disenfranchised position<sup>576</sup> while the director is constructed as the Father and owner of the phallus.

In the case of Stanislavsky, his exploration of emotionality is masculinized by his biographers and his hierarchical relation to his female students is the only part that supports a gender perspective for them: “despite Stanislavsky’s desire to treat women well [...] he does at times betray his nineteenth century upbringing in the fictionalized depictions of women students in his acting manual. His female students often cry, flirt, show off on stage, respond best to scenes that feature maternal love; in short, they are drawn from stereotypical images.”<sup>577</sup> In order to keep the phallogentric theatrical discourse intact, his interest in emotionality is read in a different register, being completely disembodied and transformed into a scientific *objective* exploration. The result is an imposition of a double standard concerning Stanislavsky’s theories. The scientificity and unity of the Stanislavskian method in theatre studies discourse are supposed to keep his theories gender neutral at best. The American school of interpretation, for example, is accused by a Stanislavsky scholar in 2009 of misreading Stanislavsky in a gendered way by incorporating foreign theories: “the US Method also provides rich soil for gender analysis, incorporating as it does popular Freudian ideas rife with sexist attitudes”<sup>578</sup> while the Stanislavskian material is *scientific* and *beyond gender*.

Some canonical directors, such as Grotowski, are consciously searching for a phallic position as

575 Zarrilli, *Acting (Re)Considered*, 12.

576 Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders*, 111.

577 Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in focus*, 5.

578 Ibid.

directors and openly discuss the obscure *scientificity* of their endeavor:

This work is something like a scientific investigation. We are trying to discover those objective laws that govern the expression of an individual. We have preliminary material from the already elaborated systems of the art of acting, such as the methods of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Dullin, and the particular training methods in the Classical Chinese and Japanese theatres, or the Indian dance drama of India. There are also the researches of the great European mime artists (e.g. Marceau), and the practitioners and theoreticians of expression; as well as the investigations of psychologists dealing with the mechanism of human reaction (Jung and Pavlov).<sup>579</sup>

After numerous re-readings and denials in theatre studies, in 2007 one of the well-known directors working for decades on theatre theory, Charles Marowitz, still names Stanislavsky the “Father of psychological realism”<sup>580</sup> proving gracefully that the canon is left untouched and patriarchal hierarchies dominated by eternal parents are still at work.

### **Vsevolod Meyerhold**

In contrast to the canonization of Stanislavsky through various conservative readings in the Soviet Union or the West already happening during his lifetime, Meyerhold’s entry in the theatre canon is quite recent and neglects a number of problems: “for decades the accomplishments of the director Meyerhold were legendary, like the cities of Kublai Khan; the West periodically received reports from dazzled travelers, viewed poor sketches of a few of the temples, but was unable to form a clear idea of the place as a whole. How can one bring alive the theatrical discoveries of a director dead for forty years, a non-person in his own country for twenty years?”<sup>581</sup>

The historical context favored some ideas of his teacher, colleague and ideological opponent, Stanislavsky, and made Meyerhold, even during the twenty-first century, rarely accepted or approved by the canon’s apologists even if in his lifetime he was considered by contemporaries to be Stanislavsky’s equal, in terms of revolutionary ideas in acting and staging. After the rehabilitation from 1955 in the USSR and the rediscovery of Meyerhold, scholars<sup>582</sup> who focused on his work

579 Quoted in Kumiega, *Theatre of Grotowski*, 117.

580 Marowitz, “Getting Stanislavsky Wrong,” 56–9.

581 Rudnitskii, *Meyerhold, the director*, vii.

582 Braun, *Meyerhold*; Hoover, *Meyerhold*; Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*.

underestimated his theories and used him as a likely opposition to the established Stanislavskian system: “nothing could be more dissimilar...Stanislavsky, suave, even-tempered, handsome, was the all-knowing, all-forgiving father. Meyerhold, impossibly temperamental, awkward and angular, was the son.”<sup>583</sup>

One of his biographers remembers Meyerhold explaining the source of his theories and practice: “You who knew Stanislavsky only in his old age can’t possibly imagine what a powerful actor he was. If I have become somebody, it is only because of the years I spent alongside him. Mark this well.”<sup>584</sup> Meyerhold’s approach to stage directing was strongly under the influence of Stanislavsky, especially in his early years: “I began as a director by slavishly imitating Stanislavsky. In theory I no longer accepted many points of his early production methods, but when I set about producing myself, I followed meekly his footsteps.”<sup>585</sup> This anacritic relation (based on the strong dependence of one person on others) was not necessarily an antagonist one, as the canon apologists want us to believe (in order to support their own masculinist equations): “they were the only two competitors in a race.”<sup>586</sup>

On a more personal note, Robert Leach writes in 2003 that “it has been noticed that Meyerhold was rejected by his father, and seemed for a time to adopt Stanislavsky as a kind of surrogate. But he rejected Stanislavsky, or Stanislavsky rejected him, and headstrong he went his own way. Intriguingly, he became something of a father to a number of brilliant young actors and directors, most notably Sergei Eisenstein, and then cast them off. But like the prodigal son, he returned to Stanislavsky in the end.”<sup>587</sup> The only mode to enter the high class of Western theatre is to go through an oedipal experience and become a father according to this author because only a father can have “all the frailties and obsessions associated with genius.”<sup>588</sup> In order to reinforce the exclusivist and misogynist canon,

583 Rudnitskii, *Meyerhold, the director*, ix.

584 Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 149.

585 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 18.

586 Rudnitskii, *Meyerhold, the director*, ix.

587 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 7.

588 Ibid.



tailored for fathers only, the two characters that are re-confirmed as members, have to prove constantly their masculinity and their “powerful and contrasting personalities.”<sup>589</sup> To achieve this type of desiderate many details and paradoxes are left out of the story: even if on many occasions there were conflicts that do not follow a linear history, the two directors cooperated on various occasions, not necessarily related to a father-son connection.

In 1905, the Moscow Art Theatre and its two founders, Nemirovich and Stanislavsky, were in a state of creative blockage and were paying attention to new ideas and contemporary movements in Western theatre. Stanislavsky wrote in his autobiography, *My Life in Art*, from 1924, about that specific moment. Surprisingly, he is mentioning Meyerhold:

Like me, [Meyerhold] sought for something new in art, for something more contemporary and modern in spirit. The difference between us lay in the fact that I only strained toward the new, without knowing any of the ways for reaching and realizing it, while Meierhold thought that he had already found new ways and methods which he could not realize partly because of material conditions, and partly due to the weak personnel of the troupe . . . I decided to help Meierhold in his new labors, which as it seemed to me then, agreed with many of my dreams at the time.<sup>590</sup>

The modernist project united the two experimentalists and Meyerhold was seen as a good exponent of the new ideas of modernism, later connected to the scientific theories of the physiologist Pavlov and the aesthetics of constructivist artists such as Popova and Stepanova (with whom Meyerhold cooperated after the Revolution). In 1907, when they started together the Theatre-Studio, Meyerhold was writing: “the modern spectator demands fresh techniques... But the desire for new forms of scenic presentation appropriate for the new spirit in dramatic literature did not in itself signify the abrupt break with the past which was to occur later in the work of the Theatre-Studio.”<sup>591</sup>

For Stanislavsky and Meyerhold opinions on theatre later became an important part of the complex climate surrounding the Revolution. The orthodoxy imposed upon Stanislavsky’s acting theories to become a universal system of acting, both near to and after his death, paralleled the orthodoxy imposed upon the scientific discourses of the era. The common approach was to come up

589 Ibid.

590 Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 429–30.

591 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 41.

with a *System for the World*, pursuing Soviet versions of what science often calls a *Grand Unifying Theory*. Meyerhold had used this opportunity openly and tried to connect his personal theories with the scientific and industrial ideas of the time, transforming actors' bodies into models of organization and efficiency, the buzzwords of the early Bolshevik era. Because the changes in the post-revolutionary world were drastic and violent, Meyerhold's enthusiasm for his theories made them anachronistic to the Soviet politics in a matter of months and it ultimately cost him his life. His early Marxian theories developed in the direction of Newtonianism and to the contemporary influences of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Alexei Gastev and Ivan Pavlov.<sup>592</sup>

### **Contradiction as a method of producing theatre theories**

From the very beginning as a student under Stanislavsky's supervision, Meyerhold employed controversy as a method for his theatrical theories as well as for his relations with others, even to the extent of promoting dissent among his audiences: "if everyone praises your production, almost certainly it is rubbish. If everyone abuses it, then perhaps there is something in it. But if some praise and others abuse, if you can split the audience in half, then for sure it is a good production."<sup>593</sup>

His theories were based expressly *on* contradiction as a way of staging productions, making politics, acting and producing new knowledge to the point that his theatrical project was not understood as a way to smooth out social problems or to resolve paradoxes but to produce them for performers and audiences. Explaining years later the performance which he directed in 1906, *The Fairground Booth*, where he also played Pierrot, Meyerhold reveals his affinity for contradictions: "Depth and extract, brevity and contrast! No sooner has the pale, lanky Pierrot crept across the stage, no sooner has the spectator sensed in his movements the eternal tragedy of mutely suffering mankind, than the apparition is succeeded by the merry Harlequinade. The tragic gives way to the comic, harsh satire replaces the

<sup>592</sup> Pitches, *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting*, 3.

<sup>593</sup> Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 165.

sentimental ballad.”<sup>594</sup>

Theatricality was explored particularly in this play, where the Author enters on stage to approach the spectators (“Ladies and Gentlemen! I apologize to you most humbly, but I must disclaim all responsibility! They are making a laughing stock of me! I wrote a perfectly realistic play.”<sup>595</sup>). The main part of the action takes place in a booth that “has its own stage, curtain, prompter’s box and proscenium opening. Instead of being masked by the conventional border, the flies, together with all the ropes and wires, are visible to the audience; when the entire set is hauled aloft in the booth, the audience in the actual theatre sees the whole process.”<sup>596</sup> The effects to the public were devastating and for Meyerhold they represented a complete success because he managed to challenge the passivity of the public. The strong reaction was what he wanted and it was a proof of what he called *true theatricality*: “The auditorium was in uproar as though it were a real battle. Solid, respectable citizens were ready to come to blows; whistles and roars of anger alternated with piercing howls conveying a mixture of fervor, defiance, anger and despair.”<sup>597</sup>

Meyerhold argued that a divided group of artists and audiences are more likely to engage at a deeper level with the content of the production, to turn in on itself, to discuss and debate.<sup>598</sup> This method brings to mind the similarity to Freud’s process of conceptual play in which his basic constructs of science, metaphor, and subjectivity<sup>599</sup> are at the same time extended and subverted. Although many *professionals* have criticized Freud<sup>600</sup> or Meyerhold for this apparent contradiction in their analogous style of theoretization, I argue that it can be read as a relevant persuasiveness of their theoretical points and a form of hysterical discourse that marks a certain style of making theory.

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594 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 137.

595 Quoted in Green, *Russian Symbolist Theatre*, 51.

596 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 70.

597 Braun, *A Revolution in Theatre*, 65–6.

598 Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 1–2.

599 Reisner, “Freud and Psychoanalysis,” 1047.

600 Holt, “Some problems created by Freud’s inconsistency,” 111–114.

Laplanche's ability to pull out and pull together threads of Freud's theory in contradistinction to the sometimes ridiculous canonical readings of those very texts exposes the self-deconstructive tendency in Freud's texts.<sup>601</sup> As Laplanche writes, "The movement we sketched above . . . is that the *exception* . . . ends up by *faking the rule along with it*".<sup>602</sup>

Meyerhold rejected the Moscow Art Theatre's naturalism as *something of an irrelevance* as he searched for a method of acting that would move beyond imitation. Although he sought this through a radical focus of the performing body, he retained two key ideas from Stanislavsky: "justified actions and clear objectives for characters."<sup>603</sup> What he kept from Stanislavsky was also a similar way of writing theatre theory with the same epistemological question: can specific techniques of an acting method be applicable in the creation of any form of theatre? Through a sustained and intensive training of the body within the framework of biomechanical exercises, Meyerhold looked for a methodology that could cope with numerous aesthetic contradictions coming from opposite styles of theatre. His search was against the notion of a comprehensive system in favor of identifying contradictory local principles within the context in which the actor's training operates. These principles were developed through specific actor training techniques/biomechanics and amplified distinctive ethical positions, without constituting a unified system.

This style of acting/directing was embraced openly by Brecht when he states that the actor cannot simply observe without at the same time interrogating the social forces at play, or by Strasberg's actor who can "create out of himself" only through the readiness to "appeal to the unconscious and the subconscious."<sup>604</sup> Working with actors as a director or acting himself, Vsevolod Meyerhold's experiments in theatre were constricted by the conscious avoidance of reproducing the reality of living, but engaging in something more *theatrical*. It was a theoretical exploration typical of its time: the quest

601 Reisner, "Freud and Psychoanalysis," 1047.

602 Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 23; emphasis by Laplanche.

603 Hodge, *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, 5.

604 Strasberg, *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*, 82.

for theatricality in theatre is similar to Kandinsky's contemporary search for the *painterly* in painting, or the Russian Formalist critics' argument that it was the *literariness* of literature that was its strength and appeal.<sup>605</sup> The theoretical search for *theatricality* within theatre is an excursion through "reversals and crises, mediated by contradictions whose status will not be immediately apparent in any attempt to situate them."<sup>606</sup> Even if Meyerhold's contradictions on theatricality and acting are strongly contextualized by his changing institutional and political positionality and cannot be attributed to one singular method or system of thought (as in Freud's case), they are all "deserving of the same "free floating" attention."<sup>607</sup> The easy (canonical) reading leaves out the extrinsic or risky contradictions and the polemic or anachronistic statements. Especially in Meyerhold's case, where his own approach to theory is based on exploring and expanding inner contradictions, this canonical reading discards parts to its theoretical loss.

The incoherence or what is ready to fall to pieces has to be erased by the canon in a concerted effort to save something greater in the style of nineteenth century European idealism: "manliness in art . . . [has to do with] tenacity of intuition and of consequent purpose, the spirit of construction as opposed to what is literally incoherent or ready to fall to pieces, and in opposition to what is hysteric or works at random."<sup>608</sup> Following this quote, Meyerhold's contradictions obstructed the performance of his theoretical/artistic virility and functioned as signs of hysteria.

The search for theatricality is done through the body, by searching physical forms. Sergei Eisenstein, one of the best actors of Meyerhold's school was connecting emotions to the body: "the pulse of the emotion (its curve) is the result of spatial-plastic placing. It is excited as a result of the quality of the treatment and training of the material."<sup>609</sup> Igor Ilyinsky, another actor from Meyerhold's

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605 Leach, "Meyerhold and Biomechanics," 39.

606 Laplanche on Freud's writing, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 1.

607 Laplanche on Freud's writing, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 1976, p.1

608 Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, 280-281.

609 Leach, "Meyerhold and Biomechanics," 40.

theatre group, wrote: “if the physical form is correct, the basis of the part, the speech intonations and the emotions, will be as well, because they are determined by the position of the body.”<sup>610</sup> Meyerhold promoted the actors’ training as an intimate understanding of the actor’s body in space, or what he named “the scenic movement.” The focus on the body and space assumed the emotionality of movement: “it is not necessary [for the actor] to feel, only to play, to play,”<sup>611</sup> Meyerhold was encouraging his students in 1913.

The play of contradictions gives form to Meyerhold’s theatre and tells a lot about the style of Meyerhold’s story rather than the predilections of the story-teller. As Freud explained, hysterics are unable to tell a complete, “smooth and exact” story about themselves. The reason for leaving out parts, distorting and rearranging information is sexual repression. For Freud, this particular incapacity to give an “ordered history of their life” was not simply characteristic of hysterics; it was the meaning of hysteria.<sup>612</sup> As he was writing in Dora’s case, the hysterical stories were like “an unnavigable river whose stream is at one moment choked by masses of rock and at another divided and lost among shallows and sandbanks.”<sup>613</sup> The fluidity of one period was sure to be followed “by another period in which their communications run dry, leaving gaps unfilled, and riddles unanswered”.<sup>614</sup>

The material performance recreates in detail the movement of the deed, not searching for the emotional life of the character through the play. Emotionality of the character becomes accessible to the actor only through doing. Jonathan Pitches, a British performer trained in biomechanics and a Meyerhold scholar noted: “to experience biomechanics practically is to understand it... I developed a sensitivity for detail. I noticed which foot was leading, where the actor’s weight was situated, the rhythmic pattern of each action.”<sup>615</sup> The theoretization based on corporeal play requires a

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610 Ibid.

611 Ibid.

612 Showalter, “On Hysterical Narrative,” 24-35.

613 Freud, *Dora*, 30.

614 Ibid.

615 Quoted in Leach, “Meyerhold and Biomechanics,” 29.

psychoanalytical search for understanding. The process of discovery in Meyerhold's contradictions and the dialogue within his own writing are intrinsic to any theoretical claim on his approach to theatre. Psychoanalysis offers the best method to deal with this type of writing: "not to achieve closure or a final truth that renders further investigation unnecessary."<sup>616</sup> The psychoanalytical style of theorizing is unfinished: conclusions are arbitrary and conventional; the thinking is temporarily and deeply contextualized.

### Biomechanics

In his Studio in St. Petersburg at the beginning of the twentieth century, Meyerhold experimented with the *commedia dell'arte* traditional characters (Harlequin, Pantaloon, Columbine) and their masks, with specific routines and gags. The performers wore masks in order to move the attention from emotions to movements. The exploration of *commedia dell'arte* continued over the years with explorations of clowns, puppets and marionettes with the same focus on embodiment. Other atypical practices for the time were introduced by Meyerhold: *self-admiration*, a narcissistic game of continuous self-watching and monitoring; another very successful practice for actors was screaming, shouting or crying for intense moments of acting; props were used as extensions of body parts (a flower was an extension of the hand).<sup>617</sup>

Meyerhold's later experiments with biomechanics explored the existing theatricality of the theatre and its relation to materiality. Nikolai Pesochinsky, a Russian critic observes: "In the power of the [biomechanically trained] actor, there resides not only the imitation of ordinary life, but also the way towards its subconscious image-association, the embodiment of the metaphor."<sup>618</sup> Jonathan Pitches explored the biomechanical exercises and he came up with the conclusion that Meyerhold's type of

<sup>616</sup> Flex, *Thinking fragments*, 12.

<sup>617</sup> Leach, "Meyerhold and Biomechanics," 40-41.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid., 52.

training enables the actor to “maximise the theatrical potential of every moment in performance as the physical quality of the body itself is defamiliarised and estranged onstage via an approximation of the Meyerholdian grotesque.”<sup>619</sup>

After the October Revolution, Meyerhold’s earlier interests in *commedia dell’ arte*, popular theatre and circus were directly attached to the new concept of biomechanics, a new keyword for the Bolshevik theatre. The innovative scientific research had a significant role in post-revolutionary theatre. The scientific element of Meyerhold’s theory of acting gave a “different method of articulation.”<sup>620</sup> Two sources of inspiration were major figures in the emerging Soviet thinking: Ivan Pavlov and Frederick Winslow Taylor.

The scientificity of the post-Revolutionary acting theories was heavily criticized by the Western scholars as too “superficial or badly thought out.”<sup>621</sup> Edward Braun considers it to be *specious*, in the sense of a deceptively attractive theory, a theory that is apparently correct but is actually false. Biomechanics was Meyerhold’s theatrical equivalent of an industrial time-and-motion study and was understood by Meyerhold as similar to Taylor’s experiments in the scientific organization of labor (and especially their Soviet version developed by Gastev). Again, Edward Braun considers the resemblance to be “superficial and exaggerated,” devised, in his opinion, only “in response to the new mechanized age” and as opposed to Stanislavsky’s theories which from this new perspective “were unscientific and anachronistic.”<sup>622</sup>

The exercises in biomechanics were first shown in public in June 1922, a few months before the birth of the USSR, and they immediately encountered a huge success due to their practicality and were right away introduced as the “form of systematized physical training into the curriculum of every

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619 Ibid., 40.

620 Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 32.

621 Ibid.

622 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 183.



Soviet drama school.”<sup>623</sup>

By connecting his theatrical explorations with the popular scientific ideas of the time, Meyerhold developed a style; he revealed his poetics by connecting “supposedly unconnected disciplines.”<sup>624</sup> Pavlov’s ideas of chain of reflex responses, as he developed them in the lab experimenting on dogs, were later explored by Meyerhold, not in the lab but in the theatre, not on dogs but on his own and actor’s bodies. The long domino line of responses was considered by Pavlov “the foundation of the nervous activities of both men and of animals.”<sup>625</sup> Taylor, on the other hand, offered the popular theory of efficiently executed, rhythmically economical actions in order to increase the productivity in American factories. The work of laborers was broken into simple and connected tasks and with a maximum speed for each task to be executed. High productivity was an obsession for the Soviet state as well as capitalist economies and became an obsession for the Bolshevik Meyerhold. In one lecture from 1922 he militates for a radical “Taylorization of the theatre” in order to perform in one hour what was performed in four hours.<sup>626</sup>

As Pitches observes,<sup>627</sup> biomechanics is a fusion of two radical theories for theatre, where the actor is efficient and productive, for which is needed: “(1) the innate capacity for reflex excitability, which will enable him to cope with any employ within the limits of his physical characteristics; (2) ‘physical competence’, consisting of a true eye, a sense of balance, and the ability to sense at any given moment the location of his centre of gravity.”<sup>628</sup> Biomechanics was supposed to offer the method for the process. Even if the actors were not working in factory conditions, Meyerhold was close to an open solidarity with industry workers: performances were supposed to be effective and were treated as finished products, they were made to “hit the mark” and communicate important messages, like a well-

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623 Ibid.

624 Ibid., 33.

625 Pavlov, *Conditioned Reflexes*, 11.

626 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 199.

627 Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 33.

628 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 199.

organized industrial unit producing goods without any waste and to specification.

The usage of the language of science and industry was not an accident: the new language used for theatrical thinking was expressing the conscious theoretical change in response to the Revolution. Just like he used before the language of the popular theatre in relation to his training pedagogy, in the first years after the Revolution, the industrial and scientific language was directly reflected in the theatre theory.

Mayakovsky, the foremost Soviet poet and playwright, had closely collaborated with Meyerhold. In a 1921 note to his play, *Mystery Bouffe*, directed by Meyerhold, he writes: “In the future, all persons performing, presenting, reading or publishing *Mystery Bouffe* should change the content, making it contemporary, immediate, up to the minute.”<sup>629</sup> This famous comment can be applied to Meyerhold’s use of his immediate cultural and political environment in his work as a director and to his theory that is lacking the universal and timeless perspective. It can also explain the effectiveness of the Meyerhold-Mayakovsky collaborations and friendship.

### **Eccentricity of the phallus**

Meyerhold is often seen in theatre studies as an opponent of Stanislavsky, a stereotypical ungrateful disciple. Paradoxically, his last theatrical project is also Stanislavsky’s last project as director. He is described by an old and dying Stanislavsky as his “sole heir in the theatre.”<sup>630</sup> Presented as dictatorial, intransigent and a control freak,<sup>631</sup> Meyerhold’s workshops on theatre practice were first of all places for freethinking and improvisation, generating numerous artists with distinct styles or creative paths (which he encouraged), even if they were not connected to his own aesthetics. Well known as a difficult person to work with, his theatrical practice proves an extended collaboration with

<sup>629</sup> Mayakovsky, *Plays*, 39.

<sup>630</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski*, 345.

<sup>631</sup> For example, Braun’s description, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 22.

musicians, actors from different schools, artists, playwrights and co-directors,<sup>632</sup> expressing a person open to different approaches and desiring to learn from other artists that were active in a mixture of fields, political and aesthetic projects during his time.

Meyerhold represents both the mainstream Soviet phallocentric aesthetics as well as its subversion, being in psychoanalytical terms a pervert who betrays the Law, moving beyond the phallocentrism of Soviet culture, in a gesture of phalloeccentricity or what Jane Gallop calls “being a prick”.<sup>633</sup> Meyerhold does not situate himself outside Soviet phallocentrism, he is both the soviet phallus and prick, he was a theatrical commissar and saboteur. This game of being phalloeccentric was not innocent or ignored by the Law of the Father. After all, exactly this approach had a tough price: torture and, finally, execution.

The radicalism of the polemical style of writing is constantly signaling even in his early articles. In 1907 Meyerhold was writing about his understanding of the actor’s role in theatre in these terms: “all theatrical means must be devoted to the service of the actor. The attention of the audience should be focused exclusively on him, for acting occupies the central position in the art of the stage.”<sup>634</sup> It was a time when the author of the play was still the central character in staging a performance and the function of the director was just emerging in the Russian theatre. In the same article he is not afraid to state what was for him the obvious: “the entire European theatre – with a few minor exceptions – is moving in the wrong direction.”<sup>635</sup>

We have to understand the role of theatre in post-revolutionary Soviet Union as a way of efficient propaganda: live performances were used as major tools of transmitting political agendas, in a place and time where the vast majority of audiences were unable to read and *talking pictures* were not invented yet. Meyerhold used this possibility in a proto-Brechtian way: spectators were subversively

632 Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*.

633 Gallop, “Nurse Freud,” 35-36.

634 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 38.

635 Ibid.

discouraged to focus their “eyes on the finish,”<sup>636</sup> but to actively politick in the performance in a consciously critical way. This specific style of staging a performance was criticizing the coherence of realism/naturalism and opened the possibilities for a less organized, more questioning and problematizing style of staging. The critical dialogue on theatre was possible due to Meyerhold’s own implication in the cultural politics of the new soviet state. Rather than taking the pre-revolutionary bourgeois theatre for granted, Meyerhold posed theatrical knowledge as a problem, encouraging new viewpoints, new subject positionality and new actions to emerge.

To help the audience to achieve this agenda, performances were revealing the hidden mechanics of theatre: “he filled his productions with self-conscious theatricalities, arranging the order of the scenes in such a way that they might collide against one another rather than seamlessly fuse together.”<sup>637</sup> What may make Meyerhold’s theatre of contradictions different from other modernist forms of criticism in theatre is its target, the context and details, rather than the line of its argument. Meyerhold’s criticism on theatre takes place within a new political/social context, even if it draws back from the pre-revolutionary theatrical context, re-evaluates it, moving to direct political action. Rather than accepting the situation of the bourgeois theatre, the theatre of contradictions emerges against it, abandoning a focalized viewpoint.<sup>638</sup> The proposed meta-debate on theatre was applied also at the level of acting, hierarchies and embodiments in a performance: “an actor working for the new class needs to re-examine all the canons of the past. The very craft of the actor must be completely reorganized.”<sup>639</sup>

### **Antonin Artaud**

Artaud’s experimentations in theatre practice and theory are all attempts to end representation and transmit the body. His style of working on stage as director and actor, especially in his 1935 production

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636 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 37.

637 Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 3.

