



Phantoming the Subject: Diderot, Lacoue-Labarthe and the actor's paradox

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ABSTRACT – Phantoming the Subject: Diderot, Lacoue-Labarthe and the actor's paradox –

This essay takes Diderot's claim that the actor is everything and nothing at the same time as the starting point to rethink the formation of the self. Going beyond Diderot's paradox as a theory of acting, this article argues in favor of a deconstructive analysis of the actor's mimetic practice, put forward by Lacoue-Labarthe, which allows us to address the ontological conditions of the interplay between possession and dispossession, nothingness and possibility, distinctiveness and malleability. This essay shows that Diderot's indirect subversion of the distinction between passive and active mimesis underlying the performing body, problematizes the question of the subject as such.

Keywords: **Actor's Paradox. Performance. Mimesis. Diderot. Lacoue-Labarthe.**

RÉSUMÉ – Créer un Fantôme du Sujet : Diderot, Lacoue-Labarthe et le paradoxe de l'acteur

Cet article part de la thèse de Diderot que l'Acteur se présente simultanément comme tout et comme rien dans le but de repenser la création du moi. Dépassant le paradoxe de Diderot en tant que théorie du jeu, cet article plaide en faveur d'une analyse déconstructive de la pratique mimétique de l'acteur, proposée par Lacoue-Labarthe, qui permet d'aborder les conditions ontologiques de l'interaction entre possession et dépossession, néant et possibilité, distinction et malléabilité. Cet article soutient que la subversion indirecte par Diderot de la distinction entre mimesis passif et actif sous-jacente au corps performant, problématise la question du sujet en tant que tel.

Mots-clés: **Le Paradoxe de l'Acteur. Performance. Mimèse. Diderot. Lacoue-Labarthe.**

RESUMO – Criar um Fantasma do Sujeito: Diderot, Lacoue-Labarthe e o paradoxo do ator –

Este ensaio toma como ponto de partida a afirmativa de Diderot de que o ator é tudo e nada ao mesmo tempo para repensar a formação do eu. Ao avançar além do paradoxo de Diderot como teoria da atuação, este artigo defende uma análise desconstrutiva da prática mimética do ator proposta por Lacoue-Labarthe, a qual permite que abordemos as condições ontológicas da interação entre apropriação e desapropriação, nada e possibilidade, distintividade e maleabilidade. Este ensaio mostra que a subversão indireta da distinção entre mimese passiva e ativa subjacente ao corpo em performance problematiza a questão do sujeito como tal.

Palavras-chave: **Paradoxo do ator. Performance. Mimese. Diderot. Lacoue-Labarthe.**

They all go back to their everyday life (and Clare goes back to her grave) – but the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian’s mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows (Vladimir Nabokov, 2012, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*).

Denis Diderot was the first person in the tradition of Western thought to signal a paradox concerning the practice of the dramatic actor. His *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1773) argues that *being-nothing* functions as the necessary condition of dramatic transformation: “it is because he [the actor] is nothing that he is before all everything” (Diderot, 2015, p. 109). Diderot’s claim regarding the constitutive bond between self-negation and acting is based on the idea of inner duplicity, a so-called double consciousness (Diderot, 2015, p. 38). Diderot paves the way for a rigorous analysis of this dual personality, which, as Phoebe Von Held (2007; 2010) and Edmundo Morim de Carvalho (2009) have already convincingly shown, problematizes the idea of the actor as a unified being, because it favors, instead, (at least the possibility of) a fragmented, alienated, self.

I share Von Held’s and Morim de Carvalho’s view that Diderot’s thesis transcends the aesthetic framework of the Diderotian eighteenth-century acting style, and I also support the idea that alienation plays a profound role in our understanding of theatricality. As Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf (1995, p. 179-180) have pointed out, Diderot argues for a “*theatrical perspective*”, which concentrates on the “representational techniques” of acting onstage and, as an extension, in the performative conditions of real life. This essay contributes to the discussion by focussing specifically on the ontological foundations of Diderot’s proposition of *being nothing* as the basic condition of theatricality. I will do so by complementing Diderot’s model of the actor’s alienation with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s deconstruction of the distinction between passive and active mimesis, thus indicating the nothingness at the heart of subjectivity.

Lacoue-Labarthe argues that, apart from being one of the first in the Western tradition to conceptualize the theatre actor’s practice as a philosophical problem, Diderot also subverts an ancient and modern conception of the subject that is still relevant today (Lacoue-Labarthe, 2003). According to this notion, a human being is a blank slate onto which pre-given, ideal models can be printed (images or ideas of the Good, the

Just, Being, the Subject). Lacoue-Labarthe calls this passive mimesis. In Lacoue-Labarthe's view, Western metaphysics (ranging from Plato to Jena Romanticism and by extension Heidegger) has sought to conceptualize a *conversion* of a passive subjectivity (the subject as *tabula rasa*) into an active form of mimesis (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1990). The latter amounts to the overcoming of the subject's plasticity and sensibility by reason, which entails shaping that wax-like material into a properly formed identity (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989). Lacoue-Labarthe shows how Diderot plays, in the *Paradox*, philosophically, with the interaction between this passive and active mimesis: the actor must surmount her flexible nature and acquire an absolute sense of control and composure on stage by molding and configuring herself according to a self-invented model.

