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"LE GRAND FANTÔME": ACTOR AS SPECTER IN DIDEROT'S *PARADOXE SUR LE COMÉDIEN*.

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"Rien...[]...ne ressemblerait tant à un comédien sur la scène ou dans ses études, que les enfants qui, la nuit, contrefont les revenants sur les cimitières, en élevant au-dessus de leurs têtes un grand drap blanc au bout d'une perche, et faisant sortir de dessous ce catafalque une voix lugubre de fantôme qui effraie les passants" (IV 1382).

Considered a manifestation of Diderot's mature thought on theater, *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1769) can be seen as an evolution in both form and content from the *philosophe's* earlier works on drama. Unlike *Les Entretiens sur le Fils Naturel* (1756) and *De la poésie dramatique* (1758), which were textually and referentially linked to Diderot's plays (respectively *Le Fils Naturel* and *Le Père de famille*), the *Paradoxe* presents itself as an independent theoretical text in dialogic form. Its primary focus—the status of the actor—creates a paradox which has become the focus of twentieth-century critical debate. How can the actor portray emotion when he himself experiences no

feeling? Throughout the *Paradoxe*, Diderot refers to the stage artist as a "grand fantôme" who learns to dominate and efface the self, becoming a ghostlike figure ready to assume any role. To perfect a character, the actor becomes a *revenant*, playing out a role repetitively both in rehearsal and onstage. In addition, the character itself is a fictional specter created through an amalgamation of real world observations.

Whereas we, the audience members, remain invisible and silent for the duration of the play, the great actor temporarily dominates the stage, provoking in us the emotions that he himself will never feel. On stage this apparition has the power to deeply affect, even frighten, the spectator, but the actor's shadowlike presence quickly dissipates backstage. At the play's end an exchange has been made between actor and spectator. While the actor returns home with no further obligation to either his character or to the audience, the spectator re-emerges into society marked by the strong emotional impressions of the play. When he leaves the theater, the audience member does not forget the dramatic lessons of good and evil. Morally transformed, the beholder's self-improvement will govern his future actions in society. Although Diderot thus assigns theater an imminently social function, the actor himself is truly phantomlike within society itself, as quiet and unnoticed as the audience during a performance. However, the actor, a silent witness of social events, becomes a mirror of society at large, reflecting this world back to the spectator through the screen of theatrical convention.

The theater was certainly not a glamorous career choice in the eighteenth century. As Diderot points out, the profession labored under an historical prejudice: "L'avilissement des comédiens modernes est, ce me semble, un malheureux héritage que leur ont laissé les comédiens anciens" (IV 1408-9). Unlike other more noble professions, which assured one social status from childhood onwards, parents did not choose to educate their children in theater. Most actors were forced into the job out of economic necessity. No one ever became an actor out of pure virtue or out of a disinterested desire to improve humanity. Diderot imagines transforming the social role of theater through a radical change in the actor's own status: "...je pense à

l'influence du spectacle sur le bon goût et les moeurs, si les comédiens étaient gens de bien et si leur profession était honorée" (IV 1409). If the acting profession were itself more respected, actors as individuals could move upwards in society, exerting a greater social influence both on and offstage. The great actor would then become "l'honnête homme" within society itself, an example of moral purity to others. Not only would playwrights create finer works to match the reputation of the actors, but the nation's moral standards would improve as a result.

Diderot's new, improved stage artist would become a highly visible entity outside of the theater, a figure closer to our modern notion of the "star" who both draws audiences and gives generously to charity. This actor would indulge his own feelings as *homme sensible*, learning to act with compassion towards others. However, as a performer, the *comédien* would begin to put himself first. Rather than playing just any character, he could now demand that roles be tailor-made to his needs. As a result, his ego and his emotions would interfere with his acting, undermining his performance onstage. The actor as "honnête homme," with a heart, a strong personality, and an influential social presence offstage runs counter to Diderot's own definition of the *comédien* as unfeeling, soulless, and invisible in society. Diderot quickly admits that a complete transformation of the actor's social role would be a difficult metamorphosis.

In fact, it is in Diderot's interest to extend and reinforce the actor's abject condition. Only because the *comédien* does not stand out in a crowd can he discretely observe the conditions and events of the society around him. The phantom is, as Jacques Derrida points out in *Les Spectres de Marx*, simultaneously present and absent: "fantôme ou revenant, sensible insensible, visible invisible, le spectre d'abord nous voit...[]...il nous regarde, avant même que nous le voyions..." (165). The actor exists offstage, yet he takes up so little individual space that he rarely stands out. In contrast to his performances, the events of his miserable existence seem petty. He cares little for the company of others and as a result has few friends. His emotional neutrality gives him the objectivity necessary as an ideal

observer—he does not become personally involved in the dramas he witnesses.

