

Stubborn Subject: The Persistence of Self in Dramatic Acting

by

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Abstract

Dramatic acting, as a theatrical event that mysteriously fuses actor with character, is also a process that is deeply invested in the idea of Self. From Diderot's early paradox through Stanislavski's highly influential psychotechnique and into the present day, notions of who actors *are* – and how they precisely *feel* – when portraying characters have remained at the centre of Euroamerican discussions about dramatic performance. Conversely, for most of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the concept of the Self as an organic, reflexive, self-directed and differentiated human being in the world has been not only “deconstructed” within every dominant critical and artistic discourse but has also – until recently – been pretty much left for dead. Yet within the realm of acting in the traditional theatre's models, the tenacity of the Self's hold as the centrepiece of both pedagogy and methodology appears to be the hallmark of a concept that, if somewhat bruised and battered, is still very much alive. *Is there something inherent – or at least necessary – within the study and practice of dramatic acting that perpetually reconstitutes the stubborn idea of an autonomous and cohesive subjectivity within the actor?* Through a freewheeling, and sometimes unorthodox, methodology of

interrogation, this dissertation asserts that, *for the modern dramatic actor*, a demonstrable sense of self is an inescapable vocational reality. This position is argumentatively framed through a valorization of the actor's phenomenological and psychological experience as fundamental to assessing how the Actor and the Self creatively collide. Though drawing from a broad range of interdisciplinary discourses, the author's subjective and self-historicizing experience as someone who has worked as a professional actor in the Canadian theatre and other media since childhood, for over forty years, is everywhere implicit in this analysis.

To Heather Nicol, for everything

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Introduction

This capacity for shifting truth, whatever it may amount to in me [...] I owe it principally to myself: for the most firm imaginations that I have, and the most general, are those which, in a manner of speaking, were born with me. They are natural and all mine.

–Montaigne.¹

lingua franca

Pick up just about any current book on the practice of dramatic acting for the twenty-first century and you will find the ghostly imprint of Konstantin Stanislavski upon most every page. Well over a century after he and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, portions of the analysis, methodology, and pedagogy of acting that Stanislavski was to study and develop until his death in 1938 continue to exist as the default *lingua franca* for actors and directors working within the dominant Euroamerican tradition of psychological realism in both theatre and film. Constitutively embedded within this legacy of praxis there exists a surprisingly robust containment of that most essential of modern constructions, that of the Self.

Surprisingly, I say, because for most of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the concept of the Self as an organic, reflexive, self-directed and differentiated human being in the world has been not only “deconstructed” within every dominant critical and artistic discourse but has also – until recently – been pretty much left for dead. Yet within the realm of acting in the traditional theatre’s models, the tenacity of the Self’s hold as the centrepiece of both pedagogy and methodology appears to be the hallmark of a concept that, if somewhat bruised and battered, is still very much alive. *Is there something inherent – or at least necessary – within the study and practice of dramatic acting that perpetually reconstitutes the stubborn idea of an autonomous and cohesive subjectivity within the actor?* The useful definition of subjectivity as a formulation that derives from ontologically stable conceptions of self-identity and intentionality is a product of the long modern era and the Enlightenment. Why might such a definition of

¹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 499.

personhood maintain such a tenacious hold on the practice of acting within a dramatic context into the twenty-first century?

To answer this question, my analytical focus will be on – and through – the actor’s experiential perceptions. That any actor’s experience in analyzing and portraying a character on stage is deeply bound up with the practical apprehensions and expectations of both other actors and spectators is a reality that cannot be elided. Yet I contend that any theory of dramatic performance that does not put the actor’s subjectivity at the forefront of its epistemology is one that is doomed to a very demonstrable sterility. Theories of representational drama as enacted in the theatre that rely *solely* on the critical distance of spectating and reception are inadequate in assessing crucial ideas about what acting *does*, and what acting *needs*. It is not by coincidence, I suggest, that the mid-twentieth century written works of Konstantin Stanislavski, Uta Hagen and Michael Chekhov continue to be the germinal texts that teachers and their students often turn to when considering the methodology of acting in the West. Although Stanislavski’s *An Actor’s Work*, (Jean Benedetti’s combined 2009 translation of Elizabeth Hapgood’s earlier *An Actor Prepares* [1936] and *Building a Character* [1949]), Hagen’s *Respect for Acting* (1973) and *A Challenge to the Actor* (1991), and Chekhov’s *To the Actor* (1953) are practical treatises which leave much to be desired in terms of theoretical clarity and consistency, each of these efforts at disseminating useful information for the learning actor arrives out of the authors’ self-reflexive labours as *practitioners* whose central professional identities were cohesive with that of “actor”. This centrality of self-identification *as actors* is essential to the paradigmatic roles these three figures play within the discourse, but moreover, the *practice* of acting theory; however, this assertion does not preclude valorizing informed analyses by teachers, critics, and scholars who *choose* to place the *performing dramatic subject* as the non-eliminable feature of any theory of acting.

As someone who has worked as a professional actor in the theatre and other media since childhood, this subjective and self-historicizing experience is everywhere implicit within my analysis and argumentation. Though I have chosen not to do a historiographical or autoethnographic study for this dissertation, I will occasionally utilize short examples from my own history– twice at greater length, in my Chapter 3 study of playing Bill Sikes and my Chapter 4 observation of playing Sir John A. Macdonald – to illustrate a point or concept. Though my own experience is hardly exhaustive of the definitions and analytical excursions regarding the

dramatic actor and self that I will be presenting, and can be separated discursively from my argumentation and illustrations, I aver that it is an important under-girding to my basic premises and assumptions. My voice here is primarily scholarly, though I value the slippages and elisions – many, no doubt, unknown to me – that may result from my personal positioning.

‘Lab’ versus ‘Biz’: This Is Not a Test

I wish to be clear, from the outset, that it is a certain and delimited form of acting in the theatre – what I consistently call *dramatic acting* – that I will be primarily concerned with in my arguments. To further elucidate my meaning, I will borrow a definition directly from John Lutterbie, who states his parameters of concern (in an article on Chekhov’s Psychological Gestures):

First, the focus is on repeatable performances including those that might be seen on Broadway or in regional theatres, thereby excluding improvisational forms such as flash mobs, Act Up, or Occupy Wall Street, or other types of performance art. Moreover, for practical purposes, the focus is exclusively on more traditional forms of Western theatre.²

Below, I will explore some of the discursive ramifications and provocations that result from my selection of these limits on my analysis, but I hereby state my generalized definitional parameters.

It is important, though, to transparently note that I am also not writing about the laboratory/studio/atelier/workshop paradigm of performance exploration that constitutes the work of acting as a “life-changing-experimental-experience”. Perhaps best exemplified by the *laboratoria* of mid-twentieth century figures Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, an astute definition of this kind of work is supplied by Campo Guilano: “A laboratory theatre is meant to build a new actor, and through the actor, a new human being. It is a terrain where individuals can

² John Lutterbie, “The Dynamics of Psychological Gestures,” in *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*, ed. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon (London: Routledge, 2015), 97.

move from an artistic, aesthetic experience, to a life experience.”³ I am, instead, highlighting the (pre)professional training and performing model that leads to dramatic characterization by actors, and the reiteration of those characterizations in rehearsal leading to theatrical performance.

Phenomenology and Psychology: Is This Realistic?

Inasmuch as my arguments will be organized by considering a humanist essentialism with regard to notions of the Self within the contemporary context of dramatic acting, I will also be adhering to the vital methodological feature of “first-personal” or “subjective” experience that is extensive of phenomenology. As a philosophical orientation first staked out by Brentano’s nineteenth-century descriptive psychology and the subsequent developments of Husserl at the century’s turn, phenomenology asserts the primacy of existentially acting from a position that can reflect on and describe one’s own conscious states.⁴ Though phenomenology was to receive a thorough conceptual excavation and reconsideration by the likes of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre in the mid-twentieth century, the core framing of this methodology as rooted in a first-person *experiential* locus which draws on ideas of *essence* and *intentionality* for its legitimacy is vital to my argumentative position that an autonomous and willing subject, identified as the Self, seems a necessarily central component for actors working within the dramatic tradition. In Chapter 1 of this dissertation I will, in part, examine in more detail the values and descriptors of this phenomenological self, taking especial interest in the phenomenal character of experience – the *qualia* or “what-it-is-like” locutions – proposed by contemporary “philosophers of mind” such as Thomas Nagel and David Chalmers. Following this, I will interrogate the important notion of *sensibility*, which draws on inter-related notions of Lockean empiricism, aesthetic values, and social codes of behaviour through the foundation of a phenomenological sense of self.

Though I will be considering arguments stemming from as varied disciplinary streams as analytic philosophy and Peircean semiotics, my prime tool for investigating my claims regarding selfhood and acting will be Freudian-based psychology, most especially focussing on mirror

³ Guiliano Campo, “After Theatre, Beyond the Self: A Pedagogy of Life from Stanislavski to Grotowski,” *Stanislavski Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017): 173–95, doi: 10.1080/20567790.2017.1377930.

⁴ Greg Janzen, *The Reflexive Nature of Consciousness* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008), 5.

theories of ego formation, individuation, and transference. Though I will centrally and liberally be drawing on Jacques Lacan's highly influential "mirror stage" theory of human development – which I introduce and examine in Chapter 2 – I will also be considering the complementary ideas of Donald Winnicott and Heinz Kohut – which I compare with Lacan's theory in Chapter 5. Throughout this dissertation, I will be cross-examining influential ideas regarding "acting theory" utilizing the various methodologies and frameworks that I have chosen to identify as salient to my argument. Selected theories and propositions adduced from Denis Diderot, Mlle. Clairon, Joseph Talma, Coquelin, Konstantin Stanislavski, Richard Boleslavsky, Lee Strasberg, Morris Carnovsky, Uta Hagen, Stella Adler, Michael Chekhov, Richard Schechner, Jean-Paul Sartre, Janelle G. Reinelt, John Harrop, Bruce Wilshire, Simon Callow, and Declan Donnellan will be duly considered in my analysis.

The question of why this formulation of the phenomenological and psychological self maintains such a commanding hold on historically Western acting methodology is a curious one, because it is not as though this valorization of the Self in dominant performance methodologies has not been problematized and contested over the last century, both in terms of practice and theory. An overriding preoccupation of these strands of praxis has been a decentering of the "dramatic" from the "theatre". Before addressing the central concerns of this dissertation, which are to explore conceptions of subjectivity, identity, and the Self in relation to dramatic acting, it is first important to tackle the thorny epistemological issue of the *dramatic* as it exists inside the *theatrical*.

Drama, Theatre and Performance

Seen in one light, the large project of such diverse figures as Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski, Molina, Schechner, Chaikin, Müller, LeCompte, and Wilson has been one of isolating the proclivities of portraying characters in a drama from the necessities of performing actions in a theatre. It is useful, then, to clarify the distinction between these two terms from the outset, as my primary concern is the presence and function of the actor in *drama* as a formulation, rather than in the *theatre* as a framework. In reference to theorizing about dramatic text and performance, it is hard not to agree with Raymond Williams that to "[...] bring them together, in analysis, seems to me a necessary emphasis [...] the drama is, or can be, both literature and theatre, not the one at the

expense of the other, but each *because* of the other”.⁵ Perhaps, cultural semiotician Keir Elam continues to offer one of the clearest definitions of the meaning-making differences between these often-intertwined concepts:

‘Theatre’ is taken to refer here to the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction: that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it. By ‘drama’, on the other hand, is meant that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular (‘dramatic’) conventions. The epithet ‘theatrical’, then, is limited to what takes place between and among performers and spectators, while the epithet ‘dramatic’ indicates the network of factors relating to the represented fiction.⁶

Taking Elam’s entanglement of performer-spectator transactions to be useful as a definitional feature of the “theatrical”, it is notable that neither of these constituent subjectivities – neither the performer nor the spectator – is present in this theorist’s conception of the “dramatic”. For drama, the foundational elements appear constructed as being “representational” and “fiction”, leaving me to wonder about questions of authorship, agency, and reception in this “network of factors”. Who is responsible for creating the field of “represented fiction” itemized as constitutive of “drama” *on the stage* – the playwright, the producer/director, the spectator, or the actor? If, as Elam states, drama is “designed for stage representation”, then the playwright must be seen as the progenitive maker. This is followed, in our traditional schema, by the director, the dramaturg, the various material designers (set, costume, lights, sound), and perhaps, the production manager. Considered next, a structuralist reading of a drama’s production might next situate the interdependent, referential aspects of a producing company’s matrix as being semiotically ‘loaded’, and therefore endemic to any notion of design: the “season of plays”; the

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1968), 4.

⁶ Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1980), 2.

“dominant politics”; the “history of production”; the particulars of the playhouse, both in provenance and construction; the “radical” or “traditionalist” producing model; the “intertextuality” of the script(s) – and so on. Following this, a poststructuralist deconstruction of the producing “network” might place spectators as the next meaning-makers in this epistemological string of influence. Finally, though, in both aesthetic and substantive terms, the actor is most often regarded as the last pearl on the necklace. Aside from the “star players” who might be cast well ahead of production in order to anchor a concept and assist in pre-selling tickets to an audience, most casting of *dramatis personae* is done after every other producing consideration has been exhausted. The reasons for this chain of signification and agency are multi-dimensional, and often work in response to simple economies of scale, but for performers this near-hegemonic lineage of (non)influence is significantly limiting. The ages-old “anti-theatrical prejudice”, so well-articulated by Jonas Barish, most powerfully, actually lands upon the *performer*, who is seen as the destabilizing, emotional, and contingent agent of contamination and dissolution when it comes to evaluating a legitimate role for drama as literature, or simply as cultural product.⁷ The complications of just where the actor *and* character fit into this taxonomy will be further analyzed in Chapter 3.

But can a performer really be said to “design” anything in drama? Unarticulated in Elam’s definitions are the “particular conventions” that drama is reliant upon; but one convention I would put forward as essential is that of “character”.⁸ If “character”, then, so it follows that “actor” would be a more targeted definition than “performer” within this paradigm, for it is the dramatic actor who is responsible *on stage* for what I take here as the design – *through* performance – *of* character. For the moment, I will leave out the problematic of the “spectator” altogether, but point out that the by-now poststructuralist trope that *receptors* (readers, audiences) are necessarily embedded within the creation – if not design – of representational meaning is an idea that will never stay submerged for long.

⁷ Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁸ Indeed, this component comes second only to “plot” in Aristotle’s list of the six essential elements of tragedy, an inventory that was undoubtedly productive within Elam’s formulation.

Yet if multiple efforts have been made to elucidate and materialize the differences between drama and theatre, many have also been made to trouble the familiarized dialectic of *performance* and theatre. That there is an antipathy towards theatricality within the sphere of “Performance Art” is widely recognized. At least since the emergence of post-Minimalist Body Art (“Live Art”; “Action Art”) and related movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea that the formalities and conventions of representational dramatic theatre can only seek to diminish the legitimacy and communicative agency of a “fine art” development that places the body front-and-centre as a tool for aesthetic and political critique has often been taken as gospel.⁹ Since the actor’s presence on stage is the literal embod(y)ment of dramatic representation in theatrical performance, the actor has come in for especially rough treatment by many practitioners and theorists of performance art. Though their opinions and positions have often been sophisticated and complex, artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and Marina Abramović have been adamant that they are not “acting”, nor “actors”, in their performances. As Abramović has so forcefully, though problematically, posited:

This is what I think: to be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake: there is a black box, you pay for a ticket, and you sit in the dark and see somebody playing somebody else’s life. The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real. It’s a very different concept. It’s about true reality.¹⁰

In concurrent trends, intermedial practitioners such as Cindy Sherman, through her multiple photographic iterations that conflate her self-image with those of dramatic cultural icons, and Rodney Graham, who often plays “himself” as the protagonist in films that subvert inherited

⁹ Fried, Michael, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998[1967]). In this publication, performance artists were already swimming in a tradition of anti-theatrical prejudice within the fine art world that might best be exemplified by critic Fried’s influential and incendiary polemic.

¹⁰ Robert Ayers, “The Knife is Real, The Blood is Real, and the Emotions Are Real: Roberts Ayers in Conversation with Marina Abramović,” *A Sky Filled with Shooting Stars: A Resident Alien Visits the Art World* (blog), March 10, 2010, <http://www.askyfilledwithshootingstars.com/wordpress/?p=1197>.

notions of narrative and storytelling, have extended the ambiguous space between first-person presence and character, yet the necessary distance between the performing as opposed to the representational body remains.

Though hardly prejudicially anti-theatrical in either their concerns or their expression, practitioners in the contemporaneous theatre have not been idle in goading submerged hegemonic notions of dramatic convention to rise from the ‘doing’ of theatre and become visible. Along with the previously mentioned Judith Malina (The Living Theatre) and Elizabeth LeCompte (The Wooster Group) – prominent and early exemplars of this strain of theatrical presentation – the list of companies that have sprung from this spirit of experimentation over the last several decades is long: One Yellow Rabbit (1982), Forced Entertainment (1984), Goat Island (1987), Gob Squad (1994), The Builders Association (1994), The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma (1995), bluemouth, inc. (1998), Punchdrunk (2000), Rimini Protokoll (2000), Mammalian Diving Reflex (2003): this is an entirely non-exhaustive international litany of convention-breaking producers who have risen not only to both critical interest and acclaim, but in some cases to notable popular and commercial success. In the broad sense that the term implies, these companies fall into the outlines of what Hans-Thies Lehmann has named a “postdramatic theatre”.¹¹ In his influential book of the same name, Lehmann himself goes to great lengths to identify scores of artists in a self-described “heterogeneous” list, for his theorizing is essentially an anterior action which seeks to codify a phenomenon of theatrical production as it had developed over several decades by the twentieth-century’s close.¹² In fact, in a Derridean sense, the counter-example of the postdramatic’s articulated *différance* from the dramatic is crucially constituent of both terms’ continually deferred meanings. For the present purpose of quickly distinguishing these two approaches to theatrical production and reception, Lehmann’s translator Karen Jürs-Mundy’s pithy summing up will do: “[such] postdramatic theatre has thus not given up on relating to the world but crucially no longer *represents* the world as a surveyable whole”.¹³

¹¹ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Mundy (London: Routledge, [1999] 2006).

¹² *Ibid.*, 23–24.

¹³ Karen Jürs-Mundy, “Introduction,” in Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 12.

Lehmann's work, critically notable as it is, also follows in the lineage of – and operates coterminously with – numerous critics and scholars who have been writing interrogatively about drama, theatre, and performance over the last several decades. Working to creatively interrogate – and in many cases “upend” – received notions about “truth” and “authenticity” in dramatic acting, these theorists were particularly engaged with decoding what it means to perform “live” in front of an audience, and how that “liveness” differs from performing for filmed media. Perhaps the most notable of early attempts within this discourse are Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) and Philip Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999). A recent study limning similar territory is Diana Taylor's *Performance* (2016). Much of this discussion has been influenced by, if not generated out of, the pioneering work of Richard Schechner – self-described as “one of the founders of Performance Studies”¹⁴ – and the various scholars associated with both *TDR* (The Drama Review) and the Tisch School for the Arts, established in 1965 at NYU. Embedded in much of these, and other disciplinary, analyses are a necessary questioning of exactly *who* is doing the performing, and how that performing might be *received* by others watching it. Through this collaborative, yet policed, action of *doing* and *viewing*, important questions were raised about what kinds of agency and power both actors and spectators were accessing and distributing during the duration of a “live” performance event. In a representative passage, Phelan points out the still contemporaneous difficulties faced when assessing notions of *self* and *representation* in aestheticized performance: “[i]n performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of ‘presence.’ But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else - dance, movement, sound, character, ‘art’”.¹⁵

Observations such as Phelan's critically unpack and re-imagine many salient conundra related to performance. There are, here, useful distinctions made between “body” and “performer”; “metonym” and “representation”; “apparent visibility” and “actual disappearance”; “presence” and “art”. Yet it is indicative that formulations such as these rely so heavily on the

¹⁴ “Richard Schechner,” NYU Tisch School of the Arts, accessed May 6, 2017, <https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/performance-studies/3508301>.

¹⁵ Peggy Phelan, “The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction” in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 150.

ubiquity of *deconstructionist* tendencies as they came to exist by the late twentieth-century. I will address the implications of these considerations more fully in my discussion of semiology and the character in Chapter 3; but in order to gain some purchase on the impact that a deconstructionist approach has had on the analysis and practice of the postdramatic performer – and to also assess the stability and resiliency of the Self as a central component of the dramatic actor’s praxis – it is important to address the historical bifurcation within the Western philosophical tradition that undergirds the tensions between the dramatic and postdramatic.

The Philosophical Divide

Central to my thesis regarding the necessary persistence of the Self in dramatic acting is a deep consideration of the philosophical claims to knowledge that first constitute and then disassemble the conception of subjectivity and identity within a historically modernist framework. Extensive of this framework are also deliberations on the epistemological structures of *representation* and *mimesis* as active correlations of such conceptions. Further to this, such slippery notions as *memory*, *consciousness*, *feeling*, and *emotion* must also be grappled with.

Delimiting and assessing such vast concepts within a contemporary framework is particularly haunted by an established schism between two competing disciplinary branches of philosophy: Analytic and Continental.¹⁶ Though the main historical tendencies of each argumentative tributary may have strong claims to legitimacy and utility within philosophical discourse *per se*, the propositional antagonism that exists between these two schools of thought offers little help to the intersectional theorist working in the margins of their grand claims. And while I may scoff and grumble at the internecine fighting that separates these strands of inquiry, I will admit that the mutual antipathy has produced rigorous debate and postulation on both sides of the chasm. I claim the right, in fact, to *choose* the chasm between: to *borrow* the ideas as they are flung back and forth, to *examine* them, to *use* their properties, to *refashion* their arguments – and then to toss them back into the fray. That I may not be allowed to judiciously draw on the insights of both Continentally-derived Phenomenology and the Analytically-sponsored Philosophy of Mind simply because these strategies of knowledge are disciplinarily estranged

¹⁶ These descriptors, though widely accepted, are confusing and misdirecting, especially in the case of the name Continental, but the debate over their usefulness and origins are not important for this study.

seems a harsh limitation for my humanistic study. That the epistemological premises of these competing disciplines may confound and disagree with each other – logically and ontologically – is yet *more* reason to include, if not reconcile, them in arguments concerning something as ephemeral and shifting as acting in the theatre. That being said, I will briefly outline the two major discursive tendencies found within these philosophical systems that pertain to, and complicate, ideas around “self”, “character”, “drama”, and “acting”.

Analyzing Continentalism

As a disciplinary arborisation growing out of broader postmodern and poststructuralist projects, *deconstruction* as a critical strategy is most closely associated with such figures as Derrida, Lyotard, Kristeva, Irigary, Badiou, and the Yale School of literary critics. A Continentalist approach to philosophical questions that identifies and interrogates the production of continually deferred and contingent meanings within a hermeneutical context of constant reference, contradiction, and iteration – what I like to call the “always already” school of thought – deconstructionism has had an arguably disproportionate influence on disciplines as discrete as comparative literature, history, geography, anthropology, architecture, psychology, sociology, and all manner of cultural (including performance) studies.

The ramifications of this influence, now shifting if not entirely weakening, are of particular interest to me in this study of actor/self, for implicit within deconstruction’s methodologies is a severing of the self-identifying “I” from any sense of a transcendental, ontologically stable “(my)self”. As Derrida offers:

Of course, when I pay attention to the possible breaks in identity I don’t mean that we should not reaffirm, *as much as possible*, the identity, the self-identity which is the condition of responsibility and so on and so forth. Nevertheless, this phenomenon ‘I think’ – this ‘I am the same’ – is not something natural or given. It is precisely the product of the oath, or the product of the commitment, and it is a stabilized artefact [...] this means that there *is* no identity, there is only identification or self-identification *as a process*; and, indeed, that there *is* stabilization of identity only means or conforms that there can be a break, there can be a

pathology, there can be ruptures. The two go together. It is *because* the break is always possible that we need and perform identification, and society is organized according to this production of artefacts.¹⁷

The problem here, when considering Derrida's deconstruction of self-identity as mere artefact within a constantly destabilizing process of *performing* identification, is that the dramatic actor necessarily performs *out* of self-identity to willfully create an artificial *character* that precisely mimics and represents human behaviour and affect so as to self-consciously *produce* a functional artefact *within* the drama. The "rupture", the "break", of identity is pre-supposed; and then harnessed to a dramatic purpose. Actors, as the sovereign creators or designers of "living" dramatic characters, *must* remain stable and cohesive in their own self-identity in order to successfully steer the process of *performing identification* for an audience in the theatre. It is the very supposition that the actor's sense of self is *viewed and accepted* as "natural" or "given" that grants the Stanislavskian model of autonomous subjectivity its great tenacity within the field of dramatic acting.

In this way, the proclivities of a deconstructionist strategy that are so helpful in ontologically critiquing theatrical performance *outside* of dramatic representation are conversely unaccommodating when epistemologically defining acting *inside* a process of mimetic narrative. This assessment does not necessarily preclude the idea that actors, as *people-in-the-world*, are also engaged in a process of identity formation that relies on rupture and reification within a matrix of performed regulatory social practices. And it is a potent question to be considered as to how an actor's continual engagement in dramatic role-playing within the theatre *affects*, and turns its performative energy back towards, the formations of self-identity in "real life". I will argue that what *is* clear is that in creating the appearance of ontologically stable and performatively repeatable characters by acting in a play, actors will necessarily rely on those aspects of their own identity that appear *to themselves* as stable – their "sense of Self". As noted above, my argumentative position here valorizes the idea that any adequate account of the

¹⁷ Derrida, Jacques. Interview by Nicholas Royle, *life. after. theory.*, ed. Michael Payne and John Schad, (London: Continuum, 2003), 25.

dramatic actor at work must recognize what Greg Janzen names as “the methodological principle of the primacy of phenomenology”.¹⁸ That phenomenology, as a philosophical movement, historically grew out of the Continental tradition that later begat deconstructionism gestures to my assertion that the terms and strategies of my analysis should never be suspended due to the nature of their taxonomies within traditions of discourse. As any actor will tell you: take what is useful and leave the rest.

In this spirit, it seems useful to highlight a central tenet of Michel Foucault’s formulation of subjectivity. Foucault’s thinking is emblematic of the enduring legacy of Continental philosophy and may be seen as a fulcrum between the structuralist rigidities of semiotics and the poststructuralist deferrals of deconstruction. Foucault, in numerous works, gestures towards the notion of “care of the self” (*souci de soi*) as being a key concept in any attentive formulation of subjectivity. Borrowing from the Greek term *epimeleia heautou*, meaning “working on” or “being concerned with”, Foucault tells us that, “[t]he one who cared for himself had to choose among all the things that you can know through scientific knowledge only those kinds of things which were *relative to him and important to life* [emphasis added].”¹⁹ This idea of actively *choosing* which aspects of life are important and relational as a taking “care of the self”, in the modern sense, guides us into a Cartesian-inspired kind of structural analysis that constitutes ourselves as both active *subjects* who seek self-knowledge, and as the passive *objects* of our self-seeking. As Edward McGushin puts it, (and I propose this as a very succinct description of the dramatic actor’s positionality):

...for the self to become both active agent and passive object, it must actively divide itself through some activity of self-relating [...] it is the activity of seeking and discovering that makes or *constitutes* the self as both active seeker and sought after object.²⁰

¹⁸ Janzen, *Reflexive Nature of Consciousness*, 4.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), 269–70.

²⁰ Edward McGushin, “Foucault’s Theory and Practice of Subjectivity,” in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2011), 129.

This formulation of subjectivity – as a paradigm that creatively conflates subject with object – is very useful to consider within my study, and will be explored most conspicuously in Chapters 4 and 5, both through psychological and pedagogical frames of reference. For now, it is important to declare the value of a dualistic pattern that sustains both the actor’s self as an active, willful, autonomous, conscious subject, and as a passive, accessible object of study and reflection that works as a catalyst for the creation of dramatic characters.

Drama’s ‘Late’ Modernism

It is an instructive thought experiment to compare the actor’s goals and methods with those of other creative agents within the broad field of the expressive arts in the years since the late-nineteenth century. This may be a fool’s errand, for the historical exigencies and conditional overlappings that become apparent whenever a reductive comparison is made between discrete practices are formidably delimiting factors, but the exercise here may still be effective.

Imagine, then, a painter and a photographer. Consider the painter (and painting) in the wake of photography’s almost total shouldering of the burden of representational pictorial realism in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. What the painter could now “do” in light of this radical development – and the previously inconceivable disruption of what and how painting could “mean”—was revolutionary. Paintings – and what painters *did* – became increasingly about *what paint could do*, rather than *trompe l’oeil* representations of “reality”. More than this, and focused conversely, the lately minted photographer was free to develop a novel lexicon of imagistic and visual semiotics that drew back from the self-conscious simulations of painterly *mise-en-scène* that had harnessed photography’s aesthetics in the early years of landscaped portraiture.

Speculating on this historical development, it can reasonably be situated as a precedent for the analogously popular displacement of dramatic acting in the theatre through movies – first by the increasingly sophisticated melodramas, feature-length situational comedies, and historical epics of the silent cinema; then, more completely, by motion picture “talkies” – nearly a hundred years after still-photography’s genesis, in the early- and mid-twentieth century. One might presume that actors, liberated from the comparable yoke of portraying realism on stage, and in possession of a new medium, would set off into fundamentally new and innovative directions,

leaving their old systems and pedagogies behind as they charted fresh territories of embodiment and affect.

Yet for dramatic actors, in a peculiarly fundamental way, this paradigmatic shift did not occur. As the postmodern scholar Steven Connor put it in 1989:

[...] historians of drama are less anxious than others to claim a distinctively modernist movement in drama itself [...] *for whatever reason*, drama's modernism seems to have been muted, or at least long delayed, at least until Brecht and, in some accounts, until the emergence and successful critical promotion of the Theatre of the Absurd in the 1950s [emphasis added].²¹

Taking Connor's critique as given, I am ready to grant the premise that modernist stylistic and political revolutions *did* occur within drama, as Epic and absurdist theatre, by the mid-twentieth century.

However, it is another proposition to say that dramatic *acting* technique took the same leaps. As many scholars have noted – and as a comprehensive and clear reading of Brecht's writing on acting would confirm – the usurpation of a Stanislavskian psychophysical technique by Epic conceptions of objectivity and “alienation” have been much overstated. John Rouse, notably, puts it well when he writes of Brecht's commitment to an important directive in the innovator's three-phase actor's process within Epic Theatre rehearsal:

The second phase continues the work already done [analyzing what a character does and why], but in an antithetical direction - one in which more than a few theoretical purists have assumed Brecht was not interested. As Brecht describes it, "the second phase is that of *identification with the character* [Einfühlung], the search for *the character's truth in a subjective sense*, you let it do

²¹ Steven Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 132–33.

what it wants to do, to hell with criticism as long as society provides what you need".²² *The actor must explore his character in all the detail demanded by the most naturalistic director, but the criterion for selection among his discoveries remains the character's social behavior [emphasis added].*²³

In this convincing analysis, I confirm that the Stanislavski-inspired focus on formulations such as the “magic if” and “emotion memory” are extended as a crucial phase of character-creation through a broader reading of “given circumstances” vis-à-vis political consciousness. The technique is never abandoned, only integrated.

Regarding the short-lived but influential movement of theatre that Martin Esslin coined as “Absurd”, it is well to remember that it is endemic to this style’s methods and aesthetics that *recognizably* realistic characters enact *superficially normative* behaviours and language codes within social and domestic scenarios that offer exacting *parodies* of realist theatre tropes and the concept of the “well-made play”. So, in the cases of both Epic and Absurd theatre, it would be a miscalculation to say that these forms’ modernist articulations are paralleled by a change in the requirements of what an actor must do to successfully articulate *characters* within any given production. Perhaps, if it can be claimed that drama arrived “late to the postmodernist party”, then it did so with a vanguard of subjectively-identified characters still leading the parade.

And yet, views on the dialectic (or strict historical teleology) between modernist and postmodernist positions have themselves been changing in the long twentieth century. According to cultural theorist Rita Felski:

Modernity is back with a vengeance. People are reflecting anew on the protean meanings of the modern, on its ambiguous legacies and current realities... Yet this return is also a beginning, as scholars tackle well-worn ideas and calcified debates from new angles. As a

²² Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke in 20 Bänden*, vol. 16, ed. Werner Hecht (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 843.

²³ John Rouse, “Brecht and the Contradictory Actor,” *Theatre Journal* 36, no. 1 (March 1984): 39.

result, our view of modernity is changing dramatically. The modern is not what it used to be.²⁴

Felski's assessment is extended by Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges in their introduction to *The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (2016) when they remind us that "[t]he modernist question of aesthetic autonomy is once more on the critical agenda, whether in the realm of contemporary art, philosophical aesthetics, or literary studies."²⁵ David Cunningham, in the same volume, goes on further to state that, "[a] short-lived episode in the recent history of ideas, whatever else one might say about the present conjuncture, it seems increasingly implausible that one might define it as *postmodern*".²⁶

The arguments and assessments about the contemporary reclamation and reconstitution of the term "modernism" are abundant and complex but, as referenced by D'Arcy and Nilges above, are highly concerned with the once-moribund notion of "aesthetic autonomy". And it is to the idea of autonomy as it exists within aesthetic discipline that I address myself in this dissertation. I contend that the very notion of a sovereign subject operating ethically within the world has remained the underpinning concept for both the "actor" and the "character" within drama.

²⁴ Rita Felski. "New Cultural Theories of Modernity," in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 55.

²⁵ Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges, "Introduction," in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism*, ed. Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.

²⁶ David Cunningham, "Time, Modernism, and the Contemporaneity of Realism," in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism*, ed. Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges (New York: Routledge, 2016), 49.

Chapter 1

The Ontological Problem of Acting

In the theatre, knowing means feeling.

-Konstantin Stanislavski²⁷

What Is It Like To Be Another Person?

Many would suggest that this question is nonsense. Except through the strict limits of my imagination, it is *impossible to be* another person. Inasmuch as I consider what it may be *like to be* another person – in a metonymic fashion, with “be” standing in for *behave* or *feel*, and “another person” standing in for *someone else’s embodied subjectivity* – then perhaps I can tilt closer to the mark. After all, it is not the same as asking “what is it like to be a bat?”, as the philosopher Thomas Nagel famously did in his same-titled article from 1974.²⁸ As Nagel argues, one may strive to take into account all the different ways in which a bat links up sensory data (through sonar, or echolocation) to a mammalian organism that flies about on webbed arms and spends much of its time hanging upside down from its feet, but all of that imaginative data can only provide one with a sense of what it is like for *me* to behave as a bat does, but not with knowledge of what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat.²⁹ Nagel prefaces this conclusion by stating that “[o]ur own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited”³⁰; but if this “limited range” of imagination excludes being able to intuit what it is like to be a bat it surely *does* include what it is like to be *another person*. I have close, hard knowledge of what it is like to be human, and correlations to my lived experience give me a

²⁷ Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work*, trans. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), xxiv.

²⁸ Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like To Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (Oct. 1974), 435–50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 439.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 439.

more transparent access to imagining what it is like to be another human – *other than myself* – rather than a bat.³¹

So, even though there seems an irreducible materiality regarding my own consciousness at play here – the essential subjectivity of what it is to be *me* – I may still infer that I can project my sensation of consciousness into a realm where I can *imagine* what it is *like* to be someone else. It does not follow, however, that I can extend my material consciousness to a place where I can actually *be* another person.

And yet, such an idealized state is what actors are asked to embody all the time. Again, it is easy to scoff at such a statement. It is also easy to satirize. The notion of the actor’s “dark secret” of thaumaturgical transformation is ripe for comedic excoriation, as demonstrated in this passage from *I, An Actor*, Christopher Douglas and Nigel Planer’s mock-autobiographical diary of the fictitious actor ‘Nicholas Craig’:

In addition to Olympic fitness, supreme courage, phenomenal powers of concentration, the acceleration of a puma and an insatiable appetite for sheer bloody sweat and grind and plain old-fashioned sheer bloody hard work, the actor also needs a supernatural ability to transform himself into another person; to ‘other be’. Not simply to ‘pretend’ to be someone else but actually to ‘enter’ that person.³²

The concept of ‘being’ another person is so tightly tethered to the popular idea of the actor’s work that it is a genuine plum for parodic skewering.³³

³¹ Christopher Beha, “Head Scratcher: Can Neuroscience Finally Explain Consciousness?” *Harper’s Magazine* 334, no. 2004 (May 2017): 88–94.

³² Christopher Douglas and Nigel Planer, *I, An Actor by Nicholas Craig* (London: Pavilion Books Limited, 1988), 15.

³³ It is notable, in this case, that the mockery is vested by the noted English actor Nigel Planer, whose invention of ‘Nicholas Craig’ as ‘the Naked Actor’ in several media, including a BBC2 television program, is a humorous intervention on a topic that I suspect Planer himself well knows is central to any discourse around acting.

In any event, there is simply no logical, causal, positivist, materialist, *ontological* way to *be a person other than one's self* – so why bother putting the question (except as parody). Philosophically – and comedically – it is intriguing; ontologically, it appears to be a dead end. Not only that, but the idea of actually “being” another person is the horribly mistaken popular trope that is used as either an accusation against, or a lionization of, so-called “Method actors”. Although this superficial use of the term “Method” has little to do with the actual pedagogy named by Lee Strasberg and practiced by his followers at The Actors Studio in New York from 1951 onwards, the longevity and sturdiness of its popular conception maintains a surprising currency in media conversations regarding what professional actors “do” in their work. And what they are asked to do, according to not only many self-appointed pundits and critics but also successful actors themselves, is to *become another person*. Here is Richard Brody writing in *The New Yorker* – and quoting noted screen actor James Franco – in the weeks following the death of celebrated “Method” actor Philip Seymour Hoffman by drug overdose in 2014:

...modern-day acting [Lee Strasberg's Method], which links emotional moments from a performer's own life to that of a character, and which conceives characters in terms of complete and filled-out lives that actors imagine and inhabit, asks too much of performers. Here's how Franco describes it:

Actors have been lashing out against their profession and its grip on their public images since at least Marlon Brando. Brando's performances revolutionized American acting precisely because he didn't seem to be “performing,” in the sense that he wasn't putting something *on* as much as he was *being*.³⁴

Inasmuch as Brody, and his supportive usage of Franco's description, simplifies the terms that might more accurately define Strasberg's Method as a holistic methodology which also

³⁴Richard Brody, “Is Method Acting Destroying Actors?” *The New Yorker*, February 21, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/is-method-acting-destroying-actors>.

accentuates such elements as *relaxation*, *concentration*, and *action* as being integral to the actor's practice, the constitution of the above passage usefully foregrounds and (re)formulates aspects of a dominant discourse around acting that is rooted in the European late-eighteenth century and extends itself into the late-nineteenth. Brody – by highlighting and connecting the formulations of “emotional moments”, “performer’s own life”, “complete and filled-out lives [of] characters”, “actors imagine and inhabit”, and “putting something *on*” as opposed to “*being*” – here invokes the pre-Stanislavskian centuries-long arguments that were catalyzed by Diderot’s “The Paradox of the Actor” (c. 1778; pub.1830), and taken up by “Talma on the Actor’s Art” (1825; pub. in trans. 1883), Coquelin’s “Art and the Actor” (1880), and the subsequent “taking up” of these ideas by the esteemed English actor Sir Henry Irving. I will continue to outline the surprisingly salient argumentative opinions of these aforementioned writers and posit what elements of their historicized discussion remain relevant to my current examination of the Self and dramatic acting. It is enough now to recognize that the seemingly inexhaustible debate around “Method” acting’s proclivities evident in contemporary popular media extends well back before Strasberg’s and Brando’s influence, and further back even from the *fin de siècle* concerns of Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre in the earliest twentieth century.

Accordingly, let me ask a different, but related phenomenological question: *what is it like to be an actor?* This question – though certainly more graspable from an epistemological point of view than “what is it like to be a bat” or, as I’ve imagined, “what is it like to be another person” – is still ontologically slippery. To be an actor, by definition, is to be someone who is *not quite one’s self*. Indeed, it is the great French *comédien* Coquelin who, in his 1880 lecture, highlights this autobiographical fungibility as being central to the actor’s social suppression and questionable status within civil society: “It is due to the fact that the renunciation by the actor of his own personality, to assume the character of one, ten, or twenty other people, is apparently a renunciation of his own dignity, and a denial of the dignity of mankind”.³⁵ Or put another way, in a less stentorian and more contemporarily ambiguous tone by Performance Studies pioneer

³⁵ Constant Coquelin, *Art and the Actor*, trans. Abby Langdon Alger (New York: Dramatic Museum of Columbia University, 1915), 81.

Richard Schechner in his self-described “not me – not not me” schema: “The [dramatic] character actor is not himself, but he is not not himself at the same time”.³⁶

Diderot goes one step further than Coquelin, regarding the societal “dignity” of the actor, by suggesting that it is a veritably demonstrative lack of civic and subjective integrity that produces such a vocational path to begin with:

What makes them [actors] slip on the sock or the buskin? Want of education, poverty, a libertine spirit. The stage is a resource, never a choice. Never did actor become so from love of virtue, from desire to be useful in the world, or to serve his country and family; never from any of the honourable motives which might incline the right mind, a feeling heart, a sensitive soul, to so fine a profession.³⁷

In any event, irrespective of Diderot’s classist and sanctimonious posturing as stated above, it might be presumed that Coquelin’s anxiety around the authenticity of his civic status as a gentleman had little impact on the actual work of his *being* an actor. It might also be deduced that the grand old actor’s fears of suffering societal judgement due to the apparent instability of his profession’s performances of “personality” have little to do with Schechner’s slippery “postmodern” ideas around the collapse of a stable subjectivity. Ideas regarding the self – and just what the “renunciation of personality” and “of dignity” might mean to an actor in society – have certainly changed since the nineteenth-century. Nevertheless, the essential dilemmas and provocations of “the dispersed self”,³⁸ as Elinor Fuchs calls it regarding the psychology of the

³⁶ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 127.

³⁷ Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. Walter Herries Pollock (London: Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly, 1883), 63–64.

³⁸ Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 9.

postmodern condition, appear to be ones that have their roots in the modern – and may in fact be so universal as to render such historicizing cultural terms not just inconsequential, but wrong-headed. Perhaps the strongest linking feature of the actor’s “problem” of selfhood has to do with *feeling* and *emotion* as they pertain to the performing subject: questions relating to *qualia* and the historical notion of *sensibility*. Consider the following judgement on Coquelin from his peer Sarah Bernhardt, wherein the great female star points to the essential failure of his acting methodology:

If the actor retains his mode of living, of thinking and behaving throughout the manifold characters that he successively impersonates, he cannot feel the passions of these characters; and, unless he can enter into the feelings of his heroes, however violent they may be, however cruel and vindictive they may seem, he will never be anything but a bad actor [...] How can he convince another of his emotion, of the sincerity of his passions, if he is unable to convince himself to the point of actually becoming the character that he has to play? I cannot forbear repeating here the example of Coquelin, who was insensible to the passions of the dramatic characters that he personated. The public itself remained unmoved, at which Coquelin was most illogically surprised. But he never managed to acquire sensibility.”³⁹

So, if I have identified that actors have an ontological impossibility placed before them in their vocational imperative to seemingly *become* another person – at least, representationally – I still must ask why the concept of *feeling* has such a central role to play within this schema. A further look at *sensibility*, as a key term in my argumentation, seems necessary before judiciously examining the literature of acting, self, and subjectivity.

³⁹ Sarah Bernhardt, *The Art of the Theatre*, trans. H. J. Stenning (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1924), 103–4.

Self and Sensibility

I ask the question “what is it like to be an actor?” partly because the parameters of the debate on *being an actor* were set by a non-actor in the late-eighteenth century and, I would argue, have barely shifted since. I refer, of course, to Denis Diderot’s (1713 – 1784) famous *Paradoxe sur le comédien* wherein the polymath philosopher sets forth his central argumentative question: should actors actually *experience* emotions when playing on stage or should they shape and control an illusionistic *display* of emotions gained from the observation and artistic distillation of those emotions? Diderot famously insists on the latter scenario, though, as Edward Duerr has pointed out, he does so with a nuanced argument regarding sensibility that is often elided by the common supposition that what he asks is for actors simply *not to feel*.⁴⁰ Asserting that “Nature unadorned has [...] her moments of sublimity”, Diderot posits that “if there is anyone sure to give and preserve their sublimity it is the man [sic] who *can feel it* with his passion and his genius, and reproduce it with complete self-possession” [emphasis added].⁴¹ Nevertheless, Diderot’s postulations about sublimity and the actor are often summed up by this aphoristic declaration: “Extreme sensibility makes middling actors; middling sensibility makes the ruck of bad actors; in complete absence of sensibility is the possibility of a sublime actor”.⁴²

The problematic central critical term deployed by Diderot in his essay – sensibility (*sensibilité*) – is one that first appears in European writing around 1700, finds its apex of usage and influence in and around the year 1800, and is rarely used contemporarily.⁴³ (Jane Austen’s popular 1811 novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, might now be seen as the emblematic example of the term’s historical ubiquity, though by the early nineteenth-century Austen was using the term as a

⁴⁰ Edward Duerr, *The Length and Depth of Acting* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 267.