However, Lacoue-Labarthe detects a subversive dimension in Diderot's approach: Diderot insists on the actor's ideal model as essentially nothing, as a phantom. The plastic material of the subject will always remain unformed. Thus, through Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstructive lens, the *Paradox* becomes a plea for an understanding of the subject as something which always always escapes the binary structure, of fixating an identity on the basis of molding neutral material into a final form. Lacoue-Labarthe concludes that, contrary to the established philosophical tradition of Western thought, for Diderot there is no escape from alienation. Additionally, he radicalizes Diderot's insight by arguing that it is precisely because of the non-coincidence of the self with itself that it is subjected to forms of theatricality. In this regard, my essay provides an existential supplement to Von Held's (2010, p. 8) account of the Diderotian notion of alienation being constructive in the sense of "supporting the self in its turn towards externalization".

I will start my investigation with a thorough analysis of Diderot's paradox, focusing specifically on the concept of *sensibilité* and the imitation of *le modèle idéal imaginé* as supplementation in order to show the relationship between passive and active forces at play in acting. I will then continue by showing, first, how Lacoue-Labarthe, on the basis of Diderot and Aristotle, integrates the subversion of the passive / active distinction in his understanding of mimesis and, second, how he applies that paradoxical mimetic structure to the formation of the subject. Finally, in light of

previous findings, I will argue in favor of an account of the self as a groundless, malleable, authorial force.

Passive mimesis and *sensibilité*

Diderot's *Paradoxe* holds one of the most uncompromising and, in some circles, still controversial claims regarding the nature of the theatre actor on stage. Contrary to his contemporaries (Diderot particularly directs his attacks against Antonio Fabio Sticotti's *Garrick, ou, les acteurs anglois*, first published in 1769) who considered the emotional life of the stage character a natural continuation of the actor's own temperament and sensibility¹, Diderot defends the idea that great actors have, in fact, nothing in common with the *inner life* of the person they portray. Moreover, during the most heartfelt moments of the performance, the actor's soul remains calm, rational and emotionally unmoved (Diderot, 2015). This argument is based on two presuppositions. Firstly, Diderot holds that "players who play from the heart" give inconsistent performances: they are incapable of maintaining the same level of quality and force throughout a series of shows; secondly, if an actor were herself while performing how were she to stop being herself? More importantly still, her personal struggles would limit her in reaching the "true grandeur" of the character (Diderot, 2015, p. 33-41; 148). Simply reliving one's own emotional life on stage prevents the actor from doing what she is appointed to do on stage, namely, *to act*, Diderot stresses with force.

It is well known that Diderot's claims are based on a specific understanding of *sensibilité*. Enthusiasm, impulsiveness, sentiment and emotionality, that is, physiological phenomena that Diderot places under the header of sensibility, are to be avoided in the poetic space of the theatre; "No sensibility? –None." (Diderot, 2015, p. 32) *Sensibilité* expresses a variety of passive, bodily impulses that have no artistic significance whatsoever unless the artist alters their nature fundamentally. However, Diderot's position on the role of *sensibilité* within the artistic process is more nuanced than first meets the eye. What the *Paradoxe* specifically objects to is the immediate impact of extreme, excessive emotions (Hobson, 1977), which we find in, for example, the first stages of being in love or in the sudden loss of a close friend. Consider Diderot's firm opinion on the mourning poet who wants to write about death:

Is it at the moment when you have just lost your friend or your adored one that you set to work at a poem on your loss? No! Ill for him who at such a moment takes pleasure in his talent. It is when the storm of sorrow is over, when the extreme sensibility is dulled, when the event is far behind us, when the soul is calm, that one remembers one's eclipsed happiness, that one is capable of appreciating one's loss, that memory and imagination unite, one to retrace the other to accentuate, the delights of a past time: then it is that one regains self-possession and expression (Diderot, 2015, p. 92).

We see here Diderot's concern with the contagious effects of sensibility, which Andrew Clark calls "physiological sympathy," where "in a play, as with a body or a painting, everything is connected: If one thing goes wrong, it infects/affects the entire piece through sympathy; each part in the assemblage reasserts its autonomy, its force" (Clark, 2008, p. 24). Thus, the *sympathetic* power of only one single gesture by an actor has irreversible impact on the performance as a whole. Nonetheless, *sensibilité* also makes the piece whole; it brings to light that everything was already connected from the start even if it comes in the form of an unwanted interruption. The right amount of *sensibilité* (when emotional episodes fuse with and are transformed by imagination) animates all individual elements in the artwork, it endows it with a unifying soul (from the Latin verb *animare*). The model of the poet and the actor can be used interchangeably here. Nonetheless, and this is crucial for Diderot, we – both the actors and the spectators – are not *naturally* aware of this mechanism, which is why the notion of *sensibilité* takes up so much of his considerations.

What we must keep in mind is that Diderot makes two kinds of distinctions here. Firstly, *sensibilité* during the preparations for a role and *sensibilité* in the actual performance for an audience (Marie, 2013, p. 328). While enthusiasm and passion are fundamental components in the rehearsing process, they are preferably absent by the time the actor comes on stage to perform. Secondly, one can discriminate between those who are capable of controlling their sensibilities and those who are not: "the fact is, that to have sensibility is one thing, to feel is another. One is a matter of soul, the other of judgement" (Diderot, 2015, p. 184). As the earlier passage on the poet demonstrates, sublime artists have a talent for sensing if, when and to what degree their emotional states are appropriate and *ready* for transformation and poetic expression. Feeling is allowed on stage in so far as it shows judgement. That is why the problem is mainly aimed at

those whose soul is characterized by a continuous, all-embracing stream of hypersensitivity from which they cannot distance themselves. Taking into account Diderot's materialism (Anderson, 1990; Bourdin, 1998), it is not surprising that we find the origin of those modes of flammability in a special region of the body, the diaphragm, as we learn from Diderot's alter-ego Bordeu in *Le Rêve de D'Alembert* (1769):

But what is a being possessed of sensibility? One abandoned to the mercy of his diaphragm; should a pathetic phrase strike his ear, a strange phenomenon meet his eye, of a sudden an inward tumult is set up, all the fibers of the bundle are agitated, a shudder runs through his frame, he is seized with horror, his tears flow, sighs choke him, his voice breaks, and the origin of the bundle does not know what it is doing: farewell to self-control, reason, judgement, instinct and resourcefulness (Diderot, 1999, p. 127).