638 Crotty, *Foundations of Social Research*, 155-156.

639 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 197.

of *The Cenci*, was doomed to fail, not fully embodying his theories, and it was in Susan Sontag's opinion "too idiosyncratic, narrow, and hysterical to persuade."<sup>640</sup> One central idea of his theories is to force spectators to be overcome by the images, in a visual overflow of social deconstruction and catastrophe, while the senses are violently allowed to run free. In this process, spectators become alert in relation to their excitability and aware of their engaged participation in the artistic event, they are invited to react in physical and revolutionary ways to what they experience. The artistic focus on the body of the hysteric in a maximum exposed and condensed form that expresses "the convulsions and jumps of a reality which seems to destroy itself with an irony where you can hear the extremities of the mind screaming"<sup>641</sup> was for Artaud the main tool to oppose representation.

When Artaud was finally released in 1946 from the psychiatric asylum of Rodez, after nine years of confinement, his body had been exposed to electroshock treatment, frequent insulin injections and a terminal phase of rectal cancer. After this return, he started writing about a body without organs, a missing body, a new body turned inside out, emptied of painful organs and social hierarchies, a body of energies. Only in his 1947 text prepared for the coming radio event with the same name, *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, does the body without organs become explicit. Over time, he used another name for this alchemical energy: *Le Mōmo*. It was a body language made of fluid desire, what Whitehead later called "the prosthetic language of the disembody, the antibody."<sup>642</sup>

Theatre of cruelty is re-conceptualized by Artaud in opposition to the psychiatric asylum, an evil theatrical system, where the unconscious is suppressed from public display. The psychiatric asylum was connected to electroshock therapy, an experimental cure at the end of the 1930s, in which "current form passes a 200-volt current of between 5 and 250 miliamperes through the body for between a tenth and a half second - often caused violent epileptoid seizures and a consequent coma, occasionally resulting in

<sup>640</sup> Sontag, *Under the sign of Saturn*, 48.

<sup>641</sup> Artaud quoted in Barber, *Artaud*, 26.

<sup>642</sup> Whitehead, "Holes in the Head," 85-91.

loss of memory of the shock itself.”<sup>643</sup>

While the electroshock therapy was still just tested on patients at Rodez, Artaud being one of them, his experience of electroshocks generated real and symbolic wounds, by living during shock therapy what he calls an "artificial death."<sup>644</sup> The bitter taste of these horrible experiences haunts his writing and is expressed in a letter to Paule Thevenin, written just before his death. It is also Artaud's final return to theatre, after attempts to move to other artistic environments dominated, in the end, by the machine, a violent remembrance of the technicality of the electroshock treatment: "where there is the machine there is always nothingness and the abyss; there exists a technical intervention that deforms and annihilates all that one has done."<sup>645</sup>

Theatre was most vividly compared by Artaud to the plague (just as Freud was comparing psychoanalysis to the same infectious disease). The plague stood for a bodily experience which was highly physical, painful, socially and personally disruptive. It was, in Artaud's words, a "kind of psychic entity" ("no one can say why the plague strikes a fleeing coward and spares a rake taking his pleasure with the corpses of the dead")<sup>646</sup> which at the same time caused social institutions and order to collapse. For Artaud, theatre of cruelty was meant to have the same function. The plague sufferers and survivors were seeing it as a divine gift to make them, through extreme physical and mental suffering, change their ways: "it seems as though a colossal abscess, ethical as much as social, is drained by the plague. And like the plague, theatre is collectively made to drain abscesses."<sup>647</sup>

The theatre of cruelty disturbs the peace of mind, giving a way out to the repressed subconscious and unexplored sexual fantasies. From this perspective, Artaud was projecting a psychoanalytical theatre: the social problems of Western society could be traced to the repressions which subjects

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643 Alexander and Roberts, *High Culture*, 166.

644 Ibid.

645 Ibid., 169.

646 Artaud, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 10 - 13.

647 Ibid., 20.

performed, voluntarily or involuntarily, and the only way out was for men and women to let their hidden fears, desires and wants be explored in the open. When Artaud explained the shocking eroticism of *The Cenci*, he used the plague element again: “how are we to explain that upsurge of erotic fever among the recovered victims who, instead of escaping, stay behind, seeking out and snatching sinful pleasure from the dying or even the dead, half crushed under the pile of corpses where chance had lodged them?”<sup>648</sup>

The failure of putting his theories into practice contributed to the popularity of his ideas of the impossible staging in the theatre environment. On a personal level, Artaud reacted to this failure by abandoning theatre and finding in other environments the expression of emotionality for his body.

### **The apprehension of flesh**

Artaud’s theatre theories (but also poetry, drama, drawing etc.) follow a personal super-objective: corporeal transformation. Artaud’s writing is a continuous struggle with language in order “to disturb the organism in its most intimate ramification”<sup>649</sup> and to end the process of representation. His investigations in theatre based on his own experiences proved to have a later strong impact on art, writing and performance, especially on the French theoretical work from the mid 1960s to the present, in the writing of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. In Artaud’s writings on theatre there is a very detailed “microstructure of mental pain”<sup>650</sup> where the self-regarding consciousness finds its total alienation, countering a detached comprehensive wisdom.

For Artaud, the mind is made as a thing or an object, while writing is an agony that supplies at the same time the energy for the act of writing. This is the reason why he continues to write, to think his pain on paper: “paralysis is gaining, so I am less and less able to turn about. I search for myself I don’t

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648 Ibid., 14.

649 Thévenin, “Search for a Lost World,” 6.

650 Sontag, *Under the sign of Saturn*, 18.

know where. My mind is no longer able to go in the directions my emotions and my fantasies welling up in me send it. My torment is as subtle and refined as it is harsh. It costs me mad efforts of imagination, increased tenfold by the grip of this stifling asphyxia, to succeed in *thinking* my ills.”<sup>651</sup> The extreme mental and physical pain is falsified when its energy is transformed into art value: by insulting art (especially theatre) and its audience, Artaud criticizes the banalization of pain. One of his major themes is the connection between writing and pain, where the right to write comes from experiencing pain, while the usage of language is a major source for pain. His struggle is not with language itself but with the relation between language and “the intellectual apprehension of flesh,”<sup>652</sup> the censorship of exchanges between mind and flesh reflected in a more general loss of vitality. He claims a sort of psychological materialism that comes out through pain. The mind is also carnal; his intellectual anguish is an acute physical anguish: “from this pain rooted in me like a wedge, at the center of my purest reality, at the point of my sensibility where the two worlds of body and mind are joined, I learn to distract myself.”<sup>653</sup> What causes Artaud’s pain is the refusal of considering the mind as separate from the condition of the flesh.

In a struggle against hierarchical Cartesian dualism, Artaud treats his mind as a body that cannot be possessed. In this struggle that is present in many of his texts, in the difficulty of matching body with words, he emphasizes his project by highlighting the fibers of the bodymind, “an unreal reconstruction of the body”<sup>654</sup> by thinking how body is mind and how mind is body: “this is no ego but the cult of flesh, with the whole weight and substance of the word Flesh. Things do not move me except as they affect my flesh and coincide with it at the exact point where they stir it, and not beyond that point. Nothing moves me or interests me except what addresses itself *directly* to my body.”<sup>655</sup>

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651 Artaud, “Fragments of a Journal in Hell,” 42.

652 Sontag, *Under the sign of Saturn*, 21.

653 Artaud, “Fragments of a Journal in Hell”, 41.

654 Italian Futurist manifesto from 1916 quoted in Barber, *Artaud*, 18.

655 *Ibid.*, 43.



Artaud's idea of the scream aims to project or picture the body in writing and break any narrative or temporal flow of words:

To scream I must fall.  
I fall into an underworld and I cannot get out, I can never get out...  
This scream I've thrown out is a dream.  
But a dream which eats a dream.<sup>656</sup>

The scream becomes the means to transmit the "spastic body, a somatic memory that is resistant to representation".<sup>657</sup> His bodily interference in language breaks, deconstructs and transforms the structure of French language in such a way that tries to reinvent a new language beyond representation. He places the broken body in language instead of using the language of representation and its efforts to fix and define. Theatre can serve only one purpose: to transmit the body and to counterattack what Artaud sees as betraying organs. Everything that is outside the body like nature, culture, God, family or internal organs does not concern him. Artaud stages a physical act that radically transforms the bodies of performers and audience: "the act that I am talking about aims for the true organic and physical transformation of the human body."<sup>658</sup>

The transmission of imageries of body and pain is impaired by representation and by what Artaud calls a double trap: the dispersal of language through inarticulation, that happens when his images of pain and the body in extreme crisis are taking a textual form, and the dispersal of relevance when a text is assembled through the loss of representation. The language changes its "cognitive coherence" and is invested with desire and sensuality. Words become spells or screams. In Artaudian spells, the cigarette burn of written paper together with tracks of cigarette ash that circle or erase the text or drawing forms the written piece's visual central part, forming the text's destructive or protective content. In Kristeva's analysis, words "become performative: direct agents – erotic and in fact deadly – of a thereby disclosed hysterical intensity."<sup>659</sup> In this process, the language does not disappear, but gains a "somnambular

656 Artaud, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. IV, 178-179.

657 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 68.

658 Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, 169.

659 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 73.

logic in which the animism of objects replaces the possibility of a metalinguistic evaluation of its discourse.”<sup>660</sup> This process is connected to an artificial dedication to the hysteric oversensitized body that is resistant to language and representation, a cruel hysterical discourse. This excitability is considered by Kristeva the core of the hysterical structure and she identifies psychoanalytical logic that she uses in her case of analyzing hysteria as a theoretical power play. What she proposes by focusing on the hysteric’s symptoms and painful jouissance is to return to the body and action, especially seduction and acting-out, just like in Artaud’s writing.

Artaud’s hostility towards representation is linked to his hostility towards religious and social institutions that representation stands for: “there is nothing I abominate and execrate so much as this idea [...] of representation,/that is , of virtuality, of non-reality [...] attached to all that is produced and shown, as if it were intended in that way to socialize and at the same time to paralyze monsters, to make the possibilities of explosive deflagration which are too dangerous for life to pass instead by the channel of the stage, screen or microphone, and so to turn them away from life.”<sup>661</sup> In other words, he attacks his own means, trying the limits of language and how it can become corporeal image, with the purpose of capturing the body on page. In its new form, language acts not *like* lightning but *as* lightning: “I say that the lost language is now a lightning which I make reappear through the human fact of breath: lightning which my pencil blows on paper sanction.”<sup>662</sup> The words contain in Artaud’s understanding a physical substance taken from the body before being set on the page, like they are projected from his chest, with the force of a physically powerful scream: “a blow/anti-logical,/anti-philosophical,/anti-intellectual,/anti-dialectical/of language/supported by my black crayon/and that’s all.”<sup>663</sup> Like in his drawing, acting or staging experimentations, the struggle for the body and against representation is left unfinished, “the body is [...] caught rawly and suddenly in willed suspension or

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660 Ibid.

661 Antonin Artaud, working notes, November 1947, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Volume XIII, 258-259.

662 Artaud, *Dessins*, Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1987, 22 quoted in Barber, *Artaud*, 75.

663 Ibid.

abandonment, before the malicious process of representation has time to set in,”<sup>664</sup> in a search for a new anatomy. When he analyses the works of Balthus, he associates painting with the painter’s body in a form of a complex collection of anatomical parts and fluids: “all painters bring their anatomy, their physiology, their saliva, their flesh, their blood, their sperm, their vices, their sexual diseases, their pathology, their prudishness, their health, their character, their personality or their madness into their work.”<sup>665</sup>

Artaud’s ideal theatre is connected to his fragmented subjectivity and would be like “an open door leading [the audience] where they never would have consented to go.”<sup>666</sup> The purpose of this theatre is to “feel the bodies of men and women – and I mean their *bodies* – throb and quiver in harmony with mine.”<sup>667</sup> Such an audience would gain “the impression that they are *running the risk* of something, by coming to our plays, [which would] make them responsive to a new concept of *Danger*.”<sup>668</sup> On another occasion, he writes about how the spectators of the theatre of cruelty should come for a performance: “as they would to a surgeon or dentist . . . knowing, of course, that they will not die, but . . . thoroughly convinced that we can make them cry out.”<sup>669</sup>

His feelings of alienation, of being abandoned, of anxiety, and of continuous physical pain found an explanation as demonic powers that exist as real as physical matter. The self is abandoned in the body and the subject is repressed by being in the world. The self discovers itself in the break with the world. To exceed the societal, tabooed, prohibited body, Artaud had to break moral and social laws, to experience physical decadence, verbal irreverence. Only when social morality had been deliberately broken is the body capable of transformation, by leaving all the laws and moral categories behind. Artaud’s corporeal project moves dichotomies: good/evil, matter/spirit, body/mind, matter/spirit,

664 Barber, *Artaud*, 76.

665 Artaud, *Balthus*, quoted in Barber, *Artaud*, 79.

666 Greene, *Antonin Artaud*, 72.

667 Schumacher and Singleton, *Artaud on Theatre*, xxi.

668 Ibid., 71.

669 Artaud, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 17.

masculine/feminine, dark/light. His obsession with physical matter found its expression in a ruined world congested with matter in the form of shit, blood and sperm. In order to defeat the demonic powers that are incarnated in matter, Artaud has to be in permanent contact with them,<sup>670</sup> to submit to them and experience pain at their discretion, to become a monster. In this undertaking, followed by his ideas of theatre of cruelty, the “psychological man, with his well-dissected character and feelings, and social man, submissive to laws and misshapen by religions and precepts”<sup>671</sup> are forgotten.

Abandonment is possible through art or theatre that can express impulses larger than life, serving an “inhuman” subjectivity in opposition to the liberal, sociable idea of subject or freedom. For him, the obstacle and the locus of freedom is the body: it is never a place for pleasure but electric capacity for intelligence and pain. The “intellectual cries” that come from his flesh are the only forms of knowledge that he can trust. This body has a mind: “there is a mind in the flesh, a mind quick as lightning.”<sup>672</sup> The theatre of cruelty stands for searching for a method to operate on the body because theatre is an exercise of a “terrible and dangerous act, [...] the real organic and physical transformation of the human body.”<sup>673</sup>

### **Beyond the subjectile**

Artaud’s body refuses to become the *so-called subjectile* or the unnamed surface for language.<sup>674</sup>

The subjectile is treated as an adverse body: “[through] a bodily vituperation against obligations of spatial form, of measure, of balance, of dimension, and, through this vindictive vituperation, a condemnation of the physical world encrusted like a louse on the physical world that it incubuses or

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670 See Sontag, *Under the sign of Saturn*, 53-54.

671 Ibid.

672 Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, 59.

673 Ibid., 169.

674 Derrida, “To Unsense the Subjectile,” 61-69.

succubuses while claiming to have formed it.”<sup>675</sup>

The theatre of cruelty is precisely this effort to bring forth what Artaud calls “the skeleton of incarnation” and a final struggle with his ignorant body, a grotesque and obscene body that he depicts in his writings, recordings and drawings as “this unusable body made out of meat and crazy sperm.”<sup>676</sup>

An unexpected theoretical support in understanding this body comes from Artaud’s “silent partner” Jacques Lacan, who treated Artaud for a couple of months in 1938. A close reading of Lacan and Artaud can bring out “multiple theoretical overlappings” in a “silent eloquence of a biographical half-saying.”<sup>677</sup> A related conceptualization of corporeality is the Lacanian “body-in-bits-and-pieces,” an uncoordinated aggregate, a series of parts, zones, organs, sensations, needs and impulses rather than an integrated whole. Each part struggles for its own pleasure with no concern for the unified body. There is no experience of corporeal unity or of occupying a fixed position within a bodily enclosed space. Sensory reactions which may animate certain organs or bodily parts cannot be attributed to a continuous subjectivity.<sup>678</sup> Against the fallen body, dominated by matter, Artaud proposes a new one: a body without organs, which he approached by transcending and intellectualizing it, in a gesture of unifying flesh and thought, because only flesh can offer “a definitive understanding of Life.”<sup>679</sup>

His theatre of cruelty has the task to construct this body without organs, in an alchemic way, by searching for a method to operate on the body and change one abject matter into another higher kind of matter. The scream as a vital concept of cruelty is an exercise of a “terrible and dangerous act.”<sup>680</sup> The blurring of boundaries between internal and external bodily spaces and selves makes “metaphor-become-flesh,” makes materiality become hallucination, and the phantomatic embodied with physical

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675 Thévenin, “Search for a Lost World,” 16.

676 Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, 238.

677 Chiesa, “Lacan with Artaud,” 336.

678 Lacan, *Écrits*, 4-5, 167.

679 Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, 169.

680 Ibid.

and somatic reality.<sup>681</sup> As in the case of hysteria, saying is doing, writing is material and words have a painful reality. The hysterical Artaud moves from a linguistic position to a more blurry one on the borders of language. The performative language of the hysteric uses sounds, noises, words and speech to act, for the sake of their musicality and intonation, to get what is wanted and to throw out only what is strongly felt. The hysterical sounds are not part of a signifying chain; they are reduplicated things beyond representation and full of their materiality. The Artaudian theatre of cruelty is more an epistemology than a method of staging performances by transcending the stage.

For Artaud, the body is a mind which is alchemically changed into matter, similar to language, a thought turned into matter. The disgust for the body and the rejection of language are similar processes. In searching for a language beyond representation, Artaud rejects literature and genres, as fallen activities of words. The language beyond representation is similar to a body without organs: “the body is the body/it is alone/ it has no need of organs.”<sup>682</sup> His last works are examples surpassing genre: letters, poems, essays, dramatic monologues, diary pages with rich graphic material. Parts of clear arguments are alternated with parts where words or letters are treated as form or sounds. In this effort to transcend genres, Artaud expresses his disgust with language, where the sense is avoided: “all true language is incomprehensible.”<sup>683</sup>

In these last writings, the screaming of his body touches inhuman intensity and rage. In his notebooks there is a visible conflict with attacks and withdrawals between the writing hand and the material of the paper, the pages are ripped due to a high speed of writing. This is just another example of how determined is Artaud in the process of getting rid of representation, where the content becomes “totems, [...] mysterious operating machines,”<sup>684</sup> where tips of pencils are shattered, broken wood enters the surface of paper and words are visible in their negative form, visible only in the cuts in the

681 Bronfen, *Knotted subject*, 385.

682 Artaud, *Here Lies*, quoted in Sontag, *Antonin Artaud*, 1.

683 Ibid., liii.

684 Antonin Artaud, letter to Pierre Bordas, February 1947, quoted in Barber, *Artaud*, 92.

page.<sup>685</sup> The drawings are intersected with text on a damaged, over-inscribed and destroyed surface of paper in an attempt to capture the gestures of the body.

In *The Search For Fecality*,<sup>686</sup> soft meat, excrement, God, all thoughts and ideas that enter and leave the body are surplus organs, signs and languages that betray and lose themselves in the repetitive process of representation: “I abject all signs. I create only machines of instant utility.”<sup>687</sup> The body without organs manifested through the theatre of cruelty is the weapon in ending the judgment of God. The body without organs is breathed and produced by the breath and by the whole body of Antonin Artaud, “in real space/ with the breath of my lungs/ and my hands,/ with my head/ and my 2 feet,/ with my trunk and my arteries”<sup>688</sup> in an ultimate attempt to rediscover the theatre of cruelty and pain. By writing, talking, drawing or screaming, Artaud is working with his whole body through his breath which acts from the most profound depths.

The adverse body, the *so-called subjectile*, that betrays him and complains, is a resistant surface, and in Derrida’s words “in this matter of the subjectile, it is certainly a judgment of god. And it is certainly a matter of having done with it, interminably.”<sup>689</sup> The subjectile becomes a membrane upon which the trajectory of the scream is thrown. The scream can dynamize the skin by perforating it, traversing it, passing through the other side in order to reveal a body without organs. Artaud describes this new type of body in *To Have Done With The Judgment Of God*:

Man is sick because he is badly constructed  
there is nothing more useless than an organ.  
When you have given him a body without organs,  
Then you will have delivered him from all his automatisms.<sup>690</sup>

Artaud’s intention to use theatre is driven by the desire to achieve in an alchemic way the body without organs, where the hierarchy of organs is abolished, where the body is not anymore the image of

685 Barber, *Artaud*, 83- 88.

686 Artaud, *Four texts*, 67.

687 Quoted in Barber, *Artaud*, 99.

688 Thévenin, “Search for a Lost World,” 44.

689 Derrida, “To Unsense the Subjectile,” 70.

690 Quoted in Kahn and Whitehead, *Wireless Imagination*, 327-29.

God, but what Artaud calls a "dance inside out...and that inside out will be his true side out."<sup>691</sup> The concept of the theatre of cruelty is used to show, in Lacan's terms, that "the actor lends his presence, his limbs, not only as a marionette to the personage," while he constructs the character "with his real unconscious, that is, the relationship of his limbs to his own history."<sup>692</sup> Over decades, Artaud's theatre, cinema, drawing, writing and radio recording were all expressions of the effort to apprehend, visualize and, materialize the body without organs that he conceptualized more clearly only after 1946. Artistic explorations and his battle with art offered him the most intimate contact with his absent body, the body of the male hysteric. In a letter to Paule Thévenin written just a week before his death, he explains:

I will devote myself from now on  
exclusively  
to the theatre  
as I conceive it,  
a theatre of blood,  
a theatre which at each performance will stir  
something  
*in the body*  
of the performer as well as the spectator of the play,  
but actually  
the actor does not perform,  
he creates.

Theatre is in reality the *genesis* of creation:

It will come about.

I had a vision this afternoon – I saw those who will come after me and who don't quite have a body yet because swine like those at the restaurant last night eat too much. There are those who eat too much and others who, like me, can no longer eat without *spitting*.

Yours,

Antonin Artaud<sup>693</sup>

The absent body cannot be represented for the subject. The paradox (as in Artaud's case) is that the hysteric body is the most excessively present body while this bodily excess depends on the subjective absence. The need for acting-out and expression through the body functions an assurance that the absent body (which is not felt) does not become completely non-existent.<sup>694</sup>

Considering Artaud as simply a mad person will easily go against his own arguments and reinstall

691 Quoted in Scheer, *Antonin Artaud*, 6.

692 Quoted in Finter and Griffin, "Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre," 24.

693 Schumacher and Singleton, *Artaud on Theatre*, 232–3.

694 Mitchell, *Mad Men*, 221–222.



a reductive clinical discourse that he always rejected. We can easily look at his works on theatre as products of a mad man, but then we plainly refuse his project and reinstall the rational and naturalized discourse of sanity that sets the framework to analyze madness. By clearly defining what is serious and sane, what makes sense, as opposed to madness, a culture sets the limits to what can be thought and cannot be thought. And those limits are constantly shifting historically. Madness in its social construction has the effect of fixing limits, deciding who has the right to talk and who has not, what type of behavior is acceptable and what type is not. This construction differs from one culture to another or from one period to another: standards of sanity are far from being universal, correct or *scientifically proven*. Artaud was very aware of those standards of madness in the Europe of his time and constantly protested against them, identifying them as the main social tools for repression,<sup>695</sup> and he also recognizes the effects of madness: an unending pain that he tries to transmit and transcend to his audiences. The limits of corporeality and writing demand a different approach in reading, where the readers are unprotected by mechanisms of reduction or applicability to their own life experiences. According to Sontag, we are dealing with a work that “cancels itself.[...] It is an event, rather than an object.”<sup>696</sup>

Even if the list can be much longer, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Artaud are acknowledged as the most important canonized modernist theatre makers. Their theories are life-long searches for a “true” art of acting, a “new” language of theatre and even a renewed culture. They imposed in their writings and theatre practice a break with the old certainties of life and society, religion and culture as they were under the influence of the popular ideas of scientific theories (one of them being the psychoanalytical theory, with which none of them engaged in a rigorous way but its traces can be observed in their writings). Nonetheless, their writing is dominated by incoherence, fragmentation and a painful search

<sup>695</sup> See Sontag, *Under the sign of Saturn*.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid., 67.

for corporeality and it resembles the psychoanalytical style of theorizing, taking more precisely the form of a hysterical discourse.

## Chapter 4

### Let the right one slip in: what is left out of canonization

Center-stage at last, free to play the hysteric to his exits and entrances, then savor the delights of your abjection. What poetry!<sup>697</sup>

The canonized modernist male directors like Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Artaud use hysterical symptoms in their work for the first half of the twentieth century which are strongly disrupting the institution of theatre in terms of acting, gender relations, aesthetic and political agendas. Nevertheless, theatre historians and theoreticians maintain the existing masculinist construction of theatre as a clear linearity of solitary male geniuses where male hysteria cannot fit. In this chapter I rediscover forgotten manifestations of hysteria for the three theatre makers and I reclaim their subversive and counter-canonical legacy in Western theatre.

The hysterical male directors embody in this chapter the uncertainty surrounding issues of gender and subjectivity, by re-defining the corporeal director-actor and director-director cooperation, masculinity, femininity and their in-between. They threaten to destabilize the gender roles that reinforce the fixed hierarchical structures of the canonized theatre: “these crises of mobility are often aligned with madness and, more specifically, with the disease of hysteria, the latter having been identified [...] with aberrant sexuality and sex-role conflict.”<sup>698</sup> Male hysteria in theatre is not an unusual connection: the common reaction to my project in private discussions with theatre people was *but, of course*. On the other hand, male hysteria through its effeminacy and queerness is a taboo subject in terms of cultural debates of canonical theatre-makers.

The masculinity that I am addressing in this chapter functions as a normative term and category

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<sup>697</sup> Davis, *Art and Politics*, 143.

<sup>698</sup> Goldman, “Madness, Masculinity, and Magic,” 991.

for heterosexual, white and male privilege. Masculinity is imposed in theatre as “a cultural imperative to enact a mode of “manliness” that is calibrated to shut down queer possibilities and energies.”<sup>699</sup> Masculinity functions in Western theatre as “a regime of power that labors to invalidate, exclude and extinguish faggotry, effeminacy, and queerly-coated butchness”<sup>700</sup> coded as forms of male hysteria. Writing theatrical histories, the projects that failed to question previous engagements with heteronormativity and masculinism only succeeded to reproduce the ideology of masculinity with its abjections.

On the other hand, the absolute trust on forgotten facts that might challenge the existing conservative histories cannot function as an alternative writing of modernist theatre history. My reading of modernist theatre history does not offer the required evidence of the rigorous historical fact; it is more of a revisionary campy history that brings back some forgotten themes related to hysteria, affectivity, bodies, effeminacy, social exclusion and canonical construction. My reflections evade the risky (but also fulfilling for the writer) historical salvage that reconstructs some forgotten and critical experiences that escaped earlier writers. Joan W. Scott explains history as “a chronology that makes experience visible, but in which categories appear as nonetheless ahistorical: desire, homosexuality, heterosexuality, femininity, masculinity, sex and even sexual practices become so many fixed entities being played out over time, but not themselves historicized.”<sup>701</sup> Oppressive histories of modernist theatre construct historical selves for a hegemonic consent on what can be or what was seen, heard, acted and played on stage and its proximity. These canonical histories function on the powerful dichotomy of *then and now*, by giving a clear cut of what can be still used nowadays in theatre practice.