⁴¹ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 23.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴³ Google Books Ngram Viewer, “Sensibility,” accessed June 3, 2017, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=sensibility&case_insensitive=on&year_start=1700&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=7&share=&direct_url=t4%3B%2Csensibility%3B%2Cc0%3B%2Cs0%3B%3Bsensibilit%3B%2Cc0%3B%3BSensibility%3B%2Cc0.

critical harbinger of a sentimental cliché “associated firmly with the under-educated, the ill-bred and the non-metropolitan”.⁴⁴) Defined primarily by the English Oxford Living Dictionary as “the quality of being able to appreciate and respond to complex emotional or aesthetic influences”,⁴⁵ *sensibility* may perhaps most easily be culturally translated as *feeling*, or perhaps *emotion*, for today’s reader. Indeed, *feeling* is the very word that Dr. George Cheyne identified as a near-synonym for *sensibility* when he published his influential *The English Malady; or A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of all Kinds* in 1733: “There are as many and as different Degrees of *Sensibility* or of *Feeling* as there are Degrees of *Intelligence* and Perception in *human* Creatures; and the *Principle* of both may be perhaps one and the same”.⁴⁶ Taking this provenance of terminology into account, it may be more accurate to accept Janet Todd’s historically-informed definition of *sensibility* as it was understood as a “key term” of the eighteenth-century: “[...] it came to denote the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering”.⁴⁷ Even more embracingly, Joseph Roach offers an aestheticized historical view that authoritatively tells us that, “like *wit* before and *imagination* after, *sensibility* lent its name to the intellectual standpoint of an age”.⁴⁸

If to recognize *sensibility* is to “denote a faculty of feeling”, then Diderot does truly establish a paradox. According to him, as I’ve cited, the actor of “genius” can both “feel” nature’s sublimity, and can “reproduce it with complete self-possession”. Yet he also asserts that “extreme *sensibility*” – which I take to also mean extreme feeling – will overcome the average individual’s possession of self, and result in “middling” activity upon the stage. He goes on to

⁴⁴ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), 133.

⁴⁵ *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s. v. “sensibility,” accessed June 3, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sensibility>.

⁴⁶ Quoted in G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.

⁴⁷ Todd, *Sensibility*, 7.

⁴⁸ Roach, Joseph R., *The Player’s Passion* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985). 96.

suggest that an actor's natural sublimity is evidenced only when the performer feels *nothing* (“a complete absence of sensibility”).

And, perhaps, Diderot is right in all this. To suggest that most actors – the “ruck” of “middling” actors – might lose self-possession while enacting a character on the stage is not a timid proposition. It may fly in the face of the vaunted professionalism and technique of the experienced performer, but it is echoed by Herbert Blau, in a typically playful and discursive manner, when he cites this observation:

...the vicissitudes of control are endemic to the art of acting, and in the exacerbation of rehearsal – with its associational process – a director may work on that, escalating a certain danger that, in the reciprocity of the actors, may really get out of hand, not only in scenes of violence but, as lyrical or tender as it may be, in a love scene as well: more of that, yes, it's splendid [...] but if the sensuousness increases, whatever the text says, text or no text, the bodies becoming the book, when do you stop? And why? since the actors are into it now...⁴⁹

Yet these observations about this term will not suffice in providing a framework for assessing how intertwined the notions of self and sensibility are in our culture, and the implications of this entanglement when considering dramatic acting. The sensibility of the corporal body and the emotional life of the acting subject practically conflate themselves into that most vaunted and contested concept for twentieth-century actors in the Western dramatic tradition: *Emotion Memory*. As Konstantin Stanislavski baldly puts it in his serviceable prose: ““You can see clearly the tight relationship and interaction of our five senses and their influence on the things which Emotion Memory recalls. So, as you see, the actor needs not only Emotion Memory but sensory memory.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Herbert Blau, “Rehearsing the Impossible” in *Psychoanalysis and Performance*, ed. Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear (London: Routledge, 2001), 28.

⁵⁰ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 203.

Scholarly works on the appearance of *sensibility* as an important philosophical, social, and literary concept emerging from the eighteenth-century consistently point to Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690) as an establishing watershed.⁵¹ “*Self*”, Locke tells us in a celebrated passage, “is that conscious thinking thing, (whatever Substance, made up of whether Spiritual, or Material, Simple, or Compounded, it matters not) which is sensible, or conscious of Pleasure or Pain, capable of Happiness or Misery, and so is concern'd for it *self*, as far as that consciousness extends”.⁵² Here, written almost a century before Diderot's *Paradoxe*, the appearance of the self as a production of sensibility – the “conscious thinking thing” that can *feel* sensation and emotion – is established as a founding principle of a systematic empiricism. Regarding its aesthetic implications, James Sambrook refers to Locke's statement thusly: “[...] the notion of *the self constantly being remade as it becomes conscious of new sensations* was to become one of the intellectual foundations of the eighteenth-century sentimental novel” (emphasis added).⁵³

All in all, the philosophical empiricism arising from Enlightenment thinking and the aesthetic valorization of an individual's sensational experience of the world resulted in a powerful reordering of *a posteriori* values in society as a whole. As Stephen D. Cox, reading R.F. Brissenden, explains it: “Basing their theories on empirical principles, aestheticians of the later eighteenth century usually assumed that rules of taste must be derived from the self's reactions to what it experiences rather than from prescriptive principles”.⁵⁴ Daniel Wickberg puts it another way, prodding the general definition into an evocation of a particular kind of “character type”:

⁵¹ Stephen D. Cox, “*The Stranger within Thee*”: *Concepts of the Self in Late-Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), 13–15; Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensitivity*, 3–4; Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1979] 2009), 3; James Sambrook, *The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1700–1789* (London: Longman, 1986), 49–50; and Todd, *Sensibility*, 24–25.

⁵² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed, Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 341.

⁵³ Sambrook, *Eighteenth Century*, 50.

⁵⁴ Cox, “*Stranger Within Thee*,” 54.

If sensibility was the necessary condition for cognition and the formation of ideas for the empiricist tradition, it was strongly linked to the capacity for feeling and emotion as responses to sense experience in the more general intellectual and literary culture of the eighteenth century. The characterological embodiment of sensibility, the so-called “Man of Feeling,” with his propensity for tears at the sight of any suffering creature, was the bleeding-heart liberal of his day.⁵⁵

Wickberg’s culturally taxonomic characterization of a thin-skinned male whose eyes weep and heart bleeds is indicative of both the theatricality inherent to notions of sensibility and the underlying “feminization” of the term.

Though the “novels of sensibility”, or sentimental novels, of the 1760s and 1770s might be seen as the most influential and iconic representations of feeling and emotional response, the theatre was clearly a place where such inventions of individualism and character could be, literally, acted out.⁵⁶ And, as public performative occasions where the embodied and reiterative behaviours of cultural change could be enacted and observed, the theatre – through the activity of dramatic characterization – became a venue that exemplified the “feminization” of culture.⁵⁷ As G.J. Barker-Benfield instructs us, “Such ‘feminization’ – liquefying the stoic male, purging Restoration sexuality, and making women the moral focus – can be seen as the effect of the reformation of manners and the civilizing process”,⁵⁸ and it is striking to consider if Diderot’s cautious yet declarative censure of sensibility *in actors* represents a kind of resistance towards, or push-back against, the faint aroma of female delicacy that clings to the blossoming of

⁵⁵ Daniel Wickberg, “What Is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New,” *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (1 June, 2007): 665.

⁵⁶ Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, 297–9.

⁵⁷ Todd, *Sensibility*, 37.

⁵⁸ Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, 298.

sensibility in the arts during his era. Though the valorization of the sensible, as I've indicated, had its roots in the empiricism and secularism of scientism, its expression as an aesthetic movement – *sentimentalism* – was strongly codified as a female-identified social practice. Noting that Diderot's *paradoxe* was penned in various forms during the latter quarter of the seventeenth century before his death in 1784, it is relevant to note Janet Todd's assessment that,

[b]y the last decades of the century, as the tide begins to turn against a sensibility which was judged effeminate, destabilizing, marginally provincial and detrimental to Christian precepts, feminine sensibility, when embraced, often had a decadent quality about it, a self-indulgent physicality and a self-contemplating vanity".⁵⁹

Though not referring specifically to the theatre, Todd's identification of "a self-indulgent physicality and a self-contemplating vanity" in this passage can easily act as a rebuke to what are sometimes seen as the worst extravagances of the stage actor. For the female actor, or *actress*, the associations were even more damning: since at least the time of Nell Gwyn, females on the stage had been associated with the embodiment of out-and-out vocational courtesanship. William Archer, in *Masks or Faces?*, his late-nineteenth study compendium of actors' commentaries on the value of Diderotian sensibility to their craft, nicely elucidates the tension between repulsion and attraction that deep expressions of emotion incite within observers when he muses that, "as a general rule [...] unrestrained weeping is a mark of passivity, whereas it is activity in one form or another that most deeply interests and moves us."⁶⁰

What may be interpreted as Diderot's theoretical ambivalence regarding the sensible actor, while as a *philosophe* and essayist he was a staunch and even visionary proponent of the

⁵⁹ Todd, *Sensibility*, 61–62.

⁶⁰ William Archer, *Masks of Faces?* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 115.

materialist science of sensibility,⁶¹ points to what Barker-Benfield calls “the continuous struggle over its meanings and values”.⁶² It appears as no accident that Diderot’s most famous accusation of excessive sensibility on the stage – Sir Henry Irving describes this excess as a “wild, ungovernable emotion” in his argumentative 1883 Preface to the *Paradoxe*⁶³ – is hurled towards the French actress Mlle. (Marie) Dumesnil (1713-1803). “She comes on the stage without knowing what she is going to say;” Diderot assures us, “half the time she does not know what she is saying: but she has one sublime moment.”⁶⁴ And what, instead, is presented as the sanctioned and antonymical example for this overly sensible behaviour? Diderot gives us:

Cool reflection must bring the fury of enthusiasm of its bearings.
The extravagant creature who loses his self-control has no hold on us; this is gained by the man [*sic*] who is self-controlled. The great poets, especially the great dramatic poets, keep a keen watch on what is going on, both in the physical and the moral world.⁶⁵

Barker-Benfield might as well be writing a direct corollary to Diderot’s backhanded ‘take-down’ of Mlle. Dumesnil when informing us that “not only were women’s nerves interpreted as more delicate and more susceptible than men’s, but women’s ability to operate their nerves by acts of will [...] was seriously questioned”.⁶⁶ Diderot, himself, is more forceful in his choice of a descriptive language which mimics the tropes of male sexual energy when he asserts for the actor that “[h]e must have in himself an unmoved and disinterested onlooker. He must have,

⁶¹ Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, xvii; Wilda C. Anderson, “Diderot’s Laboratory of Sensibility,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 67, *Concepts of Closure* (1984): 72–91; Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 20–22.

⁶² Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, xvii.

⁶³ Henry Irving, preface to Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, xiii.

⁶⁴ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁶ Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, xvii–xviii.

consequently, penetration and no sensibility.” The actor must have, in other words, much *yang* but no *yin*.

These considerations are stimulating when reading Diderot’s extravagant praise for Mlle. Dumesnil’s great rival on the seventh-century French stage, Mlle. Clairon. This is Claire-Josèphe-Hippolyte Lérés Clairon de Latude (1723-1803), who was, for over twenty years, the dominant player of the *Comédie-Française*. As personages, Mlle. Dumesnil and La Clairon (as she was often called) came to embody the arguments of the times with regard to sensibility and the actor, due in no small part to the binary positions Diderot constructs for them in his *Paradoxe*. In contrast to his critique of Mlle. Dumesnil, the *philosophe* waxes over the “perfect” acting of Mlle. Clairon for over four hundred unbroken words.⁶⁷ For Diderot, Mlle. Clairon’s portrayal of character represented “the highest, the greatest, the most perfect type her imagination could compass”.⁶⁸ This type, though, “is not herself. Were it indeed bounded by her own dimensions, how paltry, how feeble would be her playing!”⁶⁹ Instead, “once she has reached the height she has given to her spectre, she has herself well in hand, *she repeats her efforts without emotion*. (emphasis mine)”.⁷⁰ If, indeed, the *sensibilité* of womanhood – the *paltry* and *feeble* nature of *herself* – is held to be suspect, then the *perfect* and *emotionless* characterizations of Mlle. Clairon may be seen as being coded by Diderot as a way of masculinizing, and thereby authorizing, her public performances. The resistance to female practitioners within the theatrical world of the eighteenth century is a potently universalized one, and not to be underestimated when considering Diderot’s (and even Coquelin’s) dismissal of sensibility as a danger to an elevated dramatic art of acting. As Kristina Straub instructs regarding this period, “the

⁶⁷ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

professionalization of women in the theatre is, in fact, associated with the moral breakdown of the theatrical world in general.”⁷¹

Mlle. Clairon, however, was no passive explicator of her own dramatic art. In her *Mémoires d’Hyppolite Clairon et réflexions sur l’art dramatique*, first published in 1798, Clairon valorizes a calculated and purely physical methodology with regard to her own acting, while also accounting for the strenuous toll that impersonating extreme and stylized emotions takes on an actor. In the following emblematic passage, she describes her method for eliciting tears on stage:

In order to arrive at simply wetting my eyelids, to make a tear occasionally spring from my eyes, I combined a continually pained tone with an abdominal contraction which made my nerves tremble, a sort of strangling in the throat that troubled my speech, my choppy, halting breath indicating the agitation of my soul.⁷²

This example, whereby Clairon achieves the actual “wetness” of tears by willfully submitting her body to violent physical contortions, might be seen as the antithetical example to the “subconscious by conscious means” dictates of Stanislavski which lead to the appropriate use of *emotion memory* to achieve truthful performance. For Clairon, the subconscious (an unknown conceptualization during her time) doesn’t even enter into the equation: it is all “indicating” rather than experiencing. Clairon’s instructions might appear to the contemporary reader as the exactly opposite advice that Stanislavski would give to practitioners well over a century later. Here is first Elizabeth Hapgood’s famous simplification of the Stanislavskian directive in this matter, and then Jean Benedetti’s translation: “[y]ou may play well or you may play badly; the important thing is that you should play truly”⁷³; “You can sometimes play feebly, sometimes

⁷¹ Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 100.

⁷² Quoted in Jeffrey M. Leichman, “What They Talked About When They Talked About Acting: Clairon via Diderot and Talma,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 422.

⁷³ Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1936), 15.

adequately (that often depends on how you feel) but play truly.”⁷⁴ There can be no doubt in Clairon’s case that she was committed to the truth of *artful* acting within the demands of the eighteenth-century French theatre, but such artifice had much more to do with corporeal muscle aligned to reason than spontaneous affect associated with emotion.

How instructive it is to contrast Diderot’s thoughts on the matter of sensibility and the actor with his younger near-contemporary François-Joseph Talma (1763-1826). Unlike Diderot, Talma was a celebrated professional actor of the French stage who claimed no authority as a writer – “I have no pretension to be an author: all my studies have been directed towards my calling”⁷⁵—and who considered Mlle. Dumesnil to be one of the geniuses of her age, along with the men Lekain, Molé, and Monvel.⁷⁶ What, for Talma, were the essential combination of qualities needed in order to achieve greatness as an actor?

Amongst the majority of those who go on the stage, one has penetration, but his soul is cold as ice. Another possesses sensibility, and intelligence is wanting [...] the requisites for a really great actor are so many, and so seldom united in the same person, that we ought not to be surprised at finding them appear at such long intervals.⁷⁷

Talma appears to affirm that “penetration” without “sensibility” is a poor state for the actor to aspire to; in fact, heightened sensibility – combined with intelligence – is the *prerequisite* quality from which any concept of “penetration” seems to arise, for he asserts that

⁷⁴ Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, 320.

⁷⁵ François-Joseph Talma, *Talma on the Actor’s Art*, preface by Henry Irving (New York: Roorbach & Company, [1825] 1883), 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

[i]t is only by an excess of sensibility that [the actor] can succeed in producing deep impressions, and move even the coldest souls [...] to form a great actor, the union of sensibility and intelligence is required. The actor who possesses this double gift adopts a course of study peculiar to himself.⁷⁸

Throughout his treatise on the “Actor’s Art” – published in 1825, a full five years before Diderot’s posthumous *Paradoxe* – Talma consistently commends and valorizes the indispensability of sensibility to the practice of stage craft. I suggest that it is his experiential and phenomenological response based on a lifetime working *as* an actor that ground Talma’s observations regarding the central role that the senses – *qualia*, feeling – play in dramatic acting. As I also argue, these qualities of sensation are indispensable to a sense of self.

In acknowledgement of this, it might be argued that Talma’s greatest discursive contribution was not in his specified treatise on the art of acting, but in his address (so typical of eighteenth-century publications) called *Mémoires de Lekain, précédés de Réflexions sur cet acteur et sur l’art théâtral par M. Talma*, published in the same year. Distilling his observations about acting through memories of his master predecessor Henri-Louis Cain (1729-1778), often called simply Lekain, Talma was able to express some fundamentally straightforward opinions. In an indicative passage, he is able to state the terms of a professional actor’s vocation, in contradiction to both Diderot’s fearful approach and Clairon’s slightly bullyish one, as embodying:

That faculty of exaltation that agitates the actor, takes over his senses, shakes him to his soul, and makes him enter into the most terrible passions *as if* they were his very own (emphasis mine).⁷⁹

Note the “as if” – even in translation – that will come up so often in the discussion of self, Stanislavski, and dramatic acting.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 14–15.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Leichman, “What They Talked About When They Talked About Acting,” 427.

And lest I paint Clairon's observations on her craft in too categorical a hue, it is vital to point out that she, too, as a practitioner, is unwilling to dispense with the necessity of utilizing one's subjective emotions when portraying scenes of extreme action and pathos. In her exegesis on dramatic art, she makes it clear that she understands the pitfalls of relying *solely* on mimicry and artifice when performing in character, but also laments the debilitating toll that engaging in sensibility exacts on a professional actor's instrument and ability when she comments on

the indispensable necessity of being continually penetrated by the saddest and most terrible events: the actor who does not make them personal, is nothing but a schoolboy repeating his lessons; but he who appropriates them . . . is certainly a miserable being, and I dare claim that it requires a superhuman force to *act well* in tragedy for more than ten years.⁸⁰

It is stimulating to reflect upon the deep societal pressures that may have pressured Clairon to be not always inclusive of *feelings* in her descriptions of process and activity, as an actor, as she may have wanted. As a female, and one of the great theatrical stars of her age, she would certainly have been circumscribed as both a woman and an idol of that period, and leery of being pigeon-holed as merely *womanly*, I suspect.

Gender concerns aside, the physical correspondence between feelings and truth seems even recognized by the great wit and comedic English actor Samuel Foote who, when writing his treatise on *Passions: So far as they regard the STAGE* a good eighty years before Talma, and within a different cultural and scientific milieu, offers this admonishment to a "Mr. B – Y" (the Irish actor Spranger Barry) on his performance as Othello at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane in 1746:

You have, Sir, I doubt not, been often told; that your Expressions of Grief and Tenderness are very becoming, and they told you Truth; but let not this Persuasion draw you into a Prostitution of

⁸⁰ Quoted in Leichman, "What They Talked About When They Talked About Acting," 429.

the Excellence; for, not to mention that your Judgement will suffer in the Eyes of the Discerning, your hackneying the Passion, and applying it indiscriminately, will take from its Weight, and lower its Force, even with the Injudicious.⁸¹

That Foote so distinctly equates “Expressions” of emotion with “Truth” in the actor is stated up front, yet it also appears clear that such “Excellence” may be delegitimized and diminished if subjected to a “Prostitution” by the performer in question. As the term prostitution had been regularized as an indicator of female sexual harlotry since the early sixteenth century,⁸² it is no leap to observe that the connections between sensibility, theatre, and feminization are not only maintained, but used here in a pointedly pejorative sense. As Kristina Straub notes, “the private life of actresses inevitably tends to go public, and going public, in turn, inevitably calls into question the integrity of that private life”.⁸³

That being said, it is well to remember that in 1776 Foote himself was set up and charged with the attempted seduction of his footman, John Sangster; though he was acquitted, the strains of the public trial and smear had a deleterious affect on his health and ruined his career.⁸⁴ The correlations between sensibility, femininity, male homosexuality, and prostitution are complex and interweaving. As cited by Straub, the polemic *A Letter to David Garrick* from 1772 quotes Rousseau on a “profession in which a man exhibits himself as a publick spectacle for money: a profession in the practice of which he submits to the insults and affronts from those, who think they purchase, with a pence, a right to treat him ignominiously.”⁸⁵ Perhaps, it is a latent 1700s

⁸¹ Samuel Foote, *A Treatise on the Passions, So Far As They Regard the STAGE*, from 1747 edition, London (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1976), 31.

⁸² *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, ed. Robert K. Barnhart, (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrop Publishers, 1988), s. v. “prostitution.”

⁸³ Straub, *Sexual Suspects*, 94.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 60–64.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

sense of the acting profession's links to personal immorality that so troubled Coquelin in his search for civic respectability in the next century. As Straub notes, "players' struggles to claim 'respectability' are still obvious in autobiographical narratives at the turn of the eighteenth century".⁸⁶

If there is an anxiety about notions of sensibility and the construction of the feminine, then perhaps this disquiet is inevitably tethered to an uncomfortable covalence between the emerging scientism of "senses" and the "nervous system" as a conduit to self-knowledge paired with the coded "mystery" of an "inner" life as experienced, publicly, through female domesticity, and privately, through a "sense of self". Though the domestic ideal of "womanhood" – regardless of its morally retributive perturbations in early novels such as *Clarissa* and *Pamela* – was consumed and celebrated as an aesthetically and socially progressive response to male-coded "scientific" valorizations of sensibility, the imagined repercussions of validating such situations were often expressed as an uneasiness with a "prostitution" of feminized feeling and emotion. Indeed, the popularity of Richardson's novels, with their narrative surrender to episodes of rape, seduction, and looming prostitution, might be seen as casting a perpetual prejudice on sensibility as it relates to ideas of pleasure, autonomy, and identity. That it becomes impossible in this light to consider formulations of the self that honour the integrity of individual experience appears as an epistemological blot on the overall assessment of actors – *real people living through private sensation publicly* – as self-actualizing agents. As Stephen D. Cox composes it in the second paragraph of "The Self as Stranger", the eighteenth-century efforts to conceptualize "the naked self" involved intimately connecting to "what is most important to the self: its processes of 'feeling' and perception, its powers of 'sensibility';⁸⁷ and, later, that "a conviction that the individual self and its original 'feelings' are of the utmost value".⁸⁸ By the early twentieth century, this "utmost value" of the self's "original 'feelings'" had been schematized by Stanislavski into one of his most widely-known tropes:

⁸⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁷ Cox, "Stranger Within Thee," 3.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 6.

“Note this: the state of mind you are now in *we* call “*public solitude*”. It is called public because we are all here with you. It is solitude because you are cut off from us by a small circle of attention. In a performance, with a thousand eyes on you, you can always retreat into your solitude, like a snail in its shell.”⁸⁹

Much of the confusion around assumptions that “the self can best be understood as the embodiment of its ‘feelings’ – its perceptions and emotional responses”, as Cox continues, is forever exemplified in the paradigmatic example proffered by Diderot of the actor as *witnessed* by the *spectator*. Though the encyclopaedist may have been an unusually astute observer of stage performance, there is no evidence that he was ever an actor – either amateur or professional – over his busy lifetime. It is clear that, as a young man, Diderot was entranced by the idea of a life on the stage; as he puts it himself: “I myself, in my young days, hesitated between the Sorbonne and the stage. In the bitterest depth of winter I used to go and recite aloud parts in Molière and in Corneille in the solitary alleys of the Luxembourg”.⁹⁰ But, as Jeffrey M. Leichman puts it, “acting was a profession for which he considered himself far too emotionally vulnerable”⁹¹. Diderot, too, seems to concur with this adducement when he makes a distinction, regarding “giving little dramatic sketches in private life [...] in private theatricals”,⁹² between the “easy tone” of expression achieved when “you give a recitation in a drawing room” and the pitfalls of performing on the stage:

[...] your feelings are stirred; your voice fails you; you burst into tears. You have, as you say, felt, and felt deeply [...] you were carried away, you surprised and touched your hearers, you made a great hit. All that is true enough. But now transfer your easy tone,

⁸⁹ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 99.

⁹⁰ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 64.

⁹¹ Leichman, “What They Talked About When They Talked About Acting,” 428.

⁹² Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 39.

your simple expression, your every-day bearing, to the stage, and, I assure you, you will be paltry and weak.⁹³

Yet how *can* Diderot “assure” us that this is the case, when he himself never seemed to summon either the ambition or technique to actually *act upon the stage*? I concur, here, with Susan Melrose’s “banal (but politically delicate) conviction that expert practitioners working to professional criteria are differently ‘wired’ from those lacking that expertise.”⁹⁴ Hence, Diderot’s evocation of the actor’s state-of-being while performing, though not entirely inaccurate or insignificant, is thoroughly inapplicable to the realities of the dedicated daily professional. For the essayist, acting on stage is imagined as a malady of epic proportions:

[T]hat disposition accompanying a weakness of the organs, following from the mobility of the diaphragm, from vivacious imagination, from delicate nerves, which inclines one to sympathize, to shiver, to admire, to fear, to be disturbed, to cry, to faint, to rush to aid, to flee, to scream, to lose one’s mind, to exaggerate, to detest, to disdain, to have no precise idea of the true, the good and the beautiful, to be unjust, to be mad.⁹⁵

As Joseph Roach admirably demonstrates, Diderot was both a performative social figure and a startling theorist who managed to recognize and voice the essential modernist terms of performance for centuries to come; however, his insights were also forever embalmed as those of one who was, and actively strove to be, an *outsider* of actual experience. This reality of Diderot’s “observer status” was not accidental. Though it may have been authentically representative of a personal sphere of comfort and experience, it was first and foremost an expression of his – and the *zeitgeist*’s – commitment to scientific material assessment. I will suggest that even the

⁹³ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 18.

⁹⁴ Susan Melrose, “Who Knows – and Who Cares – about Performance Mastery (?)” in *A Performance Cosmology: Testimony from the Future, Evidence from the Past*, ed. Judie Christie, Richard Gough, and Daniel Watt (London: Routledge, 2006), 136.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Leichman, “What They Talked About When They Talked About Acting,” 428.

protean erudition of Roach ultimately smacks up against the valorization of *observation* as the *sine qua non* of truth-telling when it comes to human behaviour in the natural world. For Roach makes a category error in the conclusion to his extensive chapter on Diderot and the “crisis of sensibility” when he affirms that “[Diderot] encountered occasional resistance from practitioners on the grounds that he was divulging professional secrets, as indeed he was”.⁹⁶ Except, I would argue, that indeed he *wasn't*. Professional detractors, from Talma to Irving, resisted Diderot’s siding with a lack of sensibility as integral to an actor’s process and success because the essayist got the professional secret *wrong*. What Diderot was doing was applying an expansionist and alienating view of scientific knowledge and positioning regarding the human mechanism to the experiential “being” of the actor of the actor at work. As Roach contextualizes and quotes from Diderot to bolster his position:

“You may prove this to demonstration”, admits the First with the air of a *philosophe* who has entered the arena of modern science and lost, “and a great actor will decline to acknowledge it; it is his own secret”. Then as now superstition exerted its not inconsiderable charms on spectator and performer alike, raising the veil of mystification and magic over the inner source of stage effects.⁹⁷

In contrast to this summation, I contend that Diderot is gilding his own argumentative lily by proffering that the “great actor” won’t admit to the critic’s revelations about withholding sensibility because they represent the “secret” to great acting – now revealed! I submit that most actors, (great, or merely professionally committed and competent), “decline acknowledgement” of this “demonstration” because it is not *true*. In fact, it is ever only a *demonstration*, observed by an observing and critical party. This is the “veil of mystery and magic” that Roach invokes for both the “spectator and the performer alike”. But, for performers, the idea of sensibility was never in a “superstitious” crisis, as it may have been for spectators and critics. For performers,

⁹⁶ Roach, *Player's Passion*, 159.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

the sensible apprehension of true inner feelings as an authentication of both self *and* character was a foundational experience that was, indeed, the *real* “secret” to great acting. To *seem* was actually to *be*: that this might be, in a sense, “magical” I do concur and will argue, yet such multiplicity of being is not *illusionary*, but constitutive.

If, perhaps, only liminally so. As Aaron Hill (who as an inveterate manager of theatres would surely have been placed on stage with fellow actors at a moment’s notice) put it in his 1754 poem “The Actor’s Epitome”: “No dull, cold mouther shares the actor’s plea, / Rightly to *seem*, is transiently to *be*.”⁹⁸ Hill also appears to presage Talma’s notion that a great actor needs intelligence *and* sensibility in order to be effective in the work of dramatic playing when he aphorizes, “Arduous the task, and asks a climbing brain, / A head for judgement, and a heart for pain; / Ere sense impress’d, reflects adopted forms, / And changeful nature shakes with borrowed storms.”⁹⁹

Ultimately, the power and influence of *sensibility* has been substantively diminished by its teleological devaluation as a forerunner of nineteenth-century Victorian sentimentalism in literature. And yet there *is* something sentimental in Diderot’s use of the concept of sensibility in that it appears to suggest exaggeration and self-indulgence. In contrast, he itemizes the actor’s “brain”, rather than “heart”, as being the driver of effective (and properly affective) performance. Directly following the above-quoted affirmative statement regarding the “sublime actor”, Diderot goes to some length in describing his perceptions of what it is like to be an actor:

The player’s tears come from his brain, the sensitive being’s from his heart; the sensitive being’s soul gives unmeasured trouble to his brain; the player’s brain gives sometimes a touch of trouble to his soul: he weeps as might weep an unbelieving priest preaching of the Passion; as a seducer might weep at the feet of the woman whom he does not love, but on whom he would impose; like a

⁹⁸ Aaron Hill, *The Actor’s Epitome* (London: Printed for J. Dixwell, No. 148, St. Martin’s Lane, near Charing Cross, [1754] 1779), 5.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

beggar in the street or at the door of a church – a beggar who substitutes insult for vain appeal; or like a courtesan who has not heart, and who abandons herself in your arms.¹⁰⁰

The crux of Diderot’s observations regarding the actor’s being seems always to centre on the figure and behaviour of a *hypocrite* as seen by a *spectator*. He appears unable to imagine, as an audience member, that the emotions which he witnesses on the stage might be subjectively real, or true, for the actor portraying them. For Diderot, the perceptions and emotions of spectators are always the tests through which authentic responses are reified. As Duerr puts it, “the actor while performing must only *seem* to feel in order to rouse feelings in the audience.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, as Diderot reminds us, late in his own treatise: “[P]eople come not to see tears, but to hear speeches that draw tears.”¹⁰² This premise of a cause-and-effect action – seen as calculated *performance* leading to an *arousal* or *drawing* of emotion from the audience – formulates a multivalent response that synthesized new mechanistic ideas regarding human physiology with the more clearly humanist ideals of “vitalism” and “sensibility” that were contemporaneously ascendant. It is worth quoting Joseph Roach on this point:

Diderot believed [...] that the actor begins to approach perfection according to the degree to which he can train himself to overcome the influence of sensibility onstage, to discipline his gestures and expressions to the threshold at which their sensible content ceases to register on his consciousness, in short, to strive for the regularity of a mechanism.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 17.

¹⁰¹ Duerr, *Length and Depth of Acting*, 260.

¹⁰² Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 102.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 134.

This focus on actors' abilities to fuse their *sensibilities* (which I broadly interpret as their capacity for emotional response) to their *mechanics* (viewed as their expressively controlled physiognomies) is the revolutionary point at which the performing subject transforms from some threatening avatar of *mimesis* to a self-regulating being compelled by a particular task – the task, as Jungian psychologist David Holt noted when encountering Aristotle, of “something which needs to be acted through”.¹⁰⁴

This supposed, and inevitable, Cartesian duality between sensibility (sensate mind) and mechanics (machinic body) is further complicated by the noted conceptualization – uniquely formulated, perhaps, for actors – of a *double personality* at work within the consciousness of the actor. The great nineteenth century comic player Coquelin advances such an ideation convincingly from his own actor's experience:

The matter of his art, that which he has to work upon and mold for the creation of his ideal, is his own face, his own body, his own life. Hence it follows that the actor must have a double personality. He has his first self, which is the player, and his second self, which is the instrument [...] the dual personality is the characteristic of the actor. (192) The two natures which coexist in the actor are inseparable, but it is the first self, the one which *sees*, which should be the master. This is the soul, the other is the body” (193).

Theatre historian John Astington seems to concur when he writes that actors “must possess a [...] double-consciousness, believing deeply in their parts, yet remaining technically detached, aware moment by moment of the necessary mechanics connected to their function as performers.”¹⁰⁵ Certainly, Diderot himself vested great agency and responsibility upon the actor in his commentaries. “We talk too much in our plays,” he writes, “and consequently the actors

¹⁰⁴ David Holt, “Hypokrites and Analyst (1968) No 145,” *David Holt Online*, first published by the Guild of Pastoral Psychology, May, 1968, <http://davidholtonline.com/article/hypokrites-and-analyst/>.

¹⁰⁵ John H. Astington, *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time: The Art of Stage Playing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13.

have little chance to act,”¹⁰⁶; “[...] there are places where everything must be left almost entirely in the hands of the actor.”¹⁰⁷ Yet we are here brought up against the critic William Hazlitt’s idea of the “honest hypocrite”, for how can legitimate agency and power within dramatic art be given to such an ontologically compromised being as the dissimulating actor? To be an actor, from Diderot’s position, is also to be a dissembler, an “imitator [...] of every character that is not his own, of every passion that he does not feel.”¹⁰⁸

So far, I have pointed out that the central argument around actors’ subjectivities seems to revolve on *how they feel*. Or, more precisely, how they feel and then *put those feelings into action*. Or, more pointedly, how this process is *perceived*, by both actors and non-actors. There is a strong inference, within these deliberations, that the actor has a secret, and is a *deceiver* in some essential way. Perhaps a benign and pleasing deceiver, but an unreliable personage, in the end. Some further exploration of this apparently fundamental postulation is required.

You Hypocrite!

Of course, the entire notion of the actor as hypocrite is deeply embedded in the both terms’ etymologies. From classical Greece, we discover the word *hypocrites*; not in the modern sense of *scheinheilig* – “dissembler; one who pretends to be other or better than he is”¹⁰⁹ – but in the simple etymological sense of “stage actor”. Though perhaps it is not so simple, after all, as the word is a compound in the Attic Greek deriving from, as lexicographer John Ayto instructs us, “the prefix *hypo-* ‘under’ and *krinein* ‘separate’, which originally meant literally ‘separate gradually’, and eventually passed via ‘answer’ and ‘answer one’s fellow actor on stage’ to ‘play

¹⁰⁶ Michael J. Sidnell, ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, *Voltaire to Hugo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 42.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 43

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰⁹ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s. v. “scheinheilig.”

a part' and hence 'pretend'"¹¹⁰. So, here we have a term where the "actor" becomes an "answerer"¹¹¹ by way of being slowly separated, as a protagonist, from the other personages (chorus) on stage, and to be responsible for one "part" in a performance, and "[...] forced to answer the ever-questioning chorus".¹¹² Indeed, it is the emblematic "first actor" Thespis in the sixth century BCE who is generally credited with the innovation of adding both character and lines for an impersonating actor to "what had previously been a wholly narrative work sung and danced by a chorus and its leader".¹¹³

Yet is it not true that the actor is *also* a hypocrite in the contemporary sense of the word – a *dissembler*, a *pretender*, a *deceiver* – as Diderot assiduously proposes? Are not actors, by their very nature and constitution, seen as Janus-faced and unreliable subjects by the observer? Perhaps the very etymology of the word "hypocrite" leads to a notion as to why dramatic theorists throughout the ages have intuitively or calculatedly declined to much consider the 'actor's art' in their treatises and polemics on theatrical practice. The actor, by definition, is too slippery 'by half' - too contingent, too untrustworthy, too unstable – to be given a secure role (as it were) in defining the functions and meanings of a serious art form. William Hazlitt famously, and cheekily, took an aphorist's approach in describing actors as "the only honest hypocrites" in his 1817 essay "On Actors and Acting": "[...] Their life is a voluntary dream; a studied madness. The height of their ambition is to be beside themselves. To-day kings, to-morrow beggars, it is only when they are themselves, that they are nothing."¹¹⁴ I suggest that a productive tension is created by Hazlitt not only through his oxymoronical conflation of "honest" and "hypocrites", but by the extension of this rhetorical figure to include notions of what it means to be "selves". Once again, the supposition that the actor may be "nothing" when outside of playing a dramatic

¹¹⁰ John Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1990), s. v. "hypocrite."

¹¹¹ Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1977), 16.

¹¹² A. M. Nagler, *A Source Book in Theatrical History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 3.

¹¹³ Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 16.

¹¹⁴ William Hazlitt, "On Actors and Acting," *The Examiner*, January 5, 1817.

role is posited by an observer who exists *outside of the actor's subjectivity*. Indeed, throughout the history of European theatre, the art of the actor has been viewed as a riddling paradox which appears to embody an impossible action – that of *genuinely feeling and expressing emotion which is fictitiously based* – and that this protean inconstancy of affect and execution has shown itself as too destabilizing a factor to be welcomed in any coherent structural theory of dramatic form and function. The irony in this supposition is unavoidable, for the actor, also, is often viewed as *the* essential subjective contingency through which any act of theatre manifests itself. As Peter Brook famously wrote, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.”¹¹⁵ Richard Southern, too, has a simple recipe “to get at the heart of what Theatre really is”, and it involves only the combination of “[...] two separate pieces [...] the Player and the Audience. Take these apart and you can have no theatre”.¹¹⁶ In light of this, I hope to demonstrate that the role of the actor is one which can critically redeem itself through its very fungibility and responsiveness, and that it cannot be unbound from the living practice and theory of drama in the theatre.

In any case, and regardless of their ontological pedigree, actors have often been considered *suspect* - at least, epistemologically - over much of Western European historical collective project. And perhaps, in the end, for good reason, because what it is like to be an actor is *to be like more than one person*. John Harrop has identified this central intuition as “the phenomenological problem” of acting:

an actor has, in a sense, to be both himself and someone else at the same time [...] only the actor is both present on stage and yet at the same time absent, replaced by the illusion he or she creates [...]

¹¹⁵ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1968), 9.

¹¹⁶ Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of the Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 21.

the adoption of otherness while remaining oneself is an essential and highly dynamic attribute of the actor's art.¹¹⁷

It is instructive that Harrop is a writer *on* acting who *himself* is a lifelong contemporary practitioner *of* acting. His naming of the actor's dilemma – or paradox, if you will – as a problem borne of experiencing the self tied to otherness points to the central grounding that phenomenology offers to any exploration of what it is *like* to be an actor, and what it might *mean* to be like that. As Nagel succinctly asks us regarding his original query: “After all, what would be left of what it was like to be a bat if one removed the viewpoint of the bat?”¹¹⁸

The Qualia Of “Moi-Aussi’ Are Not Strained

My insistence on returning to this experiential aspect of subjectivity when striving to assess why a ‘sense of self’ seems so integral to the dramatic actor is rooted in a commitment to the notion of *qualia*. Qualia is a notoriously slippery word that is most often used to describe the qualitative consciousness pointed to by Nagel's ‘what it's like to be a bat’ thought experiment. Though by no means an entirely accepted concept by philosophers of the mind, the Oxford Living Dictionary offers this definition of *qualia*: “The internal and subjective component of sense perceptions, arising from stimulation of the senses by phenomena”.¹¹⁹ This cogent definition, I submit, affords a startling possible description of what it is to be a modern actor. In a Stanislavskian-based framework, the effect that sense perceptions have on the internal and subjective self of the actor is precisely what is identified through a psychophysical approach to dramatic playing. As Stanislavski's erstwhile student and colleague Richard Boleslavsky often put it to his American listeners, the actor's affective memory is always triggered by the imposition of a sense perception related to a heightened emotional state – perhaps the smell of lilies that accompanied a young woman's hearing of her father's death, or the taste of cucumbers

¹¹⁷ John Harrop, *Acting* (London: Routledge, 1992), 4–5.

¹¹⁸ Nagel, “What Is It Like To Be a Bat?,” 443.

¹¹⁹ *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s. v. “qualia,” accessed June 3, 2017, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/qualia.

for a couple who became engaged while eating fresh cucumbers from a field.¹²⁰ The stimulation of the senses by phenomena within this system of dramatic acting is, in the end, entirely subjective and personal. There *is* a phenomenal aspect to *analyzing* action and character within this scheme, but it is wholly guided by imaginary suppositions: what are the “given circumstances” of the play’s world, and “what if” I was really a part *of* that world? Yet the actor’s imagination is stimulated by these phenomenal questions – “what is?” and “what if?” – and responds to these perceptions as surely as if the sense memories they suggest to her are real. The essentially internal aspect which adheres to this relationship of self to sense perception, imagination, and phenomena is one that presents epistemological challenges of objective verification and classification. However, as the philosopher Robert J. Howell reminds us, “[t]oo often ‘objective’ is used as a synonym of ‘real’ thus leaving ‘subjective’ a mark of ontological deficiency.”¹²¹ A subjectivity grounded in the idea of a self who experiences that self as a component of qualia is a central argument in my assessment of the persistence of self in dramatic acting. In fact, for most actors, I would propose that this experiencing self is one which operates far outside of the world of deception or dissembling. This is as true of the Clarions and Coquelins in the profession as the Burstyns and Brandos – for do not the acolytes of Diderot’s maxim about actors maintaining absolute control and mastery of their emotions still accede that such controlled affective mimicry extends from a judicious distillation of self-perceived emotions and behaviour from real life? So, if the self that actors refer and have access to is not a deceiving but rather an authentic self, what are some of the significant markers of that self, what are the implications of its presumed ambiguity, and how are these considerations instrumental within the actor’s work?

All By Myself

Stanislavski’s later student Stella Adler – a celebrated teacher in her own right – infamously supplied a transcribed forty-point chart outlining the workings and hierarchy of the system to her

¹²⁰ Richard Boleslavsky, *Acting: The First Six Lessons (Documents from the American Laboratory Theater)*, ed. Rhonda Bair (London: Routledge, 2010), 15, 114.

¹²¹ Robert J. Howell, “Subjective Physicalism,” in *The Case for Qualia*, ed. Edmond Wright (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 127.

colleagues in the Group Theatre in 1934, after claiming to have worked with Stanislavski for several weeks in Paris. In this chart, published by Robert (Bobby) Lewis as a fold-out in his book *Method or Madness*, Adler itemizes “Work On One’s Self” as the primary article of faith when pursuing “The Stanislavski System”. This number-one directive is placed ahead of such other fundamentals as “Action” (No. 2), “Truth or Feeling or Passion” (No. 3), “Magic ‘If’” (No. 12), or “Given Circumstances” (No. 13). Clearly, Adler – and, by inference, Stanislavski – had a clear idea of what that Self was, and why work on it was absolutely vital to the actor’s work. The proclamation stands as self-explanatory and resolute in its implications and meaning. The dangers of such a hypothesis, however, are well-evidenced in the limiting realities of acting as conceived through an amalgam of American modern acting methodologies and a commercialized theatre, film, and television industry. Uta Hagen (who is often associated with the Method acting movement but only discovered Stanislavskian-based technique after training at RADA in London and then pursuing a successful career in the commercial theatre) outlines the predicament this way:

“If I must use myself, won’t I be the same in every part I play?”

The question calls to mind the “personality” actor who is really the same in every part he plays. Examples of this type clog the stage, screen and television. Because they are always the same does not mean that they are truly using themselves. They are simply playing the identical few notes in themselves over and over again without a real search or selection from themselves.¹²²

Although this observation of Hagen’s does in no way represent the kind of brave and truthful acting that Adler always advocated for in her teaching, it is a necessary corrective to the commodified result-oriented acting that is so well-rewarded in terms of income and celebrity in U.S.- style “show biz”.