What comes to the surface through Diderot's discussion of *sensibilité* is the immanentization of the soul (Vassányi, 2008), which, according to Clark, results in a continuity of movement that makes "soul and body instruments of each other" (Clark, 2008, p. 61). Clark continues by saying that given that the effects of *sensibilité* take place at the cross-roads between the physical, psychological and emotional, we have to take into account the inevitable "double aspect of sensibility" as being both "enlightened and pathological"² (Clark, 2008, p. 46). Being subjected to *sensibilité* explicates on the one hand that there is a passive undergoing of emotive episodes; the actor is always at risk of falling prey to pathos connected to the movements of her diaphragm. On the other hand, as Clark suggests, it is in and through these experiential layers that the actor can confirm her acting craft and reach a level of enlightenment through judgement. Thus, there is a performative experience of passivity in which one is not a victim of one's passions. This is where Diderot introduces the role of self-distancing.

Passive mimesis, Nature and the mechanic puppet

Putting a creation on stage demands of the actor that she works according to the internal rules of the artistic game she affiliated herself with. The act of self-distancing enables the actor to use her judgement and convert her personal traits into a totality of artistic signs that can be decoded by an audience and are perceived as appropriate for the role on stage³. In that way, every gesture, every slip of the tongue, every impulsive

and emotional reaction will be integral to and the expression of a detailed composition of the artistic creation of the role that (in the case of a written play) the playwright and director had in mind.

Crucial in Diderot's conception of self-alienation is the division between the mediocre and the great actor. Being either excellent or simply acceptable at acting is not a matter of degree. This qualitative distinction is absolute and must not be overlooked: the actor that only uses her private sensibilities, will give a performance that is average, at best. Great actors, however, "are too apt for too many things, too busy with observing, considering, and reproducing, to have their innermost heart affected with any liveliness" (Diderot, 2015, p. 41).

Diderot's image of the artist as distant observer and transmitter is closely linked to another well-known conception of the dramatic performer namely the actor as puppet (Diderot, 2015). This view presents the performer as a mere mirror, stand-in, or mouthpiece for *real-life* scenarios, which make her actions mechanically (re)produced reflections of life, as Edward Gordon Craig reminds us in *The Actor and the Übermarionette* of 1907: "The actor looks upon life as a photo-machine looks upon life; and he attempts to make a picture to rival a photograph"⁴ (Craig, 1907, p. 5). According to this account, the actor's motivation to move and speak 'naturally' or 'in accordance to life', is to be understood through analogy to a puppet passively obeying the fancies of his master⁵. The kind of soulless imitation that the puppet represents is another kind of naive passivity that Diderot does not favor.

The notion of the actor's body as automaton not only goes against Diderot's other writings, particularly *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* of 1754 – "PS. One more word before I take my leave... a *man* is not a *machine*" (Diderot, 1999, p. 34) – it also seems somewhat at odds with his position in the *Paradoxe* concerning the ontological status of the very *reality* or *Nature* that the actor supposedly has to mirror. According to Diderot, when in the midst of creating a stage role, natural traits must be avoided; they are marked by a deficiency: "Is it showing things as they are in nature? Certainly not. Were it so the true would be the commonplace" (Diderot, 2015, p. 55). Moreover, this means that the actor's talent alone is not satisfactory. Crucially, Diderot focuses on the use of artistic principles and strategies only to emphasize that the artist actively has to do something with

the performative material (select, reproduce, combine, invent, exaggerate, abstract, intensify).

Those tools provide the necessary instruments with which the actor works in the practice space and which encourage and inspire her in her most ultimate challenge, namely to *supplement* nature. A genial work of art never aims at real life, pure and simple, but perfects it, says Diderot: “It is the study of the great models, the knowledge of the human heart, the habit of society, earnest work, experience, close acquaintance with the boards, which perfect [*supplément*] Nature’s gifts”, and he is quick to add: “The actor who is merely a mimic can count upon being always tolerable; his playing will call neither for praise nor for blame” (Diderot, 2015, p. 26).

On a conceptual level, the Diderotian paradox refuses to be resolved. We need to look a bit more closely at Diderot’s understanding of supplementing nature in order to explicate the consequences of this insight. What are the paradox’s implications with respect to imitation? Why does Diderot present the actor at times as a passive imitator if mere reproduction does not suffice? More than once, Diderot points at the fact that a stage role is a fully-fabricated and carefully modeled figure that comes about in and through the complex unity of observation, imagination, judgment, knowledge of tradition, experience and, most of all, hard work. The actor gives form to the physical behaviours, the odd interactions or the uncontrollable furies that are inherent to the emotional life she is required to depict on stage. Even though certain dramatic roles may very well be considered *established* in the history of theatre and in Western thought in general, in accordance with the mores of a cultured theatrical audience, that is not to say that the actor of today should not create her own vision of the inner complexities of the role.