Elaine Showalter explained why the cultural denial of male hysteria was not just a coincidence but the result of a complex process of control, repression and clinical masquerade: “although male

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699 Muñoz, “Photographies of mourning,” 338.

700 Ibid.

701 Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 778.

hysteria has been clinically identified at least since the seventeenth century, physicians have hidden it under such euphemistic diagnoses as neurasthenia, hypochondria, shell shock or, more recently, PTSD.”<sup>702</sup> Another *hystorian*, Janet Oppenheim<sup>703</sup> positions male hysteria in the context of modern changes of the roles of individuality, masculinity, femininity and emotionality. She affirms the process of shattering nerves in men as the result of power struggles with dictatorial fathers, religious disbelief or sexual and emotional repression: „the emphatic definition of manliness in terms of physical and emotional toughness, predicated on iron nerves, created an ideal almost impossible to realize.”<sup>704</sup>

Moreover, an important element in dealing with male hysteria today and even with psychoanalysis (in terms of the academic rejection or acceptance of valid scholarly discourses) is their association with “innate Jewish tendencies to neuropathic disease and hysteria, theories which played an important role in the development of racial anti-Semitism”<sup>705</sup> and the construction of psychoanalysis as a hated *Jewish science*.<sup>706</sup> The source of an academic breakup between Freud and Charcot or Freud and Breuer is given by the issues raised by scientific theories of the time about heredity and race as major causes of hysteria,<sup>707</sup> exactly the type of theories that Freud was challenging.

The hysterical refusal to perform the masculine role in theatre and the constant search for means to disguise and to escape the impossibility of individualism and playing the same scene over and over again characterize the modernist theatre project of male hysterics. Do these male theatre makers manage to move away from the ascribed gender roles and the mandatory oedipal trajectories? Can they actually offer an alternative through their hysterical acting out and multiple identifications?

Hysteria moves on stage between „the organic and the psychological,” it muddles “the medical and the moral” while “it was ever discrediting its own credentials.” The question that is repeated ad

702 Showalter, *Hystories*, 64.

703 Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, chapter 5.

704 Ibid., 178.

705 Roith, “Hysteria, Heredity and anti-Semitism,” 149.

706 Mitchell. *Psychoanalysis and feminism*, 420.

707 See Roith, “Hysteria, Heredity and anti-Semitism.”

nauseam is “were sufferers sick or shamming?”<sup>708</sup> Through hysteria, acting becomes pejorative again: a simple *sham* or an easy but blamed lying. What modernist theatre makers are also doing in their writing on acting is to reaffirm a positive hysteria and the work behind the symptom by showing how it „involves complex learning and imitative processes”<sup>709</sup> together with the suggestion that the hysterical relation, rather than being oppositional (director vs. actor vs. spectator) is actually a combined/embodied identity.

The connection between acting and hysteria has been well known since the nineteenth century, from Charcot’s focus on the theatricality of hysteria to the famous *Studies on Hysteria* where Breuer and Freud address theatricality through the emergence of “another self from within the self as ‘double consciousness,’ which they view as a primary characteristic of hysteria.”<sup>710</sup>

To use another eloquent example, in 1904, P.C. Dubois affirmed that “the hysteric is an actress, a comedienne, but we must never reproach her, for she doesn’t know that she is acting.”<sup>711</sup> In this quote Dubois gives a coherent definition of theatricality. The spectator of the hysterical event transforms into fiction what was considered a daily non-theatrical event. Re-configuring the signs of the transference event, they are now interpreted differently, “revealing both the fictional nature of the performers’ behavior, and the presence of illusion where only commonplace reality had been expected. In this instance, theatricality appears.”<sup>712</sup> Theatricality with its redefinitions from modernist theatre gets its meaning, and also its hysterical intensity, “from the spectator’s awareness of a theatrical intention.”<sup>713</sup> The necessity of an embodied dialogue between two partners haunts the conceptualization of theatre making but also the psychoanalytical understanding of hysteria (as a necessary *folie-a-deux*). Without the awareness of the theatrical intention of the hysteric/performer there is just misunderstanding and

708 Porter, “The Body and the Mind,” 229.

709 Ibid.

710 Goldman, “Madness, Masculinity, and Magic,” 996.

711 Quoted in Showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender,” 320.

712 Féral and Bermingham, “Theatricality,” 96.

713 Ibid.

lack of theatricality.

The process of canonization excludes the hysterical element of double-consciousness in connection to theatricality. Concerning the relation between Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, the modernist canon imposed a counterfeit antagonism between the two, in the form of one denying the explorations of the other one. This conflict is constructed as a generational one, in a strict chronological order. For example, according to David Magarshack, Stanislavsky, older and usually presented by the canon as a strict father to an ungrateful son, “had the terrible example of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the great assassin of the art of the dramatist, always before him.”<sup>714</sup> Even if in the early days of socialist realism in Soviet Union, they were considered together *disgraceful* and *shameful* for their similar acting methods and tactics before the Revolution,<sup>715</sup> the two directors steadily became solitary models that could not be connected creatively. Reading them more carefully, one observes that this line is not accurate: even as late as 1935, Meyerhold emphasized that “the assertion that Meyerhold and Stanislavsky are antipodes is wrong”<sup>716</sup> and both were learning together and from each other’s experiments.

One of the main elements that these experimentalists are promoting is the actor’s right to improvise on stage and the major role that the actor has in a performance, as Meyerhold would warn “the basic problem of the contemporary theatre is that of preserving the element of improvisation in the actor’s art [...] I recently spoke with Konstantin Sergeyevich [Stanislavsky]. He also thinks about that.”<sup>717</sup> Improvisation means first of all an actor *doing something* by exploring gestures and actions constrained or unconstrained by theatrical conventions.<sup>718</sup>

In order to understand these explorations in acting, the two theories have to be read in harmony and through their hysterical identifications, just as Meyerhold had said about their methods: “each

714 Magarshack, “Preface to Second Edition”, 3-4.

715 as Maxim Gorky criticized them, quoted in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 293.

716 Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 87-88.

717 Ibid., 167.

718 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 110.

completes the other”<sup>719</sup> because “we are approaching the solution of the same problem like builders of a tunnel under the Alps. He is moving from one side, and I from the other. And inevitably, somewhere in the middle we must meet.”<sup>720</sup>

This chapter tries to find exactly this possible meeting point that is given by their common hysterical identification with each other in an intimate exercise that moves beyond the masculinist stories of solitary construction of monolithical systems that can be reproduced ad nauseam afterwards.

In constructing the performing event, directors like Stanislavsky and Meyerhold depend on each other in a corporeal way, they are bodily-connected partners: their cooperation is the process of what Donna Haraway calls “becoming with.” Through its theatricality and extimacy<sup>721</sup> (or plagiaristic identification with the other), male hysteria can be understood “less [as] a category than a pointer to an ongoing “becoming with,” to be a much richer web to inhabit.”<sup>722</sup> Hysterical directors co-work through each other’s body: “we make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love.”<sup>723</sup>

The hysterical directors that I deal with in this chapter avoid the colonizing gesture of claiming to speak for themselves as individual unified subjects or of talking in the name of the performing actor: their *becoming with* in performance is based on “the risk of an intersecting gaze”<sup>724</sup> where they do not any longer objectify with their vision but exchange looks with their partners in a creative act. The canon presents the modernist directors in the act of having solitary visions, observing actors and writing about their acting, after imposing their vision and *super-objectives*.<sup>725</sup> I want to imagine these

719 Rudnitskii, *Meyerhold, the Director*, 541.

720 Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 167.

721 See chapter 2.

722 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 16.

723 Ibid.

724 Ibid., 21.

725 The super-objective is a concept used by Stanislavsky to define the goal of each character for the whole play, available also for the playwright and the play itself. The super-objective has the potential to bring together the playwright, the director, the actors and all the characters within the play. For Stanislavsky, “the super-objective and the through action represent creative goal and creative action, which contain in themselves all the thousands of separate, fragmentary objectives, units, action in a role. The super-objective is the quintessence of the play. The through line of action is the



modernist directors as they actually meet the other director or actor's gaze and by this intersecting gaze they manage to avoid the basic mistake of canonized theatre making: to treat actors as "objects of their vision, not as beings who look back and whose look their own intersects, with consequences for all that follows."<sup>726</sup> This chapter details their struggle not to be colonizers on stage, to move beyond the masculinity construction story and patriarchal limits of modernist theatre-making and focuses on the role of male hysteria in this struggle.

The intersecting gaze and the sharing moment transform the personal event into a collaborative work that involves imagination and bodily memory (taste, touch, hearing and smelling play an important part in these types of exercises). The similarities to the psychoanalytical *talking cure* spiced up with acting moments are not accidental: we should remember that the hysteric is supposed to be "introspective and confessional" while "the therapist listens and empathizes"<sup>727</sup> in a sophisticated common exploration of subjectivities and also that famous cases of hysterics use extraordinary and sophisticated narratives to track the construction of the subject.

As Micale affirms in relation to psychoanalytical methods, the main problem is a surprising one: "in Victorian science and medicine, these are all modalities of expression and apprehension regarded as "feminine.""<sup>728</sup> The hysterical director even if he tries (like Stanislavsky, for example) cannot perform the masculine role of the dictator, he is feminized in his method of rehearsing, staging and acting and he acknowledges that he can *become with* only through the feminine.

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*leitmotif* which runs through the entire work. Together they guide the creativeness and strivings of the actor." Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 79.

<sup>726</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 21.

<sup>727</sup> Micale, *Hysterical Men*, 285.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid.

### Building tunnels under the Alps

The theatrical explorations started in the form of amateur theatre as a reaction against an authoritarian father. Besides having a strong relation to his mother, to the point of identification (Stanislavsky noticeably borrowed from her hypochondria and love for the arts, but also her hysterical fits),<sup>729</sup> the first theatre where he played was built by his "eminent and wealthy businessman father"<sup>730</sup> in the family country house in Lyubimovka in 1877. The family productions became popular locally and the young Stanislavsky received positive reviews for his acting style, especially for his "beautiful voice and sensitive phrasing."<sup>731</sup> After his father died he took over the family business and became a successful capitalist, not leaving aside his passion for theatre. Producing the amateur performances of the Society of Art and Literature, strangely enough, he became one of the leading actors and directors in the Russian theatre of the 1890s.

Years later, Meyerhold remembers him at that time in these terms: "he was a remarkable actor with a striking technique. After all, his professional attributes, as we call them, were of little help for him. In stature he was rather too tall, his voice was rather toneless, and there were shortcomings in his diction. He didn't even want to shave his moustache because of a naïve vanity. But all this was forgotten when he came out on the stage."<sup>732</sup>

In terms of directing and rehearsing during this period, Stanislavsky was playing the role of the *big boss*, closely related to his own activities as a businessman who knew how to make huge profits. His tyrannical style was based on demonstration: while he was watching actors rehearse he would stop the action and intervene shouting "I don't believe you!" S.D. Balukhaty explained his approach during the rehearsals for *The Seagull* in 1898: "what was left to the actors to do was merely to carry out within their own artistic limitations the directions of the producer; for the producer not only revealed to them

<sup>729</sup> See Ignatieva, *Stanislavsky and female actors*.

<sup>730</sup> Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 16.

<sup>731</sup> Ibid.

<sup>732</sup> Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 149.

the meaning of their parts, that is to say, *what* to play, [...] but he also showed them how to play: *how* to walk or stand still, what gestures to use, what mimicry or inflection to employ, and how ‘to feel’. This is what Stanislavsky meant when he referred to this kind of producer as a ‘producer-autocrat’.”<sup>733</sup>

Even if this style was criticized by his contemporary theatre critics and actors, it was the most productive on stage, with obvious success for the public. Stanislavsky easily indulged at that time in the appreciation of the audience and the success of the performances. Stanislavsky remembered the opening of *The Seagull* and the atmosphere after the very first performance to the public: “the mood on stage was the festive mood of Easter night. Everyone was embracing everyone else, not excepting the members of the public, who rushed up behind the scenes. One of the artistes was in hysterics; many others, and myself among those, from joy and excitement, danced a wild dance.”<sup>734</sup>

One of the significant persons who did not join the wild dance was the author of the play, Chekhov, who openly criticized the performance and accused Stanislavsky in the part of Trigorin of not understanding his role. The relationship with Chekhov grew more unstable with the new play, *The Cherry Orchard*. While the author insisted on it being a comedy, Stanislavsky contradicted him directly by using his hysterical fits as argument: “I wept like a woman, I wanted to control myself but I couldn’t. I hear what you say: ‘Look, you must realize this is a farce’ [...] No, for simple men this is a tragedy.”<sup>735</sup>

Even if Stanislavsky was dancing with the other actors and weeping with the author, his approach to directing was a tyrannical one, as he himself admitted later: “the stage director was the autocrat of the stage, especially in the first years of the existence of the Theatre. He covered the young and immature actors, of whom many gave great hopes for the future, with the pomp, the outward beauty, the unexpectedness of the production which blinded and amazed the spectator. What else could be

<sup>733</sup> Balukhaty, *The Seagull*, 101-102, quoted in Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 29.

<sup>734</sup> Quoted in Koteliansky, *Anton Tchekhov*, 147.

<sup>735</sup> Quoted in Benedetti, *Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, 162.

done?”<sup>736</sup>

The actors were respecting his drastic directions and they were treated as simple props, they were supposed to be obedient and fulfill the vision of the director, who was in complete control of what was seen on stage and the only person responsible for the production. If actors had questions or suggestions, they were easily shut off and yelled at: Stanislavsky easily lost his temper during that time. Even if this damaging approach to directing was closely related to Stanislavsky's ideas of running his own successful business and a capitalist way of thinking, Robert Leach connects his theatrical dictatorship to a sort of Russian *Volksgeist* that he embodied: “Stanislavsky knew no other way at that time. Russians who grew under the autocracy had little understanding of democracy.”<sup>737</sup>

But oddly enough, another Russian director and actor who lived under the same autocracy, strongly criticized Stanislavsky's so-called *Theatre-Triangle*, where the director was the top of the triangle, while the actor and the author were the other two corners and their work was channeled towards the director. The spectator's place in this triangle was beyond the director, who filtered the activity of the actor and author. Meyerhold strongly criticized the Theatre-Triangle and he considered this analogy a fraud, produced with the only purpose to limit the actor's agency on stage because “the actor's art consists in far more than merely acquainting the spectator with the director's conception.”<sup>738</sup> Stanislavsky was very much aware of this critique and he tried to move away from the triangle but it was still a comfortable position for him as director.

Meyerhold went even further with his critique: he openly stated that even the unquestioned success of Stanislavsky's *The Seagull* had nothing to do with his directing but was produced merely by the actors' acting and their own struggle to find a rhythm of their own for the performance. His own theoretical perspective on acting changed with that particular performance: “whenever I call to mind

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<sup>736</sup> Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 331.

<sup>737</sup> Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 33.

<sup>738</sup> Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 51.

the active participation of the actors of the Art Theatre in the creation of the characters and moods of *The Seagull*, I begin to understand how my firm faith in the actor as the main factor of the stage was born in me. Neither the *mise-en-scenes*, nor the crickets, nor the sound of horses' hooves on the bridge, were instrumental in creating the mood; what did create it was the marvelous musical ear of the performers who caught the rhythm of Chekhov's poetry."<sup>739</sup>

In an anxious way, Stanislavsky faced and tried to answer the burning problem: how to escape his dictatorial approach to directing? After a period of depression and reflection in Finland,<sup>740</sup> Stanislavsky became aware that the possible change of his own means could come from the actor and a different approach towards acting.

Stanislavsky's theories on acting and his career relate closely to Meyerhold's. Even if canon apologists obscured their relationship and the focus moved to individual creativity, this artistic connection can be still relevant in deconstructing the way that canonicity works and mythologizes male theatre-makers. As Robert Leach writes, in exploring the theories of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold the premise is "that the legacy of both men is alive in modern methods of actor training and rehearsal, and in ideas about acting."<sup>741</sup> Their virility and individuality have to be invented and recycled every time their methods are mentioned in the re-enforcement of canonicity.

The situation of acting in Russia in the 1880s had comic undertones as Stanislavsky remembered: "in the old days the actor would jump from his seat in order to pronounce an effective phrase of the text [...] The actor used the expression, 'Ah, what a candle I will give to that phrase!' – meaning that he would jump so that the whole audience would gasp. So they jumped on the stage like grasshoppers, one higher than the other."<sup>742</sup> In his autobiography, *My Life in Art*, Stanislavsky expresses his disappointment and anxiety in the impossibility of moving away from realist representation: "My God!

<sup>739</sup> Balukhaty, *The Seagull*, 124, quoted in Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 43.

<sup>740</sup> see chapter 3.

<sup>741</sup> Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 8.

<sup>742</sup> Gorchakov, *Stanislavsky Directs*, 75.

–cried out a querulous voice within me – is it possible that we, artists of the stage, are doomed by the materiality of our bodies to eternal servitude and the representation of crude reality? Are we destined never to surpass the achievements (splendid though they were in their day) of our realist-painters?”<sup>743</sup>

### **Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky**

In the late summer of 1906, when he returned from Finland, Stanislavsky became close friends with Leopold Sulerzhitsky. This was the moment when he found, in Stanislavsky’s own words, “the first and, at that time, almost the only person who was interested in my research into the field of our art.”<sup>744</sup>

Their exchange of ideas and companionship challenged dramatically Stanislavsky’s approach to theatre making. The closeness with the younger artist (Sulerzhitsky was a painter, pacifist and radical political activist, at that time banned from living in Moscow and sleeping illegally in any bed offered by friends, including Stanislavsky’s<sup>745</sup>) gave Stanislavsky a new energy and creativity through a hysterical identification with his new friend. Their creative relationship lasted two or three years and was spiced by common thoughts, theories and stimulating discoveries but also conflicts. They were reading together, “discussed and experimented on themselves and others.”<sup>746</sup>

One telling episode of their different approach towards acting took place when Stanislavsky entered the rehearsal room by surprise and Leopold Sulerzhitsky was wrestling with an actor, Leonid Leonidov, and shouting: “More force! More force!” Stanislavsky had to bodily intervene and stop the fight.

During these years, Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky developed a passion for a French psychologist,

<sup>743</sup> Quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 19.

<sup>744</sup> Stanislavskii, *Chast’ 1: Stat’i, Rechi, Otkliki, Zametki, Vospominaniia* [Part 1: Articles, Speeches, Commentaries, Notes, Memoirs], quoted in White, “Radiation and the Transmission of Energy,” 26.

<sup>745</sup> Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 66-67.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid.

Theodule Ribot, whose texts they were reading and analyzing together.<sup>747</sup> The main ideas that they explored through Ribot's theories were those of psychology of attention, creative imagination, affectivity or the inaccessible storage of experiences in a nervous memory. They connected acting to an exploration of this hidden memory (very similar to the Freudian unconscious) and to an increased emotionality of the actor.

The canonicity of Stanislavsky neglects the collective exploration of acting and theory in order to impose a mythical male genius who individually originates an acting system. In this exclusionary process of constructing Stanislavsky's masculinity, Sulerzhitsky vanishes completely. Their common idea of a *creative mood* necessary for theatre making is also based on their style of theorizing. The main three components of achieving the desired creative mood<sup>748</sup> were feeling (the exploration of emotions, the affective memory that gives urgency to performance), mind (the transformation of the circumstances of acting into the *magic if*, the make-belief of acting and the actor's complete involvement in what was happening on stage) and will (physical relaxation and concentration in relation to the action performed on stage).

The discoveries offered an answer to Stanislavsky's ethical dilemma of directing in a less authoritarian way. By focusing on experience, the life of the character and the emotionality of the actors in the rehearsal room, a particular form of improvisation that combined physical and psychological explorations. Rehearsals took a new turn, they were "divided into two stages: the first stage is one of experiment when the cast helps the director, the second is creating the performance when the director helps the cast."<sup>749</sup> The method of dealing with a play changed by not presenting a well-thought and elaborated staging at the beginning of the rehearsals but by letting the actors come with ideas about what the performance is about and how it should be done. Nevertheless, Stanislavsky

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<sup>747</sup> Gordon, *The purpose of playing*, 45.

<sup>748</sup> Whyman, *The Stanislavsky system of acting*, 78-82.

<sup>749</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski*, 175.

intervened many times and gave long discourses on various occasions. But the intention was different than before: he wanted the actors and the director to work together on the concept and to deal with the problems of the script as a unified group. One of the main concepts related to these explorations was immediacy, a present oriented acting. The obsession to stay in the present had the target, first of all, of the body. Actors were doing yoga, gymnastics, relaxation exercises; they played children games and imitated animals.

While rehearsing *The Cherry Orchard*, he advised the actress who was playing Carlotta: “first of all you must live the role without spoiling the words or making them commonplace. Shut yourself off and play whatever goes through your head [...] You will be reduced to despair twenty times in your search, but don’t give up [...] try to make her weep sincerely over her life.”<sup>750</sup>

Many of the actors felt uneasy with the new approach and there were many emotional breakdowns within the company. Even if rehearsals happened in a state of secrecy for outsiders, rumors about the new methods got out. One telling episode was when Olga Knipper walked out in tears and Stanislavsky immediately sent her flowers and compliments, assuring her of “his deep belief in her eternal talent.”<sup>751</sup>

Some of these ideas were rejected by many of Stanislavsky’s followers, for example the famous American Stanislavskian, Michael Chekhov. His particular denunciation of affective memory was based on the assumption that it makes actors “more susceptible to hysteria and mental imbalances.”<sup>752</sup> Another American follower of Stanislavsky, a teacher of *Method Acting*, Uta Hagen, warns students of the perils of psychoanalytical transference as it might be suggested by Stanislavsky: by probing the unconscious through affective memory, the actor might find some traumatizing experiences that cannot be dealt with in a rational way. She explains the dangerous ground that lurks in front of the

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<sup>750</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>751</sup> Benedetti, *Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, 277.

<sup>752</sup> Powers, “The past, present and future of Michael Chekhov,” xlv.



Stanislavskian actor: “You will risk becoming hysterical. And hysteria is a state to be avoided by the actor at all costs.”<sup>753</sup> These examples show how the American canonization of Stanislavsky’s methods consciously removed the trace of hysteria or the perils of hystericizing actors through acting from the theatre making process.

In 1908, Stanislavsky directed Turgenev’s *A Month in the Country*. His new style of directing was entirely based on the latest discoveries: the rehearsals were designed to let free the “invisible radiation of creative will and feeling.”<sup>754</sup> The change of staging was reflected in acting also, where the main technique “became the expressiveness of the eyes, the eloquence of the hands, the barely visible variations throughout the *mise en scène* that revealed the relationships between the actors on stage.”<sup>755</sup> The spectators were puzzled by the new acting style and “kept a lingering eye on the intersecting glances” of the actors who “laid bare the meaning of the words and exposed what lay behind them, uncovering the genuine desires and hopes of the heroes.”<sup>756</sup>

The actors of the MAT practiced how to communicate without any words, how to express themselves silently and how “to ‘radiate’ their mental states.”<sup>757</sup> The new rehearsing methods transformed the actors into mute subjects, they were supposed to communicate “not with words but... only with their eyes”; they were completely dissatisfied with the new situation because “the actors never spoke their lines, and if they did address each other, they did not even speak in a whisper but just moved their lips soundlessly.”<sup>758</sup> Consequently, words and corporeality were not sufficient for Stanislavsky. Influenced by Sulerzhitsky’s usage of yoga and by his own obsession with the communication of feelings, he moved into a spiritualist direction: “even the most perfect corporeal

753 Quoted in Meyer-Dinkgräfe, *Approaches to Acting*, 50.

754 Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 406.

755 Pavel Markov, “Pervaia studiia MXAT [*The First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre*] (Sulerzhitskii, Vakhtangov, Chekhov),” quoted in White, “Radiation and the Transmission of Energy,” 27.

756 Ibid.

757 Benedetti, *Stanislavski*, 181.

758 Magarshack, *Stanislavsky*, 305-6.

apparatus of the actor cannot transfer many inexpressible, superconscious, invisible feelings and experiences. For the transfer of those, there are other measures. The matter is that experienced feelings are not only transferred visibly, but also through imperceptible means, directly from soul to soul. People communicate through invisible mental currents, through radiations of feeling, commands of the will. This path from soul to soul is the most direct, influential, valid, strong, and suitable for the on-stage transference of the inexpressible, the superconscious, lending itself neither to word nor gesture.”<sup>759</sup>

Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky used yoga exercises and meditations at the Studio in their hysterical effort to communicate *from soul to soul*, frequently including the invocation of the Hindu concept of vital energy of *prana*.<sup>760</sup> It is still unclear who first used these exercises, but Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky were both fascinated with one specific book at that time: Yogi Ramacharaka’s “Hatha Yoga; or, the Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being.”<sup>761</sup> Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky used Ramacharaka’s idea of *prana* as a vital energy source (or what they were calling a *radiated energy*) that can produce the transmission of thought and affectivity from one person to another not filtered by language or physicality.

*Radiation* was borrowed from Théodule Ribot’s book *The Psychology of Attention*, where it is explained as a psychological ability to direct attention towards an object.<sup>762</sup> One important example that Ribot was using was Saint Teresa of Avila’s seven stages of prayer, the patron saint of hysteria.<sup>763</sup> His explanations in psychological terms focused on the intense concentration that can bring a higher

759 Stanislavskii, *Rabota aktera nad roliu* [An Actor’s Work on the Role], 170; quoted in White, “Radiation and the Transmission of Energy,” 28.

760 Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 138-45.

761 According to Andrew R. White, *Yogi Ramacharaka* was the penname of William Walker Atkinson, an American lawyer and member of the New Thought movement.

762 Ribot, *Psychology of Attention*, 62. For a discussion of Ribot as a positivist, see Guillin, “Théodule Ribot’s Ambiguous Positivism.”

763 Breuer mentions her at the beginning of *Studies on Hysteria*, in order to challenge the assumption that hysterics are lethargic or unproductive. He also gives Saint Teresa as example when he denies that hysteria precludes strong mental faculty and “solid mental endowment” or a “great practical capacity.” In Matus, “Saint Teresa, Hysteria, and Middlemarch,” 215-240.

consciousness and a spiritual form of ecstasy. In the preliminary phases of concentration, Ribot assumes that consciousness “tends no longer toward being a radiation around a fixed point, but a single state of enormous intensity.”<sup>764</sup>

Strongly influenced by mysticism and positivist psychology in their practice, the two Russian experimentalists conflated the two paradigms for better acting exercises. One Studio actress remembered how these exercises were used: “we worked a great deal on concentration. It was called “To get into the circle.” We imagined a circle around us and sent “prana” rays of communion into the space and to each other. Stanislavski [sic] said “send the prana there—I want to reach through the tip of my finger—to God—the sky—or, later on, my partner. I believe in my inner energy and I give it out—I spread it.”<sup>765</sup>

According to Andrew R. White and the new research regarding Stanislavsky’s experiments during that period, a crucial influence for the Studio experiments was the Moscow psychiatrist Naum Kotik who “conducted experiments in an effort to demonstrate that psychic phenomena were forms of radiation.”<sup>766</sup> In 1904, after a mind-blowing research conducted on a girl presumably able to read her father’s thoughts in a conventional example of hysteria in action, Kotik concluded: “the thoughts of one person can be transferred to another through N-rays, which proceed from the vocal centers of the first. N-rays may excite the vocal centers of the second person and produce there corresponding audio images.... In our view all humans are linked by invisible threads of N-rays, which play an insignificant role in daily life but may well acquire enormous importance and influence in all mass movements.”<sup>767</sup>

Thinking was considered directly connected to the radiant energy and Stanislavsky became an enthusiast of the new theories. He wrote in his notebook: “The irresistibility, the contagion of the force of direct communication through the invisible radiation of human will and feeling is very great. By

<sup>764</sup> Ribot, *Psychology of Attention*, 62.