So, then, what do I mean to infer when I use the word “self” in reference to a dramatic actor creating, inhabiting, and performing a character in a play? Surely it should be prudently

¹²² Uta Hagen with Haskell Frankel, *Respect for Acting* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, [1973] 2008), 28.

clear that there is only *one* self who is actually present in this formulation – the *actor's* self. The *character's* self may not, in any strictly rational way, be said to exist. As the contemporary American playwright David Mamet controversially (at least for actors) proclaimed in his treatise on modern acting, *True and False*,: “There is no character. There are only lines on a page.”¹²³ (Or as John Harrop claims Bernard Shaw once put it, with atypical pith: “There ain’t no such person as Lady Macbeth”).¹²⁴ Of course Mamet, in his typical self-proclaimed “heretical” mode of discourse, reduces any argument here to the point of disappearance. There is demonstrably more meaning and directive to a playscript than words transcribed on a page; and, Mamet would be hard-pressed, I think, to suggest that the lines and actions of such iconic male roles as Teach in *American Buffalo* and Levene in *Glengarry Glen Ross* do not add up to something called a “character”.

In Chapter 3, I will further address certain aspects of the self as they correspond to notions of dramatic character. Here, I assess it important to tackle some more fundamental contemporary questions about selfhood that clearly have applicability to this study. By one broad definition, the self may be viewed in the modern sense of being a unified, knowing subject. As I noted in my Introduction, this is a concept of self which has been sorely contested by the poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought that emanated from Continental philosophy in the late twentieth century. This strategy of critique comprehensively decentred the subject from a model of the world that upended long-standing Enlightenment ideals by poking huge methodological and epistemological holes into foundational conceptualizations such as the metaphysics of presence and transcendence. Rebecca Schneider problematizes this critical phenomenon nicely in her assessment of our recent and ongoing obsession with an archive that valorizes the real and metaphoric skeletal remains of the subject’s body over and above the flesh that gives the performing subject an active life when she writes that “[a]ccording to archive

¹²³ David Mamet, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 9.

¹²⁴ Harrop, *Acting*, 40.

logic, flesh can house no memory of bone. In the archive, only bone speaks memory of flesh. Flesh is a blind spot”.¹²⁵ She goes on to state that,

[...] the increasing domain of remains in the West, the increased technologies of archiving, may be why the late twentieth century was both so enamoured of performance and so replete with deaths: death of the author, death of science, death of history, death of literature, death of character, death of the avant-garde, death of modernism [...] within a culture that privileges object remains as indices of and survivors of death, to produce such a panoply of deaths may be the only way to insure remains in the wake of modernity’s crises of authority, identity, and object.¹²⁶

To this list I would add “death of the self”, and go so far as to suggest that, in the realm of performance, this death is the one that most defines the field and continues to provoke the very question of why the self *persists* in dramatic acting. Tracing this idea, if the self is not exactly dead in any ontologically considered way, it is nevertheless buckling under the strain of a now nearly hegemonic hermeneutics that consigns it to continual rupture and de-stabilization. As I cited in my Introduction under “Analyzing Continentalism”, Derrida’s proclamations continue to hold weight:

It is *because* the break is always possible that we need and perform identification, and society is organized according to this production of artefacts.¹²⁷

The Self, as a signifying agent of autonomous being and action, has been thoroughly dismissed by a school of thought that denied the existence of any reality that was not viewed

¹²⁵ Rebecca Schneider, “Performance Remains Again,” in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, and Michael Shanks (London: Routledge, 2012), 69.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73–74.

¹²⁷ Derrida, Jacques. *life. after. theory.*, 25.

through a linguistic or symbolic order – a reality organized around a “production of artefacts”, as it were. The legacy of this theorizing about the disappearing self, though now *itself* going through a stringent reappraisal by all manner of post-humanist ethical commentators, is still deeply embedded in much current thinking about artmaking and the theatre. Take this statement by Marietta Piekenbrock, the director of programming for Berlin’s venerable Volksbühne theatre, in 2017:

The stage of spoken-word theatre is indebted to a sense of the world that is centred on the human. On the stage of the 21st century, however, we find a new distribution of power, a new dynamic of creatures, ghosts, machines, objects. The things we once invented to define identities or let them manifest themselves on stage have lost all traction. The [human] subject – is that even a topic anymore these days?¹²⁸

Inasmuch as Piekenbrock raises interesting ideas about the inter-medial and hybridized nature of both contemporary practice and identity, her dismissal of the subject as a non-topic within current theatrical discourse flies in the face of its persistence in the methods and pedagogies of many, if not most, theatres and schools operating today in the extended Euroamerican world. As I will continue to demonstrate, the subject (and object) of self continues to be the fundamental and (dis)unified concept through which actors experience the workings of their craft.

Perhaps it is the strong parallel between our philosophical notions of the self and the modern actor’s practical notions of how ‘character’ operates in drama that gives rise to this phenomenon. Below is the philosopher and logician John Perry’s distillation of ‘self’. Compare it to what we know of Stanislavski-based ideas regarding characters and their actions and objectives:

In philosophy, the self is the person considered as an agent, knower, subject of desires, and conscious subject of experience.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Holger Syme, “How to Kill a Great Theatre: The Tragedy of the Volksbühne,” trans. Holger Syme, *Disposito* (blog), May 20, 2017, <http://www.dispositio.net/archives/2452>.

These are philosophically the most central parts of a person's self-concept: I am the person doing this, knowing this, wanting this, and having these sensations and thoughts. It is this concept of ourselves that is extended through memory and anticipation and forms the basis of personal identity.¹²⁹

Within the space of Perry's definitions, I can propose a basic Stanislavski System model for an actor's psychotechnique: I am a "subject of desires" who wants something [*my objective or task*]; I am a "conscious subject of experience" extending myself through memory and anticipation [*the subconscious through the conscious means of emotion memory and the magic If*]; I am "doing this" and "knowing this" [*my actions and my given circumstances*]; I have "sensations and thoughts" [*experiencing and concentrating*]; all these activities "form the basis of personal identity" [*the actor's work on self forms the basis of my character*].

I Am What I Am, And That's All That I Am

There is something deeply correlational about the very notion of self, though, that does not require the application of an actor's work to complicate it. The concept exists not only as a root but as a referent. Semiotically, it is a prescriptive idea that practically collapses signification back in upon itself. Perry outlines the relationship between subject and action this way:

The English expression "self" is a modest one; in its normal use, it is not even quite a word, but something that makes an ordinary object pronoun into a reflexive one: "her" into "herself", "him" into "himself", and "it" into "itself". The reflexive pronoun is used when the object of an action or attitude is the same as the subject of that action or attitude.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ John Perry, *Identity, Personal Identity, and the Self* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 190.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

Perry's grammatically informed formulation is relatively easy to understand and employ in the "normal" sense in which he supposes it. Let me compare two subjects involved in the activity of autonomously creating something: one who composes instructions in machine code, and one who plays a character for the first time. If I say that Jane educated herself in writing computer code, it is clear that Jane is not only the educator, but also the one educated. The "self" here is identically Jane whether she is the subject of the action (educating) or the object of the action (educated). Similarly, if I say that Jane congratulated herself for learning computer coding, then Jane's attitude towards herself – as both congratulator and congratulated – also refers to the same "self". Following this, the sentence "Jane wrote the computer code herself" is an effective communication of the causal interrelationship between "her" coding, and the "Jane/she" that wrote it. No information is necessary regarding the content, form, or application of the *code itself* to understand that "she" wrote it "herself". By extension, the "itself" of the code has its *own* autonomous constitution and liminalities. Though "she" wrote "it", the code's own structures and uses are not necessarily coterminous or co-extensive with "her" subjective input or identity. The object of the action – the code to be written – is the same as the subject of the action – she herself wrote it. Asserting that she wrote it herself also syntactically suggests that the code itself is both useful to her, and that she commanded the authority to write it.

But what can I make of another kind of sentence: "Tom played himself in the character of Hamlet". Or perhaps: "Tom found himself in the character of Hamlet." Or this: "Tom found the character of Hamlet within himself." Or even: "Tom saw himself in the part of Hamlet." All of the above statements are ones that can be – and are – regularly made about actors essaying dramatic roles in the theatre. Yet, following the logic previously outlined regarding the "normal" use of "self" as a reflexive pronoun, what could these statements possibly mean? If the character of Hamlet had any of the objective features that may be ascribed to Jane's computer code, then Tom's relationship to that character seems impossible. Tom might "educate himself" in the character of Hamlet, as Jane educates herself in computer code; but Jane, I suggest, could not "play herself" in computer code, or "find herself" in such code; neither could she find that digital code *in* herself, nor even see herself *as* that code. Plainly, the concept of "character" has a self-reflexivity *built into itself* which something ontologically stable such as computer code does not. By logic, once Jane has written her code, then any other person could exactly replicate it by copying and utilizing the precise language and tools of that code. One could then say Tom

reproduced Jane's computer code himself. The same would be true of building a house, designing a pattern, or printing a 3-dimensional object. But could anyone reasonably say: "Jane duplicated Tom's performance of the character of Hamlet herself?"

One might argue that there are other examples of how this reflexive pronoun might work upon objects that are not ontologically stable in the usual sense of the phrase. For instance, Jane might plan and plant a vegetable garden herself, but it is impossible that Tom might *exactly* replicate that garden due to the vital and immeasurable properties of natural elements such as the seeds, the soil, the weather, the weeding, and so on. However, it is important to note that these are elements that have no intrinsic relationship to Jane's or Tom's planning, mastery, or intent. All things being equal, the gardens would produce the same vegetables, at the same time, in the same place on the garden map, tasting the same way. By counterexample, Hamlet has only Shakespeare's (Mametian) "words on a page" – those *indications* of played character – and, unlike the vegetable patch with its generic and replaceable gardener, is realized only by the particular and specific applications of the actor tackling the role. Given the right and replicated external conditions, Tom's garden could conceivably turn out as Jane's did – identical and the same, regardless of the small differences of seed and soil, etc. – but no plausible conditions could render Jane's living portrait of Hamlet "the same" as Tom's. For Hamlet is the fictive conception of one living "self" enacted by another truly living "self". Jane might masterfully copy the gestures, movements, inflections, tempo/rhythms, and general attack of perhaps *one* of Tom's performances of Hamlet, but she could never universally simulate the absolute *differences* that Tom brings to the role each time he embodies it, regardless of how assiduous even Tom might be in attempting to authentically replicate his performance from show to show. To extend this demonstration based on what I have previously pointed to, neither Jane nor Tom could replicate the performance of, say, Roxane that Mlle. Clairon codified in her career, no matter how assiduously they followed her directives to "combine a continually pained tone with an abdominal contraction" in order to reiterate results.

Certainly, as Rebecca Schneider has admirably asserted, "performance becomes itself through messy and eruptive re-appearance", and "challenges, via the performative trace, any neat antimony between appearance and disappearance, or presence and absence through the basic repetitions that mark performance as indiscreet, non-original, relentlessly citational, and

remaining”;¹³¹ yet this seems to me an expression of ontological necessity rather than a defining rubric for the deeply self-reflexive nature of dramatic acting for both practitioner and spectator. That being said, Janelle G. Reinhelt puts it succinctly when she states that “[...] performance brings the individual and the social together in its staging of symbolic repetitions”.¹³² Perhaps, through this, it is easier to view Mme. Clairon’s previously noted insistence on a mimetic and materialist approach to her work as being inevitable, for the question of just how one *does* stage “non-original” and “symbolic repetitions”, effectively, performance after performance, as an individual deeply visible in society – i.e. as a person on stage – goes to the heart of the matter of what it means to *be* an actor.

A more nuanced and convincing argument might be made if I substitute the functions of the novel, the painting, the poem, the dance, or the musical composition in place of “the character” within the schema I have outlined above. It is often colloquially stated that artists “find themselves” in the creation of their artworks, or that they discover the artworks out of themselves or even *see* themselves through their creations. Yet I would suggest that the epistemological exigencies of these examples rely heavily on a sense of poetic allegory to make their claims. A short story or sculpture may engage and express the imagination and psychology of the creating artist to a profound degree of transference but, unlike the actor’s creation of character, it can never seek to bodily represent – through repetition – another human being’s realistic social and emotional actions in time and space. A dancer, particularly a “modern” one, can certainly be viewed as someone who repetitively enacts a series of bodily movements that might be validated as expressive of a unique selfhood, yet it is instructive to note that dance companies and their performers seek to codify and legitimate the autonomy of the choreographer’s impulse and imprimatur – from Petipa to Ballanchine to Graham to Ailey – by producing an exact replication of a previous dancer’s performance through a current dancer’s expression. As Harrop reminds us, “the artist, the musician, even the dancer, creates an artefact

¹³¹ Schneider, “Performance Remains Again,” 71.

¹³² Janelle G. Reinhelt, “Psychoanalysis,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, 2nd ed., ed. Janelle G. Reinhelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 395.

separate from him- or herself, or is the subject of the performance.”¹³³ As much as we, collectively, might admire the idea of Garrick’s *Lear*, Kean’s *Richard III*, Bernhardt’s *Phedre*, Duse’s *Hedda Gabler*, Cobb’s *Willy Loman*, or Brando’s *Stanley Kowalski*, we do not seek to exactly replicate their iconic performances on living stages today as dancers do.

Actors use “themselves” to create living characters on stage; characters that are first gestated through “words on a page”. The characters “themselves” may conceivably be replicated over generations through a reference to and repetition of those abstracted words fashioned by the playwright, but the sheer embodiment of these imaginary beings is achieved only through the absolute attributes and individual sense perceptions of whichever actor is attempting the portrayal. The actors can never be the exact subjects of such performances of character, but neither can the “artefact” of a dramatic character exist on stage without its displaying the particular embodiments of subjectivity that all actors ineluctably bring to their task. In Schechnerian manner, the actor is not exactly the artefact of character, but is also not *not* the veritable substance of that character. Indeed, as Schechner reminds us:

When, in Western theatre, we speak of an actor “portraying a role”, using a metaphor from painting where the artist studies a subject and produces an image of that subject, we slide away from the main fact of theatrical performance: that the “portrayal” is a transformation of the performer’s body/mind; the “canvas” or “material” is the performer.¹³⁴

And so, it follows that there is something inherently reflexive about the very conjugation – or, if you will, “transformation” – of self within the schema of an actor portraying a role. The very idea of *qualia* – what something feels like to be itself – is hard-wired into the actor’s process of characterization. If I say of one of my roles, “I see myself in Bill Sikes”, or conversely, “I see him in myself”, then what is the definitional difference between the “I” who

¹³³ Harrop, *Acting*, 5.

¹³⁴ Richard Schechner, “Towards a Poetics of Performance,” in *Essays on Performance Theory 1970–1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), 128.

sees, and the “myself” who is seen by me? And what exactly, is the correlation between these two selves, and the *other* self, who does not exist except as “words on a page”, named as Bill Sikes? Harrop goes some way to addressing this question with this assertion:

Despite the fact that the actor means “I the character” not “I myself” when he or she speaks on stage, in one inevitable sense it is the “I myself” that the audience sees. No matter how actors act, they cannot expunge themselves from the performance or there will be no performance there.¹³⁵

I would go one further than Harrop, though, and insist that “in one inevitable sense” it is not only the “I myself” that the audience sees, but also the “I myself” *in character* that the actor phenomenologically *experiences*. As much as any actor might wish or strive to position their work as strictly representational – “I, Bill Sikes”, or “I, Nora Helmer” – there is no phenomenological way that the “I myself” can get out of the way. It is always my corporeally “real” hand that I see when I raise its fist to strike my fellow actor’s impersonation of Nancy as Bill Sikes, and I would infer that it is always her corporeally “real” hand that Duse saw when she turned the door handle of exit when playing Nora. This fact is no less real for the actor than for the spectator – in fact, the burden of this reality, this sense of *being ‘real’* rather than *performing character*, may be the troubled legacy for modern actors that Franco identifies in Brody’s *New Yorker* article. “Be yourself”, then; not so much proclaimed as a directive towards the actor as an uttered apprehension of the actor’s incessantly self-reflexive occupation. The American Stanislavski-based actor and teacher Morris Carnovsky (whose ideas I will explore further in Chapter 4) expresses the situation well when he adjudicates that,

I choose to think about character as being the Self within the given circumstances [...] I have to add to my circumstances; it becomes the circumstance under which I labor. But the person, the thing,

¹³⁵ Harrop, *Acting*, 6.

that labors inside that circumstance is still *me*. Not you, not him, nobody else, just me”.¹³⁶

This notion of my-, him-, herself as the essential starting point for meaningful portrayal is not historically limited to the well-trod principle directives of the American Method practitioners. Just as it is a mistake to accept the trivial assertion that the notion of applying quantifiable scientific thinking to the process of acting began with Stanislavski and his readings of Ribot’s affect theory, it is teleologically reductive to repeat the claim that a distilled focus on the self arose only with the American method. That the notion of an acting approach that begins with “self” is a unique product of the American model is understandable given the massive machine of publicity and idolization that the United States bestowed upon in its own culture in the decades following World War Two. Here is Marilyn Monroe, perhaps the greatest American acting icon (with Brando) of the last century, describing the meaning of her professional relationship with Lee Strasberg in a rare 1960 interview, which I have transcribed, with the writer Georges Belmont:

When I always have a secret feeling that I’m really a fake or something, or a phony – you know how people feel about themselves; they have something secret they feel about themselves. Now I know my teacher says, “Why do you feel that about *yourself*?” And then he starts to say, “but you’re a human being!” I said, “yes, I am – but I feel that I have to be more”. He says, “no!” He says, “you start with *yourself*.” Lee Strasberg. I think he probably changed my life more than any other human being that I’ve met. Because when I started to work with him I would sort of *assume* something. And he says, “what are you doing?” “Well I have to get into the part, so I – “ “No, but you’re a human being so

¹³⁶ Morris Carnovsky, with Peter Sander, *The Actor’s Eye* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984), 35.

you start with *yourself*. “ I said, “but, with me - ?” He said, “yes, with you!”¹³⁷

It is easy to see the correlative legacy between what Monroe perceives as Strasberg’s insistence not to “get into the part” but rather to “start with yourself” with Franco’s Brando-inspired worry of not “putting something on” but of simply “being”.

Yet compare Monroe’s reflections with those of the great French actor François Joseph Talma, written for his treatise “On the Actor’s Art” in 1825, five years before the publication of Diderot’s more famous contradiction:

I also call sensibility that faculty of exaltation which agitates an actor, takes possession of his senses, shakes even his very soul, and enables him to enter into the most tragic situations, and the most terrible of the passions, *as if they were his own* [...] In the expression of the passions there are many shades which cannot be divined, and which the actor cannot paint until he has felt them *himself*. The observations he has made *on his own nature* serve at once for his study and example; he interrogates *himself* on the impressions his soul has felt [...] (emphasis mine).¹³⁸

Clearly, sensibility for Talma was a studied sensibility of *self*. A hundred years before Stanislavski’s central tenets regarding actor training were dispersed over continents, Talma was proselytizing for a notion of science-tinged “observations” based on a “nature” held by, and in, the self and its “passions”. Inasmuch as he is advocating study in order to “paint” the shades of a character, it is not the Diderotian directive to simply discover the appropriate physiognomic gestures and affect and then dispassionately repeat them on stage that Talma is advocating for. “As if they were his own”, he says, for the actor, regarding a character’s emotions; neatly

¹³⁷ Marilyn Monroe Video Archives. “Rare Marilyn Monroe interview By Georges Belmont In 1960”, transcribed by Martin Julien, YouTube Video, 49:20, August 26, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--7mbRMPQ_E&t=1871s

¹³⁸ François-Joseph Talma, *Talma on the Actor’s Art*, 14, 25.

summing up one of Stanislavski's great principles nearly a hundred years before their codification.

The Actor's Triple Self

Remarkably, the "I", "Myself" and "Character" construction that seems so indicative of the actor's being can be seen as a tripartite relationship that acutely resembles the Peircean triadic semiotics of icon, index, and symbol.¹³⁹ I say remarkably because it appears that it has taken several generations to acknowledge that there might be more than the dualism, or "double consciousness", ascribed to an actor's qualitative consciousness since Diderot's paradox was published. Right up until the present day, we are told that there is the "real person" and the "character" and ask how these two constructions of appearing and disappearing subjecthood should be defined and reconciled. What is left out of this simplistic dualism is simply "the actor". The actor is the "I" that responds to and directs "myself" to enact the "character". The "I" is iconic; it is the sign that conflates the signifier with signified in no uncertain terms. As Popeye would say, (by way of Yahweh): "I am what I am – and that's all that I am!" The "myself" is indexical; the representational abstract of my desires, will, behaviour, and personal history that stands in for my "I" in most social and relational situations. As the popular psycho-babble expressions go, "I have to work on myself, or "I need to give myself credit"." The "character" is symbolic; the thing or personage recognized as entirely representative, stripped of any corporeally legitimated or recognized meaning as a thing in and of itself, but holding meaning only as message, vehicle and covenant. As the actor might say, "I brought the character to life myself". The symbol, in this hierarchy, has no life beyond the order of its signification, just as the character has no life beyond its embodied actualization as signifier within a narrative.

Of course, I have now introduced the sticky wicket of a discourse that I appear to be framing through both phenomenological and (Peircean) structuralist modes of thinking. The Continental versus the Analytic, once again. I plead guilty to such a charge but assert that the interlacing of these two discreet modes of knowledge is justified, and indeed inescapable, when

¹³⁹ Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was an American pragmatic philosopher and logician who famously created his semiotic triad in concurrence and contraindication with the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) dyadic semiology consisting of *signifier* and *signified*.

fashioning a tapestry of why and how the concept of self operates in the actor. It is true that the phenomenologist puts forward a position that advocates for the “self-given” and extra-linguistic nature of a subject/object which stands in contrast to the semiotician’s avowal that the subject/object only comes into being through its realization as a sign which moves through a linguistically-derived symbolic order. Bert O. States indicates this tension nicely when he quotes phenomenologist Max Scheler to the effect that

something can be *self-given* only if it is no longer given merely through any sort of symbol; in other words, only if it is not ‘meant’ as the mere ‘fulfillment’ of a sign which is previously defined in some way or other. In this sense, *phenomenological* philosophy is a continual *desymbolization of the world*.¹⁴⁰

Yet it is precisely this dyadic balancing act between experience and signification that gives the actor’s work a dynamic coherence. By confronting and assimilating the linguistically created indicators of dramatic characters – those “words on a page”—through the experiential sense perceptions – or “feelings” – of their conscious and bodily selves, actors are in a perpetual process of *desymbolizing the wor(l)d*. The chain of signification in the actor’s process that moves through icon, index, and symbol – “I”, “myself”, and “character” – is continuously interpellated by a feeling subject who molds her being based on sensation and sensibility. The actor takes hold of the words, and through an alchemy of phenomenological investigation turns those words into self-given actions. This might be described as a process of *methylation*, wherein the actor’s senses are catalyzed by the words and symbols she has absorbed through a full engagement with the playscript, and then formulates and expresses the excess accumulation of these signs as “character” through the function of her self’s being.

Another way to analyze this dialectical event is by reference to the Aristotelian-derived *logic of identity*, usually termed the three Classical “laws of thought” which Bertrand Russell famously abstracts as:

¹⁴⁰ Max Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), 143.

- i. The law of identity: ‘whatever is, is’.
- ii. The law of contradiction: ‘nothing can both be and not be’.
- iii. The law of excluded middle: ‘everything must either be or not be’.¹⁴¹

To my mind, these “self-evident” laws of thought bear striking correlation to the Peircean semiotic model of signification when viewed through the lens of an actor’s methodology as an extension of self. “I” is the *sine qua non* of identity as substantiated by thought, as any Cartesian will remind us. “Whatever is, is”, Russell’s first law, reflected formulaically as “a=a”, is the iconic expression of sameness – “I am what I am” – and is coterminous with the actor’s ontological being as subject. The second law of contradiction is trickier (as it must be) and relates to the semantical “myself” conjugation through which the actor’s “I” becomes both the subject *and* object of her actions: “my” becomes the reflexive pronoun that lets “self” become indexed as an interrogated and contradictory “I”. Hence, “myself” can “both be and not be”, just as Schechner observes that I am, as an actor, not myself on stage – but neither am I not *not* myself. The phenomenon of *acting on stage* pressures the structural logic of contradiction. Finally, the symbolically-derived dramatic character comes ready-made as an experiential rebuke to the law of the excluded middle – as discussed, it both doesn’t exist as anything ‘real’ but only ‘words on a page’, and yet comes ‘to life’ and into ‘being’ through the methylation of actor into character. Seen as a dynamic process that pits foundational logic against phenomenal experience, one might creatively bastardize the third law of thought by stating: “every character *must* both be and not be.”

It is important to stress that I point to these logical formulations of identity primarily by way of allegory. (This is a position that I more fully explore in Chapter 5, when discussing the role of transformation and, indeed, *magic*, when assessing the actor’s mercurial work.) It is beyond my ken or authority to catechize the positivist value of such venerable argumentative logical positions, but I see no reason to keep their provocations off limits. The ontology of the actor is indeed a paradox – a contradiction – that seems to deal in substance and illusion, logic

¹⁴¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 40.

and fancy, reality and fantasy. This inevitable conundrum might also be fruitfully interrogated by making allegorical use of another conceptualization of identity: Lacan's 'mirror stage'.

Chapter 2

Mirror, Mirror: Lacan's 'Mirror Stage' and the Actor

My fellow human beings are a picture of myself. Theatre, at its best, enables us to acknowledge this.

–Bruce Wilshire¹⁴²

The Specular Theory

If the 'what it's like' formula of qualia put forward by Nagel foregrounds the workings of consciousness in the subject, then Lacan's formula of the 'mirror stage' of human identity development authorizes the operation of the unconscious. As philosopher Leopold Stubenberg has argued, "*to be conscious is to have qualia*";¹⁴³ it would be just as efficacious to contend that to be *self-conscious* is a defining feature of the qualia that is experienced by the *human* subject. David H. Lund puts it well in his introductory chapter to *The Conscious Self*:

The conscious self is a subject of conscious states, capable of attaining the level of self-awareness manifested in its awareness that *it itself* is the subject of certain thoughts and the agent of certain deliberate actions. It is the referent of *I* when it uses that word in a self-referring way. It may be taken, with justification, to *be* the person, as a person is necessarily a being with a capacity for self-reference.¹⁴⁴

How the human *unconscious* organizes a structure of subjectivity that results in a formation of the self – or the "I", as Lacan also puts it – is the function of his profoundly

¹⁴² Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 26.

¹⁴³ Leopold Stubenberg, *Consciousness and Qualia* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1998), 12.

¹⁴⁴ David H. Lund, *The Conscious Self: The Immaterial Center of Subjective States* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2005), 9–10.

influential theory called the ‘mirror stage’ (*stade du miroir*). Mirrors, of course, have long been objects of considered and even totemic interest in the theatre. The mirroring surface’s almost magical quality of objecthood provides an exact and inexhaustible natural image of mimetic coherence to our sense of sight. As symbol, metonym, and allegorical entity, the mirror has proved irresistible to commentators on acting and theatrical presentation and display, perhaps most famously by Shakespeare in Hamlet’s speech to the Players, “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature”. In Lacan’s conception, however, the mirror acts not as a surface that reflects an image of natural truth, (or the Real), but as a site that produces the reflection of an imaginary and unified subjectivity constituent of selfhood.

“The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” was published in 1949, though it is known to be a rewritten version of a partial-lecture that Lacan had first presented to the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad in 1936. Appropriated without accreditation from the French psychologist Henri Wallon’s experiments on chimpanzees in 1931, and extrapolated from American behavioural psychologist James Mark Baldwin’s late-nineteenth century ideas around child development and imitation,¹⁴⁵ as well as Charlotte Bühler’s ¹⁴⁶observations on transitivity, Lacan’s mirror concept would go on to be one of the defining theories of his life’s work, as well as his most famous contribution to analytic discourse. In this ‘looking-glass phase’ of individual human evolution, a child from the age of six to eighteen months becomes fascinated with its own specular image and has a *Gestalt* “aha moment” of identifying the unified mirrored image of itself as an “Ideal-I”.¹⁴⁷ According to this theory, whereas our close evolutionary relative the chimpanzee loses interest in its own reflected image as illusory once it is established that it is not another animal, the human subject jubilantly assumes the specular image as its own. Although

¹⁴⁵ Dany Nobus, “Life and Death in the Glass: A New Look at the Mirror Stage,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (London: Karnac, 2017), 129. 101-138.

¹⁴⁶ Charlotte Bühler, *From Birth to Maturity: An Outline of the Psychological Development of the Child* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, [1935] 2001).

¹⁴⁷ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), 503.

more current research, notably by Gordon Gallup (1970)¹⁴⁸ and Frans de Waal *et al* (2005)¹⁴⁹, has shown the capacity for non-verbal specular self-recognition in chimps and other higher apes – that is, being able to have knowledge that what is reflected to them are not other strangers but in fact their own bodies – there is no evidence of emotional or ego-driven ‘personal connections’ to the self-identified mirror images.¹⁵⁰

Unlike the fragmented and uncoordinated body which the growing human infant is unable to control and differentiate from its caregiver/environment, the relatively advanced ocular capacity of the young child is able to identify and appreciate its own mirrored image as a unified object which it then assumes as its own ideal subject. This transformative event links the individual’s appropriation of its own ‘mirror-object’ as ‘subject’ with a formation of the ego within Lacan’s imaginary order. In this way, the self-image, or Jungian *imago*, is established as an alienating psychic identity by and for the subject, and operates as an introduction to the linguistically-oriented order of signification that makes up Lacan’s reading of the structured Freudian psyche. Yet, more importantly for this study, it also acts as an epiphenomenal metaphor for the ways in which actors relate, formulate, and methylate characters within a paradigm of rehearsal and performance. This needs some unpacking.

For Lacan, the mirror stage is an event that leads to a sense of personal *identity*, but also, in clinical Freudian terms, to the very formation of the *ego*. Prior to this mirror phase of development, the infant apprehends a sense of its own physical mastery that is insufficient, vulnerable, and uncoordinated – a *fragmented body* – that stands in apposition to the only partially differentiated complete and nurturing body of its mother, or primary caregiver. This is a developing subject still “sunk in its motor incapacity and nursling dependence”¹⁵¹ whose reliance

¹⁴⁸ Gordon Gallup, “Chimpanzees: Self Recognition,” *Science* 167 (1970): 86–87.

¹⁴⁹ Frans B. M. de Waal, Marietta Dindo, Cassiopeia A. Freeman, and Marissa J. Hall, “The Monkey in the Mirror: Hardly a Stranger,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 102, no. 32: 11140–7.

¹⁵⁰ D. W. Zaidel, “Consciousness and the Brain: A Window to the Mind,” in *Embodied Consciousness: Performance Technologies*, ed. Jade Rosina McCutcheon and Barbara Sellers-Young (Houndsmill, UK: Macmillan, 2013), 12–27.

¹⁵¹ Lacan, “Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” 503.

and attachment on larger, more coordinated and integrated beings may be felt as weakness, frustration, and anxiety. When engaging with its own specular image, the infant is jubilantly both captivated and captured (*captation*) by the apparent unity of its own reflected body, and through a process of identification with that externalized image creates a psychic representation of itself as an “I”. The child – pertinently to my inquiry – “experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment”, and gazes at its image in “a flutter of jubilant activity”.¹⁵² In Lacanian terms, this recognition by the child of itself as a unified whole – as an *imago*, or subjectively determined image – occurs through a very particularized and total *Gestalt* that catches another human’s visual image as an integrated entity. The composite wholeness of this image appears to embody holistic properties that none of its component parts have in isolation.¹⁵³ It is instructive to note that that this *Gestalt* need not be realized through an *actual* mirror: the specular image of a unified self may be satisfied by a child witnessing another infant of approximately the same age, and not recognizing the other *as* other, but as an ideal-I *imago* of itself.¹⁵⁴

On the surface, this occurrence may seem to be a stabilizing and even celebratory experience whereby the child recognizes and establishes a personal identity that confers power and agency through a cohesive sense of self. In identifying with the specular image of a unified “me”, the infant looks forward to the potential mastery of an embodied subjectivity that can actualize its desires in reality. Yet, in fact, the constitution of this relationship is exactly opposite to this formula – not one of “I” to “me”, but of “I” to “other”. The *object* of the mirrored self-image, which after all resides elsewhere and outside of the viewer, is mistaken (*méconnaissance*) by the child as its very own *subject*. This (mal)formation of the ego as an “I” that misidentifies the “other” in the mirror as “me” leads to a perpetual state of alienation wherein the determination of selfhood resides always in a misappropriated object – the specular and unified

¹⁵² Ibid., 502–3.

¹⁵³ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 75.

¹⁵⁴ Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 16.

self – that can never be integrated or properly recovered. Lacanian philosopher Lorenzo Chiesa puts it this way:

Lacan recognizes that the subject's imaginary identity lies literally outside of himself. It corresponds to a paradoxically alienated identity [...] imaginary identification occurs in the subject through the unconscious assumption of an external image (initially of the subject's own body as reflected in a mirror) in which he recognizes himself. Therefore, identification does not imply the mere influencing of the subject by an external image or an imitative relationship between the latter and a pre-existing ego: on the contrary, the ego can first be created only because the image irremediably 'traps' the subject.¹⁵⁵

In Lacan's further psychoanalytical cosmology, the alienating image that "'traps' the subject" becomes imbricated within the event of language acquisition whereby the signifying structures of words also present incessant opportunities for the ego's self-objectification.¹⁵⁶ And just as words later ossify images and phenomena as fixed concepts and formulas, the *imago-Gestalt* of the mirror stage's self-identification becomes not so much stable as static – an imagined picture or construct that "symbolizes the permanence of the *I*" and works to "unite the *I* with the statue in which man projects himself".¹⁵⁷

Vitally, Lacan came to position the mirror stage as an event that repeats itself over the course of a person's life, due to its perpetual effect of identification through alienation. As Janelle G. Reinelt puts it in her *précis* on modern psychology's importance to performance studies, after crossing the experiential threshold of the mirror stage "the child will henceforward

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵⁶ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s. v. "Jacques Lacan," accessed June 13, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lacan/#MirStaEgoSub>.

¹⁵⁷ Lacan, "Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," 504.

desire to recapture and to be congruent with this image of the self, will also mourn for the lost self, which is forever absent.”¹⁵⁸ Far from being conceptualized as a “stage” of child development such as the phenomenon of “imaginary friends” that some individuals embrace as toddlers and then surpass and abandon, the imaginary self-relationship that occurs through the mirror stage is a fundamental aspect of the human subject’s continuous process of establishing self-identity. “[B]y means of the continuous acquisition of new imaginary identifications corresponding to different crucial moments in the subject’s psychic life,” Chiesa informs us, “the mirror-stage experience is repeated indefinitely throughout one’s existence due to the imaginary relationships that are established with other human beings.”¹⁵⁹

My contention is that, for actors, all engagements with the challenge of embodying characters within dramatic theatre are both “different crucial moments in the subject’s psychic life” and “imaginary relationships that are established with other human beings.” As such, these encounters between actor and role are immanently structured as ego identification experiences that, in fact, *mirror* the unending mirror stage repetitions that we undergo in our real lives, in “reality”. They are crucial because, in the end, performances of characters in a play are (re)presentational experiences that involve actors’ public displays of themselves – as objectified subjects – to others. This capitulating sense of “being watched” and “recognized” is crucial not only to the dramatic actor, but to the drama of the mirror stage experience. Dylan Evans reminds us of this constituent behaviour when he summarily suggests that,

[The mirror stage] represents the introduction of the subject into the imaginary order. However, the mirror stage also has an important symbolic dimension. The symbolic order is present in the figure of the adult who is carrying or supporting the infant. The moment after the subject has jubilantly assumed his image as his own, he turns his head round towards this adult, who represents the

¹⁵⁸ Reinelt, “Psychoanalysis,” 398–9.

¹⁵⁹ Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness*, 16.

big Other, as if to call on him to ratify this image (Lacan, 1962–3: seminar of 28 November 1962).¹⁶⁰

The insistence that there is a symbolic aspect to the mirror phase's complete function that implicates not only the acting subject's imaginary engagement with its objectified self-image but also the ratifying gaze of a powerful Other that witnesses and *approves* of the subject's display of self-identification holds arresting resonance when considering the dramatic actor in rehearsal leading to performance. As Lacan developed his theory of "otherness" after 1955, the "little other" (*autre*) is a projection of the ego formulated through the specular image; the "big Other" (*Autre*) is a "radical alterity" that cannot be absorbed by the subject through an imaginary identification but only through the locus of the symbolic order as constituted through language and the law. Evans outlines the parameters thusly: "The Other is both another subject, in his [*sic*] radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order that mediates the relationship with that other subject".¹⁶¹

But how might the functions of the "other" and the "Other" work within the actor's performative dramatic sphere of experience? For the performing subject in drama, the mirrored image of self can be seen as the role that one assumes through preparation and rehearsal. This is probably most blatantly correlated to the activities of the actor in front of the dressing room mirror, applying costume, wig, and make-up to unify the actor's physiognomy with the character's imaginary embodiment. However, these activities also extend to the rehearsal hall where explorations of physical traits, vocal mannerisms, tempo/rhythms, and affective emotion are distilled and perfected to produce the repeatable effect of harmonious characterization. This "character" may be seen as the "little other" – a subject inscribed and constituted by the imaginary order. The "big Other" is firstly the mediating *function* of language as represented by the character's lines, prescribed actions, and psychological strategies, but also the radically Other subjecthood that is embodied most powerfully in the form of the quasi-parental Stage Director, who most often *brings* actors to roles by hiring them, and then *ratifies* their authenticity in those

¹⁶⁰ Evans, "Mirror Stage," *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 118.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

parts by witnessing the conflation of actor (subject) with character (little other) and *approving* the display of identificatory union. (Trickily, the Director is finally surpassed as a kind of ‘placeholder’ by the multiple-Other of the audience, who validates the actor’s identification *as* character by not only paying attendance to the performance but also by acts of laughing, crying, groaning, fidgeting, focusing, dismissing and, ultimately, applauding or walking out on that performance.)

The stress that Lacan and his interpreters place on the positively emotional – the “jubilant” and expressive – aspect of mirror-stage identification holds a striking concordance with the *pleasure* that many actors identify as accompanying the activity of assuming a character in their work. Richard Hornby, in his influential and contrarian near-manifesto *The End of Acting* (1992), isolates this sense of delight as the first of five characteristics that attends that actor’s transformative “creative state”:

1. It is always pleasurable, even when the emotions being portrayed are painful.¹⁶²

Inasmuch that I have my own questions regarding whether the “altered” state of acting in character is indeed *always* pleasurable, it is certainly true that when things are going well, and the performer feels *cohesive* and *unified* with the character being portrayed, then most if not all actors feel a sense of pleasure and Lacanian *jubilation* when engaged in their occupation of performative transformation.

Most fascinating to consider is the way in which the *character*, within this Lacanian-derived schema, certainly exists as a mirrored image of unified *and* alienated personhood for the subject, but also as an *imaginary relationship to another human being that manages to be ‘me’ and ‘not me’ at the same time*. The cultural philosopher Martin Murray appears to be mysteriously echoing Schechner’s “not himself, not not himself” formula for the actor when he instructs us that “[t]he most important aspect of the mirror image in Lacan’s formulation is that it is *other* than what it reflects. This point can usefully be made in the first person singular. *The*

¹⁶² Richard Hornby, *The End of Acting: A Radical View* (New York: Applause Books, 1992), 74.

mirror image is other than me as well as being me (emphasis mine).”¹⁶³ There is an almost hermeneutical trick at play here, whereby *dramatis personae*, who are symbolically constituted *only* as words on a page to begin with, are then relieved of their ontological status as linguistic markers of a playwright’s consciousness by actors who apprehend these signs as mirroring objects: the written words become *reconstituted* (or *methyalted*) as *actual people* within the imaginary of actors, and subsequently by Others. Inasmuch as it is disingenuous, and even specious, to assert that characters in a play are Real, it is a fundamental tenet of the actor’s art that they bring their imaginations to bear on these characters *as if* they were real people interacting on the stage with *other* real people.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his conclusory remarks to *The Psychology of Imagination*, provides a slightly altered and complementary view on how the actor engages with the character while at work. Rather than making a claim that the character becomes *real* on stage through the imaginative powers of the actor, he avows that it is the actor who becomes *unreal*. As Sartre’s formulation outlines a concept that will be critical to my ensuing argument, it needs to be quoted at some length:

[...] it is self-evident that the actor who plays Hamlet makes use of himself, of his whole body, as an analogue of the imaginary person. Even the famous dispute about the paradox of the [actor] is enlightened by the view here presented. It is well known that certain amateurs proclaim that the actor *does not believe* in the character he portrays. Others, leaning on many witnesses, claim that the actor becomes identified in some way with the character he is enacting. To us these two views are not exclusive of each other; if by “belief” is meant actually real it is obvious that the actor does not actually consider himself to be Hamlet. But that does not mean that he does not “mobilize” all his powers to make Hamlet real. He uses all his feelings, all his strength, all his gestures as analogues

¹⁶³ Martin Murray, *Jacques Lacan: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 117.

of the feelings and conduct of Hamlet. But by this very fact he takes the reality away from them. *He lives completely in an unreal way.* And it matters little that he is *actually* weeping in enacting the role. These tears he himself experiences – and so does the audience – as the tears of Hamlet, that is as the analogue of unreal tears. [...] the actor is completely caught up, inspired by the unreal. It is not the character who becomes real in the actor, it is the actor who *becomes unreal* in his character.¹⁶⁴

Accepting, provisionally, that Sartre's claim of *unreality* for the actor performing in character is true and valid, then it behooves me to question what is both *real* and *unreal* about the actor's ontological state when on stage portraying a character, and how that state is accurately reflected by employing the epistemological correspondence of Lacan's mirror stage theory to its understanding.

Perhaps the stickiest argument against the possibility that a mirror stage of human development might account in a fundamental way for how we apprehend ourselves as holistic figures – both as actors and persons – is that the entire formulation of mental “mirroring” as an accurate representation of objective reality is epistemologically suspect. It's edifying to recognize that the drama practitioner's attraction to the idea(l) of a Cartesian “theatre of the mind” should never be underestimated. In such an articulation, our experiences of the world are played out as mirrored representations of nature that we subjectively scan and retrieve through some kind of Magic Lantern engagement with our own brain functions. The implications of accepting such a formulation of perception are all too easily evidenced through the neat acceptance of theatrical presentation as a metaphor for consciousness. David Hume, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, famously wrote that the “mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an

¹⁶⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, c. 1963), 277–8.

infinite variety of postures and situations.”¹⁶⁵ Whether Hume’s aesthetically satisfying evocation of subjectively perceiving through theatrical watching is emblematic of the Cartesian dualism that has enlightened and plagued our discourse for centuries is up for debate; nevertheless, the term “Cartesian Theatre” has been used dismissively in analytic circles since cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett coined the phrase in the early 1990s.¹⁶⁶ Yet, much as I argue that we do perceive the immaterial and imaginary images of our unified selves in the Lacanian mirror – as things both somehow *inside* and *outside* ourselves – I also contend that the theatrical metaphor of mirroring reality on stage through the representation of character is inherent to the subjective experience of the actor at work. In his meticulously reasoned *The Mind-Body Stage: Passion and Interaction in the Cartesian Theater*, R. Darren Gobert succinctly describes such relationships as, “the immaterial characters and plots whose dramaturgical effects we call consciousness”.¹⁶⁷

Over the last half-century, this refutation of the “mirror of nature” covenant of enlightened empirical thinking has been most notably voiced by the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, and more lately contested by cognitive scientist Donald D. Hoffman. It is necessary to take a more detailed look at Rorty’s basic skeptical premises, and Hoffman’s deeply provocative ontological reappraisals, in order to properly interrogate and expand my theory of *self* representation and “acting in character” as acts of meaning-making constituted through Lacanian mirroring.

Mind, Mirror, and Metaphor

As has been noted, Locke’s thinking on “human understanding” in the late-seventeenth century had a foundational effect on the uses that “sensibility”, or feeling, were put to in science, culture, and philosophy. As I’ve been pointing to throughout my thesis, this overarching nod to *qualia* – what something *feels like*, and how this might be vital to human consciousness, identity, and

¹⁶⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (London: John Noon, 1739), I:439.

¹⁶⁶ Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1991), 107.

¹⁶⁷ R. Darren Gobert, *The Mind-Body Stage: Passion and Interaction in the Cartesian Theater* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 2.

behaviour – has arguably been the primally debated, and valorized, notion with regards to dramatic acting, from Diderot to the Method. Yet, in Rorty’s analysis, the entire epistemological paradigm which has sprung from Locke’s empirical categorizations are not only misleading, but entirely unsupported and illogical. Rorty identifies this wrong-headed approach of representing the world as “the mirror of nature” hypothesis.