In fact, for the aim of our analysis (to investigate the ontological conditions of self-alienation and creation) it does not matter much whether the actor actually inhabits a character and works with a pre-written script or not. Even for Diderot a theatre role was not a fixed *thing*, a sort of historical monolith that has been shaped once and for all by the playwright and which does not allow for any adjustments (Diderot, 2015). On the contrary, a character only *exists* in so far as a performer decides to take it up as part of her artistic practice and makes it the inspiration for her creation on stage. According to Diderot, a written character is not automatically the

original and final source of creation. In essence, what is at stake is the question of what makes the actor's appearance on stage a productive and creative endeavor, rather than mere imitation. This is where the crucial notion of the ideal, imaginary model comes into the picture. We shall see that the notions of *passivity* and *activity* will attain a completely different meaning when considered in relation to *le modèle idéal imaginé*.

Active mimesis based on nothingness: *le modèle idéal imaginé*

Diderot's insistence on the paradoxical nature of the actor is based on the idea that she is modified by *nothing*. The actor is a practitioner of *becoming-nothing*. In fact, acting precisely displays *becoming-nothing* as the quintessential theatrical problem, *tout court*⁶. There is of course a reason for the strict opposition between the private (*natural*) and the staged self, for Diderot. As we saw in our earlier discussion, there is a risk of falling into a *pathological* mode of imitation if one is at the mercy of one's private sensibilities. As the argument goes, those modes have to be seriously modified in favor of a creative practice that moves beyond the naive and the obvious. This has to do with an implicit agreement between performer and spectator: the stage is a representational space in which the unthinkable might just become possible, that is, artistic creation distinguishes itself from nature because it perfects (finishes) nature: it pushes, or better yet, *exhibits* the limits and possibilities of nature in a way nature itself is unable to do.

Scenes on stage are thus never direct copies of *real* situations, because the context of the theatre always promises more, or something completely different, than what seems thinkable in real life. In fact, one might consider this the most prominent law of art in general for Diderot: a piece of art composes its own temporary and hybrid *plane of immanence*, as Gilles Deleuze would say (Deleuze, 2004), that is, a creative unity, which expresses a singular internal order, positing its own limits, potentials and horizons (Diderot, 1966). Additionally, regarding the artwork's unity of action, Diderot focuses on "movement, action or dynamism", which marks a break with his contemporaries⁷ (Clark, 2008, p. 107).

What is the ontological status of the performing and performed body in this context? Here, Diderot proposes something remarkable, which will be of central importance to the rest of our analysis. Diderot supersedes the

kind of passivity at play in *sensibilité* and the mechanic puppet with another kind of passivity: the actor must become occupied by the *essence* of her role (*role* understood in the most general sense of the word). This is exactly where Diderot's dual take on mimesis emerges and finds its final meaning and significance. The actor's imitations, observations and reflections of nature are mediated if not, indeed, possessed by a supplementary type: *le modèle idéal imaginé* (Diderot, 2015).

When the actor begins to work on a theatre piece, she will collect observations that might be useful for her portrayal, focusing particularly on the details: it is a specific color, a peculiar intonation in speech or, better yet, a unique assemblage of elements, which triggers her artistic soul. These everyday observations function as building blocks for the creation of the imaginary model. A long period of rehearsing gives the performer time to experiment with these elements, which at some point spontaneously start to cooperate with each other. Repeating and practicing that routine – physically, spatially, psychologically, interactively – and then *writing* that routine into concrete moments of the staged piece will, according to Diderot, ultimately produce a fully fleshed-out ideal model that is unique and completely immanent to the *mise-en-scène*.

Again, I am not speaking here of a character or a fixed, mental picture of a character but of the ideality that informs the creative modeling of any kind of stage appearance. It indicates the unity of – visual, affective, technical, representational – elements that matter for the performed and performing body. This implies an active use of the imaginary: one has to project oneself against the background of possible scenarios in order to be able to decide what does and does not work. Moreover, although Diderot uses the word *ideal*, he is a materialist through and through, which means that for him artistic creation is about the use of the forces of nature rather than about projecting ideas or aesthetic theories onto it. As David Holt (2000, p. 23) remarks with respect to Diderot's view on the visual arts, artists are not “manipulators of symbols but deal directly with the vitalism of nature”. I would argue that this applies to Diderot's account of the actor's creation of the model as well.

The recreation of that composition (*figure* as Diderot calls it) will during consecutive performances produce the coherence and ‘essence’ of one's role on stage: “A composition must be organized so as to persuade me

that it could not be organized otherwise” (Diderot, 1966, p. 780, translation mine). When staged in the presence of an audience, the actor’s appearance will be the materialized, shaped and shaping product of a long and repetitive process of what one could call *professional phantoming*. What the audience is confronted with in the theatre is thus an actor imitating that invisible *grand fantôme*: “[...] where, then, lay her talent? In imagining a mighty shape, and in copying it with genius. She imitated the movement, the action, the gesture, the whole embodiment of a being far greater than herself” (Diderot, 2015, p. 113). On this point, Diderot appears an Aristotelian: “tragedy is mimesis of those superior to us” (Aristotle, 1999, p. 83).