<sup>765</sup> Solovieva et al. “The Reality of Doing,” 137.

<sup>766</sup> Agursky, “An Occult Source of Socialist Realism,” 250.

<sup>767</sup> Ibid.

means of it, one hypnotizes people, tames wild animals, or the furious crowd, kills fakirs and again resurrects people; actors fill the entire building of the auditorium with invisible rays and currents of their feeling and captivate the crowd.”<sup>768</sup>

The ideas of hypnosis produced on stage and radiation as forms of expression proved to be extremely seductive for Stanislavsky. But his understanding of radiation focused on the way actors can radiate their inner energies with a specific purpose: “the inanimate objects on the stage, the sounds, scenery, the images created by the actors, the mood of the play itself and the production are brought to life.”<sup>769</sup> The actors have the capacity to produce the theatrical atmosphere from their own invisible energies and give life to dead objects on stage. In order to communicate this amazing energy they depend on one precious element: their acting body.

In 1916 Sulerzhitsky died and Stanislavsky was deeply shocked and hardly recovered after this tragic end to their work together and especially to their close friendship. Without Sulerzhitsky, experiments with radiations and pranas were doomed to fail and are rarely associated with Stanislavsky’s *acting system* or his later work, but nevertheless some notes on rehearsals mention them as late as 1933, for example. Rehearsing Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Maid of Pskov*, Stanislavsky surprisingly gave the following direction to one actor: “extend a hand completely to Olga, in order for the hand to call her, in order for it to *radiate* the call (and also, in my direction).”<sup>770</sup> On this occasion, Stanislavsky insists that while doing this the actor should not think about any emotion, because the radiation is more than a simple transmission of thoughts or feelings.<sup>771</sup> We are still in the land of hysteria. What Stanislavsky was producing was nothing more than hysterical attacks, by encouraging

768 Stanislavskii, *An Actor’s Work on the Role*, 170; quoted in White, “Radiation and the Transmission of Energy,” 28.

769 Stanislavsky, quoted in White, “Radiation and the Transmission of Energy,” 37.

770 B. V. Zon, “Vstrechi s K. S. Stanislavskii” [“Encounters with Stanislavsky”] in *Teatral’noe nasledstvo; K. S. Stanislavskii; Materialy, Pis’ma, Issledovaniia* [Theatre Heritage; Stanislavsky; Materials, Letters, Research], edited by I. E. Grabar, S. N. Durylin, P. A. Markov, Moscow: Izdatel’svo akademii nauk SSSR, 1955, 445; quoted in White, “Radiation and the Transmission of Energy,” 38.

771 Ibid.

actors to stimulate nerves, muscles or body parts to action, by motor or sensory overcoming the repression of affectivity and by producing a renewed affect.<sup>772</sup> Later, he engages in these exercises with caution: he no longer uses the language of mysticism by finishing his direction with the explanation that radiated energy is “formerly, what we naively called ‘prana.’”<sup>773</sup>

From 1934 to 1938, Stanislavsky was confined to his home, in bad health. The rehearsals that were taking place in his own apartment still used radiation. One of his assistants, Lydia Novitskaya, remembered later that the exercises observed in 1935 were based on an actor’s transmission of impulses, thoughts and emotions only through their eyes and the still used radiated energy.<sup>774</sup>

Moving away from an autocratic style of directing, Stanislavsky realized, with Sulerzhitsky’s help, that the training of actors was possible only in a collective form, usually within the community of a theatre company. The very idea of an individual actor that was not part of a permanent company became implausible. As he was telling the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre: “first of all one has to create a company- it is only then that you will have both a play and a theatre.”<sup>775</sup> The social aspect of theatre grew in importance for Stanislavsky over the years (while he was also moving away from his capitalist activities), training and rehearsing were possible only at a theatre and couldn’t function as an individual activity, in the conditions of actors not being worried about payment, having jobs, working outside of theatre or resting after finishing a performance.

Talking about his 1914 performance, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, Stanislavsky expressed his happiness: “it was in this production, perhaps, that there sounded for the first time those deep and heartfelt notes of superconscious feeling in the measure and the form in which I dreamed of them.”<sup>776</sup>

772 Mollon, *EMDR and the energy therapies*, 22.

773 B. V. Zon, “Vstrechi s K. S. Stanislavskii” [“Encounters with Stanislavsky”], 445; quoted in White, “Radiation and the Transmission of Energy,” 38.

774 Lidiia Pavlovna Novitskaia, *Uroki vdokhnoveniia: sistema K. S. Stanislavskovo v deistvii* [Inspiring Lessons: Stanislavsky’s System in Action], Vseros. teatr. obshchestvo, 1984, 326; quoted in White, “Radiation and the Transmission of Energy,” 39.

775 Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky on the art of the stage*, 2.

776 Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 539-540.

Usually rehearsals took a very long time and were perceived as an exhausting emotional work for the actors and the director. For example, as one actor wrote in his diary, in 1913, the first act of the play was only analyzed during sixteen rehearsals.<sup>777</sup> All these laborious rehearsals were first of all explorations of feelings and personal experiences for the whole company.

Becoming a better director didn't solve another burning problem for Stanislavsky: his own acting. After rehearsing for one year his own adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Village of Stepanchikova* with the new acting methods, he didn't manage to arrive at any results. Nemirovich-Danchenko intervened and took charge as the new director of the play while Stanislavsky had to act according to new rules. His ideas were discredited and he had huge problems adapting to his colleague's ideas. On 28 March 1917, at a dress rehearsal, Stanislavsky was crying hysterically in the wings, biting his lip and murmuring *on!* to himself.<sup>778</sup> Even if he managed to finish that particular rehearsal, he was later removed from the performance for his incapacity to cope with his role and the new *mise-en-scene*.

### Revolutionary times

Biographers obscure Stanislavsky's political engagement by assuming a sort of political naïveté: for example in 1917, according to Robert Leach "even the naïve Stanislavsky walked the streets with a red favour in his button hole and joined enthusiastically in the formation of a Moscow Actors Union."<sup>779</sup> With all his conscious effort to be part of the Revolution, Stanislavsky's methods of acting were heavily criticized for their reactionary baggage, for focusing too much on bourgeois values and individualism and being unfit to express the working class collective.<sup>780</sup>

In the early days of the Revolution, the ideological opposition to Meyerhold was already constructed by friends and former students. For example, Mayakovsky, a close friend and collaborator

<sup>777</sup> Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 89.

<sup>778</sup> Worrall, *The Moscow Art Theatre*, 203.

<sup>779</sup> Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 131.

<sup>780</sup> Mally, *Revolutionary acts*, 100.

of Meyerhold, after praising his ideas had to add a blunt “Chekhov and Stanislavsky stink!”<sup>781</sup> Another telling example can be given by Stanislavsky’s favorite student and actor, Evgeny Vakhtangov, who in 1921, wrote in a simplistic way about this polarization: “I am thinking about Meyerhold. What a brilliant director, the greatest of all those who have lived until now. Each play of his is a new form of theatre. Each of his productions is capable of starting a whole new tendency. Of course Stanislavsky is a less talented director than Meyerhold. Stanislavsky has no individuality. All his stage productions are banal.”<sup>782</sup>

Even if he died the following year, Vakhtangov’s opinion on the two directors was well established in the Russian theatre milieu of the time and was shared on a bigger scale than just a close circle of friends and students. But unexpectedly, the two directors had “no wish whatsoever to undermine the prestige”<sup>783</sup> of each other’s work. In 1921, Meyerhold was writing: “And at a time when the Moscow theatre world is like a garish bazaar, it would cause us great pain if anybody should think us too shortsighted to identify the solitary figure of Stanislavsky standing head and shoulders above the hurly-burly.”<sup>784</sup>

In the context of revolutionary turmoil, Meyerhold defended Stanislavsky with passion and bodily admiration, the actor “with a tireless supple body, a voice of enormous range, a face with amazing mimetic proprieties (without resort to make-up), eyes described by Lensky as the most riveting in the theatre, [...] this man born for the theatre of extravagant grotesque and enthralling tragedy.”<sup>785</sup> The awkward political situation that Stanislavsky was caught in could be explained by Meyerhold by the fact that he was “forced year after year by the pressure of a philistinism inimical to him to break and distort his gallic temperament” by none other than the representatives of the bourgeoisie which

<sup>781</sup> Quoted in Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 133.

<sup>782</sup> Lyubov Vendrovskaya, Galina Kaptereva, eds. *Evgeny Vakhtangov*; Moscow: Progress, 1982, p. 140; quoted in Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 133.

<sup>783</sup> Braun, *Meyerhold on theatre*, 175.

<sup>784</sup> Ibid.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

imposed their taste on his acting and directing (whom Meyerhold identifies as “patrons of fashionable restaurants, the proprietors of shops on Kuznetsky Most, and the owners of banking-houses and coffee shops”<sup>786</sup>). All that Stanislavsky was guilty of was protecting his theatre by getting “obliged to submit to the will of dictators of fashion interested only in the flashy second-rate.”<sup>787</sup> The owners of private stalls imposed according to Meyerhold a certain aesthetic that was tangible, reliable, and familiar and fit their limited class-driven desires.<sup>788</sup> Stanislavsky’s interest in psychology was also understood as an alienating element that was imposed by others, “the inevitable hangers-on” who managed to stack Stanislavsky’s shelves with “loathsome textbooks of French experimental psychology” while Stanislavsky was simply “exhausted with work alien to him.”<sup>789</sup>

Students and actors that worked with Stanislavsky (just like Vakhtangov) became responsible for his solitary condition because “they have seized his treasure, divided up his cloak. They have taken possession of his entire being, removed him from the big theatre and put him to work in a theatre with no more room than a tram-car.”<sup>790</sup> Stanislavsky was again just a victim to his pupils who reduced Stanislavsky “to fiddling with little bits of clockwork.”<sup>791</sup>

Even if various supporters of each director emphasize the ideological conflict between them at the beginning of the 1920s, their social network ignored one important element: their hysterical friendship that functioned beyond the political context of the time.<sup>792</sup> They both needed each other like siblings. Eisenstein remembered this tumultuous period when he wrote about Meyerhold’s attitude: “his love and respect for Constantin Sergeyevich was amazing [...] even in the very fiercest years of his struggle against the Moscow Art Theatre. How many times he spoke with love of Constantin Sergeyevich, how

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<sup>786</sup> Ibid.

<sup>787</sup> Ibid.

<sup>788</sup> Ibid.

<sup>789</sup> Ibid, p.177

<sup>790</sup> Ibid., Meyerhold about The First Moscow Art Studio that could sit only 100 spectators.

<sup>791</sup> Ibid.

<sup>792</sup> For friendship’s role in hysteria see Stahl and Lebedun, “Mystery Gas,” 44-50.



highly he valued his talent and ability!”<sup>793</sup>

Stanislavsky’s way to escape strong criticism was a long tour in Europe and the United States started in 1922, as a method to experiment more on his methods, finding his own “new actor” and, more important, to make a living. That is the main reason why he agreed to sign the contract with the American publisher for one book, which he wanted to be a theoretical overview of his experiments but turned out to be an autobiography, *My Life in Art*, an unsatisfying account for Stanislavsky of his numerous failures in theatre, written in a self-critical manner as an exercise of self-denigration.<sup>794</sup> The experimentation with writing went further in terms of exploring experimentation on stage. When he returned to Moscow and started rehearsing Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Tsar’s Bride*, he introduced the logbook for rehearsals. The director’s assistant took care of it and the logbook was seen as an important tool to involve the participants in the performance and to create a sense of community. All persons taking part in the performance on stage or otherwise were encouraged to write in the logbook their impressions and criticism.<sup>795</sup> The logbook was discussed together, analyzed and was seen as an important source in dealing with the performance.

### **Last years**

His dream of becoming a better actor was a failure, because after having a heart attack in 1928 he never acted again and his directing became team work with other directors and more active assistants.<sup>796</sup> Nevertheless, he refused to give up work and got more involved in writing in order to preserve his theories. His semi-retirement forced by ill health and his impossibility to test his ideas on stage as an actor influenced his writing: the actor’s creativity was idealized and the role of the director became peripheral. His obsession with reducing the passivity of the actor, under a father-like control of

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<sup>793</sup> Quoted in Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 134.

<sup>794</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>795</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>796</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

the director, got connected to on overburden of ideas, intellectual analysis and anti-physicality of the Meiningen school.<sup>797</sup> The director had to deal supposedly only with stimulation of the actor's improvisation and ego, to remain open to anything that the actor proposes during rehearsals while not making any requests outside the actor's own take on the performance. Stanislavsky saw the actor's creativity as the only way out of these dilemmas and his theories focused more on stimulating the actor, reducing external demands and keeping the actor open to experimentation,<sup>798</sup> and to *active analysis* through acting.<sup>799</sup> The new rehearsing process puzzled the actors through its egalitarian component, trust in an actor's abilities and the diminished presence of the director who became an outside witness.

His new approach to acting was difficult to deal with for many actors that he was working with. For example, while staging *Moliere*, for an important rehearsal, eight leading actors became ill all of a sudden, complaining of too many rehearsals previously.<sup>800</sup> Because there was too much pressure on their own part in preparing the performance, many actors couldn't see anymore the final concept for the performance and what they were acting in. As one actor remembered of that period, "rehearsing with Stanislavsky was difficult, exhausting, sometimes agonizing."<sup>801</sup> Even when a part of a scene was taking a final shape, Stanislavsky was still insisting on developing it more, changing it and even at this closing phase "moments of improvisation were frequent."<sup>802</sup> His procrastination over the play and its staging, his constant changes, lack of efficiency in working with actors and his inability to present final products for spectators were reflected also in his cooperation with authors and their plays. His most famous disagreement was with Bulgakov, who depicted their troubled relation in the novel *Black Snow*.<sup>803</sup> His play *Moliere* needed 286 rehearsals and countless changes in the text in order to be

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797 Under the influence of Duke Georg II of Saxe-Meiningen who introduced the function of the director in order to discipline the actors and give coherence to the performance; see Koller, *The theater duke*.

798 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 172.

799 Blair, "Reconsidering Stanislavsky," 177-190.

800 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 173.

801 Smeliansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead*, 200.

802 Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, 50.

803 Bulgakov, *Black Snow*.

presented only seven times for the public in a finished performance.<sup>804</sup>

Stanislavsky encouraged actors to abandon acting *in general* or for the one and only purpose of pleasing the public. Sometimes he was complaining during rehearsals that actors are lacking form or that they are focusing on impossible struggles to play feelings or passions *in general*, and encouraged them to become specific about their acting. One of the examples that gave was the ridiculousness of an actor playing fear: for Stanislavsky, what was needed instead were a series of actions that expressed the fact that the actor was in danger.<sup>805</sup> Also, the desire to please the spectators damages the action, as he complained once: “the first false note was the excessive bustling. It derived from your great anxiety to entertain us and not from any intention to carry out specific objectives.”<sup>806</sup>

The move away from *in general* was possible through a constant focus on the present and the inevitability of action. The *here and now* of performing could become sharper through constant improvisation that kept the immediacy of acting in the performance also.<sup>807</sup> The help for improvisation was given by Stanislavsky’s term *visualization* that was probably taken from yoga, and stood for a filmstrip of actions in the actor’s imagination. These actions were present-oriented and real, triggered by the actor’s imagination. Over time he realized that it was impossible for actors to remember a succession of feelings and act them all of a sudden, while actions were easier to memorize and that was the main method of performing a rehearsed scene anyway: “If you will always follow this line in your part and sincerely believe in each physical action you will soon create what we call the score, the physical life of your part.”<sup>808</sup>

A succession of physical actions and a confident identification with the character can offer the actor the possibility to embody the character. The character and the context of the play were supposed

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804 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 174.

805 Ibid.

806 Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 135.

807 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 180.

808 Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 124.

to be individually researched by actors, with a focus on social and historical details. The story line, the context of the play, the actor's unconscious and the physical actions were inter-connected through the actor's embodiment. As Toporkov mentions: "the importance of the transference of the actor's attention from the search for feelings inside himself to the fulfillment of the stage task which actively influences his partners is one of Stanislavski's greatest discoveries."<sup>809</sup>

This transference of attention was possible through improvisation and cooperation with other actors on stage, through what Stanislavsky calls *active analysis*, a physicalisation of the performance that should not be dictated by the director. The rehearsals took the role of only testing what should be created and recreated on stage: the performance was not a repetition or a representation of directorial vision but a live event created through the actors' embodiment *here and now*.

Even if his political situation was uncertain after the Revolution, in 1931 Stalin himself, who was enthusiastic about Stanislavsky's work and the Art Theatre productions, took them under his own wing. The Art Theatre became the Moscow Academic Art Theatre of the USSR, having a privileged status to all other theatres.<sup>810</sup> It became the good example for all theatres in the USSR, Stanislavsky's school became the model drama school and Stanislavsky's system became socialist realism (even if his writings and methods were not necessarily following this specific aesthetic and were full of contradictions).

At the same time, the natural enemy of this constructed system became Meyerholdism, as the epicenter of formalism (which again, Meyerhold would hardly recognize as his main theatrical investment). Headlines were referring to Stanislavsky as *our pride, the genius of the theatre, a brilliant master of Russian art who warmly loves his nation and works at the most famous theatre in the world*.<sup>811</sup> At the same time, through comparison, Meyerhold's theatre was considered *two-dimensional*,

809 Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, 58.

810 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 191-192; Benedetti, *Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, 343-344.

811 Carnicke, "Stanislavsky's Last Years," 293.

*superficial, schematic*, while making the serious sin of ignoring *the internal content of human life*.<sup>812</sup>

Ironically, due to his bad health, Stanislavsky could not enjoy the new status and moved abroad to treat his illness.

Even in these conditions, Stanislavsky was very much interested in Meyerhold and his works, taking lessons in biomechanics as late as 1935. Meyerhold was also hysterically close to Stanislavsky at this critical moment in their careers, as one of his collaborators remembered, they were having “a very lengthy conversation, almost an hour long, on the telephone (I was sitting in V.E.’s study) during which Stanislavsky did most of the talking and V.E. listened. They were discussing the projected staging of Mozart’s opera, *Don Giovanni*, at the Stanislavsky Opera Theatre. When the conversation was over, V.E. was in a highly excited state. He seemed almost happy.”<sup>813</sup>

The intense friendship with ups and downs and the sibling connection between the two directors were observed by others, such as Eisenstein, in his memoirs: “it was touching and pathetic to observe this reconciliation between two old men”,<sup>814</sup> while he observed that Meyerhold had “radiant eyes when he spoke of their coming together once again.”<sup>815</sup>

Even if they were constructed as antagonistic characters for Russian theatre, they both had in common a similar approach to acting and staging while they both understood their hysterical connection: they both identified with the other, they were both emotional, unhappy with their results, aware of their constant failures in their experiments and ready to experiment more. As Meyerhold mentioned, “more and more frequently it seems that the difference between Stanislavsky and me is mainly a matter of terminology. What he calls *the task* I call *the motif*. But we are speaking of one and the same thing.”<sup>816</sup>

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812 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 196.

813 Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 88.

814 Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, 161.

815 Ibid.

816 Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 168.

### Meyerhold's resistance to virility

As in Stanislavsky's case, Meyerhold is constructed by the canon within a discourse of masculinity for the male director,<sup>817</sup> where biomechanics became the epitome of the Soviet undamaged phallic masculinity in the anticommunist discourse,<sup>818</sup> in this case based mainly on theatrical myths and a lack of historical data regarding his life.

Meyerhold's repressed Jewishness played an important role in his development as an actor and director while most of his biographers prefer to ignore this chapter. When it is remembered, it usually takes the form of non-Russianness: "the man who would become one of the main figures of the Moscow stage was no Muscovite, not even a Russian."<sup>819</sup> Uncritically presenting Meyerhold as non-Russian, theatre historians opens the door for a long genealogy of nationalist and anti-Semitic repudiations of Meyerhold. Indeed, as some of the biographers mention, he comes from a big German Jewish family (he was the youngest of eight children) that was active in the vodka distillation business. He rejected the trade of his family and planned to become an actor. Around 1892, when his father died, the income of the family dropped considerably and the young Karl Meyergold decided to change his name (to the Russian and Christian Vsevolod Meyerhold, adding even the patronymic Emilievich), to take Russian citizenship (mainly for avoiding conscription in the Prussian Army) and also to join the Orthodox Church. At that time, hiding one's Jewishness was a condition required in order to join the anti-Semitic Russian theatre world. Just a few years earlier, the St Petersburg Society for Art and Literature presented the highly anti-Semitic drama *The Smugglers*.<sup>820</sup> When protesters intervened, the police violently enforced the continuation of the performance: "the moment the actors appeared on stage, however, the vegetable bombardment began again with renewed force, this time directed not at

817 See Glatzer Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 219.

818 Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet man was unmade*, 5.

819 In Rudnitskii, *Meyerhold, the director*, ix.

820 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 20-21.

the actors, but at the policemen who were visible in the wings. Finally troops positioned in the galleries began dragging students out [...] and when sympathetic spectators flew to their rescue, chaos reigned. [...] The actors cowered against the back wall of the stage and the performance was finally canceled. In the aftermath of the riot, more than a hundred people were arrested, [and] newspapers and journal editors were forbidden to report the event.”<sup>821</sup>

Considering the dangerous environment for a Jew, Meyerhold’s disguise as a non-Jew was necessary for pursuing a theatrical career. I do not imply that Meyerhold’s Jewishness functioned as a reality but as a representation “in the world of those who stereotype as well as those who are stereotyped,”<sup>822</sup> to use Sander Gilman’s syntagm. Furthermore, his career and political decisions were under the sign of repressing his Jewishness or hiding his radical political ideas in order to protect his own life: as early as 1919, he was arrested and condemned to execution by the White army. Almost 20 years later, he was arrested, tortured and executed by NKVD.

Meyerhold failed in achieving the narcissistic and stable ideal of masculinity even in his powerful political position as a Soviet commissar, even if he was wearing uniforms to affirm his dedication to the political cause (after the Revolution, for rehearsals, he was constantly wearing puttees, military overcoats and even soldier’s caps with Lenin’s image on the brim<sup>823</sup>). Meyerhold constantly used the mechanisms of drag in order to hide his intimate search for a subjective position. Drag functions for hysterics as the ultimate embodied act of liberation, of escape and of literal transformation into someone else.<sup>824</sup>

The constant reminder of *Meyerhold’s passions* in the Western construction of the canon in a transcendental tone of building a theatrical hero has also the role of feminizing his vulnerability in front of dictatorship and anti-Semitism, as a tragic reminder of the *sin* of being a Jew and doing (leftist)

821 Schuler, *Women in Russian Theatre*, 144.

822 Gilman, *The Jew’s body*, 1.

823 Rudnitskii, *Meyerhold, the director*, xi.

824 Furse, *Augustine*, 9.

politics on stage. What was the role of hysteria in this repression and identity construction? In one of the recurring cited letters to Molotov from his imprisonment in 1939, Meyerhold claims expressions of hysteria as the last way out of torture: “When through lack of food (I was incapable of eating), lack of sleep (for the three months), from heart attacks at night and bouts of hysteria (floods of tears, trembling as though from fever) I became bowed and sunken, and my face was lined and aged by ten years, my interrogators became apprehensive.”<sup>825</sup>

In another letter, dated 20 January 1940 and addressed to the State Procurator, he writes: “At the interrogation on November 1939 I again lost control of myself, my consciousness became blurred, I began to tremble hysterically and I was in floods of tears...”<sup>826</sup> This particular contradiction of hysteria fails the construction of a perfect masculinity for Meyerhold within the canon: the control and dominance over the body that are required by patriarchal order for the masculine leader become impossible. In his own words from the same letter, Meyerhold is no longer a man, but a dog: “Lying face-down on the floor, I discovered the capacity to cringe, writhe, and howl like a dog being whipped by its master.”<sup>827</sup> The connection between hysteria and the animal has a long history, one of the oldest definitions of hysteria being the animal *which is not in men*.<sup>828</sup>

### **Theatricality rediscovered**

From the early years, as an actor under Stanislavsky’s supervision, Meyerhold was fascinated by his acting and also the way that he knew how to give good advice to actors at the right moment. One telling episode happened during the rehearsals for Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, where Meyerhold played Tuzenbach and experienced difficulties during rehearsals in preparing his entries and speech. Observing his trouble, Stanislavsky intervened: “finally Stanislavsky climbed up on the stage, threw a

<sup>825</sup> Quoted in Braun, “Meyerhold: the Final Act”, 10.

<sup>826</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>827</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>828</sup> See Didi-Huberman, *Invention of hysteria*, 68.



piece of paper on the floor and asked me to break up my text in the following way: after having said three lines, I would see the paper, pick it up, continue to speak, then unfold it and speak further. Everything immediately fell into place.”<sup>829</sup>

The simple gesture of picking up and unfolding the paper solved the dryness of the soliloquy. But what this demonstration did not solve was the relation between the director and the actor. What one can identify in Meyerhold’s theories on the body of the actor is precisely the tension between a controlled use of the body (and identity) and the control by others (who have more access to power and produce subjects and passive bodies) of the actor’s body. This tension and obsession over an impossible totalizing control is worked out on the exteriority of the body or on what Dyer calls “the flawless surface of conventional masculinity”<sup>830</sup> to the point that control becomes superfluous or in Meyerhold’s own words: “I don’t know how to stage the play but one thing I do know, there is no need for discussion. What we need to do is get up on the stage and act.”<sup>831</sup>

As a classic hysteric, Meyerhold demanded audiences and partners for his madness. Meyerhold enjoyed being seduced and also to seduce, he loved whom he hated and his love was constantly unreliable. As his most famous student, Sergei Eisenstein, wrote, strong and contradictory feelings played an important role in the theatrical work of Meyerhold:

The untold torments of those who loved him devotedly as I did.  
The untold moments of triumph, watching the magic creativity of this inimitable theatrical wizard.  
How many times his actor Ilyinsky left him!  
How his actress Babanova suffered!