Rorty strives to lay bare the “mental processes” which theoretically make all human knowledge possible, called the “activity of representation”. As he states in his introduction to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: “To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations.”¹⁶⁸ As the concept of *representation* is so crucial to discussions of drama and its enactment through a complex process of *mimesis* – or *mirroring*, if you will – this idea needs further fleshing out. Long used in aesthetic arguments from the time of Plato’s Socratic dialogues¹⁶⁹, the conceptualization of representation as a reflecting mirror of a natural – and idealized – world is upended by Rorty within the schema of philosophical inquiry, (much as it was interrogated by Lacan within the realm of psychoanalysis.)

Rorty sees our hegemonic dedication to this mirror imagery as an act of conceptual imprisonment:

The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. Without the notion of mind as a mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 3.

¹⁶⁹ Plato, *Republic*, X, 596a–d.

¹⁷⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 12.

Key to Rorty's analysis is isolating and inspecting this orthodox idea of the *mind as a mirror*. He traces it back not only to Locke's "mental processes", but also to a causal chronology that foregrounds Descartes's "mind as a separate entity" and Kant's notion of "pure reason".¹⁷¹ For Rorty, and for many of the "new" pragmatists that have given his theories such value, the almost intractable dilemma articulated here is one that mistakenly conflates epistemological practice with ontological premises. Their provocation is that any quest for certainty aimed through the portals of perception, sensibility, and a "Mind's I/Eye", is doomed to circularity and barrenness: the mind simply cannot apprehend itself, immaterial as it is, except through an abstractive process that values its representations as accurate reflections of empirical events outside of its own *self*-reflections. To say that my *thought* equals my *being* – as Cartesian logic leads us to aver – is to miss the fact that thought is merely presumed to be an accurate reflection of a kind of phenomenological being-in-the-world to begin with. Here, we are in the world of what the philosopher of theatre Tom Stern calls the "slippery notion of 'metaphysical mimesis', which involves some kind of correspondence relation between the world as it seems to be and the world as it truly is".¹⁷²

But to what degree can it be claimed that the *mind* is analogous to a notion of the *self*? In Cartesian mode, I might ask, "I think, therefore I am...I am...who am I again?!" And my answer would be: "Why don't you go take a look in that mirror over there to remind yourself – or, better yet, why not try one of these dramatic characters on for size and see if it fits!" The kind of being-in-the-world that Rorty is problematizing may indeed be vulnerable in terms of the mind's epistemological strategies, but it may also be *exactly* what the actor utilizes when representing not mind, but self. In fact, Rorty points to the narrative usefulness of *self* in his chapter "The Contingency of Selfhood" from *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Just as Lacan always considered himself to be following in the psychoanalytical footsteps of Freud, Rorty, too, takes Freud to be a

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 3–4.

¹⁷² Tom Stern, *Philosophy and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2014), 22.

vital figure through his contributions to a descriptive language for the self.¹⁷³ Identifying the analyst as one who “gives each of us the equipment to construct our own private vocabulary of moral deliberation”, Rorty goes on to claim that these vocabularies – descriptive of character in the manner of “infantile”, “sadistic”, “obsessional”, or “paranoid” – have “very specific and very different resonances for each individual who uses them”:

They enable us to sketch a narrative of our own development, our idiosyncratic moral struggle, which is more finely textured, far more custom-tailored to our individual case, than the moral vocabulary which the philosophical tradition offered us.¹⁷⁴

In this vein, Rorty describes the “sense of self” as being contingent and individualized – with no demonstrable guarantee of concordance with universal ideals or ontological certainty. But he also validates “self” as a notion that is entirely useful in coping with our being-in-the-world. How we *feel* about ourselves, and then “sketch a narrative of our own development” by *naming* those feelings, may be suspect as philosophical epistemology; and yet, such naming is emancipatory on the level of selfhood and character. Just as “there are beliefs that immediately register the deliverances of sensory experience, beliefs such as ‘Red here now’ or ‘Ouch! Pain!’”, (as the Rorty scholars Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley put it)¹⁷⁵, there are beliefs such as “Look – me in mirror” and “Feel jubilant now!” that are registered as raw feelings that transition into tools for a symbolic and analytic ordering of selfhood.

Though Rorty debunks the idea that a phenomenological “philosophy of the mind” – one he admits is well-exemplified by Nagel’s “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” formulation of *qualia* – proposes an accurate representational knowledge of reality, he also validates sensory *feelings* as

¹⁷³ Richard Rorty, “Freud, Morality, and Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History* 12, no. 1 (1980): 177–85, doi: 10.2307/468813.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Rorty, “The Contingency of Selfhood,” in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 32. N23–43.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley, “Introduction,” in *Richard Rorty*, ed. Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8. 1–40.

usefully exhausted *appearances* of reality for the human subject. “Feelings just *are* appearances,” he tells us. “Their reality is exhausted in how they seem. They are pure seemings. Anything that is not a seeming [...] is merely physical – that is, something which can appear other than as it is”.¹⁷⁶ If the “pure seeming” of feelings can be plainly celebrated as a phenomenon that can only appear in reality *as it is*, then the implications for dramatic actors are tantalizing and – as is often the case in the theatre – reflective of an inescapable doubleness. Just as the *imago* perceived in the Lacanian mirror seems to us to be a holistic representation of our very selves, so the character in a drama may be perceived by the actor as an accurate reflection of a self that seems to offer ontological certainty, much as the concept of *ego* does. That a character does *not* offer that certainty in *reality*, but only as representation, puts into play the very duple mechanism of *seeming to seem* that gives dramatic acting its very power. As Herbert Blau famously put it in the opening paragraphs of his first book *The Impossible Theater*: “If politics is the art of the possible, theatre is the art of the impossible. ‘Seeming, seeming’ is what it’s made of.”¹⁷⁷ To which I might add, if representation is an act of possibility, then acting is a representation of the impossible. The ‘seeming real’ of acting in character.

I bring up Rorty’s noted use of mirror imagery not only for its contrarian concordance with the specular framework found in both mimetic activity and Lacanian ego-formation, but also for its very pragmatism. It is worth re-stating that if Rorty is dismissive of mental imagery and a theory of knowledge that is based on an idealized philosophy of the mind and its representations – one which states that the natural world is accurately represented by its image as mirrored in our consciousness – he is potentially generous in his assessment that such representations can give us individual *access* to a self that successfully entangles and *cope*s with our being-in-the-world. Our beliefs about ourselves may not represent claims to absolute knowledge in a universal or foundationalist sense, but they do present us with pictures that help construct our contingent agencies as sentient beings in the world. As put by Guignon and Hiley, Rorty’s “pragmatist conception of knowledge [...] focuses on what humans *do* in coping with the

¹⁷⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 29–30.

¹⁷⁷ Hebert Blau, *The Impossible Theater* (New York: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1964), 5.

world rather than what they *find* through theorizing”.¹⁷⁸ Though Rorty, as a philosopher, is at pains to point out that our “assemblage of images”, our “oracular metaphors”, provide an epistemological stopgap between “contemplation and action”¹⁷⁹, I suggest that for a person negotiating the world *as a metaphor* – the ‘seeming, seeming’ theatrical world of the dramatic actor – the doubling image of the mirror is the necessary tool through which to cope with this onstage ontological duplicity: to *act*; to *do* something.

Rorty himself cites the mirror analogy as a producer of metaphor: “It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions.”¹⁸⁰ In his analysis, this state of affairs is incompatible with an absolute theory of knowledge; but, in the dramatic theatre there *is* no absolute “ground level” notion of reality or the natural world. Dramatic representation – whether essayed by authors through writing or actors through doing – is constitutionally *metaphoric* in its implications. Mirror imagery, though arguably incomplete or even misleading as an epistemological paradigm for understanding nature, is an accurate analogue for understanding the nature of dramatic acting. This affirms Sartre’s original idea that it is not the character who becomes *real* on stage, but the actor who becomes *unreal*.¹⁸¹ The actor’s natural state – which includes all the components of a self-affirming subjectivity – are pressed to *stand in* for the teleologically constructed invention of the dramatic character. Metaphor, then, becomes the operative term when attempting to assess the transference of a real sense of selfhood to a wholly structured appearance of character on stage. It is not a matter of proving that this transference from ‘actor’ to ‘character’ *really happens*. Whether looked at from a classically dualist Cartesian point-of-view where the thinking mind is assessed as immaterial, or the Rortyan outlook that calls out perceptual mirroring as a misuse of metaphoric language masquerading as reality, the quality of personal interiority is one that can only be fleshed out through a transference of subjectivity from *self* to *character*. As Sartre infers,

¹⁷⁸ Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley, “Introduction,” 8.

¹⁷⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 11.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸¹ Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*, 277–8.

it is not that Hedda Gabler ever becomes *real* – how could she, as a figure constructed strictly through the symbolic order of language? – but that the functioning of language allows the actor to temporarily *live as metaphor*, as someone both real and *unreal*. This “living as metaphor” effect is the mechanism that allows an audience to virtually witness in the actor the otherwise invisible interiority that is the hallmark of any person’s own sense of self.

Rorty may dismiss our species’ conceptual mirroring as a bankruptcy of epistemological meaning, but the stubborn hold of dualism brings us always back to the underlying dilemma presented by Diderot; that is, the question of whether the actor on stage is *real* or *unreal*. Since representational drama is fictitious, the argument goes, then the ontology of its representations must *ipso facto* be fictitious too. As with Rorty, to view the actor’s actions and affect while performing a fiction as an accurate reflection of natural states is an incorrect premise. It is simply too much ‘seeming, seeming’ to encounter and hold faith in. And yet, in an impressive actor’s performance of character in drama, the audience feels that they are seeing a real person on stage; moreover, the actors feel that they are metaphorically *living* as those real/unreal persons, too. The circularity of this constant legitimizing and delegitimizing of ontological soundness as a function of Cartesian apprehension, if not exactly ‘logic’, is well-expressed by Gobert in *The Mind-Body State: Passion and Interaction in the Cartesian Theatre*: “[...] an actor’s stage performance suggests to the audience something of the actor’s interior self, since it is this otherwise invisible subjectivity that guides the self-representations that make effective emotional expressions possible”.

Notably, though Gobert’s assertion is prudently conceived as not overstepping the bounds of that which “suggests” and “guides” in this communication between actor and audience – that is, demonstrable behaviours enacted and viewed on stage – there is still the matter of what *is* an “invisible subjectivity”, and how might it appear as a “self-representation”. In my argument, the invisible subjectivity of the actor is manifested through its repetitive representational mirroring as character much in the same way that the maturing human continually reformulates its ego from the imaginary of a mirrored self. In this schema the actor has *no choice* whether to entangle their *consciousness* and *feelings* with the imaginary wholeness of the character, just as the toddler has no choice whether to capture the mirrored *imago* as their own monistic self-image. For the actor, no meaningful representation of character can occur without some form of self-revelation through displacement as *other*, just as for the person no access to the representational

world of the symbolic order can occur without a recognition of one's self as *ego*, forever displaced. Rorty shows us that these activities offer at least the useful *appearance* of reality. On stage, the character of Hedda Gabler *appears* to be a real person; in the mirror, my reflected image *appears* to be the 'real me'. How the actor negotiates the space between the imagined 'me' of self-reflection and the appearing 'not-self' of dramatic performance may best be seen as a metaphoric 'doing' of self: a becoming, rather than a being. A coming into focus; an apprehension of an image. What was not there – 'me', the 'character' – *becomes* present through the application of conscious sensations and imagination. When I'm acting, as Sartre intuitively, I become unreal as a self-defining person, but my real conscious mind and feelings are given over as a kind of proxy to facilitate the appearance of character. To validate these ideas, and to both expand and contest Rorty's critique of mirroring as an invalid method of assessing reality, I turn now to Donald D. Hoffman's theory of *conscious realism*, which proposes that it is the invisible and immaterial actualities of subjectivity and self that are, in fact, the only verifiable building blocks of reality in the first place. As I will show, a generous embrace of Hoffman's analysis will elevate the always circulating self-mirroring capacity of humans to a level of ontological integrity.

Mind Body: Mirror Being

Hoffman is an M.I.T.-educated Professor of Cognitive Sciences at the University of California at Irvine who specializes in the fields of quantitative psychology, computational psychology, and philosophy. Though hardly a maverick within his cross-indexed fields of study, his most important work in the 21st century is centred on a radical ontological proposal which he calls *conscious realism*. As Hoffman succinctly puts it in his paper "Conscious Realism and the Mind-Body Problem" (2008), "[...] consciousness creates brain activity, and indeed creates all objects and properties of the physical world [...] *conscious realism* states that the objective world consists of conscious agents and their experiences".¹⁸² Within this theory, for Hoffman as for Rorty, the idea of human perception as an ability and function that mirrors an ontologically stable objective reality is thoroughly dethroned. But whereas Rorty bases his dismissal on the

¹⁸² Donald D. Hoffman, "Conscious Realism and the Mind-Body Problem," *Mind & Matter* 6, no. 1 (2008): 87.

thesis that the mind cannot apprehend images of the real physical world except as self-affirming phantoms of its own immaterial self-reflectiveness, Hoffman goes a good step further by stating that the physical world doesn't exist *at all* except as a function of inter- and intra-acting immaterial agents of consciousness. If Rorty seems to “dead-end” at the absolute inability of our consciousness to accurately reflect an outer reality, Hoffman suggests that it is *only* our consciousness that creates any usable *sense* of outer reality at all. As he defines it, regarding our broad theories of perception, “[a] goal of perception is to match or approximate true properties of an objective physical environment. We can call this the *hypothesis of faithful depiction*”.¹⁸³ This hypothesis, which Hoffman thoroughly questions, is similar to Rorty's “mind as mirror” definition, as well as to Diderot's formulation of acting which *mimics* and *depicts* real emotions. The notion of a strict hierarchical duality between our *false* consciousness/depiction/representation and the *true* objective/physical/sensible world is deeply embedded in our physicalist view of nature. First, there is *this* – the tangible real world of ordinary *things* – and then, as a result of those *things* and the way they exist and operate, there is secondly *that* – our *perceptions* and *representations* of those monadic *things*.

Yet it is this fundamental cart-before-horse ontological assumption that Hoffman most wants to upend. As a philosopher steeped in the rigours of quantifiable theory and computational logic, he is propelled to his thesis by the demonstrable failure of our dominant scientific theories of consciousness, which all speculate on how it arises from neurological activity emanating from the first-stage existence of the brain, as an observable biological object. Hoffman concludes that,

the scientific study of consciousness is in the embarrassing position of having no scientific theory of consciousness [...] the dualistic formulation of the mind-body problem in which consciousness arises from non-conscious neurobiology or physics, has failed to produce a scientific theory¹⁸⁴.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

In face of this of this conclusion, which he has itemized and tested with several colleagues over several decades,¹⁸⁵ Hoffman has turned to a contrary hypothesis: not that “consciousness can be causally reduced to neural processes”¹⁸⁶, but that “consciousness is fundamental in the universe” and, in fact, *pre-exists* the biological perceptions of our neurological activity.¹⁸⁷

I have neither the expertise nor the compulsion to categorize and verify Hoffman’s claims. In the broadest sense, I do seek to valorize his ideas regarding the use of metaphor as a valid way of building theory and communicating ideas, even within the more quantitatively sequestered field of science. As Hoffman proposes in his 2016 paper “The Interface Theory of Perception”, understanding how humans actually encounter objective reality and then subjectively interpret it as “real” is best understood through an “Interface Metaphor”. Hoffman counters the assumption, based in evolutionary theory, that veridical perception – a perception that coincides with reality – is an adaptive feature which benefits the survival of an organism. As he distills the assumption: “Those of our ancestors who saw more accurately had a competitive advantage over their contemporaries who saw less accurately, and thus were more likely to pass on their genes that coded for the more accurate perceptions”.¹⁸⁸ Hoffman, conversely, posits that veridical perceptions are *never* more fit – with regards to survival – than equally complex nonveridical strategies, and supports his arguments through referencing multiple scientific citations. For Hoffman, “reality” is far too complex for us to mirror in its essence. If our limited sensory systems did, in fact, attempt to mirror all the depth and layers of cosmic reality, then the multiplicity of information we could not recognize and process would maladapt us for survival. Our consciousness, working in tandem with our senses, invents vital forms and symbols of

¹⁸⁵ “Donald D. Hoffman,” University of California, Irvine, accessed January 12, 2018, <http://cogsci.uci.edu/~ddhoff/publications/>.

¹⁸⁶ Hoffman, “Conscious Realism and the Mind-Body Problem,” 89.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁸⁸ Donald D. Hoffman, “The Interface Theory of Perception,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25, no. 3 (2016): 157–161.

reality that do not mirror an objective reality, but in fact “stand in for it” with corporal and temporal systems that we can interface with.

Hoffman’s metaphoric example of how this ontological mind-body might work is the desktop interface of the computer:

Suppose you’re editing a PowerPoint presentation for an upcoming talk, and the icon for the presentation is red, rectangular, and in the center of the desktop. Does that mean that the PowerPoint presentation itself inside the computer is red, rectangular, and in the center of the computer? Certainly not. Anyone who thought so would simply be misunderstanding the function of the desktop interface. It’s not there to accurately depict the objective reality inside the computer. To the contrary, it’s there to *hide* that reality.¹⁸⁹

For me, this works as a metaphor not just for Hoffman’s embracing theories of consciousness preceding actuality, but for how actors interface with characters via a mirror-stage experience. Just as with the desktop icons, the characters in a drama do not “accurately depict” real people. Real people, with all their contingency and conscious ontological inexhaustibility, are far too complex to either put in a play or put on stage. Characters actually *hide* the complexity of reality through artifice, creating an interface structure for reader, actor, and audience to apprehend and recognize human activity. For the actor, in particular, as I argue, this apprehension occurs through a (mis)recognition of the character as a mirrored image of idealized aspects of themselves which is useful for performance. The specular image of character is not actually a representation of the “real” for the actor, but it functions in the drama, and on stage, in the same way that our fundamental perceptual experiences functions universally, as “a multimodal user interface between the agent and an objective world”.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 158.

¹⁹⁰ Hoffman, “Conscious Realism and the Mind-Body Problem,” 96.

So, if the natural world is incapable of being universally represented by the Lockean/Cartesian/Kantian idea(l) of a mind's "mirror" that can accurately reflect "ground level" existence and the appearance of phenomena, then this correlates with the folly of mistaking Lacan's "mirror stage" perception as a real – as opposed to a mentally abstracted and assumed – "image" (*imago*). Perhaps the idea of character for the actor is always already an abstract realization that can never be verified; then, perhaps, it is best and complete to think of the mirror as being a metaphor that gives access to character, a useful abstraction with which to attach self to meaning. Harking back to Pierce's semiotics, as outlined in Chapter 1, here one might find, in the mirror stage as it relates to dramatic actors, another paradigm for understanding the relational chain that produces meaning: Icon (person/actor); Index (Self); Symbol (image/*imago*). The Icon continues to be "I"; the Index directs that "I" to the correlation of "(My)Self"; and the Symbol is forever abstracted and available for removal from all context and materiality – forever alienated, rehabilitated, and refashioned as the "Ideal-I".

If, as I have argued, the character exists as a functional praxis which works as an interface, and metaphorical juncture, for actors to identify with and represent reality, then how does this engagement *actually work*. For, in the end, actors *do* work to communicate an assemblage of signs as lively, if not exactly living, beings within the matrix of theatrical performance. To address this question, I now refer to my *own* experience as a practicing professional actor, so as to tease out more complications and revelations as to *what I experience* when performing a character that is both extrinsic of my real world and intrinsic of my imagined, and, perhaps, rehabilitated world. This is a world where my living, breathing, and emotive body is to put to use as a representational body within the aesthetic demands of acting on stage.

Chapter 3

The Epistemological Possibilities of Character

The human condition, Heidegger says, is to be there. Probably it is the theatre, more than any other mode of representing reality, which reproduces this situation most naturally. The dramatic character is on the stage, that is his primary quality: he is there.

–Alain Robbe-Grillet¹⁹¹

Do You Know Bill Sikes?

He's merely a character out of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, so you couldn't *really* know the Bill Sikes I'm talking about. Not in real life. He is a construction of the literary imagination, after all. And his portrayed life – as a character – perhaps in all of literature – best embodies the Hobbesian dictum regarding the Natural Condition of Mankind: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” The trajectory of his personal narrative in the famous novel is seemingly unredeemable. A petty thief who regularly assaults and eventually viciously murders his prostitute girlfriend, he also abuses his dog, kidnaps an orphan, and is hounded by a mob until he is left hanged from the rotting turreted roofs of the slums he infested. This is decidedly *not* a person you would ever want to know, but there is a fascination in knowing *who he is* as a dramatic figure in this sweeping plotted tale.

Yet, I feel that I *do* know him. Intimately. This is because, for several months in 1996, I played the role of Bill Sikes in a professional stage adaptation of *Oliver Twist* in Toronto.¹⁹² I was “five-and-thirty” at the time, the same age that Dickens gave to his anti-hero, and although I surely choose to believe that the character of Sikes and I have very little to nothing in common, *playing the part* of Sikes has had a profound effect on me as an actor. Or more, perhaps, as a person. Or, really, as a person who acts. Or, put another way, as a person who thinks about

¹⁹¹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 111.

¹⁹² *Oliver Twist*, adapted by Michael O'Brien from the novel by Charles Dickens, directed by Maja Ardal, Young People's Theatre, 1996.

acting. Or, maybe: as an actor who thinks about his person. Or, finally, a person who is an actor who both acts and thinks about himself acting.

I think you can read the epistemological dilemma that *motivates* (to use perhaps the most clichéd popular term in the contemporary actor’s toolkit) this study. Because this dilemma – or paradox, if you will – is maddeningly simple and tenacious in its basic framing: Who am I, and who is Bill Sikes, and what constitutes the difference? For the reader – as, perhaps, for the spectator who might have watched me “acting” the part of Sikes – this quandary may seem both academic and self-regarding: it is clear that I am *me* and that Bill Sikes is a *fictional character* that I *play*. This is the tacit and implicit convention that both actor and spectator conform and agree to during a performance in the theatre: Coleridge’s famous “willing suspension of disbelief”. *You* know, and *I* know, that I am not *actually* Bill Sikes; but for the sake of an entertaining narrative experience, we both choose to *believe* that I, in fact, *am* Bill Sikes for the length of a play’s performance.

But what does it entail for me, as the dramatic portrayer, to *believe* that I am Sikes, even within an established dramatic convention that disallows any notion that I could ever *become* Bill Sikes? What are the potential costs and benefits, *to me*, of embodying such a belief, and what are the ramifications that this embodiment visits *upon me*? Are there aspects of myself that I sacrifice in order to play this part? Are there aspects I valorize? Are there characteristics of the part that imprint themselves upon me both during and after the performance? What are the implications of playing this part with regard to my own sense of self-identity? What am I able, and permissible, to bring of “myself” to “Bill Sikes”; and to what effect?

I shall describe here a practical example of why these questions have made such a large impact on my thinking (if not my actual being.) The adaptation of *Oliver Twist* that I participated in was a purposefully gritty and politicized one. It meant to look at societal issues of class, poverty, gender, race, violence, philanthropy, advocacy, and governance. It also promised to be a rollicking good time, with a Brechtian-inspired company of actors playing everything from the rats in the sewers to orphaned children to patrician gentlemen. We produced our own sound score through instrumentation and vocalizing, inhabiting the openly scaffolded stage design much as acrobats and stage hands do, manipulating our environment theatrically and explicitly working the machinery. The production was also geared towards an adolescent audience, being

produced by Toronto's *Young People's Theatre*, one of North America's premier youth theatres. So, although its methods and aesthetics had a didactic base, its performances were decidedly "realistic", with characterizations that were recognizable and sympathetic.

As mentioned, one of Bill Sikes's most necessary and vicious actions in the play is to murder his girlfriend, Nancy. This is a scene of staggering brutality and pathos, and although we enacted the events in semi-observed profile on a raised upstage platform, neither the dialogue nor the physical details were in any way ameliorated for our young audience.

And, of course, the portrayal of Bill Sikes has a long and storied history on the English stage dating back the Victorian melodrama, where Nancy's death was a staple in the gruesome repertoire of vice and betrayal that the form often gloried in. Here is an apposite description by J. Hollingshead of a c. 1841-43 performance he witnessed, which feels altogether too reminiscent to me:¹⁹³

Nancy was always dragged around the stage by her hair, and after this effort Sikes always looked defiantly at the gallery, where he was answered by a loud and fearful curse... The curse was answered by Sikes dragging Nancy twice around the stage and then... working up to a well-rehearsed climax, smeared Nancy with red ochre and seemed to dash her brains out on the stage.¹⁹⁴

Now, imagine that one day, during a morning show (because it was produced for high school students), four or five weeks into the play's run, you find yourself contemplating the climactic action that you, as Sikes, must take – once again – as you approach your fictive girlfriend on stage, as she pretends to sleep, so that you may wake her with a rough "Get up!", and then proceed to representationally bludgeon her to death while she begs for mercy. And the thought you have is: "I don't want to do this today." It is not: "Bill Sikes does not want to do this

¹⁹³ Philip V. Allingham, "Early Dramatic Adaptations of *Oliver Twist* (1838–1842)," *The Victorian Web: Literature, History, & Culture in the Age of Victoria*, accessed June 1, 2018, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/olivertwist/adaptations.html>.

¹⁹⁴ J. Hollingshead, *My Lifetime* (London: S. Low Marston & Co., 1895), 189–90.

today”. Sikes is a purely literary and dramatic construction whose actions exist along a pre-determined event horizon of narrative and causal behaviour. And...he *does* want to do this heinous act, however emotionally complicated and compromised it may be. Yes, the thought instead is: “*I don’t want to do this today.*” Me, the actor, the person – *I don’t want to pretend to violently murder someone I love, and have been betrayed by, in front of hundreds of watching teenagers.* For this is the only ontologically sound materialist scenario that I can account for: “*me*” *dramatically enacting “Sikes’s” murder on stage.* I completed the action, of course, as this was my job; and in truth, who could say I was causing any real harm or suffering at all? I was pretending, the actor playing Nancy was pretending, and the act of murder was entirely and in every way a *pretense*.

And yet. There is a paradox here that I have yet to “get over”. Even though the action of murder was essentially false, the reality of *myself* doing the false action seemed the *only* reality I could draw on to complete the action. The *I* of *me* would never go away, nor leave me alone, as I embodied the gestures and behaviour of murder. Perhaps, the triadic Peircean formulation of *I*, *myself*, and *the character* was too dense a cosmology for me to assimilate, and *methylate*, as the excess aggression of Sikes’s actions became untenable, for Martin Julien: actor. My training and disposition as an actor, in fact, was *supposed* to draw on the *me* of *myself* as *I* committed the action. It was the only way to enact such violent cruelty with any integrity whatsoever – by connecting to *my own* personal feelings of love, betrayal, rage, hurt, justice, and nihilism. In this way, the character of Bill Sikes might be invested with some kind of *humanity*, and not exist only as a stage representation of a visibly and audibly violent mimetic action.

I simply knew no other way into the work I was doing as an actor. I did not want to “leave myself” behind, nor did it ever seem to me that I *could* do so. There was *me*, there was *Bill*, and between us there was the representational action of murder. What might be the nature of this bridge between us – between the sovereign personal *me* that I felt myself to be, and the contingent character *Bill* that it was my job to embody and represent? And what might I carry still within me, decades after my portrayal of Bill Sikes? Did the many weeks I spent “inside his skin” hold any quantifiable trace or residue within my own autobiographical narrative; my seemingly continuous sense of self? Certainly, over the weeks of performing this character’s actions, I had utilized Clairon’s invocations to produce emotion through conscious and material means – stirring affect by compelling my physical instrument to recreate observable behaviour

through a concentrated application of breathing, contraction, tension, and release. But what (as I cited from Clairon's reminiscences from Chapter 1) were the ramifications of such strenuous activity? If Clairon found it hard to imagine that "it requires a superhuman force to *act well* in tragedy for more than ten years",¹⁹⁵ then I found myself in the position of trying to fulfill this directive for more than ten *weeks*.

When it comes to the character, and the actor playing that character, how does the appearance and disappearance of both these figures on stage actually *work*? By exploring some epistemological possibilities of character, I mean to stay smartly centred on the *actor's* possibilities working *within* character. Characters may "work" in all manner of ways for the reader of plays and the theatrical audience, but what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge of characters that real actors need to bring them to life on stage?

Rededicating my analysis to the principle of locating argument within the lenses of acting practitioners, I find Uta Hagen's questions in this regard to be useful and direct, if somewhat lacking in scholarly nuance:

My two favourite definitions in the dictionary for the word CHARACTER as it pertains to acting are (1) "an individual's pattern of behaviour, personality, and moral constitution" and (2) "the aggregate of distinctive qualities belonging to an individual, impressed by nature, education, and habit" [...] **To an objective exploration of these elements we must bring subjective identification at every step of the way** (original emphasis).¹⁹⁶

My hope is, within the pages of this dissertation, that I can extend the concept of "subjective identification" by actors of dramatic characters – an idea that holds such weight for most professional practitioners – into the realm of theoretical legitimacy.

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Leichman, "What They Talked About When They Talked About Acting," 429.

¹⁹⁶ Uta Hagen, *A Challenge to the Actor* (New York: Scribner, 1991), 258.

And The Last Shall Be First

Looked at one way, in the dramatic theatre, the characters of a play are the last things to arrive on stage. When they do arrive, they are still and forever incomplete as human figures, and necessarily bound to the selves of the actors playing them. Arguably, my observation here is at least hermeneutically suspect if not downright incorrect. Open just about any playscript from the canon of dramatic writing and you see it there first: the *Dramatis Personae*; the List of Characters. Perhaps you know nothing but the play's title, and yet the sturdy nominative identifiers of *character* jump out from the page before a single action is specified or speech represented. Clytemnestra, Noah, Gorbuduc, Malvolio, Phaedra, Segismund, Lady Teazle, Bill Sikes, Pastor Manders, Barbara Undershaft, Amanda Wingfield, Pozzo, Ruth Younger, Rita Joe, Prior Walter – the names call out to you as if to proclaim: “Now, here is the character!” Only after this declaration can the narrative begin to unfold.

So, in this sense – in a *readerly* sense – the characters are the *first* things to impress themselves upon you. Even for the progenitive writer, who may only harbour an imagistic idea that in the play-yet-to-be-written person X will smother person Y with a pillow in a fit of mistaken jealous rage, the dramatic notion of one person *acting* upon another person presupposes that there are people there to begin with. In drama, action presupposes character as surely as character intimates action. As Manfred Pfister puts it in his fundamental consideration on “the interdependence of plot and figure”:

In the same way that the concept of action implies the notion of an active subject and, conversely, the concept of person or character implies the notion of action – whether it is active or passive, external or internal – in the drama a presentation of a figure without even the rudimentary plot and the presentation of a plot that does not contain even the most drastically reduced form of figure is inconceivable.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. John Halliday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 160.

By these lights – and irrespective of Aristotle’s wildly influential dictum from Part VI of his *Poetics* that tragic drama is pre-eminently an expression of action rather than character, which is subsidiary to it¹⁹⁸ – the notion of character is not only fundamentally torsioned with plotted action, but also seems to mandate the appearance of a fully functional – if not fully *made* – dramatic figure that is elemental and originary. This is, of course, not so different from Aristotle’s own reasoning, as articulated in S.H. Butcher’s ubiquitous translation, (and a reminder is never amiss):

Tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these – thought and character – are the two natural causes from which actions spring [...]¹⁹⁹

Following this, character and consciousness, rather than the action that “springs” from these elements, arrive *first* in drama.

Therefore, perhaps, what I mean to say in my original statement is that actors *portraying* characters are the last *corporeal* things to arrive on stage.²⁰⁰ And as such, actors, simply put, give characters *life* on stage. If, as Elinor Fuchs states in *The Death of Character*, “‘Character’ is a word that stands in for the entire human chain of representation and reception that theatre links together”,²⁰¹ then “actor” is a word that stands in for the entirely human *in* that chain. The noted Shavian actor Louis Calvert indicates as much in his 1918 treatise *Problems of the Actor* when discussing the American actor Joseph Jefferson’s widely acclaimed performance as the

¹⁹⁸ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 4th ed., trans. S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan and Co., 1932), 27.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁰⁰ Certainly, this would fit in nicely with the long-prevailing wisdom that the performing subject is the final mor(t)al complication that denigrates “the drama” from its epistemological stability as a “pure art”.

²⁰¹ Fuchs, *Death of Character*, 8.

eponymous *Rip Van Winkle*, which he played almost exclusively for forty years, from the play's debut in 1865 up until his death in 1905. According to Calvert,

Millions flocked to see his performance. The play was, in his hands, one of the greatest successes in all the annals of stage history; but Jefferson is dead now and the play lies on the shelf a lifeless, worthless thing. It has no value as literature and is quite dead as a play, requiring the genius of a second Jefferson to give it life.²⁰²

Though argued in the patrician and nostalgic late-Edwardian tones indicative of Calvert's writing, he nevertheless highlights a truism of the age of heroic actors that is evident in *fin-de-siècle* Euroamerican theatre and might be as well said about Sir Henry Irving in *The Bells* and Sarah Bernhardt in *Fédora*: they brought the characters, and the plays, to a life they simply do not have on the page.

But my argument here is not strictly about drama as a literary form that might be viewed, in the broadest sense, as the progeny of the Homeric epic and the ancient Tragedy, and as the precursor to the modern European novel or the narrative motion picture. If anything, I am envisioning drama as the sedated child of the Dionysian ritual, and the feral harbinger of Performance Art. Drama's form, as scripted action that exists through dialogic expression between characters, is primarily a frame constructed not for literary appraisal but for theatrical performance; as actors often colloquially put it: the script is a map or template for acting. For this reason, Pfister, in his formidable taxonomy *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* prefers to speak of the dramatic figure rather than the character:

The connotations of the word 'figure', which hints at something deliberately artificial, produced or constructed for a particular purpose, and evokes the impression of functionality rather than

²⁰² Louis Calvert, *Problems of the Actor* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1918), 260.

individual autonomy [...] actually go some way towards justifying this particular interpretation.²⁰³

The syntax here is informative, because although this explanation goes “some way” to justifying an interpretation, I argue that it does not go far enough. Inasmuch as I agree with Pfister that what he reasonably calls “figure” and what is typically known as “character” is functionally designed for a “particular purpose”, I differ with him in his assessment that such a purpose is only as a limited and fictional construct. My assertion is that the narrative “figure” he isolates is in fact a theoretically limitless *provocation* to performance that is only ever illuminated when a particular actor applies her willful self to a particular dramatic production.

In this way, the static nature of the Pfisterian “figure” might seem to resemble the image in the Lacanian mirror, from Chapter 2, that works to symbolize the “I” of the one who gazes at it. Both figures – the one a dramatic character and the other a subject reflected in the looking-glass – may be viewed, from an angle, as essentially illusory and inert, containing no “individual autonomy”. As previously explored, the mirror-stage image may be said to capture the subject’s image, and by doing so, create an *imago-I* that remains forever alienated *from* the subject. Can the same be said of the fictional dramatic character? Must it to be a forever displaced figure of illusory subjecthood – giving a mere appearance of ontological integrity while remaining a resolutely logocentric “figure” within a finite dramatic schema? The actor, as *reader*, can analyze and taxonomize this “figure” as efficaciously as anyone; however, the actor *as* actor needs to apprehend the “character” in a far more dynamically human way. To call a character a figure, as Pfister does, is to drain the performative potential out of it. Just as mirror-image ego-identification initiates a *process* that is incessantly repeatable for the subject, so too does the constructed dramatic character offer to the actor an inexhaustible cipher through which to self-reflect. Rather than simply identify the character as a bounded literary illusion that is forever alienated from active subjecthood, might it not show more potential to fashion its functions in theatrical drama as loci wherein the performing actor can integrate and express desire for a complex unity? Put differently, is the *seemingly* static and integrated nature of a fictive character

²⁰³ Pfister, *Theory and Analysis of Drama*, 161.

really that unlike the *seemingly* stable and unfragmented specular image of the Lacanian subject? In both cases, the image, redolent of the imaginary, purports to be *more than it is* while simultaneously constituting itself as *only what it is*. The “character” represents itself as a living human subject, but in fact is only a “figure” described and circumscribed by the dramatist and the reader; the mirror-image presents itself reflexively to the subject *as* the subject, but in fact is only a self-image forever distanced by the object that traps and produces it.

Pfister’s argument relies for its logic on a contrary supposition: that the dramatic figure is constitutionally constructed through fiction as an entirely bounded and contingent figment of context, and therefore intrinsically limited. The theorist puts the case clearly:

...unlike real characters who, of course, are influenced by their social context, but who on reaching maturity are able to transcend it, dramatic figures cannot be separated from their environment because they only exist in relationship to their environment and are only constituted in sum of their relations to that environment. Social conditions can influence or determine the life of a real person, but, in drama, the fictional context serves the function of actually defining the fictional figure.²⁰⁴

Pfister’s assertions here belie his dependence on the outlook that characters in a play are, and *should be*, seen from a readerly point of view. His dramatic “figures” are mere and finite abstractions created by an author for analysis by a reader. But even within this rubric of interpretation, it is quite unclear how something as evocative as a finely drawn dramatic character can categorically never be separated from the form and function of fictional drama. As Thomas Docherty outlines for us:

Reading character has always been a process whereby the reader learns to probe and bring to light the usually occluded murky depths of individual essences. She or he reads the visible

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

presentation of character as a mere ‘index of implications’; and the process of reading involves the revelation of those implications, the ‘depth’ or idiosyncrasies of particularized individuated characters. It is thus that ‘character’, as an element distinguishable from the narrative in which it is formally embedded, is produced.²⁰⁵

Irrespective of Docherty’s argument regarding the imaginative autonomy of the literary character for the reader, what is nevertheless entirely suppressed in Pfister’s formulation is the fact that an actual “real person” (as he puts the term) – that is, the *actor* – has necessarily to bring such a figure to life in order for any such scripted character to be apprehended by a viewer in performance. (And, I would assume, any mature actor is also, by Pfister’s definition, a real person who is able to “transcend” the influence of her “social context”.) Perhaps the circumscribed analytical tools presumed by Pfister as a reader, ones that can only and forever understand a character as a function within intra-textual limits, is directly analogous to the methods available to an actor striving to portray that character. This seems to be Pfister’s unspoken inference: that there is only one set of tools to decipher the extensions and limitations of character, and that these instruments are textual and readerly.

Moreover, Pfister’s analysis of the essential sterility of his “figures” definitionally misses important historical markers that have denoted greater and greater autonomy to notions of character. These implications arise out of the eighteenth-century bardolatry of Goethe, Schlegel, and Hegel’s aesthetic notions of character “unity” as extrapolated from Shakespeare. As Elinor Fuchs well advances these general constructs:

By contrast [to the Ancient Greeks], Shakespeare’s characters seem to the reader/spectator to exist not only within but outside the dramatic narrative that gives them life. It is possible to imagine a Hamlet apart from his tragic circumstances. Or put another way,

²⁰⁵ Thomas Docherty, *Alterities: Criticism, History, Representation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 36.

we imagine an extended ‘whole’ in which we place the only partially visible Hamlet of the text.”²⁰⁶

Yet, here, even in this intriguing formulation, Fuchs blithely ignores what the character *seems* like to the actor actually tackling the role. It is a glaring, though representative, omission: to skip over the person whose very process of production and reception activates the bridging affect between reader and audience. It is this, in fact, indissoluble actor’s activity of connecting the reader’s response to the audience’s reception that is, seen one way, the very subject of this dissertation.

Pfister’s argument makes a common ontological mistake when he grants a definitive dualism between the limitations of characters *as written* and the exigencies of actors *as lived*. By granting epistemic consideration to dramatic “figures” as constructed nullities that only gain semiotic legibility through an author-to-reader engagement, he entirely suppresses the reality that modern play scripts are primarily modelled as templates for performance, and that their effects and meanings might best be articulated as results of a living actor-to-spectator commitment. In full deconstructionist parlance, I assert that a character’s signifying function is never exhausted, and always deferred, until its embodiment is taken up by an actor portraying the role on stage. By Pfister’s logic, characters can never be “real”, as their fictional conditions absolutely *define* the limits of their potential meaning. Persons, he argues, (and again one must assume this includes actors), may be *affected* or even *regulated* by environmental factors, but they can never be *fixed* by external considerations and events; nor can their unknowable future actions ever be wholly predicted. Characters, on the other hand, are fundamentally circumscribed and delimited as figures, according to Pfister, by the fictive constructions that create and surround them. Yet it is in the dynamic relation of the unfixable actor to the fixed figure where *the character appears*, much as it is in the space between the subject and its specular image that *the ego is formed*.

The errors in Pfister’s reasoning might best be tested by interrogating the example he himself puts forward in defense of this argument, as outlined in sub-heading “5.2.1 Figure versus person” of his cytology. He offers the following comparison:

²⁰⁶ Fuchs, *Death of Character*, 24–25.

[...] whilst it is perfectly reasonable to ask in real life what Mr. Smith would do in Mr. Jones's position and vice versa, the question as to how Hamlet would behave in Othello's position and Othello in Hamlet's reflects a complete misunderstanding of the special status of fictional figures and can be no more than a form of unverifiable speculation.²⁰⁷

First, I ask, is it indeed “perfectly reasonable” to speculate as to what the “real life” persons Smith and Jones would do in each other's positions? This reasonableness, I deduce, must derive from supposing that such an assessment would result in a *verifiable speculation*, unlike the *unverifiable* conjecture later subscribed to a Hamlet versus Othello contrast. Yet, utilizing Pfister's own proclamations, how can this be so? If “real characters” are “influenced by their social context, but who on reaching maturity are able to transcend it”, then how can their autonomous transcendental actions *ever* be more than mere unsubstantiated rumours of supposition? The agential advocacy of real persons – such as the metonymic Misters Smith and Jones – can never be superseded by the speculations of an analytic prognosticator who can only venture observations vis-à-vis the influence of readable “social context”. Real individual persons *always* contain more agency than the scientific and historical pressures of their existence work to delimit. Even on the most corporeally derived level, there is no way to properly speculate what Mr. Smith's dying words would be in the mouth of Mr. Jones, even if they were to both to perish side by side under the same circumstances.

So, let me apply this concept of individual transcendental agency to the dramatic characters in a play as portrayed on the “live” stage by actors. Actors, as I have argued before, must exist first, by plain hierarchical definition, as *persons*. Their autonomous and willful agencies always transcend the limits and contracts they are heir to as actors. It is also true that, for actors performing in a live context, these agreements and conventions are more strenuously policed on every social level than most persons are. While it is not unknown – and, at times, notably awarded or disdained – that a spectator may “walk out” of a live performance in disgust

²⁰⁷ Pfister, *Theory and Analysis of Drama*, 161.

or protest, it is almost unheard of that an actor would walk offstage and abandon a performance. (It perhaps needs reminding that “the show must go on!” is the actor’s greatest cliché and mantra.) And yet, even and maybe *especially* here, the potential for an actor to derail and abandon a strenuously rehearsed and repeatable performance in *real time* before a public audience – to “go off script”, as it were – is the spark that ignites every theatre event as a potential conflagration of social expectation and decorum. The potential for absolute *difference* in every performance is the element that keeps us watching: the acknowledgement of possible *disaster*.