At the same time, Diderot’s ideal model radically breaks with platonic and neoclassical meanings of the term. Clark contrasts Diderot’s conception with, on the one hand, the platonic view of the ideal as something that can only be reached intellectually and, on the other hand, Diderot’s contemporaries who understand an *ideal* to be the reintegration “of the most beautiful existing parts” (Clark, 2008, p. 104n19). Annie Becq even calls Diderot’s use of the imaginary model subversive with respect to ordinary interpretations (Becq, 1994). The reason behind classifying Diderot as subversive might be that Diderot’s emphasis on dynamism enables him to make of theatrical mimesis a pluralizing term anchored in ongoing, artistic activity. The double-bind of the actor passively undergoing the workings of the model while actively shaping it in and through her work on stage by continuously integrating new material, produces a becoming that will never find its end or a fixed state: by “[...] constantly observing human nature [...] his acting, far from losing in force, will gather strength with the new observations he will make from time to time. He will increase or moderate his effects” (Diderot, 2015, p. 33).

In that light, the idea of ‘becoming nothing’ makes the actor’s body not so much a reproduction machine as a malleable, chameleon-like figure, indeed, a *homo mimeticus*, that is entirely at the service of becoming formed by those “phantoms fashioned from this or that poet’s special phantasy” (Diderot, 2015, p. 51; Lawtoo, 2017). Nonetheless, and this is crucial, despite the fact that the model is ideal – it is created as a supplement to nature – it lacks substance. That is to say, without the actor’s performative expression the model would not see the light of day. And vice-versa, it is the

incarnated phantom that makes of the performer the *playground* of self-alienation. Otherwise put, the actor's efforts on stage are the material expression of what she is not. Performing on stage is performing a double void: to be structured around an ideal imaginary means positing the *real* self as void, which, in turn, implies the void of the fictive model (void understood here as without property)⁸. As María Ortega Máñez rightfully argues, from the point of view of Plato's famous theory of mimesis in Book X of the *Republic* this "conclusion sounds scandalous" (Ortega Máñez, 2017, p. 112). I will return to this point.

Before we enter into Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstruction of the paradox, let me sum up what we must keep in mind regarding the passive and active features of performing. On the one hand, the performer passively undergoes the imprinting of the imaginary model, which fully occupies her. This means that, whilst on stage/in role she is unthinkable as a subject outside that model: the model and the subject coincide. Nonetheless, she transcends her passive state and uses her condition of nothingness in order to transform into whatever comes closest to what she imagines to be the perfect model, which is an active and creative form of becoming. This paradoxical state, where the passive presupposes the active and vice versa, decenters the person of the performer; it brings about "the strange parting of self from self" (Diderot, 2015, p. 58), the "loss of the subject" (Martis, 2005), or the "phantom of the ego" (Lawtoo, 2013). The actor is fully possessed by the invented phantom with which she personally has nothing to do, that she can never claim as 'hers' and which will never 'make' or 'shape' her, once and for all⁹.

The subject in-between passive and active mimesis

The actor's paradox entails the person on stage being at once the producer of artistic signs and the signs themselves. Self-created *Hamlet-signs* are embodied, yet depersonalized; the actor is her body, yet presents her body as *other*; personal experiences, features and skills must be bracketed, yet without skill and experience creation is impossible; the actor rationally reproduces emotional episodes while simultaneously undergoing those very traits. The *essence* of the role must possess the actor's mind and body and yet mind and body are the very faculties that are responsible for its production. All in all, the subject of the paradox is unquestionably the actor

herself: she is, produces, and exhibits these paradoxical modes through passive and active forces alike. In order to understand the extent to which this interaction disturbs a specific account of subjectivity, let us turn to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.

As no other interpreter of Diderot's analysis, Lacoue-Labarthe put his finger on the philosophical sore spot. His essay, *Diderot: Le Paradoxe et la mimesis*, originally published in *Poétique* (1979), later collected in *L'imitation des modernes: Typographies II* (1986) and available in English in *Typography* (1989), not only adds a poststructuralist and, more specifically, deconstructive account of the subject based on mimesis to the domain of Diderot studies, but also appears as a matrix text within Lacoue-Labarthe's own body of work. Not coincidentally is the essay placed at the very beginning of *L'imitation des Modernes*, which is, together with its predecessor *Le sujet de la philosophie: Typographies I* (1986), considered one of his most important collections of essays (Lacoue-Labarthe, 2003).

The piece on Diderot stands out not only because it uses the actor to account for the central role of mimesis in the formation of the subject but more importantly, because it makes us consider the underlying passive and active mechanisms within this formation, which are more or less out of the subject's control (Lacoue-Labarthe, 2003). Lacoue-Labarthe moves beyond simply rephrasing Diderot's paradox of being *everything and nothing* in order to justify the concept of mimesis as a constituting principle of selfhood, pure and simple. He reveals the conditions through which the actor's alienation counters a particular account of subjectivity, namely, the idea that the subject either passively imitates her surroundings (in which case the *origin* of the self is to be found in the *outside world*) or actively shapes herself by imitating her own model (in which case the *origin* of the self is *internal*). Lacoue-Labarthe challenges this internal / external and passive / active dualism by radicalizing Diderot's logic of paradox.

The subject as mimetic supplement

One of the ways in which Lacoue-Labarthe counters the idea of either being shaped (*written*) by our environment or rather shaping (*writing*) ourselves, is by deconstructing the notion of authorship. At first glance, the idea of the subject as author of her own identity refers to what Lacoue-

Labarthe calls active mimesis: I am the author of my life because I am the product of the choices that I make. Lacoue-Labarthe argues that this form of *actively* writing oneself is (phenomenologically) inaccurate because this process presupposes a subject that is already established, that has in one way or another already positioned itself in light of an ideal mode of being on the basis of which those choices make sense. We clearly see Diderot's influence on Lacoue-Labarthe coming through here. Diderot's description of the actor's ideal model is a vivid example of how the ideality that informs and constitutes our choices lies outside the subject, 'in' *the imaginary*. On the basis of the paradoxical, literary structure of Diderot's dialogical text, Lacoue-Labarthe shows how the conviction that one is the author of one's subjectivity is itself an imaginary ideal, a phantom. It indicates, as John McKeane (2015, p. 153) remarks, an "aping [of] previous models and patterns without realizing it". I will come back to this issue.