What torments – thank God they were short-lived! – did I go through, before I was thrown outside the gates of Paradise, out of the ranks of his theatre, because I had “dared” acquire a collective of my own on the side – in the Proletkult.<sup>832</sup>

From hysterical love to acting out and the embracement of the only possibility for expression through the plasticity of the moving body is a small step. In his article called *The naturalistic theatre*

<sup>829</sup> Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 149-150.

<sup>830</sup> Richard Dyer quoted in Kirkham and Thumim, “You Tarzan,” 25.

<sup>831</sup> Benedetti, *Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, 222.

<sup>832</sup> Quoted in Schmidt, *Meyerhold at work*, 8.

*and the theatre of mood* from 1904, Meyerhold criticizes the acting of the Moscow Art Theatre actors: “Actors are always made up true to character – which means with faces exactly like those we see in real life. Clearly, the naturalistic theatre regards the face as the actor’s principal means of conveying his intentions, ignoring completely the other means at his disposal. It fails to realize the fascination of plastic movement, and never insists on the actor training his body; it establishes a theatre school, yet fails to understand that physical culture must be a basic subject.”<sup>833</sup>

By rejecting realist theatre and the idea of copying life on stage, familiar objects, gestures and details achieve uncanny meanings. They also emphasize other parts of the body (for example, hands) and not only the face. In a prospectus of Meyerhold’s Studio from 1918, he explores this shifting of signification by implying that ordinary acts are made to assume on stage: “the meaning of the refusal; the value of the gesture in itself; the self-admiration of the actor in the process of acting; the technique of using two stages, the stage and the forestage; the role of the outcry in the moment of strained acting; the elegant costume of the actor as a decorative ornament and not a utilitarian need; the headgear as a motive for the stage bow; little canes, lances, small rugs, lanterns, shawls, mantles, weapons, flowers, masks, noses, etc., as apparatus for the exercise of the hands.”<sup>834</sup>

Meyerhold criticizes *reincarnation*, as a form of becoming only through make-up and language (by playing accents and dialects) or a facile form of acting that lacks plasticity and any type of ethics: “the actor is expected to lose his self-consciousness rather than develop a sense of aestheticism which might balk at the representation of externally ugly, misshapen phenomena.”<sup>835</sup> The naturalistic actor gives a finished and clearly defined performance, where subjective becoming, ambiguity or allusions are not possible anymore. Overacting functions as an effect of naturalism where the in-between and confusion are no longer possible: the acted part is already known and dead. Against naturalistic

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833 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 24.

834 Saylor, *Russian theatre under the revolution*, 216-217.

835 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 24.

reincarnation, Meyerhold proposes ambiguity and uncertainty in terms of showing, in order to let the spectator use imagination to fill what is left unsaid and answer some specific desires: “it is this mystery and the desire to solve it which draws so many people to the theatre.”<sup>836</sup>

Meyerhold identifies a specific form of creativity for spectators precisely in this unconscious *exercise of fantasy*<sup>837</sup> that is denied by naturalistic theatre. But besides the denial of imagination, Meyerhold discovers another denial for spectators of naturalist theatre: “the ability to understand clever conversation.”<sup>838</sup> The example that he uses does not come as a big surprise: the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. Meyerhold accuses his plays of being a simple analysis of dialogue and condemns performances based on these plays to be “tedious, drawn-out and doctrinaire.” This example has the role of revealing also the method of the naturalistic director: the scenes are broken into logical and equal parts that are thoroughly analyzed, broken into small actions and then put together again into one coherent performance. The scenes are full of irrelevant details with “bits and pieces of equipment”: the spectator is forced to pay attention to irrelevant details that are tiring, making the whole experience long and convoluted. The staging in naturalist theatre has the function of *explanation*, because the director perceives the dramatic text as too obscure for the targeted audience: “experience has convinced him that the ‘boring’ dialogue must be enlivened by something or other: a meal, tidying the room, putting something away, wrapping up sandwiches, and so on. In Hedda Gabler, in the scene between Tesman and Aunt Julie, breakfast was served; I well remember how skillfully the actor playing Tesman ate, but I couldn’t help missing the exposition of the plot.”<sup>839</sup>

By focusing on minor scenes with complicated dialogue and trying to sketch the Norwegian characters in a sort of theatrical anthropology, the naturalist director transforms the whole performance into a meaningless event for the spectator which receives only an *impression of types*. Meyerhold draws

836 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 25.

837 Meyerhold’s term.

838 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 27.

839 Ibid., 29.

attentions to the risks of such an approach: “the urge to *show* everything, [...] of leaving anything unsaid, turns the theatre into a mere illustration of the author’s words” and the stage becomes nothing more than “some sort of antique shop.”<sup>840</sup>

While the aesthetics of the Moscow Art Theatre was becoming the norm, Vsevolod Meyerhold rediscovers the theatricality of popular culture as an alternative to realism. It is interesting to observe that the opening of the Theatre Studio by Stanislavsky and Meyerhold gave the possibility to test new ideas in 1905. Even if this cooperation lasted only for a couple of months (May to October) and didn’t produce any new performances, being perceived as a major failure, nevertheless it produced most distinctively a fresh approach towards directing: the new rehearsing procedure followed another path, the director and actor worked together, they combined exercises and established a community where there were no hierarchies. The director worked with the actor to produce a performance in an egalitarian manner that proved to be highly creative. The new relationship meant that the actor was not only reproducing the director’s conception but was free to bring a personal perspective on the performance while the director functioned as a connection between the play and the actor and a harmonizer of improvisations. As one of the actresses recalled these rehearsals, they were “unusually absorbing” and the actor’s imagination was trusted for the first time by the director.<sup>841</sup>

The new method was named *the theatre of the straight line*, in opposition to *the theatre-triangle* and consisted in a direct connection between author-director-actor-spectator. The role of the author moved from only being the maker of a story that actors have to present to a more active one involved in the process of staging. The director was supposed to come up with some additional ideas to the actors’ improvisation, to give some musical themes for actions and to fix some key points in the performance. The actors could improvise on agreed themes and could deal with the plot of the play in an open

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<sup>840</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>841</sup> M.A. Valenti, *Vstrechi s Meierkhol’dom*, Moskow: Vserossiiskoe Teatral’noe Obshchestvo, 1967, 32; quoted in Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 53.

reading. During rehearsals, author, director and actors worked together and had ideas for themselves and others of how to deal with the performance and were active in an egalitarian way. The role of the director changed from a visionary and a dictator to a “bridge, linking the soul of the author with the soul of the actor”.<sup>842</sup> The new type of director identifies with the actor and they work together in exploring and sharing their creativity. Meyerhold identified completely with this new ideal director and tried to play by the new rules, as he was writing: “he does not insist on the exact representation of his own conceptions, which was intended only to ensure unanimity and to prevent the work created collectively from disintegrating. Instead he retires behind the scenes at the earliest possible moment and leaves the stage to the actors.”<sup>843</sup>

Even if no performance was produced by the Theatre Studio, the experiments in rehearsing were well received by those involved, including Stanislavsky, who was personally financing and supervising their activities. After attending a rehearsal in August, he thought: “there was a great deal that was new, interesting, and unexpected. There were beautiful groupings, effective light spots, the ingenuity and talented imagination of the stage director.”<sup>844</sup> Both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold realized at this time that a hierarchical theatre with a tyrannical director on top can only repeat the mistakes of the past and the theatrical novelty can come only from a new form of cooperation with the actors. A modernist theatre had to be based on new acting skills, new methods, new techniques and new directing. These conclusions changed dramatically their individual ideas of achieving modernism in theatre.

Even if this experimental theatre was criticized as being too *conventional* or *stylized*, especially through its dedication to symbolism, right after Meyerhold’s break with MAT,<sup>845</sup> the theatricality that he encouraged was a refusal to imitate of every-day life and an alternative form of expression based on acting that is able to produce and not copy experience and focus on emotionality in building the

<sup>842</sup> Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 62.

<sup>843</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>844</sup> Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 436.

<sup>845</sup> Kleberg, *Theatre as action*, 51-53.

character.

This rejection of emotions can be tracked down to an earlier bad experience of engaging too much with the inner life of a character: Meyerhold played at the beginning of his acting career the title role of the play *The Madman*. The identification with the madman was so strong that he started to consider himself *deranged*.<sup>846</sup> As he mentioned years after, it was a painful experience: “I lived every line [...] I thought I was insane”<sup>847</sup> and that was what he wanted actors to avoid by identifying emotionally with the character. The alternative sources of inspiration were Chinese theatre, popular farce and *commedia dell’arte*, sources of theatricality that European theatre was ignoring at that time.

Meyerhold explores these incipient ideas in the 1906 performance, *The Fairground Booth*, a notorious performance in the canonical history of theatre that assumes in these recollections the pretended *unique* and *solitary genius* of Meyerhold. What is left aside is precisely the collective characteristic of this performance, which represents a new style of work for Meyerhold also, as in Stanislavsky’s case (see above) from the same year. The team that was working together in an uncharacteristically close fashion on the performance included the author of the play, Blok, his wife, his sister in law, the actress Munt, other actresses and actors, Verigina, Volokhova, Golubev, as well as poets, Chulkov, Gorodetsky and Sologub, one big happy family. The collective managed to produce a highly theatrical performance, which would be ironically associated exclusively with Meyerhold’s genius afterwards. Through the mechanisms of theatricality that they used, they challenged the naturalism of Russian theatre of the time: they had a stage within the stage; scenery, ropes and trappings were all visible for the audience; grotesque and ambiguous actions were taking place on stage as well as *commedia dell’arte* characters and gags “which gave life-mocking, naïve, ironic, dynamism to carnival, masquerade and the tricks of the well-trained improviser.”<sup>848</sup>

846 Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 2003, 13.

847 Hoover, *Meyerhold*, 5.

848 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 66.

Meyerhold played the role of Pierrot, based mainly on improvisation: he had a floppy white costume, movements of a marionette and an inhuman, high-pitched voice. The sad clown that Meyerhold created resembled his own experience as an actor and the Jewish *badchen*, as Robert Leach observed: he “is alienated and victimized, yet self-pitying and passive, he is simultaneously comic and melancholy.”<sup>849</sup> At the end of the performance, he just “stood like a stork with one leg behind the other and played on a thin reed pipe.”<sup>850</sup>

The key element in the new style of performances was the improvisation of actors and how the director and author dealt with it. As one of Meyerhold’s actors explained later, self-restriction and improvisation were “the two main requirements for the actor on the stage. The more complex their combination, the higher the actor’s art [...] By self-restriction within the given temporal and spatial composition, or within the ensemble of partners, the actor makes a sacrifice to the whole of the production. The director makes a similar sacrifice in allowing improvisation. But these sacrifices are fruitful if they are mutual.”<sup>851</sup>

In order to experiment with his latest discoveries, he staged several shows at the Cove in 1908. They were unusual performances: a Petrushka folk farce, a circus buffoonade and a melodrama that dramatized *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe. In 1910, he re-acted his Pierrot as a dancing mime in another performance, Fokin’s *Carnival*, on stage with Nijinsky but also staged and played, together with some friends, Calderon’s *The Adoration of the Cross* in the dining room of Vyacheslav Ivanov’s flat.<sup>852</sup> In *Columbine’s Scarf*, he experimented further with music, dance and pantomime by not using any words and introducing the character of the devil-clown who was the conductor of the band on stage and also the main dancer, an ironic characterization of the director that played with “the duality between truth and sham [...] presented with great force, and undermined the

<sup>849</sup> Ibid.

<sup>850</sup> As Sergei Eisenstein remembered, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>851</sup> Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 160.

<sup>852</sup> Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 104-105.

comfort of the audience.”<sup>853</sup>

Meyerhold’s interests in experimental acting and the grotesque were developed further in his studio on Borodin Street in Sankt Petersburg from 1913 to 1917. Curiously enough, in order to explore the grotesque in theatre, Meyerhold constructed a new identity for himself and adopted the alter ego of Dr. Dapertutto, a character produced by one of his favourite writers, E.T.A. Hoffmann in the tale *Adventure on New Year’s Eve*. The starting elements for this new theatrical adventure were popular theatre and the masked actor. A strong modernist impulse connects the future of theatre (as it was imagined by Meyerhold and his actors) with traditional forms of theatre from the past.

What future and past have in common is the figure of the cabotin: “The cult of the cabotinage, which I am sure will reappear with the restoration of the theatre of the past, will help the modern actor to rediscover the basic laws of theatricality.”<sup>854</sup> The magic that the cabotin can use is based on specific skills and acting technique that are coming from the past. He is capable “to work miracles with his technical mastery”<sup>855</sup> and can produce highly physical performances. According to Dr. Dapertutto, the art of the performer: “consists in shedding all traces of the environment, carefully choosing a mask, donning a decorative costume, and showing off one’s brilliant tricks to the public – now as a dancer, now as the intrigant at some masquerade, now as the fool of old Italian comedy, now as a juggler.”<sup>856</sup>

By celebrating this ideal based on a model of popular performer, Meyerhold connects the mythical past to contemporary acting, art and literature in a fusion of old and new. Contemporary designers, composers, actors and writers played a crucial role in developing an innovative modernist theatre by offering a cultural milieu where experimentation became necessity.

Together with his students, Meyerhold discovered the possibilities of fragmenting the scenic action into separate parts, acrobatics and a grotesque theatricality that mixed high and low culture into

<sup>853</sup> As one spectator recalls, quoted in *ibid.*, 106.

<sup>854</sup> Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 126.

<sup>855</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>856</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.



one image. The utopian purpose for Meyerhold was that his so-called *joyful experiments* would become the propriety of all and theatre would finally dissolve into everyday life.<sup>857</sup> His literary adviser, Ivan Aksyonov, explained it later: “the theatrical performance was to be given up in favour of a free play of workers at rest who spent part of their leisure time in a game that was perhaps improvised next to the temporarily abandoned workplace.”<sup>858</sup>

Fragmentation and grotesque were played by putting together unrelated, contradictory and incongruous parts. The grotesque that Meyerhold theorized at that time<sup>859</sup> lost its metaphysical connotation, referring mainly to a distorted, out-of-place and exaggerated version of the analyzed situation: “the grotesque isn’t something mysterious. It’s simply a theatrical style that plays with sharp contradictions and produces a constant shift in the planes of perception.”<sup>860</sup> Its main tools in term of acting were clowning and dancing. The grotesque actor could dance with agility and flexibility, could sing and play instruments, could play circus gags and address the audience like a master of ceremonies. For this purpose, they were all frequent spectators to the circus and the cinema (where particularly Charlie Chaplin’s movies and silent comedies became a source of inspiration).<sup>861</sup>

The mask became an important tool in developing a grotesque aesthetic and also in terms of exploring action by not focusing on psychology or the expression of emotions through the face but encouraging the actor to express through motion. By not being able to use the face, the masked actor uses the whole body to produce expressions. The produced movement is not every-day movement but scenic; it becomes expressive and uses a certain vocabulary<sup>862</sup> that is available for the spectator also. Scenic movement engages drama. In this sense, sitting can be a scenic movement (especially by having the elbow on the knee, and the forehead resting on the closed fist) that is read by the spectator as

857 Kleberg, *Theatre as action*, 68-70.

858 Quoted in Kleberg, *Theatre as action*, 69.

859 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, chapter 6.

860 Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 142.

861 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 123.

862 Ibid., 110-111.

sadness. Meaning is produced in theatre exactly through a play of movement and stillness. The pause had to be managed through training in order to produce action on stage, while this *exclamation of silence* or *silhouette* or *raccoursi* that produces drama had the role of actually motivating movement and dynamism.<sup>863</sup> Interestingly enough, the pause was called by Meyerhold also a *dog setting*: “absolutely still, its feet pressed into the ground, its nose barely twitches as it concentrates with every tense fibre of its being.”<sup>864</sup>

These movements were developed by Meyerhold and his students into études that explored precisely the drama of the movement: “the duty of the comedian or the mime is to transport the spectator into a world of make-believe”<sup>865</sup> that is possible through technical skills. Meyerhold explained the role of movement as theatricality in these terms: “Movement is the most powerful means of theatrical expression. The role of movement is more important than that of any other theatrical element. Deprived of dialogue, costume, footlights, wings and auditorium, and left only with the actor and his mastery of movement, the theatre remains theatre.”<sup>866</sup>

### **Meyerhold and the Revolution**

In the following years of the Bolshevik Revolution, Meyerhold was part of a dedicated group of directors, playwrights, stage-designers and actors who actively tried to apply in theatre the Leninist ideas of “complete overthrow of the status quo and the installation of a new, utterly different regime.”<sup>867</sup> But even when criticized from an anticommunist perspective, Meyerhold stands alone: “Meyerhold, the major director-producer of the early Soviet drama, was an extremist in translating Communism into theatre.”<sup>868</sup>

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863 Ibid., 119.

864 Ibid., 151.

865 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 129.

866 Ibid., 147.

867 Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, i.

868 Szeliski, “Lunacharsky and the Rescue of Soviet Theatre,” 415.

Meyerhold's earlier experimentations with circus, *commedia dell'arte* and popular forms of theatre were creatively combined with Marxism and avant-garde aesthetics coming from constructivism and futurism. The role of theatre in the Soviet Union grew stronger in the 1920s, being perceived as an efficient propaganda tool (in the situation of a large population unable to read and with no *talking pictures* invented). Meyerhold used this opportunity to experiment in his own *Theatrical October*. Bolsheviks conceptualized theatre as a political laboratory: social experiments, designs and analyses could be first tested on stage. A personal project for Meyerhold was the construction of the *New Man* within theatre. Even Stanislavsky, who was not directly involved in the Revolutionary theatre observed an extraordinary "theatre epidemic"<sup>869</sup> at that time.

The new theatrical man could happen only through radical transformations: "The psychological make-up of the actor will need to undergo a number of changes. There must be no pauses, no psychology, no 'authentic emotions' – either on the stage or whilst building a role. Here is our theatrical programme: plenty of light, plenty of high spirits, plenty of grandeur, plenty of infectious enthusiasm, unlaboured creativity, the participation of the audience in the corporate creative act of the performance."<sup>870</sup>

The direct results of Meyerhold's experiments were two productions presented to the public in 1922, Ferdinand Crommelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and Sukhovo-Kobylin's *The Death of Tarelkin*, two grotesque farces with bitter endings. The constructionist artists Lyubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova designed the props and the *machines for acting*, placed on the bare stage.<sup>871</sup> During performances, actors were using and moving the enormous constructions dressed in working uniforms, employing acrobatic skills and precise coordination in struggle with the mechanical environmental opponent.

<sup>869</sup> Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, 439.

<sup>870</sup> Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 170.

<sup>871</sup> Kleberg, *Theatre as action*, 69.

The so-called biomechanical experiments from these two productions did not have the expected success with the soviet audience and didn't fit the "current tasks of Soviet society."<sup>872</sup> By employing utilitarian production aesthetics, where props were called *constructions* and the biomechanical acting *a laboratory of the new man*, Meyerhold was looking actually for a political legitimating theory. A major characteristic of the Russian avant-garde was the socially useful function of any artistic endeavor. And it was dogmatically respected by Meyerhold, together with a modernist deferral in the face of the actual failure of the experiment, a utopian projection into the future when a classless communist society could benefit from the avant-garde visions.

Meyerhold's next performance, Tretyakov's *The Earth in Turmoil*, from 23 February 1923, in celebration of the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Red Army, had an immediate political goal: *direct agitation*. Lyubov Popova's design was not abstract and technical but used real machine guns, motorcycles and other objects. Meyerhold explained the new direction: "the assembler attempts to achieve not an aesthetic effect, but an effect that is indistinguishable from what the spectator experiences in real phenomena such as maneuvers, parades, street demonstrations, etc. Costumes and things (great and small) are exactly as in reality; their nature as products is in the centre – no decorative embellishments, no theatrical tricks."<sup>873</sup> By emphasizing that everything on stage is "exactly as in reality," Meyerhold was aware of the theatrical function of the event, the real objects had a direct agitation function exactly by expressing something beyond their everyday function.

Even if actors' actions are real, difficult and acrobatic and not signs for fictional actions, the theatricality of the performance is given by the parade or exhibition style. Helen Krich Chinoy observed a remarkable connection between different aesthetics based on a rather new element at that time: "The personal distillation of the director was the modern substitute for the whole complex of social and theatrical factors that had once made theatre the great collective art. Reinhardt illustrates this

<sup>872</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>873</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 71.

process in its baroque, Wagnerian aspect. Vsevolod Meyerhold illustrates it in its constructivist, Marxian aspect.”<sup>874</sup>

Nevertheless, the spectators, mainly workers, were perplexed and offended by the strange staging and the non-linear structure. Soviet critics followed them by asking for simple plots, characters that are convincing and easy to identify with, a positive treatment of Soviet heroes and *life as it is*.<sup>875</sup>

The work with the plays to be staged reflected the constant interest in improvisation and collaborative work during rehearsals. Meyerhold contemplated the play months in advance, trying to fit it into the author’s biography, he would have looked over different versions of it and finally created his own version of the play. Nevertheless, his research would consist of identifying the context of the play: the socio-political conditions, the artistic, musical or literary environment for the setting of the play and its writing.<sup>876</sup> He would have conducted extensive research in libraries, museums and on location (for the writing of the play and its setting). Actors were encouraged to do the same concerning their characters and the whole play.

His exploration of theatricality could not answer the high demands of socialist realism, the only artistic approach possible after 1934. As *the Charter of the Writers Union* described it at that time: “socialist realism, as the basic method of Soviet artistic literature and literary criticism, requires of the artist a true, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. In this respect, truth and the historical concreteness of the artistic depiction of reality must be combined with the task of the ideological transformation and education of the workers in the spirit of Socialism.”<sup>877</sup>

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874 Cole and Krich Chinoy, *Directors on Directing*, 53.

875 Mally, *Revolutionary acts*, 100-101.

876 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 160-161.

877 Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 297.

### Actors as techno-dogs

Meyerhold rejected any type of psychological or humanist understanding of theatre and, in the modernist line of post-revolutionary science, put all his efforts into transforming theatre into a post-human laboratory. First, he moved away from a psychological individualism: “theatre built on psychological foundations is as certain to collapse as a house built on sand.”<sup>878</sup> His exploration of bio-mechanics was full of technical flaws but nevertheless, “a theatre which relies on *physical elements* is at the very least assured of clarity.”<sup>879</sup> The technological understanding of theatre paradoxically made Meyerhold emphasize the physical training of actors and put a strong focus on the bodies, which were conceptualized in a Pavlovian way: the actor was supposed to become a lab dog so “thoroughly trained that he could respond immediately, as if by reflex action, to the needs dictated by his part”,<sup>880</sup> and technological: “in future the actor must go even further in relating his technique to the industrial situation. For he will be working in a society where labour is no longer regarded as a curse but a joyful, vital necessity.”<sup>881</sup>

Meyerhold often went with his students to the zoo to study and imitate animals,<sup>882</sup> because the need for change did not just relate to forms of acting but also methods for actors to train the body<sup>883</sup> in a completely different way from that done at that time. By agitating the animal, certain dispositions in the body can emerge and new actions can be performed on stage.<sup>884</sup> By identifying with the animal and hysterically disturbing the body/mind relation, the actor gets stimulated by objects and situations and forms desires and movements that can move beyond the limits of learned theatrical behavior.

Meyerhold understood acting not as a form of artistic relaxation, but as a form of work which

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878 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 199.

879 Ibid.

880 Leiter, *From Stanislavsky to Barrault*, 56.

881 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 197.

882 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 121.

883 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 198.

884 Wright, “Hysteria and Mechanical Man,” 240.

needed methods that can be applied “to any form of work with the aim of maximum productivity.”<sup>885</sup> By focusing on the theatrical unity of time, space and corporeality, he wanted to focus paradoxically on social and political Soviet experience<sup>886</sup> and to offer analyses and solutions for daily problems. That was the primal purpose of biomechanics, which can be summarized in these technical terms: “a gymnastics based upon: preparation for action-pause-the action itself-pause-and its corresponding reaction.”<sup>887</sup>

After biomechanics, the actor is able to “go beyond the needs of psychological character depiction and ‘grip’ his audience emotionally through physiological process.”<sup>888</sup> The key element in this type of work is dealing with “plastic forms in space” and the actor’s own corporeality. He thought that the first step for actors was to study the mechanics of their own bodies.<sup>889</sup> The acting body produces emotions and this is the key for acting according to Meyerhold: “All psychological states are determined by specific physiological processes. By correctly resolving the nature of his state physically, the actor reaches the point where he experiences the *excitation* which communicates itself to the spectator and induces him to share in the actor’s performance: what we used to call ‘gripping’ the spectator. It is this excitation that is the very essence of the actor’s art. From a sequence of physical positions and situations arise those ‘*points of excitation*’, which are informed with some particular emotion.”<sup>890</sup>

Actors don’t need to identify with the characters, to show empathy for their role or even to have emotions in their activity “but to consciously comment on the character by remaining clearly distinct from it.”<sup>891</sup> For Meyerhold, corporeality and movement are not produced by emotionality but are its

885 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 198.

886 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 169.

887 Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre*, 28.

888 Leiter, *From Stanislavsky to Barrault*, 56.

889 Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 199.

890 Ibid.

891 Leiter, *From Stanislavsky to Barrault*, 57.

source: through biomechanics, the actor can achieve those “correct postures and moves” that miraculously will “lead naturally to an emotional state in the actor and, by extension, affect the audience.”<sup>892</sup> Provoking emotions through gestures might seem a cold, detached or unengaged exercise, but through Pavlovianism, Meyerhold introduces another aspect: spontaneity. When Meyerhold expects actors to become Pavlovian dogs, the focus is precisely on the theatrical usage of “Pavlov’s studies of conditioned response behaviour, the origin of behaviorism, a reflex-like realization of an impulse.”<sup>893</sup> Biomechanics becomes a modern form of acting “as technically precise as the miracles of technology” while the theatre as machine makes the most of this “representative symbol of modern life,”<sup>894</sup> in line with the Soviet struggle to construct a coherent form of scientific socialism. Even more, in order to make his methods look more scientific, Meyerhold introduced for his actors and students courses in anatomy and physiology.<sup>895</sup>

Meyerhold encouraged his students and actors to indulge in exercises of self-admiration: “One must admire oneself, the position into which one has been put by the director, which may be neither beautiful nor pretty.”<sup>896</sup> The actor could use these exercises to become detached and see the whole work as ironic, while enjoying the act of playing, because first of all, self-admiration offers “the actor’s ability to see himself from the side, as it were, and thus make his playing more simple and natural.”<sup>897</sup> The narcissism of actors was used precisely to create a form of detachment from the self and to give a sense of ironic alienation.

In order to escape psychology, Meyerhold encouraged actors to play extensively with objects, props and to put emphasis on bodily parts. Complex situations and scenes were created by actors only

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892 Ibid., 56.

893 Meyer-Dinkgräfe, *Theatre and Consciousness*, 67.

894 Leiter, *From Stanislavsky to Barrault*, 56.

895 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 139.