Diderot postulates the *comédien's* insensibility as pre-existing and innate:

On a dit que les comédiens n'avaient aucun caractère parce qu'en les jouant tous ils perdaient celui que la nature leur avait donné, et qu'ils devenaient faux...[]
...Je crois qu'on a pris la cause pour l'effet, et qu'ils ne sont propres à les jouer tous que parce qu'ils n'en ont point. (IV 1407)

Unlike Rousseau, who described the stage artist as losing the self through his many roles, Diderot defines the actor as an empty shell, ready to adapt to the specifications of any character. Despite this natural tendency to insensibility, the actor's transition to the stage is not often an easy one. It is only through a long battle with the self that the actor succeeds in separating out all emotions which might interfere with his role. Through continuous rehearsal, the actor perfects his control of gesture, facial expression and voice. The actor is truly a *revenant*, repeating again and again the signs of his role. With practice, self-domination becomes self-possession. The self-effacement which is necessary to adopt a variety of roles becomes a complete emptying of self once the actor is onstage. Observing the well-known actress, la Clairon, during rehearsal, Diderot describes this evolution. To perfect her role, la Clairon chooses an "ideal model" which exists beyond and outside of the self: "sans doute elle a conçu ce modèle le plus haut, le plus grand, le plus parfait qu'il lui a été possible; mais ce modèle qu'elle a emprunté de l'histoire, ou que son imagination a créé comme un grand fantôme, ce n'est pas elle..." (IV 1381). For each new character she plays, la Clairon creates a new personal "ghost," combining the role's historic traits with her own particular vision, the result of her observations within society.

Once la Clairon has completely mastered her role, she is no longer herself—she has consciously stepped aside, and, like a puppet, is now controlled by her character. Yet the great actress maintains an awareness of this transformation and is able to

observe her character with objectivity and critical acuity: "...elle peut, en suivant son rêve de mémoire, s'entendre, se voir, se juger et juger les impressions qu'elle excitera. Dans ce moment elle est double..." (IV 1282). This critical "dédoublément de soi" remains an essential part of the rehearsal, as the *comédien* is able to witness and objectively analyze his own performance, while imagining its effects on a potential audience. Yet once the actor reaches the stage, this doubling effect gives way to a unity established within the character, as critical awareness of both audience and role disappears. The actor no longer has any personal stakes in the affect of his role-playing on the audience. Should he allow the self to re-emerge in the examination of his personal success, he would no longer be "in character."

Although the ghostlike actor never sees his own image in the mirror, he captures a reflection of the events and people around him: "Le grand comédien observe les phénomènes: l'homme sensible lui sert du modèle et trouve, de réflexion, ce qu'il faut ajouter ou retrancher pour le mieux" (IV 1398). The actor does not simply attempt to reproduce mimetically the emotions he has witnessed in society. Such scenes, like those dominated by the actor's own emotions, would fall flat on stage. Instead, the stage artist improves upon his observations, enlarging and exaggerating them to have a greater impact upon the spectator. We, the audience members, identify with the actor's performance because he is sending back a modified version of our *own* image. When we laugh or cry during a play, we do so out of self-recognition:

C'est l'oeil du sage qui saisit le ridicule de tant de personnages divers, qui le peint, et qui vous fait rire de ces fâcheux originaux dont vous avez été la victime, et de vous-même. C'est lui [le comédien] qui vous observait, et qui traçait la copie comique et du fâcheux et de votre supplice. (IV 1383)

The spectator, too, often misses his own reflection in the looking glass. Only through a theatrical encounter with the spectral *comédien* can this image, once corrected, be recovered.

This transmission of "sensibilité" from actor to spectator takes place silently, automatically, as neither party must acknowledge the other's presence or the theatrical illusion will be broken. In *Les Entretiens sur les fils naturel*, Diderot clearly explains why there must be no contact between actor and beholder during a play: "Dans une représentation dramatique, il ne s'agit non plus du spectateur que s'il n'existait pas. Y a-t-il quelque chose qui s'adresse à lui? L'auteur est sorti de son sujet, l'acteur entraîné hors de son rôle" (IV 1145). Diderot's theater is no longer a social space where one goes to be seen, but instead a fictional universe where a contract of mutual indifference links actor and spectator.

During the performance, the spectator himself has become the phantom: "ne pensez non plus au spectateur que s'il n'existait pas. Imaginez sur le bord du théâtre un grand mur qui vous sépare du parterre: jouez comme si la toile ne se levait pas" (IV 1310). With this imaginary "fourth wall" in place, the actors no longer seek to impress the audience member with a mastery of their roles. Instead, the *comédien* demonstrates his acting ability through a complete absorption in the events of the play. Through the beholder's exclusion, the play's fiction becomes all the more convincing to its audience. The spectator witnesses events which do not depend on him for narrative progression. Through his character, the actor addresses the feelings of the audience members who, in entering the theater, have tacitly agreed to be fooled by the actor's skill. The great actor's talent is the ability to "bien connaître les symptômes extérieurs de l'âme d'emprunt, de s'adresser à la sensation de ceux qui nous entendent, qui nous voient, et de les tromper par l'imitation de ces symptômes..." (IV 1412). These "symptômes" are not the indications of true feeling, but instead a series of coded theatrical conventions which are recognized by the audience. The actor thus reproduces the series of learned gestures and expressions practiced countless times—the signs which identify a certain character.