The central thesis is that the subject only comes into being insofar as her actions and decisions are structured around an ideality, an imaginary model. Diderot already pointed at the perfecting and supplementary function of the model, which Lacoue-Labarthe will use to foreground the relationship between fiction and the fragmentation and pluralization of the subject: "the 'self-styled subject' always threatens to 'consist' of nothing more than a series of heterogeneous and dissociated roles and to fraction itself endlessly in this multiple borrowing." (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 129). How does the notion of the supplement fit into Lacoue-Labarthe's argument?

Lacoue-Labarthe reminds us that the idea of mimesis as supplementing or perfecting nature goes back to Aristotle. It is relevant to quote the full passage referring to *Physics* as it provides the historical and conceptual background for the connection between the supplement and mimesis' passive and active forces:

Aristotle says first (194a) that in general 'art imitates nature': *he techne mimetai ten phusin*. Then, a little further on (199a), he specifies the general relation of mimesis: 'On the one hand, *techne* carries to its end [accomplishes, perfects, *epitelei*] what *phusis* is incapable of effecting [*apergasasthai*]; on the other hand, it imitates.' There are thus two forms of mimesis. First, a restricted form, which is the reproduction, the copy, the reduplication of what is given (already worked, effected, presented by nature). [...] Then there is a general mimesis, which produces nothing given

(which thus re-produces nothing at all), but which supplements a certain deficiency in nature, its incapacity to do everything, organize everything, make everything its work – *produce* everything. It is a productive mimesis, that is, an imitation of *phusis* as a productive force, or as a *poiesis*. It accomplishes, carries out, *finishes* natural production as such (Aristotle, 2005, p. 120-123; p. 173; 1989, p. 255-256).

Lacoue-Labarthe deconstructs two definitions of mimesis in Aristotle. On the one hand, Aristotle speaks of *mere imitation*, that is, a “reduplication of what is given”, which Lacoue-Labarthe calls a *restricted* form of mimesis. This narrow definition corresponds to the idea of passivity. On the other hand, Aristotle speaks of mimesis in terms of *techne*, which “reproduces nothing given, but [...] perfects what *phusis* is incapable of effecting”. Lacoue-Labarthe articulates the latter as *general* mimesis, which amounts to mimesis as active force (1989b, p. 255-256). The distinction between restricted and general mimesis enables Lacoue-Labarthe to move beyond mere rejection of mimesis as a passive *reduplication* of reality towards the question of what can account for nature’s production in general. Accounting for a passive imitation of life, where the subject is a (re)duplication of (elements of) what already exists in the *outside world* presupposes a productive force that allows one to be an imitative being in the first place: imitation cannot *not* be production. To account for a self, one has to propose oneself as the subject of imitation, which entails the production of the self as lack. This double movement, says Lacoue-Labarthe, is inscribed in the poietic dimension of mimesis.

On the basis of this central Aristotelean insight, Lacoue-Labarthe turns the common logic of mimesis on its head. Instead of saying that the subject is formed on the basis of imitative behaviour, Lacoue-Labarthe proposes that the subject is at best the *possibility* of being the subject of mimesis. In the latter case, there is no clearly defined subject before, during or after the imitative act: the presentation of a subject only indicates that she always could have been otherwise. In order to understand the specificity of this claim, we have to look closer at the substituting function of the mimetic supplement and its role in making the subject a “*no one*” (Martis, 2005, p. 54).

What does substitution mean? Very simply: to replace one thing for another. One does not gradually *become* a subject through imitating

represented models (which in common understanding presupposes a clear-cut distinction between original and copy) but instead the subject *is* the production of “*something other*” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 257). According to Lacoue-Labarthe, presenting oneself means producing oneself as a play of substitution. This is comparable to the theatrical experience. As spectators we grasp the production and creation of a second order reality *as* a first order reality, where this *second* does not come after but replaces or supplements the *first*. According to this view, theatre’s supplementation does not mean adding a fictional or representational layer *on top of* nature but rather exposes nature itself as a form of theatre: “Art, since it substitutes for nature, since it replaces it and carries out the poietic process that constitutes its essence, always produces a theatre, a representation” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 257). Lacoue-Labarthe uses this concept of theatricality in his understanding of mimesis in order to explain how one can understand the subject as a hollow vehicle for substitution. In that regard, I want to suggest that the notion of playfulness, indirectly at play in Lacoue-Labarthe’s analysis of authorship, might give a possible answer to the question posed by John Martis (2005, p. 53): “What is the philosophical status of that ‘hollowed out’ self?”. I will return to this issue in the final section of this essay.

Lacoue-Labarthe’s account of the subject is a synthesis of Diderot’s notion of the imaginary model and Aristotle’s idea of the supplement. What he takes from the actor’s model is the active working of passivity: the actor is possessed by the *essence* or ideality of her role while expressing and exploring its creative possibilities. Mere imitation does not suffice because that would refer to what Lacoue-Labarthe, with Aristotle, qualifies as *restricted mimesis*, it signifies a *deficiency in nature*. The substitutive dimension of the model enables Lacoue-Labarthe to account for the replacement of a passive mimesis for an active mimesis. How does this apply to the subject? The idea of only passively imitating or undergoing *outside* forces is, ontologically speaking, a surface phenomenon. To say that the self is imitative, prone to being formed by models, a canvas behind a canvas and in that sense without a fixed ground or core, implies that we choose to be a blank canvas. This choice is the result of the fact that one cannot imitate without assuming mimesis’ poietic force. Imitating presupposes positioning oneself as a possible target of mimesis. Against this

background, the subject emerges as a pure surface or slate of possibility. Nonetheless, and paradoxically, a choice can only be made by a person. So, who or what is the origin of this decision?