This scenario brings to my mind Richard Schechner’s concept of *restored behaviour*. For Schechner, such behaviour is “the main characteristic of performance”,²⁰⁸ and is seen as

organized sequences of events, scripted actions, known texts, scored movements, [that] exist separately from the performers who ‘do’ these behaviours. Because the behaviour is separate from those who are behaving, the behaviour can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed.²⁰⁹

In one way, Schechner’s assertions about how performance “works” through the restoration of behaviour places stress on my thesis that the self is always already present in dramatic acting. Schechner clearly suggests that the behaved actions on stage appear at a categorical remove from those who “do” the actions. Yet this is a universal definition of performance, including shamanism, trance, and ritual theatre, which Schechner articulates – it *may* encompass dramatic acting in principle, but it does not delimit what it is actually *like* for the actor who is engaged in the performance of dramatic characterization. What Schechner’s theory *does* do, however, is complement my idea that the actor’s radical autonomy as a person is the necessary ingredient to

²⁰⁸ Richard Schechner, *Over Under and Around: Essays on Performance and Culture* (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2004), 101.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

make performance happen at all. As he puts it himself: “[...] restored behaviour involves choice [...] only when the actor can say ‘no’ to an action is there the possibility of restored behavior”.²¹⁰

Yet this is not true for the dramatic characters, which Pfister identifies as “figures”. “In drama”, he instructs us, “the fictional context serves the function of actually defining the fictional figure”. So, in other words, the figure is fixed, on some essential level. Its ontological weight cannot be conceived of as ever being greater than its epistemological limitation as a static construct. In the end – after all the editing and dramaturgy, designing and directing – the dramatic character, unlike the dramatic actor, has *zero* potential for absolute difference. The dramatic character is exhaustibly *known*. It cannot say ‘no’. If this is the case, as Pfister insists and I do not argue, then comparing the potential behaviour of Hamlet to Othello to a play’s given circumstances becomes not only plausible, but a *verifiable speculation*. After all, acting as a seer of presumption, it is well within my grasp to forecast what Hamlet might do when confronted with a sleeping Desdemona and a pillow, because *everything that makes up the character of Hamlet is theoretically subject to analysis and plausibility*. Unlike our Mr. Smith, Hamlet is not a *real person* but a *bounded fictive assemblage* and can therefore be evaluated within a paradigm of *absolute probability*. It is precisely because the exigencies of both Othello’s dilemma and Hamlet’s propensities are so exhaustively well-delineated by the absolute event horizon of the words and actions ascribed to them through Shakespeare’s complete folios that I can reasonably predict how these fictive characters might behave in each others’ shoes. It may be speculation but, unlike with any real person whose past and future are always elided by the pressure of a never-exceeded present, it is speculation that can be verified *as* speculation by reference to the texts in which these figures appear.

Another way of circling this idea is to acknowledge as a tautological truth that the determinants of an *imaginary* selfhood as embodied in the character’s dilemmas, actions, and desires are also *predetermined* as elements within a symbolic order devised and mapped out by the playwright. How, then, can the actor’s imagination be of any use in the process of representing an already encoded figure on stage? Jon Erikson emphasizes this dynamic

²¹⁰ Ibid., 103.

conundrum by situating the actor's activity as being bound and released by a "production of time in performance" which is – again subtly troubling Bertrand Russell's law of contradiction, as itemized in Chapter 1 – *both one thing and another*:

The actor, to invest the most in the believability of his role, has to know the outcome, in the sense conveyed by the basic hermeneutical proposition that the meaning of any part of the text (or event) depends upon its relation to the whole (and vice versa) and so the fullest meaning given to any action in the present depends upon this sense of the whole. At the same time one should not allow this foreknowledge to distance one from the full exigencies of the present situation whose pressures are no sure basis for future knowledge for the character.²¹¹

Erikson here provides a fundamental reminder that not only is the actor in a non-exhaustible present moment when at work portraying a character, but that the character's delineated "present situation" in the play can never be seen as a knowable basis for future dramatic action. Hedda Gabler, as a realist construction of human character, simply cannot know that when she takes the pistol from its case and gives it to Løvborg with the instruction to try to kill himself "beautifully" that he will in fact complete this action. The actor playing Gabler *does* know the future result of the action, circumscribed by Ibsen's script, but must play the action *as if she doesn't know* what will happen – and when I say '*she*' here, just *who* am I referring to? There is no real Hedda to apprehend in the moment, by either the viewer or the actor; there is only the player *herself* available to act, and to be seen as acting. In the end, the action has only one quantifiable result: Løvborg accepting the pistol, (and then later using it). Theoretically, on stage, *only* the actors themselves know this. As an argumentative given, audience members do *not*; and, imaginatively, neither does the "figure" of Gabler. The only quality of action not exhausted by this paradigm is that of the actor's willful *self*. "I, myself", the actor proclaims to her own interiority, "must enact

²¹¹ Jon Erikson, "Tension/Release and the Production of Time in Performance," in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, and Michael Shanks (London: Routledge, 2012), 92.

this *as if* I were Hedda and did not know the outcome.” Beholden to such an ontological bargain, it is only to the actor that any notion of *how* this action will take place can be ascribed. All the factors determining the parameters of this “*how*” exist solely within the actor’s “I”, and all of us outside that “I” may merely indulge in unverified speculation. Not even Ibsen, the character’s creator, can know how any given actor will accomplish the material, behavioural, and emotional actions embedded within the role as written, and it is no small irony that what the author says about his own work could further be stated in other form by the actor later playing the part: “Before I write a single word, I have to have each character in mind through and through. I must penetrate into the last wrinkle of his [*sic*] soul. I always proceed from the individual.”²¹²

So, what now happens if I imaginatively combine the essential unpredictability and unknowable agency of the man whom (after Pfister) I will call Smith with the utter invariability of Shakespeare’s character called Othello? Put another way, I propose not to ask, “what would Hamlet do in Othello’s position?”, but rather, “what would the person Smith do if asked to play the character Othello?”. If Othello, as I’ve argued, is a finitely verifiable and knowable construction, and the person Smith is not, then how can I possibly tell what Smith will actually *do* while playing the part? Day to day, rehearsal to rehearsal, performance to performance – and in fact moment to moment – I can *never* hold enough evidence to prognosticate with certainty *what will happen* when Smith acts as Othello. I do know that both the actor and the character he represents are meant, at a specified point, to smother Desdemona with a pillow. But I do not know, for certain, that Smith *will* do that; and, if he does, exactly *how* he will do it. Theatre, as an actor’s medium, exists strictly in real time, and although Smith may have been directed to deliver his lines with a specified force and colour, and raise his arms in a particular manner, and express his emotions in a particular register, there is no way to verify that he will *do* these things in these ways when the time comes. In a Kantian sense, the actor’s will is engaged in a *hypothetical imperative*: Smith may hypothetically commit to the imperative end action of murdering his wife as Othello, but there is no moral guarantee that he will do so. Othello, on the

²¹² Quoted in Christopher Innes, “Introduction,” in *A Sourcebook of Naturalistic Theatre*, ed. Christopher Innes (London: Routledge, 2000), 13.

other hand, as a verifiable assemblage of prescribed activity bound by Shakespeare's play, will *always* do so.

Smith's ultimate unknowability as a person means that the only person who can verify what he will do, when the time comes to act, is *himself*. For Smith, the willful application of his own sense of self to the part of Othello, or to Hamlet, or any other – such as me playing Bill Sikes – is the only way that he can commit to any guaranteed and meaningful action on the stage. There is simply no other prescriptive or categorical formulation that assures me that Smith will complete his action, except for the surety that it is by the application of his *own willful self* to the task-at-hand that this action will occur. This is why the character is the last thing to arrive on stage, if we take a character on stage to be defined by its words, actions, and appearance. The character *only* arrives on stage when the actor playing that character applies a unique and unknowable agency – the sense of a *self in the part* – as an imperative to appearance. It is for this reason, for all the theatre's traditional obsession with mimetic replicability, that each and every performance by each and every actor is constituted by *difference*. And that difference, I suggest, is knowable to all actors by the most basic ontological query that they can ask of themselves: what would I do *as if* I were in the circumstantial position of this character – and am I now going to fulfill that action?

The imaginative interior speculation that an actor commits to when asking “if I was in the given circumstances of this character what would I do?” has strikingly been called a *magic* “if” by Stanislavski's translators.²¹³ “If is a spur to a dormant imagination, and the Given Circumstances provide the substance for it”,²¹⁴ he informs us, and from this I infer that the *magic* occurs by this incalculable unconscious *leap* from “if I” to the mercurial realm of imagination. The very notion of “imagination”, not unlike its more rigorously taxonomic cousin “thought”, is self-reflective to the extreme. It, perhaps even more than the Cartesian *cogitare*, appears as the very locus of our immaterial and unknowable interior nature as individuals. When the mysteries of imaginative action are somehow *applied* to the static construction of a dramatic character –

²¹³ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 49-51.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

the Magic! – then what is revealed is a strong manifestation of imagination as an expression of interior selfhood. As Darren R. Gobert points out,

[i]t is no accident that, concurrent with the Cartesian revolution, both the French word *caractère* and the English word *character* began to shift: originally referring to a mark on a page, the word began to acquire a third dimension, a denotative deepening that is hard to separate from the discursive emergence of interiority.²¹⁵

Once again, the operations of character may be seen as analogous to the “functions of the I” in mirror-stage activity. Just as the conceptualization of character comes to include an activity of language through which an inner sense of selfhood is produced, so too does the subject’s apprehension of the “mirror-object” as its “self” represent a “discursive emergence of interiority”. For the actor, the character is simply never *fixed* in the way that Pfister describes. The character, like the reflexive mirror-image, is easy to locate but impossible to draw out of its relational operations; the actor is bound to “mistake” each of these phenomena as integrated expressions of its self. As the mercurial actor and pedagogue Joseph Chaikin asks, and answers: “What is character? What do I mean by character? I mean the actor’s study of a single person (not necessarily other than himself). The study of character is the study of ‘who’ the ‘I’ is [...] The study of character is the study of ‘I’ in relation to forces that join us.”²¹⁶

If I have, argumentatively, established the primacy of the actor’s primordial agency as the prerequisite quality for a character’s emergence in performance, it has yet to be shown how that agency works within the aesthetically enforced exigencies of actual production. Actors, as with all cultural producers, exist and work within a matrix of codes and procedures. If I make case for the *dramatic actor* within a historicized litany of prescribed and authorized behaviour on the stage, how might I justify such an appraisal within the current landscape of performance? I trace

²¹⁵ Gobert, *Mind-Body Stage*, 99.

²¹⁶ Joseph Chaikin, *Presence of the Actor* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 11.

my arguments through Diderot and *La Comédie-Française*, Stanislavski, and The Method. Yet how do these singularities bounce off of contemporary practice and analysis?

Figuring Out Character

Usefully, Khaled Besbes makes a stab at categorically outlining the principal modes of theoretical analyses applied to dramatic literature leading out of the early twentieth century:

- Structuralism
- Deconstruction
- New Historicism
- Feminist Criticism
- Marxist Criticism
- Psychoanalysis
- Reader-Response Theories
- Semiotics²¹⁷

The items in this taxonomy no doubt strike the contemporary reader as tired, exhausted, and unduly restrictive.²¹⁸ Shouldn't we be discussing any aspect of drama now in terms of the *postdramatic*? Perhaps under the supplication of a theatre which is devised, applied, verbatim, and participatory? Is it not, by now, critical to always begin with the *performative*, the *everyday*, and the *accidental*?

Indeed, the truth is that we *are* mostly speaking about theatre – if not exactly drama – in these newer and slipperier terms. Considering this, other potential categories and sub-categories of discourse might be added to any contemporary list of theatrical lenses in the early twenty-first century: postcolonial, genderqueer, intermedial, virtuality, heterarchical, immersive, applied,

²¹⁷ Khaled Besbes, *Rehabilitating Literary Theory: A Practical Guide for the Critical and Semiotic Analysis of Poetry and Drama* (Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press, 2011), viii–ix.

²¹⁸ A fact that Besbes well-recognizes, and seeks to address, beginning with the title of this 2011 publication, *Rehabilitating Literary Theory*.

verbatim, embodied, performative, aesthetics of failure. This broad movement of terminology, which seeks to activate our discursive terms beyond the supposed sterility and tail-chasing of a cultural analysis still tethered to “the linguistic turn” of the early twentieth century, is a bracing one. It is impossible to write responsibly – or at least consciously – about the material(s) of culture without taking new developments in both criticism and practice into account. There is a healthy recognition that *cultural activity* in our world now exists, intersects, and produces on many different platforms, and through many different temporal and material modes, of “reality”. Drama – by which I mean the *script*, the *plot*, and the *characters* – is no longer seen to be very gripping or vital as a mere branch of literature; as words on a page. Similarly, the evocation of drama as theatrical presentation and performance is often now viewed as unsurprising and tradition-bound; as dull actors on a stage.²¹⁹

Yet it is my affirmation that dramatic acting, as a process, negotiates both the theoretical notions of form and meaning extended through literary criticism and the actualised motions of body and loci extensive of performative action. As I continually affirm, this is because such acting is both coterminous, and co-creating, with a sense of self, at its core. It is not that the self is monolithic, or universal, or unchanging, or ontologically stable: but it is often *felt*, by most people at most times, as something ineffably *real*. And such a self always carries with it not only states of affect and memory and emotion, not only conditions of desire and aspiration and action – all the qualities most thought of when contemplating the actor’s work – but also bears with it all the accumulated intelligence, rationality, and querying that come from a discursive mind’s activity. Actors working on stage or in the rehearsal hall are *thinking beings* with a linguistic and associative history regarding *what* they are doing, and *why*. Actors at work are uniquely constituted both to *represent* dominant and subaltern forms of human behaviour through actualizing dramatic characters and to also *reflect* the epiphenomenon of their experiential knowledge and exploration of those constructed behaviours *in toto*.

That it has become so difficult for us to imagine actors as just such avatars of not only a certain kind of representative performance but also of a vitally centred discourse is a direct result

²¹⁹ Jordan Tannahill, *Theatre of the Unimpressed: In Search of Vital Drama* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2015).

of the so-called postmodern moment that had swamped so much of our inquiry by the 1990s. This phenomenon is well-evidenced – and articulated – by Elinor Fuchs in *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*, from 1996: “I suggest that one of the meanings of ‘postmodern’ – its psychological formation – was a dispersed idea of self, and that this dispersal was represented in many different ways in the contemporary alternative theatre.”²²⁰

As I noted in my introduction, and as salient as Fuch’s analysis of our passing cultural moment is, it leaves practitioners of dramatic acting – whose practices certainly do not always align with “the contemporary alternative theatre” – in a vacuum of non-entity, for the very idea of the self as being *contained* rather than dispersed is the inciting idea that creates character on stage. And not *only* on stage. Herbert Blau presents us with an arresting formulation of what is *not being represented* but rather *simply presented* when a subject acts on stage, one that puts the categorical lie to Abromović’s “theatre is fake” formulation earlier cited:

[...] in a very strict sense, it is the actor’s mortality which is the acted subject, for he is right there dying in front of your eyes. The critical thing, then, in the institution of the theatre is not so much that an actor is there, but that an actor is so vulnerably there. Whatever he represents in the play, in the order of time he is representing nobody but himself. How could he? that’s his body, doing time.²²¹

In this construction, we are all actively and corporeally subject to time as an inexhaustible ontological fact, but as actors we are *doing* that time while *experiencing* character.

I submit that, regardless of the deconstructive slippages and elisions that erode a sense of cohesiveness about our selfhood, even extending so far as our own ever-immanent mortality, the experiences we have – ourselves – *about* our selves are ideally formulated to be recoverable in

²²⁰ Fuchs, *Death of Character*, 9.

²²¹ Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 134.

the potent form of the dramatic stage. Consider what Meredith Fionola has to say about the matter of selfhood in her book *Experiencing the Postmetaphysical Self: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, from 2005:

Against the ‘autistic echo-chambers’ of the deconstructed self, I argue that far from dismissing experience as a lie, construct or illusion, we must acknowledge that we are indeed subjects constructed *by* experience, individuals immersed in particular linguistic and extra-linguistic situations.²²²

Fionola’s codifying configuration of the self as “immersed in particular linguistic and extra-linguistic situations” is another explication of what the actor *lives through* when pursuing the work of communicating dramatic character. And the actor does this not just through the “particular linguistic” nature of drama, but through the “extra-linguistic” semiology of *being bodily present*. The body is both a self *and* a sign. And the sign of the actor’s body is never dispersed in the way of Fuchs’s deconstructed self, but always contained by the visibility of its locus on stage and by the application of the actor’s self to represent the dramatic character bodily in the here-and-now.

Simon Bayly proclaims such a paradigm of knowledge conduction for the actor’s self and body as a kind of pathognomy, that is, as a site for studying extra-linguistic clues regarding passion and emotion:

The recalcitrant, resistant and abject body, subjected to all manner of penetrations, dismemberments, and interpretations, has become a resting place for many approaches to performance seeking to establish the importance of qualities of experience and the

²²² Fionola Meredith, *Experiencing the Postmetaphysical Self: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 81.

transmissions of knowledges that are not regulated by the aggressive exercise of so-called cognitive rationality.²²³

While Bayly's generalized statement of "many approaches to performance" can theoretically cover all manner of developments in the alternative theatre and performance art, it certainly also includes the dramatic actor's work as an activity bounded by experience and not regulated by purely linguistic and rational precepts. Perhaps John Lutterbie makes the point more plainly and directly when he says that "[p]lays are written to be embodied by actors, and the force of a character is dependent upon the performer's ability to reconcile the action required in the 'world' of the play with the actor's life experience".²²⁴ It is this event of *embodiment*, of *standing in* for a character, which grants the actor communicative power and agency. It is a *whole* signifying process undertaken by a *whole* person in front of another. As Bruce Wilshire reminds us: "[...] an actor must stand in for a character [...] and through this standing in the audience member stands in for the character [...]"²²⁵

What further implications does this "standing in for" a character have for the working actor? What might be the actual psychological and physical *thing that happens* when actors "stand in" for characters? How does the self – metaphorically, magically – *become* the character by this process of standing in? To explore the implications of this idea in detail, it is time to return to the riddle of the actor's *paradoxe*, the roots of the System, and the movements of the mirror.

²²³ Simon Bayly, *A Pathognomy of Performance* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 11.

²²⁴ John Lutterbie, *Hearing Voices: Modern Drama and the Problem of Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 9.

²²⁵ Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 42–43.

Chapter 4

Transformation and Mirror Theory: The Actor Prepares

This notion of the mirror stage has been especially useful for theatre studies, because of the analogy between it and the mimetic mirror of the stage, which reflects representations of the self and its world. The social construction of the representations leaves no doubt that the reflection in the stage mirror is also Other, not identical to any viewing selves, and not “accurate” about any so-called human nature but, rather, a socio-cultural construct of ideal images.

–Janelle G. Reinhelt²²⁶

Transforming Transference

At the heart of this dissertation on dramatic acting – on what it is and what it means for actors to materially tackle the idea of an author’s written character through rehearsal and performance – is the very act of *transformation*. The transformation of the written mark (*caractere*) into the player’s part (*character*). The transformation of those characters’ subtextual and unstated intentions into playable actions within a *mise-en-scène*. The phenomenological transformation of *qualia* and *raw feeling* into patterns of consciousness and identity. The transformation of a *mirrored image of unified self* into the action and agency of an ego-driven and performative individual. The metaphoric transformation that occurs when a mirrored ego-identification is applied to a dramatic character by the actor. The *mimetic* transformation, through heightened *sensibility*, of behaviour, affect, and emotion into the artifice and (re)performance of those qualities by bodies on a theatrical stage. The transformation of structurally logical ways of knowing how signs operate within the symbolic order of language into the fluid and open-ended suggestions of *metaphoric truths* and *intuitive apprehensions* of how people move through time and space. The transformation of *imagination* and *appearance* – perhaps of *consciousness* itself – into the multivalent reality of an actor’s life lived on stage.

The concept of transformation is fundamental to dramatic acting in the theatre. It is what the actor *does*. And, it is what is *done to* the actor. Transforming from one thing – what I call

²²⁶ Reinhelt, “Psychoanalysis,” 399.

here the *self* – into (an)other – which I name as the *character*. Richard Schechner outlines it this way:

When, in Western theatre, we speak of an actor “portraying a role,” using a metaphor from painting where the artist studies a subject and produces an image of that subject, we slide away from the main fact of theatrical performance: that the “portrayal” is a transformation of the performer’s body/mind; the “canvas” or “material” is the performer.²²⁷

All this, while still remaining as a *self*. But a self that both remains and alters, due to its deep engagement with the event of transforming into a character. The actor’s identity as a self holds true while also reconstituting its self through repeated transformations of that self by portraying character. Analytic philosopher Mark Johnson situates what I categorize as the actor’s ontological response to this act(ion) of transformation in terms of a logical conundrum:

[...] we need an account of the consistence conditions of persons; that is, an account of what changes they can survive or *be around after*. Survival in this basic and seemingly unassailable sense is thus logically connected to numerical identity by way of existence: if something *x* survives some event *e* then there exists after *e* a thing *y* such that $x = y$.²²⁸

Answering Johnson, in a limited fashion, I would suggest that that the Martin Julien (*self*“*x*”) that existed *before* I portrayed the psychotic murderer Bill Sykes for several months (*event*“*e*”) is both the same and yet a different Martin Julien (*self*“*y*”), after surviving the deep personal engagement of playing such a violent and pathetic character.

²²⁷ Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory: 1970–1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), 128.

²²⁸ Mark Johnson, “Personal Identity: Are We Ontological Trash?” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Barry Dainton and Howard Robinson (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 380.

Seen this way, I believe that the culminating exploration of such complex notions of transformation should take place in that field of endeavour which extends, almost constitutively, as an activity of *alteration*, of *conversion*, from one kind of thing to another: the arena of pedagogy and learning. By selecting training and instruction as a locus for continuing my investigation of dramatic acting and the self/character conundrum, I state in no uncertain terms that the individual we must fundamentally consider is Konstantin Stanislavski. Before moving further, I hazard that, *actually*, it goes without saying that to propose a pedagogical survey of modern dramatic acting is to accept without fanfare or naysaying that the monadic and germinal individual to whom attention must be paid is Konstantin Stanislavski. This is no slavish nod to the impoverished “great man” theory of history. As I will delineate, the ramifications of a Stanislavskian-based pedagogy consist of many different, and even separate, collective and historical branches. Yet to deny the primacy of not only the man’s work and influence but also of his very *name* as a marker of modern acting methodology would be an error. (The fact that it is entirely a *stage* name adds a delicious irony to its resonance.) I would argue that this is especially true now, as the formerly lionized and much-copied phenomenon of the “Method” authorized by Lee Strasberg and the Actors’ Studio has devolved into a term which serves as an obligatory cliché referring to self-involved and emotionally abusive film and television actors. As the “Method” has fallen into some disrepute and dissolution, the original precepts of Stanislavski that so vitally influenced Strasberg (and other acolytes of the Group Theatre such as Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner) have begun to re-emerge as the foundational tenets – or at least provocations – of a still-contemporary and ubiquitous acting system.

There seems no doubt that, for all of his accomplishments as a director (and eventually Soviet-muzzled impresario) through his work with Nemirovich-Danchenko and the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski’s lasting legacy resides in his activity as a relentless pedagogue. Jane Milling and Graham Ley clearly assess the horizon of influence in the opening paragraph of the chapter called “Stanislavski’s Theoretical System” in their survey *Modern Theories of Performance*:

[...] those who are famous in the theatre have traditionally been actors or playwrights, and more recently directors. In fact, Stanislavski was a dedicated and admired actor, and a significant director, but his prominence is undoubtedly due to the fame and

reputation of his ‘system’, which is a mode of preparation for actors. There was, in the history of the European theatre, no real precedent for this, nor, indeed, for a pedagogic system of acting which crossed cultural boundaries to such great effect.²²⁹

Not only is Stanislavski’s global legacy as both a practical and theoretical interrogator/teacher indisputable, but the influential and lasting record of that achievement in published form consists mainly of imagined dialogic interchanges between instructor and student(s) that in some ways resemble the psychological exchanges that occur within the Freudian (and hence Lacanian) model of psychoanalysis. This will take a bit of unpacking.

In a traditionally hide-bound and cognitively-based definition of teaching – what Ronald Schleifer calls “the conveyance or ‘transference’ of pre-existing objects of knowledge from teacher to student”²³⁰ – no transformation *of* and *around* those objects of knowledge is presumed to occur. Through instruction, the knowledge and methodologies of a practiced expert – the teacher – are presumed to be *passed on* to a practicing novice – the student. Somehow, by certain means, the technique and command of the teacher are *transferred* to the student without any mutation of those skills and mastery. Yet as Schleifer goes on to argue, the teaching situation “is better figured by the child’s acquisition of language”:

[...] language acquisition is a learning process of trial and error, guidance, and working through where the intersubjective functions as forcefully as the cognitive, and in which both teacher and student (parent and child) are not wholly conscious of or fully intending the education – the “transference” – taking place.²³¹

²²⁹ Jane Milling and Graham Ley, *Modern Theories of Performance* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 1.

²³⁰ Ronald Schleifer, “Lacan's Enunciation and the Cure of Mortality: Teaching, Transference, and Desire,” *College English* 49, no. 7, *Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy II* (November 1987): 801.

²³¹ Schleifer, “Lacan's Enunciation and the Cure of Mortality,” 801–2.

Looked at this way, in teaching, as with any intersubjective exchange, there will be a *change* that occurs within the object of the transfer. The meaning and power of the words “mama” and “papa” are substantively changed for both the parental figures *and* their child when these words become active through the agency of the child’s comprehension and utterance of them. The “pre-existing object of knowledge” is no longer merely a cognitive abstraction but a site for intersubjective transformation: a *subject/object*. It is not so simple as to state that what was once *mine* – as the teacher’s – now becomes *yours* – as the student’s. The *value* and *potential* of that “object of knowledge” – the informational subject/object of experience and skill – is now *different* in the student’s hands than it was in the instructor’s; but it will also, in an essential way, resemble or *mirror* the instructor’s original offering. Further to this, in a more complex mapping of such a pedagogical transformation, the student now *gives back* knowledge of the subject/object to the instructor in a way that appears to be *new*. For a father, his child’s declaration of “you are my papa” is an intricately altered mirroring of his own instructive phrase “I am your papa”. Instructors, in witnessing the mirroring of their subject/object of knowledge through the intersubjectivity of their students, *see* the object transformed and *renewed*. In this way, both the instructor and the student *learn*, and the subjects/objects of their learning are constantly refreshed and altered through a continuous pattern of transformation.

Yet now, here, we do bear witness to another kind of potential *transference* between teacher and student, and, in dramatic acting, between actor and character. I refer to the term, as conceptualized by Freud (and Lacan), of the procedural relationship that the analysand holds with the analyst. As I explore the rapport between Stanislavski’s dialogic inventions between teacher and student, the implications of Lacanian mirror-stage development, and modern dramatic acting methodologies, I may find that the concepts of *transference* and *countertransference* magically appear. Yet before I consider the psychological theory of transference in detail, with specific reference to the actor’s work, a number of words need to be said about magic, mirrors, and make-up.

INTERLUDE: A Word or Two on Magic

Indeed, such an analysis of teaching may seem to be layering a patina of “magical thinking” over the nuts and bolts of actual pedagogy and knowledge production. Without taking on the considerable weight of discussing educational theory from a clinical point of view, I will assert

that for students and teachers of acting alike, the academically suspect notion of “magic” is hard to disqualify as a crucial aspect of actor training’s proclivities and mysteries. In *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*, philosopher Bruce Wilshire notes that “actors train themselves to slide into [a] ‘hot spot’ of mimetic interfusion and involvement”.²³² Wilshire does this with semiotic recourse to the quality of being called “experiencing” that Stanislavski, and his translator Jean Benedetti, denote as fundamental to the actor’s work:

The absorption of the experiencing body [THE SELF/ACTOR] in the experienced object [THE SELF/CHARACTER] can proceed to the point where the *along-with* slips nonthematically into a magical or quasi-magical merging with the other, that being which officially (in Apollonian terms) one is not. The *along-with* slips into *being with* or *being in*.²³³

Wilshire grounds his theory in the notion of the “Self as Body-Self”, a descriptive nominative that resonates with the psychoanalytical identification of the *selfobject* discussed later in this chapter. What is important here is to valorize the unverifiable evocation of “magic” as a concept indivisible from the activity of representational dramatic acting – even for trained philosophers.

In less scholarly but I trust still illuminating fashion, I now gesture towards some observations by Raymond Joseph Teller, of the renowned magician duo Penn & Teller, who was a high school English and Latin teacher in Lawrenceville, New Jersey for six years before becoming a professional magician/performer. Known as the “silent” one in the pair, Teller’s gifts as a pantomimic actor within the couple’s stage show harken back to Harpo Marx, and the early silent cinema performances of Harry Langdon and Stan Laurel. In a 2016 *The Atlantic* article, author Jessica Lahey highlights a connection Teller makes between magic, performing, and teaching that is arresting:

²³² Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 157.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 157.

“The first job of a teacher [says Teller] is to make the student *fall in love with the subject*. That doesn’t have to be done by waving your arms and prancing around the classroom; there’s all sorts of ways to go at it, but no matter what, you are a *symbol of the subject* in the students’ minds” [...] And if Shakespeare[...] makes students uncomfortable? That’s a good thing, Teller said.

“Learning, like magic, should make people uncomfortable, because *neither are passive acts*.” Elaborating on the analogy, he continued, “*Magic* doesn’t wash over you like a gentle, reassuring lullaby. In magic, what you see comes into *conflict* with what you know, and that *discomfort* creates a kind of *energy* and a spark that is extremely exciting. That level of *participation* that magic *brings from you* by making you uncomfortable is a very good thing.”

(emphasis added)²³⁴

I add the italicized emphases above to illustrate how Teller pithily invokes so many of Stanislavski’s basic tenets, as a teacher and performer. In my distillation of this worldview which reveals the actor’s process, the words “falling in love” and “symbolizing” the “subject” conflate the idea of embodying character with performing selfhood; learning and magic are, like acting, not “passive”, but active; “conflict” creates “discomfort”, and drives that action dramatically; and, “energy” and “participation” are necessary for actors to engage with their roles and make them “magically” appear out of themselves.

Indeed, as I turn to Stanislavski to begin my analysis of pedagogy as a conduit to the essential self-creating nature of dramatic acting, I invoke the principles of *action* and the *magic If*: these terms, quite uncontroversially, constitute two of the leading elements of his System. If teaching and magic both push against the boundaries of what individuals think they know by revealing a new and surprising appearance of reality, then Stanislavski’s famous qualifier of the word “If” with the word “magic” establishes the condition by which unknowing actors confront

²³⁴ Jessica Lahey, “Teaching: Just Like Performing Magic,” *The Atlantic*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/01/what-classrooms-can-learn-from-magic/425100>.

their own revealed experiences, and then conjoin these recognitions with their imagination to actively create characters. For the actor in the process of character formation – much like the mirror-entranced toddler in the jubilant Lacanian process of ego formation – these “[are] not simple but ‘magic ifs’ provoking instantaneous, instinctive actions [...] the secret of ‘if’, as a stimulus, lies in the fact that it does not speak of actual facts, of what is, but of what might be.”²³⁵ Here, seen through the lenses of *action*, *instinct*, *stimulus*, and *of what might be*, the actor is practically invested in the magical order of discovering one’s self within one’s role. Robert Cohen, in his authoritative yet querying survey of theatrical history entitled, simply, *Theatre*, gives special place – and a categorical subtitle – to the perception and uses of magic within his twenty-page entry on “The Actor”. His concentration is on the Benjaminian concept of the actor’s presence as a magical projection of “aura”:

[...] this does not come about as a direct result of his skills at impersonation or his technical virtuosity [...] while “magic” cannot be directly acquired or produced, it can be approached, and its fundamental requisites can be established [...] the best acting, like any art, ultimately transcends the reach of pure descriptive analysis: it cannot be acquired mechanically. The best acting strikes chords in the non-reasoning parts of our being; it rings with a resonance we do not fully understand, and it evokes a reality we no longer fully remember.²³⁶

And, I might add, when approaching the idea of self, the “non-reasoning parts of our being”, that it is those aspects of our consciousness which depend on *qualia* and *raw feeling* for their activity – *what it feels like to be something* – which are the keys to unlocking why Stanislavski’s metaphoric ideal of a theatrically *mirroring* self remain so crucial to the actor’s

²³⁵ Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, 49–51.

²³⁶ Robert Cohen, *Theatre* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1981), 318.

work. As the Stanislavski-based actor and teacher Morris Carnovsky articulates it: “There’s a magic about the Self obeying the call of a character”.²³⁷

Stan’s Laurels and All Over Heart-‘Be’

Stanislavski, and the principles of acting methodology discovered through his “system”, can in one way be seen as the perfect antidote to the prescriptions of Diderot in his *Paradoxe*. If, as noted previously, Diderot’s most well-known aphorism asserts that “extreme sensibility makes middling actors [and] in complete absence of sensibility is the possibility of a sublime actor”, then Stanislavski’s many pronouncements on the actor’s work stand in nearly diametric opposition: it is *only* through extreme sensibility that the possibility of sublimity – or *magic*, if you will – is achievable. In one of translator Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood’s most influential and endlessly problematic passages from *An Actor Prepares*, she would have Stanislavski declaring this through his persona as Tortsov: “...*in our art you must live the part every moment you are playing it, and every time.*”²³⁸ This idea that an actor “must live the part” and the “life of the part” – repeated at various points in Hapgood’s progenitive translation²³⁹ – has had real, and some would say dire, implications for realist dramatic acting over the ensuing decades. This, of course, is especially true for the methodologies of modern American actor preparation that blossomed (and defected) out of the Group Theatre’s explorations at the time of the book’s New York publication in 1936. That this short but governing sentence was more helpfully (and more accurately) translated by Jean Benedetti in 2008 as, “[i]n our kind of acting, which means experiencing every moment in the role, that experiencing must be felt anew and physically embodied anew”,²⁴⁰ it comes too late to modify the tenacious hold that “Method” exhortations to “live the part” have made on American acting in particular, and on the English-speaking theatre in general, over time. Stanislavski’s choice of word – the Russian переживание – is

²³⁷ Carnovsky, *Actor’s Eye*, 35.

²³⁸ Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares*, 18.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14, 15, 18.

²⁴⁰ Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, 23.

clearly better translated as “experience”; the super-charged directive to “live” no doubt poetically appeals to our notion of what acting might be. Indeed, it seems important for me to often include Hapgood’s translations in my argument for just these reasons: they have become so historically inlaid within our common parlance and spheres of influence, and they are more robust and direct in their implications.

Yet inasmuch as Benedetti has strongly privileged the words “experience/experiencing” over Hapgood’s Romantically-inspired choices of “live/living” with regard to the actor’s job – going so far as to rename the declarative title *An Actor Prepares* as the more interwoven and descriptive *Year One: Experiencing* in his compilation of Stanislavski’s writings for the student actor – it is well to remember that it is *feeling* that is here to be experienced, above and beyond anything else. This is no less true for Hapgood as it is for Benedetti. In another notable passage, the first translator gives us:

’That is why we begin by thinking of the inner side of a role, and how to create its spiritual life through the help of the internal process of living the part. You must *live it* by actually *experiencing feelings* that are analogous to it, each and every time you repeat the process of creating it’(emphasis added).²⁴¹

Though far less baldly correlative regarding the direct causality of “living the part” to “experiencing feelings”, Benedetti is still at pains to validate Stanislavski’s thoughts on *feelings* outside of such an imperative:

‘That is why we think first and foremost of the inner aspect of a role, that is of its psychological *life* which we create by using the process of experiencing. It is the most important feature of creative work and must be the actor’s first concern. You must experience a

²⁴¹ Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares*, 14.

role, that is *experience feelings* analogous to it each and every time you do it' (emphasis added).²⁴²

If I may take Benedetti's addition of *feelings* as a qualifier of *experiencing* – his very titular word – then I submit that *sensibility* is in fact at the heart of Stanislavski's concept of what constitutes an actor's work. So imbricated are the notions of *sensibility* and *experiencing feelings* that the overlap between the two might as well be fungible. In this, generally speaking, I do not think that either Diderot or Clairon would dissent.

Yet just as Diderot's treatise has been simplified and distilled into an uncomplicated view that 'great actors should not feel the emotions of the parts they are playing', so too have Stanislavski's proclamations popularly devolved into simple admonishments to 'experience feelings truly and deeply at all times'. If Diderot is careful to foreground the actor of "genius" as someone who must first feel the "passion" of "sublime unadorned nature" before reproducing it, it is yet true that he asks for this reproduction of affective sensibility to never veer beyond the bounds of an actor's "complete self-possession".²⁴³ Stanislavski is even more dogged in his admonishments against the valorization of "emotion" for its own sake. In this, of course, he means "fake" emotion: the mere demonstration of emotion through grimacing, writhing, bellowing, shuddering, and sobbing. On this point, Hapgood is, as usual, more staunchly declarative in her choice of idiom: "*On the stage there cannot be, under any circumstances, action which is directed immediately at the arousing of feeling for its own sake*".²⁴⁴ For a more nuanced and extended reading of this upbraiding passage, I turn to Benedetti:

You can't squeeze feelings out of yourself, you can't be jealous, love, suffer for the sake of being jealous, loving, or suffering. You can't force feelings. That only leads to the most repulsive kind of ham acting. So, when choosing an action, leave your feelings

²⁴² Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 19.

²⁴³ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 23.

²⁴⁴ Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares*, 38.

alone. They will appear of their own accord as a result of something which has gone before, that evokes jealousy, love, or suffering. Think hard about what has gone before and re-create it.

Don't be concerned with the result.²⁴⁵

What is clear here is that although an actor should focus on *action* – Aristotle would not disagree – and that feelings can't be forced, it is also averred that such feelings will and even *should* arise and present themselves in performance as a result of the actor's thought and willful commitment to the active demands of the role.

It is here, in these crucial considerations of how the *self* should be activated in performing dramatic character – both in terms of emotion and its application – that Stanislavski and Diderot begin to both coalesce and to seriously part ways, theoretically and aesthetically. Their analytical postulations that actors should trade in *feelings* on stage only through the transoms of self-possession and re-creation – that is, at a controlled and modulated distance that merely *takes account* of sense-oriented memory and experience – seem in concordance. Both theorists converge on the idea that there is an applied craft at work in acting which synthesizes feeling and action by foregrounding the power and authenticity of choosing controlled actions to perform, in character, that evoke the emotional experiences and memories of what has occurred in the past without forcing those emotions to appear in the present. For both men, the experience and use of personal emotion is not questioned, and they seem to agree that selecting and harnessing such emotions are matters of discretion, usefulness, and studied application.

Yet, is it not salient to suggest that Diderot's "sublime re-productions" and Stanislavski's "ham acting" are merely distorted mirror images of each other? For Diderot, it is worth noting that although he recognizes an appreciation of personal *feeling* as a legitimate pool for the actor to draw from, he is also far more certain that,

Great actors [...] beings gifted with fine imagination, with broad judgement, with exquisite tact, with a sure touch of taste, are the

²⁴⁵ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 43.

least sensitive of all creatures. They are too apt for too many things, too busy with observing, considering, and reproducing, to have their inmost hearts affected with any liveliness.²⁴⁶

This is the expression of a man who is able to state forcefully that, “The player’s tears come from his brain, the sensitive being’s from his heart.”²⁴⁷ From this, Diderot is able to lavish praise on the great actress Mlle. Clairon who – in contradistinction to the pilloried Mlle. Dumesnil mentioned in my first chapter – “has imagined a type, and to conform to this type has been her first thought; doubtless she has chosen for her purpose the highest, the greatest, the most perfect type her imagination could compass.”²⁴⁸ Perhaps the most pragmatic phenomenon to reify such observations was the release of François Delsarte’s wildly popular criterion charts of 1811, which itemized in graphic detail how an actor’s eyes, hands, and other bodily parts should best express the appearance of sensibilities on the stage.²⁴⁹

I submit that it is in Diderot’s commitment to this imagined and vaunted “type” of character, acted and presented as if it were a figure emanating from some kind of removed and nearly senseless chamber of the mind’s logical and judiciary functions, that we are confronted with a sharp fork in the road, separating Stanislavski’s narrative journey towards the actor’s work from the French philosopher’s. Stanislavski, in no uncertain terms, rebuffs the kind of acting that Diderot appears to lionize, created as it is from “observing, considering, and reproducing”; from a “player’s brain”; from “the most perfect type”. Crucially, for Stanislavski and, as I will show, for the many instructors and practitioners who followed in his train and extended the tenets of his System, the kind of acting he valued was of a sort that eschewed all typical posturing and demanded a truthfulness of psychological causality and subjectivity. Essentially, an expression of *self* rather than *other*. He is clear on this:

²⁴⁶ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 17–18.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴⁹ Jeff Zinn, *The Existential Actor* (Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2015), 63–64.

Using mimicry, voice, and movement the stock-in-trade actor only presents the audience with external clichés, as though they expressed “the life of the human spirit” of a role, a dead mask for non-existent feelings. There is a large, ready-made battery of tricks, which ostensibly convey by outward means all the possible feelings you can encounter in the course of your career for this kind of playacting. There is no actual feeling in them. There is only imitation, a resemblance to its supposed outer results. There is no psychological content. There are only the technical tricks which are supposed to express it.²⁵⁰

It is worth remembering, at this juncture, that these two theorists of acting methodology lived within very different histories and topologies. For Diderot, the theatre’s apogee consisted of figures such as his celebrated Clairon reciting Racine’s *Phèdre* at *La Comédie-Française*, whose “rules” prescribed “how high hands might be raised or how far necks be turned”.²⁵¹ Inasmuch as his long-anticipated introduction to the English master actor David Garrick in 1763 sparked in the encyclopaedist a newfound wonderment for the spontaneous expressions of affect that this theatrical star introduced to Parisian audiences, his ultimate assessment of Garrick as “a kind of monster of insensibility” who can “dictate to his own soul”, (as Diderot’s biographer P.N. Furbank so grandly puts it), can credibly be seen as the harbinger of his treatise on actors’ contradictions in the *Paradoxe*.²⁵² Diderot, under the influence of the Lockean revolution with regard to empiricism and the senses, may well have held to the simplified doctrine of *nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu* (nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the senses), but he clearly seemed to value the powers of the intellect *over* those of the senses. It is not a stretch, then, to presume that the performances he witnessed and intellectually analyzed as

²⁵⁰ Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, 28.

²⁵¹ P. N. Furbank, *Diderot: A Critical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 268.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 268–9.

“sublime”, given his *milieu* and propensities, were those exhibiting qualities of extreme stylization and controlled affection, (not to say affectation).

Stanislavski, of course, was born in 1863 – a full century after Garrick’s introduction to Parisian society – and did not lead his first amateur theatre group, the Alekseyev Circle, until 1884 – exactly a hundred years after Diderot’s death at the age of seventy. Yet this does not preclude, by his own accounts, the aspiring Russian thespian and producer witnessing the remnants of an eighteenth-century acting legacy still dominant in theatrical circles during the mid-nineteenth century when the privileged young man was first introduced to the theatre. Although much has been made of Stanislavski’s studied lionization of great international actors such as Tomasso Salvini and Eleonora Duse, whose performances spurred him on to develop his System, and of the spiritual debt he owed to the first great “modern” Russian actor Mikhail Shchepkin, it is less-remembered that his first introduction to the theatre as a child came through the highly-stylized Italian opera singers he witnessed on a regular basis in Moscow. As Stanislavski puts it in his nostalgic autobiography *My Life in Art*, “all these stars were regular artists of the Moscow and Petrograd operas, under contract to the Russian Government for the whole season”, and to read his gushing remembrances of these singing actors is to potentially miss the articulation of their classical technique as being somewhat shopworn and merely technical, an amalgam of “the nobility of sound and diction [...] rhythmical, musical intonation [...] a true view of the soul of vowels, consonants, words, phrases, sentences and speech”.²⁵³ As he pointedly shares about the tenor Tamagno, based on his childhood reminiscence: “He was taught to play the part, but the means used to make him do so remained mysteries to him. They were art and technique. Like the majority of actors, he worked on his part, but he was not an artist”.²⁵⁴

All in all, encapsulating his impression as a young man of how the vocational craft of acting was predominantly transferred from one generation to the next during his student days,

²⁵³ Konstantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, trans. J. J. Robbins (New York: Routledge, [1924] 2012), 37.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

Stanislavski betrays a skeptical disappointment in the quality of much of the theatre art he was raised in when he assesses that,

[t]he majority of the so-called professors of dramatic art were charlatans, as they have remained till the present day; and prominent individual actors were in the possession of some fundamentals which they either worked out themselves, or received as a heritage from the great actors of the past generations”.²⁵⁵

The “heritage” of “fundamentals” that individual actors passed down to each other through generations, assumedly through an unsystematic combination of mimicry and anecdote, points to the legacy of performance that extended from the days of Diderot and Garrick to the professional Continental playing of Stanislavski’s early years. It is surely this moribund state in the actor’s art that he famously challenges in this description of the Moscow Art Theatre’s founding in 1898:

We protested against the customary manner of acting, against theatricality, against bathos, against declamation, against overacting, against the bad manner of production, against the habitual scenery, against the star system which spoiled the ensemble, against the light and farcical repertoire which was being cultivated on the Russian stage at that time...then as well as now, we sought for inner truth, for the truth of feeling and experience.²⁵⁶

Although Stanislavski was enticed and provoked by the very best Continental performers he was fortunate enough to encounter, it also seems clear that the “ruck of middling actors” that he witnessed were less encumbered by a surfeit of sensibility (as Diderot might have it), but rather hamstrung by a legacy of technique and mimicry that had flowed downstream from the glory days of Clairon and Molé and their “sublime” posturings. Indeed, as Jonathan Pitches and

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 79.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 330.