The beholder, having left his own predisposition for good or evil at the theater door, begins the performance at an emotional *degré zéro*. The same *sensibilité* which is so dangerous to an

actor's success becomes necessary if the audience is to be truly affected by the play: "Remplissez la salle de spectacle de ces pleureurs-là, mais ne m'en placez aucun sur la scène" (IV 1383). For the duration of the show, the spectator is governed by emotion rather than reason. Whereas the beholder leaves the theater deeply moved by the experience, the actor only perceives the after-effects of his physical exertion on stage:

[il] éprouve une extrême fatigue, il va changer de linge ou se coucher; mais il ne lui reste ni trouble, ni douleur, ni mélancolie, ni affaissement d'âme. C'est vous [le spectateur] qui remportez toutes ces impressions. (IV 1384)

When the theater doors close, the actor once again becomes a phantom, leaving the audience member to sort through his impressions of the play.

Fortunately for us, Diderot chose to document the post-theatrical experience of one exemplary spectator, himself. The day after attending a performance of Sedaine's play *Le Philosophe sans le savoir*, Diderot is so moved by his fellow playwright's work that, despite the frigid winter weather, he hires a cab and rushes out to find his friend:

Le lendemain matin je me jette dans un fiacre, je cours après Sedaine; c'était en hiver, il faisait le froid le plus rigoureux; je vais partout où j'espère le trouver. J'apprends qu'il est au fond du faubourg Saint-Antoine, je m'y fais conduire. Je l'aborde: je jette mes bras autour de son cou; la voix me manque, et les larmes me coulent le long des joues. Voilà l'homme sensible et médiocre. Sedaine, immobile et froid, me regarde et me dit: "Ah! Monsieur Diderot, que vous êtes beau!" Voilà l'observateur et l'homme du génie. (IV 1395)

Diderot's reaction as *homme sensible* is expressed through tears and gestures, as he is too overcome to speak. Like a mediocre actor overwhelmed by emotion, he appears to have lost control of his own performance. Sedaine's genius lies in his ability to remain detached from the scenes he witnesses in

society-- like the great actor, he is an ideal neutral observer of humanity. He is thus able to translate Diderot's emotional reaction into language without himself being affected: "Ah! Monsieur Diderot, que vous êtes beau!" (IV 1395).

Diderot's scene of "social theater" has thus brought the relationship between actor and spectator full circle. The moral lessons of theater are carried out into society by a deeply moved audience-member who seeks only to share his emotions with others, perhaps encouraging them, too, to purchase a theater ticket. Only too conveniently, Diderot plays out his scene before a trained observer who will, perhaps, include the essence of the event in his next play, which, in turn, will be performed by a highly skilled actor to a new audience. The actor thus does not effect social change directly, but instead reflects back to society, through the spectator, a highly refined, perhaps purer image of itself.

In *Le Paradoxe*, Diderot described theater as a well-ordered society where each citizen surrenders certain rights for the common good. Yet Diderot never defines the actor as sacrificing sentiment for the moral improvement of the audience. Moreover, we have demonstrated that the actor enters into no acknowledged social contract but instead exists on the margins of society. Conscious self-sacrifice on the actor's part for a higher principle would involve self-interest rather than self-abandonment. The actor who hopes to affect his audience reveals his own emotional weakness. For Diderot's theatrical mechanism to function, the actor's role by definition involves the complete elimination of self and sentiment. The actor's greatness is indeed limited to his onstage performance and to mastery of the character he represents. Yet it is within the perpetuation of this fiction, what Diderot calls the ultimate "persiflage," that the audience members agree to be "haunted." The spectral relationship between *comédien* and spectator not only assigns theater a social function but it also defines society as theater. Diderot gives us no concrete answers as to *how* theater should transform society, but he implies that we are all social actors. As the the dialogue concludes between the two interlocutors of

Diderot's *Paradoxe*, one voice asks: "Ne dit-on pas dans le monde qu'un homme est un grand comédien?" (IV 1426).



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La joie de re-vivre:

Spectrality and Haunting in French
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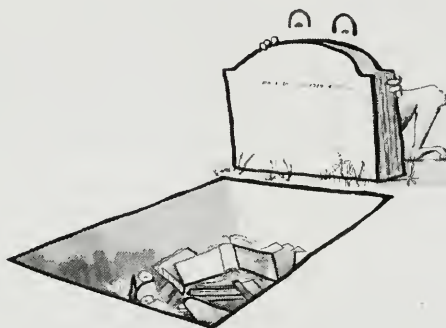
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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