The subject as plastic author

Lacoue-Labarthe argues that we must draw philosophical conclusions out of the fact that Diderot mid-way through the *Paradox* shifts the literary structure from dialogue to monologue and back again. Diderot is a playful writer, which is not of secondary importance. Lacoue-Labarthe opposes interpretations that simply regard the *Paradox's* argument against passive mimesis (*sensibilité*) and in favor of active mimesis (tranquility) as Diderot's own. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, the reason why Diderot cannot be fully held accountable for that position is to be found in Diderot's choice to split up his own authorship in two ('*le premier*' and the narrator). For him, this is an indication for the importance that Diderot gives to self-alienation and the impossibility to fully overlap with the roles or models that one plays, whether it be in a philosophical inquiry, a theatrical context or everyday life.

Lacoue-Labarthe points to the fact that the thesis of overcoming a passive, passionate state of being (often connected to *madness* or *the primitive*) by use of rational means, is a recurring and dominant one in Western philosophy. Although it is tempting to extract the *core argument* out of the *Paradox* and classify it under such a metaphysical project, there are plenty of signs in the dialogue that resist such a gesture. Diderot's disruption of the unity and authority of his own authorship is one of them. It suggests, for example, that the elusiveness and malleability of the subject does not equal passive, nonsensical behaviour. As we will see, the central idea of the imaginary, phantom-like status of the models that configure our malleable nature is at play in a radical manner in Diderot's own philosophical position. But let me first make an important remark about the concept of malleability via Lacoue-Labarthe.

The idea of plasticity lies at the heart of our discussion – “that pure and disquieting *plasticity* which potentially authorizes the varying appropriation of all characters and all functions” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 114). Interestingly though, Lacoue-Labarthe addresses the subject's

malleability via Plato, directing our attention to Book II and III of the *Republic*, which deals with the wax-like material of the infant soul¹⁰. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Plato's problem with mimesis does not primarily concern the representative or copy-like content of myths and fables, but the power of fictioning and dramatization as such (Havelock, 1982; Corby, 2015; Puchner, 2010; Lawtoo, 2019). The central problematic in the earlier books of the *Republic* as well as in the *Ion* seems to be the notion of *mimos* (actor), that is, impersonation: a total reconfiguration of someone's voice, body, gestures and mental states, which produces emotional effects that undermine and *trick* the spectator's moral and rational beliefs. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Plato indirectly assumes that we can only undergo mimetic patterns passively – I am referring to the kind of passivity developed by Diderot regarding the concept of *sensibilité*: naive and without agency. Lacoue-Labarthe argues that too often our notions of the malleable self have been informed by this presupposition about mimesis. Diderot is arguably the first to break this tradition.

The fact that Diderot purposefully places an aporia at the heart of the philosophical discussion on the actor's paradox, followed by a self-announcement in first-person, out of nowhere, shows that he acknowledges himself as a phantom author. He does not necessarily identify with either interlocutor's position in the dialogue, although he seems to favor *le premier*. Diderot finds in him a substitute speaker, replacing and supplementing *his* views. By choosing to share his mirrored, Janus-faced authorship with the reader, Diderot dismantles his own view as an immanent doctrine (Lawtoo, 2018, p. 308). Comparing the aesthetic style of acting, writing and philosophizing is not merely a formal choice. Diderot argues for the interchangeability of the roles of actor and philosopher, precisely because they are rooted in the same kind of indecisiveness regarding their own nature: "A great actor's soul is formed of the subtle element with which a certain philosopher filled space, an element neither cold nor hot, heavy nor light, which affects no definite shape, and, capable of assuming all, keeps none" (Diderot; Archer, 1957, p. 46).

The question now is what Diderot's philosophical play of/with different roles teaches us about the self. I would argue that it is indicative of the productive and creative dimension of mimesis underlying the subject: the idea of the subject being plastic, i.e. a blank, wax-like canvas onto which

models are imprinted, is based on the ontological condition of play. This means that it has to be chosen as a play. The actor is the most prominent example of the possibility of this choice. The decision to make oneself the subject of mimesis leaves room for positioning oneself as the author of that play but only temporarily, without a solid ground and escaping any absolute legitimacy. One of the most telling examples in that regard is Diderot's description of children who, in the nighttime, in a graveyard, try to scare bypassers by acting like ghosts: they would throw big white cloths over their heads, while making "ghost-noises" (Diderot; Archer, 1957, p. 17). It seems like a naive role play but against the background of our Diderotian, and by extension Lacoue-Labarthean, analysis, this *mise-en-scène* functions as a paradigm for the alienation and instability at the heart of the subject. The paradox of appearing while disappearing in the act of imitating a non-worldly phantom or ghostly figure is an example of the idea that the self has always already been entangled in a situation of play, namely the play of "hovering between nature and his sketch of it, [while s/he is] keeping a watchful eye on both" (Diderot; Archer, 1957, p. 17).