896 Rudnitskii, *Meyerhold, the Director*, 205.

897 M.A. Valenti, *Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom*, Moscow: Vserossiiskoe Teatral'noe Obshchestvo, 1967, pp.213-214; quoted in Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 121.



by using “a rose, or a wine glass, or a dagger, or a purse.”<sup>898</sup> Costumes, gloves and sleeves obtained a privileged role in solving dramatic situation and creating new ones.

With all its emphasis on work and its effectiveness, the rehearsals with Meyerhold were, first of all, enjoyable. As one actor, Mikhail Sadovsky, remembered:

What a wonderful rehearsal that was! It was not even a rehearsal – it was a party [...] we felt free and easy, we were having a really good time and played with abandon. Meyerhold was enjoying it with us.

I remember that we rehearsed for a very long time with great enthusiasm. When we went home it was almost morning, and nobody felt tired. Working with Meyerhold could be difficult, but it was always fascinating and never boring.<sup>899</sup>

Meyerhold actively produced this type of atmosphere for rehearsals, being conscious that improvisation can happen only in a friendly environment because “an actor can improvise only when he feels internal joy. Without an atmosphere of creative joy, of artistic *élan*, an actor never completely opens up. That’s why during my rehearsals I so often shout ‘Good!’ to the actors. They’re still playing badly, very badly. But an actor hears you ‘Good!’ and lo, he will in fact play well.”<sup>900</sup>

This joyful atmosphere had to be kept also during performances, because improvisation was not only the backbone of rehearsals but also of the performance. Improvisation could be successful through its hysterical acting-out and identifications and give flesh to the live performance if they were constantly encouraged, re-worked and based on non-hierarchical relations in the process.

### **The demise of Meyerholdism**

Meyerhold’s theatre and small amateur groups were strongly connected in the 1920s-1930s, a part of his influence and reception in Soviet theatre that is heavily denied by the elitist canon. Clubs actually appreciated experimental theatre and even imitated some of his performances (especially *The Forest* based on Ostrovsky’s play). Meyerhold’s Theatre was popular among the proletariat, *rabkory*

<sup>898</sup> Ibid., 121-122.

<sup>899</sup> Quoted in Schmidt, *Meyerhold at Work*, 209.

<sup>900</sup> Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, 162.

(worker correspondents) reporting the enthusiasm of uneducated spectators for the staging and especially their support for the strong criticism of the bourgeoisie that experimental theatre was producing.

Besides numerous reports produced by the *rabkory* from the factories where they were working as reporters, which are wholehearted of the reception of their fellow workers, more proof is provided by the Moscow agency that distributed tickets. Trade unions were buying those tickets and the most popular were those for Meyerhold's Theatre which were "snatched up and never returned."<sup>901</sup> Amateur theatres were directly connected to the experimental theatre of Meyerhold, many of his students organized club theatres and theatre professionals helped struggling small groups that were making theatre and offered them valuable resources and consultancy. The most valuable persons involved were the training club instructors that were formerly trained by Meyerhold. This possibility was seen as a fruitful form of experimentation and their effort was shared with numerous clubs in Moscow (over 40 in 1925) that were part of the Red Army, trade unions, the Komsomol (The Communist Union of Youth) or GPU (the Soviet secret police). Meyerhold supported and was supported by amateur theatre, especially through club theatres and he organized their training through the *Club Methodological Laboratory* in order to produce amateur performances that were relevant for local political struggles, group awareness and self-discovery.

The solidarity between different theatre-makers in a revolutionary vein is perceived as hierarchically imposed and a form of exploitation performed by Meyerhold alone:

Meyerhold was quickly made director of the propaganda theatre because his Communist zeal was most extreme and evident among the stage directors working prior to the Revolution. He exploited the form of Mass theatre. The propaganda theatre was organized along army lines to hurry to any center needing an injection of dramatized propaganda, using stages assembled at railway stations. This theatre was effective insofar as it overcame the impasse of peasant illiteracy. The people felt more involved often because they were a physical part of productions, encouraged to act and re-enact in street dramas and "entries." "Act your daily life!" was the cry.<sup>902</sup>

Nevertheless, the amateur theatre became the locus of socialist realist artistic direction and the

901 Mally, *Revolutionary acts*, 77.

902 Szeliski, "Lunacharsky and the Rescue of Soviet Theatre," 417.

friendly connection with experimental theatre was soon forgotten. The role of realism in education and the imposition of specific topics and aesthetics were supported by the Moscow Art Theatre which was training amateurs in acting, staging and writing, under the influence of social realist aesthetics. Playwriting especially gained an important role: the dramatic element was left behind; the only role of the new plays was to teach a militant history of the Revolution and to offer positive role models from the world of factories and dormitories to be copied by spectators. The new actor of the amateur theatre was first of all a political activist, able to recreate the language and every-day life of the working class for spectators ready to emulate it: under the social mask on stage there was the visible face of the worker. This new direction had the pretence to create a new socialist consciousness where the revolutionary avant-garde presumably failed by only confusing spectators.<sup>903</sup>

Music played an important role in Meyerhold's staging: jazz, in particular, was an unambiguous sign of "the decadent eroticism of the Western bourgeoisie in the last stages of capitalism"<sup>904</sup> and whenever a Western capitalist villain went on stage jazz could be heard, in contrast to the revolutionary marches connected with the Soviet proletarian heroes' appearances.<sup>905</sup> But the usage of jazz on stage was perceived as the first sign of a political betrayal and started Meyerhold's fall.

The decline of the old artistic leftists in the 1930s (with their two icons, Meyerhold and Mayakovski, who committed suicide in 1930) was brutally manifested in the closing of Meyerhold's theatre and his arrest. These directions were not forms of lack of official favors but were generated by a growing hostility towards modernism that was seen by important figures like Gorky, for example, as a manifestation of the corruption and decadence of Western capitalism. Meyerhold was a direct victim of the major campaign of the mid-1930s against modernism in all branches of art, just like Dmitrii Shostakovich whose opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was forbidden<sup>906</sup> for being an avant-

903 Mally, *Revolutionary acts*, 9.

904 Fitzpatrick, *Cultural front*, 191.

905 Starr, *Red and Hot*, 50-52.

906 Fitzpatrick, *Cultural front*, 11.

garde monstrosity that carries “the most negative traits of ‘Meyerholdism’, multiplied to the nth degree”<sup>907</sup> and denies the classical principles summarized as “simplicity, realism, comprehensibility of image, and the natural sound of the word.”<sup>908</sup> The modernist theatre was fit only for “the perverted tastes of the bourgeois audience” and was perceived as a dangerous trend in Soviet culture, emerging from the demonized “same source as leftist grotesquerie in painting, poetry, pedagogy and science”, the same obsession with novelty and shock which inevitably “leads to alienation from genuine art, from genuine science, from genuine literature.”<sup>909</sup>

The cooperation with amateur theatre was also terminated even if Meyerhold’s influences were still present: “In amateur theatre the remnants of Meyerholdism have not been extinguished... One can find many examples of vulgar sociological approaches, especially in performances of Chekhov and Ostrovsky.”<sup>910</sup>

An important reason for Meyerhold’s demise was his growing interest in feminist issues and the emergence of women’s rights in the USSR. His wife, the actress Zinaida Raikh, a dedicated feminist, introduced him to Soviet feminist politics and they worked together on performances which were emphasizing gender equality and women’s rights. In Olesha’s *A List of Assets* she played a critical actress who plays male scenes from *Hamlet* to prove a point. Meyerhold and Raikh challenged the patriarchal base of theatre also outside the stage. Meyerhold openly stated that “women should take over men’s roles in the stage, as well as in real life, by acting parts written for male actors.”<sup>911</sup>

One of the actresses that he was working with, Varvara Remizova, remembered her astonishment at Meyerhold’s ability to identify with women during rehearsals: “she was especially struck by the

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907 From the unsigned editorial in the central newspaper, *Pravda*, 28 January 1936, 3; quoted in Fitzpatrick, *Cultural front*, 187 -188.

908 Ibid.

909 Ibid.

910 S.Room quoted in Mally, *Revolutionary acts*, 201.

911 Boris Filippov, *Actors without Make-Up*, 41; Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 194-195.

direction of women in ways that were partly based on observation, partly she thought on intuition.”<sup>912</sup> His approach to directing changed also during this time, being more interested in gender reversed roles: “Give me the actresses, and I’ll make a Khlestakov or a Hamlet of them, a Don Juan or a Chatsky.”<sup>913</sup> Together with Raikh, Meyerhold changed the type of plays that he was working on, most of the new ones dealing with feminist issues. Tretyakov’s play *I Want a Baby*, a powerful investigation of women’s rights in Soviet Russia, was rehearsed but censored by the government and became an important piece in Meyerhold’s incrimination and arrest. The moment to follow a feminist agenda was not appropriate: even if the USSR was advocating women’s rights and their enforcement, in 1930 Stalin dissolved the Women’s Section of the Communist Party, while championing the solving of *the women’s question*.<sup>914</sup> Meyerhold’s involvement in feminist politics became anachronistic and problematic for the State.

The impact of Meyerholdism in Russian art was impressive. Years after Meyerhold’s death, Vasily Toporkov remembered the 1930s in these terms: “many of our theatres were still in the grip of a reactionary formalism. In search of the greatest expressiveness and in an attempt to present ‘ideological trends,’ they got lost in paths of vulgar sociology, presenting the authors’ concepts in sharp forms of exaggeration which were called by the then-fashionable name grotesque. There was a kind of directorial orgy. There was much sincere enthusiasm on the part of talented but confused directors, especially among the young, as well as naïve intuition of mediocre, dilettante directors. There were also adroit adventurers who took advantage of this state of confusion.”<sup>915</sup>

In a *Pravda* article, signed by B. Romashov and published on 26 February 1949, the “nest of bourgeois aesthetes” is viciously attacked in nationalist terms: “the anti-patriots eat away at the healthy organism of our literature and art like larvae” and “these emasculated decadents, who slight Soviet literature, have their own genealogy, their mark, their own primogenitor.” This emasculated source of

912 Howard, “Why are you looking at me like that?,” 150.

913 Ibid.

914 Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold*, 194.

915 Toporkov, *Stanislavsky in Rehearsal*, 76-77.

decadence is exposed in a surprising act of remembrance after his death: “his name is Meyerhold, and cosmopolites pray to this evil figure of a typical cosmopolite and anti-Soviet agent.”<sup>916</sup> Ironically, the theatre-maker who was ridiculed and despised for his effeminacy and cosmopolitanism becomes the model of the masculine solitary genius in a couple of decades.

Even if Meyerhold was directly associated with an unfit aesthetic during Stalinism and with the devalued work of the director, he constantly struggled to deal with his personal failed project to become a better director and actor by *becoming with*, in the company of other theatre-makers. The one that he always returned to was Stanislavsky. Already an old man, in 1938 when his theatre was closed down, his performances censored and his close friends arrested, Meyerhold wrote a letter to Stanislavsky for his seventy-fifth birthday: “How can I tell you of my enormous gratitude for what you taught me about that most difficult of things, the art of being a director? [...] I warmly clasp your hand. I embrace you.”<sup>917</sup>

After exploring the forgotten details of the life and work of two Russian theatre-makers that are celebrated by the contemporary canon, I will continue with another canonical figure that played with male hysteria while experimenting in theatre: Antonin Artaud.

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916 Quoted in Brooks, *Thank you, comrade Stalin*, 216.

917 Benedetti, *Moscow Art Theatre Letters*, 357-358.

### Artaud's theatre of dreams

During his long hospitalization, doctor Lacan visited Artaud in 1938 at the asylum of Sainte Anne, just to declare on that occasion that “Artaud is obsessed, he will live for eighty years without writing a single sentence, he is obsessed.”<sup>918</sup> Even if he was institutionalized from the age of eighteen in Marseilles and he spent over nine years in various sanatoriums under various treatments, Artaud wrote prolifically, published six books after 1938 and filled hundreds of notebooks that were published partially after his death in 1948.

In many of his late texts he was criticizing the asylum and Western civilization while a theatre of dreams was seen as their possible counterbalance. Even if he never returned to theatre practice, he was writing extensively about it. In a manual on director's methods from 1980, John Miles-Brown gives the following account on Antonin Artaud's innovative theatre: “it was to be a theatre of spectacle, using emotive effects, spectacular lighting, beautiful costumes, rhythmical movements, masks, giant effigies, strange music and sounds, cries and groans. Dialogue was to be minimal and delivered in an incantatory manner. He wanted the theatre to be a place where the audience would be subjected to a visual and auditory experience that would liberate forces in the subconscious.”<sup>919</sup>

Following this example, the theatre of cruelty manifests in two apparently oppositional directions: one is the romance with technology in staging and acting (as it was also emphasized by Meyerhold's experimentation<sup>920</sup>) while the other is the exploration of dreams and the unconscious through staging and acting in order to find new forms and contents of expression onstage. Artaud's concept of the theatre of cruelty is strongly related to dreams (together with gestures, movements and other non-linguistic elements), which can productively serve as methods to break up with the constructed and damaging repressive conventions of Western society. This form of theatre that was

918 Quoted in Chiesa, *Lacan with Artaud*, 336.

919 Miles-Brown, *Directing Drama*, 19.

920 See chapter 3.

targeted directly against a masculine notion of Western civilization was censored in various instances and Artaud himself was kept hidden away from the French cultural milieu in various mental asylums.

He mainly critiqued the representationality of theatre by challenging the basic theatrical notion of mimesis or “the imitative concepts of aesthetics developed in Western metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle”<sup>921</sup> which, as Herbert Blau writes, “breeds the lie of humanism, with its myth of individuation”<sup>922</sup> and perpetuates the deceit of a coherent self or reproductive subject. His method of choice was to ask disturbing and unasked questions about bodies, movement, gestures, voices or dreams.

In *The Theatre of Cruelty - First Manifesto*, Artaud writes a subchapter called *Technique* which starts with this paragraph: “the problem is to turn theatre into a function in the proper sense of the word, something as exactly localized as the circulation of our blood through our veins, or the apparently chaotic evolution of dream images.”<sup>923</sup> The focus on corporeality and dream-states generates a particular approach to theatre-making, a theatre of cruelty made precisely of blood, flesh and dreams that challenges “representation [that] mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer.”<sup>924</sup> The hidden conflation of the reflection with what is reflected works as a game of narcissistic seduction and precisely this conflation can be avoided by an impossible theatre of cruelty.

In Artaud’s vision of the theatre of cruelty as non-representational, dreams played a significant role: “the public will believe in the theater's dreams on condition that it take them for true dreams and not for a servile copy of reality.”<sup>925</sup> This beyond-representation connection between dreams and theatre anticipates a Lacanian interpretation. Explaining the distinctive element of the dream language, Lacan

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921 Nair, *Restoration of Breath*, 41.

922 Blau, “Universals of performance,” 255.

923 Schumacher and Singleton, *Artaud on Theatre*, 112.

924 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 36.

925 Artaud, *Theatre and its double*, 86.



focuses on “its means of staging”<sup>926</sup> i.e. the theatrical performance which moves beyond the representability of the mental image (that implies only a binary relation between a represented object and a representing object). What we are actually dealing with here is a distortion:<sup>927</sup> a significant shift or a dis-placement which means more complex relations than a hierarchical representation.<sup>928</sup>

Artaud was writing on the relation between theatre and dreams in these terms: “the theater will never find itself again - i.e., constitute a means of true illusion - except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior.”<sup>929</sup> If each *mise-en-scène* signifies a dreamlike hallucination and if stage compositions follow the surrealist tradition then these illusions of the Imaginary can be used as the main tools in dismantling representation.

What is the body without organs if not a theatrical dream of wholeness (which is, after all, induced by the fragmented body)? Bodily fragmentation or the Lacanian “body in bits and pieces” is not the cause but rather the symptom of what Lacan calls “something quite primary,”<sup>930</sup> the Artaudian limbs manifest themselves on stage against the body's desire for wholeness. Bodily fragmentation functions as a staged manifestation of hysteria as an illness of representation. Surrealism's quest to disrupt reality through dreams, along with a dialectical search of the in-betweens, beyond the abject boundaries between dreaming and waking, the conscious and unconscious, rationality and irrationality, is central to Artaud's theatrical project. Just like the hysteric sees no difference between symbolic reality and the (Lacanian) Real, the theatre of dreams moves beyond the world of severed bodies into

926 Quoted in Didi-Huberman and Repensek, “The Index of the Absent Wound,” 47.

927 See Apollon et al., *After Lacan*.

928 When I connect Artaud's to Lacan's ideas, I am aware of Lacan's rejection of Artaud and also the failure of this rejection: the only instance in which Artaud is mentioned is during one of his seminars when he warns students that he will have to sedate them if they start behaving like Artaud.

929 Artaud, *Theatre and its double*, 92.

930 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 60.

the staged world of a body without organs.

The language of the dream can be understood as a quest for non-identity, in its strong connection to the language of the unconscious (described by Lacan as the discourse of the Other). The theatre of dreams manifests a hysterical capacity to phantasize and to daydream and a constant waver between conflicting fixed identity positions.<sup>931</sup> In defining the unconscious, Lacan gives a puzzling explanation: the unconscious has reality only through the act of transference,<sup>932</sup> it is what one says, but with the condition that one says something other than what one means or intends to say. The place where the unconscious is revealed is precisely the place of accident: where language and intention diverge, considering that this divergence subverts the signifying structure of language. In this sense, the theatrical language can become a mode of disrupting the Symbolic, as Artaud explains: “THE LANGUAGE OF THE STAGE: It is not a question of suppressing the spoken language, but of giving words approximately the importance they have in dreams.”<sup>933</sup> The dreams that Artaud is writing about are unconscious phantasies that become play, directly connected to embodiment and not necessarily attached to language or images. In this sense, words can function as play as long as they are played in the illogical logic of the primary phantasy, the dream. The unconscious makes the difference between the theatre of dreams and a theatre of escapism that only explores wish-fulfilling narratives.<sup>934</sup> The staging of the unconscious reveals Artaud’s position: “crying out in dreams, knowing you’re dreaming and exerting the will to the point of madness, whipping your “innateness” so that it might prevail, as Artaud claimed for himself, on both sides of the dream.”<sup>935</sup>

Blau<sup>936</sup> explains the failure of the theatre of dreams through the characteristics of performance (it has to be seen) and the boundaries imposed by the dreamer to what is dreamed (despite the

931 Bronfen, “The knotted subject,” 53.

932 See Brousse, “The Drive,” 102.

933 Artaud, *Theatre and its double*, 94; capitalized in the original.

934 See Spector Person et al., On Freud’s “Creative Writers and Daydreaming.”

935 Blau, “Universals of performance,” 255.

936 Ibid.

somnambulist's aspiration to show the waking dream). Nevertheless, the very concept of cruelty, central to Artaud's theatre, connects dreams to the stage through what Baz Kershaw calls "a politics of ecstasy, fun and celebration."<sup>937</sup> Dreams can produce "the disruption of received realities"<sup>938</sup> through the idea of cruelty and bring into the light of the stage the already existing excess. The Imaginary penetrates the Symbolic and makes the oppressive Law of the Father transparent for spectators and its unbreakable hegemony becomes changeable all of a sudden. The dream and the act redesign the body on stage through its human and non-human elements, through "music, dance, plastic art, mimicry, mime, gesture, voice inflection, architecture, lighting, and décor,"<sup>939</sup> presences and absences, "the limits of skin and the limits of performance"<sup>940</sup> in a process of embodied dramatization.

### **The theatre of the missing body**

Even if Artaud was known and appreciated in some artistic circles, his ideas never infiltrated his contemporary French cultural scene or were experimented on stage during his life time. When he was not incarcerated in an asylum, he would experience extreme poverty, being forced to be homeless and beg with the formula: "Monsieur, the world has done me much harm. You are part of the world, so you have harmed me. Please give me five francs."<sup>941</sup> On some occasions, Parisian artists tried to help him by organizing lecturing sessions. The most promising one in financial terms was in 1947 at the *Vieux colombier* Theatre, where Artaud was supposed to lecture to a paying public of over 900, having among them important names of the day such as Andre Breton, Henri Michaux, Andre Gide or Albert Camus. The event was a fiasco, he was not able to lecture when he got in front of the audience; the only possible action was to scatter his notes in confusion.<sup>942</sup> His few performances as a public speaker in

937 Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance*, 105.

938 Ibid.

939 Artaud, "Mise en scene and metaphysics," 99.

940 Phelan, "Introduction," 16.

941 Quoted in Hayman, *Artaud and After*, 1.

942 Caws, *The Yale anthology*, 123.

these last years embodied the theatre of cruelty rather than well-developed productions. The unique theatrical event was possible only through the public display of Artaud's body in pain.

Modernist theatre is written in the negative: a constant hostility to the existing theatre and culture at large, especially in its Western and masculinist features, a constant rejection of oppressive social institutions, aesthetical conventions, a rejection of the Western commodification of theatre, a rejection of logical or rational thinking and a constant rejection of all "the aspects of bourgeois conformism."<sup>943</sup> When modernist directors are writing about acting bodies, a sense of loss is also present in their writing, more specifically, what is missing is "the disturbance and provocation of the "live" body, the spontaneity of error and improvisation, the thrill of community-formation through the shared moment of performance and reception."<sup>944</sup> How do they actually deal with this loss in their texts? In a sense they are playing the role of *ur-queer* theorists with a focus on a *queer performativity* as in the early works of Butler<sup>945</sup> and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick<sup>946</sup> or a later *no future* in the style of Lee Edelman.<sup>947</sup> For them, queer performativity of the actor/director reasserts writing and reading with the pleasurable and highly seductive characteristics of live performance<sup>948</sup>: their whole writing process depends on this possibility of transferring the theatricality of the staging process and of the live performing body to the printed mode of philosophical thinking and storybook. Artaud wrote extensively about concrete procedures that involved dance, pantomime, live music, costumes, lights, intonations, laughter and screams in order to produce a new language: "this physical language [...] this solid material language [of the theatre] is composed of everything filling the stage, everything that can be shown and materially expressed on stage, intended first of all to appeal to the senses, instead of being addressed primarily to the mind, like

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943 Artaud, *Theatre and its double*, 76.

944 Pellegrini, "Review," 23.

945 Butler, *Bodies that matter*.

946 Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching feeling*.

947 Edelman, *No future*.

948 Case, *The Domain-Matrix*.

spoken language.”<sup>949</sup>

This new performative language was already expressed during his own working time as an actor at Théâtre de l’Atelier where, to use one example, Edgar Allen Poe’s theoretical writings were used as a guide for acting improvisation.<sup>950</sup> The expressive means were used effectively to bring the living bodies upfront: “a kind of ironic poetry arising from the way it [the expressive means] combines with other expressive means. It is easy to see the result of these combinations, their interaction and their mutual subversion.”<sup>951</sup>

Even if Artaud’s ideas were not new, original or radically innovative in terms of technique or theatrical exploration of modernity, what we are dealing with here is the hysteric’s search for an acting body that can subvert the oppression of a masculinist language of analysis and distant thinking through an alternative “unique language half-way between gesture and thought.”<sup>952</sup> Artaud attended radical performances produced by other modernist directors (Meyerhold, Piscator or Copeau), he was familiar with modernist theoretical texts (Appia or Craig) or with non-realist plays that influenced his own approach to drama (he directed Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata* and named his experimental company *Alfred Jarry*).<sup>953</sup> What Artaud explored based on these scattered ideas were the concepts of the theatrical event and the live performing body. Nevertheless, as in the case of 1990s queer theorists, performance is reduced by modernist directors such as Artaud to a metaphor and different styles of performance are acknowledged only as bad examples in a constant search for a universal and ahistorical style of acting and staging. They miss or fail to explore a material history of production and reception, but with different goals. While queer theorists that are exploring performance have the purpose to “recuperate writing at the end of print culture” (as in Sue Ellen Case’s analysis),

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949 Artaud, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, 25.

950 Barba, *The Paper Canoe*, 152.

951 Artaud, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 25 -27.

952 Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, 89.

953 Gordon, *The purpose of playing*, 274-285.

modernist directors are more concerned with their own incapacity to act and to achieve embodiment.

The body of the modernist director plays the role of a missing somatic link to discourse<sup>954</sup> and a deferred promise of theatricality through the living actor that is performing beyond the psychological theatre of representation (to use Artaud's critique) while the director becomes what Augusto Boal calls a *joker*, who focuses not on the final product, a marketable show, but on a never-ending "rehearsal for revolution."<sup>955</sup> In a theatrical event the body of the actor moves away from the representational charge of the psychological theatre. If in realist theatre, the character is acted by the actor through a certain bodily interpretation of the psychology and typical behaviour of the character according to the written play, in a hysterical interpretation of acting, the body of the actor is unable to simulate or be an instrument for the narration and is engaged in a process of embodied becoming and what Stanislavsky would paradoxically identify as anti-acting. *Becoming-character* challenges the realist approach to acting as reproducing written signs, gestures and stories that are decoded by the spectator.

The laborious search for a body through acting explodes the hierarchical relation on stage between word, image and corporeality. The acting body of the actor can be read as a "psychosomatic referent"<sup>956</sup> for the missing director, this very body becomes in performance the main element of dislocation of a realist/ psychological theatrical approach and also the corporeal and alive exponent of the live theatricality of the whole event. From this perspective, the acting body is not constructed only as "an expressive tool for inner, psychological processes, as in Method acting"<sup>957</sup> but moves beyond the individuality of the actor for a parasitical sharing of one's flesh. The actor's gestures and facial expression well focused under the theatrical light are not only indicators to the rich meanings of the interior unseen soul but the "fleshly status"<sup>958</sup> functions as an indicator for the missing bodies on stage.

954 Kryszinski and Mikkanen, "Semiotic Modalities," 141-161.

955 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 122.

956 Kryszinski and Mikkanen, "Semiotic Modalities," 142.

957 Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance*, 150.

958 Ibid., 151.

The living body does not only indicate the rich subjective realm of the actor that we could not see but produces an external subjectivity for the director also. What we are dealing with here are *theatres of the flesh* as Sue Ellen Case calls them where “the flesh does not reflect or translate subjectivity as an internal process, as in Method acting, or other traditional forms [of theatre] but flesh actually produces a performative register of subjectivity.”<sup>959</sup> The acting body fails to fulfil the organicist dream or the humanist ideal of the unity of the modern individual by blurring the limits between social, interiority, exteriority or separate subjects.

Traditional forms of theatre are based on a subject which “is a character which acts according to a certain scenic and dialogic strategy on the part of the playwright”<sup>960</sup> and this strategy is completely based on fixed structures that are constantly disrupted in realist theatre through “unexpected breaks in the action, resistance of a character's gestures to interpretation, “gratuitous acts”.”<sup>961</sup> These well-developed and well-thought structures are disrupted exactly through the action of the acting body which serves as a paradigmatic variable of proximity and aliveness. The ideal of an autonomous theatricality as a form of pure communication between spectator and actor as Josette Féral suggests, in a “healthy” opposition to the conventions of the realist theatre, is challenged constantly by actors on stage. The acting body moves beyond its understanding as the “material support for the verbal and actional logos” and the acting function of the body is not directly supporting the “psychosomatically charged” subject of the actor by the referent of a certain “theatricalized body [...] in an autonomous theatricality.”<sup>962</sup> Even if this evolutionary view on modernist theatre is increasingly popular in theatre studies and “finds its justification in textual procedures as well as in the axiologies of modern theater” with the assumption that “if theater has evolved from Strindberg to Artaud and Arrabal, then it must be

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959 Ibid., 151 -152.