Stefan Aquilina have pointed out, it was the *exact* eighteenth-century legacy of the *Comédie-Française* that provoked such a reaction when Stanislavski witnessed productions there of Molière’s *L’avare* (*The Miser*) and *Le Misanthrope* (*The Misanthrope*) in 1897, the year before he co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre. From a letter to journalist Lucien Besnard, Stanislavski gives us this, regarding his experience in Paris:

I revere the French for their tradition, which, by the way, has now become a simple uninteresting routine in the realm of light comedy and drama. But their tradition in tragedy – what can’t be more dreadful [...] The greatest foes of Molière are the actors of the Comédie. This is not tradition but simple idiotic obstinacy – to desiccate such a great author the way they do [...] The actors in the roles of Molière are not living people, but mannequins”.²⁵⁷

Prend ça, Diderot et Delsarte!

What the young Stanislavski seems to be searching for is an articulation for a technique that will productively conflate the artist’s experience of a *self living a life* with that of an *actor experiencing a role*. “Let the artist live”, he exhorts us in the final passage of the autobiographical chapter entitled ‘Value of Childish Impressions’, “let him be enchanted, disappointed, happy; let him suffer, love, and live through the entire gamut of human emotions, but let him at the same time learn to recreate his life and his emotions into art!”.²⁵⁸ As an individual whose temporal life (1863 – 1938) notably mirrors that of Sigmund Freud’s (1856 – 1939), it is not surprising that Stanislavski’s urge and trajectory to investigate questions of personal identity and autonomy mirror the taxonomic turn that became so prevalent by the end of the nineteenth century. (Notably, and ironically, Delsarte’s charts of expressions, postures, and gestures can be seen as an early example of such developments.)

²⁵⁷ Laurence Senelick, *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters* (London: Routledge, 2014), 78–81.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

Entirely tucked into any analysis of Stanislavski's precepts – and, indeed, Diderot's – is a very scientist view of human behaviour. In contrast to what we value as the consistent and valuable *scientific* definitional breakthroughs by the likes of Locke and Darwin, the postulations of essentially humanist theorists feeding on science have been forever viewed as somewhat suspect. For both Diderot and Stanislavski, the notion of a unified, autonomous, willful *self* was a fairly new idea. It is not that such a comprehension of self was in itself new, but only that it had survived, and even been bolstered, by the remarkable demonstrations of scientific method that exploded from the Enlightenment and settled into the expansive taxonomies so visible in during the *fin-de-siècle*. There is no use in slavishly and opportunistically allocating too much argumentative weight to the almost-biblical order to “Know Thyself”, emanating from the Delphic maxims appropriated from Socrates. Or, perhaps: is there? The ideal of “self-knowledge” as a portal to both power and humility seems to have been recognized by humans as *nam omni tempes*: “for all times”. Certainly, Stanislavski's viewpoint and methodology emanate from an established Platonic and Aristotelian conception of human agency that delineates a clear line forward to the scientism of the nineteenth century.

As Jonathan Pitches asserts in his comprehensive *Science and the Stanislavsky System of Acting*, “[...] although there are inconsistencies in his own theoretical articulation of science, a careful analysis of Stanislavsky's *practice* reveals a startling continuity of ideas, a deep and consistent relationship between science and the System”.²⁵⁹ Moreover, as Sharon Marie Carnicke points out, “[b]y the end of the 1930s the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics painted an icon of him as a scientist who had discovered the physical laws of acting”.²⁶⁰²⁶¹

Perhaps the most unequivocal of commentators on the historicized contaminations that are partially obscured by Stanislavski's proclamations about the “universalism” of his System is Natalie Crohn Schmitt, who states that, “Stanislavski's lifelong appeal was to the natural [...]

²⁵⁹ Jonathan Pitches, *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting* (London: Routledge, 2005), 2.

²⁶⁰ Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus: An Acting Master for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed., Routledge Theatre Classics (London: Routledge, 2009), 207–208.

²⁶¹ There are at least a few factors at play here, not the least of which is the scientific obsession of communist authorities who wanted art to be an extension of their belief in the scientific foundations of their Political Project.

Nature, including human nature, has laws – eternally fixed principles of operation – and can be understood in terms of actions that are logical, gradual, and, in some sense purposeful. The view is similar to Aristotle’s [...]”²⁶²

What is important in all this is to simply note how historically imbricated Stanislavski’s grounded approach to his work was with the proliferating scientism of the late nineteenth century. The source of his practice, if not his precise methodology or positioning, flowed from a heuristic worldview which valorized a form of Hegelian idealism paired with the empirical certainties quantified by the scientific method. For Stanislavski, the natural “laws” of a human’s “true” motives and behaviour were *in there*, just waiting to be systematically discovered and accessed.

Inside the Looking Glass: Outside the Self

If Stanislavski’s simply complex formula of the “magic If” – what *if* I were a wealthy vigilante polymath with a traumatic childhood who develops a bat-persona to fight crime in a sprawling metropolis? – is considered as an actor’s construction of Nagel’s “what is it like to be a bat?” phenomenological question, then how does one get from the *question* to the *answer*? Though I contend that the answer’s genesis springs from a kind of psychophysical “mining” of the self²⁶³, this contention will not maintain without identifying a mechanism by which our human experience and consciousness reflexively substantiates character by utilizing self. In Nagel’s formula, as I described in Chapter 1, the proposition renders itself sterile since there is no imaginative way I can project my subjectivity onto a bat’s *qualia* – its qualitative experience of itself as a being-in-the-world – without creating prejudicial assumptions based on my self-reflective experience as a human in the world. To encounter a bat is to meet “a fundamentally *alien* form of life”,²⁶⁴ and so my empathic imagination can only function *as* imagination *in toto*:

²⁶² Natalie Crohn Schmitt, *Actors and Onlookers: Theater and Twentieth-Century Scientific Views of Nature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 95.

²⁶³ See my article “Just Be Your Self-Ethnographer”: Reflections on Actors as Anthropologists,” *Stanislavski Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 174–94, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/20567790.2014.11419728>.

²⁶⁴ Nagel, “What Is It Like To Be a Bat?,” 438.

it cannot sufficiently conceive of an alien quality without re-fashioning it as a familiarized expression of human nativity. It cannot get to the *there, in there*.

Yet is this same limitation not discovered when one considers what it is like to be not a bat, but Batman? The Caped Crusader is, of course, already an invented avatar-like persona created by the cartoon character Bruce Wayne, distancing itself from even the mock agency of a primary fictive creature. Nevertheless, both Wayne and Batman – a super-hero with no superpowers beyond an artificially heightened human intelligence – are clearly meant to stand in as representations of (a) “man”, and the strongly Freudian-infused origins of this Janus-faced character as a being deeply and subconsciously affected by witnessing the violent death of both parents as a child have intrigued psychologists since Batman’s *Detective Comics* debut in 1939. So, Batman, is *us*, by design. And if so, argumentatively, then shouldn’t Wayne/Batman be substantially easier to imagine as *like myself* than is a bat? Can I not, in Stanislavskian mode, quite simply ask myself: *what if I was Batman?* As a premise, I would say yes, for the “fundamentally *alien*” corrective of Nagel’s argument does not strictly apply here. Wayne/Batman is a fictitious character, certainly; he is not an alien one, however, but rather purposely constructed as a being grounded in the human, no matter how augmented and far-fetched. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to grapple with the ontological dilemma of the human subject/object. Even if I grant myself the integrity of a selfhood that can be both felt and internally constituted, by what experience, or methods of experience, can I possibly use that self to observe and *know of* another’s experience as a self in the world? How can I ever authoritatively imagine myself *as* Wayne/Batman? Philosopher Chris Clarke puts this impasse well by deducing that, “[t]he data of consciousness [...] is by its nature personal: it is what *I* am experiencing, and while an observer can monitor my neural activity they cannot, it would seem, share what this is like for me”.²⁶⁵ This cautious conclusion – that “it would seem” impossible for an other to share the *qualia* of my consciousness – brings us back to R. Darren Gobert’s concept of the “invisible subjectivity”, the “interior self”, that actors appear to show us through the affects of their symbolic self-representations on stage. Are actors really “sharing” themselves –

²⁶⁵ Chris Clarke, *Knowing, Doing, and Being* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2013), 8.

their inner feelings and thoughts – by appearing in character, or are they presenting calculated affective behaviours that merely mimic the truth of their reasoning and emotions? Is it that actors, as Sartre proposes, become *unreal* as they stand in for their characters' realities? Or, as Diderot would have it, are actors only effective when they grasp their identity firmly, remain entirely their hidden and willful selves, and strive to share only demonstrations of a sensibility held completely in check? Finally, regardless of theory or approach, how does this transference from actor to character – and, arguably, back again – actually occur?

As initially explored in Chapter 2, I believe that it is through a metaphorical engagement with the mirrored image of *character as self* that actors do their work. This mirroring occurs not through an application of will, nor through a structure of deception, but by epistemological necessity. As human subjects, I concur with Lacan that we are jubilantly fascinated with mirrored images of our wholeness throughout our lifetimes – and that these images leave us forever alienated from ourselves through their very otherness. The mirrored image – whether physical (real) or metaphorical (unreal) – gives us the *appearance* of a *perceived* truth about ourselves in the world. As actors at work, I believe that we legitimize this basic process of self-identification and alienation when we identify the images of our characters with the images of ourselves. Set against the backdrop of over a hundred years of Stanislavskian-based technique, this essentially psychological interpretation of an actor's work – whereby a character's "invisible subjectivity" appears as the mirror of an actor's "interior self" – has taken root, sprouted, blossomed, and ramified. In order to tease out some of the germs and implications for this development, it is first important to look at what Stanislavski, and his systematic precursor Diderot, had to say about actors and mirrors.

The "I"s are the Mirrors of the Soul

Remarkably, perhaps, for two theorists who are often presented and considered as codifying the most contrary positions on acting with regard to feeling and experiencing, Diderot and Stanislavski sustain a very complementary and consistent opinion as to the role of mirrors in the actor's work. They may differ in their ultimate aesthetic assessments of the effect that mirrors have on stage performances, but their analyses of what an actor-to-mirror relationship *does* to the actor's performance and its *style* exhibits a notable continuum.

A key to understanding this consolidated analysis is found in the Stanislavskian term “Representational Acting (Theatre of Representation)”. According to Stephanie Daventry French and Philip G. Bennett in their comprehensive 2016 practicum publication *Experiencing Stanislavsky Today: Training and Rehearsal for the Psychophysical Actor*, representational acting is “[a] philosophy and practice of acting whereby the actor creates in rehearsal and plays an image of a character, which is then repeated technically throughout a performance [and] perhaps reaches its height in the theatre of Molière, The Comédie Française [sic].”²⁶⁶ In reviewing what Diderot and Stanislavski proclaim about the uses (and abuses) of the self-mirrored image for the actor, it is well to remember that it is the aforementioned “representational acting” which is continually referenced – the idea that the actor creates an affective image of a character while in rehearsal (private) that is then played out through repetition as a kind of image *of* an image on the stage in performance (public).

For Diderot, this formula of performative mirroring is held in the highest esteem. He lived, of course, during the high days of *La Comédie-Française*, when its presentational flourish and efficacy assuredly straddled the legacy of Molière but before the theatre’s violent refashioning during the anti-monarchical convolutions of the French Revolution. Indeed, the ideal of monarchy as a representation of cosmic law perhaps reached an apex in Charles Le Brun’s 1661 masterwork *Le Roi gouverne par lui-même* – “The King governs by himself” – which was installed in Versailles’s *Galerie des Glaces* (Hall of Mirrors) by 1684, less than twenty years before Diderot’s birth. The painting depicts the metaphorical king Glory holding out the crown of immortality to the French King Louis IV. Yet not only were mirrored images perceived as idealizations of selfhood among the iconographers of royal hierarchy and privilege, but, according to international curator Felipe Chaimovich, by the early eighteenth century “the use of mirrors on piers and overmantels became the characterizing feature of French-style apartments. Mirrors began to compete for space and status with hung or mural paintings.”²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Stephanie Daventry French and Philip G. Bennet, *Experiencing Stanislavsky Today: Training and Rehearsal for the Psychophysical Actor* (London: Routledge, 2016), 552.

²⁶⁷ Felipe Chaimovich, “Mirrors of Society: Versailles and the Use of Flat Reflected Images,” *Visual Images* 24, no. 4 (December 2008): 353. 353-367.

Mirrors, I deduce, were almost magical and totemic objects for the class of artisans and bourgeois intellectuals that magnetised around Diderot and his circle. Given this supposition, I am not surprised to see the central role ascribed to the mirror in Diderot's nearly ecstatic appraisal of what "the great actor's secret" consists of – an appraisal to which I have given notice as being fundamentally wrong in Chapter 1. As it is a crucial set of observations and descriptions extracted from the most fervent of Diderot's exclamations against sensibility and selfhood, I include the passage at some length:

He has rehearsed to himself every note of his passion. He has learnt before a mirror every particle of his despair. He knows exactly when he must produce his handkerchief and shed tears; and you will see him weep at the word, at the syllable, he has chosen, not a second sooner or later [...] the broken voice, the half-uttered words, the stifles or prolonged notes of agony, the trembling limbs, the faintings, the bursts of fury – all this is pure mimicry, lessons carefully learned, the grimacing of sorrow, the magnificent aping which the actor remembers long after his first study of it, of which he was perfectly conscious when he first put it before the public, and which leaves him, luckily for the poet, the spectator, and himself, a full freedom of mind. He puts off the sock or the buskin; his voice is gone; he is tired; he changes his dress, or he goes to bed; and he feels neither trouble, nor sorrow, nor depression, nor weariness of soul. All these emotions he has given to you. The actor is tired, you are unhappy; he has had exertion without feeling, you feeling without exertion. Were it otherwise the player's lot would be the most wretched on earth: but he is not person he represents; he plays it, and plays it so well that you think he is the person; the deception is all on your side; he knows well enough that he is not the person.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 19–20.

What is particularly resonant here, in these descriptive offerings that equate the mirrored self as a technically idealized and unreal self, and one that leads to the divine efficacy of the player's art, is that they dovetail so neatly with Lacan's theory of ego identification through the mirror stage. "But he is not the person he represents" claims Diderot in full Lacanian mode; for is it not the co-ordinated flat surface visual image of the child's self in the mirror that represents the potential fulfillment of representation, not reality? I repeat what Diderot strives to inform us of: "[the actor] plays it, and plays it so well that you think he is the person; *the deception is all on your side; he knows well enough that he is not the person.* (emphasis added)". But I continually ask: does the actor *know* he is not the other "person" just because he *plays* the character? The character exists only as a bounded abstraction until the actor *does* play it, using the self as a ground for that playing. (As the celebrated English actor Simon Russell Beale proposes: "...you're building on firm ground aren't you, by building on yourself?")²⁶⁹ The actor, however, is both itself and the character, just as the toddler fascinated by its specular image exists both as that image's unitary manifestation and as the fractured continuance of its own body and consciousness living in space and time. So, in fact, Diderot is wrong here. The deception is *not* all on the spectator's side. Just as the wholly co-ordinated image of self-in-mirror is for the child's Other an image of appearance, it is also for the child an unreal image of its own immanent reality. In the mirror stage, the child's image so urgently represents itself that it comes to stand in for that self. In Diderot's representational theatre of mirrored recreations, the actor's playing of character so jubilantly represents the player's past sensibility that such activity might come to stand in for that very affect.

If such theorization validates anything, it is that there are at least two levels of consciousness at work for the actor. As definitions of consciousness are almost limitlessly speculative, (as I pointed to in Chapter 2), there should be no doubt that in dramatic acting the long-central paradox has been about at least two areas of conscious activity: the actor-as-self and the actor-as-performer. William Archer can be read as a noted interlocutor in this debate over a hundred years after Diderot's death. His ersatz-sociological polemic *Masks of Faces? A*

²⁶⁹ Simon Russell Beale, "Simon Russell Beale," in *Actors' Voices: The People Behind the Performances*. ed. Patrick O'Kane (London: Oberon Books, 2012), 232.

Psychology of Actors, published in 1888, and partly informed by observations prompted by a questionnaire to professional English actors, was composed as a direct refutation of Diderot's dicta. Perhaps Archer's most significant focus is on the area of the exact nature of sensibility and selfhood as regards actors and their *actual beings*. No doubt informed by the nascent field of human psychology in a modernist sense, Archer is clear to re-frame Diderot's question of what constitutes a paradox:

The real paradox of acting, it seems to me, resolves itself into the paradox of dual consciousness. If it were true that the actor could not experience an emotion without absolutely yielding up his whole soul to it, then Diderot's doctrine, though a little overstated, would be right in the main. But the mind is not so constituted [...] Why should stage emotion be supposed to absorb all a man's faculties, when the most poignant emotion in real life does nothing of the sort?²⁷⁰

My point here is not to initiate an exegesis on Archer's time-bound and clinically amateur understanding of cognition, emotion, and consciousness. What strikes me as still vital and unresolved is Diderot's supposition that an actor could ever so limit its reflexive consciousness, whether acting either as its *self* or as its *representation of character through self*, to the extent that the actor's emotions are either completely *overwhelming* on the one hand, or entirely *suppressed* on the other. For the actor, I submit, the socially constructed self is always assessing its own reactions and sensibility in the midst of real events, and the vocational performing self is always *feeling* the part in the midst of unreal role playing. In the most pragmatic sense, the two 'beings' are indivisible *while being acted out*. The character-actor observes the self-actor; the actor-character reflects the actor-self. For instance, *Miss Peggy Ashcroft* observes herself falling in love with Lord Hutchinson in real life; later on, in performance, the character *Beatrice* reflects the observed feelings of *Dame Peggy Ashcroft* as 'they' fall in love with *Benedick*. The self can never be entirely elided or suppressed within this scenario, whether that self is observing or

²⁷⁰ Archer, *Masks of Faces?*, 184, 96.

reflecting. To some degree, that self is *always* feeling; *observing* that feeling; and, *reflecting* that feeling. It is not a case of either/or: either I am feeling in performance, or I am not.

Representational acting can never function as *mere* representation, no matter how gloriously reified that representation may be coded by *a priori* cosmologies, as in the case of Louis IV and Le Bruns's painting. That is because the representational actor is neither entirely static nor material, but a living and dying human being whose ontological anxiety is forever reflected and *transformed* through performance. No epistemological hierarchy of meaning can exceed the feeling of being an actor/self alive on stage.

So, perhaps, it is not a question of whether Diderot's ideal representational actor could ever be *without* feeling, but rather about assessing the *value* of that feeling in the actor's creative work of characterization in drama. No doubt, for historicized and socially imbricated spectators, a great deal of that value may be determined by the aesthetic and political codes of their times. The formalized theatrical conventions of mid-eighteenth-century Paris may be as properly indicative of the player's sensibility and 'reality' as the Realist conventions of moody and internal Method actors in mid-twentieth century New York. Meaning and mastery are always wedded to convention and expectation. Regardless of a particular audience's paradigm of reception, I purport that, even for the representational actor, a sense of 'self' and feeling were never absent. Constitutionally, such senses simply *couldn't* be absent. And, conversely, I submit that for the sulkiest of Method players, conventions of what constituted 'reality' were also valorized and policed. I am not discussing shamanic possession here (if such a thing even exists) but the willful occupation by actors to portray dramatic characters on stage, regardless of semiotic conventions. It is in gauging what the value of 'self' and emotion might be in any modernist notion of acting that we see a clear deviation between the world of Stanislavski and the world of Diderot. I say "world" because neither of these theorists developed their definitions and values on their own. Indeed, on some essential level, they too could not help but reflect, rather than define, the *zeitgeists* of their time and place. Most intriguingly, this deviation is nowhere more clearly articulated, even delineated, than in Stanislavski's own musings on the role of the mirror in dramatic acting.

Stanislavski, the Mirror, and Me

The issues of representational acting, the mirror, theatrical conventions, and the outward expression of true feelings were so important to Stanislavski that he devoted over two thousand consecutive narrative words (in Benedetti's translation) on these enfolded topics in the early pages of his first book on the actor's work.²⁷¹ In this three-and-a-half page dialogue between the teacher Tortsov and his student Pasha Shustov (named after the Russian word *Chuvstvov*, or "feelings"),²⁷² composed under the second chapter title "The Stage as Art and Stock-in-Trade", Stanislavski delineates the argument between an experiential approach to acting (Art) and a representational one (Stock-in-Trade). It is prefaced by Tortsov's observation, of Pasha's in-class presentation of the role Iago (to student Kostya's Othello), that:

In all his playing there was a coldness which led me to suspect that his performance was fixed once and for all, leaving no room for improvisation, thus denying it freshness and spontaneity. Nonetheless, I felt the whole time that the original, on which he skilfully based his reproduction, was good, believable [...] ²⁷³

Pasha, who self-identifies in the following dialogue as "the nephew of the actor Shustov", and therefore as a young man who was raised to the theatre by a previous generation of old school practitioners, speculates on how he "learn[ed] the art of representation":

‘I used a mirror to see how my experiences were being conveyed externally,’ Pasha recalled.

‘That is dangerous and yet typical of the art of representation. Remember, a mirror must be used with caution. It leads an actor to observe not what is inside but what is outside.’

²⁷¹ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 23–26.

²⁷² Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 74.

²⁷³ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 23.

‘Nonetheless, the mirror helped me to understand how my exterior expressed my feelings,’ said Pasha in self-justification.

‘Your own feelings, or the feelings created by the role?’

‘My own, but right for Iago, too.’²⁷⁴

Stanislavski, through the responses of Tortsov, goes on to identify this form and process of acting as the “art of representation”, and likens it to a reflective repetition, learned through a mirroring of external affect and expression, of “inner feelings” previously experienced by the acting subject as “the life of the human spirit”.²⁷⁵ Furthermore, he goes on at length to support the idea that this kind of representational acting is, indeed, an art form, and produces passages from Coquelin’s *L’Art du Comédien* to bolster his assertion. Stanislavski’s assessment abides with the Diderot/Coquelin position that (re)producing a dramatic role in such a “mechanical” way not only requires no “expense of nervous or mental energy”, but that such “emotional disturbance” is harmful to the art form as it “upsets [his] control and alters the shape and form of something that has been permanently set”.²⁷⁶

Stanislavski also bolsters his dialogic exegesis on the uses – and abuses – of the mirror for actors by making a clear distinction between a legitimate representational art which “sets” the outer expressions of an earlier inner feeling, and merely copying the manner and affect of an outward image completely disconnected from the subjective sensibility of the actor. (I think here of the ultimate sterility engendered by any slavish use of Delsarte’s charts of human expression in creating a modern dramatic portrayal of character.) Pasha, unhappy with his total performance of the role of Iago, finds “the answer by using a mirror”, and imitating a person from his past

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 23–24.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 24.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 23–24.

‘[...] who bore no relation to the role, but who, I thought, was the very personification of cunning, evil, and deviousness.’

‘So you observed him and tried to adapt yourself to him?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did you use your memories of him?’

‘To tell the truth I only copied his mannerisms,’ Pasha admitted.

‘That was a great mistake! At that moment you betrayed the art of representation and lapsed into mimicry, copying, imitation, which has nothing to do with real creative work.’²⁷⁷

Clearly, now, through his use of the phrases “that is dangerous” and “that was a great mistake”, (phrases which echo Hapgood’s translations exactly), Stanislavski is wary of mirrors as tools for the actor except as they can be useful within a strictly representational form of acting. He goes on:

This kind of acting has beauty but no depth. It is effective rather than deep. Form is more interesting than content. It acts on the eyes and ears rather than on the heart and, in consequence, more readily delights than disturbs [...] And so there are some things it cannot do [...] The subtlety and depth of human feelings will not yield to mere technique.²⁷⁸

It is curious to note that where Benedetti uses the words “heart” and “disturbs”, Hapgood chooses the terms “soul” and “move”.²⁷⁹ So, while it might be helpful to think more of “heart

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 26.

²⁷⁹ Stanislavski, *Actor Prepares*, 22.

and soul” and a “moving disturbance” when considering what Stanislavski means by acting through experiencing “feelings” (as both translators have it), what is crucial to my argument is the way in which Stanislavski also frames the mirror (if you will) as a device which brings deep pleasure to the actor. In the following passage, Stanislavski gives the narrator and first-year acting student Kostya this remarkably dense, yet easily overlooked, passage, (which, in fact, was conspicuously left out of Hapgood’s earlier translation, wherein half of the Russian material was edited out)²⁸⁰:

My attention still wandered to my fellow actor. I observed his acting intensely, criticized it and, do what I might, became an audience. In their turn my fellow actors observed me attentively. I felt that I was at one and the same time a spectator and an actor under scrutiny. At the end of the day, it’s stupid, boring and most of all pointless to play for each other.

But then, by chance, I glanced at the mirror, liked what I saw, felt heartened and remembered the work I had done at home on Othello when, as today, I had to perform for myself, looking in the mirror. I enjoyed being ‘my own audience’.”²⁸¹

In this extract, perhaps, I find myself stumbling on what the true “paradox of the actor” is. Rather than accepting Diderot’s dictum which proposes that great acting relies on a completely externalized technique of sensibility that categorically eschews the actual experiencing of emotion while performing, here Stanislavski seems to suggest that as an actor one is always already both a watcher and a watched, that one is always performing for someone else’s gaze, and that watching one’s own reflected image in character is the self-reflexive act of gazing that *transforms watching into experiencing*. The pleasure derived from the mirrored gaze – “I enjoyed being ‘my own audience’” – is not one of pretense and copying, but of a deeply

²⁸⁰ Jean Benedetti, foreword to Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, xviii.

²⁸¹ Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, 89.

Lacanian engagement with the *jouissance* of apprehending the integrated self-image, the *imago*, as one's own. For actors, this gestalt "aha!" moment of encountering the "Ideal – I" in the integrated mirror image occurs not through simply looking at themselves, but looking at themselves *in character*. For both Pasha, as Iago, and Kostya, as Othello, Stanislavski offers up to us the image of acting students who joyfully discover the experience of themselves in their roles by seeing those selves-as-characters in mirrors. "My own [feelings], but right for Iago, too", says Pasha; "I had to perform for myself [as Othello], looking in the mirror", says Kostya.

Compare these observations with this extract from Laurence Olivier's nostalgia-tinged description of fashioning the make-up for his grotesque Richard III:

Nose on, wig on, make-up complete. There, staring back at me from the mirror, was my Richard, exactly as I wanted him. [THE IDEALIZED LACANIAN MIRROR IMAGE] Make-up is a strange thing. I know that now it is not the fashion to wear it, but for me that's where a lot of the magic [MAGIC!] still lies. The smell of a stick of greasepaint -- No. 5, No. 9, lake, 7 1/2 -- still makes my scalp tingle. I stood up and again looked in the mirror.

The monster [THE EGO] stared back at me and smiled.²⁸²

These notions of the idealized and complete self, of magical transformation, and of a kind of ersatz ego formation, are echoed by a next-generation English actor in Simon Callow's wildly popular (within acting circles, anyway) 1984 treatise *Being An Actor*. Callow affirms that "Sir Laurence was the genius of the make-up box, covering his face with greasepaint, appending false noses and artificial gums, blocking out his eyebrows and filling in his cheeks" in a rather dolefully pejorative manner, but is also ready to marvel at Nijinsky's dressing-room transformation into Petrushka with the statement: "Some voodoo occurred in front of the

²⁸² Laurence Olivier, *On Acting* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), 85.

mirror”.²⁸³ Substantively, he declares that, “[t]he moment you see yourself, your brain starts to work differently.”²⁸⁴

If we allow Callow his non-clinical affirmation that “the moment you see yourself” is the moment that the actor’s cognition turns to character work, it helps to bring new meaning to the number one directive in Stella Adler’s infamous transcribed chart of Stanislavski’s system: “Work on One’s Self”.²⁸⁵ To work on one’s self, as an actor who is always the watcher and the watched, is to *see one’s self*. But not only that: to see one’s self *in character*. The dramatic character, if not exactly analogous to a flat mirror, provides an optical prism through which to see one’s self refracted through the multiple lenses of self, character, and performer.

As a lifelong vocational actor myself, I was lately reminded of the deep practical and symbolic value of the dressing room mirror when I played the part of Canada’s first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, at our National Arts Centre in 2017. The play was Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Sir John A.: Acts of a Gentrified Ojibway Rebellion*, commissioned by the theatre to be part of their season celebrating the Centre’s 50th anniversary, and tied into the “Canada 150” sesquicentennial activities. A buoyant but critical look at this protean and compromised political figure from our colonial past, the character was written mostly in direct-address monologue form, discretely separated from the contemporary scenes of the other three characters. This portrait of Sir John A. was meant to appear as a real, though slightly caricatured version, of the “historical” figure. He was to be easily recognizable as the 19th-century man that Canadians see regularly on their ten-dollar bill. In a country not known for its embrace of either lionization or celebrity, Sir John A. remains one of the most recognizable personages on our political landscape, well over a hundred years after his death in 1891.

I felt that my greatest dilemma was how to portray this problematic historical figure as somehow *real in himself*. Yes, there was a strong dose of exaggeration and theatrical hijinks built

²⁸³ Simon Callow, *Being an Actor* (London: Methuen, 1984), 155.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁸⁵ Zinn, *Existential Actor*, 70.

into Hayden Taylor’s characterization, but beneath that there was a beating heart, a troubled and troubling man, a bon vivant, a gifted negotiator, a British Loyalist, a husband and father, an alcoholic, and, most importantly for this play, a racist brutalizer of Indigenous peoples.²⁸⁶ I worked towards my goal with all the usual tools of the Stanislavski-based reflexive actor approaching character: through dialectic argumentation, through an exploration of historically given circumstances, through methods of imagination and the magic If, through selecting objectives and actions, through substitution and emotion memory. Yet it was, crucially, my experience in front of the mirror late in rehearsal that helped to both unite the character of Sir John A. with myself, and to clearly delineate the distance between the ideal-Him and the shifting-I.

Sir John A., as anyone familiar with his image knows, maintained a very distinctive and recognizable hairstyle over his entire career. Parted on the far right side, a wavy mass of hair swept across his forehead and culminated in two masses of puffy curls on either side of his clean-shaven (unusual for politicians of the time) face. Not wanting to use a wig unless absolutely necessary – again, my desire was to find the “real” man – I had grown out my own hair over the previous months, and although my own locks were the proper colour and texture for Sir John, they had none of his curly bounce, nor the pated origins of his generally high receding hairline. Having been trained over thirty years before at the Ryerson Theatre School by the British/Canadian actor Jack Medley in the “old school” methods of hair and make-up so prized by Olivier and his forebears, I was not initially daunted by this task. If, as a student, I had been able to build my own prosthetic nose (in the era’s questionably anti-Semitic style) to essay the role of Fagin, and my own removable beard for the part of the love-struck Benedick, then surely I could design my hair easily enough to follow Sir John’s contours. Yet it is important to remember that the days when actors regularly “transformed” themselves into *realistic* characters through these hair and make-up techniques have been over for decades, and I hadn’t attempted such a feat of application for many years myself. (And, in the few times that I had, I was always assisted by a professional hair and make-up artist who was responsible for the actual

²⁸⁶ Martin Julien, “Sir John, Shawn, Richard, and Me,” *Intermission Magazine*, Artist Perspective, October 4, 2017, <https://www.intermissionmagazine.ca/artist-perspective/sir-john-shawn-richard-and-me>.

manipulation of styling techniques.) For Sir John A., it was deemed important, especially by me (and encouraged by our designer Anna Treusch) that I take on this job for myself. It descended upon me with what seemed a naturalized logic that if I were to transform *myself* into this very recognizable *real* person – the “true” figure of Sir John A. seen as a dramatic character – then I would have to engage with my own image in the mirror as part of my show-time ritual, and take responsibility for turning *me* into *him*.

Whether there is, in truth, any actual logic in this presupposition is beside the point. As an actor, I simply believed that this subjective movement from *a* (me) to *b* (him) – creating *c* (us) – was best done alone, in private, with a mirror. (Another reformulation of Mark Johnston’s ontological question of “what changes [we] can survive or *be around after*”). If there is a magic to this kind of transformation then it is a magic that wants no outside interference. Clearly, by my own observation and experience, there is something more going on when I confront myself in the mirror than the simple “character simulation” that Robert Cohen identifies as the first aspect to consider regarding “staged impersonation”. As Cohen identifies,

[t]he mask, make-up, and costume – which until the present century were generally created by the actors who used them – are tools for the actor’s simulated tasks [...] but there are also internal tools for use in this art of simulation, characterizations which reach into the subtleties of psychology and deportment.²⁸⁷

It is fascinating to consider what connection the centuries-old custom of actors building their own external versions of characters has with the more recently valorized internal visions that actors have for their characters. The strong focus on external qualities might be seen as bringing about some kind of cathexis with regard to the investment of internal qualities.

In the end, I will declaim that there was no other tool I utilized as a part of my actor’s arsenal that was more consistently effective at “bringing the character to life” than styling my hair as John A.’s hair in front of that mirror. To paraphrase Olivier: *There, staring back at me*

²⁸⁷ Cohen, *Theatre*, 315.

from the mirror, was my Sir John, exactly as I wanted him. (And, a little alcohol-infused rosy flush of make-up on my nose and cheeks didn't hurt either.) It felt almost like *capturing* the essence of the man through an apprehension of his outward form. Though this reads as counter-intuitive and contradictory – the ‘inner’ man through the ‘outer’ show – it also resembles the description I presented in Chapter 2, wherein the infant, when engaging with its own specular image, is jubilantly both captivated and captured (*captation*) by the apparent unity of its own reflected body, and through a process of identification with that externalized image creates a psychic representation of itself as an “I”. As adults, most of us spend little time looking into the mirror unless it is to cosmetically *correct* ourselves in order to *be* ourselves: by tweaking, and colouring, and lining, and shaving, and plucking, and augmenting our faces so that we can again properly look like what we think of as *ourselves*. For the actor, this is different; the time in front of the mirror is there to facilitate some kind of active transference of identity from myself to the other. The fact that “myself” never truly disappears, nor that the “other” ever truly actualizes, does not negate the necessary legitimacy of the mirrored encounter for the actor eliciting character.

That half hour I spent in front of the mirror “becoming” Sir John existed not only as a site for the physical capturing of my character through the specular image – what Lacanian researcher Anthony Elliott calls “the imaginary [as] a specular trap”²⁸⁸ – but a sense-based conduit to access the inner life of that character. Whether anything can be ontologically *captured* by, with, and through a mirror’s reflected image is debatable – I suspect that it can’t – but Lacan’s and my use of the word is a strong evocation of what it *feels like* to become a character; a unity; a psychic representation. Perhaps this is one answer to my initial question in Chapter 1: *what is it like to be an actor?* Actors, in order to become characters, must feel that they are capturing something that unites themselves with a speculative other. The respected American character actor William Redfield, in his popular 1966 memoir of playing Guildenstern in the John Gielgud-helmed production of *Hamlet* with Richard Burton, makes a sly and strikingly analogous observation when he writes: “The actor must not only ‘do his job’ in a conscientious manner, which is what anyone must do; he must also trap his unconscious (a neat trick) and he

²⁸⁸ Anthony Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Palgrave, 2015), 111.

must trap it *on cue* (a neater trick).”²⁸⁹ “Trapping the unconscious”, like capturing the image, may have little analytically ontological *bona fides* as a proposition, but it does have the feel of a metaphorical truth.

Is Michael Chekhov’s Gesture a Psychological Trap

The nearly hegemonic notion that a Stanislavskian-based technique exists within an exclusively ‘inner’ to ‘outer’ paradigm is one that has been propagated out of the immense success of the Method school of actors who arose, for several generations, to dominate the twentieth century American milieu of dramatic performance. As many recent scholars have shown, in a ‘recovery project’ of Stanislavskian history and technique over the last few decades, the Russian master’s continuing later work was discursively repressed, not only by proselytizers of the ascendant and ersatz American “Method”, but also by Soviet-controlled edicts regarding proper “Socialist Realism” pedagogical practices over the Eastern Bloc.²⁹⁰ It is now well-regarded that Stanislavski’s final explorations of actor technique and preparation in the decade before his death focussed on the ‘controllable’ activities of human behaviour that fall under the general rubric of *action*. The ever-changing process called the System – which is so often unsteadily presumed to also describe the “emotion memory”-centred Method – came to be codified by the later Stanislavski under the title of “Active Analysis” (often subsumed under the strictly materialist approach labeled as “The Method of Physical Actions”).²⁹¹

Yet even as Stanislavski was transforming his technique from an ‘inner’-based excavation of self to an ‘outer’-oriented performance of action, Michael Chekhov (1891-1955), his one-time acolyte, star actor, and former leader of the MAT First studio and Artistic Director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre, was honing and teaching an approach to acting that both challenged and extended early Stanislavskian principles. Inasmuch as many refugees and

²⁸⁹ William Redfield, *Letters from an Actor* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 30.

²⁹⁰ Stefan Aquilina, “Well-Trodden Paths: US, UK, Russian and Soviet Perspectives of Stanislavski’s Transmissions,” in *Stanislavsky in the World*, ed. Jonathan Pitches and Stefan Aquilina (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1–11.

²⁹¹ R. Andrew White, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Stanislavsky* (London: Routledge, 2014), 255.

proselytizers of the MAT Studios went on, through the mid-twentieth century, to gestate their own influential yet somewhat ossified versions of Stanislavskian technique throughout Europe and America – figures such as Boleslawski and Ouspenskaya in America; but also the Russians Vasiliev and Dodin,²⁹² – the actor and teacher Michael Chekhov (nephew of the revered playwright and short story writer Anton Chekhov) constructed his own specific response regarding the purpose and process of physical actions within an actor’s work of characterization. Chekhov’s unique approach may not have exactly preceded Stanislavski’s later focus on physical actions and their analysis, but his development of a technique that valorized the outer image of the actor, in contrast to the inner landscape, was to have a growing sway in the decades leading up to the younger master’s death in 1995 – it’s an influence that has not stopped its increase to this day.

If the “mirror-stage” is often regarded as Lacan’s most noted and recognized psychoanalytic theory, then the Psychological Gesture (PG) is Michael Chekhov’s most celebrated and ubiquitous concept within the realm of modern psycho-physical acting technique. As Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon authoritatively put it: “The (PG) emerges as a major element of Chekhov’s technique of characterization in acting. It is rhythmical, visually granted, and anti-emotional”²⁹³; or, as Meerzon puts it in another context, the PG is “a character’s psycho-physical entity and essence”.²⁹⁴ Yet these minimalist and reductive definitions do not tell us what the PG *is*. In some ways the simplest of concepts – which perhaps explains its arresting long-term value and usage – it is a predominantly *physicalized* approach to characterization that awakens inner activity through outer expression. In this, as I shall show, it bares a striking resemblance to the way in which the Lacanian mirror-image of bodily integration awakens feelings of identification and alienation. It is also, however, deeply individual, and notably difficult to describe and define discursively. As Chekhov himself instructs, referring to

²⁹² Pitches, *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting*, 149.

²⁹³ Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*, ed. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon (London: Routledge, 2015), 12.

²⁹⁴ Yana Meerzon, *The Path of Character: Michael Chekhov’s Inspired Acting and Theatre Semiotics* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2005), 24.

the actor's practice of the PG, "[y]ou are the one who creates it. Its value is purely subjective"²⁹⁵, and also: "It is your own free creation, through which your individuality expresses itself. *It is right if it satisfies you as an artist*".²⁹⁶ The actor and lecturer Mala Powers, co-founder of the U.S.-based National Michael Chekhov Association, gives description a try by outlining that the PG "is a movement that embodies the psychology and objective of a character. Using the actor's entire body, and executed with the utmost intensity, it gives the actor the basic structure of the character and at the same time can put the actor into the various moods required by the script."²⁹⁷ Neuro-science-influenced theatre phenomenologist John Lutterbie asserts that the PG "is based on the premise that adopting or imagining physical postures/gestures elicits the psychophysical responses that provide insight into the character and the actions to be performed in the course of the play".²⁹⁸ Simon Callow pithily offers of the PG that it is "the embodied essence of the character",²⁹⁹ which follows the lines drawn by Chekhov himself: "[it] should be as *simple* as possible, because its task is to summarize the intricate psychology of a character in an easily surveyable form, to compress it into its essence".³⁰⁰

From my own experience teaching the theory and application of the PG in various post-secondary school training contexts, I have seen that there is an initial tendency for many students to assume that the Psychological Gesture is a realistic tic or mannerism that an actor develops in order to show the psychological state of the character while in performance.³⁰¹ Yet this, at least,

²⁹⁵ Quoted in Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*, ed. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon (London: Routledge, 2015), 9.

²⁹⁶ Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 69.

²⁹⁷ Mala Powers, preface to *On the Technique of Acting*, by Michael Chekhov, ed. Mel Gordon (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), xxxviii.

²⁹⁸ Lutterbie, "Dynamics of Psychological Gestures," 107.

²⁹⁹ Simon Callow, foreword to Chekhov, *To the Actor*, xx.

³⁰⁰ Chekhov, *To the Actor*, 71.

³⁰¹ An example, often pointed out to me, would be Heath Ledger's repeated action of sticking out his tongue and licking his lips in his 2009 Oscar-winning portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*.

is clearly not what a PG is, in the way that Chekhov envisioned the term. He makes a clear definitional distinction about acting gestures in his own chapter about the technique in *To the Actor*:

There are two kinds of gestures. One we use both while acting on the stage and in everyday life – the natural and usual gesture. The other kind is what might be called the *archetypal* gesture, one which serves as an original model for all possible gestures of the same kind. The PG belongs to the second type. Everyday gestures are unable to stir our will because they are too limited, too weak and particularized. They do not occupy our whole body, psychology and soul, whereas the PG, as an archetype, takes possession of them *entirely*.³⁰²

While avoiding the ‘rabbit hole’ of speculating on the epistemologies and ramifications of such an imbricated term as “archetype” within the context of my inquiry, I do not think it is misplaced to note the provocation towards the unific and whole image that Chekhov makes with reference to the PG, and the ways in which such images “occupy” – or, indeed, “trap” and “capture” – “our whole body, psychology and soul”. Much as with the jubilant infant possessor of the “mirror-stage” self, the inhabitant of the PG is taken possession of “*entirely*” by its constructed bodily image. As Autant-Mathieu and Meerzon remind us, in complementary terms: “Chekhov’s actor on stage appears as a unity of physical and psychological characteristics.”³⁰³ One could also say that Lacan’s subject appears to itself as it appears in the mirror: “as a unity of physical and psychological characteristics”.

For myself, I would experientially concur with Peggy Phelan’s well-cited definition about what constitutes wholeness and unity in performance on stage. Whatever may be trapped or

³⁰² Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 76–77.

³⁰³ Autant-Mathieu and Meerzon, “Introduction,” 11.

captured by the actor in the process of doing the actor's work, its effects on the actor and the spectator are corporeal, apparent, and defining:

In performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of "presence." But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else - dance, movement, sound, character, "art".³⁰⁴

This state of affairs, where the body *becomes* "art", is reminiscent of Sartre's formula, discussed in Chapter 2, wherein the actor becomes unreal in his character by living in an unreal – i.e. *representational* – way. Clairon, too, always a provocative nemesis in my thesis, states something analogous in her memoirs:

Was I, in fact, Roxane, Aménaïde or Viriate? Should I lend to these roles my own sentiments and my ordinary manners? Certainly not. What could I substitute for my ideas, my sentiments, my very self? Art, because there is nothing but that; and if ever it occurred that I seemed truly natural, it's because my research, allied with certain natural gifts bestowed by nature, had lead me to the summit of art.³⁰⁵

My argument now rests upon the idea that actors, while embodying such representative ideas such as "art" in their mimetic mastery, also embody an idea of *themselves* – as both *subject* and *object* of their ministrations, in all the multiplicity that such a performative evocation implies and carries.

³⁰⁴ Phelan, "Ontology of Performance," 150.

³⁰⁵ Quoted in Leichman, "What They Talked About When They Talked About Acting," 423.

Chapter 5

Transference, Multiplicity, and the Selfobject: Experiencing Character

You're really driving four horses, as it were, first going through in great detail the exact movements which have been decided upon. You're also listening to the audience, as I say, keeping if you can very great control over them. You're also slightly creating the part, insofar as you're consciously refining the movements and perhaps inventing tiny other experiments with new ones. At the same time you are really living, in one part of your mind, what is happening. Acting is to some extent a controlled dream. In one part of your consciousness it really and truly is happening...To make it true to the audience...the actor must, at any rate some of time, believe himself that it really is true...Therefore three or four layers of consciousness are at work during the time an actor is giving a performance.