The latter qualification, "[while s/he is] keeping a watchful eye on both", is revealing of the double intentionality of the subject qua author. One uses masks, ghost-figures or characters in order to appear as a subject, but to be recognizable as a subject (by spectators, readers, bypassers, society) this requires the use of models that are available in a given context (the *figure* of Hamlet, the *figure* of a ghost, the *figure* of a white, middle-aged man, the *figure* of reason, etc.). According to Lacoue-Labarthe, the materialization of a figure never solidifies the subject's identity because what it signifies is, at best, someone's ability to produce the external characteristics of that figure. This is exactly where the Diderotian actor shows her mastery: to provide the effects or signs necessary for the *appearance* of a figure. Lacoue-Labarthe formulates the irreducible gap between being and appearing in accordance to the split between *diegesis* (direct narration) and *mimesis* (speaking in character), which he initially analyses in relation to Plato's account of mimesis in book III of the *Republic* (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989b).

Inspired by Jacques Derrida's *écriture*, Lacoue-Labarthe resists the idea that the narrating subject can speak "freely and directly", that is, without the mediation of fiction, "detached from the world", *ex nihilo* (Derrida,

2017; McKeane, 2015, p. 152). Similarly, the (avant-garde) ideal of breaking with tradition for the purpose of self-generation is naive because it neglects the fact that one is always already entangled with and (mimetically) responding to the world. In Lacoue-Labarthe's terminology, this *will to originality* is the result of a confusion between passive and active mimesis. On the one hand, *passively* relying on pre-given models for the formation of the *subject* is an inadequate reaction to reality because it ignores the fact that the appearance of those models requires concrete and embodied enactment. On the other hand, *actively* inventing models for the making of one's desired identity proves ignorant of the fact that we are always already modeled by factors beyond our control.

This essay aimed to show that passive and active mimesis are irreducible to one another, yet paradoxically intertwined. Moreover, it is precisely in Diderot's account of the actor's paradox where one witnesses the playful encounter between those two mimeses, or *mimetisms*, as Lacoue-Labarthe would say¹¹. In that context, it has been suggested that the subject qua malleable author indicates the possibility of becoming the unstable appearance of that encounter.

Notes

- ¹ For a discussion on the Anglo-French sources that informed the *Paradoxe*, see Harriman-Smith (2015).
- ² Nidesh Lawtoo formulates the double-sided nature of mimesis in terms of *patho(-)logy*: "the dual sense of mimetic sickness, and critical discourse (*logos*) on mimetic affects (*pathos*)" (Lawtoo, 2013, p. 6).
- ³ There is a variety of styles of performing, actor's techniques and trainings that depart from the use of the actor's own behavioural features for generating performance material; most notably, Jerzy Grotowski, who is known for the practice of unlearning in favor of unmediated and 'pure' acting. Other twentieth-century (experimental) theatre makers such as Eugenio Barba, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Etienne Decroux and Antonin Artaud focus on (sometimes extreme) physical training in order to explore the mechanics or excesses of the performing body. These theatre forms are primarily concerned with the performative possibilities and limits of physicality *an sich* and the body's experimental relation with space and audience, rather than with a

traditional conception of transforming into a theatre role, as is the case in Diderot.

- 4 Contemporary theatre practices, however, push classical usages of puppets into new territory, in line with an upcoming interest in the rearrangement of agency in performative contexts including non-actors, objects, animals and plants (Arlander, 2019; Ferraz, 2016; Kirkkopelto, 2016; 2017).
- 5 Aram Vartanian seems to find in Diderot a defender of this view: “Diderot accepted at face value the key argument of La Mettrie’s *Homme machine*” (Vartanian, 1953, p. 245). Joseph Roach argues, however, and I think rightly so, that in Diderot’s view “an exact duplication of life would not appear to have the right proportions – the illusion would be spoiled” (Roach, 2011, p. 134). In a similar fashion, Andrew Clark explains that “to turn a head, a foot, for mere artistic posing seems arbitrary to Diderot. Likewise, strict imitation of visible nature, a literal still life, for example, is artistically meaningless to him” (Clark, 2008, p. 104).
- 6 For a phenomenological understanding of the neutralizing power of the imaginary, specifically in relation to the practice of the actor, see Sartre (2004). According, to Sartre, *to act* means to be placed in the mode of the unreal: “[...] the actor is entirely gripped, inspired by the unreal. It is not that the character is *realized* in the actor, but that the actor is *irrealized* in the character” (Sartre, 2004, p. 191).
- 7 Similarly, Michael Fried emphasizes Diderot’s special interest in the notion of “inherent dynamism” (Fried, 1988, p. 85). Diderot has a clear aversion against artistic expression as a static and closed system.
- 8 See also Jean-Paul Sartre’s phenomenological understanding of *double negation* (*double néantisation*) as the constitutive act of image consciousness per se: “To posit an image is to constitute an object in the margin of the totality of the real, it is therefore to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it. Or, if one prefers, to deny that an object belongs to the real is to deny the real in positing the object; the two negations are complementary and the latter is the condition of the former” (Sartre, 2004, p. 183).
- 9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty sums it up as follows: “[...] we do not possess the musical or sensible ideas, precisely because they are negativity or absence circumscribed; they possess us. The performer is no longer producing or reproducing the sonata: he feels himself, and the others feel him to be at the

service of the sonata; the sonata brings through him or cries out so suddenly that he must ‘dash on his bow’ to follow it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 151).

- ¹⁰ For a recent account of the relation between plasticity and mimesis in Lacoue-Labarthe, see Lawtoo (2018).
- ¹¹ For a further analysis of the idea of the *scene* and the notion of *encounter* in relation to Lacoue-Labarthe’s work, see Kirkkopelto (2010).

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