960 Kryszinski and Mikkanen, “Semiotic Modalities,” 143.

961 Ibid.

962 Ibid.

true that this evolution has been sustained by an undercurrent of developments,”<sup>963</sup> performers can position their embodied knowledge differently in the institutional practice of theatre as Sue Ellen Case hints in her feminist critique of modernist theatre.<sup>964</sup> The very institutionalization of theatre practice assumes a straight history of acting bodies that leaves out the socially embodied actions performed on stage. My perspective on this complex and non-linear history acknowledges how “material practice and intellectual pursuits are fused into a complementary compound”<sup>965</sup> in order to produce a post-disciplinary type of knowledge.

Training practices of acting and staging manifest the outline of the body in institutionalized theatre and the construction of theatrical scholarship that I deal with in this dissertation. These very training practices are “imagined as aesthetically insulated from social critique” and are constantly de-gendered and reduced in their social relationship between director-actor-spectator and their gendered/ classed/ racialized bodies over the last decades. The social body of the actor gets stuck in the production of modernist discourse and the institutionalized theatre is strongly affected by the “ever-expanding market forces and commodity fetishism [that] fuse systems of representation to those of social organization.” Modernist theatre gets caught up nowadays in “a complex, interactive paradigm of production”<sup>966</sup> that re-writes bodies, practices and histories in a commodified fashion for the sake of various forms of capital. The living and acting body of the actor fulfils its task: to sell the performance and its theories. The ideological split between theatre practice, theory and their marketability no longer functions: in order to sell a show you market the theory and “rich” history and training behind it, all in a de-socialized/ de-politicized way where acting bodies are the ultimate commodified objects. Even the study of theatre is broken down into periods, themes and movements with their white male representatives on the same logic. The commodification of theatre principle follows the same capitalist

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963 Ibid.

964 Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance*, 101.

965 Ibid.

966 Ibid., 102; see also Case, *Domain Matrix*, 127-189.



rules when it comes to the representation of *minorities*: women's theatre, black, ethnic or queer theatres are just new products on the same shelf. A possible disruptive view on *productions* can be generated by conscious feminist spectators, for example, as Jill Dolan proposes in the late 1980s.<sup>967</sup> These spectators can actually change the meaning of a performance and transform it into a feminist event, by affecting not only the interpretation but the production itself through an alternative politically engaged focus.

Lacan talks about “the pound of flesh that life pays in order to turn it into the signifier of signifiers, which it is impossible to restore, as such, to the imaginary body.”<sup>968</sup> The acting body has the potential to return the pound of flesh in an impossible process of rediscovering materiality in relation to a hysteric subjectivity that still searches for the imaginary body or the body without organs through the live event that moves beyond its commodification and the Symbolic. In this sense, writing about modernist theatre and live bodies demands a psychoanalytical approach. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “a philosophy of the flesh is the condition without which psychoanalysis remains anthropology.”<sup>969</sup>

To return to the hysterical director, his desire is always for becoming the “pound of flesh” onstage. In the hysterical/theatrical/dream triangle, the onstage actor has the main role. By identifying with the actor, the desire is also transferred, the flesh “takes the place of the desire of the Other.”<sup>970</sup> If the pound of flesh was the price paid in order to enter the Symbolic or the Law of the Father, what is the price for exiting phallogentrism? Artaud's exercises of exiting the Symbolic led to mental institutionalization, poverty and rejection of his practice by the French theatrical establishment (not to mention that he was easily recovered years later after his death by the colonizing forces that he was struggling with).

The theatre of cruelty can function as a corporeal and physical event, where the results are not to be put into words (like in a psychoanalytical session) but to be acted out:

967 Dolan, *Feminist spectator*.

968 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 265.

969 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 267.

970 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 262.

The domain of the theatre is not psychological but plastic and physical. And the point is not whether the physical language of the theatre is capable of arriving at the same psychological resolutions as the language of words, whether it can express feelings and passions as well as words; the point is whether there are not in the domain of thought and intelligence attitudes which words are incapable of capturing and which gestures, and everything that partakes the language of space, express with greater precision than words... the point is not to do away with speech in the theatre but to change its function, and above all to reduce its role.<sup>971</sup>

However, Artaud was not the first one to initiate this type of exploration. Famous actresses like Elinor Duse used extensively the hysterical register of actions/symptoms to construct a theatrical language, a sort of hysterical “theatre of discovery”<sup>972</sup> where the audience played the witnessing role of the male physician able to cure the fit by watching it with accuracy. The body on stage communicates through facial and physical movements with a public caught up in the role of the witness. The unstable states of these movements, together with their shocking and unpredictable body positions, hold the grain of hysteria. Like the mythical nineteenth century hysterics that have inspired artists and performers for decades, modernist hysteric theatre-makers inspired contemporary feminists.

Cixous was writing about female bodies that can write through flows of blood, birth and sexuality in her conceptual *l'écriture féminine* “in a non linear, florid, stream-of consciousness style that inscribes sexual difference as the content and form.”<sup>973</sup> These ideas had a strong impact on stage and somehow continued Artaud’s theories of cruelty. The body and the gesture are preferred in this particular feminist theatre, where masterpieces are no longer necessary to legitimate the performance: “a single gesture is enough, but one that can transform the world. Take for example this movement of women towards life, passed from one woman to another, this outstretched hand which touches and transmits meaning, a single gesture unfolding throughout the ages, and it is a different Story.”<sup>974</sup> Especially in her later explorations of *l'écriture féminine* in theatre, the connection to Artaud becomes more acute.

971 Sontag, *Antonin Artaud*, 269-270.

972 Diamond, “Shudder of Catharsis,” 157.

973 Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator*, 8.

974 Cixous, “Aller a la Mer,” 547.

Feminist artists<sup>975</sup> like Orlan found inspiration in Artaud's writing to produce theatrical events with strong impact: "I based one of my operations on a text by Antonin Artaud, who dreamed of a body without organs. This text mentions the names of poets of his time. Then it enumerates how many times these poets must have defecated, urinated, how many hours were needed to sleep, to eat, to wash and concludes that this is totally disproportionate to the fifty or so pages of magical production (as he calls the creative act)."<sup>976</sup>

Through the body of the actor, theatre can move away from representation. The theatre of cruelty focuses on the unrepresentability of theatre as life, or what Derrida calls "the nonrepresentable origin of representation."<sup>977</sup>

### **The theatre of the magnetic scream**

*To Have Done With The Judgment Of God* is Antonin Artaud's last radio recording from February 1948 and one of his last projects of corporeal transformation: where the visual body is completely absent in radio broadcasting, Artaud's "spastic body"<sup>978</sup> puts together words, music, screams, glossolalia and laughter as a last corporeal attack. In this type of bodily transformation sound becomes the most convincing mark of the body. His aim is to counter the absence of the body and to materialize it explicitly through sound for an audience of millions as part of a well-established, post-Second World War form of popular culture. This last struggle with language in the line of the theatre of cruelty was supposed to be a strong experience of the entire nervous system for the listener. Artaud tries to make himself understood to the audience through one single method: the dynamic exploration of the intimate materiality of the body. Even if the recordings were not broadcast by the radio station, they represent

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975 I mention here artists like Carolee Schneeman, Yvonne Rainer, Linda Montano, Yoko Ono, Suzanne Lacey, Annie Sprinkle or Karen Finley and the list can continue. See also Gordon, *Purpose of playing*, 2006, 274-285 and 392.

976 Orlan, "Intervention," 325.

977 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 8.

978 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 68.

one of the last Artaudian experiments to end actively the process of representation and to find a body without organs, in this particular case, through sound.

In 1948 the magnetic recording tape was perfected and became available for artistic purposes such as Artaud's experiments. The technical discovery of the recording tape permitted the experimental aesthetic simulation and disarticulation of voice and established an epistemological-aesthetic shift in art: "though the radiophonic voice is "disembodied", the body is never totally absent from radio, while it is often radically disfigured, transformed, mutated."<sup>979</sup> Transformed through re-recording, looping and sound engineering, Artaud's voice projects the body without organs "as an antidote to the ills that beset the fragile, tortured body in pain."<sup>980</sup> Unlike the *betraying* theatre, radio offered Artaud the possibility not to represent his body but to transform and *annihilate* its organs and produce new artistic form and content, where one can witness, as Whitehead would call, "the direct confrontation of a body politic with the contusions and contortions of a body alone, one nervous system to another."<sup>981</sup>

In contrast to representation and bodily commodification, radio offered him the ontological possibility of transmitting his whole body as a hallucinatory presence: the body is externalized, whereas in shock therapy it is interiorized and silenced. For electroshocks the patient is wired, in radio transmission the subject becomes wireless. Artaud tries to escape representation through the "infinite modulations of the voice, of music and its rhythmical scansions."<sup>982</sup> As Whitehead suggests of this immense effort, "Artaud's voice is literally all over the place: talk-show, tirade, incantation, threat, confession, lament."<sup>983</sup> Artaud offers to his listener various amalgams of bodily parts, "wavy motions of forms [...] fugitive and mobile tableaux which no sooner appear than they disappear in the stage air", but whose 'fragility', transformation and disappearance 'compose' the tableaux with (in Artaud's

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979 Weiss, "Radio Icons," 12.

980 Ibid.

981 Whitehead, "Radio Play Is No Place," 98.

982 Thévenin, "Search for a Lost World," 14.

983 Whitehead, "Radio Play Is No Place," 98.

words) “limitless imagination.”<sup>984</sup>

In Artaud’s understanding, the absence of the body can have only one source: representation. For Artaud, representation has a very contextualized meaning: “into the process of representation are subsumed the forces of society, religion, psychiatry and medicine in general, and also the work of censorship which summarily prevented the broadcasting of Artaud’s work – a broadcast which he perceived literally to be a physical transmission.”<sup>985</sup> By the complete exposition of the hysterical body which escapes representation, intimacies are revealed and the hysterical secrets are betrayed. The expression of hysterical symptoms challenges the spectator/listener to decipher the messy fragments, masks and organs of the body in order to perceive the intimate narration of the body without organs. The spectators/ listeners have the difficult task to interrogate the exposed body of the hysteric and their own bodies, to read the hysterical body thrown out to them and to face what Artaud calls *the betrayal of the organs*.

While in psychoanalytical session, the hysterical patient works together with the analyst in a game of domination, professionalism and lawful discourse, that the analyst imposes,<sup>986</sup> in the Artaudian theatrical clinic, the exposure of the hysterical body challenges the hierarchies between parties involved in a constant search for welcoming hosts. The interpreter is always challenged and the narrative line is hard to find. Conventional coherent stories are subverted and hysterical performing bodies exceed and disobey social norms of desire and normalcy.

The radio broadcasting that emerges from noises, screams, words and drums represents Artaud’s return from physical captivity in mental institutions. His bodily interference in language breaks, deconstructs and transforms the structure of the French language in such a way that it tries to reinvent a new language beyond representation. The radio experiment places the broken body in language instead

984 Thévenin, “Search for a Lost World,” 14.

985 Barber, *Artaud*, 94.

986 Vanderheyden, *The function of the dream*, 119.

of using the language of representation and its efforts to fix and define. Even if screams and noises seem totally out of control, they serve only one purpose: to transmit the body. Everything that is outside the body like nature, culture, God, family or internal organs does not concern him. Artaud stages a physical act that radically affects performers and audience: ‘the act that I am talking about aims for the true organic and physical transformation of the human body.’”<sup>987</sup>

By identifying sound as the material basis for ending representation we can talk of a specific signifying process in relation to social systems of representation and processes of subjectivity. The body on stage becomes present through the absence of sound, by expressing lively concreteness and “not as a representable object [...] for the abstractive gaze”<sup>988</sup> of the spectator. The scream becomes the technique to transmit “the pound of flesh,” by destroying pre-given meaning and representation, what Cixous would concentrate in the formula ““text: my body—shot through with screams of song.””<sup>989</sup> The screaming voice moves away from language structures and oratory to the embodiment of breath, larynx and lungs.<sup>990</sup>

The actor on stage, performing classical characters from well-known plays, has no access to screams as a form of embodiment; the only access is to the theatrical Language of the Father, the language of the masterpiece that Artaud rejects. In the process of repeating the lines of the masterpiece the screaming body is silenced, the only possible role is to endlessly repeat the memorized (by the actor and the audience) masterpiece. Theatre practice can be revived precisely through the musical tempo of the scream and the breath beyond language.

Radio becomes a kind of ethereal environment of cruelty for Artaud, by expanding the concept of sound to what he calls the “many-hued spatial language” and “voluminous magnetic whirling” in

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987 Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, 169.

988 Schrag, *Experience and Being*, 130.

989 Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 882.

990 Shepherd, *Theatre, body and pleasure*, 82.

relation to the *mise-en-scène* of the theatre of cruelty.<sup>991</sup> The ultimate cure for a dying system of theatre-making is magnetic: “our long habit of seeking diversion has made us forget the idea of a serious theater, which, overturning all our preconceptions, inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapist whose touch can never be forgotten.”<sup>992</sup>

This Artaudian theatre of screams functions mainly as an epistemology than a method of staging performances. Artaud screams on the radio for the missing body, in a process of a theatrical re-establishment of a broken hysterical subjectivity. The theatre of screams can actively “generate a counter-language whose grammar works on verbal signification in the same revelatory way as the plague does on material form.”<sup>993</sup> Artaud produces *the plague* through his screams, the plague that heals social evil: “where the voice of the subject in anguish expresses hysterical anxiety about dissolution as engulfment in demonized matter, the cruel consciousness voices a fierce determination to identify itself . . . with the dissolving energies of the plague.”<sup>994</sup> The theatre of screams takes the role of an embodied magnetic plague: it revolts against the whole Western civilization that Artaud despised so much.

The revolt can only be apocalyptic: with demons and darkness on his side, Artaud fights precisely the immaculate goodness of humanity. The darkness plays a significant role in this struggle, the role of transgression and hysteria. The darkness of theatre announces the dangerous and uncanny change: as Cixous writes “you can’t see anything in the dark, you’re afraid. Don’t move, you might fall. Most of all, don’t go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark.”<sup>995</sup> For her, the darkness is the mother’s womb, the powerful feminine language and feminized hysteria. The actor in the theatre of darkness “transforms hysteria into a subversive performance, an active soliciting of the clinical gaze in order to reveal *its* truth—its complicity with a system of power threatened by a desire

991 Artaud, *Theatre and its double*, 63, 67.

992 Ibid., 84-85.

993 Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, 132.

994 Ibid., 104.

995 Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 878.

that must remain invisible and unnameable.”<sup>996</sup> Artaud attempts a last descent into the darkness as a necessary exercise of facing the horrors that make your body scream.

The “inflammatory, obscene and blasphemous” recording, as Wladimir Porche, the director of the French radio station, has called it,<sup>997</sup> was stopped to protect the French public from “Artaud's scatological, vicious, and obscene anti-Catholic and anti-American pronouncements.”<sup>998</sup> Artaud's intention to use radio magnetism as countershock to achieve in an alchemical way the body without organs, where the body is not anymore the image of God, but what Artaud calls “inside out”<sup>999</sup> was not appreciated by the French establishment. In his public response to the director of the radio station, Artaud emphasized that he should be the one revolted and scandalized, because the radio recordings were done “in an atmosphere so far beyond life that I do not believe that at this point there remains a public capable of being scandalized by it.”<sup>1000</sup> The whole purpose again was to create “[a] novel work which would connect with certain organic points of life, a work which causes the entire nervous system to feel illuminated as if by a miner's cap, with vibrations and consonances that invite one to corporeally emerge in order to follow, in the sky, this new, unusual and radiant Epiphany.”<sup>1001</sup>

The radio broadcast eventually took place in France, some thirty years later. Artaud's connection between limbs or organs and his history is heard in what Finter and Griffin refer to as “the sonorous projection of a new body in the voice”<sup>1002</sup>: the historical projection of his body without organs, a body made out of voices, strange sounds and screams.

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996 Silverstein, “Body-Presence,” 510.

997 Barber, *Artaud*, 157.

998 Weiss, “Radio Icons,” 12.

999 Scheer, *Antonin Artaud*, 6.

1000 Quoted in Weiss, “Radio Icons,” 12.

1001 Ibid., 12-13.

1002 Finter and Griffin, “Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre,” 24.



### The laughing theatre

If the scream has the potential to transmit the body, the ideal of a theatrical community that mirrors somehow communist utopias of the time could be produced and kept together through another important part of performance: laughter. Cixous wrote in *The Laugh of the Medusa*: “it’s in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter.”<sup>1003</sup> By criticizing the Western theatre, Artaud makes the strong statement that “nearly the whole contemporary theater which, as human as it is antipoetic, seems to me to stink of decadence and pus.”<sup>1004</sup> And one main reason for the state of theatre is the lack of laughter: “because it has lost a sense of real humour, a sense of laughter's power of physical and anarchic dissociation.”<sup>1005</sup> The physicality of laughter is politically disruptive exactly by its “spirit of profound anarchy which is at the root of all poetry.”<sup>1006</sup>

The first symptom of a hysterical fit, the burst into laughter, becomes the hallmark of the modernist hysterical director. Political parody, obscene physicality, ironic contradictions, positive madness, consciously-assumed monstrosity and grotesque were tools in producing laughter in performance. Artaud encouraged them in developing a theoretical theatre of cruelty even if these parts are erased by theatre historians in strict accounts like Christopher Innes’ ones: “comedy is signally absent from Artaud and most later manifestations of the avant-garde.”<sup>1007</sup> Laughter was politically used in modernist theatre as a virulent assault on the sacred and the bourgeois, on Western taboos and as an affirmation of physicality.

Besides its communitarian role, by distancing the theatrical event from the damaging bourgeois culture that emphasizes only the artistic individualist male with the strike of genius, laughter was

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1003 Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 888.

1004 Artaud, *Theatre and its double*, 43.

1005 Ibid.

1006 Ibid.

1007 Innes, *Avant garde theatre*, 7.

actively used by performers with another relevant connotation in moving away from “decadence and pus”: to explore the playfulness, the affective and the unconscious as feared political oppositions to bourgeois ideas of rationality and seriousness. Through its connection to hysterical women that are bursting into giggles and non-linguistic fits, laughter was consciously used by modernist directors and actors in its feminine connotation, to the point of feminizing the whole artistic process and moving away from a serious and highly masculinized Western theatrical culture.

From this perspective, laughter has paradoxically the same role as the scream: as ultimate signs of protest against the Symbolic through the living body. As in the case of suicide<sup>1008</sup> or the social role of the scream which was explored by Artaud in his study on Van Gogh, the prototype of the modern artist, laughter through its incoherence and physicality give the possibility to disrupt the oppressive Law of the Father and the Oedipal hierarchies of culture. The theatre of cruelty uses laughter through its dissolution and social rupture as a rebirth to move away from an oppressive culture that canonizes or antiquates theatrical events.

Nevertheless, modernist theatre shows us again the failure of this mechanism: the social criticism and corporeality of laughter become just another marketable element of a show, irrelevant for spectators and their social context: “theatrical forms themselves were appropriated including pantomimes, postmodern dance forms, music hall, quiz shows, improvisation, and the canon of dramatic literature adjusted to new ends.”<sup>1009</sup> The show itself becomes an escapist and highly commodified entertainment where laughing bodies are lifeless exhibits for cheap thrills. In that sense, the laughter and the scream are just part of Freud’s idea of the festival as “an authorized or organised exaggeration. People overstep boundaries not because they feel that some regulation permits it; exaggeration is part of the festivities.”<sup>1010</sup>

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1008 see Chapter 3.

1009 Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life*, 96.

1010 Quoted in Biró, *Profane Mythology*, 78.

### Theatricality as failure

In one of his lectures at Sorbonne from 1931, Artaud asks a haunting question: “how can it be that in the theatre, at least theatre such as we know it in Europe, or rather in the West, everything specifically theatrical, that is to say, everything which cannot be expressed in words or, if you prefer, everything that is not contained in dialogue [. . .] has been left in the background?”<sup>1011</sup>

Artaud’s apocalyptic effort “to unmask theatre and society”<sup>1012</sup> was first of all a struggle for and against different types of theatricality. The illusion of theatricality is counterbalanced in the theatre of cruelty by moving away from forms of acting and staging that are pre-packed and come from elsewhere, from what he calls “the excrement of another mind.” Through “spiritual athleticism”, “gesturing through the flames” and plain martyrdom on stage, actors of cruelty were expected to move beyond the banality of modern theatre.

Artaud’s struggle with theatricality never succeeded during his lifetime or afterwards, when various theatre companies rediscovered his theories in the 1960s and ironically tried to bring back the struggle and the excrement of his own mind. For example, Grotowski talked extensively about *the holy actor*, *the trance* produced on stage, *the actor-shaman*<sup>1013</sup> or cruelty, not forgetting to mention his distance from Artaud for practical reasons: “Artaud was an extraordinary visionary, but his writings have little methodological meaning because they are not the product of long-term practical investigations. They are astounding prophecy, not a programme.”<sup>1014</sup> The theatre groups of the 1960s were strongly influenced by these prophecies: “they and their enthusiastic theorists believed that in freeing the actor’s body and eliminating aesthetic distance” they can actually focus on “completed forms.”<sup>1015</sup> They achieved first of all a highly conservative mysticism where actors became *saints* and

1011 Artaud, “Mise en scene and Metaphysics,” 98.

1012 Postlewait and Davis, “Theatricality: an introduction,” 11.

1013 Barba, *The Paper Canoe*, 152.

1014 Grotowski, “Towards a Poor Theatre,” 26.

1015 Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, 68-69.

reproduced the *status quo* that Artaud was opposing with his idea of cruelty.

Artaud's contribution to a coherent history of theatre is re-affirmed by followers such as Grotowski, who is writing from the perspective of a theatre practitioner who is actively part of Western traditions. He explains: "when we confront the general tradition of the Great Reform of the theatre from Stanislavsky to Dullin and from Meyerhold to Artaud, we realize that we have not started from scratch but are operating in a defined and special atmosphere. [...] We realize that theatre has certain objective laws and that fulfilment is possible only within them, or, as Thomas Mann said, through a kind of 'higher obedience', to which we give a 'dignified attention'." <sup>1016</sup>

A way out of this type of vicious circle of interpretation can be offered by feminist critics and performers who "have wondered whether performance can forget its links to theatre traditions, any more than, say, deconstruction can forget logocentrism." <sup>1017</sup> The questions that have to be asked are not anymore related to meaning or truth on stage, but to structures of power that are using modernist theatre for very pragmatic purposes. Artaud is no exception in this usage; he slowly becomes a *theatrical master*, in a Derridean sense: "directors or actors, enslaved interpreters [...] more or less directly represent the thought of the 'creator.' Interpretive slaves who faithfully execute the providential designs of the 'master'." <sup>1018</sup>

What feminists ask inside or outside the theatrical space are "questions of subjectivity (who is speaking/acting?), location (in what sites/spaces?), audience (who is watching?), commodification (who is in control?), conventionality (how are meanings produced?), politics (what ideological or social positions are being reinforced or contested?)," <sup>1019</sup> questions that first of all are "embedded in the bodies and acts of performers." <sup>1020</sup> These questions have to be asked again by re-visiting theorists like Artaud,

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1016 Grotowski, "Towards a Poor Theatre," 27.

1017 Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, 68.

1018 Derrida, "Theatre of Cruelty," 43.

1019 Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, 68-69.

1020 Ibid., 69.

who keeps reminding the theatre-makers that “for me obvious ideas, in theatre as in all else, are dead and finished.”<sup>1021</sup> One of the main ideas that feminist theatre-makers and Artaud question together, noting its lack of obviousness is that “the present state of society is iniquitous.” Artaud’s answer is radical: it “ought to be destroyed.” Inequality or what he calls “the stink of mankind” are lasting “personal worries [that] disgust me, utterly disgust me as does just about all current theatre, which is as human as it is antipoetic.”<sup>1022</sup> He does not see theatre as a messianic means of achieving equality or destroying society but as a humanistic institution that can and should be radically changed.

Artaud finds in the staging beyond written lines the chance for another type of theatricality that challenges Western ideas: “theatre which submits staging and *mise en scène*, that is to say everything about it that is specifically theatrical, to the lines, is made, crazy, perverted, rhetorical, philistine, antipoetic, and Positivist – that is to say, Western theatre.”<sup>1023</sup>

Staging had a specific downgraded role in Western theatre and for Artaud, the change of theatre has to start there, by challenging the existing hierarchies: “I have noticed that in our theatre [...] this language of symbols and mimicry, this silent mime-play, these attitudes and spatial gestures, this objective inflection, in short everything I look on as specifically theatrical in the theatre, all these elements when they exist outside the script, are generally considered the lowest part of theatre, are casually called ‘craft’ and are associated with what is known as staging or *mise en scène*.”<sup>1024</sup>

Some authors, who are focusing on Artaud’s ideas, like Deleuze for example, reject his possibility for a new theatricality as whole because it holds a strong connection to psychoanalysis, “as a figure for the psychoanalytic determination of desire.”<sup>1025</sup> But what Deleuze<sup>1026</sup> criticizes is more specific: the theatricality of representational theatre, where characters are just representations of the oedipal

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1021 Artaud, “Mise en scene and Metaphysics,” 100.

1022 Ibid.

1023 Ibid.

1024 Ibid., 99-100.

1025 Laura Cull, “Introduction,” 2.

1026 See especially Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

hierarchies and the whole *economy of onlookers*<sup>1027</sup> where the one who looks has the power over the one who is seen.<sup>1028</sup> The unity of image on stage as a symbol of the modern individuality, has the role to intensify the distinction between the viewer and the viewed,<sup>1029</sup> what Artaud tried to actively counterbalance through sound, for one example. The way out of representation is Deleuze's concept of theatrical presence, a concept directly influenced by Artaud. Theatre as a machine can offer the context for a non-representational relation, where the ontological presence as becoming (*the perpetual variation or the difference-in-itself*) constitutes the real.<sup>1030</sup> Deleuze moves away from a Derridian understanding of presence ("Presence in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to represent itself, has always already been penetrated"<sup>1031</sup>) through a differentiation from representation through movement. Through accidents on stage or uncoordinated gestures (like in the case of clowns), the theatrical event cannot be read as a commodified image that can be reproduced and sold again.