–Sir Ralph Richardson³⁰⁶

If actors, through the self-reflexive mirroring of themselves by being both watcher and watched, cannot exactly *transform* themselves into other fictional beings, then how exactly do actors *transcend* their own subjectivities to seemingly *become* the “other” that is a dramatic character? If one can argumentatively accept my general position that all acting of this type starts with the self, and that this self “captures” or “traps” its self through an active mirroring of self-as-character, then how does this process actually *work*? What is, as Stanislavski continually asked, *an actor's work*; and what is the deep connection between – as Hapgood notably puts Stanislavski's writings in titular form – *An Actor Preparing* and, then, *Building a Character*? “Preparing” for *what*; and “building” *how*? What might be the exact psychological framework or method by which an actor takes the raw feeling and *qualia* of the internal “what it is like to be me” experience and turn this into an external performance of “what it is like to be them”? If a dramatic character might represent both the small other of ego – as in the imaginary mirror identification – and the big Other of authority – that is, as a subject symbolically determined

³⁰⁶ Hal Burton, *Great Acting* (London: BBC, 1967), 71–72.

through language – how does the analogy of the mirror function to describe the actor’s active absorption by, and creation of, that character in performance?

And what of the teacher/student relationship in this scheme? Might not the act of pedagogy extend from a phenomenon of transference, as it is easy to surmise from a reading of Stanislavski’s writings, which take the form of a dialogue between teacher (analyst) and students (analysands)?

You Say Transference, and I Say Transference

To explore these questions further, I will return to this concept which I pointed to at this chapter’s beginning; one that is important to Lacan and all Freudians, and that appears vital to this “magical” act of near-transformation: the act of *transference*. Although I will explicate further on the multivalent descriptors of this psychoanalytic theory later, here is a compact and universalized definition, provided by noted developmental psychopathologist Kenneth N. Levy: “we define transference as a tendency in which representational aspects of important and formative relationships (such as with parents and siblings) can be both consciously experienced and/or unconsciously ascribed to other relationships”.³⁰⁷

The psychoanalytic concept of transference has remained one of the central pillars of Freudian-based practice for nearly a century. Though not uncontested as a theoretical phenomenon,³⁰⁸ it exists as a fundamental model for understanding human relationships, history, and emotional attachment. This may be claimed to be true not only within the psychoanalytical schema, but for all instances of human interaction and social performance. As Freud, himself, proclaimed, in his Autobiographical Study of 1925: “It must not be supposed, however, that

³⁰⁷ Kenneth N. Levy and J. Wesley Scala, “Transference, Transference Interpretations, and Transference-Focused Psychotherapies,” *Psychotherapy: Theory/Research/Practice/Training* 49, no. 3 (September 2012): 392.

³⁰⁸ Joseph Schachter, *Transference: Shibboleth or Albatross?* (Hillside, NJ: Analytic Press, 2002).

transference is created by analysis and does not occur apart from it. Transference is merely uncovered and isolated by analysis. It is a universal phenomenon of the human mind [...]”.³⁰⁹

Before initiating an attempt to define the theory of transference suitable to my argument, let me take the time to remind myself, and the reader, that every application of a conceptual framework which I make to the work of dramatic acting takes place within the sphere of allegory. As I cautioned in Chapter 1, in the case of personal identity, the actual material mechanisms that attach individual human behaviour to systems of belief become hopelessly complicated when contemplating the multiple-level consciousness and performance of actors portraying characters other than themselves on stage. There is always, as I’ve contended, an ingredient of “magic” that one has to contend with – both in terms of the practice and training of actors, but also on an epistemological level of acceptance and understanding. It is well to remember that Freud’s entire *oeuvre* regarding psychoanalysis was first developed under the phenomenologically shaky umbrella of hypnosis,³¹⁰ a practice now almost entirely relegated to the realm of “magic shows” and the ilk. Freud, and his followers, did much to distance themselves from the ideas of hypnotic alteration and transformation as they strove to root their psychoanalytical breakthroughs in purely scientific ground. In a not dissimilar fashion as Stanislavski employed to ground his edicts in “natural law”, so too did the Vienna-school psychiatrists of the early twentieth century eschew the “magical” elements of their theories in a dedication to universal and empirical “laws”. Benjamin Wolstein puts it bluntly: “Freud did not like the magical connotations surrounding hypnosis”.³¹¹ But as Alan Read emphasizes, when assessing the relationship between psychoanalysis and performance, “it is worth recalling the complexity of the professional’s role at the end of the nineteenth century, when the distinctions

³⁰⁹ Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [1935] 1952), 79–80.

³¹⁰ Benjamin Wolstein, “Hypnotic Roots,” in *Transference: Its Structure and Function in Psychoanalytic Therapy* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, [1954] 1995), 21–34.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

between physician, surgeon, charlatan, dentist, barber and performer might have appeared less determined than they are now”.³¹²

I would add to this that the metaphor of psychological and conscious transformation, as evidenced by some kind of transference of qualities between subjects, resonates continuously through studies of acting, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy. I am compelled here to invoke the poet and playwright W.H. Auden (1907-1973), whose late-career words on teaching – and, indeed, on a kind of transference – resolutely situates the collaborative schema between *one* and an *other* within the realm of an almost-magical transubstantiation of appearance:

I’ve always enjoyed collaborating very much. It’s exciting [...] You can collaborate on a translation, or a libretto, or a drama, and I like working that way, though you can only do it with people whose basic ideas you share—each can then sort of excite the other. When a collaboration works, the two people concerned become a third person, who is different from either of them in isolation.³¹³

Who is this “third person”, I ask, in provisional acceptance of Auden’s ontological flight of fancy regarding intersubjective collaboration. And, also, what is the value of Johnston’s postulation that “if something x survives some event e then there exists after e a thing y such that $x = y$ ”? Surely – scientifically – there are only *two* figures when it comes to the teacher and student, the analyst and analysand, or the actor and character. Yet, if I allow the existence of metaphorical magic into the equation, perhaps there is at least a “third person”. And, I suggest, the psychoanalytical concept of transference might best explain this magic, as it is a structure and function which itself operates within a field of magical supposition. As psychoanalyst Robert Oelsner points out in his introduction to the recent anthology *Transference and*

³¹² Allan Read, “The Placebo of Performance: Psychoanalysis in Its Place,” in *Psychoanalysis and Performance*, ed. Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear (London: Routledge, 2001), 149.

³¹³ W. H. Auden, “W.H. Auden, The Art of Poetry No. 17,” interview by Michael Newman, *The Paris Review* 57 (Spring 1974), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3970/w-h-auden-the-art-of-poetry-no-17-w-h-auden>.

Countertransference Today, the very term is imbued with the suggestion of magic: “It is to be noted that Freud’s German word for transference is *Übertragung*, which, when used in conjunction with the prefix *Gedanken*, thus *Gedankenübertragung*, means extra-sensorial communication or telepathy.”³¹⁴ This idea of telepathy, or thought transference, dovetails nicely with the Stanislavskian/Chekhovian notion of actor radiation – the otherworldly transmission (and absorption) of energy rays that occurs between actors and each other or an audience in order to create deep, soulful performances. R. Andrew White confirms that, although Chekhov’s notions of radiation were formed under his initial training with Stanislavski at the MAT, he went on to develop his own concrete ideas about the elusive concept and its actualization, including an invocation for students to visualize an Imaginary Centre in their chests “from which living impulses are sent out...”³¹⁵

In an attempt to understand the salience of transference within a theatrical/dramatic model of characterization, it seems vital to substantially foreground what I have identified as the metaphorical/phenomenal/magical aspect of the acting process within the very conceptualization of psychoanalytical transference. Perhaps it should not appear as surprising that transference, much like Chekhov’s PG, is entirely wrapped up in notions of intra-subjectivity, and is difficult to absolutely define. A concept that, according to Anthony Elliot, “lies at the core of psychoanalysis as a field of investigation, method of inquiry and psychotherapeutic practice”, transference might ultimately refer to subjective processes of memory, relationship, idealization, and reiteration. A succinct (and necessarily reductive) definition is offered up by Gregory L. Ulmer when he concludes that “‘Transference’ refers to any experience from the past reactivated in the present relationship between analyst and analysand during psychoanalytic treatment”. (He also adds that – perhaps helpfully; perhaps consternatingly – “Lacan observed that as soon as there is a subject who is supposed to know (the Other), there is transference”: this is an idea I

³¹⁴ Robert Oelsner, “Introduction,” in *Transference and Countertransference Today*, ed. Robert Oelsner (London: Routledge, 2013), 3.

³¹⁵ R. Andrew White, “Chekhov’s Notion of Radiating: From Concept to Concrete,” in *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*, ed. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon (London: Routledge, 2015), 117.

will explore later.)³¹⁶ A useful current definition of the “transference relationship” is furnished by Derek Hook when he succinctly names it as “one in which the projections and fantasies of subjects are mobilized”.³¹⁷

In the end, perhaps, I am well-advised to simply look to Freud and Lacan for explanations that resonate with my ideas about actors and acting. Summarily, I will advocate for an amalgamation of Freud’s own pithy definitions (for he has many longer and more contestable ones), from, first, the revised translation of his 1949 publication “An Outline of Psycho-Analysis”; and, second, his 1914 paper “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through”, wherein he strives to differentiate hypnotic technique from “cases [that] behave differently from the beginning”:

[T]he patient sees in [the analyst] the return, the reincarnation, of some important figure out of his childhood or past, and consequently transfers on to him feelings and reactions which undoubtedly applied to this prototype.³¹⁸[...] we may say that the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He produces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without [...] knowing that he is repeating it.”³¹⁹

Freud’s own language here, emphasizing as he does notions of *unconscious memory*, *action*, and *repetition*, neatly outlines the deep correspondences that may exist between dramatic acting and psychoanalytic transference. Lacan, whose developments in Freudian-based thinking are of

³¹⁶ Gregory L. Ulmer, “The Upsilon Project,” in *Psychoanalysis and Performance*, ed. Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear. (London: Routledge, 2001), 205.

³¹⁷ Derek Hook, *Six Moments in Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2018), 32.

³¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXIII, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 174.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

particular relevance to my arguments, delivers a deeply provocative description in his most famous statement about transference: “transference is the enactment of the reality of the unconscious”.³²⁰ This fundamental statement has, in my estimation, much concordance with Stanislavski’s equally noted directive that through the use of his psychotechnique actors can access the “creative subconscious” through “conscious means”. I speculate that Strasberg would heartily embrace Lacan’s dictum of “the enactment of the reality of the unconscious” as a potential mantra for Method acting.

As I push my analysis into the realm of psychoanalytical theory, it is well to be reminded of what theatre scholar Rebecca Schneider has to impart regarding remembrance, performance, and transference. Discussing the idea of identical – and identity-forming – replication through ‘cloning’ and theatrical (re)creation, she suggests a spiralized version of self-in-time that doubles back on itself in a process of continuous return:

For Freud...remembrance itself is a theater, enabled *by performance*, not turned away from repetition as debased. In the theater of psychanalytic transference, the first is always only accessed through re-enactment, through a *second time* but, importantly, a second time which constitutes, backward *and* afterward, the first.³²¹

Or, as Richard Schechner notably describes this phenomenological event, relating to the restoration of behavior:

Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive. These difficult terms are reducible to the same principle of self-in/as-other: the social or transindividual self [...] Performance means: never for the first

³²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994), 149.

³²¹ Rebecca Schneider, “Hello Dolly Well Hello Dolly,” in *Psychoanalysis and Performance*, ed. Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear (London: Routledge, 2001), 106.

time; it means: for the second to the nth time.³²² [...] Put in personal terms, restored behaviour is ‘me behaving as if I am someone else’. But this someone else may also be ‘me in another state of feeling/being’. Performing my dream, re-experiencing my childhood trauma, showing you what I did yesterday.³²³

One Mirror: Three Transfers: Multiple Selves

Regarding the actor’s work, there are three particularized and potential transference relationships that I will examine. Though they are each observably differentiated in terms of their inter- and intra-relational dynamics and processes, they also exist along a continuum of experience that continually reinstates and reiterates the actions of actor transference through the lens of Lacan’s formulation of the imaginary subject *via* mirror-phase (mis)recognition.

1. Actor to Character. The originary relationship within the schema of ego-ideal formation and unconscious transference of past behaviour, aggressions, gaps, projections, and fantasies.
2. Actor to Director/Teacher. The essential modern dyadic relationship at play during the actor’s creation of a playwright’s dramatic character as a representative and realist body on stage.
3. Actor to Audience. The culminating, and alienating, relationship between the acting subject and big Other. The sustaining and reflective, but also receding and disappearing, assemblage of witnessing spectators wholly implicated in the Symbolic Order.

The evidence and argumentation that I will provide within my following analysis is non-clinical and speculative. I am well aware that any attempt to wield aspects of psychoanalytical nomenclature, procedure, and theory as tools of knowledge outside of their clinical silos of practice and discourse is fraught with potential misunderstanding and misuse. Even a simplistic

³²² Schechner, *Over Under and Around*, 102.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 103.

reading of the divided topology of psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic theories in the twentieth century between Continental and American understandings of practice shows the impossibility of achieving synthesis on these topics. Yet many powerful interdisciplinary inquiries have been initiated over the last half-century that have ramified Lacanian analytical theory into hearty and sometimes divisive discursive branches of dialogue – through Continentalist philosophers Alain Badiou and Julia Kristeva, film theorists Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey, the Slovenian Neo-Lacanian School of Slavoj Žižek, and many others. As Janelle G. Reinelt formulates this interdisciplinarity, “[...] a growing body of work has countered the fear of ahistoricity and reworked Freud and Lacan for poststructuralist and postmodernist purposes – and also sometimes for political purposes”.³²⁴ I assess that it may be equally productive to apply this critical framework to the exploration of subjectivity with regard to dramatic acting, of which my contribution here is merely a shot across the bow of disciplinary isolation.

1(a). Me, Tarzan. You...Tarzan, too.

My formulation of *actor-to-character* as a representational, or displaced, manifestation of “mirror-stage” interaction begins with, and does not negate, the notion of an actor’s self that exists prior to the event of engagement with the character’s “self”. Indeed, one of the enduring criticisms of Lacan’s original theory is that, in the summarization of Anthony Elliott, “surely for an individual to begin to recognize itself in the ‘mirror’ it must already possess a more rudimentary sense of self”.³²⁵ I highlight this not to suggest that an actor’s sense of its self – “what is like to be me” – is in any essentialized way “rudimentary”. I mention this dilemma only because it foregrounds the important idea that the mirror-phase of identification does not *institute* a sense of selfhood, but only *forges* this sense of imaginary wholeness through the self-object of the mirror (or, as I will argue, the character.)

Lacan himself was not incognizant of this conundrum, and, perhaps surprisingly, discovered an answer by engaging with the ideas of a colleague with whom he often stood in

³²⁴ Reinelt, “Psychoanalysis,” 396.

³²⁵ Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory*, 109.

disagreement on several points, the English psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald Winnicott. Most famous, perhaps, for his model of a self growing out of the “good enough” mothering relationship, Winnicott was a primary clinician who emerged as a deeply influential (and unaligned) survivor of the British Psychoanalytic Society wars of the 1940s between Melanie Klein and Anna Freud. As such, he was not a Continentalist in the Lacanian mode, but, like Lacan, who had provoked a schism with the International Psychoanalytical Association in the 1960s, he was a resilient figure in the face of internecine organizational politics. The two maintained a cordially respectful, if distant, relationship through both of their remarkable careers. Winnicott, also like Lacan, expressed a deep interest in mirroring as a psychoanalytic event, though Winnicott’s theories led him to valorize the idea of the Mirror-Role of mother and family, which focussed on, as Lewis A. Kirshner describes it, the “maternal face as the mirror for the infant” rather than the object of the mirror itself.³²⁶ Although, as Kirshner also qualifies, “for Lacanians the mother herself can serve as the identificatory mirror object [...] the important point is infants’ self-discovery in a visual image”.³²⁷

The two theorists found common cause, however, when Lacan extended Winnicott’s influential notion of the “transitional object” to a novel conclusion with regards to his own construction of the mirror-phase. As Elliot describes it, the transitional, or ‘not-me’, object “is a bridging between the inner world of fantasy and the outer world of objects and persons” for the infant. Yet although these objects are often recognized as inert material entities such as blankets or toys, both Winnicott and Lacan regard this primary phenomenon in relation to the Mother and her body. In his 1951 paper “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena”, Winnicott evokes the almost supernatural, oceanic-feeling transaction between mother and child: “The mother, at the beginning, by an almost 100 percent adaptation, affords the infant the opportunity for the *illusion* that her breast is part of the infant. It is, as it were, under magical control”.³²⁸

³²⁶ Lewis A. Kirshner, “Applying the Work of Winnicott and Lacan,” in *Between Winnicott and Lacan*, ed. Lewis A. Kirshner (New York: Routledge, 2011), 86.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

³²⁸ D. W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,” in *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1992), 238.

This adaptation to the infant's needs is the source of the "good enough" mothering that, in Elliot's words, creates a "transitional space" which is – crucially for my study – "a paradoxical realm in which the infant feels he or she creates and controls the object, yet also perceives that this object also belongs in the world of other people".³²⁹ It is hard, upon transcribing this, to imagine a better short description of the actor's living relationship to the playwright/director/audience's character-*as-object* – as something the actor "creates and controls", but also as a thing that "belongs in the world of other people".

Yet how is this relevant to the already-much discussed Lacanian concept of the mirror-phase, which includes no explicit evocation of the Mother within its definitional parameters?³³⁰ And how is this important to my assertion that a self always persists within the realm of dramatic acting? I find my answer through what Lacan, in direct reference to Winnicott's transitional object, conceptualizes as the "transferable object". If, as theorized in Winnicott's description, the infant has experienced the mother's breast as part of themselves, then the loss of that breast through maturation, Lacan posits, is in fact experienced as a loss of *a part of themselves*. In order for this sense of loss to be felt by the infant, then, as explicated by Jeanne Wolff Bernstein,

[...] a primordial identification takes place prior to the mirror stage in which infants identify with a lost part of themselves. This constitutes a prespecular identificatory moment for infants, long before they identify themselves with their alienating mirror image and mistake the mirror image for themselves.³³¹

What implications does this loss of a "primordial identification" of self have on the actor's work when addressing the creation of character? I contend that actors behave as just such grieving and incomplete persons, in Lacanian terms; half-actualized and fractured selves who are

³²⁹ Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory*, 69.

³³⁰ As noted in Chapter 2, Lacan affirms that "the symbolic order is present in the figure of the adult who is carrying or supporting the infant" but this may be seen as only ambiguously referencing the Mother.

³³¹ Jeanne Wolff Bernstein, "The Space of Transition between Winnicott and Lacan," in *Between Winnicott and Lacan*, ed. Lewis A. Kirshner (New York: Routledge, 2011), 125.

in need of specularized mirror images of themselves to regain a sense of ideal-egos through an imaginary (mis)recognition of themselves as *unified*. In short, for the actor to fully enter into a character's constructed world, the actor must *identify* with that character as its *self*, and unconsciously transfer the pain of loss and separation of its past history *onto* that character's inert – and ultimately, therefore – *alienating* subjectivity. This is how the actor can accomplish the ontologically ambiguous Stanislavskian directive to “experience” the role. As I have argued, there is no way to phenomenologically experience subjective behaviour without accessing the sense – the qualia – of what it feels like to *be* something. Unlike the uncoordinated and non-masterful infant who is jolted into self-recognition by seeing its unific specular image, the actor's self has already long entered the Symbolic Order constituted through language. The actor, as a person in the world, has constructed a feeling self that experiences its life through the lens of a symbolic reality, and does not need an *actual* mirror-object in which to *see* its living body reflected and reified. The actor is now able to *project* a feeling of wholeness and unity onto the typological marks of a playwright's written character, and to imaginatively *see its self* as reflected in the character. Uta Hagen puts it, in her inimitably practical way, as a provocation of authenticity and autobiography: “Oh...to be Hamlet! Ahhh...to be Juliet! To be St. Joan, or Eliza Doolittle, or 'Enry 'iggins for the few hours allotted by the playwright! If you really want to be, you'd better know who you are when the play begins, and how you got to be that way!”³³²

Though it may lack the ocular and specular properties of a mirror, there is much about the dramatic character that is analogous to the material looking-glass. Like the mirror, it is *bounded* as a construction. I suggest that one of the primary reasons why the character works so efficiently as a metaphoric incarnation of the Lacanian mirror is because it is both *mobile* and *finite*. Like the “living” image that we apprehend of ourselves in a mirror, the character *moves* through time and space. Just as our image never coalesces and freezes in the reflecting surface, so too does the character never achieve coherence except as a shifting line-by-line agent within the narrative, themes, and *mise-en-scène* of the play as a whole. A line such as Hedda Gabler's “I'm burning your baby...” may work to distill Ibsen's anti-heroine as a modern archetype, but in itself it does neither define nor exhaust the character's potential effects and meanings. Equally,

³³² Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, 152.

a bold and jubilant movement of jumping up-and-down may condense an infant's self-experience of the mirror-image into the cognition of an "Ideal-I", but it can never successfully arrest the essentially dynamic effects of such self-witnessing. That being said, the character's construction and the mirror-image are essentially constrained and terminal. The character, as a representation, does not formally exist outside of the original playscript it was developed for. The character *may* be appropriated and recalibrated as a creative avatar for other written and performed iterations – such as Mark Clayton Southers's re-imagining of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* as a tale encompassing racialization and the U.S. South in *Miss Julie, Clarissa and John* – but it cannot be apprehended without a causal chain of implied reference to its appearance as a character in the original play. Likewise, the infant's play with its image in the mirror might be photographed and re-displayed for others over time and space, but the originary event can never be superseded in the essential activity of its ludic specularity. The very playfulness *and* closure of the character's epistemic assembly make it, like the mirror, a perfectly delineated selfobject (more on this term later) through which subjective identification is continually deferred and alienated. In Schechnerian actor/character terms, the mirror-image is not me, but it is also *not* not me.

Viewed this way, the self persists in acting not as a fixed entity, but as an empty signifier continually being replenished with identificatory meaning through its ludic activity when "creating a role". As Barnet D. Malin instructs us: "Our consciously held sense of self and identity, along with the entirety of our subjective experience, are therefore all imaginary: never absolute, and forever ephemeral, changeable, illusory, and deceptive".³³³ So, although our "consciously held sense of self and identity" may stand in the empty gaps of signification in *theory*, in the actor's *practice* this sense becomes performatively actualized through the building of character. The invisible and non-absolute quality of my subjective consciousness becomes visible and categorical through the performance of a character who is enmeshed in a web of representational meaning through drama.

³³³ Barnet D. Malin, "Kohut and Lacan: Mirror Opposites," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (2011): 61.

For Stanislavski, the character was the irreducible entity and conduit through which to make “the *invisible* work of the actor *visible*”.³³⁴ As Hapgood’s translative titling of his second influential book on acting technique – *Building a Character* – suggests, the initial actor’s “inner work” on psychotechnique exists only to extenuate into the construction of a materialized, visible, and quantifiable “outer technique”, as is evidenced in the construction of character. As she clearly articulates it within the second paragraph of her translation: “The external characterization explains and illustrates and therefore conveys to your spectators the inner pattern of your part”.³³⁵ Benedetti, as the later translator and editor, refashions this step in the actor’s work under the title of *Embodiment* – an apt nominative for a comparison of mirror-stage-body-witnessing to mirror-like-character-apprehension.

The notion of embodiment, as evidenced by Stanislavski’s (and Benedetti’s) crucial usage of the term, is one that holds distinction within any study of acting pedagogy. Just as gestural behaviour and performance styles are passed on from actor to actor and from generation to generation through a process of oral and visual communication that elides the theoretical written word, so too does valuable information make itself known to the actor through a tangible though unarticulated engagement with the experiential *corpus*: the actor’s total body. Things are known *by* the body *about* the body that escape language and representation, but that are nevertheless useful to the actor (as they are useful to the analysand). Noted contemporary psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has named this phenomenon as *the unthought known* of the human subject. In our early formative years, the objects of the world press themselves upon our senses, and though we may not be able to consciously think about these experiences, the knowledge of them resides in us as something assumed.

“So one of the features of a psychoanalysis is to think the unthought known,” Bollas tells us, “which is part of the core of the individual, and to do so through object usage and the drive to

³³⁴ Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, 352.

³³⁵ Konstantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1949), 3.

unfold the self through space and time”.³³⁶ This last phrase – *to unfold the self through space and time* – is an apposite description of precisely what Stanislavski means by *embodiment*, and of what actors *do* in character. Perhaps it is this deep engagement with a dramatic character – which is constituent of both other and self – that creates a site for a thinking of the unthought known. The character, here, seen as the transformational object that seduces the self into giving up its performative secrets. In the following quote, replace what Bollas identifies as the aesthetic object with the notion of dramatic character for the actor:

It is usually on the occasion of an aesthetic moment, that an individual feels a deep subjective rapport with an object (a painting, a poem, an aria or symphony, or a natural landscape) and experiences an uncanny fusion with the object, an event that re-evokes an ego state that prevailed during early psychic life [...] In adult life, therefore, to seek the transformational object is to recollect an early object experience, to remember not cognitively but existentially – through intense affective experience – a relationship which was identified with cumulative transformational experiences of the self.³³⁷

1(b). The Selfobject; or, ‘Self on a Shelf’

In a colloquial sense, what better term than *selfobject* might there be to describe the materiality of a mirror in relation to the human subject? The mirror is an *object* which specularly mirrors the *self*. However, this idiom also has a varied, and specific, provenance within the realm of psychoanalysis that I am exploring. Primarily, it is a term ascribed to the work of Heinz Kohut (1913-1981), an Austrian-American psychoanalyst whose years of practice were practically coterminous with Lacan’s. Best known as a developer of the concept of self-psychology, Kohut, like Lacan, initiated discourse wherein versions of ‘mirroring’ came to have a central role. And,

³³⁶ Ibid., 50.

³³⁷ Christopher Bollas, *The Christopher Bollas Reader*, ed. Christopher Bollas and Arne Jemstedt (London: Routledge, 2011), 3–4.

even more like Winnicott, (whom he oddly never referenced in his own work), Kohut centred his notions of mirroring on the healthful engagement between mother, family, and child. As Malin puts it:

Many contributions report that Kohut and Lacan employ incompatible versions of mirroring and a mirror stage. All contrast Lacan's contention that the mirror phase, although normal, institutes the ego as a fundamentally narcissistic defense against "motor impotence and nursling dependence" with Kohut's contention that mirror processes promote unity and cohesion required in the normal formation and development of the self.³³⁸

Though in the field of psychoanalytical thought these two figures are often viewed as antithetical in their approaches to 'the mirror', I suggest that their two approaches dovetail nicely in an appreciation of what the actor does when engaging with the idea of Self in character. Just as clinical analyst Malin recognizes that the two theories are "mutually exclusive on theoretical grounds" but "may find a meeting place in the clinical domain", so too do I proclaim regarding these two versions of mirroring that they may productively collide in the practicing actor's domain.³³⁹

It is first important to clarify that, strictly speaking, the Kohutian selfobject is that of *another person* reflecting back to the viewing subject its own sense of narcissistic wholeness. These "other people" are not entities who exist in their own right, but at this stage of development exist only to fulfill the needed functions of self-validation for the child. Prominent psychoanalyst Arne Jemstedt reminds us of the centrality of persons-as-objects when he clarifies that

[i]n ordinary language the word 'object' usually denotes an inanimate thing, a physical article in the external world.

³³⁸ Malin, "Kohut and Lacan," 61–62.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

Psychoanalysis sometimes uses it in this way, but more often it employs the word to refer to an ‘other’ – a person who is ‘not-me’ – with whom the subject exists in some kind of emotionally charged relationship.³⁴⁰

It is not surprising that it is the child’s mother who is granted the originary role in this selfobject need-fulfilling function. The mother, at this stage, is identified by Kohut as “an object which is important only insofar as it is invited to participate in the child’s narcissistic pleasure and thus to confirm it”.³⁴¹ This “mirror transference”, whereby the “gleam in the mother’s eye [...] mirrors the child’s exhibitionist display”³⁴² is one that constitutes “the appearance of the undisguised urge to be looked at”.³⁴³ As I shall later explore, this selfobject figure may clearly be extrapolated as that of the teacher/director within the actor’s schema of building a character, but I also contend that the actual *character itself* functions as a selfobject which mirrors back to the actor its own sense of mastery and cohesiveness. In this sense, Kohut’s selfobject reminds me of Bruce Wilshire’s concept of Body-Self:

[i]t is a conscious, or potentially conscious, body which must be identified as a self, and it is so under the following conditions: when it can experience objects or persons which are in fact other than itself – but with whom it is mimetically involved – and then can reproduce them *as* other in their absence.³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰ Arne Jemstedt, “Introduction,” in *The Christopher Bollas Reader*, ed. Christopher Bollas and Arne Jemstedt (London: Routledge, 2011), xix.

³⁴¹ Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), 116.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁴⁴ Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 152.

Inasmuch as Wilshire’s Body-Self refers to the acting subject, and Kohut’s selfobject refers to the function of the other in relation to the actualizing self, I deduce that there is much concordance in these conceptualizations of self-to-object. Both deal with a presence that makes itself known through absence; for Kohut, it is the absent self which needs a transitional person-object to achieve individuation and wholeness; for Wilshire, it is the experiential creation of the self through mimesis and reproduction of another object-person. Ultimately, it results in what Schechner calls the restoration of behaviour, a concept I introduced in Chapter Three, and once again, he offers up a neat bow-tying of the essential conundrum: “Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive. These difficult terms are reducible to the same principle of self-in/as-other: the social or transindividual self [...] Performance means: never for the first time; it means: for the second to the nth time.”³⁴⁵

The selfobject, it is important to clarify, represents a *function* rather than an object in its own right. Now, the character may be seen as an object, of sorts, which any one of us can pull down from a shelf of plays and start “reading”. Yet, as I argued in Chapter Three, characters *really* exist *not* on the page but on the stage. Master teacher and critic Albert Bermel puts the case nicely:

The leap from literature into enactment takes its force from the actors. Whether the playwright wants his characters portrayed as plausible psychological studies or as puppets or stock figures or archetypes, they will be incarnated by human beings. The actors constitute the life of the performance, its vitality.³⁴⁶

And, for the actor, as I’ve argued with regard to Lacan, the character exists as a *mirroring* function with which to activate a sense of selfhood. This is no less true of Kohut, though his analytic use of the mirroring concept is divergent from Lacan’s mirror-stage – of which theory

³⁴⁵ Schechner, *Over Under and Around*, 102.

³⁴⁶ Albert Bermel, *Contradictory Characters: An Interpretation of the Modern Theatre* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 4.

Kohut was well-aware³⁴⁷ – utilizing the empathic responsiveness of a mother-figure as a healthy conduit to self-formation through a metaphoric mirror transference, rather than the perpetually self-alienating ego-formation of the Lacanian subject.

And again, as with Lacan’s mirror stage, Kohut maintains that “mirroring and idealized selfobject functions organize, sustain, and restore a cohesive, nuclear self throughout life”,³⁴⁸ valorizing a lifelong process that reaffirms itself through a series of repetitions. If I consider dramatic characters as potential selfobjects for actors, I mean that they operate as *functions* by which an external figuration – the character – organizes, sustains, and restores a cohesive, nuclear self for the actor through the mirroring of its ideal constitution. Characters are ideal in the sense that they are *complete* and *unfractured* entities that exist as vehicles for performance: “the appearance of the undisguised urge to be looked at”. Consider the ways in which characters are seen to “inhabit” actors, and actors to “come alive” as characters, when contemplating Anthony Elliot’s outline of Kohut’s psychoanalytic mirror transference:

Selfobjects, though in actuality drawn from the outside world, pass into the child’s own psychic structure, providing for the essential building blocks for emotional experience and self-constitution [...] selfobjects permit the bridging of inner world and external reality, a transitional realm from which the infant can take into itself parts of the object in order to secure identity [...] The mirroring selfobject arises through the child’s sense of grandiosity and omnipotence [...] the child establishes an image of itself as perfect.”³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Kohut, Heinz, “Letters to Jacques: Selected Letters of Heinz Kohut to Jacques Palaci,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 84, no. 6 (December 1, 1997): 822.

³⁴⁸ Malin, “Kohut and Lacan,” 68.

³⁴⁹ Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory*, 97.

This notion of a “transitional realm” that bridges “the inner world and external reality” is yet another mirroring of the basic Stanislavskian dictum of “the subconscious through conscious means”. Through the character – taken into the actor’s self – the actor discovers the secure and perfect identificatory features lurking in its own psyche which allow for the grand gesture of performance. The disguised self of the *inner* subject is transferred onto the *outer* disguise of the character – an “appearance of the undisguised urge to be looked at”. This performative reflection of self through character restores to the actor, in turn, a “cohesive, nuclear” sense of self. There is a merging of Self (actor) and Object (character) into a virtual *selfobject*.

Uta Hagen, within the realm of actor training, also has a lot to say about the relationships of self to object, though she rarely refers to these matters clinically. (She called Part Two of her popular treatise *Respect for Acting* “The Object Exercises”, but for Hagen the term object had little to do with psychological development or the self, but rather represented elements of the natural world that actors could focus on to master a rigorous psycho-physical technique.) A rare example of this is her use of the term “release object”, which she employs in her chapter on Emotional Memory. Hagen, through her own exploration of sorrowful emotion utilizing this highly-contested and influential tenet of Stanislavskian/Strasbergian methodologies, “discovered intuitively that what sent me correctly was a tiny remembered object only indirectly connected with the sad event”.³⁵⁰ Uncharacteristically, Hagen, who consistently couches her arguments within the practice of acting in the theatre, then situates this phenomenon in the discourse of psychoanalysis by reference to a figure who was a close associate of Heinz Kohut’s over many decades:³⁵¹

Later, I learned from Dr. Jacques Palaci, a close friend trained in psychology, psychiatry and human behavior, that this little indirect object was the release object, a release of the censor which moves along with us and says, “Don’t lose control.” This apparently

³⁵⁰ Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, 48.

³⁵¹ Kohut, “Letters to Jacques.”

insignificant object had been unconsciously perceived and associated with the original emotional experience”.³⁵²

(Hagen later identified these “personal release objects” as “triggers”, a word much in use today.)³⁵³ When considering the centrality of the “release object” to Hagen’s formulation of the machinations of emotional memory – and also triangulating this observation with an acknowledgment of the titles of the fourth and fifth chapter of her later book *A Challenge for the Actor*, “The Self” and “Transference” – I cannot but speculate on the instinctive grasp that the academically untutored actor and teacher had on complex notions relating to self, object, and the inner reality of emotions.

Another startling resonance with Kohut’s ideas regarding the transference of Self to Object through a mirroring action can be found the Stanislavski-based actor and teacher Morris Carnovsky’s (1897-1992) distillation of acting methodology into Self, Action, and Object. Carnovsky was an esteemed American actor and teacher; a founding member of the Group Theatre who was blacklisted by Elia Kazan and others during the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in the 1950s, he nevertheless went on to a distinguished career performing Shakespeare later in his career and worked for many years as an instructor at Brandeis University in Connecticut. He was also an unadulterated acolyte of Stanislavski’s strategies for actor training, developing a version of the system that avoided the pitfalls of Strasberg’s emotionally reductive approach by focusing on a simple triadic relationship of Self, Action, and Object to ground his basic analysis. Carnovsky described his own notion of Self as very intuitive and practical, holding none of the “perilously mystical” qualities that might see it as “some kind of psychological key to the Universe”.³⁵⁴ In *The Actor’s Eye*, the book of collected lectures and interviews that was finally coaxed out of him in his old age, he informs us that he was “very concerned that the whole notion of Self should be accepted easily, and not worked for as if it

³⁵² Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, 48.

³⁵³ Hagen, *Challenge to the Actor*, 88.

³⁵⁴ Carnovsky, *Actor’s Eye*, 95.

were some kind of deeply buried treasure that the student has to mine out of himself by force.”³⁵⁵

Carnovsky’s concept of the Object, to which Action was applied by the actor’s Self in order to achieve truth and coherence, is nicely drawn out by theatrical polymath John Houseman in his foreword to the book: “[...] the actor’s awareness of ‘self’ which each one of them must develop and use in their physical and emotional contacts with ‘objects’ that include their fellow students and *the characters* and situations of the play in which they are to perform” (emphasis added).³⁵⁶

For the purposes of my argument, which insists on a sense of self brought to acting that is both generated and reflected by a mirroring engagement with the other – whether the small other of the character or the big Other of the teacher/director/audience – the simplicity of Carnovsky’s definitions of Self and Object works to highlight what I would call a Kohutian *merging* through *interaction*. Clinical psychologist Bruce E. Reis offers a view on selfobject functions that resonates with Carnovsky’s basic ideas on dramatic acting:

The course of these developmental interactions is understood to exist along a continuum of merger with the object, from being able to merge with the calmness and power of the object (idealization), to sensing the essential likeness to the object (twinship), to being reflected by the object (mirroring).³⁵⁷

Idealization, twinship, and mirroring are the core ideas nestled in Carnovsky’s halting articulations of his actor training methodology and analysis.³⁵⁸ In the following passage, he begins by locating Self and Object as *differences* that collide, but eventually merge into something “simple and truthful”:

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 95.

³⁵⁶ John Houseman, foreword to Carnovsky, *Actor’s Eye*, 14.

³⁵⁷ Bruce E. Reis, “You Are Requested to Close the Eyes,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 14, no. 3 (2004): 356.

³⁵⁸ Carnovsky was not a writer, and the quotes attributed to him in *The Actor’s Eye*, his only book on acting, are drawn mostly from interviews with him by Peter Sander.

It's like driving two horses that are going in opposite directions. But I think the simplest recognition of the truth in you [SELF] comes from, I must repeat, again and again, the response to the Object. When you know your eyes are 'colliding' with, are meeting an obstruction called Object [IDEALIZATION], there's only one way to relate to it, and to be attentive to any vibrations that emanate from it [TWINSHIP], so that if suddenly, say, you are involved in a scene of anger, *you* will become involved in that same anger [SELFOBJECT] by your own response [MIRRORING]."³⁵⁹

Put simply, and using my potent example discussed in Chapter Three, if I must perform the character (Object) of angry Bill Sykes in *Oliver Twist*, then I – my Self – must “become involved in that same anger” and somehow merge with “the power of the object” as a function of this *selfobject* interaction.

Similarly to Kohut, Carnovsky sees the engagement of Self to Object as a positively productive one. As Reis relates Kohut's selfobject functions as ones that contribute to the self's “vital aliveness and cohesion of experience”³⁶⁰, Carnovsky sees actor's responses to the Object of character (or other actors) as “simple and truthful”.³⁶¹ And, moreover, the reconstitution of this healthful arrangement is, for Carnovsky as for Kohut, something that is continually recoverable and repeated. “If you lose it”, Carnovsky says, referring to the actor's simple truthfulness of response, “as actors sometimes do on stage, you can always refresh yourself at the source, which is the Object; and then test the other source, which is Yourself; and then go on to serve the activity of the confrontation between the two. Is that clear?”³⁶² Carnovsky, of course,

³⁵⁹ Carnovsky, *Actor's Eye*, 97.

³⁶⁰ Reis, “You Are Requested to Close the Eyes,” 356.

³⁶¹ Carnovsky, *Actor's Eye*, 97.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 98.

voices this relationship as one of *confrontation*, which is the commonest trope about stage *action* – that it is composed through a collision of *objective* and *obstacle* – but I prefer to reframe the observation through the lens of *mirroring*, which I invoke by including Carnovsky’s final question to his interlocutor, as though reaching towards to specular image across from him: “is that clear?”.

A complementary view of the Object’s productive relation to actor can be found in the ideas of renowned contemporary theatre director and author Declan Donnellan. An avowed Stanislavski-based practitioner and theorist – he composed the “Introduction” to Benedetti’s 2008 translation of *The Actor’s Work* – Donnellan’s foundational approach is encapsulated by the title of his influential book from 2002 (first published in Russian in 2001): *The Actor and the Target*. By “target”, Donnellan, in full Carnovskian mode, means a particular sort of actor’s Object. “[The] target is a kind of object,” Donnellan instructs us, “either direct or indirect, a concrete thing seen or sensed, and needed.”³⁶³ For Donnellan, “the target is neither an objective, nor a want, nor a plan, nor a reason, nor an intention, nor a focus, nor a motive”; the target is not something abstracted, intangible, or premeditated, but rather a commodity that “needs to be seen”.³⁶⁴ In this, it bears relation to the materiality of Lacan’s mirror, the reflecting figure of Kohut’s selfobject, and the embodied roles and relationships of Carnovsky’s Object. Prosaic examples of the target that Donnellan provides are “I read the paper” and “I had some coffee”, and more actorly ones “I impress Juliet”, “I warn Romeo”, “I deceive Lady Capulet” and “I tease the Nurse”. The point he stresses is that action – *doing* – alone is not sufficient for the actor; the action must be directed *to* something or someone. So, in this sense, Donnellan’s formulation corresponds remarkably to Carnovsky’s: A Self *acting* upon an Object. And, like Carnovsky, Donnellan also believes that “you can always refresh yourself at the source” by attending to the target. In a compendium of references from Chapter 2 of his book – “The Target” – we can get a clear idea of Donnellan’s views on this:

³⁶³ Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), 20.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

[...] the eyes have to be looking at something, whether real or imaginary [...] it is the target that propels, compels, and impels us. We give up control and entrust it to the thing we see [...] Seeing the target transform will free the actor [...] the [external] target locates the energy outside so that we can live off it; the target becomes an external battery [...] The more energy the actor can locate in the target, the greater the actor's freedom. *Stealing energy from the target paralyzes the actor.* (emphasis added)³⁶⁵

I emphasize Donnellan's remark about "stealing energy" because I believe that it locates his observations, psychoanalytically, in a more Kohutian than Lacanian mode. I submit that the phrase "stealing energy from the target" is an apt metaphorical way to describe the process of alienating "Ideal-I" ego-formation that occurs during Lacan's mirror stage development. By trying to steal – or capture (*capitation*); trap – the image of one's self as reflected in the mirror, both the actor and the individual suffer from a sort of *paralysis*. By locating "myself" in the mirror's image, I forever alienate myself *from* myself through a focus *on* myself. "'I' is often a dangerous word for the actor and is best used with caution"³⁶⁶, Donnellan warns us, and something similar might be observed about the subject who sees and then acts. Donnellan suggests that by giving attention to the target, much as Kohut's infant gives attention to the gleam in his mother's eye, we can become *free* – more *ourselves* – and gain access to a transitional and transfigurative realm where "the target is always transforming itself".³⁶⁷

In all this, it is salient to be reminded that the words such as "I", "me", "Self", "myself" and "selfobject" are always originary, progenitive, and in play. When discussing human psychology and dramatic acting, the self *persists*.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 20–25.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 25.