For Deleuze, the theatre of the future (another modernist utopia!) is Artaudian and non-representational in the sense of becoming-larvae: "a pure staging without author, without actors and without subjects... There are indeed actors and subjects, but these are larvae, since they alone are capable of sustaining the lines, the slippages and the rotations."<sup>1032</sup> Like the theatre of cruelty, Deleuze's theatre is an impossible mission: *futurist performativity*<sup>1033</sup> remains a project in the form of the modernist manifesto.

When Deleuze and Guattari use Artaud as the embodiment of their concept of a *schizoanalytic* thinking and being,<sup>1034</sup> they are reconstructing a dominant form of virility with the mythical accents of

1027 Pina Bausch's term, quoted in Biringer, "Dancing across Borders," 87.

1028 See Phelan, *Unmarked*, 25.

1029 For criticism of unity of image, see Cody, "Introduction to Part III," 217.

1030 See Deleuze, "One Less Manifesto."

1031 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 249.

1032 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 219.

1033 Puchner, "Manifesto = Theatre," 452.

1034 Dale, "Cruel," 591; Atteberry, "Reading Forgiveness," 716.

anti-heroism.<sup>1035</sup> On the other hand, Derrida's approach moves away from "the totalising operation of the exemplary" through the parasitism of deconstruction that uses "tools fashioned from within the logocentric tradition it seeks to disrupt."<sup>1036</sup> According to Derrida, Artaud is not able to help further theorists to "extort hidden truth from a life experience that refuses to signify"<sup>1037</sup> and his failures are in the impossibility of being reversed by other theatre-makers.

### **The theatre of hysterical subjectivities**

Even if Artaud constantly criticized Western bourgeois theatre and culture, his approach was quite different to Meyerhold's or Brecht's Marxist critique. His construction of the critique focused on "the psychology of characterization that he calls 'the mysterious depths of ourselves'" where "a distinction is made in representation between 'identity' and 'difference'"<sup>1038</sup> in order to produce "the uncanny 'cruelty' of the double: the incessant sliding of signified from under the signifier, the schizophrenic duality of any attempt to identify with difference."<sup>1039</sup> The actor had the main role as the provocateur, but the possibility of such a theatre remains uncertain nowadays, as Christopher Murray mentions: "Artaud is more noteworthy for his influence than for his actual ideas, which might be called hysterical. Rock music can probably achieve a greater degree of 'plague' than any theatre performance along the lines Artaud actually describes."<sup>1040</sup>

Artaud's most important production and actually the only one that put together his thoughts of cruelty, *Les Cenci*, from 1935, was done on a low budget with actors who could not put into practice his vague ideas (as Roger Blin, his assistant for the performance, remembers "Artaud hadn't taken

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1035 see Taylor, *Responding to Men*.

1036 Ibid., 71.

1037 Quoted in *ibid.*, 80.

1038 Murray, "Introduction to part three." 87.

1039 McDonald, "Unspeakable Justice," 130.

1040 Murray, "Introduction to part three." 88.

trouble to explain himself”).<sup>1041</sup> The main problem for the actors was the style of acting that they were not used to: they studied at the Conservatoire where the focus was on good diction and noble postures and all of a sudden they were to play animals, scream and make throaty noises. An unexpected support came from the conductor Roger Désormière who was ready to experiment with sound for this performance. With his help, Artaud introduced for the first time stereophonic sound in theatre, with Inca music, bells and speakers placed in different locations and the performance became “a sensational musical.”<sup>1042</sup> Technology helped him in bringing the dream on stage; Désormière had the experience with microphones and recordings and understood what type of sound effects Artaud was looking for: they recorded bells, strange noises, voices and whispers, anvils, screw nuts and metal objects. Together they shocked the audience in a phonic attack that constantly underlined the movements on stage and echoed, for example, the actors’ footsteps at full volume, creating a strong surreal effect on the audience.

In an invitation letter to Andre Gide, Artaud was writing: “there isn’t anything that won’t be attacked among the antique notions of Society, Order, Justice, Religion, Family and Country.”<sup>1043</sup> The purpose was to present elements of “terrible actuality,”<sup>1044</sup> to expose the father as *a destroyer*<sup>1045</sup> and to get into a dialogue with those spectators who think they are ideologically free but “secretly remain attached to a certain number of notions” that he criticized, and especially the “social superstition” of family. In order to do that “I destroy the idea from fear that respect for the idea will only result in creating a form, which in its turn, favors the continuance of bad ideas.”<sup>1046</sup>

The role of the décor, created by Balthus, was a significant one: “the ultra-real décor is ultra-

1041 Roger Blin, interviewed by Charles Marowitz, in Schneider and Cody, *Re:direction*, 129; see also Gordon, *The purpose of playing*, 274-285.

1042 “Antonin Artaud to Louis Jouvet, 1 March 1935,” in Schneider and Cody, *Re:direction*, 130.

1043 “Antonin Artaud to Andre Gide, 10 February 1935,” in *ibid.*.

1044 “Antonin Artaud to Louis Jouvet, 1 March 1935,” in *ibid.*, 131.

1045 “Artaud in Le Figaro, 5 May 1935,” *ibid.*, 134.

1046 “Antonin Artaud to Andre Gide, 10 February 1935,” *ibid.*, 130.



constructed but, like ruins, it creates an impression of an extraordinary dream.”<sup>1047</sup> The public was to be spared of theatrical conventions and routines because “when the public thinks they understand something, it isn’t what they understand that acts on them, but precisely the rest, the forbidden zone of rational intelligence where the unconscious intervenes.”<sup>1048</sup> We are on the unsafe ground of hysteria, where the spectator’s unconscious “is ready to burst out of its membrane” in order to “reveal its powers.”<sup>1049</sup> Cruelty functions precisely at this level through action, gesture, sound, lighting and text “by doing everything the director can to the sensibilities of actor and spectator”<sup>1050</sup> to participate together in one action that exhaust them all together. Hysterical contradiction plays an important role in staging: while sound, lighting, music, gesture, objects and word have an equal role, the stage should be an empty space filled with corporeality. The seduction of hysteria, necessary for bodily identification, demands the lack of dramatic representation in order to make way for the bodily action, the single gesture and the unique affectivity of extimacy.

The identification of the spectator with the actor functions as a self-liberation gesture, where the actor is an “emotional athlete” who suffers on stage, incarnating the “victim, signaling through the flames”<sup>1051</sup> in order to move the spectator away “from the repression and self-alienation that is the condition of modern consciousness.”<sup>1052</sup> The split between thinking, affectivity and corporeality were meant to be broken through the plagiaristic identification within the performance. This impossible but highly desired connectivity of emotions, corporeality and thinking appears through a strange coincidence at the same time (the middle of the 1930s) but through different methods in the writings, training and rehearsals experiments of Meyerhold<sup>1053</sup> and Stanislavsky,<sup>1054</sup> as a demanding answer to

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1047 “Artaud in *Comoedia*, 6 May 1935,” *ibid.*, 136.

1048 “Antonin Artaud to Louis Jouvet, 7 March 1935,” *ibid.*, 131.

1049 *Ibid.*, 131-132.

1050 Artaud, “Le Petit Parisien, 14 April 1935,” *ibid.*, 132.

1051 Sontag, *Antonin Artaud*, 259.

1052 Gordon, *The purpose of playing*, 281.

1053 Experimenting with biomechanics.

1054 Experimenting with methods of physical actions.

modernity. Artaud used the concept of the double to connect the body *of* the actor to affectivity: “the actor is like a physical athlete, but with this surprising qualification, that he has an emotional organism which is analogous to the athlete’s, which is parallel to it, which is like its double, although it does not operate on the same level.”<sup>1055</sup>

Emotional athleticism is not a systematic answer to the function of acting, but a theoretical search of connections between, for example, voice, body and mind through breathing: “this question of breathing is, in fact, primary; it is related inversely to the importance of the external movement. The more restrained and internalized the movement, the fuller and heavier the breathing, the more substantial and full of resonance. Whereas when the movement is sweeping, broad, and externalized, the corresponding breathing is characterized by short and labored puffs. It is certain that for every feeling, every movement of the mind, every leap of human emotion, there is a breath that belongs to it.”<sup>1056</sup>

Breathing becomes indispensable in training, the production of rhythms generate feelings, alive working bodies and sexuality, where an androgynous breath evoked “precious states of suspension,”<sup>1057</sup> not necessarily a systematic index of physical expressions but a continuous search for the acting body as the unconscious source of social change and the emotional potential of actors, directors and spectators.

### **Theatre of angelical multiplication**

Artaud’s concept of cruelty emphasises the idea of the desire of the missing subjectivity or the desire of being-larvae. For Artaud, desire is a material/corporeal force connected to an idea of present and to emotional activities. The failure of theatre is generated precisely by missing “this *desire*, this

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<sup>1055</sup> Sontag, *Antonin Artaud*, 259-260.

<sup>1056</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>1057</sup> Ibid., 263.

temporal dimension that creates movement, gestures, sounds and other physical appearances relating to the body.”<sup>1058</sup> In Artaud’s words, the theatre of cruelty is first of all a theatre of desire: “...is a passionate overflowing, a frightful transfer of forces from body to body.”<sup>1059</sup>

Cruelty gets dangerously close to actual violence: an actor of cruelty is supposed to “use his emotions in the same way that a boxer uses his muscles” and “once launched into his fury the actor needs infinitely more virtue to stop himself from committing a crime than an assassin needs courage to commit his.”<sup>1060</sup> Artaud was aware of the risks of violence in connection to the theatre of cruelty and was radical about their separation: “it should not be forgotten that if a theatrical gesture is violent, it is also disinterested; and that the theatre teaches precisely the uselessness of the action which, once accomplished, is never to be done again.”<sup>1061</sup> For Artaud, violence cannot be separated from non-violence; there are only different degrees of violence: theatrical violence is risky but can have the quality of being singular and non-repetitive. Artaud understands theatrical violence in a non-violent way: once on stage, it will never go back in the outside world. Nevertheless, there is a strong fascination for the risks that theatrical violence involves. Explaining the failure of his last performance and his inability to be on stage, Artaud goes back to the seduction of direct violence: “I left because I realised that the only language I could use on the audience was to take bombs out of my pocket and throw them in their faces in a gesture of unmistakable aggression.”<sup>1062</sup> His feelings on the event are mixed, but even if he expresses the desire for violence, he resists against this destructive desire and he leaves the premises.

For Artaud reproduction is social violence, heterosexuality is aggression and he tries to find a solution for it also, in the concept of angelical multiplication. Artaud’s critique is a critique of Western

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1058 Nair, *Restoration of Breath*, 172.

1059 Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 93.

1060 Ibid., 89.

1061 Ibid., 82.

1062 Dale, “Cruel,” 590.

masculinity, as a form of macho individualism and as the basis of humanism.<sup>1063</sup> Theatre and cruelty are non-reproductive, inhuman, and cannot fit the category of modern man: autonomy, freedom, unity of the self or heteronormativity. As Samuel Weber observes, Artaud criticizes “the dominance of an anthropologically anchored and teleologically oriented type of storytelling” where there is an unshakable centrality of an essentialized and privileged *man*. What Artaud wishes is that the sky “can still fall on our heads” and decenter the kyriarchy<sup>1064</sup> of Western masculinity, with its fetishistic capacity for reason, knowledge and self-consciousness.

Especially in his late writings, Artaud explores sexual difference, sexuality, virgin birth and reproduction. Attraction and abjection towards sexuality (just like his attitude towards theatre or the body) haunt these explorations. His identification with Jesus Christ (who was considered Artaud himself, who suffered through the Passions and the Crucifixion in mental institutions) is puzzling especially when he accuses Christ of sexual promiscuity while “christ has always been what I most abhor.”<sup>1065</sup> At times, he rejects manly obsession with copulation and reproduction: “men by perpetuating themselves through the filthy act of copulation have betrayed God’s law and have enslaved themselves to the Antichrist and to Satan.”<sup>1066</sup> His constant rejection of sexual and digestive organs makes him believe that he was born by himself as his own mother, through his own suffering. The way out of reproduction, religion and sexuality is a form of theatre that is not insignificant anymore but is based on the hidden life and body of the actor.

These ideas can be connected to Lee Edelman’s radical re-thinking of *queerness* as an anti-social move outside the cycles of reproduction.<sup>1067</sup> Artaud and Edelman perceive the deception of the social lie of the future that is never met. Angelical multiplication is an ironic queer move that disdainfully

1063 Weber, *Theatricality as a Medium*, 282.

1064 A term coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza that expresses the intersectional structures of domination. It comes from the Greek word *kyrios* (master), *Wisdom Ways*.

1065 Schumacher and Singleton, *Artaud on Theatre*, 176.

1066 Ibid.

1067 Edelman, “The Future is Kid Stuff,” 18–30.

investigates the absence of queers in the future and ironically functions as a legacy for the modernist future of theatre. Artaud refuses to help constructing a more desirable social order based on reproduction, because he refuses to affirm social order and renewal of social reality. What he is proposing is a single un-reproducible gesture that can take place only in the present. Non-reproductive sexuality and theatre become abject and *impossible* experiments in a society based on efficient reproduction. His theatre of cruelty and angelical multiplication conceptualize precisely the possibility of a single gesture that can bring catastrophe, a radical rupture of the social contract that is based on the deceiving promise of the future.

Modernist theatre makers use their hysterical symptoms in order to critique oppressive institutions and Western culture, to abandon the promise of the future, to play with technology, the unconscious, dreams and their own femininity and to create a theatre of flesh that breaks hierarchical representation. Through their particular strategies of exploring intimate negativity,<sup>1068</sup> they distort social relations on stage and move away from the established way of making theatre as a copy of “reality”. In their writing, staging and acting, they expose but also reproduce the phallocentrism of their social contexts; they redesign their own bodies and use a performative language to affirm corporeality. While modernist theatre makers do not offer solutions, do not come with new or original ideas, they manage to disrupt the theatrical language of their time by connecting gesture to thought in a sustained effort to overcome their incapacity to act and their lack of embodiment. The flesh of the acting actor affirms the performative subjectivity of the director and disputes the absolute autonomous theatricality while it produces a hysterical type of knowledge on stage.

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<sup>1068</sup> Intimate negativity functions as a resistance to language, to given categories of social identity and to symbolic normativity. The hysterical subject cannot be reduced to an easily recognized social and cultural identity that is contested by its fragility and undecidedness. See Sjöholm, *Kristeva and the political*, 2.

## Conclusion

The political immediacy of modernist theatre indicates its radical potential. The modernist canon requires critical reinterpretations that focus on gaps, inadvertences and misreadings. The imaginary and politics of modernist theatre makes us think about the bodily limitations of the stage. Through historicization, the canonical texts engage with the present, leaving behind their specific historical context. The institutionalization of the modernist canon created the solitary model of the male artist and posed new methodological and theoretical problems but also provoked an inevitable critical encounter and the need for its re-reading and de-naturalization.

By using the proximity and temporality of modernist theatre theory, I positioned myself against the construction of the inherently masculine male subject of the virile canon. Postmodern, psychoanalytical and feminist readings challenge this construction and I am consciously embracing such a critical location. Male hysteria functions as the main tool in my reevaluation of the modernist canon and offers the possibility of an intimate revolt emerging from theatre in anticipation of a social revolution.

The theatrical element of hysteria, first exploited by Charcot, was revisited by psychoanalysts in order to develop the famous talking cure, where acting out was transformed into language, as a method of moving away from the hysterical avoidance of thought and denial of subjectivity. Hysteria functions as a creative relationship where the presence of an audience is necessary. Becoming-a-spectacle as a continuous construction of subjectivity rejects solitude and emphasizes the need for the other in an imaginative madness in two.

The hysterical acting out avoids language and the mechanisms of reason and consciousness by an immediate satisfaction of desire. The dream, hysteria and theatrical performances have in common

the avoidance of thought and intellectualness through the primacy of fiction lived as reality. Through hysteria, a fictional subjectivity takes front stage.

In the face of authority, the hysteric pushes to prove itself knowing that the knowledge of the master is lacking. Like the psychoanalytical discourse, modernist theatre does not offer the facts and a straight forward method, it does not offer systems of thought, clarity or a direct terminology. Taking the form of the hysterical discourse, it becomes impossible to master, the writing is provocative, difficult and has an illogic logic just like a dream.

The hysterical subject occupies a silent location in language and culture based on the absence of femininity in the systems of representation. Through this absence, femininity is redefined as marginality to the patriarchal order, disposable for women and men alike. The silent acting out, the histrionic behavior and the rejection of the phallic language contest the patriarchal cultures and hysteria manifests as a disease of representation. Consciousness of the rational being, its self-knowledge and mastery are deceptive and suspect. Hysteria challenges and resists them through a political rejection of hegemonic forms of subjection and representation. The unconscious and the body take the main stage in hysteria while they decenter and denaturalize the unquestioned knowing subject of the master.

The male hysteric fails to achieve masculinity (as the socially demanded position of excluding the other) and embraces this failure, not being able to dominate the feminine and accomplish mastery. While masculinity cuts any connection to the male body and its political positionality (both perceived as feminine) in the aspiration for structure and control, the male hysteric depends on corporeality and the constant struggle to obtain a body. The cannibalistic silencing of the feminine in the patriarchal discourse does not take place for male hysterics while at the same time, they do not directly experience the social oppression and marginality of women. Nevertheless, they have the position of outcasts of phallocentrism, in alliance with women and other marginals and together in revolt against identities, the

Law or the spectacle. Male hysteria offers a reevaluation of masculinity and a disturbance of its egosyntonic characteristic while at the same time it challenges the given dichotomy of the power line - feminine women versus masculine men. The denial of sexual difference and the blurring of the fixed sexual identities in hysteria propose a social model with laxer gender roles. The oscillation between masculine and feminine expresses the unfixedness of the hysterical subjectivity in a constant search for a body and the presence of the Other. In its performances that cannot exceed the crisis of subjectivity, hysteria plays with duplicity through a language of absence and misrepresentation that creates an alternative figuration. Modernist theatre explores the hysterical subjectivity through the practice of unconscious movements that are unable to answer the demands of the Symbolic but prepare the conditions for the subversion of the social order and for revolution.

Originality functions as a main characteristic of modernism in opposition to the copy, by differentiating itself from marginality and deviance to the norm. Constructed in the masculine, originality and novelty are still the main criteria in judging artistic works and modernist canonical writers mark the features of this modernist originality. Producing original works in the masculinist individual vein becomes the main preoccupation of the theatre maker, following the steps prescribed by canon apologists. In my own research, I discovered that originality was rarely an important methodology for modernist theatre makers, the ideas that were floating around at their time were easily adopted while they influenced each other and on many occasions they admitted their own plagiaristic identifications and the collective nature of their discoveries. The modernist project of theatre-making had a radical political feature of imagining a revolutionary future away from conservative aesthetics and bourgeois social structures and ideas of the self. The depoliticizing process and the aesthetic primacy of originality are reversed by the avant-garde (understood in the Bakunian sense) by returning to a radical construction of subjectivity that moves away from a prescribed and obedient state of being into a fluid



fulfillment of becoming.

The main modernist theatre makers, Artaud, Meyerhold and Stanislavsky explore in their texts new languages for theatre and an illusive “true” art, but in an incoherent and fragmented way as hysterical discourses dominated by uncertainty and a constant and desperate search for an audience. They produce knowledge by challenging masters and plagiaristically identifying with other artists in a process where their unconscious plays an important role.

As producers of hysterical discourse, the modernist theatre makers are also mastering subjects trying to (unsuccessfully) solve the fragmentation generated by the modern experience. The subjectivity question is always addressed in an indirect way: contradictory, uninformed, troublesome, breaking the limits and modes of production, the technologies of identity and knowledge. The hysterical discourse, as a double discourse of fluidity, takes part in the symbolic phallic order at the same time it looks for an exit, moves between masculine and feminine, between order and a state of disarray. The quest for subjectivity manifests as an effect of the desire for subjectivity, a quest that is sanctioned by society and which transforms the hysteric into a scapegoat of pretending, confusion, treason, inconstancy or irrationality. Modernism reacts against such contradictions that are labeled as manifestations of femininity.

In terms of writing, modernist theatre-makers fail and abandon their theories and practices, creating a process of theoretical collapse. Their explorations are dominated by the play of oppositions and uncertainties. In this attempt, they create new meanings and develop their hysterical subjectivities by avoiding reflection and accessible thought in favor of hallucinations and visuality. Their writing is always on the move, blurring the epistemic boundaries, creating confusion and avoiding representation; connections emerge in the unclear and unthought areas of theatre theory. They relate concepts through intentional misreadings that challenge a phallogentric interpretation of the stage. Words move beyond

the page by becoming performative, being invested with desire and hysterical intensity. Without moving away from modernism, theatre theories go beyond a rational understanding, by engaging a somnamular logic and the language of the unconscious, indispensable in making sense of them.

Paradoxically, the male modernist represents the existing standards, the Law and the Canon and he embodies the figure of the Father at the same time that he betrays, laughs at and perverts the Law that he represents. The image of the prick, phalloeccentric to the Law, suits best the modernist theatre-makers.

For Stanislavsky, theoretical production developed in close relationship to the unconscious, acting was nothing else than a new form of knowledge coming not from what is known or final but as an alternative figuration of what is felt and cannot be put into language. The hysterical subjectivity offers different patterns of interconnectedness where self-knowledge cannot be achieved and the subject surrenders to the object in a blank and empty phase. The Stanislavskian actor welcomes affectivity in a constant struggle to produce and show emotions where representation is just an unnecessary device of covering interior emptiness. Affectivity paves the way to inter-subjectivity in a creative link on stage while the performance means an anti-representational live event created by the embodiment of the actor *here and now*.

Far from being coherent and unified systems, modernist theatre theories have in common inescapable failures and a hysterical argumentation of a desperate search for fragmented and evasive answers. Following the modernist obsessions, they unsuccessfully struggle with the conflict between reality and fiction and paradoxically equate in the end truth and reality with theatricality and the unconscious. The actor who invests emotions and becomes character in acting creates the reality on stage through the constant play of mis/recognitions and subversions of offstage “reality”. The fascination for a desired reality (which is generated by the unconscious and emotions) comes from the

possibility to become the other on stage. Imitation cannot offer this possibility, only the never-ending capacity of becoming can solve the subjectivity question of extimacy.

By the processes of becoming-character and creating reality, actors and directors situate themselves outside of hierarchical structures and masculinist systems of oppression, in a Deleuzian in-between, neither one nor two. Through becoming-character, the actors perform in order to know, to discover their own unconscious and the reality of affectivity beyond mimesis.

In my research, the relationships between actors and directors were far from the hierarchic student-professor models that the canon champions. Their work together was highly symbiotic, plagiaristic and unseparated by subjective categorization. The Western theatre traditionally situates the actor in a feminized position dominated by corporeality and emotions while the director represents the intellectual decision-making agent, the owner of the cognitive phallus. The modernist experience proves that these categories were not so drastically isolated.

Canonical production focuses on constructing oedipal structures in the history of theatre with strong masculine and authoritative fathers and rebellious sons. Stanislavsky and Meyerhold fall into this historical trap even if their writings do not support such claims. One important aspect concerning the connection between the two (and theatre historians constantly forget this aspect) is the complex context of the Bolshevik Revolution which drastically influenced their theories. Stanislavsky and Meyerhold found different ways to help the revolutionary effort and to show their solidarity to workers and to the communist ideals. Radical changes in their theories prove this politically motivated development of their theatre-making: by rejecting the pre-revolutionary theatre and its bourgeois baggage based on oppression and inequality, the former theatrical knowledge was abandoned and un-learned, while at the same time new subject positions and a revolutionary theatre could emerge.

For Meyerhold and Stanislavsky, the canonical reading counterfeits a vicious generational

antagonism which denies the hysterical element of their double-consciousness and the process of becoming with (central in their writing). The solitary and original model does not fit the modernist experimentation, especially in the case of the two Russian theatre-makers. What a careful reader can observe is a corporeal dependence on the other, an intersecting gaze between partners and a constant attempt to move beyond the necessary construction of masculinity and the patriarchal limits imposed by their society. The explorations of their femininity connected corporeality, a collective understanding of acting and directing, marginality and the intimate revolt against phallic authority.

Similarly to Freud or Lacan, theatre modernists employ the contradiction as the foundation for theory (and in their case, for an increased theatricality), where the concepts and their effects are constantly subverted, re-affirmed and challenged. Reversals and crises, as well as the particular role of exceptions, make the inner contradictions difficult to situate or comprehend. As a hysterical discourse, the theoretization based on contradictions cannot constitute a final comprehensive system that can be further applied. This aspect troubles any return to the modernist theories with the purpose of simplification and immediate usage in practice.

Incoherence and readiness to fall into pieces stand for a hysterical and feminized style of writing that is constantly negated or ignored by defenders of manliness. Modernist theatre-makers do not fulfill this standard of masculinism by letting their hysterical femininity-in-masculinity develop in their writing and practice. Modernist theatre-makers connect emotions to the body in intimate ways and are in constant search for corporeality in line with their performative theories. They try to tell an incoherent and incomplete story of themselves, an action full of gaps and changes that characterizes hysteria at best. The performed story has no closure, conclusions are arbitrary and the process of theorizing is left unfinished. To a certain degree, this style of telling a story influenced my own writing and my research has opened incomplete parts that have to be further explored. In some cases, the researcher has to

embrace the obscure parts of the research and just to admit “I do not know”.

Theatre radicalism attempts to end representation through hysterical intensity, irony and destruction of reality. Artaud offered the answer of the body without organs, the body that is turned inside out and emptied of painful organs and social hierarchies, the body that opposes the evil theatrical system which suppresses the unconscious and represses sexual phantasies and emotionality. The body without organs anticipates the collapse of social institutions and order while it moves beyond violent technologies and the machine which annihilates and deforms. The role of the theatre was to explore the hidden fears and desires on stage in order to move beyond the social problems produced by repression. Corporeal transformation struggles with language in the process of ending representation and reconstructs an unreal body beyond representation in the cult of the flesh. Theatre connects the fragmented subjectivities of theatre-makers to an audience that is provoked to be in harmony with their acting bodies. For Artaud, theatre of cruelty, as a form of modernist abandonment and unsuccessful search for incarnation, opposes the liberal subject of freedom and supports an inhuman subjectivity that is larger than life and unreal.

My three examples of theatre modernism focused on a theatricality of the flesh, beyond representation, in a constant collective search for external subjectivities both for actors and directors. In this endeavor, sexual difference becomes blurred and unity of the self is forgotten. The hysterical subjectivity rediscovers desire transferred into flesh in opposition to the capitalist commodification of the body. The limits between social, interior, exterior and individuality are not clear in an active micro-political revolt which anticipates a radical social change.

Even if my initial purpose was to find ways to use the modernist theories in practice and to search for their unexplored elements in order to develop a new theatricality, I soon discovered that the main lesson of theatre modernism is the impossibility of such a direct application (which remains a

personal lie and an incomplete exercise). What one can do, if one wants to use some of the hysterical knowledge from the modernist directors, is to explore and further develop their own contradictions, fragmentation and femininity for a more sincere approach to their practice and a more localized rehearsal for revolution.

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