INTERLUDE: I've Seen the Actor and the Damage Done

I shall state it as an almost tautological truth that actors come to acting in order to feel whole as individuals in a way that they do not in “real” life. After all, why would a properly individuated and psychologically sound person ever choose to pretend to be someone else for many hours every day over the course of a lifetime? This is not to contest the nearly-shamanic idea that actors may come to acting in order to find some universal and core – perhaps even “primordial” and pre-linguistic – sense of their very selves. Inasmuch as the origins of acting in our present-day culture are most often presupposed to exist as historical offshoots of ritual behaviors – and that even in our own highly secularized Euroamerican neo-liberal society we have seen this notion valorized by the followers of Artaud, Grotowski, Barba, Fowler, Foreman, Schechner, the Open and Living Theaters, amongst others – I reiterate my basic premise that *this is not the kind of acting I am writing about*. I am referring to the kind of actor who lives within a resolutely modernist, scientist, and psychologically-centred framework of cultural production. The kind of actor whom we encounter at least as far back as Diderot’s *comédien*, whom we come upon in full form through Stanislavski’s “natural” and Strasberg’s “real” versions of this practitioner, and who is still very much with us today: in theatre training academies, on Broadway and West End stages, and decamped to the soundstages of Hollywood and its satellites. This is the kind of actor whose psychotechnique works first on the *self*, and then on the written *dramatic character*. This is the kind of actor I have spent the majority of my own career *being*. And this is the kind of actor, as pointed out by Paul Menzer, who has one primary notion regarding her task-oriented goal: “The idea – by now the thoroughly naturalized commonplace – that exhibiting an inner life is the principal work of the mainstream actor [...]”³⁶⁸

This actor, I flatly point out, comes to the task with a certain degree, and kind, of personal damage. (Do not think I am being cavalier when I claim it is no accident that the early Stanislavski acolyte Richard Boleslavsky infamously called the young actor *manqué* in his instructional dialogues by the name of “The Creature”). One may contest this point, but I suggest that in the very impossibility of ascertaining the global truth of this proposition in empirical

³⁶⁸ Paul Menzer, "Something Wanting: The Actor, the Critic, and Histrionic Skill," *Shakespeare Studies* 43 (2015): 79–87.

terms lies its power. The actor's secret, as I disavowed in Chapter 1, was never the Diderotian idea that actors only mimic real emotions 'for show' while remaining subjectively detached from those emotions. The actor's secret resides in a need, and seeming ability, to actually *be* both "I", "myself", and "the character", (following the Piercean semiological model outlined in Chapter 1). The actor *needs* to do this in order to feel whole. In unscholarly fashion I will just say this: *take it from me*. Or you may wish to reflect on the number of times, if you are one to circulate in theatrical circles, that you will have heard expressions along the lines of: "Acting is living – the rest is just waiting"; "I only feel truly alive when I'm acting"; "I'm not sure who I am when not in character"; "I feel incompetent in life, but confident on stage"; "Whenever a show finishes its run, I get depressed and lose myself"; "When I'm not in character, I'm not 100% whole". And so on. As an actor, I come to the work with a problem, and – like Lacan's infant – that problem is my fractured, fragmented, vulnerable, unorganized *self*. Diderot seems also to advance this idea, through his lens of eighteenth century empiricism, in a manner which is compelling, provocative, and arguably prescient:

It has been said that actors have no character, because in playing all characters they lose that which Nature gave them, and they become false just as the doctor, the surgeon, and the butcher become hardened. I fancy that here cause is confounded with effect, and that *they are fit to play to play all characters because they have none* (emphasis added).³⁶⁹

In accepting the general parameters of these arguments about the fragmented and unorganized self, this does not mean that I purport I am incapable, as a socialized and individuated adult possessing some mastery over language and identity, of producing something ephemerally beautiful, or even meaningful. I do not subscribe – as I demonstrated that Coquelin and Diderot might do in Chapter 1 – to any notion of the actor as being somehow inadequate to the demands of artistic and civil authenticity. But I do this, as an actor, only by harnessing my

³⁶⁹ Diderot, *Paradox of Acting*, 64-65.

thoughts and emotions to a fictitious being called the “character”, and by (mis)identifying that character’s actions and feelings as my own. As Lee Strasberg deduces:

The actor’s human nature not only makes possible his greatness, but also is the source of his problems [...] an individual can possess the technical ability to do certain things and yet may have difficulty expressing them because of his emotional life, because of the problems of his human existence.³⁷⁰

The problems of “emotional life” and “human existence” are deeply existential, of course, and are encountered by all of us. For the actor, however, the need to *act* on them (as it were) is notably compulsive. The actor both copes with and despairs of these problems in a psychologically particularized way *through* acting. Twentieth-century British actor Sir Michael Redgrave waxes bracingly on the subject by asking:

Do actors despair? Only actors will understand that use of the word. Some actors even will not, those who sublimate their despair, their essential lack of “actual reality”, the substance, the essence, the nature or “the thing” which makes them actors, the hellish, or divine, doubt which drives them to live more thoroughly others’ lives than their own, to haunt, as it were, their own existence.³⁷¹

To “haunt their own existence”, Redgrave says of actors. Which I take to mean that they unconsciously *revisit*, *ghost*, *reinhabit*, and even *repeat* their own lives while “thoroughly” living through an *other’s* life. This neatly brings me to the question of what the act of *transference* may have to offer to the metaphorical encounter between the “reality” of the actor and the “imaginary” of the character. My leap of conjecture here is that while the character may function

³⁷⁰ Lee Strasberg, *Strasberg at The Actors Studio: Tape-Recorded Sessions*, ed. Robert H. Hethmon (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 75.

³⁷¹ Michael Redgrave, “The Stanislavsky Myth”, London: *New Theatre*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (June, 1946), 16-18. In *Actors on Acting*, ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970), 405.

like a mirroring selfobject for the actor, it also functions as “someone” other than itself, as what Kohut would call a “true object”, which Bruce E. Reis identifies as one “who is psychologically separate and distinct from the self”.³⁷² By engaging in a symbiotic and cathectic encounter with this other “someone” through embodied performance, actors are bound to displace their own past behaviors and emotions onto the action of the character.³⁷³ As I have discussed, there is arguably no other way for actors to gain access to characters but by utilizing their own memories and sensibilities. It is only through the actor’s sense of self – a self that has been shaped and cauterized by its past experiences – that the actor is able to mobilize its current activity as character representation. By this method, actors inevitably transfer their past feelings into the relationship they develop with the someone/other who is the character. Actors *reproduce* their past experiences through portrayals of and as characters. As Lacan makes pains to point out in *Transference (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan; Book VIII)*, correlations between *past*, *presence*, *reproduction*, and *action* constitute a deeply creative taxonomy of subjecthood:

The reality of transference is the presence of the past [...] it is a presence that is a bit more than a presence – it is presence in action and, as the German [*Übertragung*] and French [*transfert*] indicate, a reproduction [...] this reproduction differs from a simple passivating of the subject. If the reproduction here is a reproduction in action, there is something creative in transference’s manifestations. It seems to me essential to articulate this creative element.³⁷⁴

Although I do not wish to elide the fact that Lacan (and other Freudians) specifically mean transference to denote something that occurs between two *real* people, I am struck by the

³⁷² Reis, “You Are Requested to Close the Eyes,” 357.

³⁷³ It is my entirely sober assessment that this is the mechanism through which actors sustain the ability to “other be” that the satirists Christopher Douglas and Nigel Planer mockingly describe in *I, An Actor*, which was cited in Chapter 1.

³⁷⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Transference*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VIII, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 174.

concordance evidenced here when considering the actor's behaviour regarding a relationship to character. A "reproduction" of the "past" through "presence in action" might as well be a statement lifted from the teachings of both Stanislavski *and* Strasberg. "We have the repeated, the recurrent feelings which our Emotion Memory prompts," Stanislavski muses. "Learn, first and foremost, to use them. They are more accessible to us."³⁷⁵ Strasberg, in typical mode, concludes that,

[a]ffective memory is the basic material for reliving on the stage.
 What the actor repeats in performance after performance is not just the words and movements he did yesterday but the memory of emotion, which he reaches through the memory of thought and sensation.³⁷⁶

Even Chekhov's PG, though based in the externalized embodiments of imagination rather than examples of explicit recurrence, is of no use to the actor unless it resonates with that actor's own personally-experienced subjectivity and past experience. As John Lutterbie explicates in this *précis* of the concept: "The PG is a focusing mechanism, allowing the performer to attend to a particular set of feelings that link the actor's emotional life to that of the character".³⁷⁷

This "linking" of actor emotion to character formation bares a striking resemblance to descriptions of transference wherein Lacan relates the occurrence to aspects of the mirror stage. The dramatic character, like the specular image, is "the traceable thing" that is projected before the incomplete subject, "which attracts him and with which he persistently plays".³⁷⁸ The actor, in the character, is faced "with what is both himself and an other" (the Schechnerian "not me, not not me" again), and leads to a "self-fracturing" subjectivity that seeks its constitution in the

³⁷⁵ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 208.

³⁷⁶ Strasberg, *Strasberg at The Actors Studio*, 114.

³⁷⁷ Lutterbie, "Dynamics of Psychological Gestures," 100.

³⁷⁸ Lacan, *Transference*, 354.

compelled repetition, through rehearsal and performance, *of* that character.³⁷⁹ As Lacan reminds us, “[...] we must begin with the fact that transference, in the final analysis, is repetition compulsion (*automatisme*).”³⁸⁰ Both the character and the mirror image – because they are seen as complete and unified in a way that the acting subject is not – work as “the image that is offered up to it and with which it identifies”. This identification of subject with image, and of actor with character, is precisely how the “linking” process inherent in Chekhov’s PG works. If, as Chekhov tells us, the PG is meant to “compress” a character to its “essence”, then the mirror equally distills the subject’s image as perfect, as an “ideal ego” that “traps” the essence of the subject, what Lacan calls “an imaginary projection.”³⁸¹ Much as in transference, the actor’s mirroring of the past self in the present character allows for unconscious emotions and feelings to be revisited and reconstituted through repetition.

Yet if my submission that the relationship of actor to character as a potent (if alternate) metaphoric example of psychological transference is found to be argumentatively suspect, I proffer that a qualified extenuation of this psychoanalytical event is clearly evident in the collaborative engagement between student-actor and teacher.

2. I’m OK – You’re OK...Ok, Maybe You’re Not

As stated earlier, Stanislavski’s most lasting contribution to acting is as a pedagogue. Famously, his practical writings for student actors were fashioned by him in the form of a dialogical narrative between a teacher and pupils, ostensibly told and ‘reported’ by the character Kostya Nazvanov as his “student’s diary”. It is widely assumed that the central figure in the narrative, the instructor Arkadi Tortsov, is mostly modelled by Stanislavski after himself. It is important to note that this character is also unequivocally drawn as a stage director – Kostya identifies him in his very first introductory sentence as “the well-known actor, director and teacher” – and that, as Benedetti informs us, “Stanislavski becomes Tortsov, which derives from the word [abrop] for

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 354.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 172.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 356.

creator”.³⁸² In the following analysis, it is effective to remember that the roles of director and teacher are essentially conflated. I hazard generalization here, but it has certainly always been my experience in the professional theatre that directors almost always work with their actors through instruction, and that instructors almost always work by directing their students. So, for my purposes, the discussion below, focused as it is on the pedagogical relationship between teacher/student as one that exhibits characteristics of transference between analyst and analysand, is also practically applicable to the association of director and actor. This is especially true within a pedagogy of actor training, where the “professor”/“student” model of the academy so intimately mirrors and experientially foreshadows the “director”/“actor” model of the theatre. As Alison Hodges outlines the pedigree in the second edition of her compendium on *Actor Training*, “fundamentally, the director has helped to mediate and negotiate the central issue of acting: the tension between the actor’s self and the actor’s role”.³⁸³

A foundational quality that the director/instructor must be presumed to possess in order to guide this process of “mediation” and “negotiation” is that of being the one *in the know* – someone well-enough versed in the actor’s “tension”, but also objectified from it, to be of “help” in resolving that tension. A key term to understanding the phenomenon of analytic transference is “the subject supposed to know”. First defined by Lacan in 1964 as *sujet supposé savoir*, the “subject supposed to know” is clinically identified as an embodied function that arises as a result of the analysand’s supposition that the analyst possesses a kind of hidden and secret knowledge about them. It is not that the analyst actually *does* have this knowledge, but the analysand supposes that this must be true due to their mutual positions and interactions. “As soon as the subject who is supposed to know exists somewhere...there is transference”, Lacan informs us.³⁸⁴ In an often-cited paper, Robert Brooke described the phenomenon clearly, and with an emphasis that suggests its applicability to the actor-training classroom:

³⁸² Benedetti, foreword to Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, xxi.

³⁸³ Alison Hodge, “Introduction,” in *Actor Training*, 2nd ed., ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2010), xxii.

³⁸⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1977), 232.

For Lacan, transference is best understood as a dynamic structure located partly within a person and partly between people. On the one side is a “divided self,” a person (perhaps a patient) who does not understand some part of her own action. [...] On the other side is an authority figure, a person whom the “divided self” *supposes to know* how to interpret the behavior. The person who feels divided looks to the authority figure for interpretation: this person is supposed to know what the baffling behaviour means and can tell her.³⁸⁵

The relational model that Brooke describes here sustains a resonant parallel with how an actor/student looks to the “authority figure” of an instructor/director: for “interpretation” of their own “baffling behaviour”. Actors build dramatic characters by applying actions within given circumstances as if they themselves were those characters. Within such a scenario, there are behavioural elements which are not theoretically baffling; rather, they have been consciously constructed out of the actor’s work on its self through a system of analysis. Yet, as an actor cannot both witness its own behaviour objectively while also being subjectively committed to repetitively *acting out* that behaviour, the actions in rehearsal must be reflected and commented on by a watching authority who can *make sense* of those actions. A systemic analysis *a la* Stanislavski may provide a plateau for immanent action, but it can never prefigure the actuality of a constitutionally conflicted self who is *performing* that action for someone else to witness. In this scenario, unconscious behaviours inevitably arise through the dynamic structure of transference. I am reminded here of the Kohutian *selfobject*, and the way in which it assists in this process of transference. The instructor/director, seen from this way, becomes a sort of selfobject for the actor, affirming the integrity and delight of the performer’s attempts to self-create through the behaviours of its dramatic character. Paul Ornstein, reading Kohut and his notion of “Selfobject Transferences”, describes this dynamic as “[...] the need for echoing, approval, validation, affirmation, and administration: the craving for the presence of the gleam in

³⁸⁵ Robert Brooke, “Lacan, Transference, and Writing Instruction,” *College English* 49 (1987): 681.

the mother-analyst's eyes, which Kohut subsumed under the broad umbrella of 'mirroring' – the mirror transference".³⁸⁶

Lest it seem a hermeneutical stretch to re-imagine and rearticulate the multiple strands of transference theory as applicable to the training studio or rehearsal hall, it is vital to consider that – as has been posited by Brooke and others³⁸⁷ – a non-analytic transference may also result from the suppositions that students make of their teachers within a pedagogical relationship. He reminds us that Lacan himself saw transference as a universal human phenomenon, and actively urged thinkers to expand its implications into other realms of discourse. Though the existence of the occurrence was a central psychoanalytical tenet, Lacan assures us that

[t]his in no way excludes the possibility, where no analyst is in view, that there may be, properly speaking, transference effects that may be structured exactly like the gamut of transference effects in analysis [...] The transference is an essential phenomenon, bound up with desire as the nodal phenomenon of the human.³⁸⁸

A detailed, and even a cursory, look at the imaginative scenario concocted by Stanislavski in *An Actor's Work* will show his own unconscious devotion to notions of transference. That his depiction of a classroom demonstrates a controlled and fictive, though authentic, reference to the actual structures and activities of an actor-training academy I will take as given, valorizing not only Stanislavski's own extensive career as pedagogue, but also my own experience as a student and teacher within this field for close to a half-century. Tortsov is consistently presented as an authority figure who "interprets the behaviour" of his students, and

³⁸⁶ Paul H. Ornstein, "Empathy and the Therapeutic Dialogue: An Historical-Conceptual Overview of Self Psychology and a Brief Clinical Example," in *The Subject and the Self: Lacan and American Psychoanalysis*, ed. Judith Feher Gurewich and Michel Tort (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 79.

³⁸⁷ Brooke, "Lacan, Transference, and Writing Instruction"; James S. Baumlin and Margaret E. Weaver, "Teaching, Classroom Authority, and the Psychology of Transference," *The Journal of General Education* 49, no. 2 (2000): 75–87.

³⁸⁸ Quoted in Brooke, "Lacan, Transference, and Writing Instruction," 681.

then tells them what it “means”. The students, with Kostya’s descriptions often standing in for their experiences, reliably regard Tortsov as “the subject who is supposed to know” how to explicate and direct their actions, which are usually fraught with division and contradiction. What is implicit in these relations, and vital to my argument, is that what is being modelled in these instructive sketches is a continually repeating action of self-mirroring between student and teacher. This mirroring begins with the desire of the students to see themselves and their behaviour in the figure of the teacher. It occurs as an *outer* expression of the *inner* dialogue that compels them to act through repetition, both as students and as actors ‘in character’. I propose that this is one reason why Stanislavski frames his writing as a student’s diary: the form conscientiously mirrors a dialogue with one’s self. (And, indeed, Stanislavski’s portrait draws not only on himself, but on memories of his mentorship under the leading tenor of the Bolshoi, Fyodor Komissarzhevski).³⁸⁹ In their paper “Teaching, Classroom Authority, and the Psychology of Transference”, James S. Baumlin and Margaret E. Weaver outline the analytical parameters of transference as a container for adjudicating its relevance to teaching practice:

By projecting/transferring an image of the self (“the subject supposed to know”) onto the analyst, the “divided” person finds in the presumed authority figure an external means to initiate his or her own inner dialogue. Hence, the analyst serves as a mirror for the person. For analysis to progress, though, the analyst must at some appropriate moment refuse (consciously or unconsciously) to respond as the person desires (that is, refuse to mirror the person’s desired image).³⁹⁰

It is here, at the moment of the analyst’s *refusal* to simply mirror the *divided person*’s desire, that I get a clear sense of how the phenomenon of transference actualizes itself within the actor/instructor paradigm. As Declan Donnellan puts it, in his notably aphoristic manner, “[m]uch of an actor’s work is to distinguish between what is to be disobeyed and what is to be

³⁸⁹ Benedetti, foreword to Stanislavski, *Actor’s Work*, xxi.

³⁹⁰ Baumlin and Weaver, “Teaching, Classroom Authority, and the Psychology of Transference,” 77.

obeyed”.³⁹¹ Actors, as selves striving to integrate with characters, are forever both mirroring and *pushing back* against the autonomy of the teacher or director who wishes to advise them on what actions to take. This very give-and-take between the divided actor and the integrated authority figure is what often distinguishes the dynamic relationship between a gifted student and a committed educator. Of the young Michael Chekhov, studying and producing performances at the MAT, Autant-Mathieu offers that “Stanislavsky had been his spiritual father and protector, stern yet forgiving when he lacked discipline: the unrivaled talent of the young actor made up for his misdemeanors”.³⁹² In this description, it is important to view “lack of discipline”, “unrivaled talent”, and “misdemeanours” as exemplars of the same thing: the student/actor pushing back against the “stern protector” and quasi-parental subject supposed to know. Inasmuch as the actor seeks an affirmative response from the subject represented by the instructor/director, one which mirrors its own divided self as a coordinated unity, it is equally true that the self repetitively acts out *against* the knowing subject *unconsciously*. The dynamic of transference occurs within the rehearsal and training process because affective emotions from the actor’s past are continually awakened by repetition. The only figure to witness these repetitions *in toto* is the director and teacher. This authority figure who, as I’ve discussed in Chapter Two, can act as the Lacanian big Other who grants *approval* of the identificatory union of the actor’s self and the created character, is one to whom the actor looks for an interpretation of their behaviour as good or bad; correct or wrong; effective or weak; masterful or inept. Though the actor’s desire is to be reflected back through the parental “gleam” in the teacher’s eye, the only way to progress to a richer evocation of self through character is by pushing back against the judgement of the subject who is supposed to know. Seen through the lens of classical Freudianism matched to Stanislavskian affect, through transference the actor strives to relive past emotions, and to “live in them” more satisfactorily – that is, with more control and unity by being “in character” – than was possible *in* the past. Through the intense collaborative bond of being the continuously watched subject of the witnessing authority, the actor is compelled to include the director or

³⁹¹ Donnellan, *Actor and the Target*, 137.

³⁹² Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, “Michael Chekhov and the Cult of the Studio,” in *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*, ed. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon (London: Routledge, 2015), 86.

teacher into the “problem” of dramatic acting, which is a problem, ultimately, of the Self. This is not dissimilar to what occurs in Lacan’s transference, wherein, according to Lacanian psychoanalyst Juan-David Nasio:

[t]he principal characteristic of the symptom [problem] in analysis is that the analyst becomes included in it. In a cure already well underway, the symptom is so linked to the presence of the practitioner that when you think of one you think of the other – when I suffer I think of my analyst, and when I think of him or her it is the memory of my suffering that come back to me.³⁹³

I would concur that in a rehearsal or training program “well underway”, the actor’s processes of work on the self and character building are “so linked to the presence of the [director/teacher]” that all the actor’s work is now tied up with the thoughts of that ever-watching and -responding eye – or “I” – of the one “in charge”.

This phenomenon is well-evidenced if one looks at Richard Boleslavsky’s highly influential teachings in the U.S. as conceived in his seminal 1933 book *Acting: The First Six Lessons*. Like his teacher and early mentor Stanislavski, Boleslavsky utilizes a teacher-pupil narrative to communicate his ideas. Unlike Stanislavski, Boleslavsky nominates only two figures to carry out this dialogue: the teacher called “I”, and the student called (interestingly, regrettably) “the Creature”. The chronology of the six lessons is spread out over several years, with the Creature maturing from a guileless eighteen-year old student to a company member working on a complete play. This establishes the continuity and depth of the relationship of teacher to pupil imagined by Boleslavsky, and correlates to the multi-year processional relationship that psychoanalysis requires of analyst and analysand. Throughout, the Creature is portrayed as one who is continually first deferring to the reflections of the teacher’s “I”, and then dissenting against the wishes and directives of this subject supposed to know. Below is an indicative, and slightly truncated, passage of this to-and-froing, taken from the lesson on *characterization*:

³⁹³ Juan-David Nasio, *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 17.

THE CREATURE: [...] You are impossible. I have done everything as you have taught me...

I: And done it well, I must say.

THE CREATURE: Then I don't understand; you contradict –

I: Not at all. You have done faithfully everything that I taught you. So far I'm proud of you. So far. Now you must take the next step [...]

THE CREATURE: Does that mean more schooling and more exercises?

I: It does.

THE CREATURE: I give up. But go ahead.

I: You don't give up [...] ³⁹⁴

Of course, the actual work between actor and teacher is far messier and subjectively intense than the orchestrated and anachronistic dialogues concocted by Boleslavsky. Most of the exchange between student and instructor reads almost as a formalized colloquy, enabling Boleslavsky to disseminate his ideas about acting, but with little verisimilitude to the experiential relationships of real people engaging with emotion in an actor's training studio. Even though Boleslavsky was writing within an early-twentieth century context where the socially policed rules around personal conduct were stricter, it is Simon Callow, recalling his training at the London Drama Centre in the early 1970s, who evokes how markedly the instruction of Stanislavski-based techniques resemble the psychoanalytical experience. At the Drama Centre in those years, these practises were handled by Doreen Cannon, an American actor who had studied under Uta Hagen and Herbert Berghof in New York, and it is to her instruction that Callow refers in the following remembered sequence:

³⁹⁴ Boleslavsky, *Acting*, 36.

The form of the [Emotion memory] exercise is that the student lies on a couch while his fellow students sit around him in a circle. In an atmosphere of intense concentration, the teacher leads him to reconstruct an event of great emotional intensity: extreme tears, extreme panic, extreme laughter. Detail by detail, the teacher leads him: ‘And what colour was the wallpaper? Describe the furniture. What were you wearing? Was it hot?’ and so on, until the subject enters completely into the past, leaving the present behind.³⁹⁵

It is salient to note that for Callow, the exercise in Emotion Memory “just didn’t work”. He pushed back against the invective to show emotions, and set “some inner clamp on them”.³⁹⁶ It was only later that Cannon, as he says, “opened the floodgates” during an exercise called “Life-and-Death”, a Stanislavskian Given Circumstances étude that formulated “an extreme situation calling for desperate measures”.³⁹⁷ In this instance, Callow half-heartedly enacts a scene wherein he is supposed to find his girlfriend in bed with another man, and Cannon expresses her disappointment with his acted behaviour in the form of an analytic refusal of Callow’s desire to be praised. “‘Don’t believe it’ [...] ‘Is that *really* what you’d do if you found your girl in bed with another man?’”.³⁹⁸ Now it is the “appropriate moment” for the teacher to push back, honouring the interpersonal transference that is in play, for Callow redoes the scene with an intensity of attack that causes him to smash furniture, rip clothing, and terrorize his fellow students in the scene. Cannon enthusiastically congratulates him on his “breakthrough”, but as Callow is quick to point out:

Nobody, certainly not Doreen, and not even I, thought it was good acting. What it was was a powerful emotion carried through to its

³⁹⁵ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 20.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

conclusion. The remarkable thing was not the emotion, but that I had allowed myself to show it: *to show myself*" (emphasis added).³⁹⁹

This crucial idea of Callow being *seen* in a state of high emotion – by his teacher and his colleagues – reemphasizes the centrality of transference within the specular arena of self-identity. Just as the analysand unconsciously re-lives past behaviour of emotional trauma with the analyst in order that such emotional events might better be played out in their re-enactment, so to does the actor release hitherto unexpressed and unorganized emotions so as to be witnessed and recognized by the teacher as a unified and whole expressive self: “congratulations on your breakthrough”. Callow declares the absolute importance of just such self-discovery to the emerging actor of the training academy when he confesses that

[t]he whole question of emotional truth was one on which we all got desperately stuck. The early exercises encourage the hang-up – but they’re indispensable. To give in to one’s emotions in the company of one’s peers, to be able to taste them, in order to use them eventually, is essential; and without emotional freedom, nothing will happen, because the expression of wants will be forever inhibited.⁴⁰⁰

As Simon Callow valorizes expressing emotional truth “in the company of one’s peers” as a vital stepping-stone to their eventual “use” for the young actor, I shall mobilize this observation as a way to move into the last, and tricky, mirror transference engagement, that of actor to audience.

3. All the World’s a Mirror-Stage!

What *use* might the audience have to the actor with regard to the formation of the Lacanian “Ideal-I”? Does the actor simply displace the role of the teacher onto the ever-changing grouping

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.

of spectators that witness the characters in, and as, performance? How does audience presence and reaction mirror back to the actor a sense of identity and wholeness? Is it, in fact, the “character” that the actor senses is being watched – reflected, ratified – or is it the “self” *through* character?

Callow, in an interview from 2011, works to clarify his mature attitude to the task of acting before an audience:

While it started as a type of escape, it has now become the exact opposite, in that I'm actually trying to *connect to the centre of myself* rather than creating a periphery. So my final considered thought on the theory of acting is that it is 'thinking the thoughts of another person'. The thoughts of the writer must pass through my brain and body to come out as *something interesting for the audience*. And that means I have to *bring me* to the performance every day. You can't let a performance just do itself (emphasis added).⁴⁰¹

The expressions of “the centre of myself” and “bringing me” to a performance are reflective of Jerzy Grotowski’s idea that the actor emerges through a process of *via negativa* – acting not as a collection of skills but a removal of personal “blocks” that free creativity and reveal the self’s essence. Callow proposes that he must convey “something interesting for the audience”, but Grotowski intuits that there may be something more fundamental and dynamic going on. He positions the offering of the actor as one which analogically operates as a transference-like mirroring between two people:

The actor’s act – discarding half measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up – is an invitation to the spectator. This act could be compared to an act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between two beings – this is just a

⁴⁰¹ Simon Callow, “A Life in the Arts: Simon Callow,” interview by Nicholas Roe, *Guardian*, December 23, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/dec/23/life-arts-simon-callow>.

comparison since we can only refer to this ‘emergence from oneself’ through analogy. This act, paradoxical and borderline, we call a total act.⁴⁰²

Clearly, Grotowski’s notions of acting in the theatre are deeply concerned with the *actor’s* centrality to the event of performance. There is an “invitation” to the audience, but the audience’s role in the meaning-making of revelation and emergence is a specialized, and perhaps even disposable, one.⁴⁰³

For the purposes of my argument, the existence of the audience is assuredly not a dispensable object, though I share with Grotowski a focus on the actor’s experience as the arena for my speculations. Theories that place the “emancipated” spectator as a productive subject of the theatre event – so well-articulated by Jacques Rancière, Susan Bennett, and others – are beyond the scope and goals of this thesis, and I waltz around them while recognizing their analytical legitimacy. That being said, I am also not foregrounding a traditional structure where the audience’s function is, in Paul Thom’s analysis, “neither to make nor to do, but passively to behold the aesthetic object, be it work of art or performance”.⁴⁰⁴ From the actor’s point of view, the audience is *never* a passive partner, but rather acts like an organic object which reflects back to the performer the legitimacy of the personal psycho-physical work on display. As Callow identifies, “the undeniable and inexplicable fact that almost all audiences assume a corporate entity within minutes of the curtain going up means that you’re dealing with a person, not a mass”.⁴⁰⁵ As I have consistently argued throughout this dissertation, actors on stage inescapably bring themselves to their work in the most qualitative, subjective, sensorial, corporeal, and

⁴⁰² Jerzy Grotowski, “Statement of Principles,” in *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (London: Routledge, 2002), 218.

⁴⁰³ As is widely known, and much-debated within the scholarly circles of theatre and performance studies, the late-career Grotowski famously went on to explore techniques of acting that were almost entirely isolated from audiences through his course of work called “Art as Vehicle”.

⁴⁰⁴ Paul Thom, *For an Audience: A Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 13–14.

⁴⁰⁵ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 174.

emotive ways – and the crucial act of being watched and mirrored *as* others *by* others places them in dynamic relationship to their environment. But this *othering* of representational acting can never elide the truth that both actors *and* audiences know about the dramatic theatre event; namely, that they are all real people existing in real time *together*. In another arresting expression of the Schechnerian “me, not me” formula, experimental theatre maker Tim Crouch deftly teases out the realities and subterfuges of dramatic acting *in situ*. This is a position I interrogated in Chapter 1, when discussing John Harrop’s idea that “no matter how actors act, they cannot expunge themselves from the performance”.⁴⁰⁶

To suggest that the actor is not working through their personality or is not visible in their performance, as themselves, is another bit of wool we’re trying to pull over the audiences’ eyes. That distinction of performer and actor might be spurious or problematic because it suggests that only the performer is going ‘now it’s me’; I think the actor is always going ‘it’s me but I’m also playing someone else’. It’s not about not making the performer themselves visible, it’s about an actor containing two things – the idea of themselves and the idea of someone else.⁴⁰⁷

Lest we conclude that this acknowledgment of *self* and *other* is only the manifest idea of theatre practitioners, it is notable that philosopher Bruce Wilshire succinctly makes the same point when he asserts that, for an audience, “[w]e see neither the character alone nor the actor alone, but this-actor-as-this-character”.⁴⁰⁸

And indeed, seeing this-actor-as-this-character has been the primary way that actors have learned their craft, and been taught by their mentors, over time. Long before the explosion of

⁴⁰⁶ Harrop, *Acting*, 6.

⁴⁰⁷ Tim Crouch, “Tim Crouch,” in *Actors’ Voices: The People Behind the Performances*, ed. Patrick O’Kane (London: Oberon Books, 2012), 107.

⁴⁰⁸ Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 27.

training academies that have proliferated in the West over the last century or so – institutions such as MAT and the other Russian conservatories, the prestigious British drama schools, the independent studios of New York, the burgeoning theatre departments in colleges and universities all over – the way of actor pedagogy was essentially one of watching senior artists perform dramatic roles before actual audiences. Technique and style were handed down from one generation to another, and while it may seem a bit jejune to imply that this involved acts of mere copying, there are rich implications when considering that actors learned roles and ‘tried them on for size’ in front of audiences in real time. Laurence Olivier instructs us at length in this notion of generational transference in his chapter “Lessons from the Past” from his book *On Acting*:

Burbage, Garrick, Kean, Irving: four names that handed on the Shakespearean mantle to our generation [...] Burbage did not know Garrick, Garrick did not know Kean and Kean did not know Irving, but it is the little cogs in between that make it all work, make it fascinating. Burbage created Hamlet and then, some time after, rehearsed a young actor, Joseph Taylor, in the part. Taylor played for the King's Company at the Globe and Blackfriars theatres. Being the second Hamlet and taught by the first, he must have automatically retained some of Burbage's original performance. Thomas Betterton played Hamlet and he studied with Sir William D'Avenant, who has seen Taylor. Garrick studied and learned from some of the older members of Betterton's company, and Kean from the survivors of Garrick's company, and then on to Irving.⁴⁰⁹

What is arresting here is not Olivier’s perhaps speculative historiography, but that his communication so well expresses what actors have always *believed* about their vocations; and, the way in which his tale of provenance valorizes that work through oral history, ideas of

⁴⁰⁹ Olivier, *On Acting*, 16.

mimicry, and the survival of myth. The actor's work, finally, is not about the engagement with character, nor the lessons of the academy, nor the discoveries of the rehearsal. It is about performing before an audience. Callow says that "rehearsing without the audience is like surfing without waves".⁴¹⁰ Or, put another way, as Stanislavski commands it: "Work on the 'system' at home. Onstage put it to one side."⁴¹¹

Stanislavski most often refers to the audience in a traditional way, as passive observers who are "captured", "stunned", "delighted", or "moved" by the actor's performance.⁴¹² And, of course, in general, a large part of the Stanislavskian project – from private moments to public solitude to circles of attention – was to liberate the actor from any sense that the audience was even *there*. This Stanislavskian paradigm of actor-to-audience was well-summed-up by Stark Young in as early as 1925:

The theory of representational acting, stated extremely, implies that the actor creates as completely as he can the illusion of a life going on which is apart from the audience, but at which the audience is allowed to look on. The actor is not supposed to take the audience into consideration, but to live the life of the character he enacts quite as if the fourth wall of the room he occupies had never been removed.⁴¹³

If Stanislavski's depictions and definitions of "audience" are somewhat sterilely tethered to his utter commitment to an experiencing of truthful action and emotion on stage that does not take the presence of spectators into account except as something to be elided, he is very aware of the self-conscious witnessing of both self and others that occurs with actors while performing. The

⁴¹⁰ Callow, *Being An Actor*, 158.

⁴¹¹ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 612.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 16, 21, 27, 31.

⁴¹³ Stark Young, *The Flower in Drama* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925) 9–10.

theatrical performance event is one fully constituted by doing and witnessing, and in this, actors become *their own* audience, whether they desire to or not. For Diderot and Coquelin, this self- and other-witnessing is exactly the dynamic which produces powerful and sublime acting, but for Stanislavski it is the circumstance that always gets in the way of truth in performance. As I have cited earlier, in *An Actor's Work*, when Kostya complains that it is his audience of instructors that have made him play badly and self-consciously, Tortsov and Ivan Rakhmanov sweep themselves out of the auditorium in mock indignation. Yet this does not improve the situation for the actors on stage – the mirroring audience remains in the figures of each other:

Strange as it seems, when we were alone things got even worse. My attention still wandered to my fellow actor. I observed his acting intensely, criticized it and, do what I might, became an audience. In their turn my fellow actors observed me attentively. I felt that I was at one and the same time a spectator and an actor under scrutiny.⁴¹⁴

Though Stanislavski sees this situation as only a destructive problem to truthful playing – “at the end of the day, it’s stupid, boring and most of all pointless to play for each other” – I suggest that it is this very sense of being both watcher and watched that creates a constructive paradigm for the actor, based on the inevitability of the doing and witnessing that are constitutive of the actor’s work.

One might even conclude that the interplay between the playing-watcher and the watching-player, in either a rehearsal hall or on a stage, is the only relational construct that can be relied upon while performing in dramatic character. The Other of the audience – so amorphous, powerful, and anonymous – is simply too large to be controlled or absorbed. Unlike stand-up comedians, whose job it is to address and provoke the audience while playing some delineated version of themselves, or performance artists, who, through their self-stated claims to authorship, autonomy, authenticity, and endurance can willfully choose to disregard spectators entirely, the dramatic actor is left to what can be cast as the tropes of our modernist method: “the

⁴¹⁴ Stanislavski, *Actor's Work*, 89.

fourth wall”, “public solitude”, “private moments”, and “object exercises”. Stanislavskian practitioner and theorist Bella Merlin outlines the dilemma well when describing an event from her performance history:

[...] I find myself looking straight into the eyes of a man in the fourth row. We can see the whites of each other’s eyes. Into my head drops the thought, ‘My God, you really *are* close, aren’t you?’ And that’s it. Vanished. The character. My focus. The reality of the play. And I am suddenly me – *my* thoughts and *my* negotiation of the real-life proximity to a member of the public. My consciousness fragments.”⁴¹⁵

Perhaps it is this “fragmenting” of consciousness that has so compelled the likes of Coquelin and Mme. Clairon to valorize the controllable and mechanical aspects of an actor’s arsenal of technique when assessing not just the *moment* of acting, but a *career* of such moments. Faced with the daily Spector of an authorizing and even judgemental audience “beyond the footlights”, might it be entirely judicious to focus on “combin[ing] a continually pained tone with an abdominal contraction [...] in order to arrive at simply wetting my eyelids”, as Clairon extolls in a previous citation, rather than leave oneself prey to the psychological terrors that lurk when trying to engage with vulnerable emotions in front of an anonymous group of spectators in public?

All in all, it may be fair, and even forgiving, to say that although the subject – the self – is stubbornly present whenever an actor works to (re)present character on stage, the psychologically and culturally “loaded” presence of a witnessing audience, with its promises of *rapprochement* and approval, always proves to be a little too much for that performing self to show itself completely.

⁴¹⁵ Bella Merlin, “When Consciousness Fragments: A Personal Encounter with Stage Fright in Performance,” in *Embodied Consciousness*, ed. Jade Rosina McCutcheon and Barbara Sellers-Young (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 58.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to fashion practice as theory.

And vice versa.

So often, within the discourse on dramatic acting, there is a discernible lack of intellectualism when it comes to the authorship of teacher/practitioners, and a disconcerting lack of practical concern evident when parsing through the conjectures of academically-minded theoreticians. This intersectional locus of concern presses upon me, particularly, due to the trajectory of my own education and career. Having graduated from the academy-style Ryerson Theatre School program offered at Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in 1984 with a 3-Year Diploma in Acting, I did not encounter my first academic course dealing with concepts such as critical theory and cultural studies until I chose to 'upgrade' my old diploma to a BFA at the now Ryerson University in 2002 at the age of forty-one. Though I had been an actor on the professional stage and in television since the age of ten, I was almost entirely unfamiliar with key discursive terms such as semiotics, poststructuralism, deconstruction, postcolonialism, and performativity.

To say, metaphorically, that 'my head was blown off' by the revelations of the academy and its analytical tools, both aesthetically and politically, would be, to my mind, an understatement. Various ideas and notions that had remained almost wholly inchoate during my vocational activities as an actor were given revelatory force and clarity through the broad lens of late-twentieth century scholarly inquiry. Like so many actors, I was an autodidact. My critical education had been practically generated through my engagement with performance material such as scripts, libretti, and musical scores. I had a quite strong background in classical – mostly Shakespeare – literature, and modernist – mostly Euroamerican realist and, in my case, Canadian "alternative"

theatre – plays. (Also, a smattering of “close reading” approaches to English literature in the forms of poetry and novels.) My practical education as an actor, as is again so often the case, was rooted in mimicking and “learning the ropes” working with elder peers in the profession, combined with an unsystematic training in a hybridized amalgamation of various System/Method exercises and British Academy techniques addressing vocal production, elocution, and physical style.

The idea of a broader critical discourse connected to dramatic acting never even came into the equation, and perhaps the most remarkable thing I discovered through meeting ‘theory’ was a strategy for quantifying *subjective distance*. So much of my training, as well as rehearsal and performance practice, was qualified through mechanisms – if not exactly Williamsonian “structures” – of personal *feeling*. As an actor, this meant how I felt about my character in relationship to other characters, and to the scripted dilemmas we embodied and acted through; as a performing artist, how I felt about the themes, politics, aesthetics of the production, and how I might contribute to its “message”. The suggestion that there might be schematic and multi-vocal methodologies through which to “read” and analyze the work I had been doing my whole life – methodologies that drew not only from psychology, which had been a common manoeuvre ever since both Laurence Olivier’s Freudian *Hamlet* in 1947 and the mock transactional analysis encounters gestated out of Lee Strasberg’s Method, but from robust theoretical argumentation – was liberating and affirming. Philosophy, anthropology, semiology, gender studies, human geography, art history, Marxist criticism, and all manner of critical theory opened a door for me that I have yet to close.

As such, my approach to both sourcing reading and assembling research is unorthodox. I come to academic argumentation from a magpie’s perspective. Not having climbed the traditional curve of knowledge acquisition as a young scholar through the university’s structures of departmental specialties and disciplinary

hierarchies, I trust that if my analytical skills are somewhat lacking in scholastic rigour they are at least enlivened by creative and ludic thinking. Against all this, I pose, again, the central question I asked on the second page of my introduction, and speculate on which ways I might have answered it: *Is there something inherent – or at least necessary – within the study and practice of dramatic acting that perpetually reconstitutes the stubborn idea of an autonomous and cohesive subjectivity within the actor?*

To subscribe to the notion that *anything* to do with human subjectivity and selfhood might be *inherent* flies in the face of most current catechisms of social and cultural identity formation: Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis and (Artaud-inspired) body-without-organs; Althusser's interpellation; Butler's performativity; Muñoz's disidentification; Nancy's 'being-with'; Spivak's subalternity; Barad's agential realism; Haraway's cyborg feminism; Dennett's philosophy of mind. I need not list all of the intermingling positions and theories here, even if I could – yet these loci of discourse thoroughly problematize the concept of "self" as maintaining any quality that one could call *inherent*. Nevertheless, I have made a stab at this assertion of inherence by drawing on psychological theories of human mirror development, mostly through Lacan, but also through Heinz and Kohut. As previously noted in Chapter 5, Freudian-derived modes of psychoanalytically-centred theses can be decried as being ahistorical and merely interpretative rather than authoritative and soundly quantifiable. But the ubiquity of mirror theories within such theses, authorizing the constitutive nature of infant subject identification, demonstrates the idea that a mirror's function for the individual subject is one which produces *an autonomous and cohesive subjectivity*. That mirrors also figure so prominently in any discourse around acting and the theatre – as concept, metaphor, and object – leads me to hazard that this proposed inherence of influence is one that is inevitably transferred to the actor's work regarding character and representation.

Yet, if perhaps not exactly intrinsic, it was my deep and instinctive conjecture (drawn no doubt from my career working in the vocational field) that the idea of a “self” was completely *necessary* for the modern actor encountering the problem and potential of a dramatic character. That this was true had been self-evident to me for years within my practice as a professional actor, but it was really the response of young adult students to this provocation that galvanized my approach to the topic. Over the time I have been formally teaching acting and scene study technique since the mid-2000s, at the University of Toronto, the Randolph Academy of the Performing Arts, Sheridan College, and the Toronto Film School, I have been struck by the silence and attention that envelops the training studio when, usually on the second day of classes, I say the simple words: “As an actor, the most important thing that you will learn is that *you are enough.*” This very notion that “you” – your personal history, your face and body, your voice, your emotional intelligence, your integrity as a human being – is all that is needed to successfully *act* in character is a powerful notion, especially for young adults who may be experiencing autonomy outside of their family home or place of origin for the first time. I stress, as a mentor, that everything they will need to draw on are feelings and events that they have already experienced in their own lives by the time they arrive in a classroom together with their newly-adult peers: love, betrayal, ambition, envy, joy, despair, wonder, hatred, comradeship, loneliness, fear, disillusion, pain and pleasure. Never has this short invocation by me been met with less than intensely awake and focused silenced – it is as if the proverbial light bulb has gone off in their heads, or the Newtonian apple dropped on their noggins to astonished Archimedean cries of “Eureka!” The realization that *I am enough* is profound – and a lesson that good actors continue to learn throughout their lives and careers.

So, it is this rather interior and intuitive notion of “self” to which I point when I marshal the often non-theoretical observations of teachers such as Stanislavski, Boleslavsky, Hagen, Strasberg, Carnovsky, Donnellan, and indeed, of practitioners such

as Mlle Clairon, Coquelin, Talma, Irving, Bernhardt, Olivier, Redgrave, Callow, and Merlin. I fervently posit that pedagogically-based acting theory and the broad disciplinary argumentations regarding subjectivity theory are not as far apart as the institutional practices that, sadly, often separate them. I celebrate that there are many university professors and scholars who are well-acquainted and critically amorous of the acting process, and many acting practitioners who are open to salient dialogue and critique of their vocation. Nonetheless, the divide between these silos of experience and aspiration can sometimes seem too wide to forge.

I do not claim that the thread of argument I have unraveled here is organic or universalized. I have leant heavily on phenomenology, historiography, memoir, pedagogy, psychology, psychoanalysis, and cloistered logic to make my points and draw my inferences. All these forms of argumentation are contestable, and privileged, due to cultural context, as well as politicized access and restraint. There are many worldwide traditions of performance in the theatre – many of them near-obliterated or hegemonically compromised – and it is a potent query to ask how the advancement of a thesis devoted to ideas of Self, Actor, and Character might be authentically extrapolated into a more diverse and holistic view of acting on stage. However, within the self-defined limits of this dissertation’s topic, I hope that I have made some useful observations on the inextricably linked localities of subjectivity and dramatic acting.

A final provocation: if social identity is, indeed, intrinsically performative, why is dramatic acting in public not the single most important location for future studies of subjectivity? There is a wealth of knowledge to be teased out by both scholars and practitioners from the activity of actors in the classrooms, rehearsal halls, and stages of the theatre. I suggest that we must give due deference to past expressions of the essential paradox of the actor – still so prominent and consternating since Diderot’s

distillation of its parameters over two centuries ago – while recognizing that the *mystery*, the *paradox*, is simply *what we do*. And, impossibly, maybe...*what we are*.

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